

Nothing Will Silence It

By Alex Miller

I don't know that it's making any difference, is it? And if it is making a difference, how do we begin to quantify the difference it's making? It's rather like prayer. How can we know? Without poetry and drama and novels and music and art we know ourselves to be poorer. We know such things as these enrich our existence. But really that's about all we can say. We can't really say what it all means, or how it changes anything, at least not for other people, and perhaps not even for ourselves — unless we are book reviewers, of course, and no mysteries of the human soul are hidden from us. It is a rather elusive thing really, what creative writing or music mean. And this is one of their greatest charms. They elude our reason and give us respite from its tyrannies.

What is this feeling of wonder that holds us in thrall as we read W.G. Sebald's description of the decay of the Ashbury household in Ireland? Why are we so mesmerised? We don't know these people. They are not our neighbours or our old friends. We are not learning anything useful. And Sebald is telling someone else's story — the greatest source for all storytellers, of course, other people's stories. We are listening to Sebald's own astonishment, to his sense of the melancholy and the inexplicable meaninglessness of the lives of this stricken family of forlorn exiles. And as we listen to him, following his precise and clear descriptions of the elements of decay which have robbed the lives of these people of any meaning or future or purpose, we see them struggling helplessly to do something, anything at all, no matter how silly, to hold back the tide of their destruction, their efforts forlorn and useless. As we listen

to Sebald, we see that these people are without a remedy for the social sickness that is withering them. And seeing this, feeling it ourselves through the beautiful simplicity of Sebald's haunting prose, we become Sebald himself, the witness of this small, lost human saga in a place we have never visited and will probably never visit, unless it is to go there on a kind of Sebald pilgrimage. Which he would have understood and which would have amused him and touched him, had he lived. But to know what it all means, and whether it changes anything, is beyond us, thank God.

I don't write to change things. I think such a motive would not work for a writer of my kind and perhaps I would sooner be a politician or a social worker if that were my aim, social reform or some such thing. I don't know why I write. I love it, that is reason enough for me. Writing gives a convincing illusion of meaning to my life and there are readers who have told me their lives have been enriched by what I have written. That is a very moving experience, to have that said to one. It is part of the mystery of what I do. Without writing I know that I would very soon be a member of Sebald's doomed Ashbury family. It warms and encourages me when I read the work of other writers; wonderful writers like Dorothy Porter and Murray Bail and Drusilla Modjeska and Hannie Rayson and Rai Gaita and Jacob Rosenberg and Helen Garner and Ray Mooney and Oyang Yu and Anita Heiss and Brian Castro and Hazel Rowley and W.G. Sebald, and those writers who no longer need Christian names for us to know who we are speaking of, Musil and Proust and Conrad and Woolf, and so on and on. A whole world of them. Hundreds of them. Thousands of them. A society within society. I have left out so many. These are my heroes. And I am fortunate that many of them are also my friends.

Conrad wrote in a letter to a friend, "Well, you know, my life is all stories now, something preoccupied and shadowy and I think more illusive even than other existences. And so it goes on, from story to story, from fiction to fiction in an increasing endeavour to express something of the essence of life." Well, there's a reason, *something of the essence of life*. How wonderful. But I don't think we need a reason for writing any more than

we need a reason for making music or for singing or laughing or weeping. I remember in England in 1977 with my wife. It was her first visit to England and she was sitting on a log in a woods through which we were walking. It was springtime and she was weeping. I stood beside her, helpless and puzzled, and I asked her, “Why are you weeping darling?” She looked up at me and wiped her eyes and said, “I’m just weeping. Okay?”

And of course another wonderful thing is that the arts, and creative writing among them, do not progress. They change their forms, sometimes radically, but they go on being recognisably what they are for thousands of years. The theatre is still today the theatre it was for the Greeks, in its essentials if not in the subjects of its plays or in its style, and poetry is still poetry and storytelling storytelling. The arts stand outside technology and science, which progress every minute of the day and bewilder and trivialise our brief existence here with the rapidity and sweeping extent of the change they impose on our world — a world these days that we have scarcely become familiar with before it has changed again. But storytelling, the drama, poetry, music, art, these things are about our secret knowings. No matter how contemporary the setting, they are about our abiding and our common humanity, the intimate lives of us. They are about those things that are written in our hearts and which are not erased by change. And that it is why it is just as meaningful, and just as great a pleasure, for us today to read Virginia Woolf or Shakespeare as it was when they wrote, or to re-read next week Drusilla Modjeska’s wonderful book, *Poppy*, a book that is both fiction and history, as all the best books always are, of course. Writing, writing from the heart, not writing that sets out to change the world, does not go stale. Try reading Proust. It’s all still there, what André Gide at first glance thought idle gossip. As fresh for us as it was the day he wrote it — that greatest of all passages in the entire history of creative writing, which we find in Proust’s last volume and in which the following insight occurs, “And I understood that all these materials for a work of literature were simply my past life”.

The Austrian writer, Robert Musil, said creative writing is not an activity but is a condition. I think it is. While I was

listening to Fauré's Nocturnes the other evening I found myself thinking of a photograph of my father that I have somewhere in my possession — if only I knew where to begin looking for it after all these years — when suddenly I felt a need for the very first time in my life to write about that photograph and the image of my father it had left embossed on my memory. As soon as I began to write, I began to remember. It was as if I were unpacking crates and cartons of memories which I had stored up long ago just for this very day and had sealed with the photograph of my father as a wounded soldier recovering at Orpington Hospital, a young man then, good looking, smiling, happy to be out of it, and happy no doubt that a beautiful nurse leaned her hip against him and rested her hands on his shoulders ...

There are peculiar times when serious attempts to trivialise the role of creative writing in our community are made. But creative writing will persist in confronting the problem of the representation of our reality. Governments in times of crisis and insecurity, just as the academy in times of crisis and self-doubt, turn on the creative artist to find a scapegoat for their troubles and insecurities. The artist is feared at such times. Especially the writer. And in the most extreme cases his or her books are burnt or banned and the writer imprisoned, and where the rule of law prevents such behaviour, they are trivialised. People who are ambitious to change the world, to reorder things according to their own values and beliefs, fear the arts and writing in particular. It is the unchanging realities written in our hearts that the arts deal with. Something to do with the truth of ourselves, that essence of life that Conrad murmured about to his friend in his modest letter that day. It is still there, still being murmured. Nothing will silence it. It will go on, no matter what. But it will not submit to the ambitious agendas of those who wish to change the world and our community to suit themselves. Despite despots and revolutions and wars and massacres without end, the writer has not fallen silent since the great stories of the Old Testament were set down, nor since Homer told his epics.



Alex Miller

Alex Miller's third novel *The Ancestor Game* won the 1993 Miles Franklin Award, the 1993 Commonwealth Writers Award and the 1993 Barbara Ramsden Award for best novel. He won the award for the second time in 2003 for *Journey to the Stone Country*. In addition he has been short listed twice for the Miles Franklin Award, in 1996 for *The Sitters* and *Conditions of Faith* in 2001.