Alex Miller, *Coal Creek* (Allen & Unwin, 2013)

Alex Miller’s *Coal Creek* is an interesting read for the kind of arbitrariness it offers to the reader. The novel has diminutive layers to probe into, but it does offer readers engagement until the end due to the trials and tribulations of the central character. *Coal Creek* is a captivating story of friendship, love, truth, betrayal with dramatic twists and turns where a young man, Bobby Blue, is caught in the battle between his faithfulness towards his friend and loyalty towards his boss. In between such conflict, there is an emergence of innocent love.

Set in the late 1940s, *Coal Creek* is a first-person narrative in which the central character, Bobby Blue, now an orphan, is born and raised in countryside Mount Hay, Central Queensland – it is a childhood spent ‘out in the camp mustering up the scrubs with Dad’ (4). Subsequently, he takes up a job as a deputy under the local constable, Daniel Collins (who has been shifted recently to Mount Hay). With the first-person narrative, the voice of the protagonist creates an ambiguity between the writer and the character – perhaps giving an autobiographical impression to the book. The description of the protagonist’s adventurous life in Central Queensland seems a landscape that is embedded in the writer’s own memory. In an interview, Alex Miller has said: ‘this one, there was no research to do. I knew Bobby in my head. I knew his people and I loved them’. Miller is able to reflect Bobby Blue’s rustic nature through a very simple language, unschooled expressions and grammatical errors such as ‘strangers was rare’ and ‘they is’.

The novel’s rustic setting creates the credible environment of great significance to the story. The opening pages describe the town, Mount Hay, as isolated. The isolated rural background implies everything simple, honest and peaceful – and every time the peace of the town is disturbed by the outsiders, the nature clatters with humanity. Though Bobby knows that the intrusion of the outsiders in their local issues will manifest in a total despondency of whoever gets involved in it, he, too, naively gets involved in their cynicism and that leads him to darkness. Bobby becomes prisoner to his own rustic nature and gets caught up in a vicious trap that leaves him with tragic debris of the past. With such convolutions, Bobby’s dilemma becomes a kind of saga of a liminal hero.

Daniel, Bobby’s Boss, who has served in war as a soldier, takes up the case of Ben, who is also Bobby’s childhood friend. Ben, who is starting a new life with his girlfriend, Deeds, happens to be an Aboriginal person – and therefore Ben is being hunted by police for kidnapping her. Daniel is beleaguered by his wife, Esme, who wants her husband to follow the case closely – solely for the purpose that the place would then be unsafe for her daughters too. Being outsiders, Daniel and his wife perceive the locals with doubt and disbelief. This becomes their tragic flaw. Though Daniel does not want Ben to be harmed, fate has something else in store for them.

I was captivated by the story that Bobby, who has lived all his life in the scrub, narrates. He is conscious of the mystery that the land possesses. However, the Collins’s fail to understand the way of life and feel they know better than the locals. The conflict between town and country is also apparent when the Collins’s attitude towards the country boys – Bobby and Ben – is later transformed into firm doubts. Although initially it seems Bobby’s closeness with Collins will develop into a pleasant relationship, in the course of time a master-slave relationship is subtly apparent now and then. Though very elusive, there is also a clash between whites and Aborigines when Aunt Rosie Gnapun complains about Ben for kidnapping her niece, Deeds – but in fact she has a grudge against Ben for beating her son.

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1 ‘Interview: Alex Miller,’ *The Sydney Morning Herald* (5 October 2013).

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Bobby’s attachment with Daniel’s eldest daughter, Irie, culminates into a beautiful friendship where they both shared the same beliefs of half real world and half unreal world. Bobby’s tale of Old Murri people develops a yearning in Irie to live like them. However, Bobby does not want her to be caught in a world that can only exist in the mind and nowhere else. His bluntness disheartens her. Irie fails to see that the notion of half real world and unreal world cannot exist at the same time in the concrete society they are living in: ‘her dreams was what she seen as her real life, and she did not separate the two’ (192).

Thus, Irie runs away with her sister to search the land of Old Murri people. Unknowingly, they become involved in a clash that ignites catastrophe. There is a hardnosed change in Daniel and Esme’s attitude towards Bobby and they misjudge him for abducting the girls. Esme’s discreet suspicion is revealed when she says, ‘I told you there was no point giving this creature the benefit of the doubt’ (208). Daniel becomes a different person altogether: ‘the old time and its dreams have fallen behind him, broken and lost in the drift’ (213).

By placing the characters with mundane human frailties in an unusual situation, Miller crafts a unique drama. By questioning the adopted land and by not trusting the locals, Daniel and Esme – the educated elite crippled and trapped within the structure of hierarchy – constantly divide themselves from the people belonging to the underclass. In addition, Daniel’s lack of a tenacious mind leads to a tragic downfall. His misjudgment manifests into wicked behaviour when his daughters are lost. And Esme ‘in a state of fear and panic and extreme exhaustion … [and] was in no mood for acting reasonably’ (254) because she thought that Bobby and Ben were involved in kidnapping their girls.

A series of events follow one after the other as the story progresses – building up and creating tension and suspense. Miller’s saga wanders through the bush, its people and the way of the society. Coal Creek touches on several themes: love, trust, betrayal, powerlessness, injustices, and uncertainty in life. The book has been handled thoughtfully – building up pressures in setting as well as between characters – where fate becomes the guiding force in everyone’s life.

Sadiqa Beg