

# THE MONTHLY

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## ENCOUNTERS



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In February 1904, Stella Miles Franklin (then aged 24) received an admiring letter from a 60-year-old former bullock-driver named Joseph Furphy. He requested a photograph and proposed that they meet.

*My Brilliant Career*, Franklin's semi-autobiographical novel about a spirited teenager's rebellion against stultifying convention, had appeared three years earlier. It was the only Australian novel published in the year of Federation. Described with pride by Henry Lawson in the preface as 'just a little bush girl', Franklin was being hailed by the leading literary lights of the day as a significant voice in national letters.

Furphy, too, was an author. A kind-hearted, self-educated bush philosopher, he spent the previous 15 years working at his brother's foundry in Shepparton where he wrote at night in a corrugated-iron shed out the back. The result was a sprawling, discursive manuscript of 1200

handwritten pages, sent on spec to the editor of the *Bulletin* with the description 'temper, democratic; bias, offensively Australian'. Whittled to a digestible size, *Such Is Life* was published under the *nom de plume* Tom Collins.

The pair met at Easter, in the vestibule of the Melbourne GPO. From there, they drifted to the art gallery, trailed by female fans who'd gotten wind of Franklin's presence.

Seated in a small circle before Longstaff's *The Sirens*, they didn't have much chance for conversation, what with Franklin's merry laugh resounding through the gallery and the swarming attention of her admirers. The shy, courteous old bullocky later joked that he had feared arrest as the responsible male, the 'solitary he-feller of the synod'. After the gallery, he took Franklin to Cole's Book Arcade, where he gave her a 'certain publication' which modesty forbore him naming.

It was their sole meeting. Joseph Furphy went home to Shepparton and later moved to Perth to live with his sons. He died there in 1912.

Miles Franklin, daunted by the literary expectations laid upon her and the reaction of family members to their depiction in her novel, went to Chicago to work for a women's trade union organisation. She lived abroad until 1932.

In 1944, she wrote a biography of Furphy 'our bush Hamlet' in painful collaboration with Kate Baker, who was one of the posse that tailed her to the art gallery. 'Such Is Life', she wrote, 'is more than a novel – it is our *Don Quixote*, our *Moby Dick*'.

Her bequest, the eponymous literary prize, was first awarded to Patrick White. In 1995, the judges gave it to a Ukrainian-impersonating plagiarist. *Such is Life* remains a classic which nobody reads and even fewer comprehend.

## SHANE MALONEY AND CHRIS GROSZ

Shane Maloney is a writer and the author of the award-winning Murray Whelan series of crime novels. His 'Encounters', illustrated by Chris Grosz, have been published in a collection, *Australian Encounters*.

Chris Grosz is a book illustrator, painter and political cartoonist. He has illustrated newspapers and magazines such as the *Age*, the *Bulletin* and *Time*.