

Sally Morgan's *My Place*

An Indian discovers she's aboriginal; the long struggle to find a way back.

A book is only dormant, not yet fully alive, unless a readership is ready for it. *My Place* was fortunate in this regard. It appeared (1987) when there were enough Australians curious about aboriginality to give it a welcome. Many of them may have been no more than curious, but they acclaimed it. In a sense, the readers resembled the author and her family. Here is Sally Morgan's dedication.

To My Family

How deprived we would have been if we had been willing to let things stay as they were. We would have survived, but not as a whole people. We would never have known our place.

'Things as they were' ... 'not a whole people' ... 'never have known our place' ... and, in selecting words from Sally Morgan to guide me, let me also take 'deprived' ('How deprived we would have been ...') and invert it so that it becomes 'enriched'. I feel sure that those first readers of *My Place* felt they had been enriched in being allowed to share the trials and ensuing bonding that have been so much a part of aboriginal life since the white invasion.

Aboriginal people and the intruders who broke into their seclusion have been curious about each other, right from the start. Each side could see how different the others were, and the better they knew each other, the longer they lived side by side, the more

difficult it became. Neither knew how to yield, and neither wanted to, very much. The Europeans took their superiority for granted, and, unfortunately for the black people, it was the Europeans who won. They occupied not only the land but also the minds, the thinking, of those they overcame. Sally Morgan's book – and as you can see, I'm trying to locate it, to put it somewhere – is about a family who don't acknowledge their aboriginality, who in fact don't even know about it; the book's about their struggle to find out who they are and where, if anywhere, they belong; it's about the resistance of Nan (Daisy) and Mum (Gladys) to this search; it's about the eventual weakening of their resistance in the face of Sally Morgan's determination; and it's about the discovery of the links the family has in places far to the north of Perth, where Sally and her family go searching, and find some at least of what it is they need.

So why's the book called 'My Place'? Why not 'My People'? I think the answer, the lesson we are supposed to learn, is that place and people are identical; that is to say, each belongs to and with the other. Everyone belongs somewhere. That's where their people are, and that's where they have to go if they want to die in peace.

What a tribute this is to the power of the land. It's something the black people knew long before Europeans arrived, and something which many, though far from all, white people have felt since. The aborigines' attachment to the land, their feeling that it is the land

that lasts while lives are fleeting, is perhaps the greatest lesson they have for the world, and, oddly enough, it provides the best opportunity for reconciliation between white and black because it's something that white people can acknowledge too – if they're humble enough, and ready, to recognize the obvious.

Let's go back to that dedication: 'our place'. There is a certain sense of achievement in the words which is not present in the first half of the book, when Sally Morgan's family are in denial. The turning point is reached when Arthur Corunna, Nan's brother, feels the need to tell his story before he makes his journey back to his home country - his *place* - to die. Once Arthur's story has been written down, and read back to Mum (Gladys), she begins to change her mind, and she too records her story. And then, eventually, Nan (Daisy) yields a little, at last: enough to let her grandchildren bond with her and her experiences, some of them still kept secret, so that they are at peace with her, and she with them, when she goes to hospital for the last time. By now the children who 'd been told they were 'Indian' – because of their coloured skin – were proud of being aboriginal, they'd become aware of their connections with people and places far from Perth, and they'd slipped out from under the feelings of shame and worthlessness which went with being native.

This feeling of shame was an imposition of the whites; one of their most powerful devices of control. The question one must ask is whether or not the whites believed it themselves. I think the answer is yes and no. Bureaucrats of government or church probably did, being far enough from the black people not to

have their thoughts tested too much against reality. Those who lived closer to the blacks seem to have been more ambivalent, particularly the men. The Drake-Brockmann family of Western Australia is threaded through Sally Morgan's story; Howden Drake Brockmann is the father of Gladys (Sally's Mum), and, though he only gets to hold the child once before he himself dies, the narrative seems to have a certain regard for Howden; he does acknowledge the humanity of the black people that he and his family – and almost everyone else in the state – exploit, and it is that feeling he seems to have given, that he did acknowledge, somewhere inside himself, the humanity of the black people, that allows them to forgive him.

The black people have to do a lot of forgiving in this book, and no doubt outside its pages too. Something threaded through almost every page of *My Place* is a profound distrust of government. This comes as something of a surprise to the educated white reader, who expects government to be responsive to the needs and wishes of those who elected it. Elected! Governments, we think, are responsible to us, and had better take notice when we indicate our wishes. Governments are servants of the people!

This is the democratic rhetoric which most of us believe in, and it is a mind-catching feature of this book that Mum (Gladys) and Nan (Daisy) are afraid of governments, can't deal naturally, properly, or even straight-forwardly with their agents, think it best to tell lies, anything but reveal truthful information to anyone with the slightest semblance of power. Why? Because power will

always, Gladys and Daisy think – and perhaps *know* – be used against black people.

So Gladys's five children by a white father are told, after his death, that the dark skin which causes the other children at their school to comment, comes from the 'fact' that they are of Indian descent. This keeps them free of the suspicion that they might be aboriginal, and Gladys, and Daisy, have good reason – perhaps every reason – to fear that the family bonds which hold them together after Bill – Gladys's white husband, and the father of her five children – is dead, will be torn apart by some bureaucrat or church official thinking it right and proper for whites to manage blacks for what they see as their betterment. So the family, for the first half of the book, can be seen as poor whites, battered down in sub-standard accommodation, happy enough when left alone, their slender supplies of money drained away to buy their father's grog, always struggling to find any avenue to achievement, always surviving, sustained by pleasures they mostly invent for themselves, and living beyond the reach of the more sustaining features of the white society of which they are on the fringe.

Bill, Sally's dad, is a pathetic figure. He would seem to have been given little enough to start with, and World War 2 ruined him. He was a prisoner of war of the Germans, was mistreated, and has a mind full of demons. He's afraid of himself and what he may do to his family when he loses control. They retreat on such nights to their neighbour beyond the back fence; the descriptions of these retreats are wrenching. No child should go through such nights, but Sally and her brothers and sisters did, and Gladys,

their mother, knows that she can't leave her damaged husband because if she does it will destroy him.

Destruction, of course, has a way of gathering around certain weaknesses, certain people. Opportunities for failure are no more handed out evenly than opportunities for success. Sally Morgan tells her father's story with a certain tenderness, but she admits to relief when he dies. The family has a chance, now, and Gladys, Mum, works hard, taking three or four part time jobs at a time to bring in the money which means that at last they are reasonably fed and clothed. They have a chance, now, and if the kids at school ask why their skin is dark, they're told to answer that they're Indian. Finding 'their place' is still a long way away.

Before going any further with the family's quest for their place, I want to say something about the prose style of this book. Readers of this series of essays will by now, I think, have become aware of some of the assumptions underlying them, and perhaps the most strongly held is the idea that good writing means good prose. Every writer has to find a voice, and the evidence that this voice has been found is a prose which belongs to that writer alone. Earlier essays in the series have been full of quotations from the writer under study – Frederic Manning, Hal Porter, and so on – and I have done this because I think that no matter how pertinent or perceptive a critic may be, the prose of a good writer will speak more eloquently than any critic. As a writer myself I feel the need to be humble in the presence of other writers. Since I don't care for people saying what my writing means when I have been at pains to get the writing to a point where I am happy to

let it speak for itself, it is clear that I must respect other writers at least as highly, and this means letting them speak for themselves. Besides, a writer's style, the way they convey, embed, meanings in the tucks and folds, the curves and the piercingly straight lines of their prose, the writer's style, the writer's own words, convey meanings and resonances which someone commenting from outside is unlikely to be able to replicate. Writers should be left to speak for themselves, for the most part, because the prose of a good writer can't be replaced by the prose of somebody else.

In the sense of this argument I am presenting, Sally Morgan is not a good writer at all. I think you could search the first half of the book and not find a paragraph worth quoting for the quality of the prose. A change does come, however, at about the halfway mark of the book, when Sally Morgan introduces the story of Nan's brother, Arthur Corunna. (More about the name a little later.) Arthur would seem to have spoken simply and strongly to the recording Sally, and she has done justice to the dignity and pathos of his tale. The book lifts when Arthur begins his narrative, and the writing – it's no more than recorded speech – lifts in standard too. This would seem to be a condemnation of Sally Morgan, and if you want to take it that way, you can, but my comment is not meant to be destructive, as I shall try to make clear.

A prose style is a stylisation, not only of words and sentences, but of the personality presenting the thoughts on paper. A prose style means a familiarity with, and acceptance of, the conventions of presenting thoughts to others of the same society. In that sense, a prose style is a reconciliation of the needs of the writer/speaker

with the needs – and the traditions also, centuries old, perhaps – of the receiving society.

This is something that the narrator of *My Place* cannot provide because she is not in harmony with the past centuries of the society she lives in. She is in search of something, as yet undiscovered, which has other origins than, and places importance on things different to, those of the white society. Something in her senses that she's a blackfella, but her mother and grandmother deny this, even though Sally's sister Jill is in no doubt. So Sally's position in this world is both uncertain and contested. Her way of speaking, her writing voice, her prose, are not so much still in formation as in a state of uncertainty. She is in search of her place, by which I mean her artistic identity, while I also mean her idea of place, meaning that combination of family network and a space of country, as discussed before.

So we must take the prose of *My Place* as we find it, and simply be pleased that it got written, and is readable enough to show the search that's going on. Perhaps it's time to quote from the book at last.

I was successful in my (Aboriginal) scholarship application, but for the next few months, I was the butt of many family jokes. We all felt shy and awkward about our new-found past. No one was sure what to do with it or about it, and none of the family could agree on whether I'd done the right thing or not. In keeping with my character I had leapt in feet first. I wanted to do something positive. I wanted to say, 'My grandmother's Aboriginal and it's a part of me too.' I wasn't sure where my actions would lead, and the

fact that Nan remained singularly unimpressed with my efforts added only confusion to my already tenuous sense of identity.

When we read Arthur's story, Mum's story and eventually Nan's story we see that a 'tenuous sense of identity' is a problem for most aboriginal people because their certainties have been invaded as well as their land. Arthur tells us that his mother's name was Annie Padewani and his father was Howden Drake-Brockmann, the owner of Corunna Downs. Arthur's aboriginal father was one of the headmen of the tribe, and a *boolyah* man. (Sally Morgan's gloss on this word is 'a person who has attained a high degree of knowledge and who has special perceptive and combative skills'.) He has nonetheless to share his two wives with Howden Drake-Brockmann, which makes Arthur a half-caste and therefore able to avoid the initiations which would have taken him 'through the Law'. This brings us at once to one of the most heart-wrenching and stupid, though unavoidable features of the contact between, the joining of, whites and blacks. Where do the half-castes belong? Who looks after them? Most importantly, perhaps, what ideas are put into their minds to sustain them for the length of a life?

The half-caste is normally seen as a lesser being, not quite one, not quite the other. The half-caste who isn't initiated doesn't know aboriginal law, nor does he know whitefella law, before which he has few rights, only the will or whim of the policemen he runs up against. The half-caste is regularly seen as deprived, having only, as stated above, half the qualities of a full-blooded

white or black. The trouble is, of course, that the half-caste has double the problems. He's partially – perhaps almost entirely – cut off from the sources of aboriginal life, without being put in contact with the sources of whitefella life. He's a problem created by a problem which hasn't been solved, and the only solution the white society can think of is to seize the half-caste children and treat them as poor whites, separating them from their aboriginal mothers and fathers. They are then brought up as inferior whites as a way of denying the co-existence of equal but different civilisations. Nobody ever saw the black people as being civilised, so the process of civilising – often left to the church and its minions – was a process involving a great deal of denial and eradication. Arthur again:

Aah, I always wish I'd never left there. It was my home. Sometimes I wish I'd been born black as the ace of spades, then they'd never have took me. They only took half-castes. They took Albert and they took me and Katie, our friend. She was put in Parkerville. She had a big doll with her when she went, Albert had me. Others went, too. I was about eleven or twelve.

They told my mother and the others we'd be back soon. We wouldn't be gone for long, they said. People were callin', 'Bring us back a shirt, bring us this, bring us that.' They didn't realise they wouldn't be seein' us no more. I thought they wanted us educated so we could help run the station some day, I was wrong.

When they came to get me, I clung to my mother and tried to sing them. I wanted them to die. I was too young. I didn't

know how to sing them properly. I cried and cried, calling to my mother, 'I don't want to go, I don't want to go!' She was my favourite. I loved her. I called, 'I want to stop with you, I want to stop with you!' I never saw her again.

The alternative wasn't necessarily all that much better.

I remember seein' native people all chained up around the neck and hands, walkin' behind a policeman. They often passed the station that way. I used to think, what have they done to be treated like that. Made me want to cry, just watchin'. Sometimes, we'd hear about white men going shooting blackfellas for sport, just like we was some kind of animal. We'd all get scared, then. We didn't want that to happen to us. Aah, things was hard for the blackfellas in those days.

Arthur, as stated earlier, carries the surname Corunna, from the Drake-Brockmann's property Corunna Downs, named for a city and a region in north-western Spain, a place made famous by a battle between England and France in the Napoleonic wars. It seems strange to think of this name attaching itself to a man from the Pilbara region of Western Australia, but a glance at the map is enough to remind us that modern Australia is itself a hybrid of aboriginal place names, imported place names, and improvised, original, vernacular names like 'Goodnight' (a bend in the Murray River), 'Seventeen Seventy' (on the Queensland coast, and sighted, presumably, by Captain Cook's Endeavour) and the hundreds of Stony Creeks, Boggy Creeks and the like which are spattered across our land. We're European, and we're nothing of the sort; we were aboriginal, and the aboriginal has been beaten out of us

at every turn, and yet it's survived, it's lingered, however feebly, it's persisted, proudly enough at times, and it's forced the creation of a hybrid society, frequently unsure of itself, frequently very proud, which continues to this day. Arthur Corunna is a proud man, and a remarkably successful one, and his story, sitting in the middle of *My Place*, is the redemption of Sally Morgan. With the facts of Arthur's life in her grasp at last, she has the pressure she needs to drag Mum and Nan out of their lifelong denial.

Arthur is a man who will not let himself be beaten. Reference to the Drake-Brockmann aspect of his heritage diverts us from the fact that, as a battler, for that is what he is, he's similar to most of the whites in his gigantic state. Most of them are little people, struggling too. Reading *My Place* is to be reminded that institutional behaviour is generally worse than the average of individual behaviour, variable and frequently ghastly as it may be. Arthur Corunna's life shows this. He's not only used and abused by whites, he's treated generously too.

... a big squatter from Victoria, by name of Syd Stock. I had to take him by buggy to his brothers in Nungarin. One night, we was sitting by the fire, the air was real cool and quiet like, when he turned to me and said, 'Would you like to come back to Victoria with me, Marble? I've got stations there and horses and buggies too. You can work on one of my stations.' I looked at him. He was a good man. The kind of man I liked. Then I said, 'No. I don't want to go far from the north. I might never come back. This land is my home.'

Now, that could have been an opportunity missed. He was an old man, and he trusted me. I was young then, with no ties, just a young working man. He might have given me a

station. I knew he was a good man, because, whenever we went to the hotel, he never put me outside or cast me away like most white men. Where he went, I went. He kept me with him always. Treated me like his equal. That was a rare thing in those days. A thing to be treasured.

Arthur wants to be within reach of the land he knows is his; that he belongs to. So does Sally. There is a push inside her that moves her, only semi-consciously, towards her goal. Arthur's story has taken her some of the way; she feels stuck; she decides that she and her (white) husband will take their children north to look for new leads. Mum (Gladys) says this is a silly idea, and Nan (Daisy) agrees. 'It's a waste of money, you're chasin' the wind. You go up there and the cyclone'll get you.' But Sally is determined, and Mum changes her mind.

'You know,' Mum said wistfully, 'I've always had a hankering to go North.'

'Who said anything about taking you? I mean, all you'd be doing is looking at dirt. You don't want to go two thousand kilometres for that.'

'You're not leaving me here?!'

'I don't want to be dragging a reluctant mother around,' I said. 'No, it wouldn't work. I'll go with Paul and the kids.'

'I'm coming and that's that!' she said.

Nan suddenly interrupted. 'You two, you're both nuts! You, Glad, you're like the wind, you blow here and you blow there. You got no mind of your own!'

'Well, Nan, maybe Mum'll chase the cyclones away!'

They go, they find any number of people to talk to, and they visit Corunna Downs, where they are made welcome.

There were no aboriginal people on Corunna now. It seemed sad, somehow. Mum and I sat down on part of the old fence and looked across to the distant horizon. We were both trying to imagine what it would have been like for the people in the old days. Soft, blue hills completely surrounded the station. They seemed to us mystical and magical. We easily imagined Nan, Arthur, Rosie, Lily and Albert, sitting exactly as we were now, looking off into the horizon at the end of the day. Dreaming, thinking.

The visit to the north has its effect on Gladys (Mum). She dimly remembers that she once had a sister. Nan grows angry when she's asked, and locks herself in her room, saying, 'Let the past be.' Gladys becomes certain that there was a sister. I should say at this point that *My Place* is full of psychic certainties which only some, perhaps only a few, white people would be prepared to trust. This sense of a sister, existing separately from herself, somewhere, moves Gladys to decide that she too, like Arthur, will tell her story. And she does.

It's not a happy tale, but one feels, reading it, that to know some facts, some truth, must have been a huge relief for Sally, her daughter and the writer of this book. Books, and writing, increase their stature as Gladys gets her story out. A book is like something in a museum, available forever now, on display, open to interpretation, discussion, reconsideration by every generation that gets to look at it. A book can be opened by anybody, so it is the opposite of something covered over, hidden, accessible

only through lies, visible only through a peep-hole which hides everything that's thought to be undesirable. Funnily enough, although the families of the black people in the book are wrenched apart by interfering whites any time it seems good to them to take control of people who've managed their own lives for thousands of years, it still seems to me that the greatest crime of the whites is to make the blacks feel ashamed of themselves. Gladys (Mum) to her daughter Sally, and to us all:

I feel embarrassed now, to think that, once, I wanted to be white. As a child, I even hoped a white family would adopt me, a rich one, of course. I've changed since those days ...

... but at least I've made a start. And I hope my children will feel proud of the spiritual background from which they've sprung. If we all keep saying we're proud to be Aboriginal, then maybe other Australians will see that we're a people to be proud of ...

I suppose, in hundreds of years time, there won't be any black Aboriginals left. Our colour dies out; as we mix with other races, we'll lose some of the physical characteristics that distinguish us now. I like to think that, no matter what we become, our spiritual tie with the land and the other unique qualities we possess will somehow weave their way through to future generations of Australians. I mean, this is our land, after all, surely we've got something to offer.

It hasn't been an easy task, baring my soul. I'd rather have kept hidden things which have now seen the light of day. But, like everything else in my life, I knew I had to do it. I find I'm embarrassed sometimes by what I have told, but I know I cannot retract what has been written, it's no longer mine.

Brave Gladys, for saying it, and Sally, for getting it all down, in a book, a book, a book!