

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Autumn Laing, Alex Miller (Allen&Unwin, 2011)

During the two weeks I was reading *Autumn Laing* I found that even while the sun was still high in the sky I couldn't wait until bedtime, when I could read the next chapter. Some nights, as I closed the book, I couldn't get to sleep. I was buzzing, concluding that reading the novel was the highlight of my day. That could say something gloomy about my life, but I rather choose to believe it points to the skilful storytelling of Alex Miller. Only a few books a year allow me to get lost in the story to such an extent that I feel as though I am in some small way a part of it; only a few books a year have me buzzing before I fall asleep.

The book is told in two different points of view. One is from the acerbic yet down-to-earth voice of Autumn Laing, who, having outlived everyone who mattered in her life and now alone and reluctantly dependent upon a live-in biographer to move from one room to the next, has an impulse to purge herself of her life's greatest wrongdoing – which is also her life's greatest joy and accomplishment. And so begins the story of the tempestuous love affair between one of Australia's most revered artists, Pat Donlon, and his benefactress Autumn Laing. The story, however, does not belong to them alone. It is also the story of Edith, Pat's young wife who is pregnant during his first betrayal with Autumn, and to Arthur, ever-faithful to both his wife Autumn and to her younger, more passionate lover, Pat. These chapters, told by Autumn, flit seamlessly between 1938 and 1991, as memory so easily slides into place once Autumn becomes haunted by her past after a chance sighting of an elderly (but so much younger than Autumn) Edith. When we get to hear the first utterings of Autumn's voice in each of these chapters it is enough to move forward our desire to know her and her story intimately.

The plot of this book is classic stuff, but it's the characterisation of Autumn Laing that is genius. What Alex Miller has done by using the famous mistress of Sidney Nolan's – Sunday Reed – as a launching pad is proof that he is a fiction writer of the finest calibre. He took an idea of a woman, one who actually existed, and reinvented her so that she became someone he could hear and eventually feel. And in doing so he has presented us one of the most memorable modern day literary heroines. In a final section titled 'How I Came to Write *Autumn Laing*', Miller writes,

When I got home to Castlemaine from London in early October I wrote for ten hours a day six days a week for five months in the voice that I had heard in Holland Park – the voice of Autumn Laing. It is the longest novel I've ever written and the quickest. I loved every minute of it and was sorry when she finally left me. I don't think I will ever find anyone like her again. (450)

This is so very obvious. His passion for Autumn spills over the page and lands on his readers' skin. It is sticky, and cannot be immediately wiped off. An author simply cannot give a character dialogue such as “A tree has fallen somewhere,” I said. “Hopefully it has fallen onto the roof next door and has killed the lycra woman and her ugly infant in their beds” (215) and expect readers to *ignore* her. She demands attention, and so the book demands to be read.

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From the first chapter I understood the importance Autumn placed upon Australian culture and her own intelligence, and I became envious of her passion. Pat's character, too, is highly charged with passion – though fuelled by a powerful sense of anti-culture – yet I find him to be a more aloof character. Perhaps this is Miller's intent, as Pat requires an outsider's distance in order to be a complex artist as lasting and controversial as Sidney Nolan, but his detachment leaves me not trusting his character, which means that maybe the intensity of the love affair between Autumn and himself was biased towards Autumn's obsessive delusions. His nature is fascinating, but not intoxicating. We know, through 'How I Came to Write Autumn Lang' that Pat began as a slanted portrait of Sidney Nolan, but in the end it could be said he is there because Autumn needed a story to tell and Pat was the focus of that story.

Miller switches up his narrative by giving us a third person point of view in alternating chapters, possibly for a twofold purpose: so that his construct of the 'biography' works and so that we can see Autumn and Arthur's artistic circle in full. To address this first issue, I don't feel the book needs any unique structuring device to make it a better story – Autumn's character is truly enough – but the biography-approach does work. The 'Editor's note' in the back of the book was a surprise to me and gave me a feeling of having found one last tiny gift hidden under the skirt of a Christmas tree. Along with that, it suites Miller's initial path of the Sunday Reed / Sidney Nolan homage. It is the biography he didn't write, but did.

As for the third person narration allowing us to see Autumn's friends without her seductive partiality, it's brilliant. Flamboyant and moody Freddy became one of my favourite characters. He, along with the greater circle of friends, is a bit of an artistically pompous and culturally privileged – read: snobbish – cliché. But please, who doesn't love the depiction of that cliché? Clever dialogue can only follow, and tragedy has a welcome place to dwell. Along with those reasons for an added third person narrative, there is the one which suggests that Miller did it because Miller could. He is a great writer, and great writers take risks.

That said, *Autumn Laing* doesn't feel like a risk at all. It feels like a novel book lovers have always been meant to read. It feels like a novel writers have always been dreaming of writing. I am so grateful that Alex Miller was the writer who wrote the book and I one of the booklovers who read it. It is intelligent, passionate and very Australian.

Heather Taylor Johnson