



Interview of Melissa Lucashenko 2019 Miles Franklin Award Winner

By Jing Han

J: Thank you for giving us this opportunity to interview you.

M: My pleasure.

J: We have a few questions and I will go one by one. The first question is about yourself. In your essay "Whiteness", you said as a teenager, you were only dimly aware of your aboriginality, because of the "whiteness you were privileged to enjoy, courtesy to your relatively pale skin and a hidden family history". This pale skin obviously comes from your father, who claimed to be a son of Ukraine farmer or white Russian or middle class Czech refugee, depending on who asked the question, as you said in another essay "Not Quite White In the Head". Only until you were 14, did your mother confess that you were Aboriginal. By then the government stopped removing Aboriginal babies in Queensland. At twenty, you learnt that your father Wally Lucas had been born Vladimir Lucashenko.

Can you tell us about your journey of discovering your identity and the place where you grew up?

M: I grew up in Brisbane, Australia's third largest city. I'm one of the seven children. I have six older brothers. Because I was the youngest of the seven, I wasn't aware of my Aboriginality. My oldest brother is clearly Aboriginal looking, but he left the family young. So while my other brothers knew that we were Aboriginal, I was too young to have known Jonathan. I just grew up thinking that some people had pale white skin, other people had olive or brown skin and curly brown hair. And that was an era in Queensland where race was never ever talked about publically, except when people wanted to be a racist. It was still considered impolite in society to talk about anyone's race at all. It's actually not accurate to say that Aboriginal children stopped being removed in the 1970s and I wrote about that on my website. The form of child removal has changed. The Aboriginal children are still being removed from Aboriginal families that are capable of caring for them and want to care for them. The policy of assimilation into white Australians is still going on today, and very much so, but in a disguised form.

I grew up with my family and we grew most of our own food on a small acreage on the outskirts of the city. I went to school with ordinary Australian kids. I had public education in both primary and secondary school. I left school when I was 16, and I did a few blue-collar jobs. People kept telling me I should go to university, so I applied and I got in. I had no idea what university would do but it absolutely changed my life. It's the best decision I ever made. That was in the era when university education was free in Australia. I studied public policy and economics. I went into university thinking I'd want to become a small business woman. And I came out the other end, interested in politics, philosophy, sociology and literature.

J: Was it rare in those days for Aboriginal children to go to university?

M: I'm 53. I was among the first cohort of Aboriginal people beginning to go to university as an ordinary thing. It wasn't as common as it is today. I was at university with probably 30 other Aboriginal students at the time. That was really important formative years for me to meet Aboriginal people just to learn from them. Some of those relationships has persisted till today and I have been culturally adopted into one of those Aboriginal families of my peers at university.



J: Were you shocked when you were told you were an Aboriginal?

M: Yes, I was, because until that point I had this idea that basically we were Australian with Russian heritage. But as soon as my mum said it, I felt “that’s why our skin is olive, and that’s why we all got brown eyes and that’s why we looked different”. I also sensed being different, growing up, very much so. And that could come from my other side of the family. But at school, the blond-haired and blue-eyed girls were definitely the Queen Bees and I was the strange child, so far from being a Queen Bee that it wasn’t funny. I never know whether that sense of being an outsider at school coming from Mum’s Aboriginality or from Dad being a Russian, or mixed of the two, or something altogether.

J: Did that discovery have an impact on your sense of identity?

M: It took a while. At that age I was practising karate. I was a karateka for ten years. I was the Queensland champion several times. I gained black belt when I was 18. So at 14, my focus was very much on karate. That was a kind of substitute of identity. I wasn’t interested in race. So I was kind of neutral about it. I do remember talking to one of few other Aboriginal kids at my high school, Rory O’Connor, not long after Mum told me, and we discussed it and worked out that we were the same degree of Aboriginal heritage. I don’t think I knew until then that Rory was an Aboriginal, either. We had a lifelong relationship, because our families were neighbours, and our brothers were very close. Funny how things were. My and his brothers were extremely close like brothers. I think that’s not a coincidence, either. I noticed in several families how fair-skinned Aboriginal kids were gravitated to other Aboriginal kids, whether they knew they were Aboriginal or not, just because of simpatico.

J: kind of intuitively.

M: Yes, intuition. Small things, body language. I guess like calls to like.

J: Can we say that the discovery put you closer to Aboriginal values or lifestyle or Aboriginal world?

M: It sharpened my interest. I grew up with Aboriginal values, even if the fact of my Aboriginality was hidden, the values I grew up with, very strongly egalitarian, very strongly connected to nature, and I had been taught little things like you never take all of the berries from one plant, you always leave some to re-generate; you share what you got, unstintingly, things like that. The values persisted, even though the fact that my Aboriginality wasn’t known to me.

J: Is the place where you grew very much an Aboriginal community?

M: Not really. The only other Aboriginal family close by was the one that I said about my brothers were VERY close to their brothers. Mostly it was all mixed of Australians, some small percentage of Asians, European immigrants and quite a few immigrants and families. Basically it was just an ordinary Australian scene.

J: So it’s quite a diverse, not exclusively Aboriginal environment?

M: No, definitely not. I still live in a part of Brisbane where it’s predominantly white, some Asians, some South Africans. It has all different ethnicities. It’s not majority of Aboriginal. But my identity has been deepened and strengthened very much in 30 years since I found out I was an Aboriginal. I know where Aboriginal families near me are, and they know where I am. And the network of Aboriginal people across Brisbane is a very real community which I am part of.



J: How about your father's side? Has it had much impact on your upbringing or on your system of values?

M: I'm sure the answer is yes, because I grew up with my father. So the influence is definitely there. But interestingly at the same time my father, as I said earlier, was racially abused as a young man who was called "a stupid wog" and stuff. So all his life he did working class jobs. He cut sugar cane, he worked in a gold mine in Tenant Creek, he was a labourer. He was a very smart man and physically very strong. And he associated mostly with ordinary white Australians and his Russian family. And he assimilated into Australian mainstream. He had two souls, his Russian soul and his dinky-di Aussie soul. When he spoke English, he spoke very mainstream English but of course Russian as well. He was an interesting man and he worked in the bushland and had to some extent an exposure to the bush culture, and a little bit Aboriginal culture as well, so it's kind of mix-up.

J: Do you feel that you know your father very well?

M: Oh that's an interesting question. I think I'm still learning to understand him, even though he died in 2010. I wrote a poem for his funeral and I said something like "Australian name, Australian home, but Russian blood and Russian bone".

J: Did he talk about his past or his own family back in Russia?

M: His parents came to Brisbane. He never spoke about his father, ever and I only met his father once in my life. I knew his mother. She and that part of the family lived in Melbourne. He didn't talk much about the Russian stuff. That was just what he was. He just talked some funny stories from life generally and every day conversation. He had a lot of pain. He spent part of his childhood in an orphanage. His mother had to flee. His father, because he was so violent, so she had to put my father and his brother in an orphanage for a year. And when she was safe, she got them back. I am sure he was terribly brutalised in the orphanage as well as at home. He had a lot to forget. A lot of demons.

J: Is that reflected in your writing?

M: Yes.

J: About your writing. In one of the interviews you gave, you said that when you first started writing, "there was still a glaring hole in Australian literature" with very few Aboriginal fiction writers published. Of course that's not the case anymore. You said "Being Aboriginal is about culture and family links, not just about biology" which you have just touched on. However, "Aboriginal" means something different to outsiders, "usually something much more restricted and restrictive", as you noted.

How do you define Aboriginal writing and Aboriginal Australian writer?

M: An Aboriginal writer is someone who has Aboriginal heritage and who thinks of himself as an Aboriginal person and has a relationship with the Aboriginal community that accepts him as an Aboriginal. As far as what Aboriginal writing is, I think I would take a broader definition to say, it's any writing by an Aboriginal author.

J: Why do you think to an outsider Aboriginal is something restricted and restrictive?

M: Because of two centuries of colonisation and racism. Australia is only just at the very beginning of understanding that we had a complex and valuable civilisation and lived sustainably forever. The



misunderstanding is because Aboriginal people were not always seen as the part of homo sapiens but seen as some kind of precursor. And of course overseas audiences don't have good info, either. It's been an intellectual and often physical apartheid in Australia until very, very recently, so who we are is still a mystery to most of the world.

J: That is one of the reasons I want to introduce you and your book to Chinese readers. As you just said, the outside world does not have an in-depth understanding of Aboriginal people in Australia. When you say Aboriginal writing, do you mean it has to talk about Aboriginal people, culture and story? Does it have to be distinctive from other Australian writers?

M: I think Aboriginal writing will be distinctive, whether the person is addressing stereo, typical Aboriginal topics or not, because of our views of the world. When we look out, we see through Aboriginal eyes, so we see things differently to, for example, a German writer, or a Chinese writer or British writer. The same goes for photography. Tasmania Aboriginal photographer Ricky Maynard said he can tell by looking at the photography whether it was by an Aboriginal photographer or not. That makes a lot of sense to me.

J: So you can tell from one's writing as well.

M: Yes, usually. Because there is some dead give-aways like the use of "we" and "us" as opposed to "I" and "me", the individualistic vs collective consciousness. And the situation of the subject always in place in country, there is no disembodiment of individual in Aboriginal writer.

J: Being an Aboriginal writer, you have always written about Aboriginal life?

M: Yes, until now I have always focused on Aboriginal story.

J: Before Too Much Lip, you published Mullumbimby, which is a big success and you described it as "a mainstream success". So you wanted to write a different book from Mullumbimby, a book that is "a really hard-nosed book" and "frightening to write". You set out to write a book that you'd expect "everyone will have a problem with", including possibly a backlash from the Aboriginal community. When Too Much Lip is published, it has been praised as "fearless", "gritty", "unflinching", "tough", but also warm and hilariously funny. It won the highest literary award in Australia The Miles Franklin Award for 2019. In your own words, you received "everything from rave reviews to muted approval", even though you'd be "still waiting for someone to hit me over the head on a moonless night".

So the question is: what is it so frightening about writing this book?

M: It's hard to answer that question without spoilers. I think my mainstream Australian audience and critic think that when I talk about it'd be a frightening book to write, I think they believe I'm talking about me being rude talking about white Australia. That doesn't scare me the slightest, I don't care. We're still hunted like animals in this country by men in 4w drives. Every weekend in Australia, there are Aboriginal people running for their lives, not in big numbers, but here and there a few people will be chased by men who want to harm them, rape them, sometimes kill them. So I don't care if white people think I'm being rude about racism in Australia and damning racism in Australia. It doesn't frighten me the slightest to talk about that. The thing I was frightened of is not being skilful enough to write a book that does justice to Aboriginal life and which helps racist white people to demonise Aboriginal men. I don't want that to happen. But I do want to talk about the Aboriginal community in all its facets including the ugly facets.

J: Did the Miles Franklin award surprise you?



M: It's like walking on air. It has changed everything. It's a bit like when you got published with your first novel, it's like "Wow, I've got a book out there, no one can take it away. I'm now officially a writer that published a book." That gives you a massive boost of confidence and changes everything. That's what Miles Franklin did for me.

J: Did you feel that this award telling you that you succeeded in telling the Aboriginal story without having Aboriginal men being demonised? Or is it still an unknown quantity?

M: It's hard to know that. I hope so. But I've learnt to never underestimate Australian racism basically. The writer writes and the readers read the book the way they want to read, and I always take that into account, which is why writing an Aboriginal story is so complex, and why outsiders do it so very badly. Because outsiders don't understand how Australian racism towards Aboriginal people and Aboriginal history works, whereas we do, so it takes great and exacting care to second guess. It's like a game of chess, with non-Aboriginal readers. Aboriginal writers have to decide what white readers will be thinking at this point, so I need to come out from that angle, be very strategic about things and at the same time be very funny and write a good story.

J: Winning the prize is definitely a wonderful thing.

M: Oh yes, it is. It really is. Alexis Wright rang me the next day and said it took her a year to understand the meaning of winning the Miles Franklin and she's so right. I'm really glad she told me that, because it underlined for me that something I need to grow into.

J: About the book, you said on several occasions that through this story you wanted to tell truth to power and the story is about intergenerational trauma, family violence within the Aboriginal community. It is a very confronting story. In the meantime it is also a story of defiance. The defiance shapes the theme of the story and its characters. One of the typical examples that I noted is when the whole family forced themselves through the locked gate to the Granny Ava's Island to scatter Pop's ashes, or "to take Pop down to the ancestors", and Ken asked "why should we have to sneak onto our own land?" The defiance is also shown by you as the author who does not shy away from the brutality of truth. You described the violence and trauma in an unflinching manner. You tell the Aboriginal story from within, so as not to leave it to outsiders to speculate or formulate to suit their own agenda.

Perhaps you can touch a bit more on why it is so important to tell an Aboriginal story as an insider. What is the message do you want to convey to mainstream Australia?

M: To take the second part of that first. I've never written a book until this book where a major Aboriginal character dies. My single focus in my earlier books has been: we're a living culture, we have not died, we have not become extinct, we exist in every part of Australia. Even though we don't look or sound or think the way you think Aboriginal people should, that doesn't mean we aren't here going about Aboriginal lives, that has been my main thrust. Since writing *Mullumbimby* or about the time I wrote *Mullumbimby*, I became a little bit more sophisticated of what I want to achieve. I decided I want my Aboriginal characters to have four things: I want them to have beauty, I want them to have power, I want them to have humour, and I want them to have the land, because those are the ingredients for a good life, and lately I've just added love to that. I say: beauty, power, humour, land and love. Because all of those things we had before the white men came to this country. We had rich and satisfying lives. That's what I want my readers to take away, to understand our humanity.

J: Why is it so important to tell an Aboriginal story as an insider?



M: Because every story is a political story. Every story a white writer writes about us has the capacity to do damage to us. White writers can't write Aboriginal stories, they can only write false Aboriginal stories. They can only write what they believe an Aboriginal story is from a lifetime of racist conditioning in a country that has never bothered to understand us. I'm all for real collaboration between Aboriginal writers and other writers. But what I say to outside writers is, include us in your story but not as major characters, only use Aboriginal characters as a minor voice in your piece because you will not get it right, and you will do great damage in the process of getting it wrong.

J: The next question is about the story which is about Aboriginal life in contemporary Australia. The book, as you said, is to portray the Australian underclass in rural NSW, especially the Aboriginal underclass. What strikes me the most when reading the book is how close and contemporary those Aboriginal characters feel to readers. While their life is very much regional and local with unique Aboriginal characteristics, the characters are not placed in an isolated, remote or mythical environment, but live in the modern society of 2018, just as everyone else does. Yet, beneath this reality of ordinariness, there is a sharp clash or an incongruity between the contemporary life they live and the ancient entitlement to their lands that they have continued fighting for.

So, does this sense of incongruity define or underpin the Aboriginal condition and is it the theme of the book?

M: I think it does underpin the Aboriginal condition. It's one of the themes of the book. The American novelist Jane Smiley says something that always has stayed with me which is that the premise of a novel is always that things are not what they seem, and with our Aboriginal society, things are definitely not what they seem, because culturally there are hidden layers of knowledge, hidden layers of meaning and metaphor every way you look, all the time. That is intrinsic to Aboriginal culture. And to come into full adulthood as an Aboriginal person is to learn and understand the granular covering of those layers of knowledge. As I said to you before, in this book there are elements that only Bundjalung Aboriginal person will get, there are layers that Aboriginal people will get, there are layers that Australians will get and there are layers that the general audience will get. So when Ken, the oldest brother, refuses to tattoo his son Donny and says he's not ready for that yet, your Australian readers will think that he's talking about the pain of the tattoo, but an Aboriginal reader will think there will be more going on and the informed Bundjalung reader will actually understand what's going on.

J: That's really interesting. So your book depends on the reader, who reads it to decide what the level of the story they will get and what meaning they will get.

M: Yes, that's the traditional Aboriginal practice and it is also mirrored in European writing to an extent. For example, popular Aboriginal folktales that Europeans have reproduced resemble stories for children. White people think they are stories for children, because that is the only cultural level they have been exposed to, but those same stories may have three or four or even seven levels of meaning that can be revealed, that mainstream Australians are not exposed to or taught to. They are not taught the language or the stories. They are only treated like children, because that's how they deserve to be treated in Aboriginal cultural terms.

J: Do you write this modern version of Aboriginal life to counter the myth that Aboriginal people are a dying race?

M: Yes.

J: They live in a modern world that everyone can relate to them to the point that they are there.



M: All Aboriginal people live in a modern world to some extent, there are quite a few Aboriginal people in remote areas who speak poor English or sometimes no English, but they are very much a minority. Most speak English as first language, most of us live in cities, we all use modern technology to some extent and we are all still Aboriginal and practising our culture, and keep Aboriginal values, usually.

J: Coming to intergenerational violence, racial violence and historical genocide, all these are quite horrendous and making the reading quite intense, but they are in the meantime all intertwined and interwoven. "Blood will have blood. It is the oldest Law". Thus "the debt is paid". So the question is: has the debt been paid and can it be truly paid?

M: In Australia or in the book?

J: In the book.

M: Yes, on the technicality, they are on the reflecting of *The Merchant of Venice*.

J: Can the debt be paid in Australia?

M: Yes, it can be, but it will take time. The white people are blundering around rushing into a crime scene called Australia and bugging everything up, so the detective work can't be undertaken. But a treaty will be a good start to bring the country together. The racism is the real obstacle, because there is this persistent idea that Aboriginal people don't have a civilisation. We have a very complex understanding of the universe, not just of our country, but of the universe. There is so much that isn't understood. It is difficult to convey how big the gulf of understanding is. But the debt can be paid, and debts will hang around one way or the other until they are paid. It's just the way of the world.

J: You talked about intergenerational trauma and violence in your book. The younger generation has already been traumatised by violence and alcohol abuse. So do you think that redemption is possible?

M: Yes, because not every Aboriginal family is like this. There are Aboriginal families which don't have this degree of violence. The book is very much about redemption and about healing. We have the tools in our families and in our communities to do the work that needs to be done. Everything in western psychology, much that is in western science and much of Western knowledge and lots that lies outside western knowledge is in our communities, but because we are seen through a deficit model – those people are useless, those people are drunk, those people are lazy, those people have no capacity, so we get these incredibly harmful ideas about us that prevent us from healing our own lives. We want to run our own affairs and have the power to do that. We have the capacity to do that, we have done that for 60,000 years, for hundreds and thousands of years. But it's a long way before we can get other Australians understand that.

With the catastrophic fires that has happened on the east coast, there is a slim understanding of Aboriginal people managing this continent with fire. When an Aboriginal fire burn happens, it happens very differently to a white fire. If you put your hand on the ground when a traditional Aboriginal fire burning has gone through, the ground is not hot. The ground remains lukewarm or cool. And so the plants are not destroyed, the animals can live there quickly. And it will protect the country in the next fire, also. We have these gifts that white Australia could be getting, but like it says in the Christian Bible, "Don't throw your pearls before swine, lest they trample them, and turn around and savage you". People forget. We have these gifts of knowledge and wisdom but you can't give to people who aren't ready to receive.



J: About characters. At the end of the story, Kerry “looked for faces in the rising smoke, and didn’t know who she was anymore. The family had always been proud of their Chinese blood, and Kerry had long assumed a bit of white convict was floating around somewhere in the family tree. But to descend from the very first land-grabbers, the murdering pioneers?”

Will this identity search be a continuous theme in Aboriginal writing?

M: Well, this is an interesting question, because what happened in 1988 was sister Sally Morgan in Western Australia published her story *My Place* which is a story of someone similar to myself who didn’t know she was an Aboriginal and who came to understand she was an Aboriginal and that journey. Ever since then mainstream Australia tends to read every Aboriginal book through that lens.

Now the only identity confusion in my book is when Kerry learns that they are related to certain white people in the town and the characters of one family who are not the main family who discovered their Aboriginal heritage. Apart from those, there is no identity confusion in this book. But outsider readers coming to Aboriginal text expect to read a Sally Morgan story. That’s very often what they impose. I was told that someone reflected upon *Mullumbimby* as a story of someone looking for her identity. Absolutely isn’t. The main character in *Mullumbimby* knows she’s an Aboriginal and she speaks some of her language. She has no confusion whatsoever about being a Bundjalung. But that’s what an outsider reader expects and that’s what they project on to the story.

Identity will always be a central component of my writing and a lot of Aboriginal writing, because that’s the legacy of the genocide policies. However, it is important not to see an identity struggle where one doesn’t exist. Kerry knows who she is. Ken knows who he is. Black Superman knows who he is. Pretty Mary knows who she is. Granny Eva definitely knew who she was. Granddad Chinky Joe knew who he was. You can tell by his name that he had Chinese blood and he is related to another character in the story. Pop Owen struggles hard with his identity and that’s not a coincidence that he is one who is so violent.

J: What about Donna?

M: But even Donna is doing it knowingly. She made a choice. A lot of people all over the world made the choice.

J: It’s about the language of this book, black and blackfella humour. The book, as critics have commented, is gritty but also hilariously funny which I found so. I often laughed and cried. Black humour and blackfella’s humour dominate the tone of the story and make the reading engaging but also intense, because there is a sharp edge to your humour. Joke is used as a defensive mechanism, as Kerry says “The only safe thing was to make a joke of it”.

Can you tell us why the use of black and blackfella’s humour is so important in this book?

M: It goes to the authenticity of the book, a portrayal of an Aboriginal family. I think probably other Australians think we sit around being miserable or drunk. But there is a lot more laughter in Aboriginal lives than any other lives I’ve observed. We have got hundreds and thousands of years of social observations to draw on and people can be mercilessly funny, sometimes.

J: Is being funny a demonstration of defiance?

M: Yes, particularly with poor Aboriginal people, not all Aboriginal people are poor, but a lot of us are. When you have poor people who have nothing to lose, when you have nothing to lose, you can be as however cutting and funny as you like. I’m sure you are familiar with that from Chinese culture, as well, the mockery from those who are on the bottom rung towards those above them.



J: The other question I'm interested in is the title, Too Much Lip. At the beginning of the story, Auntie Tall Mary said about Kerry "Too much lip, this little gin!". Close to the end of the story, there is a comment on Kerry "Too much lip, her old problem way back. And the older she got, the harder it seemed to get to swallow her opinions".

Can we say that the title has a double meaning, one refers to Kerry who brings up issues and secrets hidden away in the past by being loud with her views and thoughts, the other refers to the author who decides not to swallow her opinions and observations in her portrayal of Aboriginal life?

M: Yes, there are those two meanings and there's actually the third meaning, too. I'm an Aboriginal author writing mostly to non-Aboriginal audience. White Australia is an adolescent country. White Australia hasn't yet matured into a fully adult society in my view. It is the condition of an adolescent to be angry and petulant and to protest. And so I used that title deliberately because I knew that title would resonate with mainstream Australia and its adolescent culture.

It's a quote from a friend of mine who is an Elder from Cape York. Years and years ago I was telling him about me, being cheeky to some authority. He said in an admiring way, "Too much lip, this gin," as a compliment. It's like "talk back, don't be quiet".

J: As you know, I will translate this book into Chinese and introduce you and your work to Chinese readers. What do you expect Chinese readers to get from this book?

M: I just hope they understand that we are still here. We're modern and ancient at the same time, which I think is probably true for a lot of Chinese people. You have your modern life, but you have your roots that go far, far back in time. And those roots are always important and always present in your modern life.

J: Thank you, Melissa, for your precious time and wonderful answers.

M: xie xie ni, Jing.

Interview was conducted on 16 February 2020 in Sydney.

THE END

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