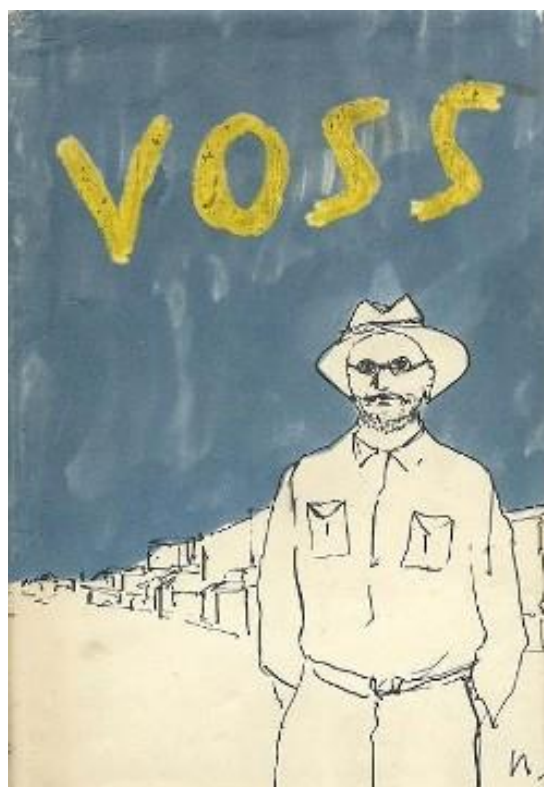
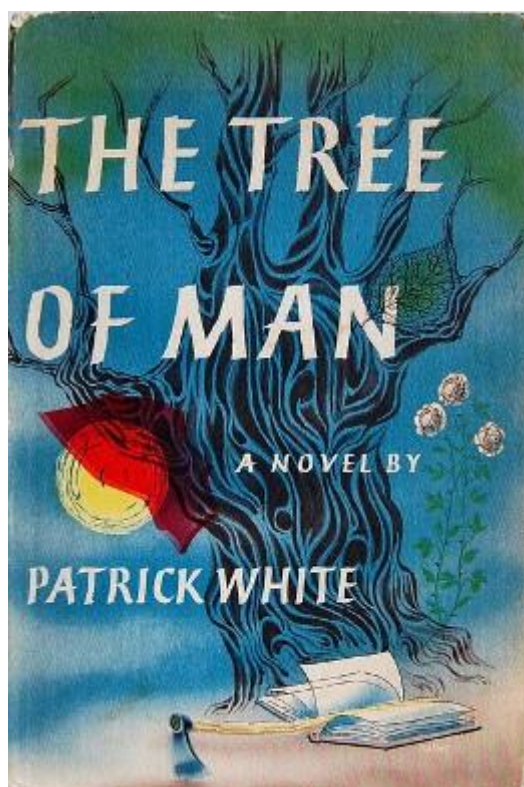


*A Double Review:*

*Patrick White's Voss and The Tree Of Man*



*An Essay by Garry Victor Hill*

In May 1974 this writer was in the audience when Patrick White spoke in support of the Labor government, which was facing re-election. He was succinct, witty, pithy, vigorous in his statements, optimistic, captivating, persuasive and passionate in his commitment.

If only his writing was like that with every above adjective applying, but it is not; with every adjective listed above find the antonym and apply it to *The Tree of Man* (1955) and *Voss* (1957) and many of his other works. Add recondite, pretentious and pointless.

Consider that adjective succinct. The meaning covers concise, condensed, clear and sharp. Consider combining the adjective pithy and witty. When he spoke the man had bite - and he bit with an amusing shrewd confidence, not malevolence. Because of that speech for many years I remained unsure about Patrick White, but that uncertainty has vanished and what his writings are must be stated. Very over rated has to be the first descriptive phrase. Adjectives include turbid, turgid, overblown, overwrought, rambling, depressing humourless and just plain boring.

Yes I know that he won the 1973 Nobel Prize for literature, awarded to the world's greatest writers. I know that he has been acclaimed as a genius, and also as another Tolstoy by some literary critics. Some lecturers, journalists and politicians and teachers praise him. He has been put on the educational syllabus for senior high school students, a rare honour for a living writer. In *Fifty Works of English and American Literature We Could Do Without* (1967) assorted literary sacred cows are attacked, but White is not among them, indeed he gains praise for his toughness. In *Novels and Novelists A Guide to the World of Fiction* Martin Seymour-Smith writes as another critic who will attack sacred cows on sight, yet with some reservations he rates White and his *Voss* highly. Even so I call it as I see it and I see a sacred cow: this is the opinion of many.

When doing the HSC our class read *The Tree of Man* (1957) and when I asked the lecturer what this novel was about, all she could do was quote bits of it which did not answer the question. When I foolishly persisted with asking what was so great about it I became her class target for innuendoes and snide sotto voice abuse. That shut up the rest of a resentful, bored class – at least in front of the lecturer. Out of class most discussed how they were vexed at being forced to read it. This was not the only class to react this way. Another HSC student told a similar story about her class and gave a succinct and accurate interpretation. To paraphrase:

*The Tree of Man!* It just goes on and on for hundreds of pages and nothing much happens and we think surely what it's about will become clear at the end and all that happens is some cranky old farmer stares at a gob of his spit and insists its God.

Seeing a cousin's husband reading *Voss* and having recently finished it in boredom and bewilderment, I asked for his opinion. He stated that he was often puzzled about what was happening, struggled to follow the difficult narrative and concluded that in the desert parts White had lost himself in his own story, which did not make sense.

If these assessments are considered the views of near illiterate philistines forced to read against their will and challenged by their limited abilities, the opinions of a bookseller and a university lecturer, (both of whom have commercial reasons to like White's work and both have clearly proven literary abilities) should be considered. The first said that White was over rated and his books made no sense. He then mentioned a name I did not recognize who interviewed White in a futile attempt "to get some sense out of him." At university one of the best English lecturers winced when he saw I was carrying a Patrick White novel and asked me "Why on earth I was reading that bore?" Good question. Perhaps it was because I heard him praised so much and thought my difficulties on focusing, my doubts and disaffection were my fault. They are not.

Other writers can be difficult. White's contemporaries William Faulkner, Virginia Woolf, Toni Morrison, Herman Hesse, Yeats, Joyce, Herman Broch and Cormac McCarthy are frequently definitely difficult, sometimes to the point of their narratives apparently losing cohesion and clarity. Even so, they all have vigor, colour, an overriding sense of purpose and can be read without vexation. White lacks these saving graces. His narratives are almost non-existent, his characters have little character and are almost simulacra for pallid turbid ideas and their author's observations.

In *The Tree of Man* Stan Parker, a young Australian farmer, enters into a joyless marriage with Amy. With dogged determination they work the hard land, located somewhere unspecified, but between the fertile coast and the desert. Stan goes off to World War One. Their son is lazy and greedy and ends up a criminal. Stan lives to be old and dies, some of his last words are muttering about God being a gob of spit. Here is the plot to 499 large pages of small print.

The theme seems to be about how difficult it is to be an Australian farmer in what Australians call the bush, that is the remote drought, flood and fire affected inland. Life amongst such people tests them and they endure endless

draining challenges with stoicism, determination and pain. Henry Lawson said this first in 'The Drover's Wife.' (1892). He also said that with more clarity insight and empathy and did it by not wasting a word, thereby using 494 fewer pages than White did. Lawson could create a sense of place and character: he gets into a character's mind, while White always keeps an omniscient distance. He writes of human behavior the way scientists write up their observations about creatures in cages or things under microscopes.

These are not the only problems with White's writing in this novel. The one obviously dateable event in *The Tree of Man*, WW1 means the story goes on for several years before and after that event, certainly several decades as does Stan, aging from a young man to an elderly one. These were times of great change in Australia, particularly affected by the world wars, the Great Depression, migration, politics and technology, and yet little of any of this appears and even less of it shows in how it affects people.

Also over rated is his style, obvious from the first paragraph on where a cart gets personification as it "drove" itself between two stringybark trees which grow above "involved" scrub. The trees are described as hairy. Carts do not drive themselves and trees obviously have bark, not hair. Involvement suggests some level of awareness: scrub does not think or perceive. Such personification should serve a purpose, but it does not here as it immediately gains contradictions in the next paragraph. White then makes it clear that the cart has a driver and horse. Personification rarely works outside fantasy, science fiction or the minds of depicted disturbed characters. So why use it here? Is he hinting that the bush is a magical realm, a living thing? It does not work here, nor does it seem to be the start of anything as White then takes his story into a dreary, joyless realist mode with little sense of passing time or dialogue. Whimsicality, humour, vivacity, vitality, optimism, magic, exuberance and good fortune are extremely difficult to find in this work. "Extremely difficult to find" is being polite and opens the possibility that others might glean something, or at least offer their interpretation which might demonstrate just one of these qualities.

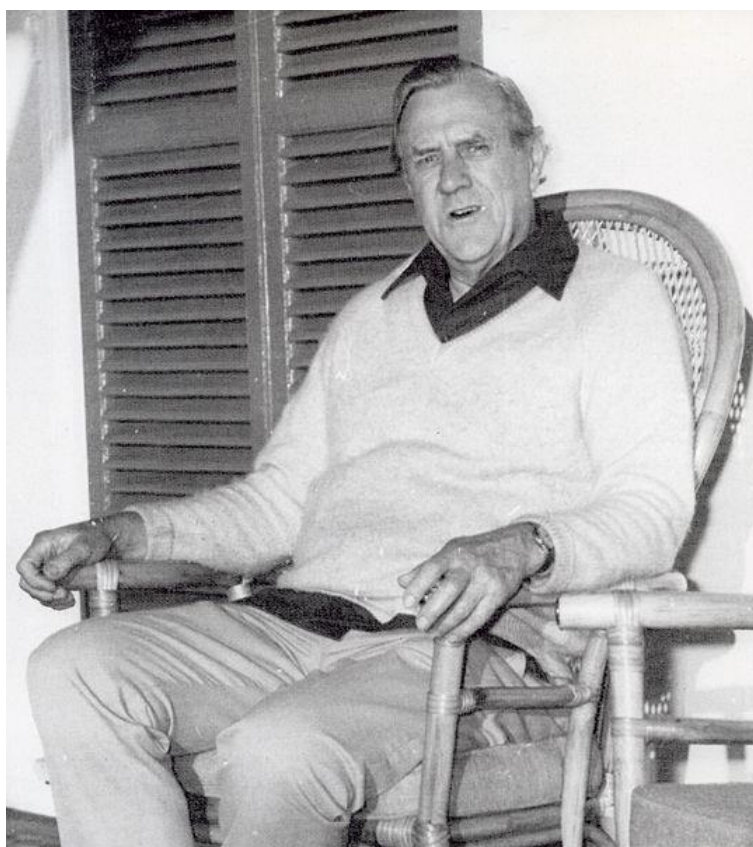
The endless dreariness of the lives he depicts becomes dreary. About a fifth of the way through I found myself losing attention, dreaming of Groucho Marx quips, Audrey Hepburn comedies and cornetto ice creams.

*Voss* in some ways is even worse. At least *The Tree of Man* has a plot humans can follow. Here the plot, such as it is, concerns an 1845 expedition to cross the Australian continent. At this time central Australia was an unknown quantity and so is the expedition's leader, a German migrant, Voss. The expedition becomes almost literally a nightmare as the group wander into a seemingly

endless desert where Voss has visions or hallucinations and obsesses about his love for Laura Trevelyan, whom he rarely met. The expedition splits with Voss's half vanishing and eventually a second expedition goes on a futile search for them, unknowingly getting as close to their remains as the length of a football field, with their return vanishing Voss becoming a mystery and a legend. What is the theme? I do not know. As in James Dickey's *Deliverance* (1970) and Peter Forbath's *The Last Hero* (1988) the theme might be that men who crave to lead have a way of pitting themselves against nature's power for two entwined reasons: they think themselves invincible and do not understand nature.

The beginning and end of *Voss* reads well, Here White reveals a knowledge of early Victorian decorum and has an ear for the speech patterns of the time. He adds apt, succinct dialogue and shrewd observations. It is during the expedition that he, and therefore his readers, becomes as lost and confused as his character.

In interviews and non-fiction quotes White showed a modest, shrewd personality, but his personal qualities do not make him the truly great novelist many insist that he is.



Patrick White 1912-1990

## Acknowledgements

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### *The Tree of Man Frontspiece*

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### *Patrick White*

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Patrick White in 1973 unknown author / CC BY-SA 3.0 NL

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