



Finding the Bloke

Bloke: Who does this bloke think he is?
Bruce Pascoe
Viking/Penguin, Melbourne, 2009
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It is not often that I start a novel and finish it within four days. My copy of *Bloke* went with me everywhere so that I could devour another chapter or two between other activities. From page one I was drawn into the Bloke's world of diving, small-town life, corruption, prison life and love. Like the abalone divers he works with, I came up for air occasionally, gasping. The writing is consistently lyrical and evocative:

... a lazy estuary where jade water whispered across sandbanks rippled like the roof of a baby's mouth. or:

... a house where hate had disallowed even one bed of geraniums.

The Bloke, who narrates most of the story, is a complex character. He roughs it with the best and the worst of them, while observing keenly and giving us memorable descriptions:

We were suffused with sunset ...all tinted by a rose of embarrassing tenderness. Only the very rich or the very poor could afford to live within sight of such beauty. Or the very lucky. or:

... I didn't know the rules. Not the old rules ... this seadance where the harvest was the least part of the meal.

If the Bloke appears at all confusing as a character, it is because he is thoroughly confused about himself and about the world. One of the glories of this book is that the author takes us on the same journey of discovery as he takes the central characters.

The main theme is that of identity: individuals finding and struggling with their roots and with their relationships with the environment, work, other people and society. There are many tensions at play: sexual, social, societal, and those of loyalty, mateship, family and survival. Some of these are resolved, many are not.

Bloke can be read purely for enjoyment, as a well-constructed thriller. But to get all the undertones and references (some subtle) the reader needs to pay attention from the start. There are many passages of sharp humour with historical or political references:

... protected by a white-faced heron, lord of the stink ports.

Political references such as this are safe, because Menzies is no longer here to take umbrage. However, Bruce Pascoe steps into perilous territory when referring to possibly identifiable individuals who are still alive and able (and known to be willing) to take nasty retribution for real and imagined slights. It explains why, at the book launch, Bruce remarked that reports of harm to him may soon appear in the media – I trust that Penguin's legal department did its job thoroughly.

Bruce Pascoe is an historical and social commentator (see for instance his non-fiction *Convincing Ground* – Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra 2007). However, while *Bloke* is full of such commentary, it is written so masterfully that this seamlessly forms part of the narrative and flows naturally from the mouths of the characters. As the reader, I never felt lectured at.

The author gives us a rare glimpse through a dusty window into the lives of Aborigines who feel (and are) marginalised by much of Australian society and by the politicians and bureaucrats who are supposed to support *all* Australians in their pursuit of fulfilling lives. He does this with humour, compassion and great insight. He invites the reader to open heart and mind and to wish to understand and to care about the plight of these marginalised Aboriginal communities, about

corruption in our society and its institutions, and about the difficulty of honest relationships between people.

At the launch, Bruce warned of the danger writers face if they can't control their obsessions. In *Bloke* he has managed to exert that control, while still allowing the obsessions to inform the characters' words and actions.

Bloke is a multi-faceted story of intrigue, corruption, love, loss, temptation, self-discovery, survival and redemption. Although the author has drawn on personal experience, this is not an autobiography. It is a fictional thriller which dips in and out of recent and more distant history, real and unreal events, factional and fictional politics and the author's own connection with his Aboriginal roots and the 'white invaders'. The characters are totally believable, very alive and very flawed. Throughout, there is a finely observed tension in the developing relationship between the two central characters, who have both experienced past damage, betrayal and hurt.

My only minor criticism is the insertion in three places of another character's narration. As used, it seems to add nothing to what we need to know and breaks the momentum. She is a vital character and giving her a more prominent voice would have made sense. Apart from this, there is hardly a page that does not offer a lyrical passage, an evocative description or a deeper insight into one of the characters. *Bloke* richly rewards the reader.