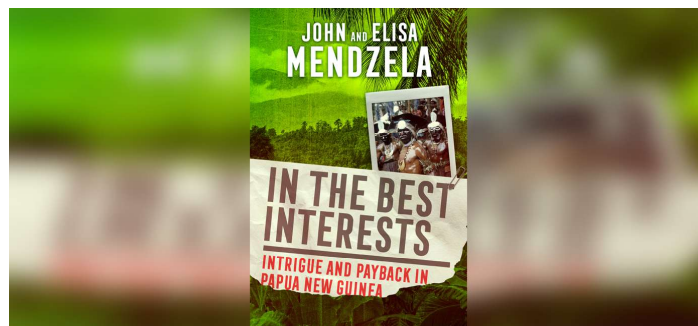


Indigenous News

WORLD NEWS

A whistleblower memoir that keeps receipts

👤 Dean Foley ⌚ 15 Hours Ago 💬 0 📖 5 Mins



Review: [In the Best Interests: Intrigue and Payback in Papua New Guinea](https://www.amazon.com/Best-Interests-Intrigue-Payback-Guinea/dp/0473748142) by John and Elisa Mendzela (Mendhurst, 2025). A first-person account of how two teachers documented and challenged the abuse of male students in PNG's college system and what it took to force a reckoning. <https://www.amazon.com/Best-Interests-Intrigue-Payback-Guinea/dp/0473748142>

Content warning: sexual exploitation of students, institutional abuse.

Why it matters to First Nations readers

Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students study away from home. The book shows how boarding settings can empower students—or place them at risk when systems protect adults over young people. It's a reminder that inspection regimes, complaint pathways and right-of-reply only work when they are transparent and accountable.

John and Elisa Mendzela's memoir is more than a dramatic yarn; it's a methodical record. From the first pages the authors set the ground rules: "This is a true story... All of the events portrayed can be fully validated from reports, letters, photos, notes and newspaper clippings." They also spell out why publication matters: "This story relates past events. But abusive behaviour... continues to this day."

The setting is Keravat College in East New Britain. In the late 1970s and early 80s it operated as a two-year government academy drawing about 400 boarders from across **Papua New Guinea**. Teaching was basic by design (English, Maths, Science and Social Studies) with student captains running much of the campus life. The picture the authors paint will feel familiar to anyone who has worked in remote boarding: strict routines, limited resources, and teenagers who shoulder more responsibility than most adults give them credit for.

The book's title comes from a contract clause that allowed the Public Service Commission to sack expat teachers "in the best interests of Papua New Guinea". It becomes a bitter refrain as the story unfolds: a courageous staff member can be punished swiftly, while an abusive insider is shielded by procedure.

The narrative's engine is document-led escalation. An inspector arrives; concerns grow about late-night "soundings" with students and off-the-record gossip about teachers. When the staff raise formal objections, a headquarters "Ratings Conference" stamps key critics "Unsatisfactory". One letter from a deputy secretary chides a teacher after a colleague had tried to warn him off the behaviour: "It is unfortunate that you have failed to take notice of his advice."

Meanwhile, a separate thread (supported by copied letters and later, a published art review) links a senior staff member and the inspector to sexual exploitation of male students. The authors and colleagues choose process over scandal: they assemble evidence, ensure right-of-reply and try to route everything to the Secretary for Education rather than the tabloids. It's painstaking, often thankless work...

Some scenes sting. In a staff meeting, the inspector snaps: "And I'm sure you'll agree that neither you nor anyone else in this room should be telling me how to do my job!" Elsewhere, headquarters operatives try to shunt dissenters to remote postings with the assurance that the "deal has been done". The pushback only hardens the authors' resolve to keep a paper trail.

The payoff, when it comes, is procedural not cinematic. The secretary quietly reverses the rigged ratings and blocks the transfers. The reader is left to infer the rest because the point is the method.

■ The documents matter; the minutes matter; witnesses matter.

Importantly, the memoir refuses to paint students as passive. Student leaders, allies on staff and a parish priest all play roles in the turnaround. Kapti (Cup-of-Tea) Day bursts off the page as a celebration of culture and pride, a reminder that the most powerful protection is a community that sees itself as worthy and capable.

For Indigenous readers here, the parallels are close: boarding far from Country can offer opportunity and risk in equal measure; inspections and ratings mean little if the system can be gamed; and the safest schools are those where students, families and communities hold real power.

It's not a perfect book. At 400-plus pages the narrative occasionally wanders and some figures are sketched thinly... but the core contribution is significant: a case study in how to make an institution tell the truth about itself.

The lesson is familiar: community accountability, combined with paper-trail courage, can beat a closed system. It lands because the authors show their working, not just their outrage.

Memorable lines

"This is a true story... All of the events portrayed can be fully validated from reports, letters, photos, notes and newspaper clippings."

"This story relates past events. But abusive behaviour... continues to this day."

Clause allowing dismissal: "in the best interests of Papua New Guinea".

Inspector to staff: "And I'm sure you'll agree that neither you nor anyone else in this room should be telling me how to do my job!"

Deputy Secretary's letter: "It is unfortunate that you have failed to take notice of his advice."

Source

John and Elisa Mendzela, *In the Best Interests: Intrigue and Payback in Papua New Guinea* (Mendhurst, 2025).

<https://indigenousnewsaustralia.com/2025/09/30/a-whistleblower-memoir-that-keeps-receipts/>