



# Mullumbimby

*Melissa Lucashenko*

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## **Mullumbimby** Melissa Lucashenko

A darkly funny novel of romantic love and cultural warfare from one of Australia's most admired Indigenous voices.

When Jo Breen uses her divorce settlement to buy a neglected property in the Byron Bay hinterland, she is hoping for a tree change, and a blossoming connection to the land of her Aboriginal ancestors. What she discovers instead is sharp dissent from her teenage daughter, trouble brewing from unimpressed white neighbours and a looming Native Title war between the local Bundjalung families. When Jo unexpectedly finds love on one side of the Native Title divide she quickly learns that living on country is only part of the recipe for the Good Life.

Told with humour and a sharp satirical eye, Mullumbimby is a modern novel set against an ancient land.

## **Mullumbimby Details**

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Author : Melissa Lucashenko

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## From Reader Review Mullumbimby for online ebook

### Jesse Blackadder says

I absolutely loved reading Mullumbimby. An unforgettable main character and a brilliant use of language. I felt as though I'd entered a world that coexisted with mine (being set in my local town) and yet had been invisible to me. It felt as though I physically entered that new world every time I sat down with the book. Superb.

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### Natasha Reid says

Wow, this feels like an important read. About country, culture and belonging. About love, family, and connection. But also about Aboriginal understanding of the land, how to listen and take in the signs the land and the nature world around us is delivering, if only we stop and listen and pay attention to.

The use of Goorie language dropped in is powerful, and leaves me wishing to learn more. But the connection to country, and the spirituality has me very keen to read up more. This read feels like it has moved me a little further in my quest to understand more about Australia's First People.

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### Graham Crawford says

I found this one of the most challenging books I have read in a long while. "Mullumbimby" is certainly a cleverly written authentic account of contemporary indigenous life and I really wanted to like it more. Sometimes the closer you are to something, the larger the differences seem. I have a lot of personal baggage I bring to reading this so my rating for the book says more about me than the book's considerable merit.

I have worked in the Indigenous health and Family support sector for over a decade so I know first hand just how accurate the depictions of life are in this book. The people I know are from tribal groups a little further south than those depicted in "Mullumbimby" but I can tell the dialogue is tape recorder accurate in both language and the (sometimes banal) topics of conversation (a lot more on "language" later). And I also have a darker connection with the actual places and real peoples this book is about.

I am adopted, and a couple of years ago I set out to discover my "roots". When I finally tracked down my birth mother, one of the many things I learned about my ancestors was that they were the first white people to settle in the "Northern Rivers" area. They solved the "problem" of Aborigines camping on their newly acquired farmsteads by giving the tribes sacks of poisoned flour. One of my ancestors, or more precisely the younger brother of my great-great-great-grandmother is mentioned by name in this book. Serious baggage!

Melissa Lucashenko has written a wonderful account of what it feels like to be an indigenous woman living in the Northern Rivers area. She shows the underbelly of Native Title war - I've seen this face to face and it's nasty ugly. She also beautifully illustrates the deeply spiritual (and more than a little superstitious) connection Aboriginal people have to their land. If you are not familiar with the culture, it might seem this book is laying it on a bit thick - but it's spot on. There wouldn't be a week in my office when there was not a conversation involving eerie (retrospective) predictions and apparitions (often accompanied by willy wagtails and dead pets). I have noticed that a lot of subconscious decision making is legitimized in the sharing of these twilight zone moments, and if discussed by the group, there is the sense a of collectively

manufacturing a shared dreaming. More often than not this tends to re-enforce a pecking order. Lucashenko certainly captures this slippery process without being judgmental.

"Mullumbimby" is a (justifiably) uncompromising novel that uses language as a weapon. From page one until the end she battered me with it. I was completely at home with the rough Australian dialogue and bush colloquialisms and although this book has more "fucks" and "cunts" per page than any I've read in recent years, she's probably toned that down from real life. I didn't know you could use the word "cunt" as an adjective (or possibly an adverb) until I started hanging out with the Aunties at beer o'clock. (I'll hasten to add their language is an exemplar of professionalism during office hours!)

I loved the insertion of traditional words in this novel, how could I not - my people have a long tradition of appropriating colourful cultural artifacts and putting them in specimen bottles - tell me your stories, name your constellations, what's the aboriginal word for kangaroo...

**As long as you keep that language firmly caged between quotation marks.**

What threw me, what makes this a challenging, difficult, political and risky book is that the language creeps into the narrative voice. From page one, I was screaming, for god's sake just narrate this in the first person, or have some tribal elder tell Jo's story round the camp fire. The porosity of voice was infuriating. Third person narratives are supposed to be objective, written in formal grammatical non colloquial ENGLISH (and without swearing) right?

And of course here's the rub- the language in "Mullumbimby" is giving me a taste of my own medicine. Why Should Lucashenko be forced to jump through the literary hoops of (my) colonial conventions? Who am I to assume my sort of third person narratives are actually **objective**. They are merely privileged. Bleeding Jo's subjective voice into the narrative subverts the process and this has a number of profound effects on how one experiences it.

First up, as a white person I am instantly an outsider. There is not a paragraph in this book where I am not told I am not welcome, I don't belong. Suck it up boy, you want to know what it feels like to be unwelcome in your own country? I may have found this exclusion harder going than most as in my everyday life I am mostly included in Indigenous circles. On reflection I manage this through body language, tone of voice, and knowing what *\*not\** to talk about. Look for the common ground. It doesn't always work- a couple of weeks ago an Elder friend introduced me to another Aunty, who promptly turned on me snarling "Who the fuck are you cunt and why's you talk like fucking that!! Have you paid your rent for my land dog cunt!!" Admittedly she was somewhat "charged up" but being exposed to that level of resentment is always uncomfortable. Being trapped in Jo's seething resentful head-space for an entire book, and unable to use my reconciliation toolkit was that conversation on perpetual loop.

I did wonder what a "blackfella" reading this book might feel. I suspect they would find this an extremely empowering inclusive experience. The subjective voice in this case becomes a political tool. Alas none of my Indigenous colleagues read books for entertainment - (probably a mark of the demographics of indigenous woman working in my sector). I certainly hope the readership is not confined to white liberal types. That would be a shame. I also wonder how included/excluded from this text readers outside Australia might feel.

Back to narrative voice - The **really** strange thing with this text was that once the veneer of objectivity was stripped from it, I no longer knew who to trust. Was I meant to identify with Jo? Was I meant to think Twoboy a good catch? Was I to take the spooky signs and wonders at face value? Can you have an unreliable third person narrative voice? Absorbed in the moment I found myself recoiling from the

protagonist, queezilly unsure if the writer expected me to have sympathy for her character. I physically started pulling away from the book at the dead horse passage. Jo's emotions were over the top and her grieving went on way longer than I was comfortable with. Thankfully a hint came a few pages later, Jo says white men (like me) can't cope with women showing strong emotion. I start to see I am being played - the author's voice is playing an even deeper game. The confirmation slowly comes together over subsequent chapters. Jo is utterly dysfunctional and she slowly comes to recognize it.

A similar game is played out with the "romance". From the start and from the dialogue - I couldn't see anything in the guy. Another weed smoking uni dropout, lashing out at everyone around him, using up Jo's hot water and hogging the laptop. And a blackfella (mis)quoting Dr Goebbels! Creepy! Was I really meant to think he was god's gift to women and good in bed as the text kept insisting? Maybe I just don't get Chic Lit ...and the sex scenes *were* pretty corny. Alas all too true to life. I don't think I know an Aunty who hasn't had man trouble and most don't have all their own teeth. And once again the story slowly turns and I see that my first impressions were basically correct.

Lucashenko is making her reader **feel** what it is to be cut off from cultural (and thereby moral) certainties. These are characters with Post Traumatic Shock Disorder. Their emotions are ampted up, hair triggered and they make really bad decisions. Jo neurotically worries about remembering the correct words from the old languages, and all the things she wasn't able to learn in time from her Aunty Beth. This culture has been cut off from it's traditions and is desperately trying to re-invent itself without any guarantee of legitimacy. This is a world without certainty. Is there magic in the hills, Lyre birds, or just a chainsaw.

That this novel ends on a hopeful note, is almost brave, considering the odds these people have against them. I didn't enjoy reading this, but I certainly deserved it.

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## David says

First, an admission: I think this is the first book I've read by an author of indigenous Australian heritage, so that, coupled with the fact that I am far away in the UK and am not familiar with all the issues it deals with, means I'm very wary of offering an opinion on it. However I do find these Goodreads reviews a useful aide-memoire.

I have read a couple of novels that touched upon the Native Title issue, but this is the first time I've read about it from an aboriginal perspective and that was certainly fascinating - indeed, in her intertwining of the personal and the political, Lucashenko's writing reminds me strongly of Barbara Kingsolver. 'Mullumbimby' is a very funny book (though it's a biting humour); it's also an angry book (quietly, justifiably angry), and those two traits really carried me through, as did the voice of her protagonist, Jo. There is some lovely writing here too - the landscape is vividly realised, and a tragic scene with Jo's beloved horse is heart-rending. Lucashenko writes powerfully about country and belonging and employs some beautiful, memorable images.

However, the novel for me wasn't without fault. 'Mullumbimby' has an important story to tell, but I felt that Lucashenko's writing wasn't always up to the task she had set herself. The romance between Jo and Twoboy never convinced me because Twoboy himself, like all her male characters, wasn't well-realised enough to convince me; and her large cast of (strong, opinionated) female characters all sound pretty much identical. And the last ten pages or so, which tie up every thread with a neat bow in revelation piled upon revelation, are straight out of Agatha Christie.

So, overall a frustrating book, because it could so easily have been superb.

### **D.M. Cameron says**

Such a wonderful funny, tough Australian voice in this novel. Great humour and terrific insight. Thoroughly enjoyed it.

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### **Ariella says**

The voice in this novel is amazing: an powerful blend of slang, indigenous language, literary references and familiar phrases (I acknowledge my whiteness in saying this). The tragedy in the first third of the book (I won't spoil it--I highly recommend it to others) hits you in the gut. From this point, we, like the narrator, see the constricting nature of fences and boundaries, an image which is so neatly transformed in the image of the barbed wife bird's nest, which appears, not coincidentally I suspect, at the Buddhist retreat. Although thematically nuanced, I really didn't believe the love story between the narrator and Twoboy. I think both characters were working too hard to show represent something for their relationship to really work--for Jo, the damage to the self-worth and belief in true connection wrought by isolation, disconnection from culture and racism; for Twoboy, the masculine anger and desperation to prove self through the claiming of the native title. I thought Ellen's characterisation at the end was a little contradictory (again, I don't want to spoil the ending). Still, powerful stuff.

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### **Liz says**

This took a while to get started but once it did I blazed through it. It was really good to read a story about Indigenous relationship to country that's about intra-community dynamics, not black/white relations. I loved the optimism running through this book and I wanted Jo to have a happy ending, but I was just never that sold on her love interest -- he always came off as a bit of a dickhead. The ending was a bit rushed, too, a bit too neat. But overall I loved it.

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### **Anita says**

Should be on the Australian curriculum!

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### **jeniwren says**

This is my first reading experience of this author and following on from this I have just read Taboo by Kim Scott. Both explore indigenous life in a contemporary context and also that of land rites. Jo in Mullumbimby buys a property on her ancestors land and strives to return it to health. In Taboo a group of troubled aboriginals revisit land that witnessed a long ago massacre. A lot of food for thought in both novels. I enjoyed Mullumbimby very much and the authors acute use of language interspersed with native words was interesting and the glossary at the back a bonus.

## Cheyenne Blue says

I bought this book after hearing Melissa Lucashenko interviewed on the ABC. She made an impact with her obvious intelligence, thoughtfulness, and observations on race, identity, and growing up Russian/Irish/Goorie.

Mullumbimby is a stunning novel. Set in the northern NSW town of the same name, it follows the story of Jo, her daughter, Ellen, Jo's lover, Twoboy, and her various friends and other characters that populate the rural region. Jo buys a small farm with her divorce money, and thus realizes a long-held dream of holding land and keeping horses.

Set against Jo's story is Twoboy's, who is struggling to establish his Bundjalung identity and get his land rights claim accepted in the courts. Each of these characters have their own lives and agendas, but somehow they form a relationship.

There are several things I love about Mullumbimby:

I love the sense of place, the landscape, the descriptions and love and immersion the characters—all of them—have with the land where they live. This is particularly important to me, as it's something I share, and something I always try to incorporate in my own writing. Lucashenko is lyrical in her love for the bush and the birds and animals, whether she's talking about king parrots wheeling over the forest, an approaching storm, or talking to the blue heron that appears to block her path. Birds play an enormous part in this story: fairy wrens, lyrebirds, magpies, and of course the parrot in the pet shop in town that Twoboy teaches to say "Let me outta here you cunts".

I loved the dialog. Her characters speak with a naturalness and a realness that brings them to life. There's no stilted dialog in this book. I loved the many aboriginal words used throughout, in conversation and thought, and I am appreciative that they're not italicized as a foreign language. There's humor too, a natural playfulness in the words, short sharp sentences, little explosions of thought and words.

This is a quietly, deeply humorous book too. Not laugh-out-loud funny, but the inner chuckle sort, at the expressions, the irony of speech, the laconic nature of people. It's uplifting, and warm, even as it's gritty and somewhat desperate.

I loved the complexity of relationships. Jo and Ellen, Jo and her friend, Therese, Twoboy and the Bullockheads, Uncle Humbug and his totemic meat, Slim the Python. I didn't wholeheartedly embrace the relationship between Jo and Twoboy – but then I'm not sure that I was supposed to. Two fractious people set on their own course. That there was lust and a sort of love, yes, but not necessarily the lasting sort.

There were a few things that I didn't whole-heartedly love in the writing. At the start, it seemed as if the author was trying to shovel every tiny memory fragment of her time in the region into the book, so that she could remember it (Lucashenko said in the interview with the ABC that when she could no longer afford to live in the now trendy and expensive Mullumbimby area and had to move to Brisbane, she poured her loss into her book). At the start, this was too much, but once Lucashenko settled into her story, the memory fragments (if that's what they were) flowed more naturally with the story.

There were a few jarring POV switches, where we were handed a sentence or two of another character's thoughts or motivations amid the solid POV of Jo Breen, but this I could overlook. These tiny gripes—as that's what they are—are not enough to drag me out of the story.

One thing this book brought home to me, particularly in the current culture of multiracial harmony that Australia is striving for, is that the racial divide is still there. Not only the racial divide between aboriginal and white (in this book, often reinforced by the Bundjalung people) but also between the different groups of aboriginal people. It brought home to me that, as a white Australian, my roots aren't here and belonging is an accident of birth as much as anything. That sits uneasily with my own hopes and thoughts, and I don't like it. Maybe I took it too personally—but ties to land aren't necessarily tied to birth and shouldn't be negated for that reason.

But at the end of the day, at the end of the book, this is a story that will resonate with me for a long time. One of the best books I've read this year.

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## **Dillwynia Peter says**

When Australians think of Native Title claims, I'm sure they think that all is harmonious in the indigenous community and the title claim is from the correct people. In fact, it often involves warring families that believe they have equal rights to full ownership. One of the important themes in this novel is Native Title and the process involved to have a claim accepted. For me, this is what made the novel special, as it isn't a topic well covered in our literature, and yet it has had a profound impact on tropical and arid Australia. For instance, the Northern Territory is now 2/3rds under indigenous ownership - that's a lot of land; more than the whole state of Victoria, and easy half the size of New South Wales.

The novel starts in quite a banal fashion and I almost gave up on it – it was only that it is a book club entry that I persevered. I was rewarded, so get past the boring “poor bugger me” aspect of the single indigenous mother dealing with an angst teen daughter, who is hankering for love.

The meaty, worthy part of this novel is the Native Title claim. Two families claim full rights, and the vindictive methods (legal and personal) to outdo the other family, highlights how destructive these can become. And it doesn't end here; in my local town one person always claims they haven't been consulted on cultural heritage, whereas in fact it is a ploy to cover that they don't agree with the consensus as their viewpoint is extremely conservative. I kept on thinking how the valley would change once the title was victorious. I was also made aware of how rigorous, and at times, unrealistic the court is regarding its request for hard evidence - papers etc - when we are dealing with cultures that were exclusively oral.

I never could work out why Jo wasn't able to be part of the claim from either faction, considering she had an Auntie that seems to have been very in tune with the local Bundjalung customs and language. Later, her intuition with the land made me feel she had an even stronger claim than her lover Twoboy.

The concepts of connection with country are very strong themes throughout the novel, and are treated in such a way that it is educational to anyone not familiar with the indigenous peoples and the land. The interspersing of language is wonderful and true. I hear language in my town and I could relate to the realistic aspect of the novel. There has always been a form of mystic realism in the culture of all indigenous peoples of Australia – again hardly surprising in cultures that are tied strongly to landforms, places and nature, through story telling and songlines. This becomes very important in this novel, and I won't say more to allow others to enjoy the 2nd half of the book when this becomes an important element.

Perceptions are also important. Uncle Humbug and Granny Nurrung are juxtaposition opposites and they surprise us in the last 50 pages; so too is the white neighbour landholder Robb Starr. It is good to not take everything at face value. In fact, I am a little confused about the hinted pedophilic scenes in the book: it is so

very easy to have a prejudice that confuses one and makes one make conclusions made on circumstantial evidence. Those scenes made me uncomfortable because the author used language to direct us towards something I wasn't convinced based on what Jo was seeing was actually happening. It is time we called out on targeting single males as pedophiles when in the company of youngsters. I won't deny this doesn't happen, but the current society has a shrill mantra that is destructive in allowing older males to mentor younger ones to become good fathers and adults. It reminded me of these vigilantes that jump to very erroneous conclusions that have far reaching consequences.

Some parts of this novel really annoyed me - they were the "perfect" incidents. Twoboy was just too good looking & nice (thank goodness, he shows some fault, because I had become bored with him as a 2-dimensional cut out by then); Ellen blitzing the art show; and the pedigree of the Gift horse. There were also times when the style and language became really lazy and was filled with current colloquialisms. I felt these would date the book quickly, and limit the audience to Australians, and it needs to be more widely read out of our shores. I'm also pleased someone convinced the author to remove 17,000 words. Anymore and this book would have drifted.

Stories regarding Native Title, and their effects on all people, both indigenous and white, need to be told; they are really relevant to contemporary Australian culture so I am pleased Lucashenko has done such a thing. I hope it doesn't get lost with the passage of time, as this would be an ideal set piece for middle high school.

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## **Tamene says**

I made it over halfway but I think I'm done.

I'm done with tawdry, hackneyed and corny descriptions of lovemaking under rain on a tin roof. I'm done with platitudinous descriptions of northern NSW settings which are made more underwhelming due to the tediously drawn out dialogue (admittedly, very realistic dialogue). I'm done with vapid characters that are half drawn and whose relationships don't feel real. I'm done with a turgid narrative. I'm done with an annoying female narrator: physically and intellectually strong yet so emotionally vulnerable just waiting for a black hero to sweep her off her feet.

Done.

The themes and setting should have worked. I wanted this novel to work but it just didn't for me.

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## **it's me says**

This is one of those books that I devoured, and now I'm lying in bed at two AM, content and comfortable in this orb of joy that Lucashenko has given me in Mullumbimby.

Holy SHIT that was a good book. It was funny, dark, goosebumpy, lovey, strong, rightly angry, passionate, honest, educational... This book made my heart sing.

Read it ASAP. Do it. I don't care what else you're reading. Read this. Now.

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## **Maree Kimberley says**

I really enjoyed this book. A few reviews I've read have noted the language and use of swearing. I didn't notice the swearing at all - maybe that says something about me! - but the language and dialogue was one of the great things about Mullumbimby. I did baulk a bit at a couple of the love scenes, though. They were a little on the awkward side but luckily were not a big feature of the book.

Lucashenko has a great storytelling style, which is deceptively simple but draws you in to complex issues almost without you realising it. I loved the descriptions of the bush and her farm, and the all too realistic depictions of rain (and the mould that always follows it). The characters were all well-drawn, and I adored Jo, the main fabulous character, in all her flawed glory.

The third person point of view jumped around a little but still worked well and I never felt lost within the narrative. The author has a deft and confident touch that lets you know that, as a reader, you're in safe hands. The pace of the story moves well, and there are quite a few edge of your seat moments.

A highly original and enjoyable story with a great heroine at its core and some great humour (I had a few laugh out loud moments). Highly recommended.

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## **Lisa Walker says**

Mullumbimby is Melissa Lucashenko's fifth novel and is, as the name suggests, set in northern New South Wales. The protagonist, Jo Breen, is an Aboriginal woman who uses her divorce settlement and the money she earns mowing grass at the Mullumbimby cemetery to buy a block of farmland. She sees this as her own way of reclaiming Bundjalung country and the process of returning her land to health is deeply satisfying.

Jo's life is already complicated by her artistic and moody teenage daughter and becomes more so with the arrival in town of an outsider, Twoboy. Twoboy and his brother are down from Brisbane to initiate a land claim which stirs up a hornet's nest of conflicting interests in the area. Jo is reluctant to get embroiled in what promises to be a messy fight. Twoboy, however, is dreadlocked, devastatingly handsome, heterosexual and apparently single. This is practically a miracle as far as Jo is concerned.

Jo also has to come to terms with her new neighbours, including the farmer Rob Starr, who wears expensive boots and erects fences where none seem needed and Granny Narrung, an Aboriginal Elder who Jo initially dismisses for her old-fashioned and uptight Christian ways.

The book is full of cheeky humour and witticisms, such as when Jo first sights Twoboy coming out of a bookshop and immediately wants to rush in and find out what he bought, '... hoping – please, oh please – that it wasn't Armistead Maupin.'

I enjoyed the way Lucashenko used Bundjalung words throughout the novel. This added richness to the story and a glossary at the back provides a handy reference. Jo is troubled by how little she knows about the spirituality of Bundjalung culture and is wary of the looming peak of Wollumbin. 'She knew Wollumbin was strong men's business, and to be avoided at all costs.' The difficulty of maintaining Bundjalung culture and links to land is an ongoing theme throughout the book. The fraught issue of native title is also handled with honesty and insight.

This book can be enjoyed simply as a well-told yarn, but particularly for those of us who live in this area, it

is so much more. Mullumbimby offers a window into the living Bundjalung culture and the meaning of the Country which I found both moving and enlightening. It is also a page turner – highly recommended.

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