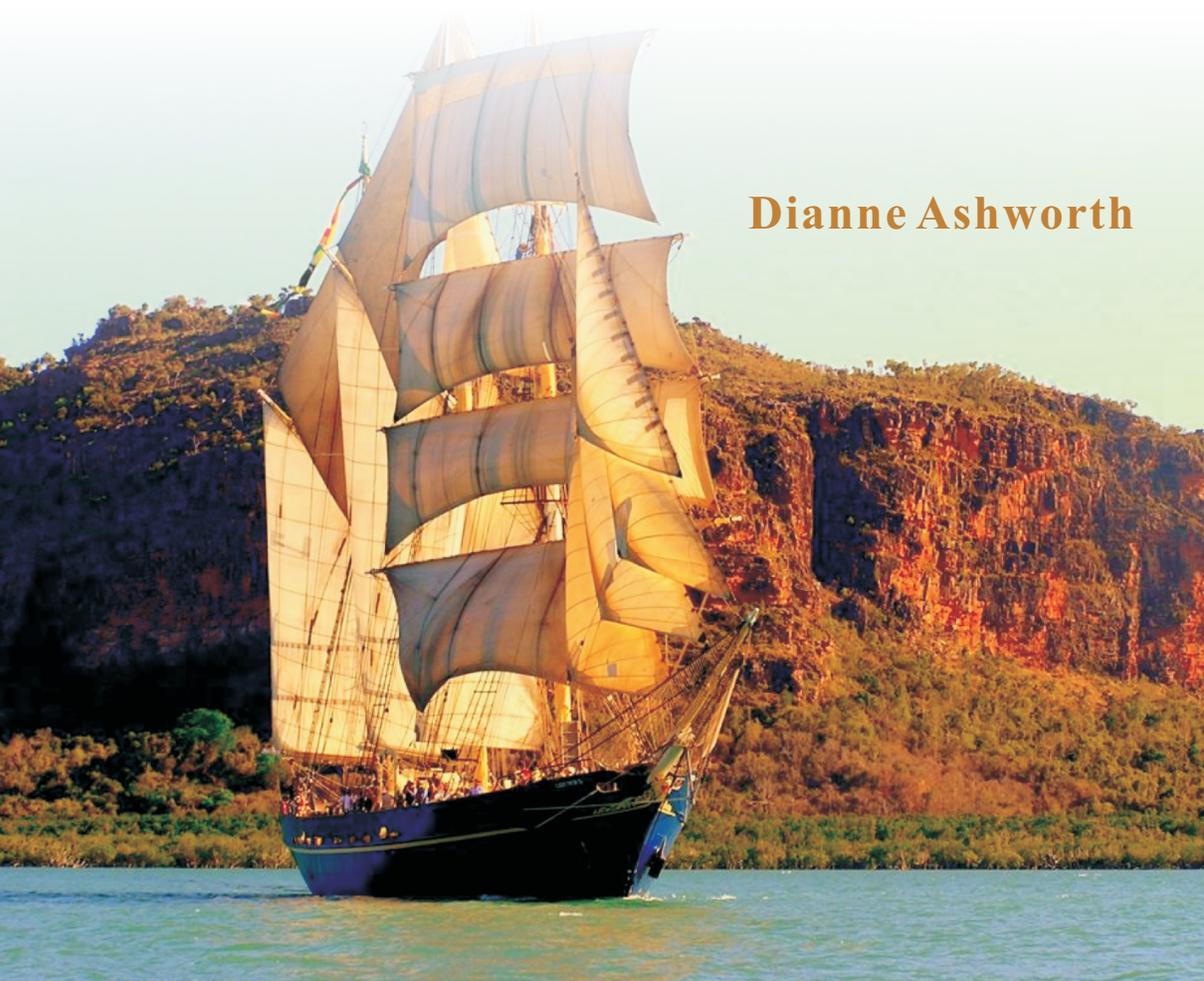


# Sailing Tall: Young People, Their Identity Development and Communitas

**Dianne Ashworth**





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**Dr. Dianne Ashworth**



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## Preface

*Sailing Tall: Young People, Their Identity Development and Communitas* is a book exploring young Australian people's relationship between their adventures sailing the Leeuwin II tall ship and their personal development. Sailing on this majestic square rigger along the Western Australian coastline, the young sailors, or trainees as they are known as, embark on a voyage of a life-time. However, while their participation on this outdoor adventure can be understood as unique, what they experience is also in many ways common to young people's participation to other adventure programs. Yet this book is different; it stands out from an expansive amount of other studies on young people's personal development and outdoor adventure as it points toward the relevance of communitas in their contemporary individualised life.

The book indeed, begins this adventurous research journey by introducing contemporary society characterised by individualism as backdrop to young people's development and their participation in outdoor adventure. What is clear, and established from the onset, is the complex nature of understanding the trainee's relationship between their personal development and their participation on the Leeuwin II tall ship in light of their everyday lives. As such, the investigation is a creative and novel combination of methodological ethnographic and grounded theoretical approaches. In addition, a theoretical perspective that draws on Pierre Bourdieu's notions of habitus and social fields discusses the relationship between agency and structure to explain outdoor adventure and trainee's development in this contemporary individualised milieu.

Further, it includes a review of the literature that reveals how vast and rich this area of investigation is. In essence, what the literature conveys is that from ancient times to contemporary days, outdoor adventure has been overwhelmingly

understood as beneficial to young people's identity development particularly evident in increasing their positive sense of self. However, understanding how and why this occurs is not as well understood. As such, this is a more recently growing area of investigation producing a wide range of reasons suggesting how and why these benefits occur. For example, teamwork as well as their solo experience are both suggested to make the difference for the young participants. Another reason put forward as to how and why adventure works is because they are taken away from their everyday life to experience something new. Or like other studies suggest, it is the responsibility they experience sailing a tall ship, the crewmembers or their peers, or even the young person's age that makes the difference. Still another suggestion is that young people connecting to the wilderness; an innate response to connecting to nature might be the reason how and why outdoor adventure benefits their identity development. As the saying goes, the mountains speak for themselves. But do they? Young people participating in outdoor adventure are also likened to a rite of passage to explain how and why outdoor adventure works. This is because in both instances they are separated from what they know, they experience transition from childhood to adulthood before they reconnect to their community with their new identity (Van Gennep 1960). Yet this link between this traditional initiation practice and outdoor adventure is not always agreed upon in contemporary life that is based on individualism where it is the responsibility of the individual to create their own identity rather than the community embracing it on their return. For Victor Turner (1969) what is important in young people's developmental transition according to this model, is *communitas*; a place he describes as "betwixt and between" their everyday lives.

While many voices contribute to understanding this relationship including two Leeuwin II board members and staff/crew and volunteers as well as my own experiences as a trainee sailing on board, it is the trainees at the helm of

this study as they shine light on this complex area of investigation and indicate *communitas* as reason how and why their outdoor adventure works. Three categories of trainees representing adolescents between fourteen years of age and under eighteen years of age, post adolescents between eighteen years of age and twenty-six years of age, and a group of past trainees whose ages spanned across the age range of adolescents and post adolescents when they sailed many years ago, took part in one-to one semi-structured interviews where they were asked about their personal development and how and why they thought it happened. Overall, it is not surprising that their responses reflected what the literature conveys; that they experienced positive personal development, particularly in building confidence as well as a sense of maturity. In light of everyday life, these are arguably distinct qualities contributing to their success in it. Moreover, their responses raised many of the reasons how and why their adventure experience worked similar to the literature also. But while the majority agreed in having a positive voyage, in contrast, one past trainee did not. Subsequently, what she revealed about her experience highlighted the characteristics of *communitas* as the reason how and why the *Leeuwin II* tall ship outdoor adventure positively contributed to their personal development. This includes being separated from what and who they know, the experience being real, experiencing responsibility and connecting to their peers, *Leeuwin II* workers and the environment. Thus, listening to the voices of the trainees, especially the words of one of them that contrast the rest, shines light on how and why the characteristics of *communitas* are an important part of their identity development in a contemporary individualised life.

Hence, understanding the value of *communitas* in their identity development in contemporary life as this book discovers, is significant learning and worthy of further attention. In the final chapter, future research in this area is suggested to continue contributing to our knowledge. But it also has important practical

application. As such, youth workers, social workers, or any other professional working with or for young people such as teachers or policy makers will be interested in reading this book. In addition, because this study understands young people's personal development in relation to outdoor adventure in light of their everyday lives, it also provides an interesting theoretical perspective relative to the field of academia. Thus, there is also scope for further research to build upon how we understand the relationship between agency and social structure in relation to youth development and *communitas* in contemporary life.

Why did I conduct this research and write this book? As a social worker, I am very aware of the importance of this study and the potential of it to help our young people prepare for their lives in this contemporary individualised life. Statistics certainly indicate many issues such as mental health and even suicide rates, are experienced by them today. But with my non-professional hat on, losing a young man I knew called Matthew to suicide turned these statistics from a collection of numbers into reality for me. In fact, his spirit is wind beneath these research sails and I dedicate this book to him. Thus, my initial intention was to explore trainee's relationship between their personal development and their experience sailing the *Leeuwin II* tall ship fully aware of the complex relationship between them and their everyday life on a number of different levels. The qualitative approach undertaken to do this provided an optimum platform for discovery. Indeed, what 'Sailing Tall: Young People, Their Identity Development and *Communitas*' found, is certainly important to young people's development, as well as the practical and theoretical opportunities that have opened up to benefit them, turns out to be potentially an enlightening understanding of young people's personal development in this individualised life of the twenty-first century.

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