Wild Cat Falling: Indigenous classic still relevant as class and race loom large

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Colleen Keane

Australia's first novel by an Aboriginal writer remains topical today with a spotlight on indigenous disadvantage and alienation.

Then and now: Wild Cat Falling explores the alienation and dispossession among indigenous communities.

Identity and belonging – and their opposites: namelessness and isolation – are bold, stark themes in *Wild Cat Falling*. The first novel by an Aboriginal writer (then Colin Johnson), it is now 50 years old, published in 1965 as a literary perspective on disadvantage and the curse of petty crime and imprisonment in aboriginal lives. It is also an existential novel and immediate, first-person account of youth restlessness and alienation.

All things are alien from me. I am rejected and I stand utterly alone. Nothing is mine or belongs to me and I belong nowhere in this world or the next…I believe in nothing and nobody. There is no refuge or comfort anywhere for me (92)

It didn't make much difference where I was – one place much like another – all dreary and a drag. Prison a refuge of a sort where I was nearer belonging than anywhere. (118)

We first meet the protagonist on his second departure ('Release') from Fremantle prison at age 19, and his story interweaves present and past. Despite his bleak experience and stance against hope, a taste for romance infuses this nameless anti-hero's internal dialogue, flagged by his reading and philosophical musings. He is one of the hip 60s generation, inspired by the Beats and French intellectuals, by Beckett's intriguing play *Waiting for Godot*, and by music, especially negro jazz. But the forms of identification he tries on are Bodgies, cool cats and Bohemians. Yet he doesn't really belong with any of them and is highly attuned to the "phoney".

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By race and class he is an outcast, and also casts himself as a cool outsider, often sneering and superior in his confused being, anticipating rejection and getting in first by fleeing. His light-skinned appearance creates ambivalence, for others and himself.
His troubled internal state emerges in his fear-filled childhood dream of the "wild cat falling" (with both wings and claws) and cat references traverse the narrative, as it moves backwards and forwards across the present and his early years. He is a divided figure, influenced by his love for his widowed mother but critical of her craving for safe conformity, white recognition and rejection of her black family background and Noongar mob. Connection with the local black kids is forbidden, but poverty is inescapable and the fall begins when he steals to help his mother have nice things that are unattainable for her.

At nine years old he is "taken away", just as she feared. From then the pattern of falling is consistent and restlessness endemic, driven by background, circumstances and individual psychology. His high capacities are mixed with low expectations: Nothing ever up to them. Only up to us, the outcast relics in the outskirt camps. The lazy ungrateful rubbish people, who refuse to co-operate or integrate or even play it up for the tourist trade. Fly-blown descendants of the dispossessed erupting their hopelessness in petty crime. (44)

In "Freedom" he acts out possible roles and identities, wandering round at a loose end, from the beach to the milk-bar, reminiscing and hooking up with Denise and his old gang but also attracted to a new girl, June, outside his league. A university student, she draws him into her circle for a short time while he entertains them with his novelty, until he faces the inevitable class and race differences and decides they are pretentious and patronising.

It is resentment, anger and hopelessness that compel him to steal again, having few alternatives, no other clear way to survive, fit in or break the cycle. Real crazy-mad night for a night cat, too numb to feel the cold. He feels belonging in this dark, not like in the day, outcast and naked. Nigger-nigger-go-away-day (82).

Themes of stasis and nothingness discovered in Beckett make sense, provide clues for his questions about meaning and action, how he got to where he is. He ponders quotes from the play: Simple question of will-power…/ Let's go / We can't / Why not? / We're waiting for Godot…And where were we yesterday evening according to you?/ How do I know? In another compartment. There's no lack of void (84/5). Should he bother attending the student loft party? He does but it backfires, as usual.

The final section – "Return" – raises new potential. After more petty crime will he merely return to prison? The narrative undercuts this simple pathway as he returns to his hometown with a former prison mate…to do a hit on a hardware store. But "return" – as with the "wild cat falling" – is also a metaphor. The job is botched, as his criminal skills are limited; that identity as yet unfixed.

On the run he encounters the old black rabbit hunter from his early memories, who knows his mother's family and tells him she has returned to the camp to die – The Noongar mob, shiftless and hopeless, but with a sort of strength, a blood call to their kind that she knew and feared (123). The rabbiter gives him refuge, embodying both kindness and indigenous knowledge of country, and revealing more about his dream and its connection to place…"That cat look sorry then. 'I got no wings'. Then the old crow laugh carr-carr. 'You don't need no wings. You can fly all right. You try now.' See?" (127) The nameless young man returns to country – beyond a simple return to his hometown – and even steals from the old black man, but is forgiven. And when he is apprehended he will inevitably return to prison for his crime of shooting a cop. But the cycle may be broken – his thinking has shifted, along with his sense of self. Luck is on his side and the policeman is not dead. Life may yet reassert itself in fresh and hopeful form.

Fifty years on, Aboriginal identity is differently regarded, but many struggles and issues of indigenous disadvantage and alienation from white society remain, despite changing government policies, interventions and reconciliation ideals. History – national, racial, personal – is impossible to erase, and needs to be faced and redressed consciously and consistently over time. Some questions have arisen round Mudrooroo's indigenous heritage and bona fides, but he has continued to publish prolifically since his striking debut in 1965, fiction and non-fiction, including Doin Wildcat (1988) and Wildcat Screaming (1992).

REFERENCES
