

## What tree is that? *Eucalyptus* by Murray Bail

A man with no name snatches the prize-woman from Mr Cave in a book of endless deception: is there anything we can take as certain?

When I first became interested in trees, authorities said there were just over six hundred eucalypts; this number included sub-species identified with a further name, as for example, *Eucalyptus albens* var. *elongata*. I found it reassuring to know, when I stood surrounded by bewildering bush, that trained minds had been through before me. Since then, I discover, scientists have been re-classifying, and the process never stops. How many species there are today, I don't know, and I don't much care because I know that the number will change again as other, newer minds approach the problem ...

What problem? That of classifying, differentiating, identifying ... Why bother to do this? Why give them names at all, and if we must, why not characterise them by the birds that nest in them, the creatures that live in them, chewing little holes; that is, identify them by where they sit in the hosting of the endless feed chain that we would need, if we lived among trees in the aboriginal way?

Why not indeed? Well, first answer, we'd never have had Murray Bail's *Eucalyptus*, a book about the classification, the naming, of every species of the genus for which Australia is noted. I find myself on the verge of telling you what the book's about, but if I do that I'll be falling into Bail's trap, and I suppose I can't avoid

it because I'm trying to guide you through the book and I can't do that without guiding myself. Here goes!

Central to the book is the project of a man called Holland, who arrives in an area west of the ranges in New South Wales. He's new in the area, which means that his identity is 'New Holland', so, you see, he brings with him a very old conception of our country, which means, again, that we can't be quite sure how to take him. He had a wife, long dead, and he has a daughter, Ellen, who, in the course of the book, becomes so beautiful that every man who sees her desires her. It's clear from this that we're in a land of fable, where people – men, mostly – act in the ways that men act in stories about men desiring women.

You should be feeling wary by now!

Holland develops the idea – not quickly, but over forty pages or so – that he'll cause at least one specimen of every single eucalypt to grow on his property. After much work, this is achieved. This too tells us that we're in story-land because anybody with half an eye can see that *E.Regnans* (mountain ash) could not co-exist with the various desert trees named throughout the book. Holland even grows a species from somewhere west of the Olgas in central Australia which has been reported but nobody now alive has seen. See what I mean? Perhaps these trees are reassured by the presence in numbers of the river red gum (*E.Camaldulensis* – there's a story about this name), the most widely distributed species in the continent, a tree that can take a forest form, but which is better

known for huge, sprawling specimens clinging to the earth in low-lying spots where water lies after floods or rain.

Holland gets these trees to grow, and, at the same time, his daughter Ellen reaches her maturity. She has no mother, remember, and no siblings, only her father. He's a man of limited imagination, devoted to his daughter but without any layer of awareness comprehending her deeper needs. What will he do next? He decides that the man who correctly identifies every eucalypt on his property can have Ellen's hand in marriage.

At this point I invite readers to look around them at all the markers which give them stability, an ordered life, a range of meanings to be applied in suitable situations, in order to gauge how far this story-situation diverges from the world you – we, I – think of as real.

*Real.* It's a wobbly word, isn't it. Bail's book is, perhaps, an attempt to find some realities and undermine some old ones. Perhaps. We'll continue our search.

Let's start with those early pages. Surprisingly, in view of what I've just told you, they don't begin with the time-honoured 'Once upon a time'. Those are the words which tell us that fable is entering the door. 'Once upon a time there was a beautiful princess ...' An opening like this is a claim by a story that it's free of any logic but its own. The world of the story may not be the same as the world of the listener/reader, but it exists for all that, and we, listening, have to let it go wherever it wants. The promise is that some undiscovered cache of jewels, gold or wisdom lies ahead and may be revealed, if we're attentive.

That's the way stories work; but what sort of story is Bail telling us, or, we have to ask, is it a story at all?

Could it be that it's a narrative of some other sort, political perhaps, pretending to be about a contest for a beautiful woman, when that's only a distraction, something to keep our eyes in the wrong direction while we're brought to something else?

Let's go back to the opening. Each numbered section of the book carries the adjectival name of a eucalypt. The first is *obliqua*, or messmate if you know the forests of eastern Australia, but Bail, characteristically as we will come to see, heads off in another direction to talk about *desertorum* and soon after that, *pulverulenta*. Then it's *diversifolia*, *transcontinentalis*, and *globulus*. Many pages later, he suggests that *globulus*, translated as global, could be the symbol of our place in a globalised world. I don't think I made that up; I think Murray Bail said something like that. It's very hard, after dealing with his allusive style for a time, to be sure what he said and what you thought in response. I think this is how he wants things to be.

The opening. *Obliqua*. The word sits on its own, never mentioned again. There's not a messmate to be found in Section 1. So why's the word there? I must suppose that he's telling us that his writing will always be at an oblique angle to what's being considered. That *feels* true, so perhaps I'm right. What's the book about? Too soon to tackle that question; we'll have to wait.

The second section's called *Eximia*, after a tree that grows from the Hunter Valley to Nowra, in New South Wales. Popular name is Yellow Bloodwood, according to Bail, and he makes it the first

tree planted by Holland and, perhaps, his daughter. His project has begun.

Unusual for a eucalypt the Yellow Bloodwood has a shivering canopy of leaves almost touching the ground, like an errant oak. The botanical journals have this to say: 'the specific name is taken from the English adjective *eximious*, in the sense that the tree in flower is extraordinary'. Late spring the flowers put on their show. It is as if someone has merrily chucked handfuls of dirty snow into the military-green leaves. Dirty snow - so far inland? Colour of beer froth. Make that a blonde's hair. Perpetually oozing red gum is the 'blood' in the rest of the name.

The prose style in those lines I've quoted repays some attention. It begins with the intellect in command, then, after a comma, something poetic slips in: 'like an errant oak'. Note the claim that an oak, a genus so powerful, so dominant, in many parts of the world, would be 'errant' in the landscape under consideration. A couple of lines later, the 'prose' is as vulgar as the common speech of Australia. Chucked. Beer froth. Blonde's hair. Where's the refinement gone? Not far. It'll turn up next time it's needed. Bail writes an apparently featureless prose which is in fact making adaptations all the time, like the genus he purports to be talking about. He's chosen them - it - because they (it) give him good cover. He can slip from one tree to the next, talking about anything he feels like, telling you about the changing trees as a way of hiding from you the fact that his subject matter, his topic, is changing too, wildly, arbitrarily, humorously, seriously, each topic that comes to his mind being dealt with when he's ready.

Eucalypts cover much of Australia, the river red gum being the most common, and they change all the time, adapting to whatever's provided by the earth, recalling the old saying, 'Things must change in order that they may remain the same.' So much for the reformist's mind! 'Things must change in order that they may remain the same.' Are we any closer to the elusive Bail? Perhaps, perhaps not ...

So where is he then? Answer, behind his story, pulling the strings. Holland is a cardboard figure, allocated human characteristics. If we took it seriously, his promise of his daughter to the man who can name the trees on his property would be a monstrous act. Does Ellen have no wishes, no feelings, of her own? She doesn't rebel, or not in any way that Holland notices. She does, however, have conversations, she walks and talks with a man who begins to hang around the property. I speak of the man with whom she will leave at the end of the book, the man she prefers to Mister Cave, who names all the trees and stays to claim his bride, only to find that she's growing weaker every day. This sickness, this weakness, is her protest at what's to become of her, but when she needs the stranger most, he stays away. Then he comes to her, after she's told her father she'll speak to Mr Cave in the morning. This other suitor lies beside her, then she's persuaded to get up, dress, and leave with him. If - it's Murray Bail's book, so we have to say 'if' - *if*, in this moment of decision, this reassertion of her needs over her father's wishes, she's going with the stranger, what does this mean? What makes him preferable to Mr Cave?

I think this takes us to the heart of the book. There are two points to make about the stranger. The first is that we actually met him, many pages earlier, when Holland was going to put metal plaques under each of his trees, identifying them, as in a botanical garden. This man knows the trees as well as Mr Cave. He is, in that restricted, peculiar, but, in the terms of this book, comprehensive sense, the equal of the ever-so-knowledgeable Cave. But he is also a story-teller. The book *Eucalyptus* is as full of stories as it is of trees, and it is an elaborate way of setting up a conflict between two types of thinking, both of them largely though not essentially male. The first way of thinking is that of classifying, differentiating, identifying, as stated earlier; the second way is via stories. You look, and you classify, or, you understand, and then reveal. It is the latter which wins Ellen's heart, and Mr Cave will be a sorry man when he comes to claim her, because she'll be gone. Bail being the sort of storyteller he is, you know that even if he were forced to add another chapter, Cave and Ellen's father would have no hope of recapturing her, once she's made the choice.

Notice that Bail is true to his fairytale form in that he doesn't give Ellen the capacity to formulate these choices for herself: they're presented to her, they are the situation she's pushed into, and then she has to decide how to get out of the situation. This she does by choosing. She goes with the stranger, the man with no name, whose stories are more liberating, at least potentially, than Cave's knowledge, which like her father's knowledge, is not so much liberating as something one needs to escape. That, the basis of that

decision – narrative before scientific description – is, I think, the real subject of the book and the reason for its appeal.

Narrative before scientific description: why do I rank them thus? That's easy enough. There's life in narrative, and it has to be clamped, kept still, made ready for examination, before science can get to work on it. This is, of course, no small thing. Investigative science, descriptive, analytical science, has made huge contributions to mankind's life in this world. It's probably the major contribution of European – now global; remember E.Globulus? – civilisation. No small thing, as I say. Nonetheless, it's a way of understanding, and the forms of life, be they dragons, sharks, spiders or what you will; even humans, if you're feeling bold – the forms of life don't much care whether they're understood or not. In fact, they would probably prefer not to be understood because understanding is a means to control, and to control may mean to wipe out, as any threatened species could tell you. When understanding rules, humans have the whip hand, and this question of control underlies, in my view, most of Murray Bail's *Eucalyptus*. Urbane as the narrator may be, some of the stories he introduces have something harsher to show. Let's have a look.

Over time the River Red Gum (*E.Camaldulensis*) has become barnacled with legends. This is only to be expected. By sheer numbers there's always a bulky Red Gum here or somewhere else in the wide world, muscling into the eye, as it were; and by following the course of rivers in our particular continent they don't merely imprint their fuzzy shape but actually worm their way greenly into the mind, giving some hope against the collective crow-croaking dryness. And if

that's not enough the massive individual squatness of these trees, ancient, stained and warty, has a grandfatherly aspect; that is, a long life of incidents, seasons, stories.

Casual this may be, introductory – we'll get to Naples in a moment – but it's also borrowing for the narrative something of the stubborn, weather-resisting dignity of a tree that survives where most of us could not. The genus eucalyptus is an adaptable form of life and the river red gum, as noted before, is the most widespread species and therefore the most adaptable. Non-human nature has a lesson for humans there. Survival has always been the first problem for settlers in Australia; think of the convict settlement at Port Jackson, in the years after 1788, when they simply didn't know how long they could last, who would die, and who would be alive to see the next English boat. Those early Englishmen were stubbornly, stupidly, English in their certainty that they were superior to the blacks when commonsense should have planted it in their minds that they were not. Bail, in choosing as his central figure the quizzical Holland, who has no apparent way of making a living out of his extensive land, is, in his joking way, setting him up as admirable because he plants gum trees instead of ripping them out, as his predecessors on the same property did. It is a quirky book!

Curiously, for all its wide distribution in Australia, the River Red Gum was first described in the literature from a cultivated tree in the walled garden of the Camalduli religious order in Naples. How did this happen?

Bail has set the scene for his tale, one of the many tales within the tale, to begin. 'Late in the nineteenth century a paddle-steamer captain – Irish, a widower, based in Wentworth – vowed to kill his own daughter!'

This wild Irishman – who's never named – has a knack of navigating the Darling River, and he normally, like Holland, has his daughter beside him. Then she's not there any more, and he begins to make mistakes. He runs his steamer aground, loaded with wool bales. He's suspicious of his daughter, and he's right because she's pregnant to a local grazier's son. The couple flee. The grazier's son disappears from the story at this point, but nature, the region and the river, with all its trees, do not. Here's how Bail describes the river-man's suspicions:

... suspicions which were always aggravated by the sight at Wentworth of the Darling River flowing into and becoming one with the stronger Murray River. Unless he was mistaken his daughter's appearance had subtly altered.

The daughter disappears, and the father sets out to follow. Years pass, and he tracks her down in Naples, where the Camaldulensians have an order. He finds her scratching the soil with a hoe. He questions her. 'Either in anger or relief to get a word out of her – nobody knows – he took her by her shoulders. They struggled in the garden ...'

This is when Bail's tale within a tale becomes conscious of itself:

It was then, the *story* goes, a Red Gum seed dormant in the river man's trouser cuff spilled onto the ground.

The seed takes hold, much as happened when the daughter conceived her child, long taken away.

... soon after he left, shaking and exhausted, a green shoot appeared.

The daughter tended it until it grew into a healthy sapling, and she lived with the Camalduli order long enough to see the sapling become a tree, then a full-grown River Red Gum, a tree of great girth, dominating the garden, its water-seeking roots cracking walls and sucking dry the vegetable plots, the same tree that lined for hour after hour the Darling River, which she would never again see.

If we look for the source of the nobility which has suddenly entered the book, it's as much in the tree itself as in the passions of father and daughter, and it's strongest, I think, in the distance covered by the story, the sheer arbitrariness of the event. 'A green shoot appeared.' A tree which didn't belong had found a new place to grow. That, after all, is how every species finds its limits, and the places where it's most at home. I began this essay by referring to my early interest in eucalyptus trees; that was in my twelve years as a teacher in East Gippsland. I found it amazing, driving about, to observe that trees not only knew when a place was right for them, they crowded out the other species growing near. Spotted gum, *E.Maculata*, grew in a tiny area south-east of Buchan, nobody knew why, but there they were. Not far away was a larger patch of a close relative. *E.Maculosa*, a white-barked tree that made you white too if you rubbed against it. *Maculosa* had another home, on the Dargo road ... All these trees had homes, places, restricted, some of them,

vast in other cases, which seemed to be the natural, *given* home of the species. Some force, mysterious to humans, regulated the habitats of species, and this force, hard for humans to understand, seems to be operative in Murray Bail's book. That, I think, is why his opinions, whenever they get to be stated, seem so tentative. The real controls of life, the underlying ground rules, are not those articulated by humans, but the operative forces of nature: narrative forces, rather than scientific laws, laws that are better known in the telling than by their measurement. It's a most unusual novel we have in hand!

Another story. *Diversicolor*. That's the name for Karri, one of the tallest trees in Western Australia, famously hard and durable. The genus eucalyptus is of astonishing variety. Some of its species, by the standards of a European or American forest, are scrubby little bushes, hardly better than weeds to an aristocratic eye. These are the ones that produce the most amazing flowers. The grandest trees, reaching to the sky, are unimpressive when they flower, but, when surrounded by ferns and perhaps some drifting fog or cloud, have a way of joining people at their feet to some dimension that releases them from the burden of being human. They offer an escape, and they offer it to all. Democratic trees, the eucalypts; rather like horses and dogs, they don't care who you are but they know if you're treating them badly. One suspects, at times, that they can read our intentions; one shouldn't go among them carrying an axe. Or a chainsaw!

*Diversicolor*. Karri. In this story – it's one of the narrator's own, not one told by a character in the book – a salesman comes to a town

'out west of Sydney', books into a hotel, but for some reason takes his breakfast at a café run by Greeks.

The Greek had moved his family inland, as far from the sea as possible. This was to prevent his daughter being seen in a bathing costume. It was rumoured that a part of her body was disfigured by a wine-dark stain, though no one – certainly none of the hoons who sat around every night in the café – had seen such a mark with their own eyes.

As to the nature of this town, Bail is summary.

There was never much going on in town. The few young men who remained spent the most vital years of their lives talking about cars and hazarding guesses about the waitress, only to clam up and grin when she came to their table. If one of them was lucky enough to take her to the pictures or for a drive to the next town her father wanted her home by 11pm, and she herself had never allowed anyone to see what lay underneath her blouse and jeans. She'd grown up with these young men ...

The visiting salesman hears reports about the marks on the woman's body, and wants to see for himself. He takes all his meals at the Greeks', but his usual approaches to women, of flattery, jokes, and so on, have no effect. He sits in the café drinking coffee, but the waitress shows no interest in him. 'If anything, she became downright suspicious, hostile even.' He decides to give himself one more night. 'He couldn't stay in this dump forever.' Or so he thought, but as we shall see, that is what fate had in store. *Diversicolor*. The Karri tree, producing great lengths of good timber, is often used for telegraph poles. On the salesman's last night he

leaves after his meal, not bothering with coffee. He places himself where, if he climbs a picket fence, he will be able to see into her window when she knocks off. When she undresses, ready for bed.

Her light comes on. The salesman watches from the dark. She takes off her clothes, and turns. He sees her naked, he climbs a little higher, and sees the dark stain on her legs, 'as if she was up to her knees in ink.' Then a very strange thing happens:

At that moment she faced the window. Although she didn't cry out, he stepped back; or so he thought. Something solid met him from behind. He couldn't move. There was no point in struggling. He could still see into the room and the waitress's pale body. His arms disappeared into his sides. And he felt himself merge into something altogether hard and straight; unusually tall. Foolishly, he realised he should be getting back to his home in Sydney. His head became cold. He then began to hear voices.

From the waitress's muscular legs the stain was transferred across the short distance of chicken wire, bottles and tins, lengths of useful timber, etc., over the grey splintered fence to the base of the new telegraph pole, Karri, which would stand in all weathers with a clear view of the Greek waitress in her room, regularly naked.

She of course lived, happily ever after, sometimes enjoying the company of men.

We move at once to section 28, *Decipiens*. It's only a few lines long:

To this day examples continue of a man coming across a woman undressed who is simply unable to avert, let alone shut, his eyes. Very common within the species. At any given

moment it happens somewhere in the world. Accidental? More than likely an essential deep-seated mechanism is at work here; and as the eyes possess the unprotected body, a secondary mechanism is activated which can produce unexpected consequences, on occasions, retribution.

The next section, *Neglecta*, follows immediately. Has Bail said, in section 28, all he wants to say? We must assume so. The man who's turned into a telegraph pole – *diversicolor*, remember: Karri – was changed by the activation of a secondary mechanism, and from what we've heard about, and been chilled by, as well as fascinated, he suffered an unexpected consequence. A retribution? Yes, we have to say, but what brought it about? Bail doesn't pretend to know. What he does know, and exploits as a writer, is that stories can let loose forces which humans simply don't understand. Humans can be shocked by unpredicted forces rushing through them via the channels of those things in themselves which they least understand, and sexual desire, and curiosity, are two of the most potent of these. If humans are to achieve any sort of wisdom, maturity, balance, they must be in control of themselves, and most of us are only in control when we're living within our rules. Decency, propriety, restrict us, and nobody likes to be restricted, but, Bail's little horror-tale tells us, if we try to outwit the restricting forces, they may surprise us. It's fitting, I think, that the salesman's disaster is an outcome of spying on the Greeks of a little town, because Bail's story has something about it of the legends of Greece, wherein people are often struck by unexpected forces.

This is a way of thinking which lies outside the formulae of nineteenth century Australiana, but it's present in our society today,

and several decades of multiculturalism have made available to us many, many modes of thought. Bail's book would appear to be determinedly parochial, nationalistic, in its outlook, but those endlessly restrained observations, pointing our minds in any number of new directions, are nudging us, all the time, towards giving new thoughts a go.

I am inclined to think, then, that *Eucalyptus* is a novel disguising the fact that it's an endless social commentary, a novel setting up incidents, events, for the opportunities they provide for observation and comment. Is that what the book's about? I find myself likening it to a train, travelling along lines laid down by engineers and surveyors, carrying loads of wheat, cattle or manufactured goods, iron ore, coal, or possibly some passengers. Some of these passengers spend their time looking at the country they see through the windows, while others travel inside their own thoughts, hardly looking out at all. Some do both. I think this comparison shows that a book may have more than one meaning, just as a train carries hundreds of people all making journeys that are different, one from another. I think that *Eucalyptus* is both a very prescriptive novel, and a most un-prescriptive book, at one and the same time. I'm sure many readers will think this a strange thing to say, and I suppose it is, but I'll stick to it. The story about the suitors coming to name all the trees in hopes of winning the beautiful woman is, on the one hand, quite silly, unlikely, based on nothing but fantasy of one sort or another, and, as stated earlier, it rests on the impossibility of getting all six hundred (or so) species to grow in the one place. I say impossible; it would be possible if we think

that Holland's property is in fact the whole of Australia; if, that is, his property is a way of understanding the nation. You may think of it that way if you please but it's a little too far-stretched for my understanding. I don't think any inconsistency about the scope, the extent, of Holland's property is in Murray Bail's mind, or, if it is, he doesn't seem to be worried about it.

What is he doing, then? He's contrasting narrative with scientific classification, a point made already and more than once. And since we've all seen identifying plaques, cards and so on, beside plants in nurseries, flower shops and in grand botanical gardens, Bail can take it for granted that we understand the idea of classifying and identifying. They're activities we're used to.

Similarly, we're used to stories, and we understand the nature of narrative very well, since we've all given our minds to it, right from our earliest years. But have we thought what a difference it makes to our understandings whether we extract the essence of a story or simply go along with it? Have we trained ourselves to use stories well, to extract their honey, shall I say? Bail's approach in *Eucalyptus* suggests that he thinks we need a lot of training; hence his endless supply of stories. There are at least as many in the book as there are classificatory adjectives – *pulverulenta*, *desertorum*, *regnans*, *sideroxylon*, *illaguens*, and the rest. Here's Ellen thinking about the strange suitor who emerges from the trees, often when least expected:

The way the stories began in a time-worn way had relaxed her. It was his way. 'There was an old woman who lived at the foot of a dark mountain ...' 'The quality of miracles has declined over the years ...' 'Late in the evening of the 11th

...' 'There was once a man who ...' These old arrangements of words caused Ellen to smile secretly and return to the trees, at which point she grew thoughtful and began to frown – another version of day replaced by evening and night.

Earlier in this essay I commented that *Eucalyptus* doesn't begin with 'Once upon a time ...' Bail does introduce a couple of phrases which are very similar in those pages which he's using to get his story started, but I now think that he decided not to use the fairytale formula at the beginning because the book he's giving us is both a fairytale and something very different; it's a journey, a narrative, experienced by a variety of minds, of ways of looking at things. To begin with 'Once upon a time ...' would have been to settle on one side of the ship, as it were, before seeing what the view was like from the other side. So what is the book about? It's about the many ways there are of seeing things. It's about the futility of classificatory systems, however useful and/or sophisticated. It's about the variety of fortunes handed out to human beings, and how they sometimes are and sometimes are not related to our structural place in things. Are we fathers? Daughters? He says little enough about mothers, except insofar as they have to get to that position through being daughters first, and in Bail's view this is formative and inescapable. Even to think about these things leads us to the question, what are the ties that bind us, and it seems to me that Bail's response to that or any other question we could dream of would be to tell a story. He's the writer most unlikely to give us an answer based on systems of reward and punishment, handed out according to a morality-based definition of vice and virtue. May we all be spared such systems of thought! They make life simple,

but they imprison us. Stories release. Stories give us independence, though they teach us that we'll have to pay for pleasures taken, and if we don't pay for them, someone will, possibly someone innocent and uninvolved. Stories are brutally realistic, and they feel no responsibility to look after those they mention in any well-disposed sort of way. No, it's devil take the hindmost in a world where stories are the only guidance, and that's the world which Bail is offering us, in that basket-full of observations he reaches for whenever the main story – the eucalypt-naming – is in abeyance.

The ending of the book is such a moment – of abeyance, that is. Cave has named all the trees. All six hundred, if that's the total. Clever man, eh? Holland's stuck with the bargain he offered, even though he must be ashamed when he sees how miserable Ellen is. If Cave was halfway decent, he'd say to Holland, 'I don't think she wants me!' but there's no evidence of him thinking that, nor of Holland trying to make him say it. The daughter's to be handed over ... except that she escapes.

To what?

Really, we haven't the faintest idea. And nor has she. The second suitor hasn't made any promises and, such is the nature of Bail's presentation, we feel that he's to be respected for that. If he made a promise we'd know straight away that it wouldn't be kept, because that's the nature of promises when found in stories. If the promise is kept, you don't have a story, you have only a moral tale, that is, a tale which supports an idea already present in the mind, whereas real stories probe into the darkness surrounding whatever it is that humans think they understand.

Hence, I think, the tentative nature of Bail's observations when he's not actually telling a tale, something he does with rare skill.

It was not always necessary to tell a story, although Ellen preferred them. On account of its thickish leaves the Grey Gum of southern Queensland is called Leather Jacket. This was enough for him to say the bikies who sit astride their heavy machines are the modern, necessary equivalent to medieval knights on horseback. Bikies too stagger under the weight of protective gear, the helmet and visor, their boots resting on stirrups. The machines they handle and accelerate away in small groups are powerful, draped in leather and chains; a large motorbike is a version of a sturdy horse in all its power and heat underneath.

At this point Ellen's thought, as so often in this book, changes direction.

... Ellen could have asked about the small snick below his eye, the History of a Scar; there was a story written there: but he had already moved onto the next tree.

So restful, so vague, sifting through like this. It was at a half-conscious level, just below the brighter waking surface; paddling in the shallow of her private river, as it were.

We are not going to get an over-arching statement from novelist Murray Bail. It's enough to have traced his ways of working. The paths he's cleared for his thought. The sorts of high ground he uses for observation. Or, to return to our travelling train metaphor, the moments when he releases himself from his own thoughts to have a look at the country he's passing through. For those who know

their eucalypts well, the species, or combinations of species which make their home in a particular place are its best expression. What more can we say of an area than that it's box-ironbark country, it's redgum forest, it's an area where messmate – *obliqua*, did you remember? – grows on one side of the range and silvertop ash – E.Sieberi – on the other. Or the soil's deeper on the wetter side of the range, and E.Regnans can reach into the sky, an expression of the earth it's in. I feel sure that Bail sees this indicative, metaphorical, expressive aspect of the eucalypt, a quality that's almost out of sight of anyone not familiar with the trees, but can nonetheless be felt by anyone, however uneducated, who's responsive, and, although he's given us a book about classification and naming he's indicating to us, through all sorts of signals coming via stories, that we should look elsewhere for the decision-making influences on anything that really matters.