

3.15 Read with Me: Australian Literature

Angourie [host]

Before I begin, I would like to acknowledge that this work was developed and presented on the unceded territory of the Lenape people. I wish to pay my respects to Elders past, present, and emerging.

[fade in: theme music with violins, clarinet, and twinkly triangle]

Angourie [host]

Hello and welcome back to The Community Library: a podcast and book club for anyone interested in stories, and how and why we tell them. I'm your host, Angourie Rice.

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Angourie [host]

This week, I am going to take you along with me on a journey to read more Australian literature. So, since last month our theme was Australian literature, it's actually carrying over a bit into October, and I wanted to expand my knowledge of the Australian literary canon. And I thought: what better time to do that than now? Well, basically any other time would have been better than now. I naively began this journey a month ago, at the beginning of September, when I was preparing to fly to America. And my reading journey took me all the way through the lead-up to my travel, then my actual flight, and then my feeble attempts to get over jetlag, and also my first week back at work. So, not the ideal reading environment. But, I did manage to finish three and a half Australian books! So let me take you with me, back in time to a younger, more innocent me – a me who was optimistic and ambitious in completing a high number of books for this challenge – a me who did not know how much she would struggle with balancing work and reading in the coming few weeks. See you on the other side.

[fade in: upbeat jazz music with drums, bass and trombone]

Tuesday the 8th of September

[fade out: upbeat jazz music]

So, we are beginning my Australian reading journey, I guess – is that what we're calling it? Anyway – with a nonfiction book. This is an essay collection, this is *Growing Up Aboriginal* in Australia, and it's edited by Anita Heiss. I am 92 pages into it, this is an anthology of personal essays, and I've read the first fourteen. Um, and at this point - I mean, I don't really have any insight onto this book, it's not really something I can review or evaluate because these are all real people's stories. You know, you can't slap a star rating on someone's life, or how they choose to express their story. I am really enjoying it, though, so, if that counts for anything. All of the voices in here are really unique, but there are similar themes and experiences that tie these stories together. And I want to read you a quote from the introduction. Anita Heiss, who edited the book, wrote the introduction, and she says, quote:

“While lives have been lived and expressed individually, there are numerous communal connections and shared experiences that frame common themes, including the importance and influence of identity, the stolen generations, family and kinship, education, concepts of country and place, and sport. [...] We are diverse peoples and that’s exactly what growing up Aboriginal means today in Australia.”

End quote. So I just wanted to read that because I think it really captures the essence of what this anthology manages to do and express really well. But, I’m going to keep reading! So I will chat to you soon.

[fade in: upbeat jazz music with trombone, piano and high hat]

Sunday the 13th of September

[fade out: upbeat jazz music]

I just finished *Growing Up Aboriginal in Australia*, and I really enjoyed it! It was a great reading experience. So many unique and interesting perspectives to read from. As I mentioned before, I feel like I can’t rate a book of personal essays, so I’m just going to give it five stars. But I really enjoyed it, you know, this isn’t a throw-away five stars. I would recommend this to anyone who likes memoirs or personal essays. There were a few that I particularly liked reading – often because of the writing style or the way they approached telling their story. Um, but all the essays and perspectives were important and engaging to read. But I just want to tell you a few of my favourites, so I really liked *My father has a story* by Tony Birch. I liked this one because it included some poems. I also really liked the piece by Deborah Cheetham, *So much still pending*. Deborah Cheetham is an opera singer and composer, and I saw a recording of one of her requiems – which is actually on YouTube, and I’ll link it below, it’s really beautiful. *I remember* by John Hartley was a spoken word piece, which was obviously written down and I read it in my head, but it was just really lyrical and you could kind of see the cadences in the way it was written and it was really moving, so I loved that one. Another piece I really loved was *Nobody puts Baby Spice in a corner* from Miranda Tapsell. She’s an Aussie actress, and her essay was just really engaging and funny. And there were so many more that I loved, but those were just a few of my favourites, so you should definitely pick this book up for yourself and see which ones you really enjoy reading. So now I have to choose the next book I’m gonna read! And I really need to get a wriggle on, too! So, the other night I re-watched *My Brilliant Career*, which is an Aussie film from 1979, and it’s based on the book of the same name by Miles Franklin. So, I think I’ll move onto that one next, because I just re-watched the film and I’m really intrigued to read the source material. Also, I think it will take me the longest time to read, so I’d better start right away!

[fade in: upbeat jazz music with loud trumpets, upright bass and high hat]

Wednesday the 16th of September

[fade out: upbeat jazz music]

Alright, I am now 40 pages into *My Brilliant Career* by Miles Franklin. And ... that’s not very far, but it has already surprised me, in a way. If you’re not familiar with the book, it’s an Australian novel by

a woman named Stella Maria Sarah Miles Franklin, who wrote under the penname Miles Franklin. And it was written in the late 1890s and published in 1901. It's about a young woman named Sybylla Melvyn, and her life growing up on a farm in rural New South Wales, and all her ambitions for a brilliant career. It was an unexpected success when it was published, and Miles Franklin now has an Australian literary award named after her, as well as the Stella Prize, which is a prize for Australian works written by women. This book is written forty years after *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott, but I did expect it to kind of ... I guess, follow that same trajectory or be similar in tone. But it's actually a lot less linear than *Little Women*. It's told in first person in hindsight, and feels very autobiographical. And the writing style is kind of very higgledy-piggledy, but it's really charming, and it's an interesting first-hand account of what life was like for white families like the Franklins during that time period. At the time it was praised for its portrayal of Australian life and landscape, but it's obviously a very narrow representation of white colonial Australia.

I also started another book a few days ago. This one is *Laurinda* by Alice Pung. I wanted to try this one because it's a YA contemporary. It was published in 2014 and it's about fifteen-year-old Lucy who gets a scholarship to a prestigious private girls' school called Laurinda. Lucy comes from a poorer neighbourhood, she comes from an immigrant family, and she is kind of thrust into this environment with wealthy, privileged girls and she's struggling to find her place. I'm about 100 pages into this 350 page book, and ... look, I've gotta be honest, I'm waiting for the other shoe to drop. Lucy is a very passive character, she spends a lot of her time just observing people. And there is a lot of great commentary on class divides and privilege and race, but Lucy hasn't really become involved in any of the action herself. So I feel like I'm waiting for a twist or a big catalyst that sets everything into motion or something, I don't know. The thing that I am really enjoying about this book is that it's set in Melbourne, which is where I live, and it's just really nice to recognise some of the suburbs and street names and places they mention. But other than that, yeah I'm intrigued to see where this goes.

[fade in: upbeat jazz music with trumpets, bass and snare drums]

Thursday, the 17th of September

[fade out: upbeat jazz music]

I have not made any more progress on *My Brilliant Career*, but I have been consistently listening to *Laurinda*, and I'm now 70 percent of the way through the audiobook. I still feel like nothing pivotal has really happened. Our character has changed a little for the worse, kind of like how Cady becomes like Regina George in *Mean Girls*, but it's very understated and slow-moving, and almost like, imperceptible, these character changes. I like the writing style, and there are some great pieces of social commentary in there that are really subtle and understated, but mostly I'm kind of bored. And I'm really disappointed and sad that it's just not working for me. I'm really hoping that it'll pick up in the third act and we'll see a big shift in the characters, and hopefully our heroine might become more active in her own story, but we'll see. I don't know, I don't want to give it a negative review, but, um ... yeah, I guess we'll see

[fade in: upbeat jazz music with piano, bass, and high hat]

Saturday the 19th of September

[fade out: upbeat jazz music]

So I finished *Laurinda* by Alice Pung today, and ... argh, I don't know how I feel about it! So, to remind you, *Laurinda* is about a fifteen-year-old girl called Lucy who gets a scholarship to a private girls' school. And there she discovers a trio of girls called "the cabinet". The cabinet is comprised of three wealthy and privileged girls who exercise their power over other students, and even some of the teachers. And so in this new environment, Lucy tries to come to terms with her identity and stay true to herself. And the novel is told in the form of letters to a friend named "Linh", but you kind of forget it's in the form of letters, kind of like *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, it reads very seamlessly. Okay, ah, let's start off with the things that I liked. So, I liked the writing style, I think Alice Pung is a really gifted writer in that sense. She describes things in such a unique and interesting way, using some really fun metaphors and analogies. I also liked all the commentary on private school politics, and how these toxic systems continue to function and uphold themselves. She talks a lot about all the little pieces that come into play when forming a seemingly indestructible power structure, and I really liked how that can also be read as a mirror for the real world, if you will.

But, as I mentioned before, I spent the whole time waiting for the other shoe to drop. You know, when were we going to get the big thing that would send the plot into motion? Ah, we didn't, really. It was a very subtle, slow-moving story, not much beginning-middle-and-end structure to it. Sometimes I don't mind that in books, in fact, I often really like that in books. But for that to work for me, we have to have strong development, and unfortunately I just felt like Lucy's trajectory as a character was not very clear. Throughout the book it was so subtle and slow, and then at the end, we were just hit with all these, like, on-the-nose descriptions of this big transformation she had gone through. And as I read it, I thought: this is so weird, she's talking about, you know, this big transformation, but I feel like I haven't seen that happen.

Something about this book that really surprised me was that there was a twist, ah, and I'm not sure if I was supposed to realise it right at the very end, or if I should have realised it earlier on, but I didn't do either. I only realised the twist when I sat down to write this review. And so now I feel really silly and incompetent. And thinking more about the twist, I do really like it, but I think it just should have been made a little more explicit, because I did not pick up on it at all. Um, I mean it could just be because, like, I'm jetlagged and not paying good enough attention. But I guess, also, the fact that I failed to pick up on this thing, means that part of the reason why I didn't like this book is circumstantial. Because I clearly wasn't paying attention, and it's my fault to try and critically read a book while flying halfway across the world during a pandemic. To recap: I liked the writing style and bigger-picture observations, but ultimately the plot pacing, and character development didn't work for me. I didn't know this until I looked it up afterwards, but this is Alice Pung's only novel. Her three other books are memoir/nonfiction, so I'm more inclined to give one of those a go.

For my next choice of Australian Fiction, I have chosen *Too Much Lip* by Melissa Lucashenko. Melissa Lucashenko is a prolific writer of European and Goorie heritage. Her first novel was published in 2002, and since then she's been writing literary fiction novels for both adults and young adults. *Too Much Lip* is her most recent novel, it's an adult literary fiction, and it also won the Miles Franklin award in 2019. So *Too Much Lip* is about a young woman named Kerry who returns

to her hometown in New South Wales to say goodbye to her dying grandfather. I'm listening to the audiobook through my library, and it's narrated by Tamala Shelton, who is an actress I worked with about – oh my gosh – five years ago, now. But it's really nice to hear her voice in my ears! She reads so beautifully. I'm only about two chapters into the audiobook so far, so I don't know much about the plot, but the thing that's really striking me now is the writing style. It's very, um ... I was going to say casual, but "casual", like, isn't the right word. It's very personal, and feels spontaneous but it's not. It's told from third person perspective, but it kind of feels like first-person, because the writing is so intimate in the way it uses slang words and phrases and swear words. I'm really intrigued to see where this plot takes me, and I think I'm going to like it a lot. I can already feel myself starting to really care about these characters.

[fade in: upbeat jazz music with piano, bass and high hat]

Sunday the 27th of September

[fade out: upbeat jazz music]

Okay, so it's exactly one week until I'm supposed to be publishing this episode and ... I've got to admit, I've been really slack with reading. I asked you guys on Instagram what you wanted to hear more of in the episodes, and a lot of you said you want to hear more about my life. So, I guess I should explain that I've been slack with reading because I'm preparing to go back to work. And usually in the weeks and then days leading up to starting a job or recommencing a production, I always get very nervous and a bit all over the place. It's not even about, like, preparation or getting into character or anything like that, it's more the fact that I'm just too antsy and fidgety to sit down and do anything for too long. And I guess also it is partially about being invested in a different story, and getting into the headspace of a story that's different to the story that I'm going to be performing in if that makes sense ... Oh my god. I'm still jetlagged. Okay, the point is, I feel that whenever I'm working on a job, I read a lot slower and I tend to only read one book at a time.

To recap where I am with reading, I am four chapters in to *Too Much Lip* by Melissa Lucashenko, and it's going well. I'm really liking it. I'm still just under halfway through *My Brilliant Career* by Miles Franklin. It's coming along a lot slower than I would like. And um ... oh, that's it. Yeah, that's it, that's all I'm reading! So, I guess I'm really gonna try and knuckle down and finish these two books in a week. Ah, but I'm also starting work this week, so ... Oh goodness me, I've really stitched myself up here, haven't I? Welp, wish me luck, my friends.

[fade in: upbeat jazz music with trombone, piano, bass and high hat]

Saturday the 3rd of October

[fade out: upbeat jazz music]

Okay, so here we are, almost a week later. It's the night before this episode is supposed to go up, and ... I'm struggling. Yikes. I gotta be honest with you guys, you know, I was so motivated to read and put everything on hold to finish those two books. And it just – it just didn't happen. I have not finished either of them. This week was my first week back at work, so it's just been, like, intense. You know, I feel like my schedule has gone from 0 to 100. You know, I haven't seen anyone but my

family for the past 5 months, it's so strange to suddenly um, you know, talk to people and see things that aren't the four walls of my house, you know? It was almost like a sensory overload, just being in a work environment after what has felt like an eternity of lockdown isolation. So needless to say, I haven't really been in the headspace to concentrate on reading. But I have managed to get a considerable amount of the way through *Too Much Lip*. I have been listening to the audiobook on my drive to work in the morning, and I've only got about 2 hours left. So, here's my plan. I will get through another little bit of that tonight and then I will finish it tomorrow morning before I edit this mess and upload it.

I haven't given you much of an update on how the story is going. As I mentioned before, we're following Kerry, who has returned to her hometown. But she gets there, and her older brother is still horrible and abusive, and her mother is still traumatised and ... it's just – it's really quite sad. And as the story goes on we're learning more and more about this family and how deeply traumatic their past is. And the little bit that I just read, there was a little twist that I didn't see coming, which was great. So I'm really enjoying that, but I'm anxious to see the repercussions of that twist! And there's also a really sweet romance that I didn't expect going into it, so that's just been really nice to follow as well, because a lot of this book is just heart-breaking. I'm curious to see how this all resolves in the end. We've just hit a really big turning point in the book and I just – I wonder how all the characters are going to recover from this. I just hope they're all okay!

In terms of how I'm going with *My Brilliant Career*, well, you know, I have been much less successful. I'm still only, like, halfway through, I'm definitely not going to finish it by the time this episode has to go up. I will finish it eventually, but just, like, not in this short time frame. It's a tricky one to read right now because it's kind of slow-paced, I guess, and you know, there's quite a bit of old-fashioned language, and I'm reading it as an eBook, so all of those factors have contributed to it not being my number one reading priority. But, I'll still have a bit to say about it in my wrap-up at the end of this episode. But now on my laptop the clock has just now ticked over past midnight and it's now Sunday, so I think it's time for me to go to bed. I will talk to you in the morning!

[fade in: upbeat jazz music with trumpets, saxophones, bass and high hat]

Sunday the 4th of October

[fade out: upbeat music]

Alright, so it is upload day! Except it's also not because I am postponing this, I'm gonna upload it tomorrow. But I just finished reading *Too Much Lip* by Melissa Lucashenko, and I really loved it. It was so gut-wrenching and beautiful and also really funny in some ways. You know, it is a story about class, and poverty, and race, and also about grief and forgiveness, and the impacts of trauma. And this is exactly my kind of book: it's a character-driven drama with a great ensemble cast and not much plot but lots of emotion. But don't mistake my meaning in thinking that it's boring, because this book is far from that. It's really engaging, quite fast-paced, a few twists in there, as well. And something I really loved about this book, and something I think sets it apart from other character-driven dramas I've read, is the writing style. And I mentioned this before, you know, it's quite familiar and casual. And there is quite a bit of swearing in it, which some people might not like, but I think in this case it really added to building the characters and setting.

And something I really loved about this was the happy ending. Oh my god, you guys know I'm a sucker for a happy ending. Not necessarily, like, an unrealistic happy ending, but I just appreciate it when the good guys come out on top. Of course I'm not going to give it away, but I just loved how this family, who had gone through so much trauma and pain, that they were given a second chance at success and happiness. That being said, I think my one gripe with this book actually was kind of the ending. Because there was one character in particular who appeared to do a complete 180 in a very short space of time, in order for everything to wrap up neatly. And I would have liked to spend a little more time with this character and see how his journey to healing and becoming a better person was a lot more complicated than completely changing in the space of 24 hours. However, I thought this was a fantastic book, and I'm hovering somewhere between four and five stars. I'm not sure yet. Either way, I highly recommend it. It's a really powerful story about – and here I'm gonna rattle off some key words – family, trauma, colonialism, love, forgiveness, grief, all of that stuff. I think if you like Celeste Ng's work, like *Little Fires Everywhere* or *Everything I Never Told You*, or even Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, then I think this novel is definitely for you.

[fade in and out: upbeat jazz music with upright bass, trumpets and high hat]

Back to the present! That was a journey, wasn't it? Yes, listening back to that, you can really see my slow descent into madness. To wrap it all up, I read three and a half books for this challenge. The first one I finished was *Growing Up Aboriginal in Australia*, edited by Anita Heiss. I also read *Laurinda* by Alice Pung, and finally I finished *Too Much Lip* by Melissa Lucashenko, which you just heard me talk about. So the fourth book that I read half of was *My Brilliant Career* by Miles Franklin. Now, this is not a DNF – I will be finishing this later on this month. I just couldn't get to it in the time I allocated for myself. I've been quite cagey about my thoughts on *My Brilliant Career* thus far, so here's my two cents. I think the movie is better. Yes, you heard that right! Scandal! I think this movie is better than the book. Here's my reasoning: there isn't much plot to the book, and it very much reads like someone's diary. And they changed a few things in the film for dramatic effect, which doesn't always go down well with fans of the book, but I think in this case, it makes a really big difference to the story-telling, and works really well. So of course I haven't finished *My Brilliant Career* yet, but if you're looking to experience this story, I would probably recommend watching the film instead of reading the book.

So my thoughts on the book. Look it is really fascinating to read a story written by a woman growing up in Australia in 1897? 8? Something like that. I think it's a very interesting, unique perspective that I think so many people have tried to imitate, but it's not quite the real thing. You know, you've got that truthful element of historical accuracy because she was there, she lived it. Something I was surprised to find was how funny this book actually is. There are quite a few sentences I've highlighted that are just so absurd and cheeky. One of the chapters is titled: "Chapter Eighteen. As Short as I Wish Had Been the Majority of Sermons to Which I Have Been Forced to Give Ear". And I just thought was really funny. So there are a few funny quips like that, and you can tell it was written by a seventeen-year-old girl, and that's really nice and fun, I guess. I think the thing that just sours my whole interpretation or reading of this book is just the knowledge of what was happening at the time, that she wasn't talking about – that she was ignoring. And that's the violence that was being enacted upon the Aboriginal communities at this time. Not that this was a thing that stopped, or a thing that was unique to this time. But it just – it feels uncomfortable, you know, to read the perspective of this girl lamenting about the isolation of living in Australia, and how hard life is for her on this barren land. Just knowing that this was the

beginning – or kind of – it was the ongoing of the destruction of sacred Aboriginal land and cultural genocide. I don't know if I would necessarily recommend this book, I don't know if this is one that would widely appeal to many people.

So, how to bring this episode to a close, and this whole theme of Australian literature to a close? Well, we can't talk about the Australian literary canon without talking about Australia's history, and we can't talk about Australia's history without talking about Colonialism. Australia's Colonial history is an inextricable part of Australia's identity and culture. And it begins with the first British fleet in 1788, and we've got all these images of convicts and settlers working hard to tame this unruly and barren land. And this story of Australia is one that promotes "mateship" and "comradery", but is rooted in exploitation of the land and erasure of its original inhabitants and custodians. Australia usually identifies itself as a new country, because it became a federation just over 100 years ago, in 1901. And it remains part of the British Commonwealth. And so when talking about Australian stories, it's easy to forget that Australia's cultural history started long before Colonial settlement. Australian Indigenous cultures are among the oldest continuous cultures in the world, but stories from Australia's First Peoples continue to be sidelined. So often, stories that are heralded as "universally Australian" only show white Australia. But we, as readers and consumers have the power to combat this by recognising the pattern of exclusion, and picking up and promoting stories from marginalised voices.

So what I've learnt from this experiment is that I really love reading books from Australian authors, I really do. I love hearing audiobooks narrated in a familiar accent, and recognising places, or understanding particular references. But this experience has also taught me that I still have so much to learn about Australia and our history. And by that I don't mean dates and prime ministers, but the ongoing implications of Colonialism. If you are Australian, I encourage you to seek out a diverse range of own voices Australian books. And if you're not Australian, I still encourage you to do that. But also, another challenge for you, is to read some books from where you live, particularly if where you live is typically underrepresented in the book community. Because even though I think books do an incredible job of bringing people from across the world together in a common experience, you know, a lot of the most popular and most marketed books are American or British. So if you're not American or British, then I encourage you to look for some local fiction. You might find yourself feeling a deeper connection to a story because of a familiar accent or language or setting. You might find your new favourite book.

[fade in: theme music with violins, clarinet, and twinkly triangle]

Thank you all for listening and for being patient with me this week. It's been quite tricky to try and balance this new schedule and see where the podcast fits into it, so thank you for being patient while I figure it out. Next week, I've got a very special spooky episode in which I am going to read some Agatha Christie mysteries, so stay tuned for that. The episode will be out on Sunday as usual. Just a reminder that our book club pick is *The Trap* by Melanie Raabe – that's spelt R-A-A-B-E – and the discussion episode for that will be out on October 25th. And as always, you can follow me @angourierice on Instagram, or @the_community_library on Instagram. I hope you're all taking good care of yourselves, and maybe reading some local stories. Chat soon.

[fade out: theme music]