



Just the place for poetic prose

The Blue Mountains have inspired a work that puts Australian nature writing on the right track.

MEMOIR

The Blue Plateau: A Landscape Memoir

By Mark Tredinnick
 UQP, 276pp, \$26.95

Reviewed by Claire Scobie

AS A young boy, when Mark Tredinnick read Tolkien's *The Lord Of The Rings* it "opened the door to the wild", he says. In particular, the "ents" – the living trees that walk, fight and grieve – stood out as a powerful motif "of the land's consciousness".

The tree has further symbolism for Tredinnick, an Australian poet and essayist: it is "the prefix" to his surname and "Tre" means "place" in Cornish. So he says, "I speak the word place, with all its mystery, longing and possibility, whenever I speak my name."

It is apt, then, that when Tredinnick moves to the Blue Mountains in 1998 for a "tree change" he reads Tolkien to his nine-year-old son. As he does, he reflects that "people grow from places: places make them". This notion is the driving force in *The Blue Plateau*, where the central character is the plateau itself.

For seven years Tredinnick lived with his young family near Katoomba, known by the Gundungurra tribe as "the place of falling water". Except that these were years of drought and while the book is about the relationship between the plateau, the river and the people who live there, "the water itself fell less and less often".

In writing about place, Tredinnick draws on the tradition of "nature writing" that in the US,

and to a lesser extent Britain, is an established nonfiction genre that began with the work of Henry David Thoreau. As editor of *A Place On Earth: An Anthology Of Nature Writing From Australia And North America*, and now with his latest work, Tredinnick is establishing himself at the vanguard of Australian nature writing, still relatively unknown here.

Impersonal and personal, scientific and philosophical, it is also, in Tredinnick's case, lyrical and somewhat whimsical. His river, the Kedumba, is "a fallen woman" who "cuts down into tough old Devonian stone" through valleys like breasts. His nights are spent living "where you could lie down with the moon". His days are flooded "with bronze light, the shadows sharp on the ground".

While Tredinnick obliquely refers to the original inhabitants, his focus is the "settler culture". He befriends Jim, a veteran horse rider with a thick, rusty accent who takes him into off-limits areas of wilderness. He learns the history of three generations of Maxwells, who first arrived in 1832 "to pioneer the land". From the 1960s, Les Maxwell and his wife, May, lived in "a weather-board demountable" in Kedumba Valley. Drawing on their box of diaries and photos, Tredinnick sensitively evokes the couple's hardy lives. May's terse diary

entries are a journal of exile; Les's legendary road building a tale of sherry-fuelled survival.

Tredinnick slips in and out as the narrative jumps backwards and forwards through time. If occasionally confusing, this serpentine plot evokes the cyclical and holistic qualities of the land and the river. There are some beautiful set pieces on the meaning of home and belonging, as explored through one of Tredinnick's great friends and neighbours, Henryk, a Polish immigrant fleeing a tragic past.

Tredinnick longs to belong, too, but, he says, the valleys "never did take me in . . . My belonging in the plateau . . . was a project, not an inheritance." After seven years there, he had "come to love her less". It wasn't the landscape that lost its allure but the towns. Katoomba, he writes, is "a tawdry theme park, perched in an astonishing terrain". Only at the end, as he's packing to leave, does the author admit to spending "too little time on the plateau in the company of the first people" and their presence is conspicuously absent in the book.

Despite this, *The Blue Plateau* sets a new benchmark for nature writing in Australia as it re-clothes a familiar landscape in striking, unfamiliar poetic prose.



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Location with character ... "people grow from places: places make them".

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