

BRUCE Pascoe lives on the tip of Cape Otway. The house, which he built himself and shares with his wife, their 13-year-old son and two heeler crosses, is in a sea of twisted manna gums. It is an eerily beautiful environment, like being surrounded by hundreds of giant dancers in sinuous flowing poses. No other human habitation is in sight.

Pascoe, a light, wiry man with ginger hair and dark, passionate eyes, runs Koori tours in the area and has agreed to take me on one. He is also a writer whose new novel, *Shark*, completes a trilogy begun in 1988 with *Fox*. The series' central character, also named *Fox*, discovered when he was 20 that he was of Aboriginal descent on his mother's side. Beyond learning that his Aboriginal forebear was from "somewhere on the Murray", *Fox* knows nothing of his origins.

Pascoe spent his early childhood in Richmond, the son of a builder of Cornish extraction. When he was eight, the family moved to King Island ("a boys' paradise"), returning when he was 13 to again live by the sea, at Mornington. Later, when things got tough financially, the family moved to the Melbourne working-class suburb of Fawkner. When I ask him whether the years by the sea fashioned his consciousness, he replies quickly, "No more than the ones in Fawkner".

It was during the Fawkner years that he became politically active, regularly protesting against the Menzies government which, as he now recognises with due irony, educated him for free via the old Commonwealth Scholarship system. (When I ask the source of his politics, he describes his parents as "the two most just people I ever met".) He became a teacher and was the coordinator of Australian studies for the Commonwealth Schools Commission during the Hawke government before leaving education in the early 1980s to write and publish the magazine *Australian Short Stories*.

Pascoe is a community-minded man. He runs a cricket team for kids in nearby Apollo Bay and, at the age of 50, still plays reserves for the local footy club because he can't bear to see them short of numbers. So too with *Australian Short Stories*. A lot of writers in this country owe the excitement of being published for the first time in a journal with an active readership to **Bruce Pascoe**. After 15 years, and countless hours of effort, the magazine was sold in November 1998.

He is also, to quote his blurb, "a proud member of the Wathaurong Aboriginal Co-operative". He was 30 when he discovered that he was of Aboriginal descent on his mother's side. His inquiries into his family history had always baulked at his mother's mother. In the end, he employed a genealogist who informed him - in his own words, a person who had grown up white and been educated white - that his great-grandmother was a Bunurong woman from South Gippsland. That knowledge changed everything, henceforth running through his writing like an electrical storm, but it was never going to make for a simple life.

In the eyes of the white community, he was one of those deeply suspicious individuals who discovers a mid-life enthusiasm for Aboriginal beliefs and causes. In the eyes of the Aboriginal

community, while the family connection might be valid, there was still the reality that he hadn't grown up black. He could never know those things that only experience teaches.

In 1989, his increasing immersion in indigenous politics led him to apply, as a writer and journalist, for a visa to enter West Papua. He was refused. He reapplied as a builder's laborer and the visa was granted. He was in the highlands when the ruse was discovered and he was escorted from the area. Even so, he says he was "too dumb" to fully understand the situation. It was only later when a startled museum guide in Jayapura took him aside and told him to be careful after he asked a series of questions about the Papuan resistance, that he began to see the hidden fear.

In *Ruby-eyed Coucal*, the second novel in his trilogy, Fox is in the highlands of Irian Jaya fighting with Papuan guerrillas against the Indonesian army. Oddly, in this place where he is seen simply as a white man, Fox seems most at peace. In the third book, Fox has returned to a fishing town on the Victorian coast to be with his blonde-haired daughter and Reuben, the dark child she has conceived with a Thursday Islander. Back in what is ostensibly his own country, Fox is "a silent anonymous ghost" who feels "the bonds of duty but not those of belonging".

In his speech, and in his art, **Pascoe** combines colloquial warmth and humor with flashes of unnervingly direct emotion. Once, when he was chairing a reading at Apollo Bay in which I participated, he began talking about the bodies of some Aboriginal people that lie beneath a local building. Emotion overtook him and he had to stop. Later, when I sought to thank him for the job he had done, and touched his arm, he hardened beneath my touch. Can't take a compliment - he'll tell you that.

It's not hard to have differences with such an individual, and in the course of my Koori tour we have a number of minor ones. He describes the lifestyle of the Katabanut people who lived in the Cape Otway region as utopian. Is it wise to idealise any group of people, I ask. Did they not fight wars? "There were wars in Utopia," he replies, referring to Sir Thomas More's 16th-century tract on the subject. It is the riposte of a well-read man.

Walking along the rocks by the water, he picks a periwinkle for me to eat, thumbing it from the shell. It is good, something like squid. Then there is a tiny oyster and, later, the leaf of a native plant that crunches refreshingly on the palate like cucumber. Continuing along the beach we pass a symbol of white culture, the rusty anchor of *Eric the Red*, an American trading vessel that sank off Cape Otway last century.

"I always try and pass it when I bring people here," he says. "But they always see it and stop." When I ask him how many of the crew were lost, he says, "About 15."

He describes himself as having the patience of a scholar, by which he means a lot of his knowledge comes from books. The tragedy with this part of Australia, he says, is that so much Aboriginal knowledge has been lost. The admission wears him visibly. But he admits that what dispirits him to the point of despair is when Aboriginal people come to him seeking knowledge he has got from books.

Most writers believe their work is neglected, but **Bruce Pascoe** possibly has more reason to think so. True, his writing is a wildly mixed creature. *Shark* contains a fine passage of writing that

culminates with Fox's death when the fishing boat he works with his daughter's white boyfriend is caught in a wild storm in Bass Strait. The writing is as large as the seas it describes and, in its way, as awesome; when Fox's body is finally found, sea creatures have eaten the eyes from his head.

But the author then proceeds to what is structured as the climax of the novel: Reuben's initiation into the Thursday Island community and his political coming of age. Lest the political intent of the novel be missed, the author also stages a Koori demonstration outside the Victorian Parliament at which one of Reuben's friends, 16-year-old Rocky Clark, is apprehended and mishandled by the police.

In the 20 pages that remain, Rocky does time in prison, completes his VCE and begins studying law at the ANU. His heroes include Michael Mansell and Geoff Clark, and he becomes a member of the Aboriginal Provisional Government. However, neither Mansell nor Clark are uncontroversial figures among their own people and, while Rocky's political position in relation to the white community is blazingly apparent, what the author doesn't explore is the much more difficult and revealing issue of Rocky's politics vis-a-vis the black community.

"Identity is everything," says Pascoe defiantly. Perhaps, but it is not a simple issue. In fact, what I value most about Bruce Pascoe's writing is that he maps the necessary confusion in our evolving consciousness of what it means to be Australian.

Our day ends back at his house, which appears like a stone ship out of a sea of green branches. His dogs rush to greet us and then this fierce, friendly man invites me in for a last cup of tea.

Shark, Magabala Books, \$16.95

CV: Bruce Pascoe

Born: 1947, Richmond, Victoria.

Educated: Fawkner High School and University High (attended 13 schools).

Career: Established Pascoe Publishing, 1982, and published Australian Short Stories for 16 years.

Books: Night Animals, 1986; Fox, 1988; Ruby Eyed Coucal, 1997; Shark, 1999.

Family: Married, with two children.

CITATION (AGLC STYLE)

MARTIN FLANAGAN, 'The proud map-maker - PROFILE - Bruce Pascoe - Writer', *Age, The* (online), 25 Dec 1999
3 <<https://infoweb-newsbank-com.ezproxy.lib.uts.edu.au/apps/news/document-view?p=AUNB&docref=news/105460066CC94C31>>

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