

## Examples of EXPLOITATION and EMPOWERMENT by Janna Eliot

*The following story illustrates EXPLOITATION and cultural theft.*

One evening, a group of Roma camped near a lake in Sweden were visited by a well-known writer. The writer said he was interested in learning more about Swedish Gypsies, and asked if he could stay with them for a while. Many of the older members of the group were against this idea, having already met researchers who wanted to describe the Romani lifestyle. These elders pointed out that researchers were usually only interested in furthering their own academic careers, and that the results of their findings often increased prejudice against the Roma.

However, the group was persuaded to allow the writer to stay as a guest. The kids soon got used to seeing the white-haired man sitting under a tree, noting down what he observed.

A year later, the writer published his book. The elders were proved right. The book describes the writer's prejudices and distorted understanding of the Romani way of life, but has been widely accepted amongst academics and intellectuals. The author has done well from his experience, selling lots of books and gaining a reputation as an expert on Roma society. The Roma, the objects of his study, still face discrimination in employment, education and accommodation issues.

This incident is typical of what has often happened to the Roma people in many parts of the world. A common complaint, (one I recently heard on a Traveller Site in London), is that photographers ask to take pictures of children to give to the parents, but later this photo turns up in a book about Roma, without the permission of the family. Gypsy music is written down and sold in sheet form, without a penny being paid to the composer. Researchers descend on trailer parks to befriend families, then publish their findings, being awarded professorships and scholarships, sometimes without the families knowing anything about the published work, or only finding out about it years after publication.

With rapidly increasing literacy and political awareness, this situation is changing, but serves as an example of cultural theft and exploitation.

### AN EXAMPLE OF EMPOWERMENT

I cite the work of Gunilla Lundgren, a well-known Swedish author, as a shining example of good practice. Gunilla has worked with many Roma adults and children, often producing work at their request. She is sometimes asked to record their stories, and does this as co-author, sharing royalties and publicity opportunities. I don't class her work as theft, as she's given free access to the stories; she always lets her co-authors read all drafts, and discards anything her co-authors later wish they hadn't revealed. She empowers people to share their wisdom with the wider community.