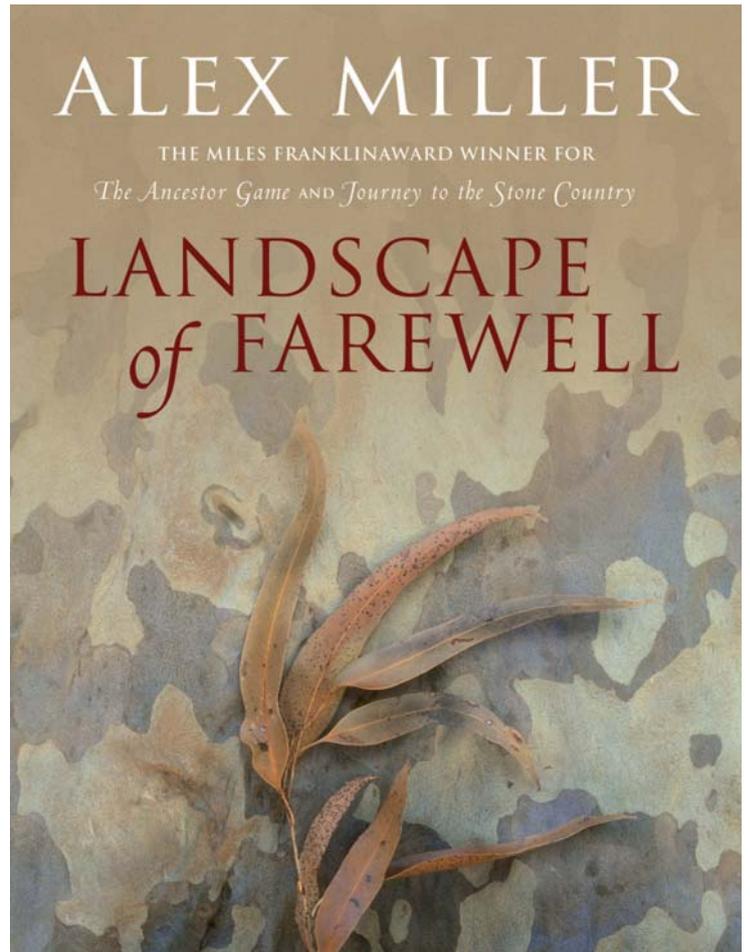


ALLEN & UNWIN



READING GROUP NOTES

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In Brief

A profound and moving story about the land, the past, exile and acceptance, this deeply intelligent and thoughtful novel is a worthy successor to Miller's much-loved and critically admired *Journey to the Stone Country*.

A hauntingly beautiful meditation on the land, the past, exile and friendship, *Landscape of Farewell* is the powerful new novel from acclaimed Australian author, Alex Miller.

It is the story of Max Otto, an elderly German academic. After the death of his much-loved wife and his recognition that he will never write the great study of history that was to be his life's crowning work, Max believes his life is all but over. Everything changes, though, when his valedictory lecture is challenged by Professor Vita McLelland, a feisty young Australian Aboriginal academic visiting Germany. Their meeting and growing friendship sets Max on a journey that would have seemed unthinkable just a few short weeks earlier.

When, at Vita's invitation, Max travels to Australia, he forms a deep friendship with her uncle, Aboriginal elder Dougald Gnapun. It is a friendship that not only gives new meaning and purpose to Max, but which teaches him the profound importance of truth-telling in reconciliation with his own and his country's past.

Following Alex Miller's Miles Franklin-winning *Journey to the Stone Country*, *Landscape of Farewell* is a wise and grave novel of power, beauty and truth.

About the Author

Alex Miller is one of Australia's best loved writers. He is twice winner of the prestigious Miles Franklin Literary Award, Australia's premier literary prize, the first occasion in 1993 for *The Ancestor Game*, and again in 2003 for *Journey to the Stone Country*. *Conditions of Faith*, his fifth novel, was published in 2000 and won the Christina Stead Prize for fiction in the 2001 NSW Premiers Literary Awards. It was also nominated for the Dublin IMPAC International Literature Award, shortlisted for the Colin Roderick Award in 2000, the Age Book of the Year Award and the Miles Franklin Award in 2001. He is also an overall winner of the Commonwealth Writers Prize, for *The Ancestor Game*, in 1993. Miller's seventh novel, *Prochownik's Dream*, was published in 2005.

'*The Ancestor Game* is a wonderful novel of stunning intricacy and great beauty.' - Michael Ondaatje.

'Miller is a master storyteller.' - Drusilla Modjeska.

On Writing the Book

Landscape of Farewell is a celebration of friendship between two men of my own generation. I first heard the story of the Cullin-la-Ringo massacre when I was a boy of sixteen and was newly arrived in Australia from England. I was working in outback Queensland as a stockman on Goathlands Station in the beautiful valley of Coona Creek, not far from Cullin-la-Ringo Station, where the massacre of nineteen white settlers by the local Aborigines took place on a lovely summer morning in 1861. Over the years since then I often wondered how I might write the story of that massacre without setting it in an historical reconstruction of the times in which it took place.

My inclination has always been to write of my own times, or at least the times of my family and friends. The idea of writing about Cullin-la-Ringo, however, continued to pester me. When I was in Hamburg in 2004 at the invitation of the Gesellschaft für Australienstudien, I met and became friends with Dr Anita Heiss, one of Australia's foremost Indigenous writers and intellectuals. Anita was teaching Indigenous Studies at UTS at the time and told me of her admiration for my novel *Journey to the Stone Country*, a story also set in North Queensland, and which dealt with a profound reconciliation of the past that had been effected by two friends of mine, one a Queensland Murri and the other a descendant of one of the white settlers who had dispossessed the Aborigines of their country in the 1860s. These two people were, of course, familiar with the Cullin-la-Ringo massacre, the white woman's father even having owned for a time a section of the original run on which the massacre took place. I told Anita about this web of connections and she encouraged me to write about it. Although I'm certain Anita was unaware of it, I felt that her enthusiasm was a green light to my desire to write this book. So it was in Hamburg that I first began to imaginatively piece the story together.

My fiction of the retired German professor of history, Max Otto, writing his own fictional account of the massacre at Cullin-la-Ringo is a celebration of my real life experience of writing my first published short story, *Comrade Pawel*. From 1968 to 1973 I lived alone on 1,500 acres in the Araluen Valley in New South Wales. My closest friend at that time was Max Blatt. Max was older than I, a highly educated and deeply humane man, he was a German Jew from Upper Silesia who had barely survived torture by the Nazis. The promise of his youth and his loved one were destroyed by the Nazis and he had eventually made his way to Australia via Shanghai.

Earlier that weekend Max had finished reading a draft of a novel I was writing and, on finishing it, had thrown it down on the table in disgust with, "Why don't you write about something you love!" I loved Max and I recognised the enormous value in the truth of what he had said to me as a writer. That night I wrote my imaginary re-enactment of the story he had told me about the comrade who had first saved him then betrayed him just because he was a Jew. I called the story *Comrade Pawel*. In the morning I gave it to him to read. When he finished he looked at me and I saw that he was moved. He said, "You could have been there." It was the moment when I first began to believe I could write and from that moment on I have always written about what I love.

For Australians of my generation some things are inescapable. They pervade our emotions, our attitudes and the way we experience art and life. I have listened to intelligent and well-informed Australians of great moral probity make the claim that they did not know about the stolen generations until the publication in April 1997 of *Bringing Them Home*, the Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families. When we consider the vast army of lawyers, government officials, legislators, administrators, and the families and acquaintances of all those thousands of people involved in the active policy of stealing Aboriginal children from their parents over a period of seventy years, indeed until well into the sixties, it makes the claim, "I didn't know about it" implausible.

As a novelist, it is not possible for me to write as if these things are not part of my life, embedded deeply in my experience and my psyche.

Reviews

'*Landscape of Farewell* has a rare level of wisdom and profundity. Few writers since Joseph Conrad have had so fine an appreciation of the equivocations of the individual conscience and their relationship to the long processes of history.' – Shirley Walker, *Australian Book Review* (November 2007). To read the full review, go to: <http://home.vicnet.net.au/~abr/Current/nov07walkerreview.htm>

'This book is a truly remarkable achievement. In only 220 pages of unhurried, exquisitely paced storytelling Miller has enriched universal themes such as love, ageing, memory and friendship, with particularly Australian themes such as colonial violence, inter-racial relationships, Indigenous history, and reconciliation. The result is a book that will resonate with readers all over the world.' - Graeme Moore, Bookseller & Publisher (Oct-Nov 2007).

'Alex Miller is a wonderful writer, one that Australia has been keeping secret from the rest of us for too long. *Landscape of Farewell* is at once elegiac and bracing and, as always, limpidly written.' – John Banville, author of Man Booker Prize winner *The Sea*.

'*Landscape of Farewell* is a triumph' - Hilary McPhee, *Australian Literary Review*.

Some Suggested Points for Discussion

- ☞ Discuss the nature of history writing versus fiction writing. Can history be written as fiction? Can fiction be written as history?
- ☞ How does Vita alter Max's way of thinking about his past? What does she represent within the story?
- ☞ Max Otto says, 'Perhaps it is only with the detached gravitas of historical scholarship ... that some things can be set before the generations that follow us. Perhaps fiction dissolves the pain too readily, and too readily enables us to accept and absolve ourselves.' Are there some subjects that should not be used for fiction? Or does rendering difficult subjects in fiction make them easier to understand and encourage empathy? Is one truer than the other?
- ☞ Max Otto's retells Dougald Gnapun's story of massacre; discuss the 'ownership' of stories, and the notion of how we come into possession of stories and make them our own.
- ☞ The notion of country, the land, something worth dying or killing for, is passionately asserted in this novel, by Max Otto's German uncle and by Dougald and also Max, writing as Gnapun. Discuss the importance of the notion of 'country' and the role it plays in the novel.
- ☞ What do you think the title '*Landscape of Farewell*' refers to? What is being farewelled, and why?
- ☞ What do you understand by the vision of the gypsy girl? Why does it move Max so much? Why do you think he sees those visions at the end of the novel?
- ☞ Do you find this a melancholic book? Or an uplifting one? Were you moved by it?

Further reading

The White Earth by Andrew McGahan

A Long Long Way by Sebastian Barry

Other Country by Stephen Scourfield

Other books by Alex Miller

The Ancestor Game by Alex Miller

Journey to the Stone Country by Alex Miller

Conditions of Faith by Alex Miller

Prochownik's Dream by Alex Miller