

## WHERE THE LINE BREAKS

MICHAEL BURROWS

### ABOUT THE BOOK

The Unknown Digger is Australia's answer to England's famous First World War poets – Brooke, Owen, Sassoon. But for decades, his identity has remained a mystery.

Matthew Denton – Australian PhD student at University College, London – believes the Unknown Poet is one of Australia's greatest war heroes: Lieutenant Alan Lewis VC of the 10<sup>th</sup> Light Horse. Matt is starry-eyed and in love with Em, a fellow student and assistant to Matt's supervisor, the nattily dressed Professor Alistair Fitzwilliam-Harding. But, as the footnotes to Matt's thesis reveal, not all is fair in love and war.

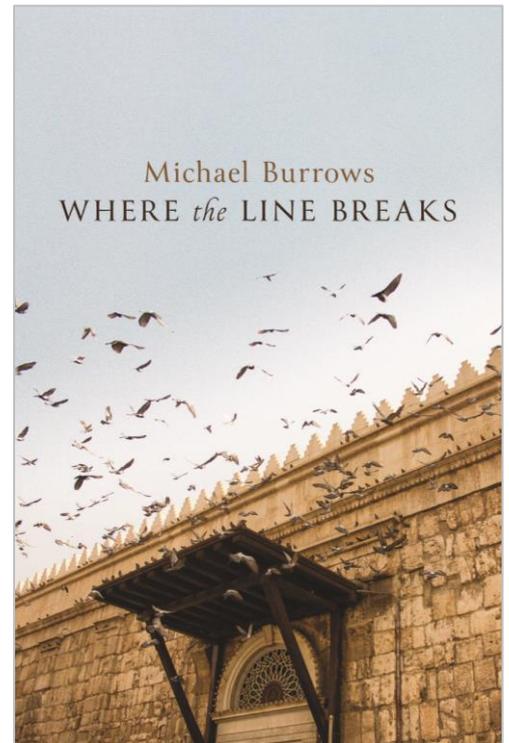
Meanwhile, in the past, Alan Lewis fights his way across the Middle East as part of the 10<sup>th</sup> Light Horse, his fiancée, Rose, and the life he left behind disappearing. The questions of what makes a poet, a lover and a hero grow more ill-defined with every battle fought.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Burrows was born and raised in Perth. He wrote the first draft of this novel as part of his master's degree at City, University of London. *Where the Line Breaks* is his first novel and was shortlisted for the 2019 Fogarty Literary Award.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What do you think is the meaning of the book's title?
2. This novel contains a thesis and footnotes. How did you navigate its different components?
3. Why are war poets and war artists important in our understanding of the experience of war?
4. To what extent is this a novel about the relationship between art and life?
5. In what way does this novel contribute to the conversation about mateship and the Anzac spirit?
6. At what stage does the reader begin to understand more about what is going on for Matthew than he does?
7. To what extent does Matthew's project succeed or fail in its relation of the identity of the Unknown Digger? Why has the author chosen to let the story play out this way?
8. To what extent is part of the myth of the Unknown Digger caught up in the fact that he *is* unknown?
9. With what characters do your sympathies lie?
10. What do you see as the elements of 'true' love, friendship and heroism in this novel?
11. What is the connection between Alan Lewis's dream on p. 9 and the final scenes of his homecoming in the last chapter (pp. 216–218)?
12. *Maybe there is a little Alan Lewis in me after all.* (p. 209) To what extent is Matthew right or wrong about this?
13. Does it matter that Matthew often misreads situations and the information before him? How does this make the reader feel about him?
14. The thesis contains references to real books and fake books; Alan Lewis and his men participate in real battles. What is the role of fiction in playing with reality in this way?



## INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

***Where did the idea for this novel and its complicated structure come from? What were the most challenging aspects of writing a novel in this way?***

*Where the Line Breaks* was very much inspired by my own visit to Gallipoli for Anzac Day 2013 – like Matt I've always had an interest in military history, and before the Gallipoli trip I had been researching ideas with the intention of writing a novel about the Second World War, but over the course of the night we spent on the Gallipoli peninsula, the idea for a novel about an Australian war poet started to take hold. After returning to London I spent a lot of time in the Imperial War Museum conducting research, but as hard as I looked, there was never enough information on Australian poets for my liking. So I figured I'd invent my own, and then explore the reality of the romance of the Anzac legend by contrasting it with a modern-day storyline.

Originally, my plan was to structure the novel as a sonnet – fourteen chapters, flipping back and forth between the First World War timeline and the modern day, with each chapter 'rhyming' or echoing the following in the ABAB way found in a sonnet. That idea fell away somewhat as I wrote, although the back and forth, and the elements of the two storylines echoing each other, still remain. What took over was the idea of Matt's thesis as a way to hold the established facts up to a light and, by contrasting them with the lived reality of Alan's experience, to examine the nature of heroism, love, masculinity and the other important themes of the novel. Matt's own story unfolding in the footnotes – and the way it takes over, or disintegrates, the thesis – seemed the perfect mirror to Alan's experiences. I was inspired by the way works such as Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, and *House of Leaves* by Mark Z. Danielewski, played with traditional formats.

Matt's fictional thesis was undoubtedly the most challenging aspect of the writing process – I have a master's, I've completed my honours, and done a little academic writing, but writing a PhD thesis, even a fictional one, proved to be difficult. I wavered back and forth over many different drafts on how academic to sound, how to make it enjoyable to read and yet still sound reasonably succinct, and how to ensure Matt's increasingly erratic hypotheses were still grounded in realistic arguments. In one memorable draft, I swung the pendulum too far towards parody, and turned the thesis into an unreadable swill of hyperbolic academic-sounding nonsense. Eventually, with much help from my editor, I was able to find a middle ground: an academic thesis that, hopefully, you were excited to read. Still, I don't think I'll be completing my own PhD anytime soon.

***Why do you think it is important to keep telling stories of Australians at war?***

I'd begin by saying I think it's important to tell Australian stories, full stop. But new stories, from different perspectives, different outlooks, differing cultural backgrounds. It's no good rehashing the same well-worn tales, especially if there are interesting alternatives waiting to be told. Australian war stories deserve the same thing – new perspectives, original stories, fresh takes.

I knew I wanted to write something involving Gallipoli, but I didn't want it to look like the Gallipoli we've seen in movies and on TV. I wanted to write about the Australian experience in the Middle East during the First World War because I think we're so used to seeing the trenches of the Western Front and Europe that we've almost forgotten that it was truly a global war in more than just name. And I was really adamant that I wanted to make my characters realistically human, even if that meant they'd turn out to be less than perfect people.

We have a strange relationship with our history in Australia: we're proudly Australian, yet we are the result of a deadly European invasion on a peaceful native population. We're defiantly proud of our convict heritage, but we like to think of ourselves as big players on the global stage. We idolise the diggers, yet our national day of remembrance is for a comprehensive defeat. We barrack for the underdog, but when they win, we cut down the tall poppies. We want our heroes to be smart and confident and talented, but disdain overt displays of acquired knowledge and skill.

That might sound pessimistic, but actually, I love that grey area. I wanted to write about that, because that's what I want to read about, and why it is important to continue telling these stories – because there are no easy answers. Our history is chequered, our heroes are human, and that fascinates me.

## ***Which character do you most identify with?***

There's a bit of me in all of my characters, in some way or other, so I think I identify with whoever I'm writing at the time – I'm a little of Nugget's incessant good humour, a healthy dose of Em's stubbornness, some of Rose's romantic side, probably too much of Professor Fitzwilliam-Harding's sometimes eccentric dressing style.

But obviously Alan and Matt are very close to me in quite a few ways. I identify with Alan's worries, his anxiousness, his need to prove himself (in a family of high achievers, there's always that pressure to succeed), and the way his story unfolds is based on my own questions about heroism and bravery. Likewise, Matt's journey from Perth to London mirrors my own – I wrote the first draft of *Where the Line Breaks* as part of my Master of Creative Writing at City, University of London in a tiny studio apartment in North London. Where I separate from my characters is in the actions they take to deal with the situations they are in – that old writing cliché of 'write what you know' is all well and good up to a point, but half the fun of writing is in what you don't know, forcing characters to make choices you would never make and to do terrible things in order to see the consequences of their actions.

Having said that, I absolutely identify with Matt accidentally wearing purple trousers because he thought they were blue. Write what you know ...

## ***What's next for Michael Burrows?***

I like to keep myself busy with a number of creative projects on the go at any one time – some might call it disorganised, but I like to think of it as having a finger in every pie, and as I'm also a fan of pies, it's an idiom I can get behind.

My next novel is well underway, about a bushranger in the early days of the Western Australian settlement, alongside an album of Australian folk songs inspired by their deeds and actions. Like war poets and Australia, I think in Western Australia we're somewhat lacking in famous bushrangers, so I'm trying to rectify that in my own way. I'm also working on a few screenplays – movies being one of my earliest loves – trying to incorporate my love of experimental literary formats into the visual medium of film. Can a movie include footnotes? We'll have to wait and see. And that Second World War story I was researching and meant to write before *Where the Line Breaks* came along is always sitting at the back of my mind, waiting for the right time to emerge. Hopefully, by the time you read this, some of these projects might be nearing completion.

***Michael Burrows is always happy to answer questions: find him on twitter at @mperegrineb***