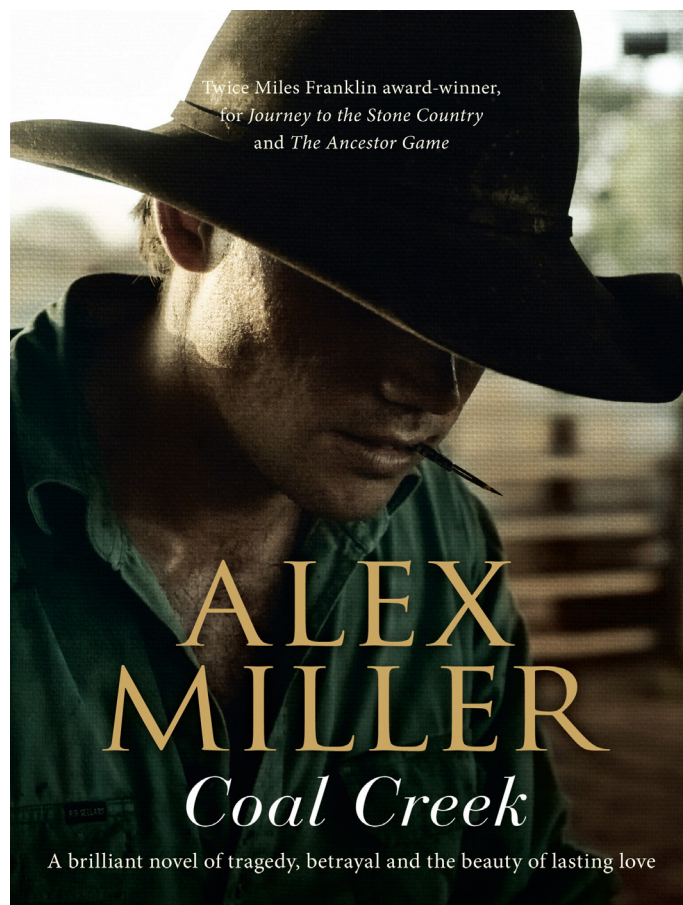


ALLEN & UNWIN



READING GROUP NOTES

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About the book

'Me and Ben had been mates since we was boys and if it come to it I knew I would have to be on his side.'

Bobby Blue is caught between loyalty to his only friend, Ben Tobin, and his boss, Daniel Collins, the new constable at Mount Hay. 'Ben was not a big man but he was strong and quick as a snake. He had his own breed of pony that was just like him, stocky and reliable on their feet.' Bobby understands the people and the ways of Mount Hay; Collins studies the country as an archaeologist might, bringing his coastal values to the hinterland. Bobby says, 'I do not think Daniel would have understood Ben in a million years.' Increasingly bewildered and goaded to action by his wife, Constable Collins takes up his shotgun and his Webley pistol to deal with Ben. Bobby's love for Collins' wilful young daughter Irie is exposed, leading to tragic consequences for them all.

Miller's exquisite depictions of the country of the Queensland highlands form the background of this simply told but deeply significant novel of friendship, love, loyalty and the tragic consequences of misunderstanding and mistrust. *Coal Creek* is a wonderfully satisfying novel with a gratifying resolution. It carries all the wisdom and emotional depth we have come to expect from Miller's richly evocative novels.

Caroline Baum talks to Alex Miller about *Coal Creek*

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DkKgSS5bMMI>

About the author

Alex Miller is twice winner of Australia's premier literary prize, The Miles Franklin Literary Award, first in 1993 for *The Ancestor Game* and again in 2003 for *Journey to the Stone Country*. He is also an overall winner of the Commonwealth Writers' Prize, in 1993 for *The Ancestor Game*. His fifth novel, *Conditions of Faith*, won the Christina Stead Prize for Fiction in the 2001 New South Wales Premier's Awards. In 2011 he won this award a second time with his novel *Lovesong*. *Lovesong* also won the People's Choice Award in the NSW Premier's Awards, the Age Book of the Year Award and the Age Fiction Prize for 2011. In 2007 *Landscape of Farewell* was published to wide critical acclaim and in 2008 won the Chinese Annual Foreign Novels 21st Century Award for Best Novel and the Manning Clark Medal for an outstanding contribution to Australian cultural life. It was also shortlisted for the Miles Franklin Award, the Christina Stead Prize for Fiction, the ALS Gold Medal and the Commonwealth Writers' Prize. Alex is published internationally and widely in translation and is a Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities.

For further information on Alex Miller and his novels, please go to www.alexmiller.com.au

The author, Alex Miller, on writing *Coal Creek*

The idea for the story of Bobby Blue, his love for Irie Collins, and his account of the tragic events at Coal Creek, came to me late one night while I was doing the washing up on my own. Like walking alone in the bush, I find washing up on my own late at night is often a good time for telling myself stories. Mostly I've forgotten those stories by the morning and never given them another thought. But the character of Bobby Blue, the narrator of the story of *Coal*

Creek, stayed with me and refused to leave me in peace until I let him have his say.

Bobby is a semi-literate bushman of the kind I worked alongside and came to admire when I was a boy employed on cattle stations in the hinterland of North Queensland. He is an honest worker and a believer in the values given him by his mother and father. The story he has to tell is both bleak and beautiful, a brutal tragedy and a gentle love story. My imagination was captivated by the simple manner of Bobby's telling, setting out the truth as he recalls it, how the killings at Coal Creek came about not through a vicious desire for vengeance, as the media recorded it, but through misunderstanding and tragic mischance.

Bobby's motive in telling the story is to redeem the truth and the memory of his friend, Ben Tobin, who was made to pay the ultimate price for his part in the events. Bobby writes his account in the hope of setting the truth in place of the twisted ironies of the court case and the sensationalised exaggerations of the media. His telling is open, honest and confiding. He lets us know when his knowledge should not be taken as gospel but is no more than hearsay, and in this way cements our trust in the truth of his account.

Writing *Coal Creek* was a pure joy for me. It was like listening to the sad and beautiful story of a man and young woman whom I might have known when I was a young man myself working in the wild and beautiful ranges of the North Queensland hinterland.

Reviews & Quotes

'Miller has been a master of visceral description from as long ago as the first novel he published, *Watching the Climbers on the Mountain* ... Finding out what happened is a pleasure waiting for Miller's readers.' - *Weekend Australian*

'Because of this subdued mode of storytelling, the tension mounts gradually and when tragedy strikes it is truly, hideously, mesmerising ... an evocative and moving novel of the Australian bush.' - *Books and Publishing*

'Miller's voice is never more pure or lovely than when he channels it through an instrument as artless as Bobby ... The intelligence of the author haunts the novel, like an atmosphere.' - Geordie Williamson, *The Monthly*

For discussion

- 📖 Bobby Blue, as narrator, is the reader's sole window into the events that unfold in Mount Hay, and at Coal Creek. How does Bobby's 'watchful quietude and everyday competence' shape the reader's understanding of events?
- 📖 The landscape of Central Queensland in this book becomes a living, breathing character in Miller's hands, participating fully in the build-up to the tragedy. Is this your experience as a reader and in what ways does Miller create this intimacy between man and country?

- ☞ 'The imagination of the reader is at least as important as the imagination of the writer ...' What is your view on that opinion?
- ☞ Geordie Williamson in his review in *The Monthly*, comments that, 'Miller dwells much on animality – via his narrator, communing with horses, dogs, birds – in order to expand our sense of animals' worldly presence; their silence, which is eloquent of otherness; and their patiently borne suffering at our hands.' In what ways does Bobby's respectful relationship with animals contribute to the thematic depth of *Coal Creek*?
- ☞ Daniel and Esme Collins' outsider status, and their inability to understand Mount Hay and its inhabitants is the catalyst for the tragic events that ultimately destroy their family. Bobby, on the other hand, who has never known anything but Mount Hay in his twenty-one years, is the ultimate insider, but he is also unable to alter the outcome. Should Bobby be considered to be just as much to blame for the events as Daniel and Esme Collins?
- ☞ *Coal Creek* has been described as being a novel of complex relationships, issues of tradition and masculinity. Would you agree with this? What else is the author writing of?
- ☞ In the *Weekend Australian*, Peter Pierce says of Alex Miller, 'What might also be considered are the likenesses, more than ever apparent, between his career and that of Patrick White. Each draws deeply on his youthful experience working in the outback. Each writes of the making of art. They are alike adept at acrid comedies of manners.' Discuss.
- ☞ Miller believes that, 'it matters absolutely if fiction is not true.' What do you suppose he means by that statement and do you agree? Does *Coal Creek* have veracity for you?

Suggested further reading

True History of the Kelly Gang, Peter Carey

The Roving Party, Rohan Wilson

Foal's Bread, Gillian Mears

Game, Trevor Shearston

Journey to the Stone Country, Alex Miller

Landscape of Farewell, Alex Miller