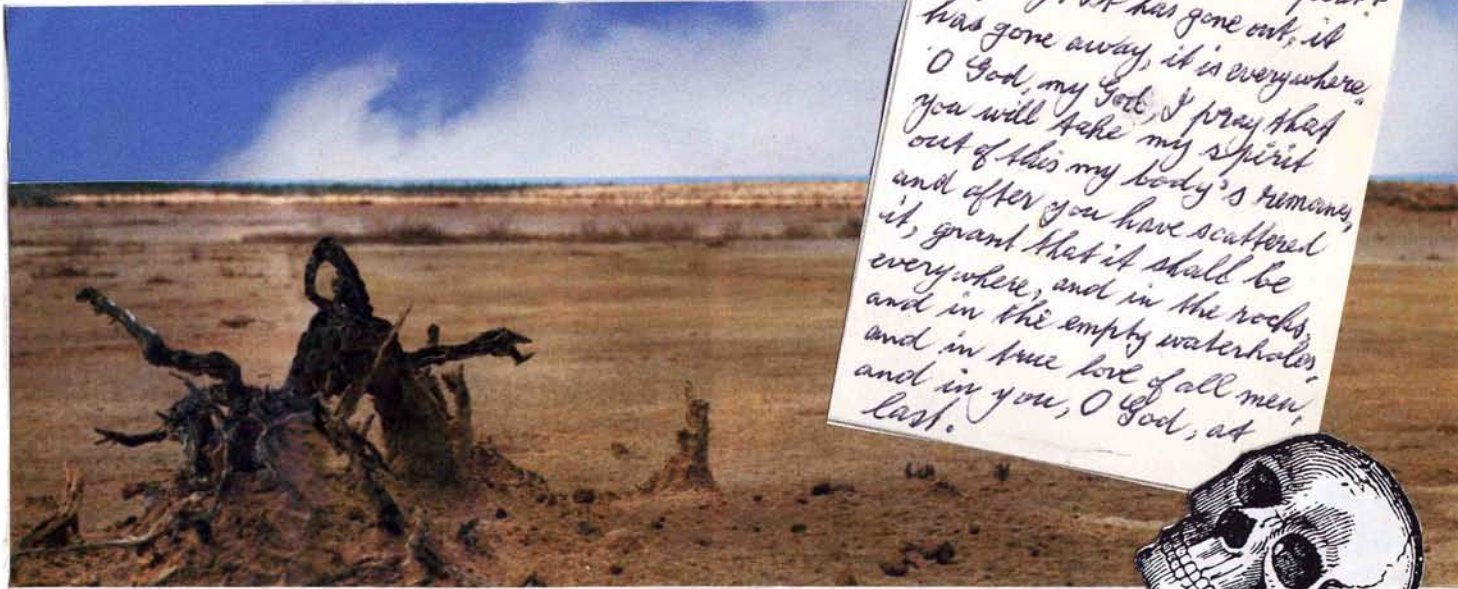




## A desert song, or is it? Voss by Patrick White

The desert as a state of mind: something of a shame, really

### Chester Eagle



They chase this kangaroo, and  
when they have cut off his  
pride, and gnawed his charred  
bones, they honour him in ash  
on a wall. Where is his spirit?  
They say: It has gone out, it  
has gone away, it is everywhere.  
O God, my God, I pray that  
you will take my spirit  
out of this my body's remains,  
and after you have scattered  
it, grant that it shall be  
everywhere, and in the rocks,  
and in the empty waterholes,  
and in true love of all men,  
and in you, O God, at  
last.



## A desert song, or is it? *Voss* by Patrick White

The interior as a state of mind: something of a shame, really

Early in my re-reading of *Voss* I found myself wondering if it was an historical novel, and found that I couldn't deal with the question because I wasn't sure what the term meant, or if it meant anything definite at all. The question arose from two sources: a statement on the back of my copy that 'the true record of Ludwig Leichhardt, who died in the Australian desert in 1848, suggested *Voss* to the author', and a feeling I gained from the early pages that White was recreating early Sydney with considerable skill. He seemed well-informed as to what the place had been like.

I read on, wondering whether the question mattered; White had such a powerful imagination that I felt sure – indeed, I remembered from earlier readings, years before – that, insofar as White would draw upon matters previously described by historians, he would transmute them into something personal. It was, as far as I knew, the way his mind worked. My latest reading, however, has left me somewhat puzzled; *Voss* is strong in ways I'd forgotten and, for this reader, problematic in other ways, mostly internal to the mind of the explorer and his colleague, Frank Le Mesurier, who dies in the desert before *Voss* meets his end. (The dying *Voss* is beheaded by one of his aboriginal guides, Jackie by name, who cuts the throat of the explorer, hacks his head off, and throws it at the feet of the tribesmen who prompted Jackie to do this un-aboriginal deed. More of this anon.)

Is *Voss* an historical novel? Yes, it can be seen that way, if we focus on the opening third of the book and the last fifty or so pages, that is, on the weeks when the exploring expedition is getting itself organised and making its early moves, still within the bounds of the uncertain civilisation which is New South Wales in 1845; and then on the same colony, twenty years after the expedition's failure to return. White handles his colonials very well. There is Mr Bonner, a merchant who is perhaps the expedition's main backer, and there is Colonel Hebden, who goes out, twice, to search for the lost party. There is Mr Sanderson, proprietor of a handsome estate which one imagines is based to some degree on the White family's holdings in the Hunter Valley; we meet Mr Sanderson in his maturity and later, when he has been simplified but refined by old age. Joining the beginning of the book to its end are Laura Trevelyan and Belle Bonner (later Radclyffe), who give the book most, though not all, of the femininity it possesses. Belle is lovely as a girl, with no complexities to baffle anybody, so beautiful that she de-complicates the pages she inhabits, whereas Laura, both early and late, is a handful, if we may use the word, because, like *Voss*, indeed perhaps far more than *Voss*, she sees into the heart of things, ready to consider the uncertainties of a new country. Laura's mind is open while the society of which she is a part is so desperate for the ordered civilities of the old country that they will settle too quickly for temporary solutions offered as if they are permanent, when permanence is a quality the new country hasn't yet achieved.

Sydney's society is a transplanted British society but many of the customs that prevailed as if by law in the old land don't work so well in the new. Laura, with her powerful intellect, seems less troubled by these uncertainties than most.

At the end of the book Laura is the headmistress of a tiny but respectable school, held in high regard but posing problems for Sydney society because they possess no categories for the likes of Laura, and never will because they don't understand her. One of White's finest achievements in this novel is his creation of Laura as a woman whose self-understanding is a work in progress. She is as deep in her thoughts at the end as she was at the beginning, and we feel, as the book reaches its final page, that the involvement with Voss which possessed the young Laura has become an acceptance of mystery which means that life's questions will be forever open, for her.

'I have been travelling through your country, forming opinions of all and sundry,' confessed Mr Ludlow to his audience, 'and am distressed to find the sundry does prevail.'

'We, the sundry, are only too aware of it,' Miss Trevelyan answered, 'but will humbly attempt to rise in your opinion if you will stay long enough.'

'How long? I cannot stay long,' protested Mr Ludlow.

'For those who anticipate perfection – and I would not suspect you of wishing for less – eternity is not too long.'

Mr Ludlow finds the idea of eternity in the new country not to his liking. He changes the subject to the stewed crow that he was offered in somebody's humpy. And yet, a line or two later, Laura has him listening again. Mr Ludlow:

'Oh, yes, a country with a future. But when does the future become present? That is what always puzzles me.'

'Now.'

'How – now?' asked Mr Ludlow.

'Every moment that we live and breathe, and love, and suffer, and die.'

This leads Ludlow to raise with her the question of Voss, to whom a statue has now been raised; White observes, tartly, that he 'was hung with garlands of rarest newspaper prose. They would write about him in the history books. The wrinkles of his solid, bronze trousers could afford to ignore the passage of time.' White is, it seems to me, not attempting anything very different when he gives Laura Trevelyan, prompted by Mr Ludlow, the last words on the matter.

'Voss did not die,' Miss Trevelyan replied. 'He is there still, it is said, in the country, and always will be. His legend will be written down, eventually, by those who have been troubled by it.'

'Come, come. If we are not certain of the facts, how is it possible to give the answers?'

'The air will tell us,' Miss Trevelyan said.

Laura may be hard to fathom, but she's taken responsibility for that part of Voss which cannot be cast in bronze – the *idea* of him, we might say. In a sense she has always had that burden because in her handful of meetings with the German before he set out, and in her imaginings ever after, she has accepted her share, a good half, of the problems which he has gone to face.

For Voss, no matter what publishers put on book covers, or critics write, or even, perhaps, White himself may have imagined occasionally, is no explorer. A more hopeless, clueless wanderer through the outback it would be hard to imagine. He does say, early on, and again in the middle of the book, that he intends to cross the country from one side to the other. Apart from that, he never knows where he is, or how far in front is his nameless goal. Broome? Derby? Port Hedland? Geraldton? The reader hasn't the faintest idea and she will search White's pages in vain for any sign that the expedition is going somewhere. They are not. They are exploring the mind, the worldview, the problematic considerations of Johann Ulrich Voss, and so is Laura, loyal, indeed complicit, as she is. Somewhere in his biography of White David Marr observes that *Voss* is a book of the Egyptian desert, not the Australian. (White had spent some of World War 2 in Egypt.) Marr may well be right, but if he is I think he is probably basing his remark on the fact that White had not made the forays and preparatory excursions which someone writing about such an undertaking might be expected to make. I think that the desert Voss is exploring is a notion of humanity that White discovered in his own mind, and

felt was worth, or needed, examination. Let us look into this a little further.

The *Oxford Dictionary* says of 'desert': 'an uninhabited and uncultivated tract of country; a wilderness; a desolate and barren region, waterless and treeless, with but scanty herbage', and the dictionary also gives '*abstractly*. Desert condition; desolation.' By these definitions White's book never enters any desert because the voyagers – we can hardly call them 'discoverers', since they discover nothing – have aborigines close at hand throughout the latter part of their travels. In fact, I rather think that 'desert' is a reaction of incompetent or semi-competent Europeans to conditions which aboriginal groups handled with skill. Burke and Wills come to mind, dying of starvation while healthy blacks surrounded them, helping them at times. Death and exhaustion, as White understands very well, are matters of mind as much as of body, and one can say of Voss that he died of not being able to solve his problems, since he could always have turned back, as half his party did. Indeed, this division of the expedition raises further questions about what it is that White is pursuing in this book, because Colonel Hebdon, going out twenty years later, finds Judd, the emancipist whom White regularly - and offensively, to my mind – calls a convict: Judd did not die at the moment described by White when we, as readers, were certain that he'd reached his end, but was, apparently, rescued by blacks, and lived with them for twenty years. Judd is another William Buckley (the convict who escaped from the 1803 settlement near Port Phillip Heads, and lived with the blacks for the next three

decades) and therefore far more interesting to modern Australia than Johann Ulrich Voss, who discovered nothing.

I think the reader can reasonably ask of Patrick White why he's bothered us with Voss when Judd is so much more interesting. Why?

Why?

Why Voss rather than Judd?

The German is an outsider, he embodies mystery, and he's beyond the understanding of the Sydney people backing him; beyond everyone's understanding but Laura's. As for Judd, he's been transported as a convict, though he's competent now in all the local ways. I can't imagine that White ever considered making him the central figure because he's not the sort of person White would have chosen. And why not? Because White, looking at Judd, would have found no personal connection. He couldn't embody White's own journey, his own struggle to conceive of himself in ways that would give him a place of honour in the world. White's mother had determined that her son would be a writer, and a writer he became. He railed against her often enough, but he turned her into Elizabeth Hunter in *The Eye of the Storm*. What has this to do with Voss, you may say. My answer is that, for White, the business of writing a novel was one of taking the events he was considering inside his imaginative workshop and rebuilding them according to the rules prevailing therein. White had begun writing early, but had taken years to develop; he was not, even in his war years, a man who mixed easily. There is almost always, in his novels, satirical observation of people who don't qualify for his acceptance. Such

people are often treated savagely as they're turned into characters, but they are at least spared the sometimes frighteningly penetrating scrutiny he turns on those with whom he can identify. Johann Ulrich Voss is a creation right from the centre of White's mind, and the position of Laura is vital: without her, he could not exist. The man is difficult enough, but the fact that Laura can find links between her own complexities and his, makes him bearable for the reader, allowing us to be patient with him, to withhold judgement, and wait to see what he'll do, or think, next.

Do, or think. Voss, unlike most of this country's better explorers, doesn't keep a journal which is quotable. For this aspect of an explorer's duty, White gives us Frank Le Mesurier, whose writings take us to the cortex of the expedition's mind, always assuming that it has one. Surely it does? A group of men, with attendant animals, are in unforgiving country for weeks, they are surrounded with the unanswered questioning of their supporters back home, and they have the blacks keeping pace with them, towards the end, as they grow weaker. Even if, out of dispute, or inside such communalism as a leader-centred party is able to manufacture, consensus is weak, it still exists. They have some sense of sense as they move ever further from the social agreement forged in Sydney. They are exploring. It's their job to find new country, to appraise it, and report on it to their backers. The fact that their leader feels little responsibility for these duties is a hazard for the others who must, in some way, feel the responsibilities as theirs. All the more so if Voss, the leader, isn't carrying them out. Otherwise, what are they doing where they are? Why not go home? Why not die?



So Le Mesurier's thoughts, which we will examine shortly, are important. Besides, they exist. For the reader of *Voss*, they are a part of the journey from first page to last, and cannot be ignored. But let us stay a little longer with the way the party conducts itself under its unpredictable but strangely formidable leader. Voss, before the expedition is properly underway, observes that an understanding is forming between Judd and Palfreyman; this causes a reaction in him which needs to be examined:

Why, then, have I been foolish? the German asked himself; no man is strong who depends upon others. And as he went inside, he thought of the contempt he bore Palfreyman.

'No man is strong who depends upon others.' The leader of a party can't exist with such ideas in mind. Voss is not an expedition's natural leader, only a man with an obsession. Who picked him? Why? Didn't they test him first? No, no, no ...

The previous quote was from page 138 (Penguin Modern Classics edition, 1963); here we are on page 212:

Voss, who had felt more exposed on some less physical occasions, despised all sickness; he despised physical strength; he despised, though secretly, even the compassion he had sensed in the ministrations of Judd. His own strength, he felt, could not decrease with physical debility ...

And a few lines later:

But when the fellow [Judd] had gone away, he continued to suspect him of exercising great power, though within human limits. For compassion, a feminine virtue, or even grace, of some sensual origin, was undoubtedly human, and did limit will.

So it is *will* that is the driving force in Voss, and he is exercising it in a landscape where the very idea, surely, is one of the least suitable, least necessary, importations of European thought. Will! I asked earlier why White didn't prefer Judd over Voss for his central figure, and one answer is that he associates the German-ness of Voss with the central notion of *will*. I say central, but this is only so if you allow me a further assumption – that the assertion of will is both highly important, and can be linked to the urgency of the matter which is of highest priority in the writings of Frank Le Mesurier, mentioned before. Here are a few samples from the man's notebooks.

Man is King. They hung a robe upon him, of blue sky. His crown was molten. He rode across his kingdom of dust, which paid homage to him for a season, with jasmine, and lilies, and visions of water. They had painted his mysteries upon the rock, but, afraid of his presence, they had run away. So he had accepted it. He continued to eat distance, and to raise up the sun in the morning, and the moon was his slave by night. Fevers turned him from Man into God.

A little later:

Then I am not God but Man. I am God with a spear in his side.

And again:

They chase this kangaroo, and when they have cut off his pride, and gnawed his charred bones, they honour him in ochre on a wall. Where is his spirit? They say: It has gone out, it has gone away, it is everywhere.

O God, my God, I pray that you will take my spirit out of this my body's remains, and after you have scattered it, grant that it shall be everywhere, and in the rocks, and in the empty waterholes, and in true love of all men, and in you, O God, at last.

When he reads this, Voss says '*Irrsinn!*' Madness. We may agree, but Mesurier's madness is a companion to Voss's own. Voss lies down after reading Mesurier's journal, but can find no comfort, telling himself that he is exhausted, physically exhausted, and that is all. White adds:

There remained his will, and that was a royal instrument.

Royal? It seems we must add White himself to the madmen wandering in what they think is desert, when it isn't. The word is a condemnation. Many years ago, travelling towards Innamincka, in the top right corner of South Australia, my wife and I came upon sandhills, stretching as far as the eye could see. The track was easy enough, and we stopped the car for a look. It was mid-morning, and the light was filtered by thin cloud. The sandhills, we saw, were covered with golden daisies, from where we stood to the furthest horizon. It was as wonderful a sight as I'd ever seen. That was desert? Only if you say so, and it was gibber plains that came next. It dawned on me that day that my country was a long procession of ecosystems, each operating in its own way, demanding and rewarding. It was harsh, but it gave as much as it took, if you had the combination of strength and spirituality, the awareness and the capacity to respond to a world offering nothing except harshness and beauty. Certainly not any sense of overlordship. The very

idea of God seemed silly to me amid the flowers that morning, and so it does today. 'God' is a localisation, a putting together in one place, powerfully compressed, of things in the world around us that compel reverence and respect. We do not need the concept because the thing it attempts to consolidate, and therefore express, is around us, everywhere and all the time. The black people knew this, and must have wondered why the whites built churches and got dressed for services inside them. Clothes could add little to what the naked body received, and felt, surrounding it. One of the reasons why white people needed to feel superior was that they felt their notions of spirituality challenged by the way the blacks lived. Nowhere can this have been more obvious than when a party of explorers came in contact with people settled in places they'd known for thousands of years. I think it must be clear by now that I pull back frequently when reading *Voss*: it's a book which I wish had not been written in the way it is.

My discomfort increases, though, when I realise that White is putting down, sharply, with his usual penetration of insight, those thoughts on the same matter which are his. I said earlier that I thought that Voss was created in the centre of White's mind. He has taken the proudest, most obtuse and difficult parts of himself and given them to the explorer, then sent him into the 'desert' to work things out. When I see it this way I find it moving. Then I bring to mind all that I've read by and about our country's better explorers – Mitchell, Sturt, Giles, and so on – and my exasperation recurs. I can scarcely contain my fury that White's Voss should be considered to be representative of this group, a leader, when the

men I've named wouldn't have chosen him to be a member of their disciplined parties. What could you do with a man like Voss? Take him into the outback and lose him?

It is possible, of course, if the reader can step around the above outburst, to see Voss as the very embodiment of the superior whitefella attitudes that I am repudiating. That is to say, we can see Voss as possessing the faults of European Christian man, and realising a need to be purged of them. Looking at him in this way, we would see his suffering and eventual death (but the means of it, the *means!*) as a necessary precondition for the incoming white civilisation to rid itself of the attitudes and philosophies veiling their eyes, preventing them from seeing the land properly, and grasping the earlier and still-existing understandings of the people who, as we well know, regarded themselves as custodians, caretakers, those whose life patterns taught them to fit in with the land and its ways and not to imagine that they were God, Christ, or Man with a capital M when lower-case would be enough. Have a look at the word:

man

It looks fairly harmless, doesn't it, when presented modestly? This, one might say, is the Judd spelling, not that of the German. Early white settlers looked among the black people for chieftains, and often enough, if they found someone satisfying their idea of what they were looking for, they presented him with a silver-plated plaque inscribed 'King Billy' or something of the sort. Europeans were obsessed with power and the management, or transfer thereof. Power. It is a major factor in human life, certainly, but it seems to

have been more subtly managed by our black people than we've given them credit for. The very word 'God', as I was saying earlier, is a concept of concentrated power. God, the English word, is more fearful than numinous. One wonders, to be frank, why any discussion of 'God' should be part of a book about an exploratory trek, but that was the great European problem when they considered their colonies. God the unknown was equated to some degree in the European mind with the unknown, unexplored country that lay beyond their limited, because imported, certainties.

Hence my discomfort when trying to put the pieces of *Voss* together. Let me return to my initial consideration of whether *Voss* is/was an historical novel. For the sake of convenience I will take this to mean an account which can usefully be checked against, or compared with, historians' coverage of the same events or period. History plus imagination, we might say. As I said earlier, I think we can regard the first third of the book in this way, and if we do we must concede that it is splendidly done. Voss, the man, is restrained by having his backers close to him, questioning and talking, he is to some degree managed by the thoughtful eyes of Laura, whom he will, in spirit, take with him, and of course he is busy with preparations. Civilisation may be raw in New South Wales but Voss is well and truly inside it. This is the civilisation that wants to know what's beyond itself, and that's for Voss when he's no longer restrained. The last fifty pages too, I think, are excellent, as we see the slightly more developed Sydney, the city being studied by Englishmen like Mr Ludlow, who wonder when a 'real' city will emerge from its period of crude, energetic growth. As Laura tells



him, the development he's looking for is happening every day, and those who are alive while it's happening can't voluntarily throw their lives away as contributions to something that won't emerge until later; they must, rather, swallow with acceptance what's happening in their own time. Pioneers aren't simply statues; they exist as fully as those born later. Laura, I think, would be aware that for every gain there is a loss, and to her credit, and her creator's too, she accepts both the qualities and the shortcomings of her period. This is a point where White's art is more expressive than his many utterances, delivered over decades with memorable scorn, about the quality of the culture surrounding him. Laura's awareness, late in the book, of the failings of her society in no way diminishes her stature or the quality of her personality. Our surroundings are not always superior to the qualities we present to them. People can, if not change, then at least influence their times, and it's done via the quality of the lives they lead. An historical period is no more than the quality of the lives led inside it, and in that sense our period – yours, mine – is created by what we do with ourselves. Here, I think, we reach the limit of the applicability of the term 'historical novel': White is asserting that every period is made by those who live in it. This means that if standards are constant – and they're not, but perhaps they should be; White was conservative in this regard – then all periods can be judged in the same way. Laura, now that *Voss* has been written, will live as long as his statue. Bless her!

So the problem is not in the first third of the book, nor in the closing fifty pages? No. It's in the middle, when the expedition is doing, or not doing, if you feel as I do, its exploring. *Voss* in

the inland is hardly even observant. He has no eye for country. Birds, trees, soil, teach him nothing. He doesn't read a landscape geographically. Where does its water come from? Where does it reside? How would one describe the seasons of the places where they go? If the land is so difficult for whites, while tractable enough for blacks, what comparison does that enforce about the two civilisations? Two, yes, two. *Voss* was quite memorably set as an opera by Richard Meale (libretto by David Malouf), and I recall a pronouncement sung by Voss: 'I do not accept the terms.' Voss, the man, in both novel and opera, wants to set the terms for himself, and I think White is complicit in this, whereas, critical as I was of other well-known explorers (see Interlude 6: the otherness of Australia), I think we can see, from reading the journals of Giles, Mitchell, Sturt, et cetera, that they realised, or were forced to realise, that the terms of their travel would be set by the land they were moving through. It's significant, I think, that the only time when the Voss party is happy with its 'terms', that is, its relationship to what's around them, is at Mr Sanderson's Rhine Towers, the property based to some extent on the former White family holdings.

In Australia, the land will always dictate the terms, and most Australians have come to realise this. As I write, our society is having to come to terms – *terms* – with climate change and the degradation of river systems due to too much water being taken out for irrigation and not enough being left to maintain environmental character. It's perhaps unfair to criticise a novel published in 1957 for not presenting the thinking that's developed in the ensuing half

century, but that is how we judge books and art movements, is it not: what do they say to us today?

Having made that point as firmly as I can, I want now to move to White's treatment of the aboriginal people in *Voss*. Perhaps the simplest observation to make is that they are only there when the Voss party sees them. What else they may be doing and where they may be doing it is beyond the reader's view. Let me put my objection this way: if you can't see the land then you can't see the people, because the black people's lives were tied to the land and everything that lived on it. When *Voss* was written that wasn't obvious to its author. The local people are only presented insofar as they impinge on the explorers. At this point you may reasonably remind me that all books are written in this way: that is, there is a ruling viewpoint, a central point of focus, from which everything is seen. I accept this, indeed I must since I am a writer whose works are subject to the very same law, but I am saying that it is a limitation of *Voss*, a limitation of the period when it was conceived, that it is not a book of two civilisations, as it would be if it were, let us say, about events of the British raj in India. It's a book about one civilisation only, with blacks on the fringe, which is how the people of Sydney in 1845 saw things. Their historical understanding is reproduced, and I think this is a limitation.

On the other hand, White writes benevolently enough about the blacks when they appear. One of the admirable qualities of his patrician (not meant to be a joke) outlook is that he is objective about people different from himself. There must be good reason,

he makes us feel, why they have been made as they are. There is, however, a limit to this detachment, as I wish to show.

The Voss party has two blacks assisting it, Dugald and Jackie. Before very long they are outside the area they know: the area where they have any right to be. This makes them dubious assets, and each strikes a blow at the party's leader, though White makes no attempt to blame them. Dugald asks to return to where he came from, and Voss agrees, giving him a letter to take back to Jildra, from where, he hopes, it will be sent to Laura, his spiritual companion. Laura never sees this letter, because Dugald first discards it, then tears it into tiny pieces. There is something wrong with this. Tearing paper into pieces is something white people do, not black. I don't know why the letter isn't simply dropped. Or ignored. Tearing it up seems to be a requirement of whitefella narrative rather than something a black man would do.

This may strike you as trivial, but the death of Voss is not. Jackie, at the behest of men of whose tribe he is not a member, cuts the throat of Voss, then hacks his head off. Hacks the head off and throws it at the feet of those whose will – if that's the word! – he is obeying. The death of Voss is thus ritualised in a way more appropriate to Macbeth than to the customs of our aborigines. I cannot accept this dismemberment of the German. I think it happens because of an hysterical wish in the mind of Voss's creator, who needed, required, something as shocking as this to happen.

Why, I cannot say. Let us move elsewhere before we bring this essay to a close.

Sydney in the final pages of the book seems a little more mature than it was at the beginning. This may be no more than the reader's acceptance of the events of the book, sad as they are. Or it may be in the writing, making us come to terms – that word again – with all that's happened. Belle, if you remember, gives a party, held in the evening of the day when the statue of Voss has been unveiled. She and Laura are still close; it's not in Belle's nature to re-build her intimate friendships. Others, knowing Laura only by reputation, which is hardly more than gossip, feel excluded by her valuation of things. They take revenge in thinking that Mercy, the girl she's brought up, must be her bastard daughter. This is made possible by the fact that Laura has never explained Mercy's origins, which are known only to a few.

One might point out here that Mercy's real mother, the servant girl Rose, was introduced to the story for no purpose other than to produce Mercy, the child who would then be moved into the care of Laura. Mercy is the child that Voss and Laura never conceived, and Rose, who brought her into the world, was removed by the author when she was no longer needed. It was her misfortune to contract Novelist's Disease, for which there is no treatment, let alone cure! White does give Rose one touching moment when she gives her child its name. Belle and Laura are a little surprised by her choice, and Laura suggests that Rose give the baby a second name; Mary, perhaps. But Rose is unmoved, and we have a feeling that the name she's chosen is by way of a prayer she's embodied in the child's life, which she won't live to see.

So Belle gives a party, and Laura, though not dancing, stays to the end, with Mercy beside her for much of the night. The final

pages of *Voss* are a virtuosic performance by Patrick White, because he gets the evening function started, then reverts to the statue's unveiling, earlier in the day, when Laura is presented with a rather confused and forgetful Judd, then resumes the evening party, with a retiring, indeed withdrawn Laura the centre of the gathering. In doing this, White is very sure of his way of handling the culture – men do, women interpret. Mr Sanderson is there, Colonel Hebden, Ludlow the visitor from England, but White, with consummate skill, draws the energy of his narration from Laura's thoughts, her words, the reactions people have to her. The book balances delicately, at the end, and it does so by making us realise that Laura, within the confines of a ladylike life, that is, a life lived at home, and with the responsibility of a daughter to care for, has found – or rather, has never stopped looking for – the answers to the same questions that troubled Voss, and drove him into the wilderness to find, or try to find, his answers.

There is one other moment in the book that I would like to mention, when the explorers are still at Rhine Towers. Voss goes to the slab hut where Judd, who is to join his party, lives; Judd is not at home but Voss encounters his wife.

'What will you do when your husband goes?'

'What I always do.'

She was washing the butter. The lapping of the water would not allow the silence to wrap her for very long. She reduced the butter, then built it up again, a solid fortress of it.

'I will be here,' she said, 'for ever now.'

'Have you no wish for further experience of life?'

She was suspicious of the words the stranger used. An educated gentleman.

'What else would I want to know?' she asked, staring at her fat butter.

'Or revisit loved places?'

'Ah,' she said, lifting her head, and the shadows hanging from it, slyly sniffing the air at some ale-house corner, but almost immediately she dropped the lids over her searing eyes. 'No,' she said sulkily. 'I do not love any other place, anyways enough to go back. This is my place.'

There is a finality about this which makes Mrs Judd a balance for, perhaps a commentary on, everything else in the book. The expedition is hardly begun, and here it is being reduced, not by a wise judgement, for Mrs Judd would never claim to be wise: simply, she is as she is and exploration, much as it may be in her husband's line – he is forever staring at the stars with a telescope, she tells Voss – is not for her, because she knows where she belongs. She appears on three pages only of a longish book, then, when her husband appears, she goes inside, leaving an indelible mark. It is a sign of White's confidence in his theme that he can allow it to be contradicted, then march on as before.