

Essay by Graham Saunders, re: "Playground", the novel by Richard Powers:

The following text is a summary of an experience I had in Tahiti decades ago. I already had an interest and opposition to nuclear testing by the French government. This was reinforced by this experience.

"Playground", the novel by Richard Powers, has multiple themes. Some take place on Makatea, a Polynesian island subjected to phosphate mining (1906 to 1966: millions of tonnes of phosphatic sand were removed). Currently, an Australian-owned company, Avenir Makatea, has been lobbying for years to resume mining on the island.

"Playground" does include occasional mention of the French government's nuclear weapon testing in the Pacific. Between 1966 and 1996, the French government conducted 193 nuclear weapon tests, both ground and air explosions in the French Polynesian islands.

Through the 1960s, Australian and New Zealand peace groups protested against the nuclear testing in French Polynesia. [France and weapons of mass destruction - Wikipedia](#) contains some comprehensive reports of events, including New Zealand and Australian governments action to take France to the [International Court of Justice](#) in 1972).

Recent research has revealed the extent of environmental and health impacts of nuclear testing in French Polynesia. "The story of this largely unknown health disaster began on July 2, 1966. On that day, the army carried out the Aldebaran fire, the first of the 193 tests fired from the nuclear atolls of Moruroa and Fangataufa until 1996. The first, also, of a series of tests among the most contaminating in the history of the French nuclear program: the tests in the open air. Between 1966 and 1974, the military carried out 46 such explosions." Source: [Moruroa Files](#)

The above is a lot of background to get to what I want to talk about. I worked in the Australian Weather Bureau in the late 1960s. I occasionally attended talks and protests about the French government nuclear testing both in Sydney and Melbourne Australia. In 1969, I booked a passage on an ocean liner, Fairsea. In this era many migrants to Australia arrived by ship. Bargain prices were available when the ship was routed back to Europe. The Fairsea departed from Sydney, stopped in Brisbane to pick up more passengers. I became acquainted with Robert who boarded the ship in Brisbane. Robert was originally from New Zealand and was the coach of the Australian bridge team that was traveling to Italy to compete. He also was fluent in Italian, handy because the ship crew was Italian. The ship sailed to Suva, Fiji and then headed east across the Pacific Ocean the following morning. A few days later the ship was close to Tahiti. Robert and I were on the deck as the city of Papeete became visible. He mused, "Would it be like the last time?".

I asked him to explain. He mentioned that he had been in the New Zealand Navy during the Second World War. He remarked, with a hand sweeping gesture "It was a bar, a brothel, a shop, a couple of bars, another brothel".

As the Fairsea approached the wharf more than 100 people were there to greet the ship. The first street of Papeete did not look anything like a Gauguin painting.

A small group of us decided to rent a car to explore the island beyond the city. I was the only one in the group who spoke any French, so I handled this transaction and asked a couple of times for directions on how to get to the highway out of the city. Immediately the lush tropical landscape did resemble backgrounds in Gauguin's art.

After driving awhile, we stopped for a break and perhaps to explore a beach. There was a medium-size fishing boat anchored next to the beach. Some men waved at us and motioned that we should join them on the beach. There was a small campfire burning and a rectangular

container with multiple fish. Some of the fish had remarkable colours, and they were sorting and choosing certain fish.

I noted that two or three of the fish had especially exotic colouring and wondered if those were the fish to eat. The fishermen were from the Philippines. They were able to speak Spanish and some French. We were struggling to communicate with broken French and gestures. The fish that I was pointing to received, “No” from several of them and one of them drew an X in the air.

I sensed that the rejection of this fish was somehow significant and persisted with my enquiry. even though the conversation was limited because of the language barrier. In response to why, pourquoi, por qué, one of the men used his fingers to outline the shape of the big mushroom, ie, a mushroom cloud, an atomic explosion. The mood of the entire group became quite sombre. None of us took this conversation any further.

The mood lightened as we joined them for lunch which included some fresh fish and coconuts. After dining, we said farewell and continued on the highway to explore a little more.

That moment, recognizing that these people were living with the consequences of nuclear weapon testing, remains with me. It likely reinforced my efforts to oppose nuclear weapons and nuclear energy.

“Playground” does include mention nuclear weapon testing. I was surprised that This did not receive more attention in the book.

[Treaty of Rarotonga | United Nations Platform for Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones](#)

[50 years after Mururoa protests: Still no idyllic Pacific stopover | Yachting New Zealand](#)

[Nuclear Testing in French Polynesia: After Fifty Years of Lies and State Secrets How to Calm Our Anger and Rebuild Ourselves: How to Calm Our Anger and Rebuild Ourselves](#)

Map of South Pacific (next page):

