

**Mudrooroo. *Tripping with Jenny. Exile Bay: ETT Imprint, 2019. 303pp*  
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Back when Mudrooroo was Colin Johnson, he was hanging out in jazz dives in Melbourne being hip and earning royalties from *Wild Cat Falling*. He married Jenny Katinas, who migrated as a child from Latvia, and with two other Euro-Australians they hit the road to Asia. In his last years, after many more books and much scandal, the writer recalls his youthful journeys with ‘his first wife,’ in the process revealing something of the sense of self that underpinned all his later work.

I am not certain how firmly Mudrooroo intended his private nostalgias to be issued as a public record, but if he was writing for publication, he might have thought that rigorously documented idle conversation and colloquial tics (such as repeating a phrase three times—really irritating after one or two instances), even if they are meant to convey the hipster mentality of his characters (‘dig it’) will not endear him to readers. The banalities of pot smokers are only really impressive to the smokers themselves, and the text often lapses into bland clichés, or characters adopt the tones of a Victorian novel (‘Let us hasten away from this, this place of ill omen.’). As a travelogue, we get more about hunting for the next source of ganja than insightful encounters with new societies. When the author does engage with a place, he gives us some second-hand guidebook information, large chunks of which are probably in contravention of copyright laws on fair usage. These are matched with some over-long disquisitions on experiences read through popular movies, Joseph Campbell’s archetypes, and Kerouac’s *On the Road*. The real interest of the book is in the picture we get of the writer as a young man.

In terms of travel, the author appears as an innocent abroad, excitedly collecting new visa stamps more or less for the sake of arriving in places he’d never thought to visit (‘another day another border,’ he chortles as he heads for Angkor Wat). His European friends serve as worldly-wise foils in a manner not unlike the secondary characters in another trip through Asia, Christopher Koch’s *Across the Sea Wall*. In this context, the narrator is not marked as anything other than an innocent/ignorant Australian (his nickname is ‘Skippy’). As such, he shows a number of superficial identities: the leftist who is uncomfortable being hauled around by rickshaw men; the anti-colonialist who trots out his hostility to places where ‘the British military boot’ has marched (he is quite happy at the same time to get preferential treatment at border crossings and in hotels as a citizen of the British Commonwealth). These are a set of ‘attitudes’ that are as inauthentic as his adoption of Kerouac’s cool rebel persona.

The casual, careless roleplaying befits the tale of dropping out and hanging loose in an endless smoke-fuelled high, but it spreads into other parts of the narrator’s self-presentation that are more crucial to his identity. There is a persistent reference to time spent at Clontarf Boys’ Town, the Catholic boarding institution where Johnson was sent when his mother was deemed to be incapable of raising him properly. Once or twice these are supplemented with subtle allusion to his time in gaol. Neither set of leitmotifs is related to racial identity, but both are related to the narrator/author’s repeated assertions of himself as a Buddhist. Being set to polishing the floors of the dormitories at Clontarf is likened to the sweeping disciplines in a Buddhist monastery; a prison cell is like a monk’s cell, the monastery holds an open day to raise funds, just like his Catholic ‘home’ and so on. It is as though Mudrooroo is constructing an identity that will redeem earlier experience and connect him with his Asian encounters. At the same time, his travels with his new wife call this most important line of self-construction

into question. Jenny is sometimes a practical aid, sometimes an ironic corrector, but always a voice relegated to the background as ‘my wife.’ Newly married, the narrator checks out the local girls (and transvestites) and has sex with a prostitute, passing it off as his ‘innocent abroad’ gathering of experience but also raising the question of how much he really understands the idea of Buddhist detachment, and how much it is just another self-serving (masculinist) bit of role-playing, perhaps deriving from the anomie of being raised in a boys’ home. In his identity as Buddhist, the narrator finds a congenial monastery in Thailand and declares that he might return and become a monk. Jenny, supposedly on her honeymoon with her new husband, understandably cries, ‘What about me?’

Some genuine engagement with Asian life occurs when the two travellers (they have lost contact with their other companions) happen upon the Coffee House on College Street in Calcutta. A sense of shared anti-colonial attitudes (one telling instance for Australian readers is when the narrator hears about the Amritsar Massacre and drily comments, ‘Yes, the British are fond of massacres’) links the writer to young Indian litterateurs, and they introduce him to the works of Tagore and Satyajit Ray (biographical outlines included). The narrator fails to appreciate Tagore’s songs (Jenny tells him he does not know the language and ‘lacks the sentiment’) but grows to like the poetry and in a rare moment of retrospective comment, remarks, ‘long after these events he influenced my *Stradbroke Dreaming* poetry collection.’ He spends some time analysing *The World of Apu* and concludes that Indian treatment of protagonists—‘this way of looking at the world from the view of a hero’—is Buddhistic. At this point he admits that his attachment to Buddhism in Australia ‘had been very bland’ and that his unexpected contact with Asian culture in Bengal led him later to write *Struggling*, using *Rasa* theory as an experiment in how ‘mood determines environment.’

Race enters the narrator’s consciousness when he arrives at Heathrow and sees how ‘Dominion’ citizens are treated with more care than ‘Colonial’ (coloured) ones. For the first time, Jenny mentions his Aboriginality and suggests that he should be as wary of entering London as a Latvian arriving in Moscow, but her husband is quite taken with being at the heart of Empire and points out that without its invasion of Australia he would not exist. They leave the contradictions unexamined and immerse themselves in the climate, food, music and small slights of the metropolis. Here the affectations of hipsterism fall away and we get something like a sincere bit of travel writing memoir. The narrator makes a bee-line for Calder & Boyars bookshop, partly to check their Buddhist titles but also to talk about his interest in ‘the French new novel’ and its refusal of certitude. The discussion about Robbe-Grillet suggests later influences on Mudrooroo, and he overtly questions his own reliance on realism—something projected onto other Aboriginal writing in his later critical work. The couple spend time reading and watching French films and the writing seems to gain energy, at which point Jenny gets disturbing news from her family and pushes to return home.

Still attached to his persona as ‘wild cat,’ Mudrooroo settles down to write his new novel, attempting Kerouac’s spontaneous flow, and tries some stories in the style of Nathalie Sarraute. He then flies back to Thailand, haunts the bars of Vietnam-era Bangkok, visits Chiang Mai, crosses into Burma and finds the dangers of the newly militarised region unsettling enough to head back to an Australia he confesses to feeling alienated from. There he finds an antsy wife, a new age of Dylan, Zappa, Hendrix, anti-war demonstrations and LSD and a job as a librarian. Living with his in-laws, he continues to bash out his next novel (which disappears into Angus & Robertson’s files after he’s advised not to exploit Aboriginality so much), tries to use acid to short-cut to Nirvana and turns to Tantric yoga. As the referendum approving Aboriginal

citizenship happens, he plans to head off again and we leave him and Jenny boarding the plane for India.

Mudrooroo has reflected with some bitterness on his longer history and general reception in his piece in *JASAL* 11.2 (2011) and that longer history is filled in by Gerhard Fischer in an Afterword (which focuses on the mother figure and attempts a recuperation of Aboriginal identity for the author). This first title in a planned trilogy of ‘autobiographical novels’ cordons off a carefree youthful past from any strong sense of experiences gathering to produce a later coherent, more complex self and closes with a short intimation of the cultural politics around race that would enmesh his older self. The narrator goes tripping with Jenny mostly in the hippie sense of tripping; one senses that it is Jenny who does the harder tripping in terms of travel as travail and *Bildung*. The book is presented as a tribute to her, but remains an autobiography that shows someone who is most alive when living among novels and films. It also shows the fragility of someone who never was able to assemble a wholly integrated selfhood and remained a shape-shifter through *maya*-like roles all his life.

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