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by Author

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## About Alex Miller

Alex Miller is one of Australia's best loved novelists. His books are internationally acclaimed. He has won the Miles Franklin Award, Australia's most prestigious literary prize, twice. The first time was in 1993 for his third novel, *The Ancestor Game*, which also won the Commonwealth Writers Prize and the Barbara Ramsden Award for Best Book in the same year, and the second time was this year (2003), for his latest novel, *Journey to the Stone Country*, which was published to high critical acclaim in October 2002. This novel, his sixth, was also shortlisted for *The Age* Book of the Year Award, nominated for the Dublin IMPAC International Literature Award and short-listed for the Christina Stead prize for fiction in the 2003 NSW Premier's Literary Awards, which Alex won in 2001 with his fifth novel, *Conditions of Faith*. *Conditions of Faith* was nominated for the Dublin IMPAC International Literature Award and was shortlisted for the Colin Roderick Award in 2000, *The Age* Book of the Year Award and the Miles Franklin Award in 2001.

Alex was born in London of an Irish mother and a Scottish father. He came alone to Australia at the age of seventeen and for some years worked as an itinerant stockman on cattle stations in Central Queensland and the Gulf Country. Alex eventually travelled south and enrolled at Melbourne University where he read History and English. He now lives in Castlemaine, near Melbourne, with his wife and two children and writes full-time.

## On writing *Journey to the Stone Country*—Alex Miller

*Journey to the Stone Country* is based on the true story of two of my friends. It also draws on my love of the landscape of the Central Highlands of Queensland and the Bowen Basin, where I worked on cattle stations as a young man.

I had just finished writing my previous novel, *Conditions of Faith*, and was thinking of taking a break when my friend Bo Rennie (not his real name) rang me from Townsville and suggested we travel together for a couple of weeks through some of his old clan country—much of which is also the cattle country I knew as a boy. Of course I jumped at the chance. Bo said, 'Come up here, mate, and I'll show you my country.' Bo felt the time was right for it. A year or two earlier when I was visiting, he had said I would write a book one day about these old places and their stories. At that time I replied that such a book was beyond me and that I had no plans for one.

But Bo did have plans. And as I've learned, when Bo Rennie has plans it's best not to resist but to just go along with them and get them done as best you can. Bo believes the will of the Old People speaks through his life and through the lives of the other Jangga. This is a truth that I have learned to trust and to greatly admire.

Bo is a Jangga and the land we were to travel through was the country of his people—who, by the way, smile wryly whenever they hear Europeans speak of the dispossession of the Indigenous people. The idea that they have been dispossessed amuses them, for they truly see what Keating used to call the big picture. Displaced temporarily, maybe. But not dispossessed. 'The story's not over yet, old mate,' is their laconic response to the suggestion that they have been dispossessed. Already in fact, after scarcely 150 years of displacement, many Jangga have returned and are living once again on the traditional lands of the Old People. What's 150 years between friends, after all? Ten thousand years might begin to spell dispossession, but not 150.

Bo and I and Annabelle, Bo's partner and my old friend, set out from Townsville in the Pajero one balmy morning and headed south for Bowen and then inland into the ranges . . . And so the story of this book began to unfold as we travelled together for the following two weeks, camping in country that has been destroyed for ever by mining and clearing, and seeing country like the Ranna valley where the flora and fauna and the water are as intact and pristine today as they were before the first Europeans overlanded their herds and their belongings from Victoria to Queensland in an amazing epic of faith and endurance back in the early 1860s.

When I came back to Melbourne after our wonderful journey together I sat down to write up my notes. I began to write a few sketches, intending to broaden and elaborate a little the sparse entries in my diary before the details faded from my memory. I enjoyed writing up these sketches and soon became imaginatively involved in reliving the landscape and the lives of these two people. After a week or so of this I realised I wasn't writing preliminary sketches at all but had begun to write this book. I rang Bo and he picked up the phone and said, 'You're writing that book, old mate.' I soon saw the structure of the book would follow the structure of our journey.

Nothing, of course, is quite that simple. I found, for example, that I couldn't give the story its full narrative force without including the romantic drama of Annabelle's meeting with Bo. In real life they have lived together for years, but in my fiction they relive the uncertainties and surprises of their original meeting. In fact that is how they did meet, but not on *this* journey. And the Ranna homestead does not have an intact library. I gave Ranna the white-anted library of an old uncle of my wife's who left his books stacked in wooden boxes in a back shed in Sydney for years until they became a solid wall of white ant nest. So realities got moved around a bit rather than

invented—re-invented might be a better word for it. Reconfigured into a picture that I hoped would make sense to a stranger, the reader, the one who comes to the book to complete it when the writer has done with it.

It took me eighteen months to write the book, which I did in three drafts. It usually seems to take me three drafts to get to a level of familiarity with the story where I feel I can move about with confidence in the company of my characters and their setting. And of course some elements of the book are pure invention. But always based on my understanding of what I call an underlying cultural truth. Old Panya, who appears at the end of the book, the Ancient Dark—herself a living incarnation of the Old People—is such an ‘invention’. But of course Panya is not what literalists might dismiss as ‘a mere fiction’. There is a truth embedded in Panya and her existence that has moved to tears old Jangga people who know her story. I don’t know where she came from or how she got through to me. I am not an Indigenous person. I am not in touch with the Old People, as Bo Rennie is. But I’ve generally found the Jangga to be an inclusive mob and generous, and Bo’s opinion on this question is that Panya is part of that larger voice of our culture that he reads in the language of signs and silence, the language of the Old People, his *first* language. ‘You’re starting to pick it up, old mate.’

There are three principal characters in this book: Bo, Annabelle and Landsape. All novels of course have landscape as one of their principal characters—impossible to imagine Tim Winton’s wonderful novels without his landscapes of W.A. Just as impossible to imagine Don DeLillo’s great novel, *Underworld*, without the landscape of N.Y. And how to have Dickens without the landscape of Nineteenth Century London? The principal characters and the setting of *Journey to the Stone Country* are both real and imaginary. They have an existence in the book, in the mind of the reader, and out there in real life. The real Ranna valley, which has existed for all time, is like our idea of an untouched Eden. Its abundant flora and fauna are today as intact as they were before the arrival of Europeans. And there really is a plan to dam the valley to meet Bowen’s growing need for water—how else will the people of Bowen solve their problem? Not many Australians have heard of the Ranna valley. Indeed the places of this book’s landscape, Collinsville, Mount Coolon, Nebo, have no entries in the tourist guide books. The astonishing natural beauty of the Ranna (not its real name) is unknown to most Australians. Soon it will be under water and nothing but a memory. For in real life, as well as in my fiction, the Ranna is to be dammed. How many of us had heard of or visited the Franklin before the proposal to drown it for hydro power? And of course that is the nature of the pristine and the wilderness, they are places we have not yet plundered. So we haven’t taken a lot of notice of them. We are about to plunder the beauty of the Ranna for its water. The Ranna is no less important to us and our culture than the Franklin. We just haven’t heard of it yet.

## Reviews

### *Daily Telegraph*—Lucy Clark Reconciled by Love

Alex Miller cannot help himself. When the Miles Franklin Award-winning author comes to write a book, there is something he can't resist, no matter how simple the tale. 'I guess with all my writing there's an element of social critique involved—inevitably I get caught up in the ideas of the time . . . although I have struggled to keep things simple, I find I have to get involved in some way', he explains.

Not that Miller's latest involvement is overly complex. It's just that in penning the love story of a white woman and an Aboriginal man, he finds it impossible not to touch on the issues of black politics and reconciliation.

There is no soapbox moralising in his elegantly subtle narrative, but under the circumstances, the persona is inescapably political . . . For Miller, the story itself was like 'a gift'. The real Annabelle Beck and the real Bo Rennie are friends of his who shared with him their black/white chequered past, their personal land rights controversies, and their modern-day love story that paints a true picture of reconciliation.

Intertwined with this is Miller's own story and his special relationship with a part of Australia that he first discovered as a 17-year-old boy from England.

'I had a mad dream as you do when you're that age, and when I got here I really felt as though I had arrived home, rather than in a strange place,' says Miller. He attributes this to the feeling that 'escaping from England was pretty important' despite a happy working-class childhood. In Queensland he worked as a ringer in the Gulf Country and also in Central Queensland, which is home to the stone country of which he writes with obvious affection and knowledge. The country is like a character in the book, and Miller's detailed, evocative writing describes an unpredictable landscape populated by unpredictable characters. But that's Miller: 'As a writer I tend to celebrate things that haven't been celebrated.'

And so his characters do not always do what you expect them to do, and his portrayal of the local Aborigines, particularly, is mercifully free from stereotype . . . 'The biggest lesson for me travelling around with the real Bo was that Aborigines—at least up there—are not terribly interested in reconciliation as much as they are interested in an acknowledgement of their difference, that they are different from Europeans . . . In a sense it's the same all over the world—the Indigenous peoples of the world long for an acknowledgement of their difference,' Miller says. 'And

one of the main differences I think is the way European culture is based on this right to know everything and the more knowledge we have the better we have the right to go everywhere and see everything. In the end it's not just knowledge for knowledge's sake because knowledge is power, the power to possess things, the power to control things. We are assuming that we always have something to give to the Indigenous cultures, that we'll do some work to help them when really it's time we started listening to them.'

In a pivotal moment in this, his sixth novel, Miller's European protagonist must decide whether she will visit a sacred tribal burial ground where her own ancestors were responsible for violent bloodshed. Yes, it is her history too, but will Annabelle Beck give up the European right to know everything?

### ***Good Reading*—Lisa Slater**

Alex Miller's *Journey to the Stone Country* is a mannered novel that, initially, appears to tread the well-worn path of love and betrayal. But by venturing into the less chartered country of inter-racial relationships, Indigenous spirituality and colonial violence Miller brings the characters' personal dilemmas onto the political stage . . .

We follow Annabelle to the place of her birth; a country from which she has been estranged. She and her husband never spoke of her country upbringing. It was understood that she has 'progressed' beyond such a 'quaint' place. Annabelle's connection to her childhood home, which she has forsaken for the life of the mind, is spiritual, not rational . . . Through Bo, Annabelle's memories of her idyllic childhood become infused with violence and betrayal; whilst Bo is regenerating a spiritual connection to a tradition that is beyond Annabelle's knowing. In this strange country of the heart, Annabelle's reasoned academic self is set adrift.

Through Annabelle, Miller is suggesting that we need to not only acknowledge our violent colonial history, but also investigate its continual resonances. Australia's colonial history began with those armed with European reason as they attempted to righteously take possession of all this country holds. And like Annabelle we too, perhaps, need to acquire new ways of thinking, rather than succumb to the empty self-possession which reason offers.

### ***Adelaide Advertiser*—Katharine England** **Finding future in the past**

*Journey to the Stone Country* begins in Carlton in an emblematic, trendy inner-city setting. The trattoria visited, the European conferences planned: the delicate bones of a 15-year academic

marriage—ended by the letter the main character has found on the hallstand by page two—are economically and gracefully sketched, set up as antitheses for what will follow.

The woman who has shared the name of ‘Dearest’ with her husband throughout their marriage, for example, will soon be more formally addressed—named, known, identified, understood—in a one-word version of her maiden name, ‘Annabellebeck’ . . . For Annabelle, Bo symbolises a welcome return to her heartland; for the novel, he is the engaging incarnation both of old defiant private reconciliation and of attempts at what is a difficult modern public version . . .

In the doomed valley, Annabelle is captivated by the old homestead, regally preserved, and wants to save it for posterity until, in a shattering confrontation with the bitter local guardian of Aboriginal history, she learns that it is riddled with more than white ants, that its heritage—and hers—is shame. This is a brave and well considered novel, redolent with a deeply-felt and beautifully conveyed sense of place. Save perhaps for Bo and the enigmatic Arner, Miller has eschewed both sentimentality and easy answers: his characters and conflicts ring vibrantly true, his conclusions remain realistically, challengingly open.

***Canberra Times*—Gillian Fulcher**  
**The past’s power over the present**

*Journey to the Stone Country* has a less than subtle beginning. A Melbourne academic in her forties enters her house and realises, at once, that her husband has left her. The description is flat, reflecting the less-than-bold Annabelle, and there are hints of stylistic irritants (over-writing, an obsession with present participles and some laboured similes). But within a few pages, Alex Miller had corralled me with his formidable abilities to tell a good story . . .

[Annabelle and Bo] are an unlikely couple: Bo, a chain smoker, hawking up his phlegm, sure of himself and his past, and the pale white woman who has left hers behind. Though they were born on neighbouring stations, Annabelle has no recollection of meeting Bo before. But Bo tells her they met as children when his Grandma Rennie and her mother would picnic together (Annabelle’s father not allowing the Rennie children in his property) and that she, Annabelle, and Bo, ‘tumbled naked in the water together’. Annabelle wonders about all this. Her forgetting, we are persuaded, symbolises her displacement, her loss of connections with her origins.

Annabelle’s odyssey is also Bo’s. Discoveries await them. In the country which is to be mined, Annabelle finds an unusual stone artefact. A cylindrical, carved object, it puzzles her. It seems to be Miller’s metaphor for things beyond knowing. Not everything has to be explained, Annabelle comes to realise much later, thereby rejecting the academic enterprise and her own tenuous identity

. . . *Journey to the Stone Country* is, however, no simple treatise against European settlement. Some time after Annabelle and Bo arrive at an abandoned station, Annabelle discovers an extensive library. Termites have eaten the books' contents, leaving the spines, and Annabelle comes to a view that European relics also have cultural significance . . .

Miller's art is not bound by political niceties. We learn of Bo's feeling for the land through his exchanges with Annabelle. He seems at ease, almost comfortable, with a history which is more frequently depicted as one of dispossession and theft. But it is the pale, red-headed Annabelle who flails, not Bo. As do a young family of settlers who hope to live by mustering wild cattle and who have mistaken their future . . .

In depicting the complexities of contemporary Australia, in the divides and continuities between black and white, and in its themes of displacement, identity and sense of belonging, the novel reaches epic proportions.

### ***The Age*—Andrew Riemer** **Hope in a type of Hell**

The road to hell, as everyone knows, is paved with good intentions. That is the painful lesson the central characters of Alex Miller's new novel seem to be on the point of learning as they approach the end of their travels in the Queensland hinterland, through derelict towns, abandoned cattle stations, past defoliated bushland and accompanied by shadowy reminders of the European impact on the region's Indigenous population . . .

Gradually, Annabelle realises that her flight to Townsville represents more than an attempt to find a breathing space after the collapse of her marriage. This, she begins to feel, is her world. Images of her earlier life flood into her memory, reaching a climax of some poignancy as she wanders through the crumbling rooms of a derelict great house, all that remains of former grandeur and ambition. And so, inevitably perhaps, she find herself falling in love with Bo.

Bo too becomes preoccupied with the past: with his grandfather, the successful pastoralist who defied convention, and his grandmother who made sure that her descendants would not forget the old ways of her people. And he also remembers how that proud old lady was dispossessed after her husband's death by fraud and malice.

In these ways, then, Annabelle and Bo come to think that they might somehow carve out a life for themselves, grounded in that shared past, in spite of their different backgrounds and experiences. They are not unmindful, of course, of the difficulties in their way—suspicion and



even, perhaps, hostility. Nothing, however, prepares Annabelle and Bo for what they hear when they visit an elderly woman who remembers only too clearly what happened during their grandparents' time. So, at the climax of Miller's novel, it would indeed seem that their good intentions had led Annabelle and Bo along the road to a particular hell.

There is no doubting Miller's honorable intentions. His novel is engaged in a quest for some kind of reconciliation, for a way of aligning sharply divergent views of the past and its injustices. The provisional, but by no means despairing, conclusion suggests ways in which past and present enmities could be overcome.

I cannot pretend, though, that I found this novel wholly satisfactory. The trouble is with the central characters, Annabelle and Bo who do not seem to me to live as vividly as Miller's supporting cast. They struck me as ciphers, abstractions even, without the 'rightness' that distinguishes fully fledged characters, not the least those in some of Miller's earlier work. Perhaps this detachment, the sense that Bo and Annabelle are observed rather than brought to life, is the price to be paid for the tact and sensitivity that characterise Miller's foray into a field littered with ideological traps and pitfalls.

### ***West Australian Weekend Extra*—Anne Partlon Loving and the Land**

Forty-something women ditching partners/careers for sensitive New Age fringe dwellers are all the rage with Australian novelists right now. Both Tim Winton's *Dirt Music* and Alex Miller's *Journey to the Stone Country* make use of similar plots, and it is interesting to reflect upon the different approaches of these two prize-winning authors to some of the big issues of the day.

One of the biggest for Australians must be the question mark hanging over the whole 'sorry' reconciliation debate. While this is one of many interwoven strands in Winton's narrative, it is the focus of Miller's book, as the evolving relationship between Annabelle and Bo suggests the terms of a new cultural accommodation . . . Miller's monolithic narrative lacks the breadth of Winton's, but has as much to say about life and our affinity for the land . . .

Like *Conditions of Faith*, which was inspired by the author's mother, *Journey to the Stone Country* is partly biographical, and features yet another trapped woman struggling for emotional release. But Annabelle is gentler, more reliant than Emily, her free-spirited predecessor. Emily has more in common with Winton's feisty but fragile Georgie Jutland. Beside them, Annabelle often appears a trifle enervated.

To compensate, Miller piles on the detail, justifying it on the grounds that ‘there [is] something precious about these seemingly insignificant connections’. Maybe, but life’s minutiae is sometimes just that, and too much of it can slow a girl down.

It is Bo Rennie who emerges as the most vividly realised character of the book. Outsiders as much by choice as by circumstance, Bo and Winton’s Lu Fox are romantic figures, pointing North away from the empty consumerism of the urbanised South.

***Courier Mail*—Meg Sorensen**  
**Journey to Control Country**

. . . the language is spare, at times almost painfully tentative, even banal, as if it is afraid of disturbing a deeper harmony that will only reveal itself to the most careful and reverent observer. It reflects the patience that comes only with serious personal discipline, something Miller admits he hasn’t always had . . . not only is it a love story to defy the most cynical, in a world at loss as to how it should live, it has the urgency of relevance, offering a plausible hint that in spite of the apparent chaos, an order is there to be deciphered.

***Australian Book Review*— Peter Pierce**  
**Elusive Beauties**

. . . The ending of the novel is open rather than inconclusive. As before—for instance, in his previous book *Conditions of Faith* (2000) —it is Miller’s desire to let the ending resonate with the complicated possibilities so carefully set out in what has come before.

Watchfully, too, for that is one of the words that in part describes his narrative methods. Miller’s characters seem to be quickly released into an independent life, and are left to tell us through their conversations and monologues of the dreams and memories that they share, or wish to keep apart. Long stretches of the book are in reported speech, especially from Bo . . . It is a minor miracle that Miller keeps Bo just this side of portentousness, and intimates the considerateness that has been won from his grieving.

Miller also accepts the challenge to write of Aboriginal people. It is thirty years since Thomas Keneally did so in *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*. Since then Keneally has reflected that he must have been ‘a fucking madman’ to undertake such a venture. Taking his own risks, Miller first addresses the contested scene of Aboriginal politics. He does so without condescension or a sense of trespass . . . Looking on is the giant, almost silent figure of Arner . . . It is as if Arner is pondering whether there might be some part for him to play. In a novel where so many characters

tell or repeat themselves into identity, the young man's taciturnity passes judgment on them. Its essence may be obscure even to him. But it is Arner who is favoured by the angry old Aboriginal woman Panya, who scathingly tells Annabelle that her grandfather joined in the killing of Panya's people . . .

One of the pleasures of *Journey to the Stone Country* is to watch Miller's strenuous, yet unobtrusive, exercise of his craft . . . The hardest fictional business for Miller to negotiate concerns about the relationship between Bo and Annabelle. Warily, but immediately, they feel intimacy for each other. With Bo leading, they speak formally, using their full names as endearments. This is the softest element in the novel, but Miller allows neither a drift into sentimentality nor glimpses of realised hopes. In one sense, this longish novel harbours the form of a classic novella: the depiction of an intense, dependent relationship between two people. Usually, this is only concluded by the death of one of them, but that is not in the portion of their story that Miller chooses to tell . . .

. . . Few of his [Miller's] contemporaries so resolutely mark out new territory with each novel (although one thinks of Tim Winton). Here, Miller offers a love story coloured and almost subsumed by family and ancestral memory, one located in a landscape that, insofar as it has appeared in Australian fiction, is the site of such wilful myth-making as Patrick White's *Voss*. . . this journey beckons us to think more toughly of such jaded abstractions as 'the land' and 'the outback'; and dares us to imagine and reflect as vigorously as Miller has.

### ***Sydney Morning Herald*—Andrea Stretton Slabs of butter, layers of history**

. . . a narrative that takes the city-dwelling Annabelle on a journey, if not an initiation, right into the powerful landscape of her pioneering European ancestors in Queensland . . . her sudden flight to the supposed sanctuary of the old, abandoned family home in Townsville quickly, if not audaciously, segues into a saga exploring the terrain of black and white relations in Australia . . .

[Bo and Annabelle's] instant attraction could, in lesser hands, have glibly suggested that their fate, Dear Reader, is sealed. In fact, there are moments within the ambitious scale of the plot when you might fear a potential descent into romantic bathos, racial parody or didacticism.

But those familiar with Alex Miller's meticulous, skilful writing, especially his award-winning novels *The Ancestor Game* and *Conditions of Faith*, will know that for him nothing is ever 'sealed'. Miller's fiction has a mystifying power that is always far more than the sum of its parts, or the details of its plot. Here he takes us into a palpable world as Bo takes Annabelle on a long, hot road

trip . . . sites still humming with a harsh beauty, but now imbued, to Annabelle's unraveling dismay, with the shocking brutality, isolation and misunderstandings of their histories.

. . . this novel it is not a one-sided story, nor is it about indigenous defeat in the face of violence and domination. As Boy says, faced with the ruins of a squatter homestead and 'slipping the irony in . . . like a slim stiletto', it is the aristocratic pastoralists, tragically failing to understand the land, who became 'the vanished race' there.

The trip also draws upon Miller's intimate knowledge of the outback, enlivened by intriguing characters, unexpected incidents and passing images: the scent of springy wattle and red bottlebrush blossom; the once loved, now termite-ridden books found in a long-abandoned squatter's library; a brindle dog flattened against the dirt, its tail greeting them, 'sweeping the dust slowly side to side like a windscreen wiper'; Annabelle's attempt to introduce steamed broccoli on to those endless plates of sizzling meat.

How to move forward together, with love, respect and hope in acknowledgement if not full understanding of a painful history—that is the question at the heart of *Journey to the Stone Country*. As a whitefella writing about black and white history in this country, Alex Miller often goes where angels dare not tread. But as a novelist his footsteps—softly, deftly, steadily—take you places you may not have been, and their sound resonates for a long time.

## Some suggested points for discussion

- ◆ In the opening chapter we first meet Annabelle, encounter her marriage to Steven and her life in Melbourne. Here Miller manages to set up a whole series of contrasts that play out later in the novel. What do you think some of those contrasts are?
- ◆ All that is left of the pastoralists, the Bigges, is desolate Ranna station with its library of hollowed-out books. The family is described as 'a dying breed' and 'a vanished race' and Bo says 'Them Bigges never knew they was gonna die out so quickly. They thought they was founding a whole new civilisation. But they're gone. All them rand people are gone.' What is the lesson to be learnt from the experience of the Bigges at Ranna station?

- ◆ The climax to this novel is the scene with old Panya. Afterwards Bo says ‘Them days is over. If we don’t live together now we gunna do it all over again in years to come.’ Here Bo is arguing that the way forward is to live as Grandma Rennie did. Do you agree that Grandma Rennie and her life on Verbena station is a model for reconciliation?
- ◆ This is a story of black and white Australians. Indigenous and non-Indigenous. A cultural mixture, in other words. Why then do you think the point of view of the narration is that of the European woman alone?
- ◆ The word European is always capitalised. Should Indigenous also be capitalised?
- ◆ Why does Annabelle decide not to go to the ‘playground of the old people’? In doing so do you think Annabelle is rejecting her Europeanness by accepting that she does not need to know and see everything?
- ◆ Discuss the juxtaposition Miller creates between the Aboriginal code of signs and silence and the European one of inquiry and explanation. Annabelle says ‘If she were to adopt Grandma Rennie’s and Bo’s language of signs and silence it would be to defy the code of inquiry that lay at the heart of her own culture.’ Do you think these two worldviews can be reconciled?
- ◆ Arner is surrounded by images of stillness and silence and is described by Miller in regal terms. What is the role of Arner in the narrative? At the end of the novel Arner must decide between Panya and Bo. Which path does he choose?
- ◆ Does it matter whether or not a novel reflects the authentic conditions of the culture it claims to portray in the eyes of the peoples of that culture, even when these conditions may be surprising and counter to the more popular understanding of the reader? Or is it more reassuring and ultimately satisfying for a reader if the cultural stereotype is confirmed by the writer?
- ◆ Andrea Stretton has said ‘In *Bo Rennie*, Alex Miller has created one of the great fictional characters of our literature’. Andrew Reimer has described Bo and Annabelle as ‘ciphers, abstractions even’. Compare and contrast the views expressed by Andrea and Andrew—who do you agree with?

- ◆ As Bo and Annabelle journey closer to the place of their origins, the contradictions embedded in their lives are exposed. Do you think despite this knowledge Bo and Annabelle's love can survive and grow? What do you imagine their future to be?
- ◆ When the people and landscapes of our art, our music and our literature cease to have an existence in reality and survive only in our consciousness and in the art itself, does this represent a permanent and irreparable loss to our culture? Do we become members of a culture in decline as a result of these losses? A culture that is poorer and weaker? Should we struggle to limit the rate of these losses? Or should we view them as an inevitable exchange, the price of an increased wellbeing in the larger story of our evolution?

## Further reading

*The Ancestor Game, The Sitters and Conditions of Faith* by Alex Miller

*Voss and Tree of Man* by Patrick White

*Dirt Music* by Tim Winton

*Cold Mountain* by Charles Frazier

*The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith* by Thomas Keneally

*Remembering Babylon* by David Malouf

*Gould's Book of Fish* by Richard Flanagan

*Skins* by Sarah Hay