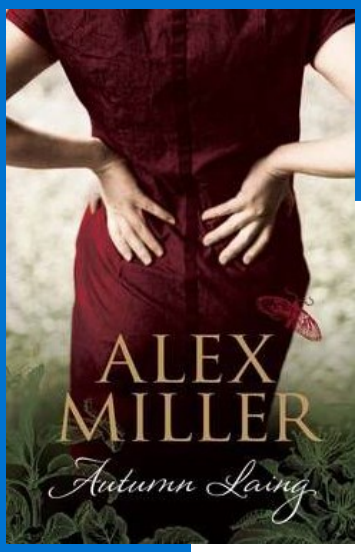


Autumn Laing
Alex Miller

Author Background

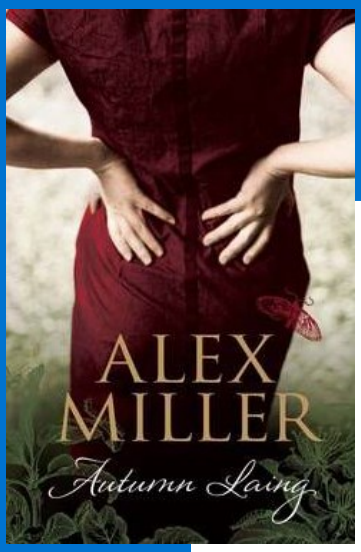
- Birth—1934
- Where—London, England
- Awards—Miles Franklin, Commonwealth Writers' Prize, Christina Stead Prize for Fiction, New South Wales Premier's Award
- Currently—lives in Victoria, Australia

Alexander McPhee Miller is an Australian novelist. Born in London, England, he migrated to Australia at the age of 16. After working and travelling he graduated from the University of Melbourne in English and History in 1965. He was co-founder of the Anthill Theatre and a founding member of the Melbourne Writers' Theatre. Miller now lives in Victoria with his wife and two children.

He is twice winner of Australia's premier literary prize, The Miles Franklin Literary Award, first in 1993 for *The Ancestor Game* and again in 2003 for *Journey to the Stone Country*. He is also an overall winner of the Commonwealth Writers' Prize, in 1993 for *The Ancestor Game*. His fifth novel, *Conditions of Faith*, won the Christina Stead Prize for Fiction in the 2001 New South Wales Premier's Awards. In 2011 he won this award a second time with his novel *Lovesong*. *Lovesong* also won the People's Choice Award in the NSW Premier's Awards, the Age Book of the Year Award and the Age Fiction Prize for 2011. In 2007 *Landscape of Farewell* was published to wide critical acclaim and in 2008 won the Chinese Annual Foreign Novels 21st Century Award for Best Novel and the Manning Clark Medal for an outstanding contribution to Australian cultural life. It was also short-listed for the Miles Franklin Award, the Christina Stead Prize for Fiction, the ALS Gold Medal and the Commonwealth Writers' Prize.

Alex is published internationally and widely in translation. In 2012 he was awarded the prestigious Melbourne Prize for Literature. Alex is a Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities.

(from publisher)



Autumn Laing
Alex Miller

Book Summary

Autumn Laing
Alex Miller , 2011
Allen & Unwin
448 pp.
ISBN: 9781742378510

Autumn Laing has long outlived the legendary circle of artists she cultivated in the 1930s. Now 'old and skeleton gaunt', she reflects on her tumultuous relationship with the abundantly talented Pat Donlon and the effect it had on her husband, on Pat's wife and the body of work which launched Pat's career. A brilliantly alive and insistently energetic story of love, loyalty and creativity.

Autumn Laing seduces Pat Donlon with her pearly thighs and her lust for life and art. In doing so she not only compromises the trusting love she has with her husband, Arthur, she also steals the future from Pat's young and beautiful wife, Edith, and their unborn child.

Fifty-three years later, cantankerous, engaging, unrestrainable 85-year-old Autumn is shocked to find within herself a powerful need for redemption. As she begins to tell her story, she writes, '*They are all dead and I am old and skeleton-gaunt. This is where it began*...'

Written with compassion and intelligence, this energetic, funny and wise novel peels back the layers of storytelling and asks what truth has to do with it. *Autumn Laing* is an unflinchingly intimate portrait of a woman and her time - she is unforgettable.

Awards
Winner, Melbourne Prize for Literature 2012

Shortlisted, 2012 Prime Minister's Literary Award for Fiction

Shortlisted, 2011 Manning Clark House National Cultural Awards (Individual category)

Shortlisted, 2012 Adelaide Festival Awards for Literature Fiction Award

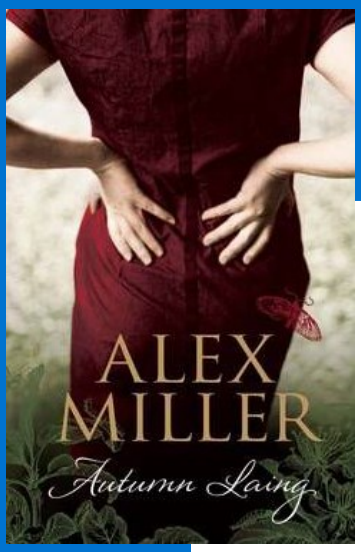
Longlisted, 2012 ALS Gold Medal

Longlisted, 2012 Miles Franklin Literary Award

Shortlisted, 2012 Queensland Literary Awards

(from the publisher)

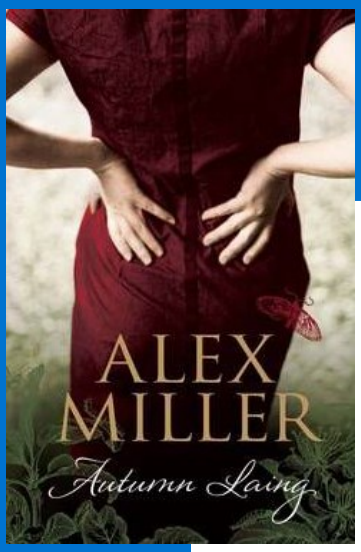
Book Groups @ Blue Mountains Library



Autumn Laing
Alex Miller

Discussion Questions

1. Alex Miller describes Autumn as “confident, well informed, passionate, cultivated and very down to the earth. She is, in some ways, the personification of a certain type of the cultivated Australian woman. She couldn’t possibly be English or French.” (p450) Do you agree? In what ways in she “Australian”?
2. Autumn is surrounded and supported by “her men” Freddy, Arthur, Barnaby, Pat and Stoney. What does she need/take from each of them?
3. What life options did Autumn have as a childless wife in the 1930s? Imagine her as a young woman today. How did the 1930s societal expectations of woman shape her actions?
4. Autumn feared that Arthur knew about her affair yet she maintained the pretence of secrecy. If Arthur did know, why would he willingly participate in the pretence?
5. Do you feel Autumn paid too high a price for her affair with Pat? Or was her brush with “greatness” worth it?
6. Autumn is crushed by Pat’s rejection of her and she falls into a deep depression. Arthur nurses her despite probably knowing the cause is the loss of another’s love. How do you feel about Pat and Arthur’s respective treatment of Autumn?
7. Edith says of the circle of artists at Old Farm that it was “as if a spell had been cast over it, and the people who gathered here were trapped in an invisible web of disdain for the rest of humankind, bewitched by their own way of talking and their vain egotism” (p328). Was she right?
8. The novel switches between past and present using a first person monologue full of the harsh realities of old age to define the present and a softer, nostalgic third person narrative to define the past. Why would Miller make this stylistic choice?
9. Max Rubbo in his review states “one of the initial temptations in embarking on this novel is to fit Miller’s characters to the real life characters of Sunday and John Reed’s world but it is to Miller’s credit that this desire fades and it is his characters that truly matter.” Do you agree? What does the semi-factual basis of the novel add to the novel?
10. Miller says he writes fiction over biography so that he can understand and empathise with his characters and explore their motivations and inner life and that if an author does this well the “readers are convinced and willingly enter into the illusion” (p452). Has he succeeded?
11. The 1930s Boris declares “There is no Australian art...you will have to continue to be Europeans in Australia or improvise something entirely new of your own.” (p 307) while 1990s Autumn talks of modern mansions “all vaguely influenced by the holidays of their owners in Provence or Tuscany” complaining that “The old Australian Australia has gone...It is all mock European now.” (p106). Have we come full circle? Did Australians find their identity only to lose it again?
12. The theme of truth, or reality, occurs many times throughout the novel: Pat declares “the stuff we erase with our rewriting and repainting is more revealing of our truth than the stuff we overlay it with” (p 84), while Freddy states “our imagination is the way to ourselves” (p 101). Autumn refuses to authorise Adeli’s research stating “Historian’s know the official biography is worthless...our truths are written in our hearts” (p183) and laments (p248) “Why is reality always so disappointing?” What do you feel Miller is trying to convey to us about ‘real’ life and the past?



Autumn Laing
Alex Miller

Reviews

The story of Heide and its artists is one of our abiding myths, its version of Bloomsbury bizarrely frozen in Nolan's Kelly paintings. Miller takes these raw materials into fiction, hammering out transmuted figures. He keeps confronting the barbed question 'what is great art?' and his troubling novel has at its centre the chatelaine of this artistic world. Accordingly we see it all through the eyes of Autumn Laing, alternately young and very old. Miller's creation of her passions is a triumph of etching: hers is the stuff of 'unplanned and arbitrary moments'.

Judges Comments (Prime Minister's Literary awards 2013)

At about 450 pages, it's surprising how little actually happens in *Autumn Laing*, and yet how captivating it is. Of course there's drama; it's about an adulterous affair in the art world after all, but this novel very much dwells in the inner world of creativity, emotion and wisdom.

The story's set in the late 1930s during the brief period in which struggling young artist Pat Donlon suddenly enters, then just as suddenly exits, the lives of affluent art lovers Autumn and Arthur Laing. The attraction between Autumn and Pat is immediate, and they carry out an affair under the noses of her mild-mannered husband and his pregnant wife, Edith.

This affair's progress toward inevitable implosion is intercut with the elderly Autumn's reflections, half a century later, on that most pivotal period of her life. Her end is nigh and, having glimpsed Edith in the street for the first time in more than fifty years, this once admired and influential woman seeks absolution from the hurt she inflicted through the affair, if not a little balm for the pain she brought on herself.

Alex Miller shows extraordinary technical skill in deftly switching between Autumn's past, presented as quite formal third-person narration; and present, told in intense, immediate first-person monologue.

It's a remarkably effective structure, as it gives real weight to the story. The actions and emotions surrounding the affair are not fleeting and inconsequential, but reverberate across the decades, weighing the ailing but still feisty Autumn down. Her complex, often contrary feelings of bitterness, ardour, guilt and mirth become almost tangible, hardened and polished by time.

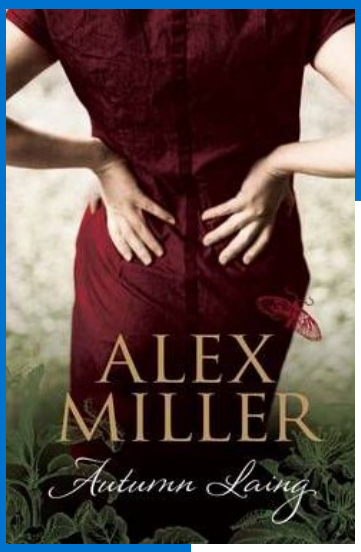
Autumn is this novel's dominant voice. She's a potent creation that shows an author at the height of his powers, but the supporting cast has also been superbly drawn by Miller. Congenial, passive Arthur, and volatile, self-centred Pat develop into the robust, contrasting figures the character of Autumn needs to bounce between psychologically. But so many of the minor players, from the mercurial artists, poets and thinkers who she surrounds herself with, to her reliable, non-judgmental handyman, come to life through mere scraps of potent description and dialogue.

Everything in *Autumn Laing* turns on the affair, and the development of Pat's artistic vision is one of its most important repercussions. This thread expands the novel beyond introspection, and tackles questions of creative expression that aren't limited to the setting of mid-20th century Australia.

Pat has rejected the conservative Melbourne art establishment when he meets the Laings, but has little time for their circle's theoretical chatter, which champions European modernism. He searches for his own unique vision, a distinctly Australian artistic expression, and finds it, as Sidney Nolan famously did, in the outback. Towards the end of the novel, Miller brilliantly captures the intense heat, stillness and isolation of Queensland's hinterland, in which Pat's artistic yearnings finally find form in a frenzied, colourful series of paintings that launch his career. Poetic and rich with meaning, it's perhaps the most impressive passage in this remarkable book.

Remarkable, I think, because *Autumn Laing* is so believable - though not because there are flesh and blood people hovering in the background. It's obvious that Miller was inspired by the Heidi Circle, the group of artists and writers whose personal and professional lives coalesced under the influence of Melbourne art patrons John and Sunday Reed during the mid-20th century. The novel has clear parallels to the relationship between Sid Nolan and Sunday, and how his time with the Reeds led to his artistic flowering.

The desire to compare Miller's characters to real people rapidly diminishes as they come into their own, however, their words, actions, thoughts and feelings bringing them to life on the page. At times



Autumn Laing
Alex Miller

Reviews (continued)

the words of wisdom Miller puts into the head of Autumn in particular are astonishing insights into the human condition. Indeed, this is no roman a clef. *Autumn Laing* stands on its own feet as a work of fiction that's a vivid and distinctive meditation on life, love and art.

Patricia Maunder, The Book Show, ABC Radio National

Seldom, I suspect, has an Australian novel met with the rapturous critical acclaim showered on *Autumn Laing*, Alex Miller's latest and seemingly greatest offering. When it appeared late last year there were accolades aplenty: 'a novel of bravura intensity and insight,' …. 'inhabited by characters whose reality challenges our own.' …. 'a novel in which facts are forever being bent to the service of ideas,' …. 'a triumphant appropriation of vulgar if high-toned gossip for the purposes of unrepentant art.' …. 'rare and radiant fiction. An indispensable novel.'The applause is well deserved.

Miller has borrowed a handful of the key characters from what is probably the best known cultural saga in Australia, and rendered them truly his own. All who are even remotely familiar with the *ménage* at Heide during World War 2 and beyond will immediately make connections and morph Heide into Old Farm, Sunday Reed into Autumn Laing, her husband John into Arthur, and her painter lover Sidney Nolan into Patrick Donlon; Nolan's first wife Elizabeth Patterson is clearly Edith Black; less obvious is the Barrett Reid/Barnaby Green pairing and greater familiarity with the real people is necessary to make this connection before reading Miller's revealing post script 'How I came to write *Autumn Laing*'.

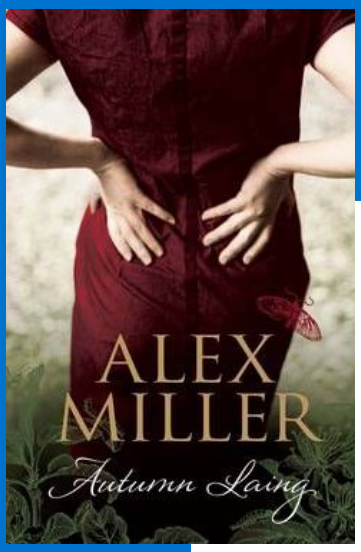
These are the main characters of the novel and they emerge very much as being of Miller's making, but as might be expected, there are some coincidings of the real and the imaginary. A major series of paintings, Nolan's *Kellys* and Donlon's *Hinterland*, each themed on a national icon and destined to change the direction of art in this country, is one; the breakdown in the relationships between Pat and Autumn and between Sid and Sunday is another. Some few others coincide in the most minute detail – Arthur is reading Wilenski's *The Modern Movement in Art* when Pat comes to his office, as was John Reed when Nolan came to his. I am sure the cognoscenti have enjoyed looking for pairings less obvious, and testing their knowledge with teasers such as is there a real life Adeli Heartstone and could the legendary Basil Burdett really have been at all like the rubbishing Guy Cowper?

However ruminations like these will only serve to diminish for the reader Miller's great achievement in taking the bare bones of history and giving them, per medium of his keen insight and compelling prose, new flesh to be clothed in his literary finery.

In the acknowledgements Miller states that Autumn is 'my own fictional character, but if her imaginary life touches from time to time on real historical themes' his inspiration was to be found in Janine Burke's *The Heart Garden: Sunday Reed and Heide* (Knopf, 2004). The characters are certainly his own, but to the extent that fact and fiction do inevitably blur, I find Sunday Laing and Pat Donlon to be painted more through Barrie Reid-tinted glasses. Miller first met Reid six years before he died and regarded him as a dear friend – indeed there is an almost domino-like effect in the infatuation of Nolan and Sunday Reed, the infatuation of Barrie Reid with both, and the apparent infatuation of Miller with all three.

Reid died in August 1995 exactly a month before the anthology of his poetry, *Making Country* (Angus & Robertson, 1995), was launched at Heide by Miller with readings by Shelton Lea. Just days before his death Reid was given a prepublication mockup of the book, and on this mockup he made personal comments and notes.[1] Against the poem "The Artist" Reid has written: 'Nolan of course.' "The Artist" includes the lines: *Now night comes, now your slow / eye learns new tricks. Old / tricksters feel the cold, / move fast. Don't look now / Herr Dr Conjurer.* The influence of Barrie Reid, more so than Janine Burke, inflects passages such as Autumn's observation early in the book: 'Pat was never deep. He was intuitive, but he was not deep. It was I who was deep.'

Miller's characters, especially Autumn, pulsate with life and I suspect few men have ever so believably written as an ageing woman. In their recent book *Sunday's Garden: Growing Heide* (Miegunyah Press, 2012), Kendrah Morgan and Lesley Harding describe Sunday as 'elusive, paradoxical and endlessly fascinating' – surely as succinct an encapsulation of her character as has been written. What I find endlessly fascinating about Autumn Laing, is that without being Sunday Reed, she is also elusive, paradoxical and endlessly fascinating.



Autumn Laing
Alex Miller

Reviews (continued)

So too is this book, which opens brilliantly on New Year's Day 1991 with Autumn's staccato utterance 'THEY ARE ALL DEAD. AND I AM OLD AND SKELETON-GAUNT. THIS is where it all began fifty-three years ago.' Quite remarkable is that just four months later in real time, at the very end of one of his last interviews, Nolan used virtually the same phrase when summing up his years at that old farm: 'Well, they're all dead,' he says, 'including the dog…. such a curious feeling isn't it?'

Miller speaks in his post script of the 'private shallow grounds of contradiction and elaboration beyond fact and outward appearance that interest me. Fiction is the only mode with which we can approach this ground in others. …. we are at liberty to do it well' – and it is done exceedingly well here – 'in which case our readers are convinced and willingly enter the illusion with us.' This brings to mind Nolan's comment 'Painting is I suppose meant to be a way of getting rid of lies' – not quite the same as the aphorism attributed to Picasso, 'art is a lie that shows us the truth,' nor the Nabokov line used by Miller as his fore-quote: 'The most enchanting things in nature and art are based on deception.'

Illusion and deception however, like beauty, are in the eyes of the beholder, and in *Autumn Laing* we have only Autumn's perspective. How great if this were but the first book in a Miller tetralogy wherein, as in *Talking to a Stranger*, differing illusions and deceptions appear when seen from the perspectives of each of the main players. Indeed there is a congruence with *Spring Snow,* the first in Mishima's *Sea of Fertility* tetralogy, with both books sharing a seasonal title.

What a challenge! *Autumn Laing* - telling of art, love, creativity and redemption; *Patrick Donlon* - telling of art, love, creativity and …. (perhaps) betrayal; *Arthur Laing* - telling of art, love, creativity and …. (perhaps) disappointment; and *Barnaby Green* - telling of art, love, thwarted creativity, and …. (perhaps) delusion. Their lives intertwining kaleidoscopically, the ashes of three of them mingling in real life death at the foot of the huge tree at Heide from which aborigines once took bark for their canoe, the other resting in London's Highgate Cemetery where his gravestone proclaims him PAINTER – one whose alchemy was forged in the crucible of an old farm and who, perhaps more than any other painter, brought to the world the essence of this ancient land.

A biography of Nolan is nearing completion, one on the Reeds is in planning, and one on Barrett Reid – who in my view will be shown in time to have underpinned much in the lives and relationships of the other three – will surely appear one day. With these publications, fact could well be shown to be not only stranger than fiction, but, like both Sunday and Autumn, more elusive, more paradoxical and more endlessly fascinating. Meantime, we are fortunate that Alex Miller – whose expatriation from England to Australia is somewhat a mirror reversal of Nolan's – has given us *Autumn Laing.*

David Rainey (aComment.com.au)