

# Long Paddock

**Joseph Cummins.**

*Autumn Laing* by Alex Miller.

Alex Miller's novel *Autumn Laing* continues to grow his reputation as one of Australia's finest novelists. In it he provides a detailed and captivating portrait of a tumultuous relationship based on Sunday Reed and Sidney Nolan, and the circle of artists who congregated at John and Sunday Reed's farmhouse Heidi in the late 1930s. Miller's characters, and the dynamic they share, while clearly referencing Reed and Nolan, sit comfortably in the fictional realm; Autumn Laing is a wealthy patron of the arts who is gifted with the ability to recognise talent, and Pat Donlon, searching for confidence and a fresh perspective, is the young artist she chooses to help. Miller has acknowledged that the original motivation for the novel was a long-planned project on the life of Nolan, (Miller often cites a book of photos of the outback, which he later realised were taken by Nolan, as one of his motivations for emigrating to Australia as a teenager to work on cattle stations in "the bush"), but he credits the voice of Autumn as the driving force behind the direction the novel took. Though issues of geographical imagination and artistic rebellion are fascinating elements, the central focus of the novel is Miller's portrayal of Autumn. While her affair with Pat provides many of the most vividly realised scenes in the novels, the narrative is grounded with the Autumn of 1991, who uses the act of writing to sift through the memories of her time with Pat. One of the achievements of Miller's novel is his incisive depiction of the physical and emotional challenges of growing old, a continuation of his exploration of old age seen in 2007's *Landscape of Farewell*.

The tone of Miller's irresistible, effortlessly engaging writing is more often than not perfectly consonant with the bitter-sweet palette of memories that Autumn is

forced to encounter after her ghostly chance-meeting with Edith, one of the main casualties of her affair with Pat. A particularly striking memory emerging from this meeting with the past occurs in Autumn's first recollection of Pat and Edith's home in Ocean Grove; Autumn, looking out the eyes Edith, sees the scene as a painting: "She is a fugitive figure in her own composition." (43) Although the movement between Autumn's past and present can be slightly jarring it does underscore the contrast that is created between the miasmic, sonorous details of her written memories and her sharply pugnacious attitude towards old age and the present.

Reflecting on the genesis of the novel in the intriguingly included "How I Came to Write *Autumn Laing*" (how often does an author provide an explanation for his motivations at the conclusion of the novel?) Miller says, "I don't think I will ever find anyone like her again. She is confident, well informed, passionate, cultivated and very down to earth." (450) Autumn dominates the narrative, and her clearly unreliable narration only enhances the sense that we are getting an intimate insiders perspective on the growth of an artist at a critical stage of his conceptual development.

The mythic elements of the story, such as Autumn's work of artistic recognition and Pat's period of butterfly-like evolution, are not over-played, but are carefully balanced with the damaging realities of Autumn and Pat's affair. Pat's incubation with the explorer journals reminds me of Patrick White's much fabled encounter with the very same material before his return to Australia after World War Two. After reading a section of Leichhardt's explorer journal Pat muses to Autumn on the creative inspiration he is drawing from the narratives of European encounter with Indigenous Australia:

"Isn't it beautiful? Don't you feel it? Out there a thousand miles from another white man and these people seeing Charley coming along. Never having seen anything like him before. Standing up and gazing at him. Can't you just feel the silence of that moment? The whole of Australia is in that silence." He looked down at the book in his lap. "What a great thing that is. That silence. It calls to you, doesn't it?" (356-7)

Although it occupies only a small portion of the novel, Pat and Autumn's visit to a country property (located near the Expedition Rangers mentioned in Leichhardt's journal) is a pivotal event in the artistic life of Pat, and the work that emerges from the trip propels him to national and international fame. The importance of this immersion in the Australian landscape, the "source", is an idea that resounds across a number of Miller's recent novels, including *Journey to the Stone Country* (2002), *Landscape of Farewell*, and his early-career "artist" novel *The Sitters* (1995). By his own admission, it is only in *Autumn Laing* that Miller is able to link up the two streams, of art and landscape, which his work has formed since the publication of his first novel in 1988.

In *Autumn*, Miller has created a finely rendered, complex, and memorable character, one who brings to life the fabled space of the Heidi-inspired "Old Farm" with its group of artists and poets. Her reflections on the space of the Australian outback make a compelling contribution to the ever-expanding horizon of work by writers, musicians, filmmakers, artists, and critics who seek to grasp the space of the Australian landscape.

...in truth the outback is not a place but is the Australian imagination itself. It is always elsewhere. A steady thunder of silence is imposed on the inhabitants of this island by the impossible weight of isolation in space and history. The truth is not admissible, so we deny it. Pat saw the truth, grasped it intuitively, and painted it during those few extraordinary days in the machinery shed at Sofia Station. (414-5)

*Autumn Laing* is a kind of *kunsterroman*, not only for the young artist Pat Donlon, but also the landscape imaginary of post-colonial Australia. The novel bridges the divide between Miller's "art" and "landscape" novels, continuing his exploration of art, fiction and memory, and the landscape of the mind.