VINTAGE

THE PAGES

MURRAY BAIL

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About the Book

On a family sheep station in the interior of Australia, a brother and sister work the property while their reclusive brother, Wesley Antill, spends years toiling away in one of the sheds, writing a philosophy. Now he has died. Erica, a philosopher, is sent from Sydney to appraise his work. Accompanying her is Sophie, who needs a distraction from a string of failed relationships. Her field is psychoanalysis. These two women, each with different views of the world, face a situation they have not experienced before, with surprising results.

Murray Bail's first novel since *Eucalyptus* is a beguiling meditation on friendship and love, on men and women, on landscape and the difficulties of thought itself.

About the Author

Murray Bail was born in Adelaide in 1941. He is the author of four novels and two collections of short stories. Harvill Secker published his *Notebooks* in 2005. His novel *Eucalyptus* was awarded the 1999 Commonwealth Writers' Prize and the Miles Franklin Literary Award.

ALSO BY MURRAY BAIL

Fiction

Eucalyptus
Camouflage
Homesickness
Holden's Performance
The Drover's Wife and Other Stories

Non-fiction

Ian Fairweather
Longhand: A Writer's Notebook
Notebooks

The Pages

Murray Bail

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

1

AT DAWN – WHAT a word: the beginning of the world all over again – the two women set out from Sydney in a small car, as other people were slowly going about their tasks, or at least beginning to stir, producing a series of overlapping movements and stoppages, awakenings and false dawns, framed by the glass of the car.

They were city women. Comfortably seated and warm they were hoping to experience the unexpected, an event or a person, preferably person, to enter and alter their lives. There is a certain optimism behind all travel. The passenger, who wore a chunky necklace like pebbles made out of beer bottles, had never been over the mountains before. And she was forty-three. Directions had been given in biro, on a page torn out of an exercise book. It would take all day getting there. Over the mountains, into the interior, in the backblocks of western New South Wales, which in the end is towards the sun.

At an earlier time, perspiring travellers found no other way but to hack a path through the jungle or the dry bush. Very common image. Now on the long wide road called Parramatta, the obstacles consisted of nouns, adjectives and flags, and flashing lights in the shape of arrows, the many different interruptions of colour and promises, honestly, the hard work of selling jutting into the road itself, cluttering and distracting the mind. Traffic kept stopping, starting: you'd think by now they could synchronise the lights.

The woman behind the wheel preserved a high, elbowy method of steering and changing gears, more like a series of nudges and prods, which can only be described as

feminine. It was her way in general. It suggested refinement: everything's temporary, take the provisional position, in stages.

Erica Hazelhurst had a calm face, pale lips. In profile she had an elegant nose which became more ordinary as she turned. She lived alone.

A few years younger, her passenger had a slightly large head, which most people missed, because it was obscured by a restless, self-absorbed energy. She was a woman always losing something, leaving it on a table, or on a chair, or in the back of a taxi, as if dropping clues to herself for someone to follow . . . sunglasses, a glove, keys, books, purse, and, once, her virginity. Now she had one foot on the seat and head bent, painting her nails. As she concentrated she was at the same time describing a man they both knew. She turned to her fingernails. With rapid precision she reeled off his recent behaviour, and proceeded to go through his lesser-known qualities, some of them good qualities, which only gave greater credence to his evasive and careless qualities. In rapidity and sureness of touch they could have been paragraphs snipped out of some sort of manual, a manual of Types, various case histories pointing in a clinical style to Inevitable Behaviour, et cetera.

Finished, she ruthlessly inspected her nails. She didn't appear to notice they were bitten down. Now she wanted something else to concentrate on, some other situation

– a person – and Erica, waiting for the attention to turn to her, adopted a very smooth expression.

It was often like this. Instead of ease of familiarity they enacted a kind of hectic casualness, more like a demonstration of familiarity, which required no response. And months would pass until one of them called on impulse, no particular reason, or when one was having difficulties of an unspecified kind; then they would pick up, as if they had left each other only the day before.

Erica glanced at her friend's hair – reddish, open to experiment. Her own was short, determined, academic. And she noted too with some admiration the blouse which appeared to be casually chosen, of faded silk, here and there traces of embroidery, and buttons undone, where shadow offered the ample promise of softness.

'I would make a gloomy wife,' she felt like saying, but frowned instead.

She immediately wondered why she had had the thought in the first place – was it a true one? And why would it appear as out of character to people nearby? Concentrating on the driving, she saw it was hardly a thought at all, more one of those non-thoughts, those that come in from every direction, interfering with possible clear-thoughts.

Sudden rain – hit the metal car – glittering sunlight, rain again.

They were on top of the mountains, the road rising and falling and turning this way and that, which had their heads leaning one way, then the other, passing tearooms, railway station, shops selling old kettles and cane furniture, corner hotels and hotels set back, whitegoods, petrol, pink paintwork, pies, newsagent. A woman stepped out and waved to someone, not them. Presbyterian church there converted into a carpet emporium.

Sophie – the passenger – now examined herself in a compact mirror, paying close attention to her teeth.

'So much for the Blue Mountains. I haven't seen a single instance of blue.'

Below, on the right, a purple sunlit plain appeared as if unfurled on a butcher's calendar. Patches of mist erased the red roof of a homestead and an entire paddock of merino sheep. It had something to do with ground and air temperature. To Erica, anything that suggested incompletion or hazy thoughts made her impatient – the years of training. Had she, by trying all her life to banish woolly thinking, become harsh – was she a hard woman?

The question had been coming upon her in unexpected places, such as the bathroom, stepping out of the shower, at the supermarket, reaching out for the tomatoes, in class recently when she was in the middle of a medieval sentence – without warning, the oddest times. The frequency of it implied a concern deep-seated. This was not about to go away. In the bathroom, naked, just herself, she could only glance at her shape in the mirror. Can a woman be strong and clear without turning hard? Hardness – not something we want to think about in a woman. Erica almost opened her mouth to ask Sophie. Had she – now intent on steering this efficient Japanese car – had she become a cold-hearted, off-putting woman? ‘Do you think I’ve developed a hard side?’

Erica Hazelhurst had a lovely, rounded body, patterned from her mother’s, pale, with hand-shaped hips, the two vertical halves not quite symmetrical. She wore flat shoes. Erica came from a family that didn’t believe in a person drawing attention to themselves. Her mother and father, and her six uncles and thin-as-a-rake aunts, and their neighbours also behind hedges in the short hot street in Adelaide, made a point of keeping thoughts to themselves. To talk was to wave attention to yourself. Better to clam up. As for talking about feelings – this was a really difficult area, without solid foundation, more trouble than it was worth; better to keep the lid on feelings. The prevailing stoicism might have come straight from the sticks, the dry unyielding country. It puts the squeeze on words. The place hadn’t been feminised yet. Still, it generated its own set of decencies. There was an underlying honesty in Erica’s family – in relation to economics, and towards all other people. And no one would dream of complaining about the plainness of circumstances.

Her father had a shop in one of the granite buildings on King William Street, third floor, between a stamp dealer and a milliner. The first time Erica saw him behind the counter

she hardly recognised him, her own father. It made her twist her legs and look away. To protect his cuffs, her father wore a green cardigan she'd never seen before, and elastic bands on his sleeves. These he put on as soon as he arrived at work. Fitted to her father's eye was the protruding magnifying thing. It would stay there all day. With practised movement he levered open the back of a silver Longines, exposing the insides which shivered like an oyster. When it came to payment, Victor Hazelhurst never actually replied to the customer but searched around for a scrap of paper and scribbled a figure and pushed it forward.

Erica was waiting at the bus stop for her father to come home. She held onto his thumb, and began talking. After a few steps he made an unexpected noise, not exactly a word, and slipped out of her grip. People came forward, some kneeling tried pushing his chin and cheeks. The sun was shining. Even the bitumen road was harshly lit. For a long time Erica didn't know what or how to think about anything much. She believed she stopped thinking. Corrugated iron church there looked more like a shearing shed. A brown horse stood against the entrance, out of the wind.

Now more than anything Erica wanted to make sense of her life. It can be a strain trying to understand brief moments, the fleeting registrations, as well as what appeared as long and solid, or at least constant; always returning to herself, how and where (and why) she fitted in. Erica said to herself she was a separate individual, a live being who happened to be a woman. She tried to go on from there. No one else on earth was like her, not even in appearance. It was amazing how her sister born of the same parents barely a year before didn't think or speak or look like her at all – especially now they were in their forties. And over the years this person, herself, Erica Hazelhurst, had encountered endless experiences, each one of them supplying unequal additions and alterations to her original self – it included experience of words – a multi-layering

which increased still further her distance from other people, other women. These experiences passed through her, as did time, and in contemplation and possible measure of this she drew near to what has been called ‘thinking about thinking’. The trouble was: she was excluding everybody else.

2

HOW ANYONE CAN believe that Sydney could produce in its own backyard a philosopher of world significance or even minor significance shows how little understanding there is of the conditions required for philosophical thought.

Sydney of course is one of the nicest places under the sun. The location, location. A young settlement, brightly lit. It has come late to just about everything, and enjoyed both the advantages and disadvantages of that. The first arrivals were conveniently composed of thieves, forgers and unmarried mothers, accompanied by unshaven soldiers and tragic magistrates, the shopkeepers, brewers and road-builders, the brick-makers, midwives, followed by farmers and farmhands and others (the horse-dealers, publicans, four-eyed tailors, stunted fettlers), all hoping for a fresh start. They could hardly be expected to pursue philosophical interests – most of them couldn't write their own names. For the first fifty years there was only a handful of books in the entire country. Other missing ingredients were slavery, or an imbalance of religion and superstition in daily life, or else a collective stammering of the self, a general mood of darkness and obscurity, and some would include a cold climate, all of which have in earlier times turned people to philosophy for answers. By the time Sydney passed through and built upon its original settlement and began standing on its own two feet, philosophers, if there were any, found hardly any problems left for them to tackle. The important philosophical questions had more or less been settled. The remaining questions were paltry; they could all fit onto a pinhead. People in Sydney still interested in philosophy were

reduced to commenting on the work of others, and in their isolation became world authorities on figures at the margins, such as Charles Peirce or the terrifying Joseph de Maistre.

In the late nineteen seventies there used to be a man who lived in a boarding house in Glebe, a thin short-sighted man, with an exceptionally wide mouth. Most days he could be seen in the park at Black Wattle Bay, lolling about and squinting up at the clouds for hours at a stretch. When he wasn't doing that he'd be seated on the park bench, sharpening a blue pencil with a pocketknife, as if he was refining an original idea. He wasn't known to rattle on about anything, let alone thoughts of a philosophical nature. He kept his thoughts to himself. Children were occasionally caught throwing stones at him. He may have been one of those who'd lost their marbles in the war. And yet – or rather because of all this – people said he was a philosopher! What a country. Greengrocers and policemen were fond of giving a tolerant wink in his direction, 'the philosopher', or 'our very own philosopher'.

At the very word 'philosophy' people in Sydney run away in droves, reach for the revolver; they look down at their shoes, they smile indulgently; they go blank.

It is different in other places; Berlin, Copenhagen, Vienna come to mind. There, philosophy is not in the awkward, remote background, but in the foreground of everyday life. These are places where the philosopher has his rightful position, that is, on a pedestal. It is common in those old cities to find a philosopher's image cast in bronze and his most difficult propositions being discussed over breakfast, and certainly every other evening on the radio.

Meanwhile, Sydney never bothered itself with philosophical questions; as a consequence, philosophers are nowhere to be seen.

Such an absence normally would leave a hollow centre, an entire group of people living without the benefit of long

sentences – foundation sentences; yet we can now see how the lack of interest in one field encouraged a rushing across into an adjacent field, the way passengers crowd to one side of a ship when a harbour comes into view.

Psychology, and its vine-like offshoot, psychoanalysis.

In Sydney it's hard to bump into anyone who isn't in analysis, or has been, or is about to be.

From being the most unphilosophical city in the world, Sydney has become the most psychological city in the world.

Rows of terrace houses in the inner suburbs, and rooms in small office blocks close to medical centres, have been fitted out with the heavy curtains and the chair and the couch in duplication of the cave-like atmosphere first tried and found to yield interesting results in Vienna, on the other side of the world. In the long summer months on the footpaths, when the windows of these rooms are raised like so many open mouths, a murmuring hum can be heard, blending into one, each and every word and sentence circling around the self, nothing else. In early evening, women doing well in big business, earning heaps, hurry away from it all for the regular appointment. And they enjoy it – the endless sentence. Who knows what sacrifices they have endured and confusions vaguely felt – all for their work? Others – perhaps soldered to their father's hip, or baffled by the broken marriage – drop everything at three or four to make it there. An excavation through words. It can be hard work. And these patients are the articulate ones. Emerging after fifty minutes on the dot they can be seen hurrying along the footpath in a return to ordinary life, the everyday in all its complexities, its apparent breadth, its incompletions, some wearing an exalted expression, while fumbling for the keys to the car.

What is going on here? The skies are blue, forever cloudless – is that it? A great emptiness sending people back to themselves. Now that the city is up and running, no

longer a country town, there's been a transference from the landscape and its old hardships to the self? Various repressions are said to be hidden away, 'frozen anger' is one of the terms used. They say it is a matter of gradually lifting the layers, to find the original self, where there might be recognition, which then allows a suggestion of hope.

It has become the age of the self; confessions in public all over the place, the spillage of the 'I', and in private, in a quietly structured manner (the therapist has replaced the priest). And who is doing this talk? Not ill, at least not seriously, the self-obsessed personalities have a concentrated, almost technical interest in the self, as if they were specimens. Interest in others tends to be perfunctory, impatient, showy. It is they who have a natural attraction to analysis, where again they can dwell solely on themselves, the problematical 'I', and, since this is the very source of their difficulties in the first place, there is a real danger of psychoanalysis not uncovering, but giving shape to, and confirming, a person's self-obsession. Eight, ten years in analysis is not uncommon. In Sydney parents have been sending their own children, not yet in their teens, into psychoanalysis – ironing out the unformed mind before the unevenness of everyday life could give proportion or self-correction.

Years spent murmuring the endless circling sentence, while the analyst remains almost, though not quite, hidden.

A philosopher would not allow this; but when needed there were none.