



CONDITIONS OF FAITH

by Alex Miller

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About Alex Miller

Alex Miller was born on the South London Council estate of Downham. By the age of 15 he was working as a farm labourer on the edge of Exmoor in Somerset. While working on the farm Alex read Jean Devanny's *Travels in North Queensland* and at 17 went to work as a ringer (stockman) on a cattle station in the Central Highlands of Queensland. He stayed in the Central Highlands for two years, then found a job in a cattle camp on the remote Leichhardt River country of the Gulf of Carpentaria. He spent the next two years working with the Birri and Jangga ringers in the stock camps of the Gulf before going on holiday to Townsville. When he ran out of money in Townsville he joined a carnival and travelled for the following year from one small outback Queensland settlement to another as a spruiker with Paddy McCarroll's speed wheel. Alex began to feel there must be more to living than spruiking and ringing so he left Paddy and hitched a ride south.

When he reached Melbourne Alex began studying at night and the following year enrolled at Melbourne University, where he read English and History. After graduating with a B.A. in 1965 he travelled to Italy for a year, moved on to London to visit his family and then returned to Australia.

In the Sydney suburb of Leichhardt he worked at night cleaning rooms for academics at Sydney University while writing his first novel during the day. In a year he had written 450 pages. He never re-read this manuscript. He tossed it in a bin outside the Leichhardt Hotel and wrote another novel. This novel came less easily than the first and took him almost two years to complete. When it was finished he re-read it, *then* threw it into a bin. Writing was harder than he'd thought.

Nearly 30 now, Alex moved to Canberra, where he worked for the Department of Trade and Industry. He has no memory of writing during this period. At the end of two years he resigned from the public service, sold his house in Canberra and bought a run-down farm at Lower Araluen. With the advice and help of neighbours, he set his cows, calves and bull loose on his 1500 acres of scrubby hill country and while his cattle went forth and multiplied he settled down to write his third novel.

Alex's third novel was rejected by the first publisher he sent it to. He then sold the farm, bought a house in Port Melbourne and went to Paris to live. He studied French in the morning, and re-wrote the novel for an hour or two in the afternoons.

After almost a year he returned to Australia to sell the house in Port Melbourne so he could live in Paris for good.

His first night back in Australia he sat down and wrote a story about Poland: Jim Davidson bought the story for *Meanjin*. So Alex wrote another story: *Quadrant* bought this story. Then a friend asked him to write a play. He wrote the play, called it *Kitty Howard* after his argumentative eldest sister, and gave it to The Melbourne Theatre Company who accepted it at once and asked him for another play. He was soon so busy writing that he had no time to sell his house. Alex currently lives with his family in the house in Port Melbourne where for some years now he has earned his living writing full-time.

Conditions of Faith is Alex's fifth novel. His other books include *The Tivington Nott*, *Watching the Climbers on the Mountain*, *The Sitters* and *The Ancestor Game*. He has received many awards and prizes for his writing, including The Braille Book of the Year Award, 1990, for *The Tivington Nott*, as well as The Commonwealth Writers Prize, 1993, The Miles Franklin Literary Award, 1993, and The Barbara Ramsden Award for Best Book of the Year, 1993 all for *The Ancestor Game*.

Q&A with Alex Miller

When did you start writing?

I started writing (bad poetry) when I was 22 and had just left the bush and come to the city. I didn't know where to go from there. There was a need to talk, to begin a dialogue with myself about the where and why of my life. The dialogue is still going on. A novel is still, for me, principally, a conversation with myself.

Where do you get your ideas from?

I don't really have ideas for books. My novels come out of my past and the pasts of my intimates. They are not autobiographical in any literal sense, but the material my novels deal with always has some intimacy for me. The characters and situations in my books are usually traceable to people and situations I've known or have come close to. They are often an exploration of something mysterious and undisclosed in my life or in the life of someone I've loved. I never know when I begin a novel how it will turn out. The writing is a journey filled with surprises, the familiar

often appearing in unfamiliar guises. I follow these clues. It is a kind of archaeology and I never know what is going to be turned up by this restless, relentless fossicking.

What writers have influenced you most?

Wilde, Tournier, White. George Eliot and Proust. These are all on my shelves, along with Duras and Beckett and Artaud and Celine and so on and on. And that astonishing biography, *A Life*, by David Marr. All books that are better at second reading. But where's the influence? Except to persist. To go on with these intimate explorations, this conversation with myself that is really a conversation with all humankind. I could say more confidently who *hasn't* influenced me than who has—Joyce and the great American writers of the twentieth century. But then I like the intimate, the lyrical, the detailed, the confiding moment, the hard-won simplicities of a modest prose, deceptive and clear and smooth, rather than the fireworks displays, the crackling blaze of glory where nothing is what it is but is forever akin to something else.

What is your work in progress about?

It has become a journey once again and has surprised me. I'd thought it was going to remain in the one setting. But it has become *Journey to the Stone Country*. A place in North Queensland. The labyrinth of the stones. A Jangga Stonehedge. It's the story of these two people, the progress of their love for each other and their progress through the land to the place of the stones.

On writing *Conditions of Faith*—Alex Miller

Conditions of Faith is the intimate story of the loves and betrayals of Emily Stanton, an intelligent, discontented, ambitious young woman confronting the conflicting claims of motherhood and personal liberty. After a struggle which brings her close to death—a struggle involving the vulnerabilities of her own body and those of the body of the society to which she belongs—Emily resolves her timeless dilemma in a manner that challenges society's most deeply cherished beliefs about motherhood and the family. Anyone who has struggled at some point in their lives to retain their personal freedom against the determinism of convention will recognise themselves in Emily Stanton.

My mother was educated at a teaching convent in Chantilly in the early twenties and later became a maid and nanny to a family in Paris, before she returned to England and met my father. When we were children growing up in South London, our mother seemed to myself and my sisters to possess an exotic and mysterious past. It was partly my search to uncover the hidden persuasions of my mother's mysterious past that led me eventually to Emily's story. Over the years of writing the book, the specifics of my mother's story were subsumed and transformed. Little of her story remains now but the presence of Sophie Lemaire and the setting.

When Flaubert was asked for the identity of Madame Bovary, he replied, '*C'est moi*'. And in that sense, Emily Stanton is no less me. I have been nagged painfully all my adult life by the problem of a reason for living. Only writing seems to keep this problem at a healthy distance for me. This book is my attempt to explore the problem of a reason for living. It is, it seems to me, a problem that arises acutely when the individual finds that their conventional role is not meaningful to them and they set out to either change the conventions or to subvert them for their own personal ends.

I travelled to Tunisia and revisited Paris and Chartres during my research for this novel. In Tunisia I was accompanied on my travels by an archaeologist from the Institute d'Archaeologie et Arts, and a car and driver were put at my disposal by the Tunisian government. I was able to go to places I would not have been able to reach alone and it was an interesting time. In Sidi bou-Saïd I stayed in Gide's old room at 'Antoine's' house. This beautiful room is given to Emily in the book.

Reviews

***Washington Post*—Carolyn See** An exceptionally grand tour

Miller has written just a medium-size novel that's deceptively 'easy' to read, but within the boundaries of this narrative he's brought up notions of whether it's better to fail than succeed, what so called 'science' can bring to this world, the efficacy of religion in our everyday life, the influence of history on all of us (and whether we should believe any version of history), the effects of personal ambition on both male and female humans, the savage origins of Christianity and how we've prettied it up,

the globalisation of family, what it means to discover and live in your own ‘home’ and, most movingly and profoundly, the terrible demands of biology on all of us, particularly women, particularly as they become ‘mothers’, especially if they’re not emotionally set up for that biological project . . .

This is an amazing book. The reader can’t help but offer up a prayerful thank-you. Thank-you God that human beings still have the audacity to write like this . . .

On a whim Emily marries Georges and [when] she becomes pregnant . . . she’s wild with despair. She sees herself vanishing: ‘I’m not going to be me anymore!’ (And thus Miller allows himself to discuss and examine one of our most secret human issues, one that’s been brutally trivialised in recent journalistic treatments of the ‘mommy wars’, that terrible chasm between women who are meant to be mothers and those who are not) . . .

There are so many ways for us to live! On the beach at Melbourne, where in 1923 no one had even thought to write a history of Australia; in Paris in fetching, rainy gloom, dancing at night spots and walking beautiful streets; in Chartres, in cramped rooms that smell of old women and liniment; in North Africa in a trance of heat and flowers and thousands of years of history literally underfoot. We have so many choices, but in reality perhaps we don’t. It’s often said that men get to build bridges while women are stuck having babies, but perhaps building bridges is as much a task and burden as having children, and just as limiting (if indeed either of these projects is limiting).

At one point, unasked, Emily confides to Georges ‘the intimacies of her dreams, to work, to love, to create, to be’. He’s drunk and goes to sleep but she too has been diminishing his dreams all along. We must work and dream for ourselves, the author suggests; sift through science, religion, history, sex, friendship, passion and love and the Thing itself, the Universe, to find what it is we want and need to make us ourselves. Whatever that is.

***The Advertiser*—Katharine England** Facets of Faith

Faith in God, or the ineffable future, faith in oneself and faith—or faithlessness—in love are the three facets Alex Miller explores in his page-turning new novel.

Emily Stanton writes to her daughter of ‘the age of unbelief—those precious treacherous years when we at last challenge our unquestioning childhood beliefs. Those years when to believe ceases to be the easiest thing for us and becomes hardest thing. Then we spend the rest of our lives searching for the conditions of faith we once possessed so effortlessly and have lost’. It is the age at which Emily begins the novel in 1920s Melbourne . . .

‘The idea for this book’, Miller records, ‘had its origin in a brief journal my mother left me’ . . . Miller has shared his mother between two engaging characters, Emily herself, fiercely, unfashionably determined that matrimony should allow a woman wider scope than simply the ‘*matris munia*’—the office and duties of motherhood—and the little maid Sophie from the Chantilly convent who grows under Emily’s influence from passive acceptance of her lot to courage, competence and contentment in the face of an individual destiny. . .

His sense of his mother’s ardent search has led Miller back in the direction of the great female heroines of 19th century literature . . . although he has not achieved—perhaps has not wanted to emulate—the depth of introspection and soul-searching of such heroines. Emily comes across as a far more superficial character; if depths are hinted at—promised for a time in the future when the present more pressing events have been resolved—they are never plumbed, and the reader is pulled on across the surface of them by the novel’s considerable narrative drive . . .

The novel’s real brilliance, however, lies in its minute and loving recreation of time and place. Miller builds up, in a patient and constant accretion of the tiniest details, a picture of early 20th century Port Phillip Bay/Paris/Chartres/small-town Tunisia that is vibrant and vivid with the sights and sounds and smells and manners and habits of people in their place and era. It is commonplace to say that a novel would make a great film: *Conditions of Faith* IS a great film, unscrolling before the eyes of the mind an experience so intensely and sensually authentic that it’s almost impossible to believe it has been achieved by clusters of little black-on-white marks.

***Canberra Times*—Christopher Bantick**
Dark and subterranean levels of desire

Emily and Georges marry in February 1923—not so much for love but for Emily to fulfil a ‘kind of promise’ she had made to herself as a girl, following a trip to Paris,

to return to the city. Before long we realise that there are dark and subterranean levels of desire beneath the delicate filigree of their marriage, and Miller believes that readers will make their own sense of the story and construct their own meanings from it. ‘Emily is not passionately involved with Georges’, he said in an interview. ‘She is somebody who finds herself at a time of her life when she needs something more which is not obviously on offer’.

Emily and Georges are richly realised characters. We are drawn to them in their frailties and insecurities . . . Central to the story is Emily’s accidental meeting in Chartres Cathedral with Bertrand Etinceler, a priest . . . and what occurs in the crypt between Bertrand and Emily is reminiscent of the events in the Marlabar caves in E. M. Forster’s *A Passage to India*. Emily declares to Georges that ‘nothing happened’, though this is plainly not the case. She has discovered incandescent desire for the priest, and he for her. She is forever changed.

Some readers may see this as Emily’s betrayal of Georges. He has been a good and attentive husband, if not a little distracted by visions of the design for the Sydney Harbour Bridge.

Miller said that he was not asking us to judge Emily. ‘I am not giving moral answers. Is Emily moral? I think this is one of the questions the book raises, and it is up to the reader to decide.’

Emily does care greatly for Georges, and to knowingly hurt him is an anathema to her. What she has to contend with—as does Georges in a different way—are the opposites of desire and loss. Emily feels loss after Bertrand does not reply to her letter to him, and Georges senses the loss of Emily’s affection.

Miller described it like this: ‘Georges is more in love with Emily than she with him. Emily puts her finger on it when she says that travellers fall in love and return’.

***Time*—Michael Fitzgerald**

Finding a home on the plains of uncertainty

In the 2nd century A.D., a young Berber woman of Carthage found herself torn between motherhood and belief. With Christianity outlawed by Roman rule, she refused to renounce her religion and, along with five others prepared for baptism, was condemned to death by the sword. While imprisoned, Vibia Perpetua began a

diary, in which she recorded the relinquishing of her infant through the cell bars, the ultimate sacrifice for her faith.

Perpetua's diary has survived as one of the earliest records of a Christian woman, and it is this sense of a soul in exile that haunts the 20th century heroine of *Conditions of Faith* and cuts to the heart of author Alex Miller's fiction. From 1981's *Exiles* to *The Ancestor Game* . . . Miller has specialised in displaced souls searching for a spiritual home. The labyrinthine *Ancestor Game* presented four generations of Chinese Fengs, spread across continents and centuries, from Shanghai to Melbourne. It's 'in the regions of uncertainty where definitions have yet to be located', muses one character, 'that we must find our place'.

Such is the dilemma of Emily Stanton in *Conditions of Faith*. One of our first glimpses of her is as she swims through the sun's dazzle towards a submerged wreck in Port Phillip Bay. 'There's no telling how far she'll go', her father observes. To 1920s Paris, no less . . .

About spiritual crisis, *Conditions of Faith* could have become ponderous if it weren't so grounded in the senses. Emily's initial tryst with a priest . . . is accompanied by the scent of ripening peaches; her rediscovery of history at Carthage, where she convalesces during pregnancy, seems awakened by the eucalypts that perfume the air; back in France, the 'salty, appetizing smell' of bacon hangs in the house where she gives birth to daughter Marie. In Emily's 'age of unbelief', only matters of the body have clarity—and through Miller's exact prose, come vividly alive.

Indeed, it's hard to recall another novel—least of all one written by a man—that stares so unflinchingly at the moment of birth, when 'it was not possible to know if Emily's body strove to expel the child or to retain it'. Motherhood not only links Emily to the future, which she addresses at the book's end, but also the past, bringing her closer to the figure whose history she is determined to rewrite: 'The mystery of Perpetua's story is preserved for us in the moment she hands over her child, and not, as [church leader] Tertullian would have us believe, in her eager embrace of death for the sake of eternal life'. And so *Conditions of Faith* becomes more than a finely-wrought piece of historical fiction; it's a universal meditation on how to live.

Australian Book Review—Andrew Riemer
Nineteenth century trajectory

Conditions of Faith . . . reaches back to the world of *The Portrait of a Lady*, *Madame Bovary*, and even *Middlemarch* and *Anna Karenina*. I do not mean to imply that Miller was consciously borrowing from such seminal works of the nineteenth century, yet his novel clearly reflects the aesthetic, ethical and social preoccupations that generated those masterworks, and much else besides . . . this fine novel follows a trajectory that leads it into experiences and possibilities of life of a kind that late-nineteenth-century novels habitually explored. Like Isabel Archer, Emily is an independent minded woman from a new world who is both enchanted and imprisoned by the ceremonies of the old. As with Emma Bovary, though without the least trace of cheap sentimentality, her longings and desires bring her into conflict with a narrow, hypocritical and fundamentally provincial society. In Tunisia, where she is sent to recuperate from an illness contracted in the early months of her pregnancy, she discovers—like Dorothea Brooks—the allure of the almost exclusively male world of scholarship and antiquarian research.

And like Dorothea, she searches for her own Key to All Mythologies (in a sense) through her fascination with Vibia Perpetua, an early martyr (or perhaps independent woman) whose fate was commemorated by Tertullian. Finally, like Anna Karenina, though for a very different reason, Emily is forced to confront the possibility of abandoning her child . . .

I have drawn attention to these echoes and resonances not to imply that there is anything derivative in Miller's novel, but to suggest that it is, in an entirely legitimate manner, essentially backward-looking, drawing together concerns and preoccupations largely ignored by contemporary writers. For that reason, it seems to me the period in which the novel is set is highly significant. *Conditions of Faith* (like *Middlemarch*) looks back three generations or so, to a past recent enough in some ways, yet already a chapter of history. Its principal axes— notions of modernity implicit in Bradfield's dream of a bridge spanning Sydney's harbour and the legacy of antiquity; Australia and Europe; the imperatives of social life, religion, marriage and sexual orthodoxy and the desire for independence and self-determination—trace the ambiguous and perplexing conditions of faith, so to speak, of our parents' or grandparents' time, out of which ours emerge . . .

Of course, compared with the masterpieces of the past, *Conditions of Faith* reveals certain shortcomings which must be acknowledged. We are never allowed access to the deepest recesses of Emily's longings and sufferings in the way that we are privileged, for example, with Isabel Archer's discovery that her dreams are crumbling away or when Anna Karenina confronts the conflict between the demands of her desires and the iron rules of proper conduct. To draw such comparisons is improper, some might say. Yet to raise them with this admirable novel is the greatest compliment I can think of paying it.

***The Australian's Review of Books*—James Bradley**

Early in *Conditions of Faith*, Emily Stanton, the heroine (and I use this old-fashioned term quite deliberately) of Alex Miller's new novel, passes the tedium of the sea voyage to France by reading: 'She found a place out of the wind in the sun on the deck and she read Flaubert's pitiless narrative of *Madame Bovary* in French and watched the sea for hours' . . .

The invocation of *Bovary*, albeit with that added qualifier, 'pitiless', is oddly (and no doubt deliberately) appropriate. For Emily is in many ways an archetypal 19th century heroine—intelligent, passionate, unconventional and trapped between the dictates of her nature and those of society.

Conditions of Faith itself seems to find its sustenance not in contemporary writing, but in the great masters of the 19th and 20th centuries, most obviously Tolstoy, but also George Eliot and Henry James, and in a more minor key, Forster.

Like these antecedents Miller's characters move in a canvas that is at once panoramic and domestic. And like Miller's Miles Franklin award-winning *The Ancestor Game*, the connections between the two, between the new world and the old and between the past and the present, are subtle and suggestive. The bridge Georges longs to build to unite a city divides him from his new wife. Family, whether in Melbourne or in Tunisia or Chartres, at once ground and confine. And ease with oneself often lies not forward, but back.

This sophistication is sometimes disguised by a sureness of construction and lightness of touch that seems to underplay the novel's very real intellectual and emotional sophistication. Yet it is precisely this sophistication and suggestive play of ele-

ments against each other that allows *Conditions of Faith* to move beyond its constituent parts which, with its silent sexual encounters with priests and handsome but proud Arab archaeologists, might be caricatured as straying dangerously close to *Thorn Birds* territory (although on such a test, *Anna Karenina* might also seem more at home in Melrose Place than Moscow). Instead, these events are woven into a narrative which is utterly absorbing and deeply rewarding both emotionally and intellectually.

All the same, there is something about *Conditions of Faith* that seems strangely out of kilter with the times. Yet this is not a criticism, nor is it meant to suggest for a moment that Miller's novel is old-fashioned. But there is a sense in which it seems to be a novel from another time, or perhaps a novel rooted in another time's conception of what novels might be: capacious, subtle, humane; of narrative pace; and of the richness that can lie in subtlety.

***The Book Bulletin*—Judith White**

[*Conditions of Faith*] has received much critical acclaim. Perhaps it's heretical of me, but I find it marred by occasional slides into melodrama. In Australian literature, as in Australian life, the lusting priest has become a tiresomely familiar figure. *Conditions* is undoubtedly a cut above *The Thorn Birds*, but the plot involving the priest and Emily seems contrived; and if she has such liberal aspirations, why is she so determined 'to confront him with her situation', setting up the highly coloured denouement? And speaking of colour, the prose does take on a tinge of purple at times: 'His manly nakedness was uncompromised by his struggle against the effects of the whisky' . . .

***The Sydney Morning Herald*—Peter Pierce** Nowhere to hide from a date with destiny

In it [*Conditions of Faith*] he [Miller] takes risks with the confidence of an old-time master of the craft. On reflection, characters vividly alive to us at first take on the contours of stock types: randy priests (tormented, too), grumpy mother-in-law, suave Tunisian homosexual, husband preoccupied with his work . . . young nationalist, spinster aunt, hard-bitten, aging, ambitious American female archaeologist.

Yet part of Miller's intuition about them is how convenient—at least, for some time—is retreat within these roles. Self-protection is thus made easier; the world can be warily assessed at a distance.

Emily Stanton has no such defences. Impetuous, and perhaps self-destructive, she will come out of the great crisis of her life, following the birth of her daughter, Marie, and the decision to join a dig in Tunisia near what was Carthage, able to tell the priest: 'I am more recovered than you or anyone else can imagine'.

Her behaviour is shockingly unconventional, yet another of Miller's triumphs of touch is to show the sympathy which others can feel for Stanton's choice of a future even when, like her husband, they are most hurt by them . . .

If *Conditions of Faith* has its melodramatic moments, Miller comprehends the serious uses to which his predecessors (such as Balzac, Dickens, James) have put melodrama. This is a mode that deals centrally with the terrors of loss and dispossession. That is another way, one of several that the hook [sic] enables, of speaking of Stanton's life.

Some suggested points for discussion

- ◆ Emily Stanton is on a quest for some purpose in life outside marriage and family. At one point Emily says, 'Motherhood is not the solution to the problem of a reason for living'. It is Miller's exploration of this problem that is the timeless theme at the heart of this novel. What in the end becomes Emily's reason for living?
- ◆ When Emily discovers the story of Perpetua and her martyrdom under Tertullian she feels for the first time since leaving university that history is 'a mystery directly affecting me'. Emily's passion for Perpetua brings her to the crisis of the story. Is she committed to the life of a scholar or will she give up her career for a future as a mother and wife? Emily, like the martyr St Perpetua must decide whether or not to leave her child. What was your reaction to Emily's decision?

- ◆ While travelling on a train Emily sees clearly her relationship with Georges and what she must do. For Emily, escape equals freedom and integrity. Do you think there could have been a different ending for Emily and Georges?
- ◆ *Conditions of Faith* is boldly old-fashioned in its unapologetic narrative drive, vibrant range of minor characters, shifting of scene from suburban Melbourne to Paris and Chartres, to an archeological dig in Tunisia. How else do you think this novel compares to the classic novels of the 19th century?

Further reading

The Ancestor Game by Alex Miller

Ahab's Wife or, The Star-gazer by Sena Jeter Naslund

Madame Bovary by Gustave Flaubert

The Portrait of a Lady by Henry James

Middlemarch by George Eliot