



MULLUMBIMBY

by Melissa Lucashenko

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INTRODUCTION

‘Sit, and look, and listen, them things that lie at the heart of being proper blackfella. Dadirri. Sit still long enough and you see everything clear, bub, Aunty Barb had promised, a fishing line welded to her aged hand. Sit until the superficial bullshit falls away – but, ah, sit still long enough, you make yourself a target at the same time. That dadirri be a two-edged sword, my aunt.’ (p 12)

In Melissa Lucashenko’s *Mullumbimby* she weaves a complex and delicate web of meaning, with big ideas expressed in minutely constructed language. The novel begins and ends with a line referencing Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*. It is at its heart about love, connections to home, country and place, and the fierce bonds between parent and child, spouses and lovers, ancestors and descendents. It traverses the battleground between Aboriginal and white cultures in Australia and also between Aboriginal groups. Melissa is a writer of immense intellectual rigour, passionate conviction and stylistic grace. Words, ideas and feelings matter in equal measure and so does the ironic humour that imbues her writing. *Mullumbimby* is the Aboriginal name of a town in northern New South Wales, and in this simple descriptor as its title the novel lays claim to the fact that the land is marked by its history, as are its people – both black and white.

THE STORY

Thirty-five-year-old Jo Breen, while working at a cemetery as a groundskeeper, buys a farm located in her Aboriginal people’s country. ‘Unbelievably, she and her brother Stevo had together bought back a patch of Bundjalung land, reclaimed a fragment of their country.’ (p 30) Her thirteen-year-old daughter Ellen isn’t impressed with being taken away from the city and her friends, but Jo has confidence that they’ve made the right move. ‘She’d circled right around the hideous politics of colonial fallout, and bought back the ancestral land herself.’ (p 42) She has a few close friends nearby who support her, but is essentially a loner, still recovering from the fallout of her failed marriage and divorce from Paul, and also from the death of her parents in a car accident when she was a child. Her sister Kym lives elsewhere, but her visits with her gorgeous sons Timbo, Kai and Jarvis and husband Jason offer much needed sustenance.

Jo is also a gifted singer and songwriter, but has buried those talents in order to survive, as she struggles with the work entailed in holding down two jobs. Then the gorgeous Twoboy Jackson arrives with his brother Lazarus, with land rights on their agenda, and Tin Wagon Road and the surrounding valley in their sights. In order to lay claim to this country, though, they are up against local owners the Bullockheads and the Watts. And when Jo falls for Twoboy, things get complicated. Broken into three parts (headed sequentially: Jagan

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Country Ch 2; Gwong Rain Ch 7; Njanjargali Lies Ch10) this book is about land and nature; about Jo's love for animals such as warrigal and yarraman; about the language of birds and about the secrets of the sacred places. Jo loses her beloved colt Comet and senses strange messages from the landscape. She's not sure who to trust. Twoboy? Starr? Sam? Humbug? Granny? A cast of iconic characters, who are artfully inscribed in this thematically sprawling work in a very concise way, people Lucashenko's saga. The story is contained within the perimeters of sharp, lyrical and incisive language. This novel is about a search for home and country and about really seeing the truth around you.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Melissa Lucashenko is an Australian writer of European and Goorie heritage. She received an honours degree in public policy from Griffith University in 1990 and published her first novel, *Steam Pigs*, in 1997. It won the Dobbie Literary Award for Australian women's fiction and was shortlisted in the New South Wales Premier's Literary Awards and regional Commonwealth Writers' Prize. *Steam Pigs* was followed by the Aurora Prize-winning *Killing Darcy*, a novel for teenagers, and *Hard Yards*, which was shortlisted for the 2001 *Courier-Mail* Book of the Year and the New South Wales Premier's Literary Awards. *Too Flash*, a teenage novel about class and friendship, was released in 2002. Melissa lives between Brisbane and the Bundjalung nation.

DISCUSSION NOTES

1. This novel reveals the frustrations felt by descendents of elders who knew their lore, and how difficult it is to get that knowledge and their country back. Aboriginal people's sense of loss is evinced by Jo's frustration. Discuss with reference to the following three quotes:

'It rains here, thought Jo, entranced by the spectacle, as if the gods are trying to wash away some terrible story, wash away the blood in the rivers, wash away the names of the true owners of this place ... But how do you buy back a tribe? Where do you shop for a mob to call your own?' (p 82)

"Ah, we all know fuck all really," Jo agreed, feeling a tension she hadn't been aware of instantly drain away, "us young ones. My aunty, not my blood aunty, other way, she had the names for the constellations, the whole bloody lot, in two or three different languages. And she could tell you exactly where every single star was – in the daytime. But she went and died before I was old enough to really listen." (p 60)

'Look at that hill. I dunno for sure, but I reckon Mum's old people, a lotta our old people, gotta be buried up there ... Heal it. Sing it. And maybe then our old people might rest easy for once. That's what the court case is about.' (p 165)

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2. Humour imbues this novel from the opening paragraph, a clever pastiche of the opening line from Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. Other examples include: 'It was a constant mystery, how she and Ellen could live on top of each other in an eighteen-foot metal box and still things managed to get lost. Sardine Dreaming.' (p 7); 'Talk about wikileaks, they had nothing on Ocean Shores Primary.' (p 33); 'Well, just don't come running to me when you break your leg.' (p 103); 'But I must say I'm not hearing the dharma here.' 'I'm a Buddhist, luvvy, I never said I was a fucken saint.' (p 203) How important is humour in the novelist's articulation of its thematic concerns?

3. 'Horses and dogs were the people for her; her favourite humans all lived in the pages of novels.' (p 5) This novel is full of literary references: Austen (p 1), Whitman (p 5), Molly Bloom (p 61), 'she was Sisyphus with earmuffs' (p 160), Bilbo Baggins (p 244). How many more references did you discover to literature, music, or art? Discuss these quotes in the context of the novel's themes.

4. The destructive effects of early white invasion are raised throughout this novel. Jo is rescuing her land by destroying introduced species such as the camphor laurels and lantana. Discuss with reference to the following two quotes: 'The Big Scrub would have towered where the Mills and the Garrards now lay under green mottled marble, the rainforest still healthy and filled with animals and birdlife, not yet doomed by the axes of men who – months or years from anything they thought of as home – had tried to slash and log and burn their way into freedom here.'(p 6) 'Rodents in the storeroom were a small price to pay to know that *mulanyin* wasn't hunting carcinogenic frogs in the roadside ditch; to see the parrots and fairy-wrens and butcherbirds on the farm and know that their eggs wouldn't fracture in a mess of poisoned fragments before the chicks had a chance to hatch. Long Live the Mullum Organic Rodent, Jo insisted to Basho's bafflement – although she wouldn't have said no to an occasional visit from a deadly organic cat.' (p 149)

5. White invasion introduced the concept of restrictive physical and legal boundaries. Discuss with reference to the following two quotes:

'The word trespassing out of a dugai mouth didn't sit happily with her.' (p 26)

'As she drove from the farm into Mullum each morning, she ruminated on the clear fact that the country roads she travelled were lined with fences, boundaries, impenetrable borders ... to lace the country tight, using bitumen and wire and timber to bind their gift of a continent to themselves.' (p 133)

6. Relationships between various Aboriginal groups can be just as poisonous as those between some white people and some Aboriginal groups, when the ownership of land is being contested. Discuss with reference to the following four quotes:

'Therese had no idea what went down between blackfellas when land was at stake. Think Gaza, she warned her. Think Custer's Last Stand.' (pp 33-4)

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“Hang on,” Jo said slowly, looking at Chris and aware that now she perhaps was being a little bit of a pollyanna. “I thought you Lawmen were supposed to take care of everything on your country. No exceptions.” “And?” Twoboy looked blank. The idea that the Bullockheads were a part of his country had never once entered his head.’ (p 224)

“It’s a fulltime job, Native Title, eh?” she said. “It’s driving Jason’s family mad too. Shitfights everywhere you look. First cousins not talking after fifty years, brothers bashing brothers, it’s Colonisation 4.0. The dugai don’t have to lift a finger anymore – they’ve outsourced it to us.”(p 234)

“Listen, pollyanna, this might look like a fight with lawyers in a fancy courtroom, but really it’s a war. You got that? A war, not a game, over the same thing that war’s always been over anywhere in the world – country. And the sooner you realise that, the sooner you’ll work out where I stand, and why.” (p 222) Discuss.

7. ‘And just like that, Jo felt the hard carapace of her resistance begin to flake and crumble away. Years worth of armour fell from her tender heart. Great slabs of steel and granite hit the wooden floorboards and shattered into fragments there. Jo sat, wondering, among the shards. This isn’t happening. A black prince rocking up at the Billi on a Friday night, quoting the Coens at her.’ (p 44) This is a poignantly suggestive description of Jo’s romantic feelings for Twoboy. Discuss the love story at the heart of this novel.

8. ‘The dream she had fucked up all on her own with her cold anger and her rages and her disappearing to gigs; her refusal to let Paul in; her immense self-loathing that told her constantly that whatever she had was never, never enough. That she was bad, and if anyone dared to love her, it was simply evidence that they, too, were deeply and irrevocably flawed.’ (p 88) Jo admits here that the failure of her marriage wasn’t one-sided. This is the first step in both her healing and her ability to embark on another love affair. Discuss.

9. Magical or spiritual beliefs are referred to in enigmatic statements such as: ‘Circles protect you if you let them, girl. But you gotta let em. Gotta not get in their way.’ (p 22); in the ancient voices in forest (p 97); in Ellen’s second sight (p 107); and in Jo’s fear that she is seeing a sign when the bird lands in front of her (pp 209-10). ‘That hidden part of the culture, Jo shivered – no, he could keep it. If there were secrets in the hills, mooki, ancestors holding sacred knowledge and secrets, well then let them stay where they bloody well were.’ (p 211) The strange topography discovered on Ellen’s hands seems another ‘sign’: ‘Before almost anything. Ellen’s been carrying the entire valley around with her for thirteen years, unknowing. Jo thought wildly. I gave birth to the valley.’ (p 246) But Granny Nurrung knows better. Jo finally learns from Granny (pp 263-4) that the lyrebirds were mimicking the ‘talga’ which they’d heard the old people sing. This is a moment of revelation for the reader, but then, one recalls the comic scene in which Twoboy teaches the parrot his words (p 199). Lucashenko’s novel cunningly conceals clues to its meaning in conjunctions like this, which are either explained, or obscured as necessary. Granny says the map on Ellen’s hands is just ‘the Lord’s way of bringing your girl home to country.’ (p 276) which might be a bathetic explanation or a

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deliberately obscure one. The apparent looseness of this writing disguises Lucashenko's clever inventions as an astute and complex writer. Discuss.

10. Uncle Freddy Humbug is one of the most intriguing characters in this book. Discuss in reference to this quote:

'Humbug smiled a humourless smile that didn't reach his eyes, and allowed the contempt he felt for this imposter to show on his lips. The fool didn't realise he had been born into war ... And now this cheeky dugai, standing there with a wire rope to twist around his brother's neck, ready and all too willing to effect another removal, wanted to know what war he'd been in? Well. "This one," cried Humbug, shattering the Snakeman's nose with his hard right fist.' (p 177)

11. 'It was an old story: apparently Jo had endless time and compassion for the world, sans Ellen – but not for her, who had to be as stolid and tough as Jo herself was, and who had better not require affection more than once every blue moon. "It's not fair," howled the murderous two-year-old inside Ellen's chest. "Not fair at all."' (p 151) In the vicinity of our parents, do we ever really grow up?

12. "Nothin. Forget it." Put other people first. Make me feel like an accident, an afterthought. The freak mistake that killed your music and ruined your life.' (p 151) Was Ellen the reason Jo gave up music, or was it simply her own self-doubt which forced her to do it?

13. 'Watching Therese walk past the bees and join in Ellen's game, Jo felt winded by the man's sudden harsh commentary, not least because it was true. On some level she did expect betrayal, heartbreak and agony. Not because her lover was Twoboy, but because he was alive, and that's what living people – men, mainly – did in this world. They used you up, hurt you, took your trust and affection and betrayed you. And if they didn't, then you did it to them, often automatically, without even meaning to. Her divorce had taught her that.' (p 164) Jo's response to men is shared by many divorced women. Discuss.

14. 'Winter wattle made a sensational necklace for the roads as Jo and Therese headed down the highway. Fragrant balls of blossom exploded in lemon and buttercup yellow and gold everywhere she looked, and ten thousand daw poorfellas were no doubt sneezing miserably into their indoor hankies.' (p 169) Discuss Lucashenko's gift with descriptive language in other passages which were particularly resonant for you.

15. The arts are important in this family (Jo's music, Ellen's art and Timbo's writing) and in Aboriginal culture. Discuss.

16. 'The animals, Jo reflected, they're the ones who know the country more than any of us ever will. They have no rights and yet all the deep, deep knowledge is written in their muscles and their bones.' (p 182) Discuss.

17. Lucashenko questions the presumptions people sometimes make based on first impressions rather than

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really investigating a person's situation. Jo's suspicions about Starr prove ill-founded when she discovers that he's been helping Sam and the Nurrungs; she didn't like Granny Nurrung's Christian zeal, and so failed to recognise her Aboriginal spirituality; she also failed to recognise Humbug's connections to the Nurrungs. Discuss.

18. The arrogance of the wealthy tourist who stops and asks Jo to pose for photos (p 208) is indicative of the widespread ignorance of sightseers who travel through other people's land. It's particularly galling to someone like Jo whose labour is making her property what it is, and who has deep connections to this land. Discuss.

19. 'With her palms on Ellen's shoulders, she was a thousand black women, ten thousand black women, a mighty army of Goorie women who had been holding their jahjams safely on this same spot for tens of thousands of years.' (p 250) Aboriginal women seem to have borne more than their share of the load. Discuss.

20. 'Kalwunybah. Liarbird place,' said Granny Nurrung softly. 'That talga you bin hearing, that's the liarbird singing out to you, calling you. He telling you that you found the right jagan there, you and your girl. Telling you you're home.' (p 276) This novel is about a search for home. Discuss.