



Miles Franklin Literary Award 2009 Longlist

The Pages
Murray Bail

Text Publishing Melbourne Australia

Reading Group Notes

Praise for *The Pages*

'With nearly 10 years since his last novel, it's very exciting to see Murray Bail return with *The Pages*. An intriguing story, it is a beautifully written novel...surprising and elegant...well worth the wait.' *Bookseller*

'A mere summary is a terribly inadequate tribute to this exquisite novel from the Miles Franklin Award-winning author of *Eucalyptus*. With economy and style, *The Pages* succeeds both as a philosophically engaging novel and a "good read". [Bail's] novels are rare treats and—for readers and writers—always worth the wait.' *Good Reading*

'As he did with *Eucalyptus*, Bail demonstrates his ability to write with a luminous, elemental aura surrounding everything.' *Australian*

A reader's introduction to *The Pages*

At dawn, Erica and Sophie leave Sydney to drive over the Blue Mountains into the dry outback landscape and the home of the late philosopher Wesley Antill.

Erica, a philosopher herself, has been asked by her university to review Wesley's work, to read his notes—the pages. They are as Wesley left them, unread, untouched, at the rural property run by Wesley's sister Lindsey and brother Roger.

Sophie, a psychologist whose professional skills in listening seem to be confined to her patients, accompanies her friend, painting her toenails in the passenger seat and reeling off her opinions of the various qualities of her current man.

At the homestead, Roger Antill works the property, seeing to the requirements of 10,000 merinos, while Lindsey dresses in dark velvet for dinner. And the pages, far from lying ordered in a philosopher's study, are piled amongst handfuls of wool, wheat sacks and a discarded bottle of tomato sauce in the woolshed.

The Pages explores how the women's visit to a sheep station in New South Wales changes them. At the beginning, in the car, the women experience a '...series of

overlapping movements and stoppages, awakenings and false dawns...' Their lives until this point seem to have followed this pattern.

The women's personal journeys raise questions about how we make sense of our lives. What level of importance do we place on real intimacy and how do we achieve it? To what extent do our surroundings, our books, our family, friends, lovers and gender impact on our identity? To what extent are philosophy and psychoanalysis useful in making sense of the world? Does psychoanalysis lead only to self-obsession? Does philosophy lead to thinking about thinking at the exclusion of life?

Sophie leaves the station driving towards a future with the sun in her eyes. Erica, through her reading of Wesley's pages and her friendship with Roger and Lindsey, begins to see her life differently.

Underlying the present day story of the novel is the developing philosophy of Wesley Antill: shaped by books and experience, lovers, tragedy, solitude and the ordinary man. 'The philosophers have been unsatisfactory in the examination of the emotions,' he writes. Can philosophy even make a dint in our understanding of emotions?

Questions for Discussion

1. Murray Bail has commented that this is the age of narcissism. Discuss ways in which *The Pages* is, in part, an argument against narcissism.
2. Erica and Wesley use philosophy as a way to explain the complexities of living. Sophie interprets people using the tools of psychology and psychoanalysis. Discuss how the novel represents these two disciplines. Can either bring clarity? How is Sophie a physical embodiment of the idea that psychoanalysis is a '...sentence circling around the self...'?
3. How does Erica's philosophy distance her from people? Discuss how Erica changes throughout the novel. How does Bail use the landscape to symbolise her shift? Do the characters in the novel act as catalysts for her change? Discuss the idea that she is able to change more than Sophie, because, like Wesley's philosophy, she is willing to '...begin again.'
4. Has the writer created parallels between Erica and Wesley? Erica and Rosie? Sophie and Virginia Kentridge? If so, why?
5. 'I have always had trouble working out who I am. All I have is a faint idea of what I am not.' Wesley's comment is explored in different ways through the novel: the missing stamps, Roger's empty seat at the table, the gaps in his speech, and the absence of the city that allows Erica to make sense of her life. Discuss the idea that it is the absence of things that enables people to make sense of their lives.
6. 'At the very word "philosophy" people in Sydney run away in droves...' Discuss the representations of Australian identity that Bail explores in the novel.

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7. The idea of being photographed made Wesley ill while Sophie has many photographs of herself in her home. What point is Bail making about philosophy and psychology in his reference to the self-importance and shallowness of photography? Is Bail satirising both philosophy and psychoanalysis in the novel or does he favour one discipline over the other?
8. Despite the in-depth discussion of philosophy and psychoanalysis in the novel, does the chapter on the postman ultimately support the idea that the point of life is simply to be there and to wonder?
9. 'Being witness to death, or almost death, or to suffering—at least to be in the vicinity of extremes—would perhaps reveal the occasional truth not available in ordinary life.'
10. Do you agree with Wesley that tragedy brings clarity? Is this the case for the other characters?
11. What differences between men and women does Bail explore in the novel? How does he use the landscape to highlight these differences? Does Wesley Antill blur the line Bail has drawn between men and women?
12. What factors does the novel suggest influence us as individuals and as a society? How important are factors such as landscape in shaping our cultural identity? How important are factors such as family and friendship in shaping our personal identities?
13. Wesley comments on the need for an original philosophy. Without originality what is the point? Are the characters in *The Pages*, like all humans, circling around the same questions? What questions are central to existence?
14. Even if we're not thinking about anything new, it's essential to think. Or can too much thinking lead to madness?
15. '...philosophy was a confession on the part of its author, a kind of involuntary and unconscious memoir.' Discuss what Wesley's confession reveals about what he has learnt by the end of his life.