

A space of its own creation

Alex Miller's indispensable new novel

Morag Fraser

AUTUMN LAING

by Alex Miller

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Not since Marguerite Yourcenar's classic *Memoirs of Hadrian* (1951) have I encountered a novel of such bravura intensity and insight into the jagged contours of the human heart.

Autumn Laing opens with a mercurial soliloquy. Over eighteen shimmering pages, the novel's eponymous heroine draws scarcely a breath as, in a soul-scouring torrent, spanning a lifetime while skewering the moment, she conjures the characters who are 'seething in her brain'. Autumn parades her dramatis personae of lovers and artists, loathed family, and beloved friends. She struts her many selves: Cleopatra and crone, artist's muse and scourge, Sybil and hysteric, moral vagabond and seeker after redemption. Haunted by her own mortality and resurgent remorse, she brandishes Tennyson: *Let me thrive me clean, and die.*

Die? Not this character. Not while we still have books and a will to understand the creative and destructive alliances women and men form out of passion, ambition, love, and need.

Miller claims that Autumn Laing's voice swooped into his consciousness while he was sitting on a bench in Holland Park, remembering his London boyhood. He had, he says, long wanted to base a fiction upon the art and life of Sidney Nolan. It was to be a work conceived out of gratitude – homage of a kind – to Nolan, for opening Miller's English eyes to the mystery of Australia's interior, the territory he has since memorably inscribed in *Journey to the Stone Country* (2002) and *Landscape of Farewell* (2007). But the project was hijacked by this importunate voice, this pouncer who carried his story away

home with her. She takes some bearings from the woman whose ambition coalesced with Nolan's and who spurred his art – Sunday Reed, chatelaine of Melbourne's Heide. But Autumn has a life beyond Sunday Reed's span; she is a creature of Alex Miller's own imagining. With her voice in his ear, he flew back to Australia and wrote ten hours a day for a herculean five months (hence the comparison with Yourcenar's white-hot forging in *Hadrian*). *Autumn Laing* is the triumphant result.

Miller allows that his novel draws freely on the lives of Nolan and the Heide circle, and acknowledges his debt to the researches of art historian and Sunday Reed biographer, Janine Burke. But does that mean one should read *Autumn Laing* as a roman-à-clef? Absolutely not. *Autumn Laing* is gloriously and fully realised fiction. In fact the more one reads the sources – on Nolan (including Patrick White's famous dismissal), and the many publications that have analysed the influence of John and Sunday Reed and their fellow artist-champions of Australian modernism – the more distinct and separate Alex Miller's novel seems. Like the bodies in some of Nolan's paintings, it floats free, in a space of its own creation.

'Fiction is the landscape beyond reality and has its own truth, the truth of our intimate lives. The place of empathy.' That is Autumn Laing speaking. But her voice doubles the voice of Alex Miller. And as the character leads the reader in a hectic dance of death and life, so does the author.

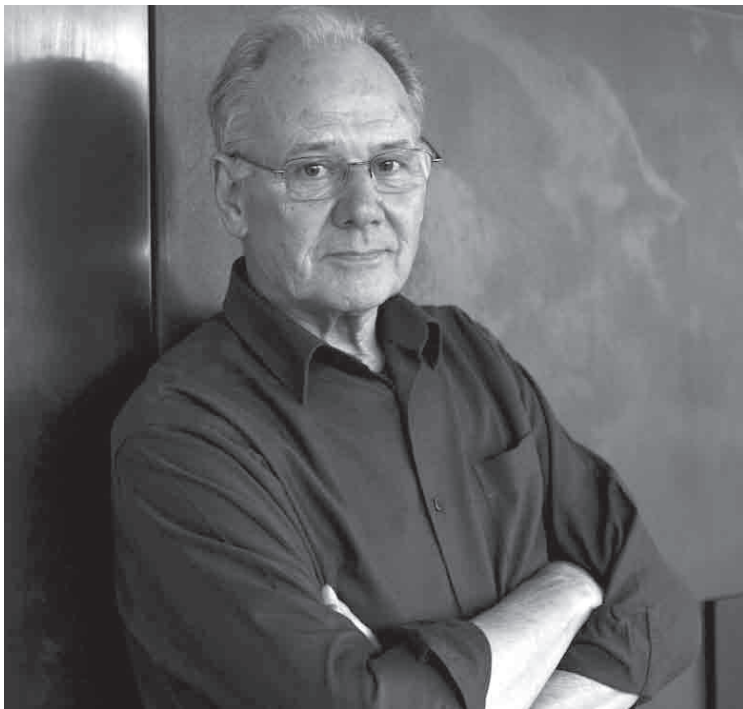
The novel will inevitably provoke controversy and be a juicy prompt for 'who's who?' gallery speculation. Some readers may object, claim misrepresenta-

tion. But most, I hope, will allow themselves clear space in which to hear the authentic voice of a novelist who is wise, canny, and artful enough to tell a story that re-explores and distils answers to the questions that have preoccupied Australians over the past century – questions about identity, about personal and artistic integrity, about passion and commitment. About who we are in the world, and where we are going.

The glory of the novel is that the explorations are so fully embodied in characters who are not just credible, but also smartingly alive. You can see them, smell their breath, argue with their opinions, taste their blood, stare down a wild boar with them, mourn their passing. Autumn herself is cranky, cruel, often vile-tongued – and given scope to be so, because in her various modes she is the novel's dictating voice. But there is always, in her, a whip crack of self-deprecation, a down-to-earth ribaldry and switchback intelligence that rescues her from afflatus. After one passionate cannonade she concludes: 'All foolishness was mine that day.' Her family home was called Elsinore. 'Elsinore! See how I was schooled in grandiosity.' She is imperious and fragile. Beckettian. She can't go on. She must go on.

I remember once having a chance conversation in the foyer of the National Library with Dorothy Hewett – a woman who had always intimidated me. That day the elderly writer with her unapologetically long tresses was sage, witty, and companionable. I treasure that conversation. It did not diminish her, and it beguiled me. Alex Miller writes such formidable women with an uncanny depth of understanding.

The novel's structure is simple but virtuoso, alternating first-person monologue with dispassionate third-person narrative. It begins with Autumn, 'old and skeleton gaunt' at eighty-six, near death but reanimated, so she tells us, by guilt. She has chanced to see Edith Black, the woman who fifty years before lost (or relinquished?) Pat Donlon, her husband, to Autumn, and to the siren of art and ambition. It is Edith, so finely, so scrupulously portrayed, who is the ostensible prompt for what follows – Autumn's memoir and apology. Seek-



Alex Miller (photograph by Edwina Hollick)

ing 'confession and absolution'? Perhaps. But Autumn has always been driven by an impulse 'to probe the rubbish with the toe of my sandal, disturbing the litter in hope (or fear) of something turning up'.

What turns up is a recreation and revision – sometimes a rescuing – of the lives of people she has loved and hated, lives she has devastated. Like her creator, Autumn is ever conscious of the pitfalls of her undertaking, alive to her limitations as she seeks to do justice: 'Here she is then, Edith Black. The best I can do for you. A realist portrait. Realism, that most difficult of styles, filled as it is with intricacy and contradiction.'

And so the novel moves, seamlessly juxtaposing past and present. Autumn writes in secondhand exercise books (their tattiness an affectation she acknowledges), watched over by her biographer, a statuesque (think Aristide Maillol – Miller does) American called Adeli Heartstone ('only an American could possess such a name'). The two women, never friends, become dependent upon one another, bound by ironies. Adeli is given the novel's final (brief) chapter, her 'Editor's Note', in which she contradicts some of Autumn's assurances, adding a further, complicating dimension to the novel. But Miller, ever playful, allows Autumn to anticipate Adeli: 'I've not asked to read anything she has written about me ... let her

struggle with her own truths. I won't influence her with mine. Our truths are written in our hearts and are not a currency of exchange.'

Autumn, christened Gabrielle Louise Ballard (she dubs the capable Adeli 'Bollard'), adopts the name given her by her uncle Mathew, the man who awakened her to poetry and to sexuality. It is characteristic that Miller should license Autumn to cherish rather than suppress or repudiate the memories of her 'darling' uncle's fugitive affections. Human beings are infinitely complex. It is uncle Mathew who identifies for Autumn her signal gift – 'the gift of recognition'.

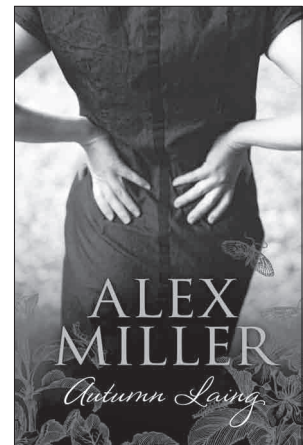
And it is on Pat Donlon, raw, intuitive, untutored ('I can't draw'), hungry-eyed, and ultimately unknowable, that Autumn exercises her gift: 'That was me. I drew him out and encouraged him and shared the mad illusions that made an artist of him. And I paid a terrible price for it. You will hear all about the price I paid before I'm done.' And so we do. We hear about the trio at the novel's centre – Autumn herself, her husband Arthur, caparisoned in impeccable manners, and her 'never deep' but implacable lover, Pat Donlon. And all about the cavalcade of friends who move in and out of their orbit.

The novel is expansive, ambitious. It mines twentieth-century Australian art and life, captures the heady excite-

ment of the modernist debate. It could all have gone badly wrong, tipped over into bathos or pretension. But it never does. Miller maintains the decorum, the intellectual seriousness as well as the glamour. He protects the dignity of his characters even as he peels them back to their most vulnerable, fallible, occasionally risible selves. Arthur and Donlon gain stature as the novel advances, immune from our judgement but demanding of our understanding. The bit players – the habitués of Arthur and Autumn's idyllic 'Old Farm' – are as memorable as the three principals, and so movingly written. Here's my favourite: Barnaby, 'A man of such powdery illusions, such primal gaiety.'

The novel's pace never slackens. Rather, it accelerates into the late, luminous writing about the outback, about art and the Australian imagination, in the chapter set at 'Sofia Station', near Ludwig Leichhardt's Expedition Range. It is here that Donlon finds the spark that ignites the series of paintings, 'Hinterland', that will establish his fame, while Autumn, in a crucible of her own, measures the heat and the consequences of the conflagration she has kindled.

Such riches. All of Alex Miller's wisdom and experience – of art, of women and what drives them, of writing, of men and their ambitions – and every mirage and undulation of the Australian landscape are here, transmuted into rare and radiant fiction. An indispensable novel. ■



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