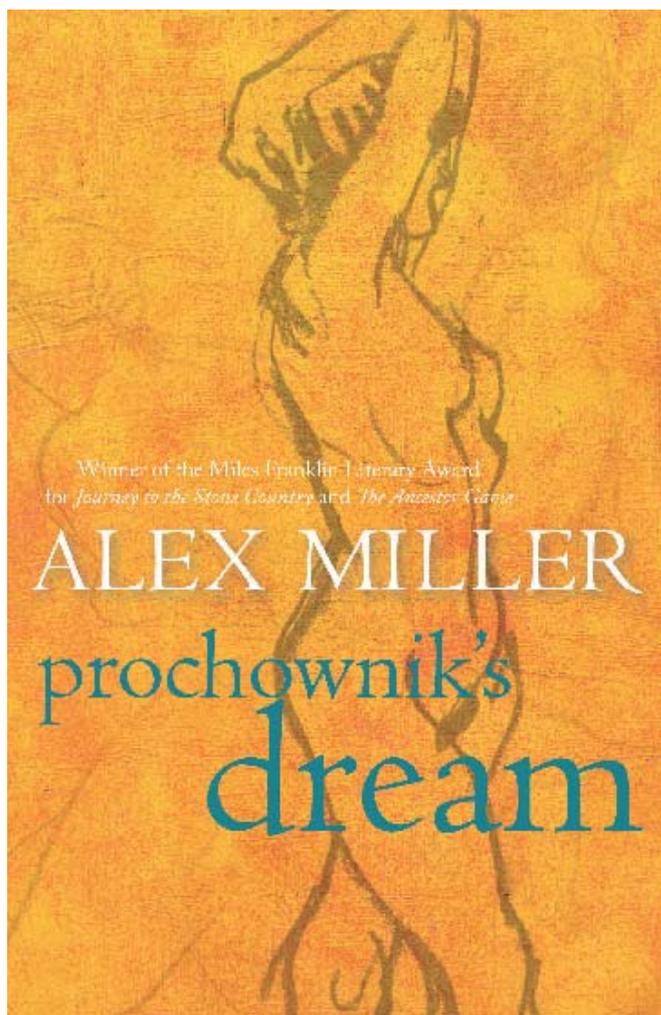


ALLEN & UNWIN



# READING GROUP NOTES

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## About Alex Miller

Alex Miller is one of Australia's best loved writers. He is twice winner of the prestigious Miles Franklin Literary Award, Australia's premier literary prize, the first occasion in 1993 for *The Ancestor Game*, and again in 2003 for *Journey to the Stone Country*. Tim Winton said of *Journey to the Stone Country* 'It is the most impressive and satisfying novel of recent years. It gave me all the kinds of pleasure a reader can hope for'.

*Conditions of Faith*, his bestselling fifth novel, was described by the *Age* as 'a work of true genius' and in *The Australian* as 'a truly significant addition to our literature'. Published in 2000, it won the Christina Stead Prize for fiction in the 2001 NSW Premiers Literary Awards. It was also nominated for the Dublin IMPAC International Literature Award, shortlisted for the Colin Roderick Award in 2000, the *Age* Book of the Year Award and the Miles Franklin Award in 2001. He is also an overall winner of the Commonwealth Writers Prize, for *The Ancestor Game*, 1993. His seventh novel, *Prochownik's Dream*, published in 2005, was highly commended for the Fellowship of Australian Writers (FAW) and the Christina Stead Award for Fiction. Alex is currently at work on his eighth novel, *The Landscape of Farewell*, which will be published by Allen & Unwin in late 2007.

Born in London of an Irish mother and a Scottish father, as a young man Alex travelled to Australia, where for some years he worked as an itinerant stockman on cattle stations in Central Queensland and the Gulf country. Alex eventually travelled south and enrolled at Melbourne University where he read History and English. After graduating from Melbourne University, Alex travelled in Europe for a year then returned to Australia to begin writing. He taught creative writing for several years in the Holmesglen TAFE program, which was one of the earliest writing courses in Australia, and was later an adjunct professor at La Trobe university, where he taught 'the novel'. He now writes full time and lives in Melbourne with his wife and his daughter.

Reviewing his critically acclaimed most recent novel, *Prochownik's Dream* in *The Sunday Telegraph*, Lucy Clark said,

"It exemplifies everything we've come to expect and enjoy from one of Australia's most accomplished authors: subtle, real drama, the ability to detail characters with great economy, and the canvassing of larger issues that leaves you with something to ponder and debate ... Wonderfully absorbing and insightful."

## On writing *Prochownik's Dream*—Alex Miller

In my new novel, *Prochownik's Dream*, the principal character, an artist, Toni Powlett, remembers asking his father when he was a little boy, What shall I paint? Toni's father was himself an artist, but of the private world of the family's domesticity. His art was not for public display and was his consolation in a world that had shattered his childhood in Poland, and which, in Australia as an adult, required from him the daily imprisonment of repetitive factory work. When his son asks him this question, Dad, what shall I paint? Moniek Prochownik, the father, replies softly and without hesitation, Paint what you love, son. This exchange of father and son is taken from an event in my own life and is placed here in this fiction in order to preserve its truth and to pay homage to the friend who spoke those words to me many years ago, and in speaking them taught me to write. That friend was Max Blatt, a Polish Jew, a man considerably older than I, and, like Moniek Prochownik, a survivor from the European landscape of ruins

created by the terrible phenomenon of the Third Reich. Max was my dearest friend.

The question the artist asks, either of him or herself or of his or her friend or mentor, What shall I paint? Or What shall I write? is in reality the question, How shall I liberate my creative energies and set about the task of becoming an artist? For it is not obvious to the young artist or writer how this becoming is to be accomplished. The young artist or writer knows the desire to create, not the means for achieving that mysterious focus of imaginative energies that enables the creative act.

Max Blatt was my mentor, my friend, and a man who brought to my world the cultivated perspectives of a Europe I had known only through reading history and the works of great writers and artists such as Kafka and Thomas Mann, and Edvard Munch and Paul Klee. I had studied Medieval, Renaissance, and Modern European History at university and was aware of Germany's age-old struggle for a confident sense of a national identity - I was even vaguely aware, as the great German critic J. P. Stern reminds us in his masterly collection of essays, *The Heart of Europe*, that the Germans had fought the war of 1914-1918 to assert such a national identity. When I hear or read of Australians worrying about their national identity today, I think of the futility of such a preoccupation and of its potential for causing great injustice and human suffering. For as soon as one engages with the question of an authentic Australian identity, one is required to decide sooner or later that certain people do not now, and never will, fulfil the criteria necessary for them to qualify for inclusion in this category, and those who are excluded are at once in danger of being seen by the True Blue Australians as either a threat to that precious - even sacred - sense of national identity that has been so hard won, and of becoming a persecuted minority. For all my reading, and the brilliance of inspired teachers at Melbourne University such as Marion Gibbs, the problems of European history remained for me largely in the realm of ideas and human and social contests that were abstract in their nature. Max Blatt clothed these ideas and abstractions for me in the warmth of living flesh and made them real.

Before my friendship with Max, I believed that the novelist was called upon to deal with the social and cultural issues of contemporary life, and that the writer must in some way reflect in his or her works an imaginative record of these issues as they affected the society of their day. When Max came to stay with me on my farm at Araluen, where I had hidden myself from the distractions of the city in order to concentrate on writing - Araluen, in fact Lower Araluen, was a place in the late sixties where I was not likely to be sidetracked from pursuing my vocation either by visitors or emails - when he visited me there, Max asked me how my writing was coming along. Max believed in me and had high hopes for what I might do. His belief was very important to me and it helped to sustain me in the lonely business of becoming a writer. When he asked me what I had been doing, I produced a four hundred page manuscript of a novel. The novel dealt with an endemic network of corrupt dealings between local councils, the then Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works, and the Victorian State Lands Office. Max asked me if he could read it. As I handed the manuscript to him, as he took it in his hands, I knew with a chilling dismay that this was not a novel that a man such as Max Blatt would be able to admire. I did not know why he would not be able to admire it, I just knew, in that instant of his taking it in his hands, that he, the cultivated European, would find my novel empty and cold and that his heart, indeed his soul, would be left unengaged and untouched by it.

Max took the manuscript with him to the back verandah and sat in a chair and began to read. I took myself off for the day and tried to do some fencing. It was an agonising wait and I did not get a lot of fencing done. When I got

home that evening Max was still reading, so I prepared a meal for us. By the time the meal was ready he was still reading, the lamp on now in the back verandah, the occasional sound of his cough or the setting aside of a loose page. I left the meal warming on the wood stove and sat at the kitchen table and I rested my head on my arms and waited ... Some time later I was abruptly woken by the thump of the manuscript landing beside me on the table. I started up from my dreams to see Max standing above me in the lamplight, his features lined and aged - like a drawing of a suffering peasant by the Austrian artist and poet Oskar Kokoshka. The expression in Max's eyes was cold, bored and resentful. He said, with faint bitterness and disgust, for I had put him through hell with that book; Why don't you write about something you love? And on the word love he seemed to me to lay a kind of emphasis that was filled with regret and longing for the youthful hopes and the beauties in his own life that had been lost for ever. It was a moment I shall never forget. I burned the offending manuscript in the wood stove after he had gone to bed. As I stood by the stove watching the flames devour my work, like Toni Powlett, the artist in *Prochownik's Dream*, I knew now what I had to do. I felt the weight of it and the liberation of it at the same time.

Toni Powlett, the principal character in *Prochownik's Dream*, is a young artist-in-waiting, as it were, a child in fact, when he asks his father, Moniek - a survivor from that same landscape of ruins that destroyed Max's hopes - What shall I paint? Toni's father has the answer for him at once and without hesitation, for he knows that the only thing that will sustain his son as an artist through the trials of life is love. Moniek Prochownik is, of course, a loving homage to my fictionally transformed friend Max Blatt. I hope it is a book he would have admired. I can only hope this, because Max is dead and it is no longer possible for me to hand him my manuscripts for his approval. Since that night, however, the reader whose approval I have sought in my writing has always been my friend Max Blatt. When I think of him, I think that friendship is surely the greatest thing.

When Max dropped the manuscript of that pre-novel of mine on the kitchen table beside me and pronounced his verdict on it, a verdict I had known was coming and for which I had been waiting with an apprehension of doom throughout that endless day, I ceased to be an apprentice writer. He had, to express it as simply as I know how, taught me how to write. He had taught me, and I was fortunate that I was in a frame of mind to learn it from him, that the novel is first and foremost about the intimate lives of us and is only incidentally, and secondarily, about the social issues of our day, if indeed it is about these things at all. This may seem an obvious fact to everyone else. Despite all my wide reading of novels, it had not been obvious to me. The way in which an artist's imaginative and creative energies are stimulated - and no creative work can be done without this liberation - is, it seems to me, via an emotional engagement with the subject, whether the artist is a poet, a novelist or a painter. Unlike an historian, who is called upon to tell our human story coolly and with an Apollonian detachment - at least such is the ideal - the artist can only tell the human story from the hot, unstable, Dionysian point of view of someone who is engaged emotionally with their subject. Nietzsche is not my favourite philosopher, but he still has many interesting things to say.

The weekend following Max's reading of my failed so-called novel, a number of my friends came to visit me for lunch from Canberra. They were young academics, Labor politicians - out of work in those days - and some Canberra journalists. We sat around the long kitchen table and drank red wine and ate salami and bread through the afternoon and well into the small hours of the following morning. Then they drove back up the winding gravel road to Braidwood and on to Canberra, all very drunk but somehow surviving. During the visit of my friends the

conversation around the kitchen table had been loud and vigorous and often heated. One topic, for a reason I now forget, had dominated, the perennial question of the sources and the persistence of anti-Semitism. After they had all gone, Max and I sat in the quiet of the rural night by the open fire with a cup of tea and we watched the flames and thought our private thoughts. In his soft, modest, faintly yielding voice, a voice that disguised the sharpest and most well-informed intelligence I have ever known, Max asked me, 'Would you like to know what anti-Semitism is?' I dare say there are as many opinions about the essential nature of anti-Semitism as there are people interested in finding the answer to the question. Max then proceeded to tell me, in very brief outline, indeed in a few sentences only, for it was late and we were both tired, something he had experienced at the very beginning of the war, when he had been a young soldier in the Polish army.

The following day I wrote my own version of Max's story of the night before. I handed the manuscript to him that night. It was quite a long story, several thousand words, but he stood to read it through to the end. I watched him. When he had finished he embraced me and said with emotion, You could have been there! They were the sweetest words I have ever heard. It was 1974. I sent the story to *Meanjin* and it became my first published work of fiction. When Jim Davidson, the new editor of *Meanjin* who was preparing his first issue of the journal, telephoned to let me know that he wished to publish my story, which I had titled *Comrade Pawel* - there is that awkward Polish W again - he told me the fiction readers, the avant-garde Finola Moorehead and the steady traditionalist, Arthur Phillips, had been - for the first time ever it seemed - in agreement about a piece of unsolicited fiction. Before Jim called, however, I already knew that my fiction of Max Blatt's youthful experience in the war was the real thing. I knew, in other words, that it was both authentically his story and my own story. I had learned from him not only what to write about, but that a story is made our own when we write it with the freedom and inspiration that only love can give to the fictional voice. This is still true for me today.

But love, the hot Dionysian element of our lives, as Nietzsche would have it, is unstable and is not predictable. With love we are also dealing with fire. When Toni Powlett, the principal of *Prochownik's Dream*, loses the will and the ability to paint after his father's death, after his loss of the central source of his inspiration, he recovers it some years later by means of an erotic charge, and for a while another kind of love becomes his source. The novel itself, the story it tells, is the working out of how Toni, the artist, deals with this; of how he is mastered by it and almost loses everything of value to him through the exercise of it. It is through this love, however, that he eventually comes to visualise his life's work and to redeem himself imaginatively in his sacred memory of his dead father.

Toni Powlett and his fictional story enshrine for me a truth that cannot be enshrined safely within history, for the historical truth of today is soon revised and becomes the contested opinion of tomorrow. And that is only as it should be, for History, that noble pursuit of an understanding of the past's importance to us, is a dialectical process, its conclusions and proposals inviting the test of repetition and proof. And for this reason the closer History can get to Science the better it likes itself. In his novel, *The Ambassadors*, on the other hand, Henry James speaks of the impression left upon one of his characters by a place he calls the sculptor's garden. In James' hands it is, of course, a fictional garden, but in reality we know it is almost certainly a garden modelled on James's impression of Rodin's real garden in Paris. The sense of names in the air, James says, of ghosts at the windows, of signs and tokens, a whole range of expression ... For the reader of James' story, the real sculptor's garden is liberated from its literal dimension

and becomes a landscape of the mind and the imagination, even a landscape of the spirit. James does not present us with a view of the garden that will become the subject of revisionary argument among the generation of writers who follow him, but presents us with a truth of the imagination that will remain guarded for all time within the artful carapace of his fiction.

It is not until Toni Powlett places himself within his own art that he at last experiences the full liberating force of his father's advice to him as a child; Paint what you love. The excerpts from my novel that follow, seem to me to illustrate something of the emotional dynamics that I have been speaking about here, the process of what is going on with Toni and his art:

He paused in the passage and stood looking at his father's framed gouache. It was a tonal image of a straight-backed chair and a corner of their old kitchen table at the flats, one of his mother's jugs and a blue-striped bowl. The domestic vision he had inherited. The gentle melancholy of the low-toned mood suggestive of a vanished Central European light. The scene speaking to him of his father's silence. Outside the flats the night and the howling city, but in these objects of his father's contemplation an eternal stillness. The still lives of his father's inner world. The absence of the rattle and clatter of the moulding line. Calm. Familiarity. Simplicity. These three things, and his father's certainty of their universal and indestructible value. It was an image that bore witness to the tranquillity of Moniek Prochownik's endurance and was not intended for public display. Chapter 13,

When he attempts to place his own figure in his ambitious painting, *The Schwartz Family*, Toni finds his imagination blocked:

A week later *The Other Family* was going nowhere for him. He found to his dismay, after the initial euphoria of beginning work on the problem of himself, that he was unable to translate his imaginary presence convincingly onto the canvas. He made no attempt at the figure of Marina, but painted himself into the composition and scraped himself back to the canvas a dozen times. Always, however, there was the feeling that something essential to the success of the figure was absent. It was a great disappointment to him that this image of himself remained so unresponsive, so without light and life; so without, in fact, the conviction of that elusive sense of presence that is necessary in all successful representations of the human figure in art, even if the representation is no more than an entirely impersonal depiction such as the fugitive figure of Haine's running man. He was finally forced to admit, with a faint feeling of self-disgust, that he was blocked. His visual sense of himself was inadequate to the task he had set himself. He could not deal with it. For days he did not know what to do. Chapter 15.

Toni gives up for the moment and picks up Sartre's first novel, *Nausea*. Toni is holding this novel in his hand when *Prochownik's Dream* opens and the first line in my novel is a quote from it; I should like to understand myself properly before it is too late. We are now at page 225, however, when Toni at last picks this book up again and reads it. He believes it to be a random choice. After he has been deeply distracted from his problem with the painting by the novel, he puts the book aside with the feeling that he knows what he must do.

He drove to the local hardware store and purchased a cheap full-length mirror of the kind used on the doors of built-in wardrobes. He brought the mirror home and set it up at the back of the studio. Then he took off his clothes and sat on

the stool.

There he was. A naked stranger!

He might not have been looking at himself but at another man who, until this moment, through a kind of mental blindness, he had been unable to see. Looking at his naked body as a subject for his art was a novel experience for him, and was quite unlike looking at himself in the mirror in the normal narcissistic and semi-critical way that he did every day while he was having a shower or shaving. Now his eye was detached from his vanity and he was at liberty to search in the mirror for the truth of the visual form of the naked man reflected there. As he sat gazing at himself it was as if he had become two people.

During the following nights he worked up dozens of studies of his naked torso and limbs in pencil, charcoal, gouache and oil. The studio was soon filled with these intimate images of himself. As he worked on a large freehand charcoal drawing of his shoulders and chest, he was aware that all this self-research, the newness of it and the promise it seemed to hold for him of a real and substantial future as an artist, was linked in some way to his having accepted his identity as the artist Prochownik and to having cast off the old false identity of Powlett; a name which had been given to his father before his own birth by the foreman at the Dunlop plant, who had told his father on his first morning at the factory, Prochownik is not a name in Australia. In what precise way this relinquishing of the falseness of his past name was linked to the revolution of his view of himself and his art, he did not know, and perhaps he never would know. All he knew for certain was the feeling of rightness about it. Belief in himself was the key to it, not understanding. As he worked he wanted very much to tell Marina everything that had happened to him since they had taken The Schwartz Family to Richmond. But he resisted the desire to telephone her. He was not sure why he resisted, but was aware that there were probably a number of good reasons to resist. So instead of speaking to her over the telephone, or even in the flesh, he made do with imaginary conversations with her in his head. He was at liberty, in these very real but imaginary conversations, to say whatever occurred to him without censoring his thoughts, and so during this time alone with himself and his own reflection, Marina became the ideal companion of his hours and seemed to share with him a perfect intuitive understanding of his situation.

He did not attempt to depict his facial features in any of the studies of himself. Seated on the stool in a variety of poses, and sometimes standing close up to the mirror, he examined his body hour after hour, and as the days and nights passed he gradually became his own familiar. When he closed his eyes before going to sleep beside Teresa in the early hours of each morning, the intricate details of his body remained imprinted on his inner eye ... One night he was playing around with Theo's head on a drawing of his own torso when he realised there was something about the composition that greatly intrigued him. He set up a small canvas on the easel and painted an oil study of the subject. When he had finished it he titled the painting *The Eye of Tiresias*. The bizarre, but beguiling, image came to him not only from Theo's drawing of the youthful satyr with the head of an old man, but also from the passing glimpse of Theo's head on the pillow, framed by the doorjamb, as he went by his bedroom that day; imagining the old man's sorrow at the loss of his beloved Marguerite, and seeing his features hollowed by misery behind his closed eyelids. There was something beautiful and poignant in the perversity of this image for Toni, the dying man's head on his own youthful torso. He was aware of dealing not with strict likeness but with the repressed, the inarticulate, the unconscious, the as-yet-unrealised, and knew himself to be in touch at last with that dimension of himself that had always eluded him, a place only revealed

by a trick of the light at night when he was tired and his mind was no longer clear but was open to the bright, sudden, uncanny energies of fatigue. He could scarcely bear to leave his work and his studio even to eat or to sleep and he did so only reluctantly and briefly, anxious all the time he was away to get back as soon as possible. As he worked he was conscious of touching upon something concealed that he would only be able to recognise when the work was finished. He did a larger painting of Theo's head on his own naked body, working for hours without a break, lost in the process and unaware of the passing of time. It was an image that seemed to hold for him the key to something of great importance ... p.225 ff.

This placing of the dying old man's head on his own youthful torso, this mysterious fictional image that is himself-not-himself, an image that carries his own story and at the same time carries the story of the beloved other, is the point at which Toni breaks through into an imaginative landscape in which the future of his work is laid out before him. Fiction, as with art, must encompass the legendary, the poetic, and the spiritual truths of the human story if it is to find an authentic place in our lives and in our culture. To liberate our story from its literal dimensions, so that it becomes a landscape of the mind and the imagination, even a landscape of the spirit, is the task of the artist and the writer. The writer or the artist who fails in this regard, betrays his or her contemporaries and the culture just as surely as a poor translation betrays the source that inspires it.

## Reviews

### ***Weekend Australian*—Ingrid Wassenaar**

#### **Rough journey along path to an artist's rebirth**

Given Alex Miller is twice winner of the Miles Franklin Literary Award and a Commonwealth Writers Prize winner to boot, expectations are high for his seventh novel. *Prochownik's Dream* offers a 21st-century update on that very 19th-century relationship, the artist and his muse. It is a theme Alex Miller has explored before, in *The Sitters* (1995).

Given the theme, we may expect a dissection of erotic tension, and at one level we're certainly given this. But Miller has more metaphysical fish to fry. Underneath the surface story is a thesis: although life and art don't fit together well, it's the attempts to solve that problem, emotional disasters and all, that give rise to art in the first place.

### ***The Age*—Jane Sullivan**

#### **The Miller's tale**

There's a story Alex Miller tells about his old friend and mentor, Max Blatt. It happened when Miller was living on a remote farm in the Araluen Valley in New South Wales, struggling to make his mark as a writer.

Max came out to visit him in the back of beyond, in a taxi. He was a Polish German Jew from Silesia, a cultured refugee from the ruins of wartime Europe. He wore a Homburg and smoked a perpetual cigarette. Miller wanted him to read his latest novel. He had written three, none of them published. Max took his time. He sat on the back veranda all day with his tea and 400-odd pages of manuscript. Miller left him alone and kept busy, but he could not

concentrate. Somehow, he knew what Max was going to say. When he had finished, Max brought the pages over to the nervous Miller, slammed them down on the table. "Why don't you write about something you love?" he rasped.

There's a sequel to this story Miller tells less often. He wrote a short story, *Comrade Pawel*, based on a true experience that Max had had as a young soldier in the trenches outside Warsaw. *Comrade Pawel* became Miller's first published work. It appeared in *Meanjin* in 1975. But the highest accolade came from Max Blatt. "I gave it to him to read and I knew he would love it. He read it through standing at the table and then said with tears in his eyes, 'You could have been there,'" Miller says. "That was proof he had just taught me to write."

...In *Prochownik's Dream*, a Melbourne artist, Toni, has lost his way. Then he meets two old artist friends, Robert and his wife Marina. Like the muses of old, Marina reignites Toni's creative flame, and he throws himself into a frenzied new phase of drawing and painting. But as his work draws him into the elusive world of dreams, it also draws him inexorably away from his wife and little girl.

Like all his work, Miller says, the story and characters are based on real people, though "they are not portraits of real-life people at all, there's scarcely an aspect of them you'd recognise - except they are artists." Artists were key characters in two of his other novels: the Chinese artist in *The Ancestor Game*, and the old artist painting a woman's portrait in *The Sitters*, and it's tempting to see a parallel between the artists and the writer.

But if Miller has ever disappeared into his study all night and neglected his family, like Toni, he's not letting on. Asked if there's something incompatible about the creative and domestic life, he says: "It hasn't been that way for me. But there's always something to be negotiated, definitely." He smiles at the thought of what would happen if he had an affair, how Stephanie would react: "She'd come out of her bottle, she would."

Toni's wife, understandably, is consumed with sexual jealousy. She sees Marina as the Other Woman. But Toni's journey takes him back to father figures, and ultimately to himself. His father, Moniek Prochownik, a migrant from Europe, spent his days in exhausting factory work, but used to paint serene domestic images purely for his own pleasure. He was the one who encouraged Toni to follow his dream: "Paint what you love."

"There's quite a bit of Dad in there, and also the spirit of Max Blatt," Miller says. His own father was a belligerent chef from Glasgow (he does a good Billy Connolly-like imitation of his father swearing and giving the Poms hell). At weekends, they'd get on the bus, escape from their council house estate in South London, and go fishing. They'd pack an easel and paints with the rods, "just in case"

"We'd throw our lines in ponds and we'd start drawing. He said to me 'There's only one way to learn to draw. You draw, and you draw every day.'" Miller never followed up those early lessons: perhaps his father's advice comes out in his writing.

But *Prochownik's Dream* is not just a story of creative types. Miller hopes it will resonate with everyone, and early reactions suggest it will: "We've had a fantastic response from booksellers. Heaps of them have read it and they keep sending volumes of email to Allen & Unwin. It's proved to be a bloody good read."

A young man in a bookshop talked to him about it: "His reading was not that it was about the difficulty of

negotiating art and life. It was about negotiating life.”

The difficulty, Miller says, is reconciling the two sides of life: “One side is hot, Dionysian, unstable, sexual, charged - if you like, creatively charged as well. It’s the side that dreams, without boundaries. Artists and writers give the weight in their life to that side, and many come unstuck.”

The other side, he says, is cool, Apollonian, detached, disciplined. It’s the side that recognises the normal boundaries of marriage and parenting. If you slip away from it, you might become an alcoholic, or sexually out of control. You might gamble or overspend wildly.

He wrote about a young woman’s ambivalence in facing a similar life dilemma in his award-winning novel *Conditions of Faith*. At a time when women had few choices, his heroine, Emily, has to choose between her husband and child and a unique opportunity to explore the life of the mind.

It’s an indication of how charged these issues still are that women have reacted so differently to the novel. Many loved it, but a woman who interviewed him on radio in Britain ended the interview by telling him: “You know what I think about Emily? I think she needs a good spanking.” Miller laughs. “I nearly said, you wouldn’t like one yourself, would you?”

There’s quite a bit of Miller’s mother in Emily. His story was inspired by journal entries she made as a young woman. He remembers her as a devoted wife and mother, an Irishwoman with no sense of division between the material and the spiritual life. “She’d talk of something of the spirit in the same terms as doing the washing-up.”

It was the cool, Apollonian discipline of history that first attracted Miller when he went to Melbourne University, after he had emigrated to Australia on his own at the age of 17 (“It was a great adventure”) and had worked for a few years as a stockman in Queensland (an experience he later recycled in his last novel and second Miles Franklin winner, *Journey to the Stone Country*).

He studied English and history, graduating in 1965, then considered doing a master’s degree in history at the Australian National University in Canberra.

There he met Professor Manning Clark, who told him he was a novelist. “He said, ‘You want to be a writer. My first love is literature, but I’ve let myself in for this six-volume history of Australia, it’s too late now. In my next life I’m going to be a novelist.’”

Miller saw at once what he meant. “History and the novel are both the story of humanity, but the novel liberates the human story, it’s about the intimate lives of things. We’ve had the death of the novel several times, and the death of history, but history and the novel will continue to be written by those people who either understand intuitively, or are passionately engaged with, a sense of the human story.”

It took him years, however, to discover his way as a writer. His three unpublished novels - he calls them “my pre-novels” - were about big, important issues, but they didn’t find their way into intimacy, or the other dimension of the imagination.

“They had no warmth. I knew Max’s heart would remain untouched, because my heart hadn’t been touched.”

He wrote some plays too, but his first breakthrough came in 1989 with *The Tivington Nott*, a haunting fable of a novel that Allen & Unwin is reissuing with a new author’s note and photos, revealing its origins in Miller’s teenage years as a farm labourer on Exmoor. It found a small British publisher, but nobody in the Australian book industry wanted to know about a story of deer hunting in England.

Then his third novel, *The Ancestor Game*, seemed to come out of nowhere in 1993 to win the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize, the Barbara Ramsden Award and the Miles Franklin award. He feels there was “a lot of understandable surprise and resentment” from some of his contemporaries in the writing game. “They must have thought, we’re the ones who have earned it, where’s he been?”

Later, he emails me, concerned that he has been too “negative” about his struggle for recognition: he doesn’t want to sound churlish or paranoid. In fact, he is warm in his praise of those who did welcome him.

They include Barrett Reid, Paul Carter and Tim Winton, and he’s thrilled at a two-year-old review he’s just discovered of *Journey to the Stone Country* by Alan Gould in *Quadrant*, that hails the novel as a masterpiece.

Writing for Miller may be following the dream, but it has never been easy. *Prochownik’s Dream* took him three years. “The first draft was done very quickly, in six months. Then the hard work began. It takes me a while to quietly get to my people.”

He compares the process to the artist Giacometti, who keeps scratching back his image and starting again. “Each time he’s starting from a more elaborate sense of failure.”

His study is full of piles of books, marked with yellow paper tags, on Goethe, Schiller and Rilke, and on indigenous Australian history. They are research for the novel he’s working on: “It seems to me the one I’ve always wanted to write.”

It’s about two old men, one a retired German professor of history, the other an Aboriginal elder related to one of the characters in *Journey to the Stone Country*. Both passionately want to tell their story, both are haunted by the huge unanswered questions of history.

As Miller outlines his story in detail, sitting on the edge of the sofa, he gets quite carried away. “I love these people, I really love them, I can hardly say it for emotion. That for me is the dream.”

And who is he writing it for? “My reader is Max. I write a book I want Max to admire. I’m not satisfied with what I’ve done until I can hand it to him and not have that feeling in my guts I had when I handed him my pre-novel.”

## **Prochownik’s Dream**

### **James Ley — *The Age***

The common view of art and artists is, to a large extent, a legacy of late 18th and early 19th century Romanticism. It

is from the Romantics that we inherited the idea that art is a form of symbolic autobiography, and the related idea that artists tend to be troubled souls.

The true artist is therefore a special kind of person, someone who experiences life more intensely than others. He is someone able to translate his feelings into artworks that transcend their subjective origins.

Art is thus an extension of the artist's personality, but the process by which it is created also has an intuitive dimension. Part of the artist's job is to tap into the murky waters of his unconscious. He might labour over his technique, spend years trying to master the intricacies of form, but the real work is somehow being done in his ongoing battle to understand the complexities of the self.

Alex Miller may or may not ascribe to this neo-Romantic account of artistic creation, but it is a fair summary of the beliefs of his protagonist in *Prochownik's Dream*. Toni Powlett is an artist who has been unable to paint since the death of his father. He has turned to producing installations, but his career has stalled and his inspiration has dried up. The novel begins when some old friends, fellow artists Marina and Robert, return to Melbourne from Sydney.

With their encouragement, Toni decides to return to painting to produce a major work that will be, in a vague way, a tribute to his late father - an amateur painter who never lost his faith in the redemptive power of art. To the chagrin of Toni's wife, Teresa, Marina steps into the role of Toni's muse, and he begins the difficult and deeply personal process of realising his vision.

Most of the novel is preoccupied with Toni's creative struggle, which is also a search for self-knowledge. As a consequence, on a purely dramatic level, very little happens in *Prochownik's Dream*. There is, however, a persistent awareness that Toni's dedication to his art comes at a cost. As he pursues his elusive "dream," he becomes so absorbed in "the problem of himself" that he grows into a monster of selfishness. Again and again we see him sacrifice the feelings of those closest to him in the service of his art.

*Prochownik's Dream* explores this tension between everyday life and the demands of the refined artistic temperament, although not to the extent that it might call into question Toni's solipsism. His distant and gloomy demeanour is always assumed to be an unavoidable part of the process; he is merely doing what is necessary in order to create.

Occasionally, one is tempted to believe there is a mitigating sense of irony at work when Toni surprises himself by realising the blindingly obvious, but if there is any attempt at a distancing humour it is so refined as to be undetectable.

That Toni is such a dour and uncharismatic character is the main reason the novel fails to engage, although it is not the only reason. The existence of a strange alchemy of creation that lifts art above the dully representational is proved in *Prochownik's Dream* by the alarming frequency with which it absents itself.

Artistic creation is doubtless a slow and laborious process whose ends are not always clear; it might well be something ineffable that goes to the heart of the artist's sense of self. But the process is not inherently fascinating; the special pleading that is implicit in these ideas needs to find its justification in the quality of the art itself.

*Prochownik's Dream* is thoughtful and well written, but Toni's restless search for self-knowledge and his hang-ups about his father are stubbornly uninteresting, while the novel's discussions about the nature of art are forced and earnest.

Miller is too finely observant a writer for the novel to be irredeemable. He can write with great subtlety about relationships. He has the ability to give a strong sense of the complicated emotional subtexts that are often present in ordinary-sounding conversations. There is, too, a final moment of confrontation that belatedly supplies the narrative with a much needed sense of drama.

It provides a retrospective justification of sorts, partly because someone finally strikes Toni with a blunt object, but also because it snaps the novel out of its daze of introspection.

*Prochownik's Dream* makes a concerted effort to shed some light on the complicated psychological processes that are at work in the artist as he attempts to transform the raw materials of life into art. It is, nevertheless, rather disappointing.

Artists ask to be indulged in order to create; in a sense, they are also asking to be indulged when they make their work public and invite us to consider their creation. This attention is willingly granted, but in return we might reasonably hope for something a little more compelling than *Prochownik's Dream*.

## Some suggested points for discussion

☞ Fidelity in art and life is a moral necessity. The artist, as much as the husband or wife, is required to be true to his or her source of inspiration. How does fidelity fare in the lives of these characters? Theo, Toni and Marina, after all, break the rules, but to what extent does their art require this from them?

☞ Is this a book about art or the breakdown of a marriage? Who has the moral authority in this story, Toni or Teresa?

☞ Stand up all the perfect people! This is not a book about evil and good people, but about real three-dimensional people, who are complex, troubled, loving and struggling to order their lives. Is it of any value to make judgements about their morality?

☞ What is the significance of the scene between Toni and his daughter Nada, when she asks to be permitted back into his studio? How does Toni come out of this situation?

☞ What do you think is the significance of Toni being the son of a migrant? Do you think this has any bearing in terms of his identity or self-perception?

☞ So much of the novel is an exploration of the tensions between the life of art and the domestic life of the family. Reality, D. H. Lawrence said, is deformed by art. Do you think that Toni can ultimately reconcile his love for his family and his passion for his art?

## Further reading

*Journey to the Stone Country* by Alex Miller

*Conditions of Faith* by Alex Miller

*The Sitters* by Alex Miller

*The Broken Book* by Susan Johnson