



## *TOO MUCH LIP*

by Melissa Lucashenko

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### THE STORY

In 1943, fourteen-year-old Owen Addison knew boxing was the only means of protection available for himself and his Aboriginal family in the era of forced assimilation. What happened to him next determined the course of not only his life but also that of his descendants.

Decades later, Owen's granddaughter Kerry Salter is angry with the world. Her girlfriend Allie – who's been nabbed for an ill-conceived armed robbery – has recently broken up with her; Pop Owen is dying so she has to head home to small-town Durrongo to say her goodbyes; and her mother, Pretty Mary, has been mourning the disappearance of Kerry's sister, Donna, for almost twenty years. Pretty Mary lives with her freeloading eldest son, Ken, and troubled nephew Donny. Kerry's brother Black Superman has developed a successful government career in Sydney, and, with his partner Josh, has taken in two at-risk children of relatives. Deceased elders Granny Ruth and her mother Granny Ava (wife to Grandad Chinky Joe) are revered, and Uncle Richard is now the wise elder of the family. Aunts and neighbours also play their parts in this fast-moving drama.

Not long after Kerry's return, a backpack containing the spoils from Allie's last job is stolen by shady local mayor, Jim Buckley. She feels trapped by the weight of her family's expectations, especially her mother's, and is extremely wary of Ken's short fuse. Meanwhile, ambitious southern realtor Martina Rossi has been asked to manage Buckley's real estate agency at Patterson, the nearest town to Durrongo, for two months, in exchange for a shot at her own agency in Sydney. Her task is to help Buckley shift some properties, making way for a prison development on the riverbank of the Salter family's traditional lands, threatening Granny Ava's Island. Kerry overhears the mayor's plans and the Salters begin a protest while Kerry seeks other, less conventional, ways to take her revenge.

Scarred by a lifetime of racism, Kerry has contempt for most dugais or 'whitenormalsavages' and has never contemplated dating one until she meets the handsome gym owner Steve Abarco. Steve might just give Kerry a reason to stay in town after a particularly bad falling out with Pretty Mary and Ken. But when Kerry accidentally discovers that Martina is her long-lost sister Donna, she isn't sure how to break the news to the family. Pretty Mary's birthday is upon them, but will this news ruin yet another birthday for her? And will the Salters be able to stop the sale of their precious homeland?

University of Queensland Press – Book Club Notes

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### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Melissa Lucashenko is a Goorie author of Bundjalung and European heritage. She has been publishing books with the University of Queensland Press since 1997, with her first novel, *Steam Pigs*, winning the Dobbie Literary Award and being shortlisted for the NSW Premier's Literary Awards and regional Commonwealth Writers' Prize. *Hard Yards* (UQP, 1999) was shortlisted for the Courier-Mail Book of the Year and the NSW Premier's Literary Awards, and *Mullumbimby* (UQP, 2013) won the Queensland Literary Award, was longlisted for the Stella Prize and the Miles Franklin Literary Award for Fiction, and shortlisted for the Kibble Literary Award. She has also written two novels for teenagers: *Killing Darcy* (UQP, 1998) and *Too Flash* (IAD Press, 2002). In 2013 Melissa won the inaugural long-form Walkley Award for her Griffith REVIEW essay 'Sinking below sight: Down and out in Brisbane and Logan'.

Her semi-autobiographical novel, *Too Much Lip*, is partly inspired by Ned Kelly and The Beverly Hillbillies, the one TV show that addressed class and made sense to her as a child.

Visit her website for further information: [www.melissa-lucashenko.com](http://www.melissa-lucashenko.com)

### **DISCUSSION NOTES**

1. Why is Kerry so angry with the world, and why do her family give her such a hard time? See: 'To Pretty Mary she was and always would be the Great Abandoner. Shame enough to turn out a dyke, but her far greater sin was the empty hole she'd left behind her in the family. Even in the terrible dark shadow cast by Donna's disappearance, Kerry had still up and left to live among whitefellas and city people. Sharper than a serpent's tooth, blah blah de-fucken-blah.' (p. 43)
2. How is humour used in this novel to convey messages? For example: 'You don't see old mate Freddy McCubbin painting that, do ya? Talk about down on his fucking luck.' (pp. 7–8); 'Turned out hell hath no fury like a Kiwi chick with a missing incisor and no Medicare.' (p. 52); 'I'm just about ready to harvest Donny for his organs if the useless prick don't move his arse soon. Talk about Limpet Dreaming.' (p. 20)
3. Kenny is always after 'the main chance'. Kerry observes wryly of him at one point: 'Action was his new catchcry; Ken's self-image had shifted from Retired-Footy-Hero-cum-Sex-God to Activist and Culture Man. So far his activism had consisted of vague threats of revolution down the pub, and of dragging an ancient land rights shirt from the bottom of the hall cupboard.' (p. 98) Does he have any redeeming features? In the context of Durrongo, what does Kenny's presence offer the family home?
4. Donny's situation is critical; young people often retreat from society when they have been threatened or damaged by it. What/who is responsible for rescuing Donny from this twilight world?
5. The novel deals with both environmental despoilment through development and the destruction of Aboriginal sacred places. Mayor Jim Buckley plans to sell the land around Ava's Island so a prison can be built on it. Is his corrupt behaviour atypical, or is this part of a larger problem? See quote: 'Jim Buckley didn't just

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own the mayoralty and the only real estate office in Patterson. He owned the cops and the local magistrates. He owned the town of Patterson, or he thought he did, and when an old dugai in moleskins and a blue shirt whose great-great-grandfather had been the second white man to ford the Caledonian River in 1859 thought he owned something, then by and large that old white man generally did.’ (p. 40)

6. What do you think of Martina’s approach to her profession as a real estate agent? Read, for example: ‘A smart realtor could flog off a property at both ends of a marriage and still come out friendly with both husband and wife.’ (p. 56) Are Martina (Donna) and Black Superman likely to act in a more ethical way in their own business?
7. What is the author saying about the state of Aboriginal poverty in Australia in this quote: ‘It was a shamejob to go explaining how blackfellas lived. Even if dugais believed you, they were full of useless fucking genius suggestions on how to climb out of poverty. Like it was simple. Like it didn’t suit the powers that be to keep poor people scrabbling in the shit, keep their attention off the rich world’s sparkling goodies in case they got any bright ideas about grabbing some for themselves.’ (p. 119)
8. Why is the role of female elders such as Pretty Mary, Granny Ruth and Granny Ava so important in Kerry’s family?
9. Kerry reflects on how Aboriginal kids like Brandon are treated by the law: ‘But that was dugai logic for ya. Steal a million acres and you’re a pioneer hero with a brass statue in the council chambers, but pinch a car or a mobile phone and you’re some kind of fucking monster.’ (p. 173) Do you agree with her assertion?
10. Having discovered how badly Pop suffered as a youth, is it possible to have empathy towards him? Can intergenerational violence and abuse ever be excused?
11. Why did Donna stay away for so long, what did it cost her to do so, and what did she gain from being estranged from her family?
12. What does it mean for Donna, Kerry and the family now that Donna has returned and Kerry has also decided to remain in Durrongo?

**FURTHER READING**

Lucashenko, Melissa ‘If I live to be a 100, I’ll never forget the first day I visited my daughter on that ward’ *The Guardian* 23 September 2014 <<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2014/sep/23/melissa-lucashenko-if-i-live-to-be-100-ill-never-forget-the-first-day-i-visited-my-daughter-on-that-ward>>

Lucashenko, Melissa ‘Sinking below sight: Down and out in Brisbane and Logan’. Griffith Review 41 Now We Are Ten’ July 2013 <<https://griffithreview.com/articles/sinking-below-sight/>>

‘Melissa Lucashenko’ Wikipedia <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Melissa\\_Lucashenko](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Melissa_Lucashenko)>

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Murrumbidgee Aboriginal Language and Culture Cooperative <<http://murrumbidgee.org.au/languages/bundjalung/>>

Watts, Madeline 'Interview with Melissa Lucashenko' Griffith Review Issue 41, <<https://griffithreview.com/articles/interview-with-melissa-lucashenko-author-of-sinking-below-sight/>>

Yugambeh Museum, Language and Heritage Research Centre <<https://www.yugambeh.com/>>