Misreading the myths

WALK TO KULENTUFU
Gail Morgan
Houghton Mufflin, Australia

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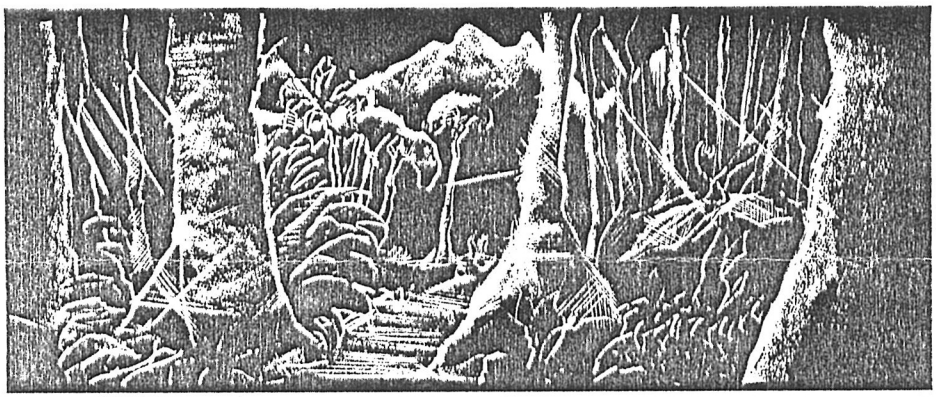
To generalise about culture is to fall into the irrationalities often encountered in the most execrable prejudices. Sometimes it is humorous. Most of the times it kneels at the altar of myth. It does not, as one hears from time to time, make more sense of the world. Generalisations help enlarge myths, increase the angle of error and may lead to tragic misreadings.

Take for example, this New Guinea highland tale related by one of the characters in Gail Morgan's *Walk to Kulentufu:*

"The Australian government was worried about the Chimbu. Raymond said with pride, 'We ate flesh under the Australian flag. Ten years ago they sent up a team of lawyers and magistrates from Port Moresby, to convince the headmen of the evils of cannibalism. They flew the chieftains in an Air Force plane to Moresby, to the jails, saying, 'Look what will happen to you if you continue to kill one another.'

When the old men got back they had a laugh. They announced to the village. 'In Port Moresby, the people are more sophisticated than us. They put their enemies in cages to fatten them, before they bring them to the table.'"



In Morgan's wry and acerbic novel, White people do a lot of misreading.

Wojtek, a Polish immigrant flung into the hedonistic banality of Bondi, undergoes culture shock. Touchy about European civilisation, out of which the greatest horrors of the century had come, he carries the past like a monkey on his back. It makes him critical, dissatisfied. Bondi was "provincialism without independence, sun without sunshine." He meets Anne, an independent Australian woman who deals in Sepik art and who intends to build a trout hatchery in the New Guinea Highlands. They fall in love. He is attracted by her independence; she by his foreigness. The first half of the book swings between their sophisticated repartee and their quickening relationship. The dialogue appears at times to be too calculated: chess moves that are too planned; set pieces, too wooden.

Yet, if the conversation is too clever, smug in the soporific torpor of Sydney, if we don't seem to get close to these characters, it is often because beneath this tyranny of distance there are dense sociological observations operating within the narrative to disturb one's sense of rhythm, of belief in the order of the world. Morgan reminds us that generalised wholeness has too much a sense of ease, of illusion, in this world of migrants, in the relations between men and women, in the writing process itself, to be accepted at face value. For early in the novel we are already warned of Wojtek's childhood experience, in which his breaking with ritual, his misreading of the signs, leads to catastrophe . . . something which will bring the novel to a tragic close.

The second half of the novel is suddenly invigorating and fresh, filled with a sense of danger. Anne goes off to the Highlands. Wojtek follows. One can hear the change of gear in the prose from the sharp conventional lane-changes to impressive surges of descriptive power. Simplicity takes on a different meaning, and although New Guinea appears simple to White people, it conceals even greater sophistication. The conflicts between cultures and between Wojtek and Anne take on larger dimensions against this backdrop:

"While the rhetorical flower of their youth was pawned in Europe, older campaigners took on Kokoda, a nightmare in the jungle which inspired the philosopher... As ammunition ran low, they fought hand to hand, bayonet against blunt bayonet in medieval fashion. Perhaps this justified her interest, amidst the rivers, raincloud and lava-flows."

It is precisely this building of myth against the horrors of history which would help Anne to survive. But it is because of her intense need to demystify that she overlooks the warning signs. Imbued with her Antipodean confidence, she sees neither the dangers of transgressing tribal customs nor the submerged treachery of Wojtek's jealousy. Her self-assurance blinds her to what Wojtek can see. Ironically, his vision cannot prevent tragedy:

"New Guinea was a powerful country. He had not listened to its warning. There was no need to feel the pressure of political compromise here. Nor was there the lazy indifference to truth he had found in Australia."

The tyranny of distance is no excuse for innocence. *Walk to Kulentufu* amply demonstrates that neither wilfulness nor suspicion will adequately sustain human relationships. In the affairs of the world it takes a special kind of vision; one forged by suffering and sacrifice. Unfortunately, too, often this vision is a belated one, fed by hindsight and not foresight.

Brian Castro is the author of **Birds of Passage** *which won the Australian/Vogel Literary Award. His next book* **Pomeroy** *will be published by Allen & Unwin in September.*