



Miles Franklin Literary Award 2009
Shortlist
Judges' Formal Comments

***The Pages*, Murray Bail
(Text Publishing Australia)**

Two Sydney women, friends, but oddly matched, set out on an adventure. Erica, who is self contained, academic and undemonstrative, has been commissioned to appraise the philosophical leavings of an Australian autodidact and thinker, Wesley Antill, whose papers are preserved in the woolshed of the family sheep station in western New South Wales. Sophie is opulent, compulsively verbal (a psychologist) and recovering from an affair that didn't go her way. Both women are of an age to be examining their lives.

Detached from their urban routines, the two women find their diffident but obliging hosts, sister and brother, Lindsey and Roger Antill, disconcerting, and rural life, with its integrity, ritual hospitality and latent threat, unsettling. New alliances form, different affinities develop. The friendship frays.

No Murray Bail novel follows a straight narrative track. Each sentence, each paragraph is layered, every observation pointed ('Presbyterian church there converted into a carpet emporium'). The novel's structure is a pattern of interleaved reflection, story, and speculation about love and being, grief and understanding, sometimes embedded in the narrative, at other times given in a voice that has the timbre of the authorial, a sceptical voice that has done some time with Australian philosophy, and with its British and European antecedents.

Wesley Antill's own philosophy, which is also the story of his life, is at the novel's core, and Erica's task, the reader's task, is not so much to judge what it is worth, but to follow it as it sounds, like an antiphon, through the narrative, recalling the journey of Antill's questing life, from his fractured childhood, through country and city experience, affairs and friendships, epiphanies, intersections, through Australia and Europe, the great and not-so-great philosophical metropolises, to his death, prematurely white-haired and aware of what he has lost, what he has missed, what he has failed to value, or understand, until too late.

If the novel raises questions, and it does, it also plays with paradox, and wonders at human intellectual endurance: 'The puzzle is whether to continue with the *puzzle*. The puzzle? What are we doing here?' The answers, and the occasional tentative resolutions, when they came, are all the more poignant for being, perhaps, provisional.

16 April 2009 - Miles Franklin Literary Award 2009 Judging Panel
Professor Robert Dixon
Morag Fraser AM
Lesley McKay
Regina Sutton
Murray Waldren