

# The Canberra Times

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## **NB. Wongar: a white speaking for blacks**

*Hamilton Smith talks to a writer with deep Aboriginal empathies.*

9th may 1992

THERE has been considerable controversy surrounding the writings of the Australian author B. Wongar. His more outspoken critics have accused him of fabricating — under the guise of an Aboriginal writer — an elaborate literary hoax. The Times Literary Supplement surmised in the late 1970s that he was an American, most likely a black deserter from the US forces in Vietnam. After lengthy investigation, The Bulletin ran an article on him in 1982 identifying him as a Yugoslavian anthropologist.

Wongar is in fact a pseudonym for Streten Bozic, who arrived in Australia in the late 1950s. A political exile, he could not speak a word of English and had to begin the difficult task of learning the language. While traveling through the Northern Territory in 1968, his car ran out of petrol. He wandered around for seven days before he was found by an Aboriginal tribe. Later he married into the tribe and lived in Arnhem Land for more than 10 years.

Several years ago his tribal wife Djum'ala died, and he now resides in Victoria, his companions a pack of dingoes.

Wongar's first foray into writing was through collaboration with Alan Marshall on •an edition of Aboriginal myths published in 1972. Since then he has produced 13 books focusing on Aboriginal culture and the tragic consequences of the introduction of the white man to the country.

Wongar's latest novel, *Marngit* (Collins/Angus & Robertson, 138pp, \$12.95), is his first book-length work that has been published first in Australia, although several of his books have been published here after their overseas publication. Collins/A & R have also reissued an impressive earlier collection of short stories, *The Track to Braglu* (120pp, \$12.95), which was originally published in *Les Temps Modernes* in 1978. To date, his books have been translated into 13 languages, and have sold more than 250,000 copies. In many countries Wongar is recognised as a leading Australian writer. I asked him why he has been largely ignored by local publishers until now.

"I suppose some people have felt uncomfortable about my works because I write about many of the painful things the white man brought to the Aborigines," he said. "If instead I tried to write about positive things it might be different, but I can't even if I wanted to — my name I write under was given to me. I have a strong emotional attachment to it. I use it for my works because ' they are all about Aboriginal people and their circumstances."

During our conversation, there was little trace of anger or resentment, questions were generally replied to directly, without hesitation. While Wongar did not stress the point, his critics have tended to be white Australians. The Aboriginal community seems to be quite comfortable with his writings.

Wongar's books have received accolades from such diverse writers as Alan Paton, who wrote a commendatory preface to *The Track to Braglu*, Thomas Keneally and Simone de Beauvoir. The latter, shortly before she died, expressed a strong interest in travelling to Australia to see the desert landscapes and Aboriginal culture that Wongar writes about in his stories. "I was very flattered but I didn't have the resources to help organise such a trip," he said. "The climate and harshness of the desert terrain would have been very hard for her."

Wongar grew up in Europe during World War II. "Life was very hard, a struggle for survival," he recalled. "My education was not typical. As a child a great deal was passed on through storytelling, oral history. In this way I have always felt a great affinity with Aboriginal culture."

Wongar goes to some length to point out that he writes fiction, not history. He considers himself an artist, albeit one who does not take himself too seriously. "I look for inspiration, I shape my imagination to fit a character. Often a story will take weeks, even months to grow, before it is completed. I am not a philosopher, just a simple writer. I could not write in an academic, sophisticated manner. For me even a short story is difficult, to struggle to find a particular word to express how I feel."

An overwhelming sense of loss, even bereavement, is found throughout Wongar's novels and short stories. The vanishing culture of the Aborigines is something for which he feels a deep compassion. To him they represent one of the greatest of all cultures.

"Aboriginal culture survived in Australia for 40,000 years," he reflected. "It was far more realistic, more in tune with the country than the Europeans. To Aborigines, the soil, the land, the trees, they are something that is very precious to them. They are very sensitive about these things. The spirits of ancient ancestors wander over the land, other ancestors have been transformed into trees, animals, birds. It is all part of a whole, of a continuity.."

In the 1970s Wongar, was actively involved in land rights. While now more philosophical, his views are little altered. "Mining companies have been very persistent, very focused on their self interests," he said. "In a small local community, the influx of a large number of whites completely alters the character, the balance of a community. The locals suddenly become the minorities. For mining companies throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the Aborigines were little more than a nuisance. For some they didn't exist at all."

The central focus of Wongar's latest work is *marngit*, the Aboriginal word for tribal healer or magic man. Each story is accompanied by an original sketch by the Aboriginal painter Yumayna Burarwana. The *marngit* has a particular significance. "For so long he was the centre of the whole universe, for all occasions, the custodian of the culture," Wongar said.

"In many ways, Aborigines have had to witness the painful disintegration of their universe, of the ways of the people. Everything has disappeared. "Politicians are talking now about some compensation or change in values between whites and Aborigines. There has been talk like this around for quite a while. Last century politicians talked in Parliament about how it would be humanitarian to exterminate all the Aborigines to relieve them from their suffering."

It is ironic that Wongar has attracted his greatest recognition outside Australia. Apart from the political and social overtones implicit in his works, he is foremost a gifted writer. A writer who happens to possess a special understanding of the circumstances of black Australians. At a time when Aborigines are still dying in jails across the country, politicians would do well to reflect the empathy that Wongar demonstrates in one of his short stories, "Buwad, The Fly", written almost two decades ago: "The darkness is thick here, and wherever I turn I'm face to face with a concrete wall. It was very bad in the beginning, when I screamed and cursed the whites for building a box not big enough for an animal."