

Searching for identity

FOX. By Bruce Pascoe. McPhee Cribble/Penguin, 167pp, \$11.99.

THE ONION MAN. By Max Dann. Penguin, 152pp, \$9.99.

Reviewer:

VERONICA SEN.

BRUCE Pascoe spent Australia Day at an Aboriginal mission in southwest Victoria. A significant statement, consistent with the themes of his first novel and his opposition to the view that the first settlers occupied a vacuum.

Fox concerns a young Aboriginal man who is driven by a desire to find his origins and achieve his own special identity. A sudden act of rage against the white man who had brutally killed his mother is the cause of Fox's flight from the law. As he runs he becomes deeper embroiled in trouble; but he also gains a greater knowledge about himself and his society.

Pascoe successfully creates the idea of a man who, with his instinct for survival and natural intelligence, evokes both sympathy and admiration in many people he meets. Even the policeman on his case becomes reluctant to apprehend his quarry.



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Fox attracts people with his self-contained air and a taciturnity that endows him with dignity. He wins the trust and help of a number of white people of contrasting backgrounds: an idealistic cafe owner, a writer, a travelling salesman and a filmmaker. The latter, Eileen, becomes his lover and it is to her that he confides his dream of finding out more about his mother, who died when he was little more than a baby, and about his own people.

Interspersed with the narrative of mostly friendly encounters and continuing pursuit are lyrical passages that suggest Fox's ancestry and the lore that has been fed by stories told by older members of Fox's race. Wherever he goes — the Murray, Moree, the Northern Territory — he meets Aboriginal people who have special affinity with their particular region.

There is a sense of re-awakening not only in his own heart but also in groups across the land: and he "could see that these people had a tenuous grasp on the great primaries of their lives — the great beauties were carefully being reassembled after a century of estrangement."

One is conscious that the ideas, fears and longings of Fox are, as here, described for him, from the outside, and with an overlay of a white author's interpretation. Pascoe is, after all, imagining the psyche of an Aboriginal person; and it is not possible for him to convey all that the concept of "my people" would mean to, say, Colin Johnson or Sally Morgan. He writes as a humane, informed liberal, but as a white man as well.

However, the issues that Pascoe's beautifully structured and sensitive novel addresses are important ones: land, education, the treatment of black people in custody. He presents a sympathetic view of people, black and white, struggling to reconcile the material and the spiritual, the personal and the social, and to expiate, however inadequately, the indignities of the past.

Another first novel is Max Dann's *The Onion Man*. Psychologists would have a field day analysing his central character, Roland, who has written himself a "life review" in

central character, Roland, who has written himself a "life script" in which he sees himself as a generous, helpful person, never appreciated or understood by other people. He has come to the conclusion that "you're better off just thinking of yourself."

Roland's story of his life, as open as anything Holden Caulfield ever said, is amusing in its own way. However, the humour becomes increasingly wry as one realises that his jaundiced views, closed mind and paranoid tendencies are not going to change. He expects failure, and invariably achieves it. Roland loses

jobs, friends, lovers, family through his inability to make connections between the events in his life.

The comic-tragic truth is that Roland has little self-knowledge and the more he shares with the reader the more he exposes his unacknowledged loneliness and misanthropy. One of the many ironies of the novel is that its title is derived from a film Roland remembers from his childhood about a young boy who learns through suffering. In his own life Roland learns virtually nothing from his experiences: they serve to contract rather than expand his vision.

When he is hospitalised for a duodenal ulcer he seems to be responding to friendliness and to be discarding his usual suspicion of other people's motives and his dislike of being imposed on. Frustratingly, his negativism prevails after the camaraderie of symptoms and operations wears off; and he sinks back into his customary belief that "it's not human nature to be happy."

Dann's novel has some amusing comments to make about such diverse subjects as junk food — Roland's passion — church hospitals, family ties, pollution and literature. Yet its overall impact, rising above the comic persiflage, is depressing. Undoubtedly there do exist lonely and mistrustful souls who alienate others, with a Roland-like perversity, and then rationalise their failures. And without a doubt Dann has convincingly brought to life one such loser at life's feast: even if one secretly wishes that he hadn't.