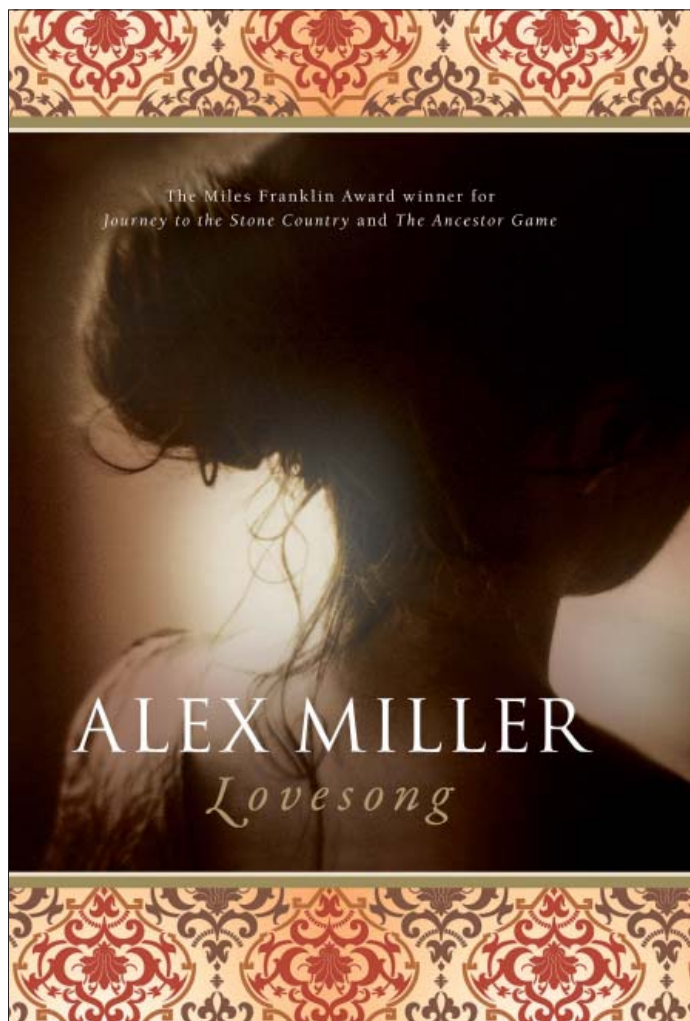


ALLEN & UNWIN



# READING GROUP NOTES

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## About the Book

Seeking shelter in a Parisian cafe from a sudden rainstorm, John Patterner meets the exotic Sabiha and his carefully mapped life changes forever. Resonant of the bestselling *Conditions of Faith*, Alex Miller's keenly awaited new novel tells the deeply moving story of their lives together, and of how each came undone by desire.

Strangers did not, as a rule, find their way to Chez Dom, a small, rundown Tunisian cafe on Paris' distant fringes. Run by the widow Houria and her young niece, Sabiha, the cafe offers a home away from home for the North African immigrant workers working at the great abattoirs of Vaugiraud, who, like them, had grown used to the smell of blood in the air. But when one day a lost Australian tourist, John Patterner, seeks shelter in the cafe from a sudden Parisian rainstorm, a tragic love story begins to unfold.

Years later, while living a quiet life in suburban Melbourne, John is haunted by what happened to him and Sabiha at Vaugiraud. He confides his story to Ken, an ageing writer, who sees in John's account the possibility for one last simple love story. When Ken tells his daughter this she reminds him 'Love is never simple, Dad. You should know that.' He does know it. But being the writer he is, he cannot resist the lure of the story.

Told with all Miller's distinctive clarity, intelligence and compassion, *Lovesong* is a pitch-perfect novel, a tender and enthralling story about the intimate lives of ordinary people. Like the truly great novelist he is, Miller locates the heart of his story in the moral frailties and secret passions of his all-too-human characters.

## About the Author

Alex Miller is one of Australia's best loved and most critically acclaimed 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. *Landscape of Farewell*, published in 2008, was shortlisted for the ALS Gold Medal and the Miles Franklin Award and won the Annual Foreign Novels 21st Century Award from the People's Literature Publishing House in China.

Also in 2008, Alex Miller was awarded the Manning Clark Cultural Award for an outstanding contribution to the quality of Australian cultural life. In 2009, Alex Miller was named as a finalist for the prestigious Melbourne Prize for Literature and his most recent novel, *Lovesong*, was published in November 2009 to great critical acclaim.

## Alex Miller on writing Lovesong

My daughter was visiting us in the country and she and I were sitting by the fire reading. I had finished writing *Landscape of Farewell* a month or so earlier and was without a writing project. I was reading Edward Said's *Musical Elaborations*, an exquisite series of three lectures on a musical theme that Said had given at the University of California in 1989. I was close to the end of the third and last lecture, 'Melody, Solitude, and Affirmation,' when I read the following: "And that memory led me back to Louis Malle's film *Les Amants*, constructed around the relatively innocuous tale of a nameless unknown man happening on a lonely wife (Jeanne Moreau) in the country, and then becoming her lover for a time before he moves on." When I read this I laid the book aside and said to my daughter; 'I think I'll write a simple love story.' My daughter, who was eighteen at the time, answered at once; 'Love's not simple, Dad. You should know that.' The young are wise. I did know it. Love, or at least sensual love, is the most complicated and hazardous of our states of mind.

What I imagined, when I laid Said's little book aside and looked into the flames of the fire, was a man driving along the old gravel road to Lower Araluen, where I once had a farm. The man, who was in a sense the nameless unknown man of Said's memory of the Louis Malle film, was returning to the farm which had once been my own. He was returning after an absence of many years. He was coming back out of curiosity, just to see the old place again. When he came to the farm, the old house below the road and just above the creek flat, he pulled up and sat looking down at the place that had once been his home. A woman was working in a well-tended vegetable garden at the back of the house. He sat watching her for a while, then decided he would go down and make himself known to her.

Before sending the nameless unknown stranger down to the nameless unknown woman in the garden, I asked myself where the man was returning from. As the author of this love story, I believed I should know. Who was this man? He could not be me. I could not bear that. But perhaps he could continue to have something of my background. During the seventies I had lived for a year in Paris. So why couldn't he be an Australian who had gone overseas and, instead of living in London, had lived in Paris? What, I asked myself, might have kept this man in Paris? Was it love? Was he returning to his old home after the breakup of an earlier marriage?

I sold my own farm in the Araluen Valley when I went to live in Paris, invited to go by a woman friend who, when she visited me at Araluen, had seen how jaded I was by my lonely life on the farm. After I'd been living in Paris for a year, I decided I liked it so much I would come home to Australia, sell my house in Melbourne and move back to Paris permanently. When I got home, however, I met a young woman and we fell in love, and instead of selling my house I lived in it with the young woman, who soon became my wife, and eventually the mother of our children. In a sense I gave John Patterner the reverse of my own story. His story is why he stayed, and the life he lived there with his wife, when, like me, he had not intended to stay.

I used to visit a café in Paris called *Chez Max*. I visited it regularly. It was my place for coffee and to eat my evening meal. It was run by a North African, a *Pied Noir*, and many of his clients were North Africans, but it was not exclusively North African and always had a good mixture of people. I liked the easy going atmosphere and the padron made me welcome. Also the other clients were not French and spoke French little better than I did. We got along. We were outsiders in Paris. *Chez Max*, of course, became, with a little twist here and there, the model for *Chez Dom* in this story. The book that became my complicated love story, as my daughter had predicted.

I had visited Tunisia some years before while researching my novel *Conditions of Faith* and had made Tunisian friends. The country and its people have stayed with me and have become part of the vocabulary of my imagination. Tunisia and its people fit easily for me into the Paris I know. When I think of my Paris days I think also of my days in El Djem and Sidi bou Said and the people I knew there. Perhaps one day I shall return to the farm at Lower Araluen and let the unknown and unnamed strangers meet at last. But that's another story!

## Reviews

"It is wonderful, as all your work, full of wisdom and compassion." —Anne Michaels, Orange Prize-winning author of *Fugitive Pieces* and *The Winter Vault*

"As John's story unfolds, so does Ken's desire to take it and refashion it. *Lovesong* is a beautiful novel, very different to Miller's last four books. In some ways it is reminiscent of *Conditions of Faith*, which also had French and Tunisian connections, but it is not only the absolutely gripping story of Sabiha and John that makes this book so interesting, but the experience of the ageing writer, who is sucked back into telling a story. *Lovesong* confirms my view that Miller is one of Australia's best and most interesting writers." —readings.com.au

"The intertwining stories are told with gentleness, some humour, some tragedy and much sweetness. Miller is that rare writer who engages the intellect and the emotions simultaneously, with a creeping effect." —Australian Bookseller & Publisher

"...utterly enthralling... With exceptional skill, Miller records the ebb and flow of emotion. *Lovesong* is a love song to the potential of fiction to imbue private crisis with profound resonance." —Australian Literary Review

'The usual remark to be made about novels that rely on simplicity to generate their effects is that such clarity is deceptive. But with an author such as Miller - whose prose reads clear as running water, and whose insights into the ethics of storytelling, the sadness of ageing and the motions of the heart are laid out with such directness - perhaps simplicity really is the aim and the end. It is the intricate yet enduring mechanism of a successful marriage that is truly complex; Miller's fiction is the pellucid medium through which that complexity gleams.' *The Monthly*

'*Lovesong* explores, with compassionate attentiveness, the essential solitariness of people. Miller's prose is plain, lucid, yet full of plangent resonance ... With *Lovesong*, one of our finest novelists has written perhaps his finest book. Unlike his narrator Ken, Miller gives no sense that this is a farewell, rather than a new beginning.' *The Age*

## Discussion questions

☞ Ken, and Miller's, daughter says "Love's never simple. You know that, Dad." In what ways does Miller explore some of love's many complications?

☞ Dom and Houria 'were both misfits the day they met, and each knew at once, with a fierce instinct, that they would cleave to the other for life... Dom and Houria completed each other' (p.18). And yet, 'Something in Houria was completed by the death of her husband' (p.39). Discuss this development.

☞ Sabiha believes herself destined to be a mother and approaches her seduction of Bruno with a sense of

purpose: 'The time had come for her to take matters into her own hands, just as the woman in her grandmother's old song had done. She could wait no longer but would go and kill her lion.' (p.135) How do you feel about Sabiha's solution – is it understandable and justifiable, or do you find her actions repellent?

☞ How did you feel about Bruno's feelings for Sabiha? Do you think he was 'mastered by his lust', or did his feelings run deeper than that?

☞ To what extent do you think that Sabiha is responsible for Bruno's death?

☞ Were you surprised by John's reaction to Sabiha's confession? Is it the response you expected from his character, or did you expect something different of him?

☞ The notions of home and belonging are repeatedly asserted in this novel:

☞ 'No matter how long she (Sabiha) lived in France, she would always be a stranger here; she and John, strangers both of them. Yet Houria had not been a stranger here' (p.199). How was it, do you think, that Houria made Paris her home and John and Sabiha did not?

☞ Meanings of 'home' change with the passage of time: 'If I went back now, I'd be more alone than I am here,' Houria says of returning to Tunisia after Dom's death (p.35). Where else do you see changes to the idea of 'home'?

☞ What do you think John means when he says, 'There must be things about ourselves we can only know properly when we're at home'? (p.325)

☞ In his review for Readings, Mark Rubbo says "As John's story unfolds, so does Ken's desire to take it and refashion it... it is not only the absolutely gripping story of Sabiha and John that makes this book so interesting, but the experience of the ageing writer, who is sucked back into telling a story". Discuss the writer's experience and its effect upon the shape of the story.

☞ Who owns the story and the right to tell it?

☞ What is the significance of the novel's title, Lovesong? Why do you think Miller chose it?

☞ Do you believe that this is ultimately a 'love story'? Or is it a story of a marriage? Or are they the same thing?

## Suggested reading

☞ Conditions of Faith – Alex Miller

☞ Ancestor Game – Alex Miller

☞ Woman to Man and Woman to Child – Judith Wright