

for she has long been a “word-spreader” trapped in the position of go-between, of mis/informer and informant. She is interpreter and interpreted, a translator translating herself into place, into time, into a self that is Asian *and* Australian, Asian-Australian. At one point a nervous breakdown leaves her nearly catatonic, a refugee in her own room, unable to communicate with self or other, but soon words, the English words of her Asian-Australian self, return to let her tell her story, in her voice.



Jane Frugtnieit

FLYING HIGH

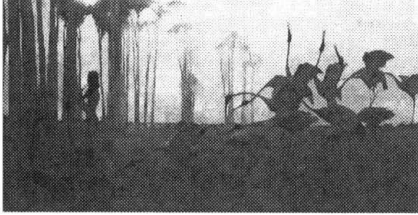
Pat Skinner. *Brolga*. Canberra: Ginninderra Press, 2006. ISBN 1 74027 367 2. RRP: \$30.00. pp.396.

Brolga is Pat Skinner’s first published novel. A NSW-based poet and fiction writer, she has won several literary prizes, including the Ginninderra Press Short Story Competition in 2002 for “Blaming Eucalyptus.” Clearly, the Australian subject matter evident in her prize-winning short story is reflected in her novel, where place is inextricably linked with art, nature, and landscape. Divided into two acts with an interval and a *réverence*, the tale opens in

Melbourne, but judging from the title of the first act, “Queensland,” and its chapter heading, “Going North,” the location will soon shift. Indeed, the novel’s central theme is movement, as evidenced by its structure, and reflected by its narrative subject — dancing.

The protagonist, twenty-nine-year-old Jared Kahler, is a senior artist with the Australian Ballet. However he is disillusioned with his career, despite his close friendship with Sophie, his dancing partner. It would appear that success has not fulfilled this complex character and he consequently disappears, seemingly without trace, leaving behind a meagre paper trail. Motivated by a memory of Sydney Long’s *The Spirit of the Plains* that instilled disquiet and yearning in his teens, he aims to discover what drives him or, more accurately, what has led to his lack of drive — what lacks in his soul. Interestingly, his quest for self-discovery germinates in Brisbane at the Queensland Art Gallery where once again, almost twelve years later, he is confronted by *Spirit of the Plains*. However, this is an earlier version of Long’s painting, painted in Australia in 1897. This temporal shift symbolically represents Jared’s dislocation with reality, but at this juncture there is more connection with Australia, as evidenced by his description of the newer version of the painting which was painted in Europe: “I still say there’s something wrong with this painting. But I can’t put it into words. There’s a sort of primevalness about the landscape,

hinting more at a sort of ancient Greek mythological primevalness than anything related to ancient Australia" (19).



Notions of doubleness and disquiet are enacted throughout this novel in many ways: for example, the rivalry between Melbourne and Sydney, and the displacement between north and south, between high culture and low culture. The corporeal is symbolic of that doubleness, where there is a sense of disarticulation in fellow dancer Troy's knee injury; a fact that disturbs Jared. He is able to dance but is unwilling; Troy wants to dance but is unable. Perhaps the most significant symbol of doubleness is the frangipani-wreathed hand mirror fitting together "like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle" (31). Unlike the hand-held mirror that "had mysteriously disappeared somewhere in the VAC's dressing-rooms a few weeks ago" (31), or the substitute "ordinary two-sided square mirror with sturdy plastic frame. White, of course, built-in grip handle and magnifying mirror on the reverse" (31), this mirror is intricately crafted with the back of the mirror "painted to represent the underside of the frangipani flowers, with their

stems curving in towards the mirror back's centre" (31). Jared purchases the frangipani mirror at the Port Douglas Sunday market, along with a broлга appliquéed t-shirt, and learns from the stallholder, Rose, that her housemate has danced with brolgas. Here commences Jared's journey proper. A series of coincidences sees Jared meet Ida, the dancer, and the Canadian backpacker, Nathan, who is also searching for something.

Although Jared ultimately dances with the brolgas, the act only heightens his sense of uncertainty: he must travel further on his journey. That quest takes him to Canada on the Rocky Mountain Discovery tour, led by Nathan, where he is confronted by further displacement. Faced with that sense of dislocation, Jared finally feels consolation from the Canadian landscape paintings of Emily Carr, an artist who "had appropriated First Nations culture" (345). Yet his affinity with these paintings is challenged by appropriation, the same conflict that he experienced in his assessment of Long's *Spirit of the Plains*; what belongs to whom? He muses: "All I wanted was to connect with them in some way, to respond to those landscapes, to express my response through my dancing and my own created ballets. Even if those landscapes belonged to someone else, couldn't I say they were beautiful and find a way to dance them?" (342). Jared's willingness to connect results in a frightening near-death encounter at Natural Bridge when he attempts to jump into the raging torrent below, an experience

that he barely remembers. It is only later, when the incident is retold to him, that he realises the enormity of the abyss that lured him.

Part of that dilemma of confronting the schism is resolved through compassion and acknowledgement of difference. Birds dot the landscape of this narrative, as Nikolai, Jared's prospective lover, notes: "My traveller would be more like a bird who has lost his flock and travels the world searching for it [...] He's a bird who mates for life, so he meets different birds, which are friendly, but they're not his own flock. He does find it, and his mate, eventually'" (390). Earlier, Nikolai observes, whilst viewing the Emily Carr paintings at the Art Gallery on the Island in Victoria, "I often think that the best paintings, or at least my favourite paintings, are like dancing, and the best choreography is like painting" (388). Birds, dancing, painting and landscape are inextricably linked, and it is through the arts that humanity is able to explore the dilemmas that confront their existence.

My major concern with this otherwise compelling novel is the rather too easy resolution to Jared's quest: love may conquer all but the moving vignette towards its dénouement is marred by over-sentimentality. However, other than that quibble, this novel is written enticingly. Its intricate prose and depth of emotional insight take the reader on a journey of painful discovery. The two-page *révérence* set in Melbourne

and entitled "Valentine's Day" may sound clichéd, but it is replete with emotional well-being and simplicity, evidenced by its brevity — like the curtsey that it is. To borrow from Shakespeare: "All's well that end's well." To let the final curtain fall: this novel is definitely worth pursuing to the end.



Malcolm Tattersall

NO RETREAT FROM THE PAST

Alex Miller. *Landscape of Farewell*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2007. ISBN 978 1 74175 375 2. RRP: \$35.00. pp.275.

Eight novels in twenty years have established Alex Miller as one of Australia's most respected authors. He received the Miles Franklin Literary Award in 1993 for *The Ancestor Game* and another a decade later for *Journey to the Stone Country* (2002), and was shortlisted on three more occasions, most recently for the present book.

Landscape of Farewell revisits themes of *Journey to the Stone Country*, but with quite different emphasis and treatment. The minimal narrative in the new book is little more than a frame for an extended