

To the Highlands

Jon Doust

PUBLICATION DATE: August 2012
ISBN: 9781921888779

About the book

It was 1968. The world was falling apart. Bits of it were burning. In Europe, Britain and America students were running amok. In Perth they did what they always did: studied, got pissed, stumbled in and out of relationships, played tennis, went to the beach, fought, fucked, bragged about fucks that never existed, and drove cars into fences, trees and other cars. When I left school most of the kids in my year went on to university, as they should, because my old school, Grammar School for Boys, expected it, their parents expected it, they expected it. They were future leaders and had to be groomed to take over. My shocked parents did not cope well with my final exam results and my mother tried to rip my face off. Dad stepped in, pushed Mum out of the way, and gave me to the bank, Australia's first bank, The Colonial Bank of Australia. He grabbed me by the scruff of the neck and hauled me down to the local branch and said to the manager: Take him, or I'll kill him. Well, he didn't say that, but his look did.

So begins *To the Highlands*, a novel that can be read as stand-alone, but also that follows chronologically from *Boy on a Wire* (Fremantle Press, 2009). It depicts the year in the life of Jack Muir following his lacklustre departure from his exclusive grammar school for boys and his entry into the adult world.

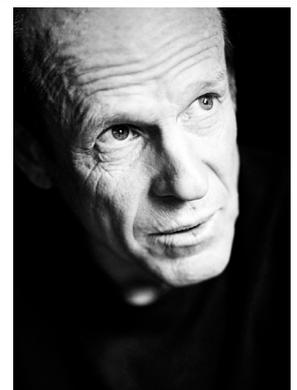
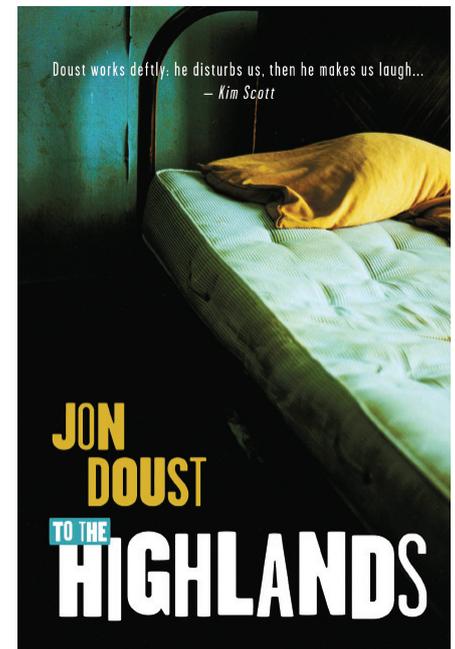
Jack, the son of disappointed parents, and reluctant employee of The Colonial Bank of Australia, is dispatched to the capital of a regional outpost, to some unnamed islands somewhere to the north of Australia. Like the capital itself, the country's highlands – to which Jack is subsequently demoted in further disgrace – have a familiar feel to them. One suspects, very strongly, that this place might be Papua New Guinea.

In 1968, the greater world is full of upheaval and protest, warring and lovemaking. Its events are a million miles away from Jack's sleepy and complacent Perth. But on the islands, Jack falls into his own kind of revolution as he is lured by the irresistible promises of a sometimes brutal hedonism: on the islands Jack comes to lose (at last!) his virginity and many of his inhibitions.

If Jack and his compatriots are there for sport, there are locals for whom the precipice of independence is a serious matter indeed. So Jack meets the beautiful, talented, unattainable Margaret Baker, being groomed to assume her rightful place amongst the classes of educated and elite, and he meets George Kanluna, powerful and impressive, watching and waiting for the moment his country will seize independence.

To the Highlands is a book set in a time and a place where a clear-sighted interrogation of colonialism could scarcely be expected of the white people who worked within its system. Jack Muir comes to the islands with no more insight than many of his contemporaries, but his growing discomfort in a murky moral terrain becomes a mirror for the relationship between two countries poised (though to varying degrees) on the edge of maturation.

This novel is more than the story of one boy's journey to man: it is an unflinching metaphor for a less than salutary chapter in Australia's colonial history, laying bare, as it does, uncomfortable aspects of our own national identity.



About the Author

Jon Doust was born in Bridgetown, Western Australia, and spent his high school years at a private boys school in Perth. He failed his final year due to rebelliousness, drinking and surfing. After school his father insisted he take a job in a bank. The bank in its wisdom chose him for higher office on a South Pacific island. Out of that disaster came much good and Jon recovered well enough to attend a university and get a degree. He went on to write two children's books and a novel, *Boy on a Wire*, which was longlisted for the Miles Franklin Literary Award in 2010. *To the Highlands* is the second work of this trilogy, which is called One Boy's Journey to Man. Jon lives with his wife in Albany, Western Australia, where he writes in a smart house, runs, surfs, grows vegetables and agonises over the future of everything.

From the Author

Boy on a Wire has been described as a 'dislocated memoir'. Is To the Highlands similarly a dislocated representation of your own experiences?

This second novel is much more than dislocated because during my one year on the unnamed island I was often drunk and disorderly, kind of manic and all too eager for adventures and new experiences and, as a consequence, exact memories are not easy to access. But I also remember it being a very troubled time in my life and the thoughts, feelings, ethical dilemmas, confusions and guilt complexes that ran rampant during my late teens seem to have remained clear. A number of incidents are deeply etched, including my final 'breakdown', which hit me hard and with a deep and lasting vengeance after I arrived back in my home town.

Jack Muir's views and those of his contemporaries might be seen as anachronistic – in particular, as racist and sexist. Was it difficult to negotiate these potentially unpalatable qualities in a way that would keep the reader on side?

Not only was it difficult, it was heart-rending and soul-wrenching. Remembering a nastier time when so many attitudes were repugnant and violence commonplace and, in particular, the small part you played out in the middle of it all, was not assuaged by simply writing about it. During the writing process other measures had to be taken in order to maintain a balanced life. Whatever the consequences it was vital that the story be written in order to reveal what I call 'universal truths'. Finding the right tone and balance, yet not disguising the raw reality, may well have been an impossible task. Some will think I have succeeded and others will be sure I have failed.

When reading To the Highlands, Josef Conrad's Heart of Darkness comes to mind, and of course, as you state in your own acknowledgements, so does Randolph Stow's To the Islands. Can you comment on the influence or connection these works have with your own?

This was a book I never thought to write and probably never wanted to write. I seemed sure my next book would cover this stage of my early life in a cursory manner and I would not have to explore it in any detail. But on reflection I realised I could not escape the plunge into what were the two darkest years of my first thirty – 1968 and 1969. Before I stuck my head down for the final plunge I re-read *Heart of Darkness* and *To the Islands*. They gave me courage and made it clear to me that none of us in that mixed-race island group were Conrad's Kurtz, the lost mad soul up the Congo, or Stow's Heriot, the lost and wandering missionary. Some of us, however, were a mix, certainly one with a bit more Kurtz and others with a bit more Heriot.

You have not named the place, the island. Why not?

Naming the place would have located it and people who had been there, or lived there, or still live there, would probably be continually referring to their own experiences, comparing them and making judgements. *To the Highlands* is based on a year (1968) I spent in Papua New Guinea, but I wanted to explore a number of universal themes, including racism, misogyny, colonialism and a young man's struggle to work out what kind of man he was, and I didn't think locating the fiction would assist in those explorations. Then, of course, it is not possible to re-create a life in two hundred and fifty pages and once I had determined what I was writing about I had to make choices. My real year was somewhat more complex and included a great deal of joy, but it also ended in misery and was followed by a long and deep depression.

If this is the second part in a trilogy, then what lies ahead for Jack Muir?

The next instalment will shine a more positive light on Jack Muir. His miserable life mainly behind him, he can't escape that he is on some kind of journey and finds himself on a socialist communal farm, a kibbutz, in Israel, in the early 1970s. During his time there all manner of major events take place, both in the Middle East, Asia and back home in Australia. They include the Yom Kippur War, the rise of Gough Whitlam, the fall of Richard Nixon and the end of the Vietnam War. Jack matures, finds his moral core, marries and cuts a fragile deal with his shadow.

Discussion Questions

- Why does this novel begin with the two letters from fictive doctors Ian Palmer and Grey Hammond? What difference does their inclusion make?
- The book opens with a fight, in which Jack Muir has not come off at all well. By the time readers return to the fight at the end of the book, in what ways do they understand that Jack has been reduced to ‘a small pool of what was once me’?
- As in *Boy on a Wire*, both Jack Muir and the author Jon Doust use humour in this book as one of its arsenal of weapons. What role does humour play in Jack’s life? And what role does humour play in the telling of this story?
- What does the reader understand ‘going troppo’ to mean? In what ways is ‘going troppo’ an excuse for the white inhabitants of the islands? In what ways is it a condition that befalls them?
- *I am on the little path that leads to Dorothy’s house. I see movement in the bushes. There is something there. I know there is. Oh, Jesus, not the thing, the haunting thing, the thing I think is there but I know it can’t be, can it? No, not here in the village. I am safe here. Stupid boy, there is no such thing.* (p. 123) What is ‘the thing’ that intermittently disturbs Jack during his time on the islands?
- Why does Jack have recurring flying dreams? How do they change and what do they mean?
- What is the purpose of keeping the reader abreast of world news, as seen via the filter of *The West Australian* and through the reading of Jack Muir himself?
- Why does Jon Doust set his character’s journey against figures and events being played out across the world?
- How does Jack’s relationship to/with women change in the course of this book?
- Is Jack sexist? Is he racist? What do these terms mean? What difference does the application of a context make when considering these terms?
- In what ways, as Kim Scott says on the cover quote, is our ‘prim censure’ ‘destablised’ in the course of reading this book?
- *I am of the firm view, says Kanluna, like your Mr Whitlam, that Australia can never truly mature as a nation until it divests itself of its colonial appendages. By that I mean all these islands that surround it that it controls for a wide variety of reasons, not all of them benevolent.* (p. 176) What is the effect of allowing Jack to have access to a character like George Kanluna? How does Kanluna’s presence allow the reader/Jack to understand the islands experience differently?
- *To be free, George Kanluna goes on to say, you must set free.* (p. 176) What are the different ways that the islands’ inhabitants (indigenous and visitors) seek to achieve freedom, and free love? How does the ‘free love’ that Jack finds run contrary to a freeness of spirit?
- What roles do Jimmy Irish and Howard Merkel play in Jack’s life and in the reader’s view of the colonial presence on the islands?
- What, importantly, might the reader come to understand from Jimmy Irish’s desperate revelation just before Jack leaves the islands?
- Does Jack consider himself to be a ‘failure’? How is ‘failure’ defined in the context of this novel?
- Why, at the novel’s end, does Jack call himself a ‘coward’?
- How does the reader’s knowledge of Australia’s relationship to what is now called Papua New Guinea affect a reading of this novel?