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The Stolen Generations

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Bloke

By Bruce Pascoe

Penguin, Camberwell, Vic., 2009, 273 pp., A\$33

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By: Michael Jacklin, University of Wollongong Category: Fiction

Since the coming of the Europeans, Australia's ecosystems have been challenged by exotic, introduced species which, once established, quickly spread and threaten both native species and environmental balance. Jim Bloke, the first-person narrator of Bruce Pascoe's new novel, is unaware of the most recent of these biotic challenges – abalone virus ganglioneuritis or AVG – when chance brings him into the small East Gippsland town of Nullakarn. Soon after settling in at the local pub – before he's got the foam off the top of his third beer – he's been offered a place on the local footy team and a job as an oyster harvester. But if this ordinary bloke's luck seems too good to be true, it's because it is. Oyster work leads to diving for sea urchins, leads to abalone harvesting, leads to trips to Singapore to bring boats with unknown cargo back to Australia and this, of course, leads to trouble with the law – trouble that relates, ultimately to the “ganglio” that threatens the abalone industry along the Victorian coast. With *Bloke*, Pascoe spins a yarn that effectively combines the crime-thriller genre with a search-for-identity narrative, along with romance, humour and, as in all of Pascoe's work, Aboriginality.

An important voice in Aboriginal writing, Pascoe is the author of seven previous novels, three collections of short stories, a book of prose/essays, numerous reviews and columns, as well as the 2008 publication, *The Little Red Yellow Black Book*, a pocket guide to Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and culture. For his latest novel, Pascoe draws on his deep familiarity with the Victorian coast where he lives, and his knowledge of its landscape, its communities and their concerns, including the outbreak of AVG, to create a story that builds an understanding of people, place and circumstance and that takes the reader to its bays and reefs, its pubs and cabins, and its sea urchin and abalone boats. The origin of AVG is disputed, but in the novel the introduction of the virus into Australian stocks is linked to the suspected illegal importation of Taiwanese fishmeal used in land-based aquaculture. With typical irony, the narrator comments: “The whole operation was one of those pieces of genius that Australia is famous for. Think rabbits,

blackberries, prickly pear, foxes. You pump sea water into a tank, watch the fish get fat, convert them to squillions, [...] then pump the effluent straight into Bass Strait. Simple. Stroke of genius.” However, when AVG spreads from cultivated abalone into wild stocks and the “squillions” are at risk, the big players – whose interests stretch from abalone to drug-running – look for a fall guy and Jim Bloke all too easily becomes the scapegoat.

Bloke is a man who falls into things without much thought of consequence. As the opening pages suggest, most events in his life have been a matter of chance. In Nullakarn, chance brings Bloke to work with the attractive but stand-offish Giovanna Romano, a school teacher who occasionally crews on fishing boats. Initially their conversations are like “tennis matches,” defensive and aggressive by turn, and Bloke rues his Australian male lack of conversational subtlety or sophistication. They do, however, trade bits of their stories and we learn that Bloke has spent time in “the big gym”, as he refers to prison, although he won’t say why, and that Giovanna’s father was a fisherman who years before had been a dupe for the same big players who are now making life tough for Bloke. The romance that develops between them is integral to both plot and character development, as through the novel Bloke’s male desires are tested by another attractive woman, his cousin, “black-fella way,” Retha.

Sexual attraction and fantasy are recurring features of Bloke’s narrative. He is a man familiar with the trouble that follows from “snapping at the lure of desire” and the novel succeeds in conveying, with humour, this male fascination with physicality and the female body. When Bloke sees Retha for the first time he is entranced and in less than a minute of their meeting he is thinking: “She was darker than tanned and dark blue veins scrawled at the top of her breasts. I dragged my eyes away. You couldn’t help thinking of your lips tracing those veins to the nipples. Well, I couldn’t anyway.” From the opening sentence of the book, Bloke insists that he is telling his readers the truth, regardless of how well or badly it reflects on him. He says at one point that it’s his nature; then, at another, he says his insistence on truth is his way of working things out, meaning not only his troubles with the law but also his past and his understanding of who this Bloke is.

It is this struggle to come to terms with identity that is the real strength of the novel. The crime/thriller plot, punctuated with the humorously erotic descriptions of Bloke’s romantic fantasies may keep the pages turning, but it is the narrator’s journey of discovery of his Aboriginal heritage that is the core of the book. As in his earlier

Fox series of novels, Pascoe has created in Bloke a character cut off from his past and his Aboriginal heritage and who must now work towards reclaiming some connection. After the complications in the abalone work, and the trip from Singapore that goes bad, Bloke is arrested and in prison he gets to know the Islander and Koori inmates. One of these, a fellow called Nugget, tells him that where he comes from on the Murray River there's a mob called Buloke. "Bit like your name, eh." And so, once out of prison, Bloke sets out to find his family and his past.

The people Bloke meets in the second half of the novel are portrayed with greater empathy than other secondary characters in the book receive. In one scene, Bloke stays with Mrs Bowlglah, an Aboriginal woman whose eighteen-year-old son Shane comes home drunk, aggressive and swearing after his ute has been declared unroadworthy. That night he sleeps, whimpering, "tortured by his impotence in the face of laws designed for people with money." From this family, Bloke is passed on to Uncle Munt, an old Aboriginal man who speaks only in Aboriginal language to his dogs and to country. To communicate with Bloke he gestures; at one point he sings Bloke's name to country: "buloke, buloke;" and eventually he brings Bloke to his relations, including Aunty Cookup, a strong Aboriginal woman, from whom he begins to learn his mother's story. She encourages Bloke to reclaim his heritage while at the same time challenging him.

Pascoe, in this section of the novel, has achieved something particularly fine with regard to the difficulties faced by Aboriginal people who were part of the Stolen Generations. Staying in Mrs Bowlglah's home, Bloke feels "uncomfortable and awkward. Full of embarrassment and shame. Trying not to notice the crack in the teacup, turned grey like a dying tooth." Discomfort with poverty, though, is the least of the challenges Bloke faces. Offering him another cup of tea, Mrs Bowlglah says to him, "Pity you didn't know your mother."

"They told me she was dead."

"Hmmpf."

His excuse that he "was just a kid" is dismissed, indicating to Bloke that his never having sought his Aboriginal family before is a failing not easily overcome. When he meets with Aunty Cookup and tells her he is looking for relations, she says to him, "I'm ya mum's cousin. She never stopped lookin for ya, ya know." Her words, Bloke realises, are "an accusation." Conversations such as these, slight as they may appear on the page, point to the deep and ongoing pain of Aboriginal family

separation, documented in testimony recorded in the *Bringing Them Home* report from 1997, and a feature of Pascoe's fiction for nearly a decade before this. They also demonstrate that reuniting with family and "becoming" Aboriginal as an adult is fraught with complications. Bloke's working through these challenges provides readers with an understanding that, for many Stolen Generations members, finding family is the beginning of a difficult process of making sense of self and place.

Even at its most serious, however, *Bloke* remains a work of humour. Hardly a scene passes without a wry observation or an exchange of dialogue that sends up someone or something. Pages after being introduced to a Maori character named Nectar we learn that, as New Zealand television has a high demand for actors able to play big violent Maoris, Nectar – of course – was an actor, his New Zealand accent resulting in his incongruously floral moniker. Frequently the humour points slyly to cultural icons. In a free-for-all at sea following the dumping of smuggled goods one bloke lets go of a parcel of what is most likely heroin to haul in his mate who is going under for the third time. "No greater love hath man," the narrator quips. "Talk about Simpson and his dolphin" – a reference to the ANZAC legend of Simpson and his donkey, famous for rescuing wounded diggers under fire at Gallipoli. As might be expected, many of these quips are deliberately blokey. In describing the "boyish exuberance" of a particular pair of rogues, the narrator tells us that "a thousand sixteen-year-old girls have gone through the windscreen to celebrate such impossible charm," a turn of phrase in which the humour is both terribly cruel and effective.

Life is often a series of accidents, as Jim Bloke says. "A mishap leads to a fluke" in one case, while in another it leads to tragedy. Pascoe's novel acknowledges both outcomes, but with its comedic bent *Bloke* provides a space and a set of circumstances that encourage readers to think through matters that they might otherwise chose to ignore, or turn away from. The book's Aboriginality is not obvious from its cover design or back cover blurb. Rather, the novel is positioned as a "typical Aussie" story, which most certainly it is. It is also one very much worth reading, especially for the encounter with Aboriginal community and country at its heart.