



“More dangerous than Afghanistan.” That’s the description I was given at a security briefing when I travelled to Papua New Guinea – also one of the most beautiful places I’ve ever visited – for UNICEF in 2007.

But John and Elisa Mendzela, a British couple in their 20s, were up for adventure when they signed on for a teaching stint on the remote North-Eastern coastline in the late 1970s. What they couldn’t have expected was a three-year battle for their reputations and the safety of their students. More than 40 years later, they published the tale in a joint memoir, *In the Best Interests*.

The book has all the twist and turns, heroes and baddies of a classic whistleblower story, and (reader caution) the attitudes and language of the 1980s come through strongly, which serves to make John and Elisa’s stand against the “sexual exploitation” – stronger language would be used today – of their students by white expatriates even more extraordinary.

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The students had this tremendous respect for authority and the deep degree of trust they had, and how vulnerable that made them – John Mendzela

Ali Mau: What prompted you to write this book after so many years?

John Mendzela: When we finished those three years, we weren’t really in the mood for reliving it. We’d written an extensive chronology to make sure we had everything there in case we ever needed it. And we looked at the idea of writing a book, but it was something we hadn’t got around to, until we saw, quite by chance, that somebody had written something reporting to be a history, and that it was quite misleading.

Elisa Mendzela: Basically what was said was that the villains were okay. They were just, you know, doing their jobs and that we had ‘personal problems’ and therefore the best thing that happened was that we were terminated. Really odd.

JM: It didn’t say anything about the reforms that came afterwards, or the report to parliament. It didn’t say anything about the impact on the students. And we found that quite upsetting. So we decided, okay. Let’s get the facts out.

AM: Tell me why you decided to write it a chapter each, alternating voices as the story progresses? I liked it!

JM: We didn't want to do just a dry historical narrative. We wanted it to be a story that people would want to read and enjoy and feel inspired by and have an emotional response to. So it just came fairly naturally to say, if we alternated the narrators, it would give us the opportunity to have the best of both worlds.

EM: John is much more cool, calm and collected than I am. I'm a creature of emotion, I'm half Italian. And you know that bit of me that is half Italian, it comes to the fore, whereas John's much more focused and analytical and cool, and, you know, quite the opposite of me. And I think sometimes that's actually quite a good thing.

JM: It gave the opportunity to present ourselves in a more rounded way as well, because there are times when we didn't do quite the right thing, or lost our cool or whatever. And this is a way of exposing that and then trying to create a more rounded and real picture of how people behave, being imperfect individuals and under, at times, amazing stresses.



John Mendzala



Elina Mendzala

AM: How important was it to create a sense of place? Not many people have been to PNG, it's not a common experience.

JM: That was a key part of it. It wasn't just a narrative that could have happened anywhere. It was also telling people about PNG, which, as you'll know from your own experience, is a uniquely fascinating place. And many of the features of the PNG environment were important to the story, like the concept of payback. I think it's not unreasonable to see expatriates behave as a kind of tribe, loyal to one another. I know that people have trouble with the concept that we would attack our own people. There's also the way the students had this tremendous respect for authority and the deep degree of trust they had, and how vulnerable that made them. You've read similar stories, say, about the Catholic Church and some of the abusive priests there.

AM: Describe how you felt when you first discovered the abuse?

EM: It was always about being in loco parentis. Because these kids came from a zillion miles away and they had no easy way of getting home. You know, the [teachers] in the high school and the inspectors had a job, which was to act as a parent, almost, and safeguard the young people who were in their care. And it really is about abuse of that loco parentis.



AM: It's extraordinary as the book goes on, to see the lengths officials were willing to go to to paint you as villains. Is it because perhaps they didn't realise what stickability you had?

EM: I think it had never happened to them before. They might have had the odd person say something and perhaps write a memo, but that was the end of it. They never had anyone ever mount such a very organised assault on their wrongdoing, basically.

AM: What kept you focused on protecting the students rather than just your own careers?

JM: That was the cause, that was what needed to be done, and we stuck to that. I mean, at one point they even tried bribery – promotions – and I suppose a lot of people might have said, I think I'll take that and run. And then when they fired us, they gave us a good sum of money, and they obviously expected us to get on the next plane and say, whoopee! Instead, we spent all that money continuing the fight. One thing that came through very clearly is that the senior people in charge of education didn't give a stuff about the students, not about their welfare, not about their education. They were prepared to use any weapon to preserve their positions of authority. We had our chances to pull out with honour, I guess you could say, or maybe with a profit, but we just weren't going to let that happen.

AM: Time and time again in my own work I've seen people stay silent or become enablers when they discover wrongdoing, and there's plenty of those characters in your book. What is about you two, that made you willing to go the distance when so many others welch out?

JM: Good question. Well, at the beginning you don't know what the distance is."

EM: Yes, every time we thought we'd reached the finish line it started all over again!

JM: I guess, when you're faced with a challenge you either back down, or you get tough. It's the playground bully syndrome – you either stand up to the bully or you run away. And we decided to stand up.

Ali Mui is a journalist, author and co-founder of Tika, a legal charity for survivors of sexual abuse.