**Ideas and Society**

**Bendigo Writers’ Festival**

**Alex Miller**

**Raimond Gaita**

To start I want to acknowledge that the city of Greater Bendigo is on the Dja Dja Wurrung and Taungurung country, whose ancestors and their descendants are the traditional owners of this country. We acknowledge that they have been the custodians for many centuries and they continue to perform age-old ceremonies of celebration, initiation and renewal, and we acknowledge their living culture and their unique role in the life of this region.

I’m Rai Gaita and I’m incredibly pleased to be here with my dear friend Alex, talking about some books that I love. There are three books that are identified, and Alex identifies as his Queensland … central Queensland, novels. The first one is *Journey to the Stone Country*, then *Landscape of Farewell* and *Coal Creek*, and you can see I’ve really done my homework. When I’m not doing my homework, I read. I read these books for the first time, but I’ve got all these little stickies in them, which is good, but I don’t know which sticky refers to what.

But I want to start off reading something from *Landscape of Farewell* because it captures something beautiful about the quality of Alex’s writing, not just the bit I’m going to read, but just more generally, and it’s in a section where a warrior, Gnapun, is leading some indigenous fighters to what he knows to be a massacre of white settlers who have desecrated the land in their sense of things. And I just want to read you this passage.

Gnapun has observed that [the leader of the white settlement, who’s a devout Christian] sometimes rides far into the scrub to the south of the cape during the heat of the day and he knows that he goes in search of a sign at the approach of his brothers and their party, hoping they’ll soon arrive to strengthen him against his father. Gnapun says nothing of this to the others, but falls silent. Looking over the assembled warriors, he senses their eagerness for him to inspire them with a hot desire to kill the strangers (the strangers being the settlers). And so he addresses them with the words that come naturally to his heart at this moment and which he is well satisfied will arouse their spirits with the fierce heat that’s required if a man is to kill another human being, which he knows is not an easy thing to do. We’re not going to leave a single one of them alive, he cries out and he shakes the long shaft of his favourite spear until it hums many singing and fills the air above the waterhole with the sound of the great red hornet, promising the fiery sting of battle. ‘We’re not going to leave a single one of them alive,’ he cries, ‘down to the babies in their mothers’ wombs. Not even they must live. The whole people must be wiped out of existence. And none to be left to think of them and shed a tear.’

Gnapun turns to the tall messenger who stands at his side and he lays his hand on the messenger’s shoulder and offers him the privilege of killing the leader son, whose hand is never far from his gun. The tall messenger smiles and the young men look at him with respect and envy, eager to see on the day, who he performs his task. ‘I shall deal with the leader myself,’ Gnapun says,’ for he and I are brothers and we know this is the way it is to be decided between us.’

That leads to this passage which I particularly wanted to read to you.

The young men possessed a kind of vague poetic sense of what Gnapun might mean by this puzzling claim, to be the brother of the leader of the strangers. They do not ask him for any further explanation of his meaning, for they trust that if he wished them to have a fuller sense of his extraordinary claim at this time, he would give it to them, without them needing to ask it from hi. They are confident that one day the fullness of Gnapun’s meaning would become clear to them. One day, if they survived the battle, long after these events, when they are old men and walking alone through their own country thinking of nothing in particular, an understanding of Gnapun’s meaning will suddenly blossom in their minds like the rare flower of the moon tree that blooms only once in a man’s lifetime and they will know what Gnapun meant when he stood before them and told them the leader of the strangers and he were brothers.

I think you’ll agree that that’s just a very beautiful piece of writing but it resonates at so many levels and one of the reasons I thought I’d pick it, is because … I’ll just read you now one paragraph of something I wrote in an essay about *Landscape of Farewell*, a book of essays in Alex’s honour.

In the year since I first read *Landscape of Farewell*, I’ve done what Gnapun’s messengers did. I have trusted Alex and his words, knowing them to be wise words, words that come from the deep understanding and love of humanity. I did not interrogate them. I allowed them to enter, in their own way and time, into my own feelings and thoughts about the Holocaust, about Australia's indigenous peoples, and about what it can mean to be terrified by the suspicion that someone one loves might be guilty of terrible crimes by deed or by omission. It was, as I always knew it would be, trust rewarded.

That expresses the way I have felt about a lot of Alex’s writings and you can read it – it’s all … you can read it at one level and skate … not skate through it, but be excited by it and read through it all the time, because it often has such wonderful and exciting and suspenseful qualities. But it has so many different layers of meaning, such that when you’re puzzled about it, you can either try to press it or to, as the men in that passage, to trust that as you live your life, these words will resonate through your life and your understanding of their subject will deepen.

So one of the reasons I think this is possible with Alex’s work, why it has that real depth and why so many people often ask especially about his description of the North Queensland landscape and the indigenous peoples there and the white settlers who’d been there, how he has managed to do it so well, to capture it so truthfully, in so much detail. Then it would seem to me that one reason that this is so, is, and I’ll let Alex talk about that, one reason it is so, is that at a certain time when he was a young writer, a man who had great influence on his life, said after reading Alex’s first attempt at a novel, which this man apparently didn’t care for too much, Alex says that he’d given this man, whose name is Max Blatt, the novel to read, that Max had read in a day and an evening, and that Alex woke up one morning, with a thud as he threw it out, as Max threw it out, the novel, next to Alex’s ear in bed, and said ‘why don’t you write about what you love?’ and the imperative implicit in that question, and it was an imperative, a rhetorical question, is I think what … Alex has honoured that imperative, been obedient to that imperative, shows in the fact that its love in his writing that gives it its particular quality of truthfulness and of course such observe of detail, because if you love something, you tend to, closely. Alex?

**Alex Miller**

No, just keep going Rai. There’s nobody I would rather hear talk about my work than Rai, and Rai and I haven’t colluded on this particular meeting. We haven’t talked about, until we just met up in the Green Room, then, before coming on, we didn’t talk about what we were going to talk about. We just … Rai said he wanted to talk about these books and I said, good. And Rob Manne had asked us would you do that? And we both said, yes. That’s it. That was it. There was no preparation.

But in fact I had prepared something rather similar to what Rai has just said, in the sense of just a couple of bits of text that I wanted to highlight for a couple of reasons, that Rai himself has now covered in his own way. And when Rai wrote that piece for the symposium a couple of years ago, in Sydney, he begins it by saying, apologetically, I’m not a literary critic. No, thank God for that, because also what he has to say is from the heart, and it stands the test of time and reflection, as things from the heart usually do.

That particular piece that Rai read, that Gnapun … Gnapun is quoting the father of Western poetry – Homer, when he says we’re not going to leave a single one of them alive, not even the babies in their mothers’ wombs. It’s from *The Iliad*. It was written nearly 3,000 years ago. That is in an earlier … it’s also in the novel. It’s an ironic statement coming from him, coming this Aborigine. There’s a vast wealth of irony involved in the fact that I give those words to him, as a person, as a poet, as a man to be celebrated, not perhaps by Western people but certainly by indigenous people. And when those two celebrations coincide, that is when things begin to make a bit of sense.

Some people have wondered why did you use this quote from *The Iliad*. It’s in the early part of the book on page 13. I was just going to read it, so I know what page it was on. And it’s quoted by this professor, Max Otto, who is a professor of German history and he gives a lecture on massacre, without mentioning the Holocaust of course, and he chooses a passage from the father of Western poetry. He says, ‘here’s the words of the father of our poetry’. And that was there not to make a comparison with the Holocaust, there is nothing to which we can compare the Holocaust. It is unique in a very specific way. But what he does is to demonstrate if you like, to his German audience and to others visiting, including an Australian woman, that the Holocaust has asked us this vast question, to which we have no answer, and that is, can … until the Holocaust it was assumed that … and even in my childhood, and I was born in 1936, before the war. Even in my childhood, the sense that we were making progress, humanity was making some moral progress, was pretty well implicit in all historical writing. In much historical writing. Very, very few historians, sociologists and biographers, really … I mean, there were famous books like *Decline of the West* and those books, but there was a sense in which we were making moral progress. Certainly our teachers considered that to be the case.

The Holocaust asked the question, is it possible for humanity, for humankind, to make moral progress, because here we are, 3,000 years after *The Iliad*, after the writing of *The Iliad*, and we’ve made no progress at all.

So that was the reason it’s there. Not as a comparison, but as a reflection on the failure of humankind to have made any moral progress during that time. Despite Christianity. Rai and I will disagree about this, but I say despite Christianity.

The other thing, I suppose I got some … I just want to read perhaps a couple of these things. I was fortunate … I’ll just read this because I said it, I wrote it here, rather than just saying it off the cuff now, but it’s really important to me that I was fortunate to come of age in Australia as a boy of sixteen, when my fellow people of my age were doing Year 11 and 12, and getting ready to go to the university, I arrived alone in Australia and went up north to work on cattle stations, and the Aborigines who I contacted then were tribal people. They hadn’t had equal pay, so they weren’t removed yet from their land. They were still on their tribal land, and I was fortunate to come of age in Australia at a time and in a place where Aborigines weren’t viewed as a dying race, as they were in the cities of the south in the ‘50s, but were abundant in numbers and were at the very centre of the work that I was undertaking.

So that was my first impression of Australia and of Australian Aborigines. I knew nothing about racism or the history of the sense that these people are a dying race, which of course they’re not.

For Australians of my generation, there are these two things that Rai has immediately locked on to in these books, and they pervade our emotions and our attitudes and the way we experience art and life. The Holocaust is one of these things, to which we have no answer and no understanding, and the confusion of childhood feelings of guilt and shame that we associate with it, certainly I do, that will never leave us.

And another is the terrible price that Australian indigenous people have been required to pay for the prosperity and the opportunities enjoyed by people such as me. I’m a beneficiary of the dispossession.

As a novelist, it’s not possible … I can’t see how it can be possible for me as a novelist and a thinking person, to write as if these two things didn’t exist and weren’t part of my life. They are embedded too deeply in my experience and my psyche, so I can’t help writing about them.

Part of the job of a novelist, it seems to me, is to do that sort of thing, to write about what you love and what exercises your sense of community.

**Raimond Gaita**

In a moment, I’d like to talk about a journey to the stone country, but since we are talking a little bit about the Holocaust, one of the things that I think is truly remarkable about *Landscape of Farewell* is that it’s a very deeply reflective novel. It reflects about the massacre of white people by Gnapun and his warriors and indeed, sort of celebrates Gnapun as a great general, implicitly decrying the fact that this has not been recognised, and I know that the massacre that was the template for this was one, often talked about, but derided in Queensland.

But, it is as Alex said, it’s about a German historian who tries but can’t write about massacre, who’s desperately afraid in a way … desperate to find out but desperate also to avoid finding out, the truth about what his father did in the Holocaust, and the massacre on the one hand by Gnapun, where he speaks those terrible words, but those words are then nestled in the remark that his brothers, which of course Menelaus in *The Iliad*, could never have said. The tone in which those exact same words are said by Menelaus as he’s about to head off to sack Troy and the way in which Gnapun speaks are utterly different in their spirit, but when we hear that terrible reference to the people – they must not survive, of course that does immediately bring up thoughts about the Holocaust, the attempt to exterminate the Jews, wherever it was possible to do it.

But again, nothing remotely connected to the spirit of Gnapun’s [transcript unclear] because they were conceived to be vermin, partly because in some sense of other, they could be thought to be brothers. And the novel is reflective about what it means to tell the truth about these things, especially what it might mean to tell the truth in a story.

But this is the remarkable achievement. In none of that deep reflectiveness in this book, and this is true of all of Alex’s books, but it’s most remarkable here because this is so obviously one of the most reflective of his books, there’s not a trace of didacticism. And so the Holocaust comes in and then there’s the thought about what happened to the indigenous peoples, what happened to them, and what they did, and somehow each of these stories deepens the other. They’re there in the book together, but not ever sort of compared, and that’s partly why I actually said at the beginning, that if you were to ask, well, what does Alex Miller think about the relation to what happened to the indigenous peoples and also what they did, and what happened in the Holocaust, you would have to unpack all this very, very slowly, it having deepened in you through you trusting the story and through trusting whatever connections emerge as a consequence of that trusting. That’s what I feel is so wonderful and so remarkable about this – most reflective novels also have traces of a didacticism in them, especially when they tackle such big and great themes as Alex does in *Landscape*. And there’s not a trace of didacticism. He is the least didactic of writers.

But perhaps in the case of J*ourney to the Stone Country*, there’s also a terrible discovery by one of the characters, of what her grandfather was involved in, the killings of indigenous peoples, and that awakening in her comes in a story told to her by a woman and it’s told very, very brutally and with great hatred and bitterness, and I thought we might talk a little bit about that and maybe I could read a little bit, or you read a little bit, about Panya’s … perhaps you could briefly tell us what leads up to … I know it takes hundreds of pages in the novel, to what leads up to her extraordinary speech in this book, which is just spellbinding and shocking and frightening.

**Alex Miller**

Thanks, Rai. I think as you suggested, it takes a while to lead up to Panya’s final revelations and her accusations of the hero in a sense of the novel, which is Bo Rennie, if you’ve read it, he’s the guy who in a sense the book is really about, and he’s a friend of mine, Col McLennan, and he is the bloke who really got me to write that book, and it was a journey that I undertook with him and with Annabelle.

But Panya exposes him, the hero in a sense, Col, Bo, as being a fraud, as being less than a complete Jangga man. His grandmother, she says, was the last woman to be born, to be given birth to, in the stone country, and he has let down the people, she says, this woman, to see me and this woman’s grandfather. I remember him. I remember him, she says, he’s the one who did it, he and his mates, they went out there and they killed the boys, and they killed the girls. We hid in an old dried-up dead bullock, we hid in the carcass, in the framework, in the rib cage, and we saw them doin’ it. And she accuses him of betraying them.

So this is part of the politics, I suppose, that I came across in travelling with Col and Liz, in the north, up in the highlands there, beautiful country where I worked as a boy, and Col had said come on up and I’ll show you me country. And that was what the book was. It was the story of our travels at that time, and I left myself out of it, of course.

And Col is exposed as a bit of a dandy, sort of fancies himself a bit, rolls a smoke and stands there with his cowboy hat, just tilted nicely back a little bit, you know, winks at the girls, and he also is going around with this white woman, who is relations back in the old days. He’s about joining in, being part of society the way it is today. Not reconciliation, none of them believe in reconciliation, that’s a white idea, so that we don’t have to recompense them, which is much more expensive and trying and difficult for us to do. Remember our good mate Rudd, when he was trying to get elected in Queensland, I was going around Queensland at the same time, spruiking my book as he was going around spruiking his party and himself. And Howard had just said, I’ll give you 37 billion dollars refund on your taxes, and Rudd said, oh, I’ll give you 34 billion. And I thought what a visionary we’re about to get, you know, what an opportunity was there for somebody to seriously put forward for the first time in our history, a new plan for righting the wrongs, for recompensing, for creating genuine educational facilities, genuine work situations and genuine health situations, on a par with our own. The kind of thing that 34 billion dollars could start looking serious about. But no, it was to come back to us, the middle class people who were already enjoying good clean stuff and having good fun. And I thought then, that’s when I first called him Rudd the dud, on Queensland, and we were sort of following each other around, and presumably he hated my guts. Good. I hope he did. Very glad to see him go.

Why am I talking about Australian politics? Well, if my publisher were here and she’s not, thankfully, she would be starting to get a little bit annoyed because I haven’t mentioned *Coal Creek*.

Well, I don’t think these are opportunities, really, for spruiking your book so much. I kind of disagree with the idea that writing festivals are really sales conferences. I think they’re for talking about the things that you’ve spent your life involved with and the values that you’re dealing with, rather than simply the latest book, and why it’s better than all the others. But anyway, that’s all right. And Australian politics is part of it, isn’t it? How can one possibly escape from the way in which the country is governed and the sort of vision that is brought to the governing of the country by the various people we elect, and thankfully we can get rid of them again, as we do.

Rai is trying to get this back off me so …

**Raimond Gaita**

I want … I just want to read you this wonderful … it’s frightening.

Panya crows with laughter. No, see, too busy, big note – this is about Col, as Alex describes him. Too busy, big-noting yourself around them white people to see nothin’. Your grandma seen it wasn’t worth telling you nothin’. We been waiting for you, Bo Rennie, we knew you was comin’ back. That Beck woman (that’s Annabelle in the story, with whom Col has fallen in love actually, and she, Annabelle, with him). That Beck woman you got with, you must got down on her knees to you, did she? Covered her hair in dust and tore off her shirt and begged you to forgive her for what her people did to our people. That’s how come you got her with you. She begged you to forgive you for the killing, busting open the skull of my poor little brother. She laughed and coughed, choking on her tears before regaining her breath. No one never came here and asked me to forgive ‘em. I never heard nothin’ from none of them. They knew where I was livin’ all these years but not one of them, Becks or Biggs, ever come by and asked me to forgive ‘em. All they want to do is forget. They want us to believe the bad times is over and we’ve all got to be friends now. Only they got everything for themselves and they’re not giving it back. That’s what the white man now wants, peace for himself and that’s what you’re gonna give him. But that’s not what I’m going to give him. Let’s all be friends he says, as if nothin’ every happened, and if some of us don’t want to be friends, we’re a trouble to him, and in the wrong again.

She was silent. There’s gonna be no peace for him. I’m used to being in the wrong so it doesn’t matter to me. I gave him the slip a long time ago and he won’t catch me now. We’re different from them boy, and we’re always gonna be different from them and you know that Bo Rennie. The white men never want to hear nothin’ about what’s different from him. What’s different don’t interest him. He don’t see it. He don’t know how to respect what’s different from him. He just want to explain everything his own way and forget what he’s done but I’m never gonna forget. He thinks he’s got nothin’ to fear from a broken down all Jangga woman like me, but that’s the mistake he made before. He just making it again, the same mistake, that’s what he does. He thinks it’s all over. He thinks he won.

She cackled. You forget and you’re one of them. As good as a murderer of your own people. Is that you Bo Rennie? Do they forget their own dead? Well, they don’t. Look at that Gallipoli stuff they go on about. They don’t forget. So what makes them think that we’re gonna forget?

Now you get out of Panya’s house. This story’s not over yet. The old people not finished yet. They’re gonna fight this war for another thousand years. Where’s the white fella gonna be in a thousand years? He’s the one gotta worry about that, not us. We still gonna be here.

Very powerful writing. I want to talk to Alex about that passage, but let me just give the highest praise that can be given of it. It was again at this conference, and Frank Budby, who was, as it was, the prototype for Dougald, in *Landscape of Farewell*. Dougald also in *Journey to the Stone Country*. And there’s a conversation between Dougald and Annabelle was there, Liz Hatte. Col unfortunately couldn’t be there but so Elizabeth Webby asks this question about that very confronting, as she rightly puts it, confronting passage. It’s very confronting but it’s also an incredible character. So is there an original for Panya? We’ve heard about the others and Frank had been saying how wonderfully accurate these portraits are. He says, it’s fiction, but I recognised them straight away. And I had so say, as soon as I saw Col McLennan I knew him straight away from Alex’s portrait of Bo Rennie.

And this is what Frank Budby says.

I think she’s a conglomeration for want of a better word. I don’t know all the fancy words like some academics. Yeah, a conglomeration of a lot of different people that Col had talked to Alex about around the campfire. I have an idea who it is, but I can’t sort of talk about it. She’s passed on now.

Elizabeth Webby

I’m just being an ignorant white person who wants to get too much knowledge. Alex Miller.

Alex comes in. Well, as one ignorant white person to another one, when I wrote the Panya section, which took me totally by surprise, I said to Col, I don’t know where she came from. And he said, the old people gave her to you, old mate. And I think that’s as good an explanation as I’m going to get. It’s not only as good an explanation, it’s the highest praise that could possibly have been given, to Alex, by his dear friend, now passed away, Frank.

But it ain’t over yet is what Panya says, and I remember Alex telling me that when there was talk of reconciliation, Frank Budby said to you Alex, it ain’t over yet.

**Alex Miller**

Well, I’m giving a lecture at the new Docklands library on the 23rd of August and I’ve given the title, The Story’s Not Over Yet, which is quoting Frank and this book *Landscape of Farewell* that Rai has been talking about, is dedicated to Frank Budby, who is the principal elder of the Barada Barna people around the Lake Elphinstone area up in North Queensland, and as Rai said, he passed away earlier this year. And I was hugely honoured when the old people, the elders of his mob and his family, asked me to come up and read the eulogy, which I did. And it was a very moving situation, especially because in the end, Frank was being buried in country that wasn’t his own. And at that point, we filed past the coffin, much as you do at a Jewish funeral. There were a lot of common things in this, putting the earth in, throwing the earth in yourself. And when I got to the gravesite to put the earth in, a woman handed me a casket and it was full of soil, of a different kind to the soil around Mackay, and she just leaned forward and she said, from Lake Elphinstone, uncle. And it was his country in the casket. So I put some of that in. You know,

So all that ritual of seeing the last, and in a sense also the beginning. Frank was an inspiring man, and everybody who’s met him and many of my friends have met him, including Rai and Helen Garner, and my wife and I frequently have gone up to their place and Frank has stayed with us often and on one occasion the title for my essay came from an occasion when Frank was staying with us in Castlemaine, not so long ago, and we had some friends there, and one of them lamented to Frank what they referred to as the dispossession. And Frank’s response to that was, the story’s not over yet.

And the story is not over yet, because one of the great things that has happened, toward a recompense, is Land Rights. The Jangga people have just got, Col McLennan has just got the biggest land rights settlement in Australia ever, and we all went up to that, Rai was there too, and celebrated that with them. So that’s one of the good things because there’s compensation involved, from all the landowners and lessees in that Jangga area, a huge, huge area, they have to pay compensation and that compensation goes into a fund and the fund is being used – one thing it’s being used for … it’s being used for a lot of things, but one thing it’s being used for is to send the children to private schools on the coast, where they’re all getting first class educations, and will be going on to the university. And breaking the poverty cycle. And Frank restored his people, the Barada Barna people, I mean Frank was an old ringer, a stockman up there, as Col was, as I was back in the ‘50s, and they re-invented themselves as leaders of their people, and I re-invented myself as a novelist and wrote about them, as well as other things, because they were friends and I knew them, not because I was particularly moral about it or anything like that. It was just that they were friends. You write about the friends you have inevitably and the incidents in your life that relate to those friends. What else are you gonna write about?

And yeah, not being able to see you is actually quite troubling for me because I feel as though, normally when I’m talking to people, I eyeball people, and you get a response, don’t you? But I can’t eyeball anybody out there. I can ‘t actually … I can see little blobs. But you’re not little blobs.

So I’m sorry. It’s a bit hard for me to engage directly with you, in a way I would like to.

**Raimond Gaita**

Again I just want to read a little passage from … this time it’s from *Landscape of Farewell*. Because I want to reflect a little bit on it in a way that is also, I think, brings up issues that are common to this and to *Journey to the Stone Country*.

It’s Max, the man who’s the historian, desperately troubled by what his father might have done as a German soldier, troubled because living with his uncle, his uncle once said about his father, he’s not at the front. You get this growing sort of thought that maybe he didn’t quite act decently, which develops in the thought that maybe he was involved in the most unspeakable of crimes.

But there’s a beautiful section here that I want to read to you.

After the war was over, we held our breath in case anybody ever dared to ask such a question as the one you asked me (the question was asked by a young woman – what did your dad do in the war?). It sounds a simple thing to you, but to me, to all of us, it was impossibly difficult. We just wanted to be viewed as human beings again, to be ordinary people, to be part of life and not have to apologise for being the children of our fathers. I felt all my life that I had had to apologise for my existence. I’ve always known myself to have been on the wrong side. You might think it’s been a small price to pay and of course it has been. It was never that I didn’t want to ask my father what he did during the war. I couldn’t ask him.

I did not turn around to see if she was listening to me, the young woman. The young man and the girl had gone. The street was deserted.

When he was home with us again after the war in the evening, at the table doing my homework, I watched my father reading the newspaper, by the fireside, and I often imagined myself asking him, dad, what did you really do in the war? But I could never day it out loud. In this little play of mine, my father responds to my question without the least sign of tension. Why, my son, I was the captain of a company of infantrymen. They were fine soldiers, a loyal company, and we behaved as good men do, even in the terrible circumstances of war. And after this reassurance, in my little play we’ll all breathe freely. That’s what I wanted – to breathe freely.

After a while my father left me watching him and he looked up from his newspaper and asked me if I needed help with my maths problem. He was an engineer by profession. I let him help me, even though I didn’t find maths difficult and knew the answer to the problem in front of me. After he helped me, he went back to his newspaper and the little circle of our family remained closed, the seal in place.

My mother looked across at me with gratitude. Then she went on with her sewing, or she got up and gave the fire a poke and suggested we have a cup of hot chocolate before going to bed. Or sometimes she came over to me and stood behind my chair, and rested her hands on my shoulders, and she looked over my homework, and in a quiet voice, she congratulated me, as if it was the quality of my work that pleased her, but really it was that I had respected our secret vow of silence.

Such a wonderfully delicate piece.

**Alex Miller**

Denial is, well, it’s a strategy of survival. We often think of people in denial as being in some way morally reprehensible, but it’s a way, or a strategy for survival, if what you’re denying is going to make your life extraordinarily painful and difficult in a way that it isn’t while you’re denying.

The book *Landscape of Farewell* came to me when I was in Hamburg. I went to a conference in Hamburg and I took with me *Journey to the Stone Country*, which is why I’d been invited there, and when … people warned me that this Australian academic woman, Aboriginal woman, would be there and they said, you know, she’s like a really feisty person and she’s sort of the person who guards Aboriginal story and stuff, and here you’ve written this book about Aborigines and stuff. And I said, well it’s actually a book about white and black people, because they happen to be my friends, these people, and I was involved in the story. I haven’t written a book about Aborigines, I’ve written a book about Australians.

Anyway, I got there and all these dark-suited German academics and other academics from Switzerland and wherever else in Europe were standing around and they were standing around … this is Warburg House, a beautiful old house that was owned originally by of course, a Jewish family in Berlin, and who founded the Warburg Institute, in London.

But with her back to them was a woman in a cerise coat. So there was the black – this is my memory of it, a black mass of silent men and there were a few women among them but they were also wearing black, and with this person in a cerise coat with a scarf, a rainbow scarf kind of flicking out around her, holding up a book and yelling at them, banging the book, and it was *Journey to the Stone Country*. And she was saying, listen up you guys, this is the white man getting it right.

And so as you imagine, I was all set for a stoush, and I’d never met Anita Heiss before and this was Anita in full flight, as only Anita can do it and someone said to her, he’s behind you. And she swung around and oh my God, you know. So we sorted that out by going out and getting drunk together.

And that book … I went back to my apartment, not apartment, a room in a hotel, which was weird, it was a huge ballroom where these two young blokes had just started this hotel and said, would it be all right? And took me into this ballroom. And there’s a bed way over there. Anyway, I was sitting in this ballroom afterwards and looking out the window, and I suddenly realised that there were the ingredients here for something I’d always wanted to write about. I’d always wanted to write about the Cullin-la-Ringo massacre, which has been very lightly, lightly touched upon by Australian historians, including Henry Reynolds, who’s a great man and a great historian, but he’s only lightly touched it, even in his most recent book, *The Forgotten War*. If it’s a war, there are two sides. There are great generals and strategists on both sides. No strategists among our Aborigines have ever been recognised. I wanted to do that. I wanted to do that for Frank Budby. And I wanted to do it for myself, and I suddenly saw Anita as this catalyst. Here she was, an Aboriginal leader, in Hamburg, and here I was, embedded amongst all these academics.

The young people, the PhD people, they were all really keen to talk about the Holocaust and really keen to talk about Aboriginal dispossession in Australia. The people of my age, the old professors and those people, I thought, right, I’ve got to ask them too. So I started asking them because I could see how these three things could fit together and in a compelling way, with Anita Heiss as the kind of catalyst, drawing them together. And one old professor, old, like me, you know. I badgered him. I did, I badgered people to give me an answer and a response, and he burst into tears finally and walked away, and I thought, awful. And another one got really angry and started thumping the table, and in the end, began almost to defend the Nazis. You know. It was unbelievable, the reactions I got, because I was very persistent and I wasn’t polite about it.

I decided, I needed, I wanted to understand something. And some of them just said, no, don’t worry. I never asked dad, anything. Would you? And then looked at me like, would you? And I thought to myself, my father was in the war for four years with the King’s Own Scottish Borderers and was badly wounded and was sent home in the end. But I remember my brother and I sitting there in front of the fire once and we were discussing, how would you carry on as a soldier if people were jumping out of a trench saying, comrade, I give up. What would you do with these people if you were in the middle of this terrible fire-fight and people are shooting at you from different directions? What would you do with these prisoners? And we sort of looked at dad, like, we didn’t actually say, what did you do with prisoners? And he threw his paper down, got up, and said, we didn’t take prisoners you bloody fool. Walked out of the room and slammed the door. And that was all he ever told us about his war experience. And immediately we were sort of frozen with the realisation, he was saying, we shot them in cold blood, presumably. Or hot blood, or whatever. You know, we didn’t take prisoners. Presumably, have killed them.

So, supposing you found out that your father … when I came back to Australia, there was an old friend who was living on the Gold Coast now, she was retired, and I went to see her and I said to her, nobody ever asked you … I know because we were old friends together, she was a German, no one asked you what your dad did during the war. And she went white. I said, come on, tell us what did he do? And she started trembling. She’s an old lady, like me. And she said, he was in the Waffen SS in Poland. But he was just doing paperwork Alex. And then she started to cry. Of course. So that was pretty terrible of me, to force her to answer that question. And when I got home, she wrote to me, a really beautiful letter, saying thank you, no one ever asked me. No one ever made me answer that question before. At last I said it. You know, very moving, very beautiful.

But I knew when I was writing this book, and I understood that, to ask the question and the bit that Rai just read, where the young boy colludes with the denial, he colludes with the silence, for the sake of his mum and dad and the family, how can you ask? Supposing you get the answer. Supposing they tell you. I was one of the people who perpetrated and helped to organise the Holocaust. Supposing he told you that. You would have to live with that, for the rest of your life, and your family would be finished.

So, you know, some of these old professors said, Alex, we never asked. Of course, we didn’t ask. As if I would already understand all that, which I don’t think I did, at the time, I hadn’t quite empathised to that degree. But that’s the sort of challenge that was involved in it.

When Anita and I were back in Australia, and the book was being launched in Sydney at a book shop, she held the book up and she said, you guys, right? I’m Vita, all right. No mistake about that, that’s who I am. So I just put her straight in the book as Anita, Vita. And she loved it and launched the book for me.

**Raimond Gaita**

It seemed to me, when I read that book and I thought one of its most profound lessons about when one thinks about people who have committed great crimes and if one discovers that someone one has deeply loved or admired had committed terrible crimes or had been in one way or another, seriously complicit with them, there’s always the temptation to think that there must be, if they … well, suppose they did commit the crimes, it’s not a question of whether, then there’s a temptation to think that there must have been something about them, some psychological factor, that in principle one could discover which would explain why they did it and others didn’t. And that one’s tempted to think, if only one had seen it beforehand, one would have realised that they were the kind of person capable of doing these terrible things. And one’s inclined to think that must be true, because after all, they did it. For me, one of the most profound lessons of reading *Landscape of Farewell* was there’s the realisation this might not be true. There’s no must about it. There may be absolutely nothing to be found that will answer the question, how could they have done it?

Sometimes of course there will be. You see all brutish things in their character or something. But sometimes the most frightening lesson is that there may be nothing to find, not because we haven ‘t got the psychological understanding to find it, but simply because there’s nothing there that would explain how it were possible that such a person could do such terrible things. And that’s … it’s always been with us, the lesson of the Holocaust. After all, it’s supposed to be the big lesson of the Holocaust that ordinary people can do the most awful, terrible things. But I think despite having everybody acknowledged that that’s the lesson, we haven’t taken the deeper lesson, which I think comes out in this book, that it’s not … they are genuinely, ordinary people. And there may have been nothing whatsoever psychologically interesting to say about them which would explain why in the end they became terrible people, either through what they did or through what they refused to condemn, or even cheered on and supported. Having learnt that lesson, I have thought quite a lot about the Holocaust and I feel very grateful to Alex.

I don’t know if we’ve got a couple of minutes for him because you see, one of the things … I’ve read the bit where Frank said, the voice came to you from the old people. Yes, Panya’s voice.

**Alex Miller**

Well, he might say the unconscious …

**Raimond Gaita**

But you’ve often spoken of how voices have come to you and seized you. *Autumn Laing* obviously. But here, this wonderful voice of Bobby Blue. Here, just read a little bit. We’ve got three minutes according to that clock, because I want people to just see …

**Alex Miller**

The thing about *Coal Creek* though is that it took me ten weeks to write that book, from the idea to the completed book, and there really wasn’t any editing to be done. Because I seemed to just listen to the story, as he told it to me. And I thought it was going to be a short story. In fact I said to Ross Donnellan, who many of you will know, the poet, who usually lives in Castlemaine but is at the moment living in Malmo or somewhere in the northern hemisphere, and he asked me what I was doing and I told him roughly that there was this little story that I was kind of thinking about and I said, I won’t be doing it though, because I want to write about Hazel Rowley who was a good friend, who died shockingly, suddenly, only a couple of years ago. And I felt I should write about her. And he said, what, you must do something with that story, the *Coal Creek* story – you can’t just leave it. It’s such a fantastic story Alex, you know how hard it is to get good stories. And he said, why don’t you write it as a short story? So I said, all right, I’ll go home and do that this arvo.

And I really meant it.

**[Raimond Gaita**

I’m sorry, this book, I spilt water on it.

**Alex Miller**

You’ve been defacing my book. Just those two lines.

**Raimond Gaita**

No, half a page. **]** We’ll go for a couple of minutes. I want Alex to do this because it shows a remarkable writer …

**Alex Miller**

Virginia Woolf said, whatever you do, don’t read my work aloud. And one reason for that is we all have the perfect inner voice.

I did not weep out at the yards that day. I heard my mother had been dead a week, but I wept when I was on my own later, and since that day I have wept for my mother many times, thinking of her love for us all and her special regard for me, that I was never to know again, from any woman, but one. Me and dad buried my mother up there in the cemetery behind the town reservoir and everyone in town come to her funeral and walked up the hill behind me and dad and Ben. And his dad, who was all carrying her coffin, which weighed very little.

At the graveside I seen my dad was weeping, his hat held in his hands in front of him, his face uncovered to the crowd and his grief at the loss of his beloved companion plain for everyone to see, and no shame in him. It was the only time I seen my dad weep and it moved me greatly. My grief caught me in the chest and I wept with him.

Charlie, my brother, he did not get back from the coast for it.

I can read the next three hundred pages actually.

**Raimond Gaita**

Okay, we’re two seconds to go. And we’ve got a clock here. No seconds to go. I really want you to thank Alex. I hope I’ve chosen bits of his writing that will enable you to see what a wonderful writer you have in this area of the world.

**Alex Miller**

I’ve been looking forward to this, and dreading it, no …

We have a wonderful friendship folks and we’re very lucky. And we know how lucky we are to have friendship. It’s the most important thing. Thank you.