



ZILLAH BETHELL'S
CHILDHOOD IN
PAPUA NEW GUINEA
A SCRAPBOOK



GROWING UP IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA

I was born and raised for most of my childhood in Papua New Guinea. When people hear this, they often ask lots of questions like:

Did you get malaria?

Did you meet crocodiles and sharks on a regular basis?

Did you have your own canoe?

Yes and yes and a canoe called Bird of Paradise!

I thought maybe it would be easier to write a book about my memories of growing up there, and this was my inspiration behind writing THE SHARK CALLER. It is, for many Papuans, still taboo to both take photographs or make audio recordings as it is seen as capturing a part of the soul, so the following collection of photos – taken on a 8mm cine film during my childhood in Papua New Guinea – are a rarity. Memory is an elasticated and ever changing thing, and it has been extraordinary to be taken back so entirely and all at once.





THIS IS ME

This is me at about 7 years old in my house in Busong, Papua New Guinea. Memories of my childhood here inspired me to write **THE SHARK CALLER**. Shark calling is a practice unique to Papua New Guinea.



MY HOUSE

All the houses in our village are on stilts to protect from snakes. You can hear the lapping of the ocean from inside each house. Everyone helps to build a new house or canoe. The roof is made from palm leaves. We cook and eat outside, like a barbecue. There is no electricity, just a few paraffin lamps bought from the trade boats. We go to bed at sundown to protect from mosquitoes. There are no clocks or watches and we learn to tell the time from the position of the sun.



MY BEST FRIEND FLAME

This is my BFF known as Flame because she was the only one in the village who could jump through a cooking fire unscathed. She was a great dancer and could catch fish with a net made from sticky spiderweb. When she was older she carried unexploded bombs left from the war out in her canoe to deep water.



JUMPING INTO A FRESHWATER CREEK

The freshwater creek is my bathroom. There is no running water so we have to wash in the sea or the creek. You learn to swim fast as freshwater crocs have got a lot of teeth. You also learn to swim underwater to escape them and you can detect how deep or shallow you are by the amount of light coming down.



SWIMMING IN MARKHAM RIVER

The Markham river where we collected clay to make cooking pots. It is taboo to talk when the clay is taken from the riverbed. We must stay silent and give prayers that the cooking pot will produce nourishing food and good health. Many objects are endowed with spiritual significance.



COLLECTING FLOWERS FOR A WEDDING

Collecting flowers for a wedding in the highlands of Wau and Bulolo. Ceremonial headdresses are worn for weddings made from the fallen plumes of lorikeets and the Bird of Paradise. Sometimes we took tourists gold panning or orchid searching and they paid us in nuts and raisins or PK chewing gum and razor blades. Papua New Guinea is a place of trade and we traded in objects such as shells, feathers, butterfly cocoons. Trade boats came up and down the coast and small aeroplanes came in to Popondetta.



AUNTIE MARLEY & ME



Auntie Marley taught me how to make seed necklaces and she used a bush knife to cut open coconuts. Most mornings we drank coconut water for breakfast and ate mangoes or fish. There were no breakfast cereals, dairy produce, sweets or chocolate. We all had very good teeth!





COOKING FLUMMY DUMMY FISH

Our kitchen. Fish in a sago batter. Everything is cooked outside and we have to be careful to cover the ash with sand afterwards. There are no fridges so no food is stored. The day is spent in finding, hunting, collecting, preparing and cooking food. Oh and then eating it! With a trochus shell food scoop for a spoon!



MAKING CANOES

The whole village is involved in the construction of canoes. They are the only means of travel so everyone needs one. There are no cars, no buses, no trains. We only have the sea and we can only travel by sea. The bush is too dense to travel far through. Kapiak trees are hollowed out by axe or a stone adze and a long time is spent in carving intricate patterns and symbols on the prow of each canoe depending on the character of its owner and their ancestral identity.

OUTRIGGER CANOE



An outrigger canoe has more stability in the water. A family moves house or moves to another tribe by outrigger. We own very few possessions — they can be easily packed up. There are no shops, no televisions, no schools, no computers. The world consists of our village and the sea.

TRADE BOAT



The whole village comes out to meet the trade boat which turns up every now and then. We buy tinned goods like Spam or bottles of tomato sauce and sweetened condensed milk. Occasionally a picture book or a plastic doll might appear or even a letter from England! There is no postman in the village! Certainly no telephones!

Papua New Guinea is an island country between the Pacific Ocean and the Coral Sea, and lies, at its closest point, 150 kilometres from Australia. There were few books in Papua New Guinea. Stories were told around the fire as we feasted; embellished, passed on. Mimed. Sung. Danced. Remembered. Rarely written down. Ever changing. Stories that were only able to survive if there were people to listen and to hear. I hope THE SHARK CALLER enters the minds of its readers — your mind — endlessly re-morphing and changing itself...



 @ZillahBethell
#TheSharkCaller