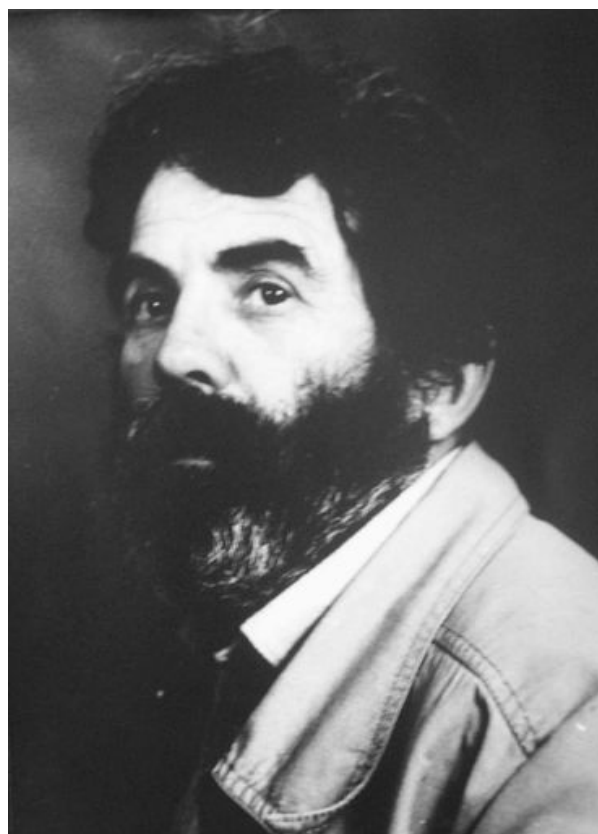


B. Wongar  
(Sreten Bozic)  
(1932 - )

David Matthews  
*University of Newcastle*

BOOKS: *Aboriginal Myths*, as Sreten Bozic, with Alan Marshall (Melbourne: Gold Star, 1972);  
*The Sinners: Stories of Vietnam*, foreword by Alan Marshall (Greensborough, Vic.: Greensborough, 1972);  
*Balang an Village* (Melbourne: Council of Adult Education, 1973);  
*A Stone in My Pocket*, as Bozic, with Marshall (Melbourne: Council of Adult Education, 1973);  
*The Trackers* (Collingwood, Vic.: Outback, 1975);  
*The Track to Bralgu* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1978; London: Cape, 1978; Pymble, N.S.W.: Angus & Robertson, 1992);  
*Babaru* (Urbana & London: University of Illinois Press, 1982; North Ryde, N.S.W.: Angus & Robertson, 1991);  
*Walg* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1983; London: Macmillan, 1986);  
*Bilma* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1984);  
*Karan* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1985; London: Macmillan, 1986);  
*Gabo Djara* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1987; London: Macmillan, 1988);  
*Marngit: A Novel* (North Ryde, N.S.W.: Angus & Robertson, 1992);  
*The Last Pack of Dingoes* (Pymble: Angus & Robertson / London: HarperCollins, 1993);  
*Raki: A Novel* (Pymble, N.S.W.: Angus & Robertson, 1994; London & New York: Boyars, 1997);  
*Dingoes Den* (Bondi Junction, N.S.W.: Imprint, 1999);  
*Totem and Ore* (Melbourne: Dingo, 2006).

B. Wongar is one of the most unusual of Australian writers. For more than thirty years the polemical concern of his writing has been, almost exclusively, the condition of Aborigines in Australia. However, he himself is not Aboriginal, but Serbian. He was born Sreten Bozic in 1932 in Tresneva in what was then Yugoslavia. The Aboriginal name under which most of his writ-



*B. Wongar, circa 1985 (courtesy of the author)*

ing has appeared and by which most people know him was adopted in the early 1970s.

What is known of Wongar's upbringing and early life is based chiefly on interviews he has given and on his memoir, *Dingoes Den* (1999). These sources are not entirely reliable, but apparently Wongar's father was a man named Stefan Bozic who fought in World War I in the Royal Serbian Army. He once visited Aus-

tralia as a prospector but returned to his native land to raise his family. In Wongar's childhood, this early link with Australia was strengthened by his interest in stories of Australian women—most notably writer Miles Franklin—who had served with the Scottish Women's Hospital in Serbia during the war.

Wongar's childhood was frequently traumatic. His father was often absent in the years of World War II, and on one occasion, when soldiers came looking for him, the young Wongar had a gun thrust in his mouth during an interrogation. He began attending a village school, but the teacher was killed by soldiers and never replaced. Then in the postwar years Wongar's father, outspoken against the regime of Josip Broz Tito, was often in jail.

By his own account, Wongar read no books until the age of eighteen because of his interrupted schooling. However, he became familiar with the strong tradition of Serbian oral poetry, which was later a crucial influence on his writing. He did his national service in the early 1950s, and only then did he begin reading. After national service, as he wrote in the foreword to the 1997 American edition of *Raki* (1994), "I headed for Belgrade eager to read books and write poetry. Much of what I learned was self-taught; I supported myself with a meagre income derived from writing poetry and doing odd jobs." He joined a writers' club and began to write, initially attempting to portray his own simple, pastoral life around Tresneveca. He was also introduced at this time to the writing of Franz Kafka. Later, Bozic got work as a journalist on a newspaper in Uzice, though he was not a member of the local Communist Party, with a brief to cover Serbian traditional culture. Eventually, he left Yugoslavia and went to Paris in 1958, where for two years he lived as a refugee in Red Cross shelters, learning French and reading. But, as he wrote much later, "my dream was to reach Australia, the country my father had told me about."

Bozic arrived in Australia in 1960. Work was then plentiful for migrants (even if, like Bozic, they spoke little or no English). He decided to look for a job on the construction site of a large dam on the Ord River, in the country's remote northwest. Naively, he took the advice of a white man in Alice Springs (in the center of Australia) on the easiest way to travel there. The man suggested he go by camel across the Tanami Desert and sold him an animal. Two weeks later, with the camel sick from eating saltbush, Bozic was in danger of dying from dehydration when an Aboriginal man, Juburu, found him and rescued him, assisting him on the rest of his journey. Wongar did find several laboring jobs after that, but his interest in Australian Aboriginal culture never waned, and he took every

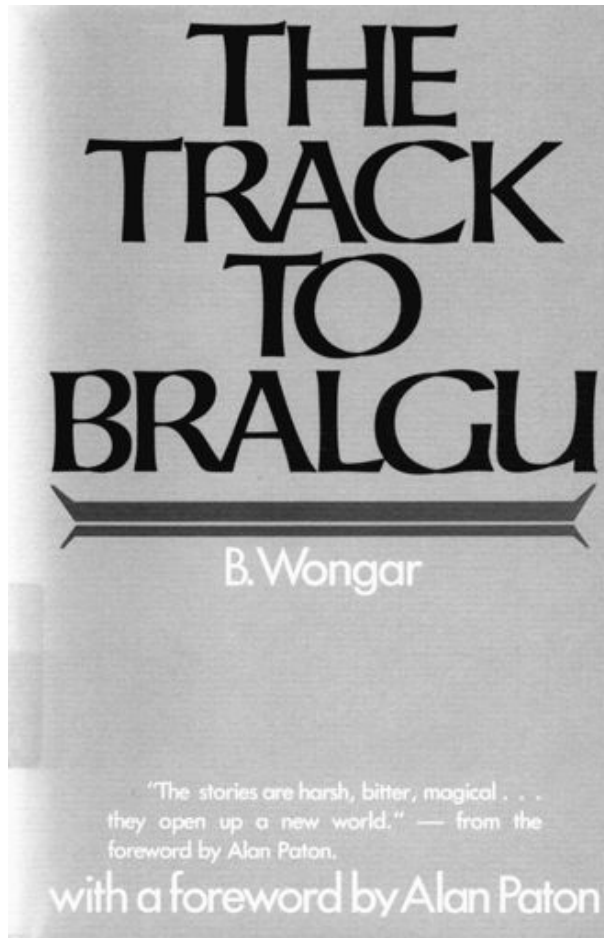
opportunity to seek out, befriend, and at times live with Aboriginal people.

Flouting the regulations about who was allowed to visit the settlements where Aborigines lived, Wongar was on one occasion almost caught by a visiting white ranger. To conceal him, his Aboriginal friends laid him on the ground and heaped dust on him, chanting over him as if he were sick. The ranger asked where he was from, and they replied that he was from the Wongar mob, which in their language meant from the spirit world. Satisfied with the answer, the ranger departed. The name "Wongar" stuck. The initial "B." he has explained in various ways. In his books he has sometimes been known as "Birimbir" Wongar, and later as "Banumbir" Wongar, but he said in an interview that the initial letter commemorates his own Serbian surname.

For several years in the 1960s Wongar continued to work in the Northern Territory of Australia. He also spent time with Aborigines in the desert, eventually marrying, in a tribal ceremony, an Aboriginal woman named Djumala. But he also began to spend some time in Melbourne, where he had become acquainted with celebrated Australian short-story writer and memoirist Alan Marshall. Feeling that he was being persecuted by authorities on account of his Aboriginal sympathies, Wongar moved to Melbourne around 1970 (in *Dingoes Den* the date is slightly vague), planning to bring Djumala and their children there later. He never saw them again and was later told that they had disappeared during the cyclone that destroyed Darwin in 1974. The story of Djumala's death varies, however; a different version is given in the 1992 interview with Ray Willbanks: "The news that I got, not from the authorities, but from the tribal people who lived in the area, was that they [his wife and children] drank from a water hole which was poisoned, or in some way polluted. The water wasn't fit to drink, and they died."

Taking a menial job on the suburban railways of Melbourne, Wongar began jotting down stories. He also bought some land at Noojee, in rural Gippsland east of Melbourne, where he began to develop the stories that were eventually published as *The Track to Bralgu* (1978). First, however, with the help of Marshall, Wongar published two books in 1972: a collection of short stories titled *The Sinners: Stories of Vietnam* and the compilation *Aboriginal Myths*, which was billed as a collaborative work with Marshall, although in *Dingoes Den*, Wongar says that the inclusion of Marshall's name was to help sales, at the publisher's insistence.

Not surprisingly, given the history of oppression in Wongar's own family and his observation of the oppression of Aborigines in the 1960s, he made links between the two. His own early experiences also made



Front cover for Wongar's 1978 collection of stories based on Aboriginal myths, with the character "Mogwoi, the Trickster"  
(Richland County Public Library)

him wary about being identified by officialdom. He appears to have adopted the Wongar name around 1970 and has published little under the name Sreten Bozic. In 1974 Wongar put together a polemical exhibition of photographs on the subject of the exploitation by mining companies of uranium resources on Aboriginal land. The exhibition, under the title *Totem and Ore*, was quickly banned when shown in the library of Parliament House in Canberra. Wongar was left with a lifelong sense that Australian authorities and publishers were not interested in his work. When Gold Star, the publishing house that brought out *Aboriginal Myths*, collapsed, Wongar began to look abroad for publishers.

His success in that respect was extraordinary. With the support of such high-profile figures as Simone de Beauvoir and Alan Paton, Wongar had his work published internationally throughout the 1970s and 1980s. The novels in the so-called Nuclear Trilogy—*Walg* (1983), *Karan* (1985), and *Gabo Djara* (1987)—were

all published in the United States and Britain before they were imported into Australia (where they attracted little attention). These and others of his works have been translated into many languages.

At first, Wongar approached the topic of Aboriginality only obliquely. Marshall, who knew about Wongar's identity, helped draw a veil over it by suggesting to journalists that Wongar was a black American GI who had deserted from the war in Vietnam and had written the stories published as *The Sinners*. (In *Dingoes Den*, Wongar writes that this collection of Vietnam stories was part of a deliberate attempt to hide his identity from authorities.) The collection *Aboriginal Myths* is presented straightforwardly as an attempt by a white man to preserve Aboriginal stories. Then in his first novel, *The Trackers* (1975), Wongar presents a southeast Asian protagonist. Dao Ba Khang lives in Australia and is keen to assimilate. He wakes up one night to a phone call in which he is abused as a "Chink." Looking in the mirror, he notices that he seems to have become darker. A series of dream-like, nightmarish experiences follows. Dao is advised to go to a doctor, who has a file on him that contains, among other things, his driver's license, which previously was missing. The doctor gives Dao a prescription that, when he takes it to the chemist, turns out to be for chow mein at a nearby restaurant. Dao goes off to the Australian desert to live with Aborigines, the only people who will accept him. He meets a man named Qoari and strikes up a friendship with him. They go in search of various figures in the desert. Eventually, Dao returns to Melbourne, only to wish that he had not left the desert.

Although on the face of it, the novel is about an Asian man (from a part of the world Wongar had not visited), certain themes and techniques that run through most of his fiction are visible in *The Trackers*. The opening, with its mysterious transformation and the persecution of an individual by various official figures, is unmistakably reminiscent of the works of Kafka. The mistrust in the novel of hostile authority figures—particularly doctors, medical researchers, and state functionaries—is a hallmark of Wongar's later fiction. Similarly, a sojourn in the Australian desert, where a wise, tutelary Aborigine is encountered, is at the heart of many of his books, mirroring his own experiences with Juburu in the Tanami Desert on his own first visit there.

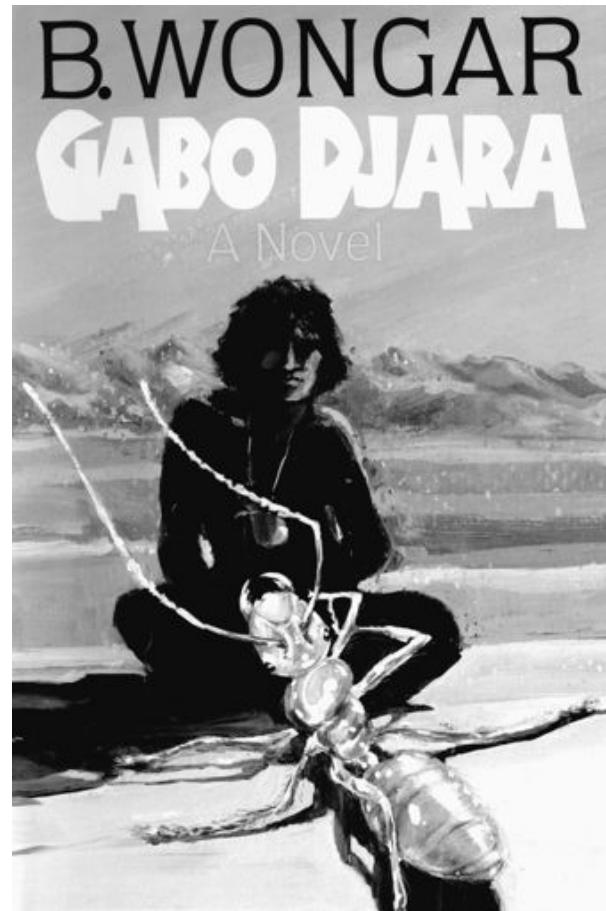
After *The Trackers*, Wongar more fully inhabited his own self-created Aboriginal identity. The stories in *The Track to Bralgu* are illustrative of figures from Aboriginal myth: they all bear such titles as "Mogwoi, the Trickster," "Jambawal, the Thunder Man," and "Willy-Willy Man." The lavishly illustrated collection of poems *Bilma*, which was published in the United

States in 1984, was similarly concerned with Aboriginal stories.

Although Wongar was gaining an international reputation by the mid 1980s, he was barely known in Australia. He had, however, received funding from the literature board of the government funding agency, the Australia Council. This award helped fuel controversy in 1978 when some Australian journalists began asking who exactly the author of *The Track to Bralgu* was. Anyone who tried to speak with B. Wongar instead encountered only Sreten Bozic. A few critics were inclined to condemn Wongar as a fake. Robert Drewe, later a distinguished novelist himself, closed the case more sympathetically in 1981 when he simultaneously revealed that Bozic was Wongar and rather than condemning Wongar, concluded that he was “a sort of living novel.” Nevertheless, for some time many people were concerned that Wongar had obtained government funding under false pretenses. Some Aboriginal people condemn Wongar’s enterprise. But many, such as Eve Fesl (a former director of the Aboriginal Research Centre at Monash University), support it. When literary frauds and forgeries became extraordinarily prevalent in Australian letters in the late 1990s, Wongar was not generally implicated. He has continued to write as B. Wongar and prefers to be addressed as Wongar.

Despite the controversy, his works remained barely read in Australia. Instead, his critical reputation developed in the United States, especially because of *Walg*, *Karan*, and *Gabo Djara*, probably Wongar’s best-known work. Collectively, these books are known as the Nuclear Trilogy, and although Wongar himself has said that the novels were not written as a trilogy, they are closely linked in theme and approach. They represent the writer’s lone crusade against the way in which the uranium mining industry and the outback nuclear testing of the 1950s have dispossessed Aboriginal peoples. The novels have sometimes been claimed as science fiction because of the nuclear concern and the presence in them of shadowy scientific organizations and sinister scientists: the Centre for Human Development and Dr. Cross in *Walg* and Dr. Tinto and the Tribal Research and Assimilation Centre (TRAC) in *Karan*.

*Walg* is the story of Djumala, Wongar’s tribal wife (to whom the book is dedicated). At the outset Djumala appears to have escaped from imprisonment in a kind of breeding experiment by whites aimed at producing a new race (which is also the theme, satirically treated in a grotesque manner, of the short story “The Turtle” in *The Last Pack of Dingoes* [1993]). Though she is disconnected from her ancestral roots and tribal practices, Djumala sets off to go back to her own country because she is soon to give birth. As in all of Wongar’s longer



Front cover for Wongar’s 1987 novel named for the green ant in Aboriginal myth, the third book in his “Nuclear Trilogy”  
(Richland County Public Library)

fiction, this trek results in a long journey of discovery, both actual and spiritual. At the end, as Djumala is about to give birth, she hears Djanbuwal (the thunder man, also celebrated in a story in *The Track to Bralgu*), whipping up a destructive storm, possibly a reference to the Darwin cyclone.

The second novel, *Karan*, begins as effectively a revision of *The Trackers* with an Aboriginal protagonist. Anawari Mallee is an assimilated Aborigine (with a white fiancée), who wakes from his dreams to find a strange cicatrized device on the skin of his chest. Like Djumala in *Walg*, he has grown up disconnected from tribal traditions, and like her he is involved in an experiment run by the oppressive TRAC.

*Gabo Djara* is named for the green ant from Aboriginal mythology. In Wongar’s telling of the story the green ant is powerful, but largely uncomprehending, almost unaware, of the modern world around him. His is perhaps the most peculiar spiritual wandering of the Nuclear Trilogy, sometimes uplifting as the mythical

figure simply ignores the trappings of the nuclear industry and is unaffected by uranium. But sometimes the green ant seems to be reminiscent of naive wanderers of the Western literary canon: Voltaire's *Candide* or, even more aptly, the Child of Nature in *L'Ingénu* (1767), characters whose perceptions are limited, but through whom readers see more than the characters themselves comprehend.

These novels are written in a sometimes cryptic, allusive, and dense style. The narratives are often difficult to follow, partly because of the nature of the myths on which Wongar draws. But, as Wongar has frankly acknowledged, he arrived in Australia in 1960 without any English, and when he began writing in the early 1970s, his written English conformed to no standards. *Gabo Djara* is dedicated to Prue Grieve, Wongar's former partner, who, as he makes clear in *Dingoes Den*, edited his work in a more than usually detailed way, one that constitutes almost a collaboration between author and editor.

Interest from Australian publishers did not come until the early 1990s, when reprints of Wongar's earlier work were published by Angus and Robertson, along with new works—the short novel *Marngit* (1992), the story collection *The Last Pack of Dingoes*, and the novel *Raki*. Following the model of Wongar's earlier story collections, *The Last Pack of Dingoes* is based on figures from Aboriginal myth. But they are now the subject of sometimes savage satires, usually involving the clash between the modern world and the traditional ways of Aboriginal people.

*Raki* is perhaps Wongar's most challenging work. In it he mingles two major strands and draws for the first time on his own Serbian childhood to link the Serbian oral stories he grew up with to Aboriginal myths. The story is narrated throughout—with some interruptions—by one first-person narrator. But the nature of this narrator changes. At one point he tells of what are clearly Serbian wartime memories from the naive perspective of a child, witnessing atrocities whose full

import he does not understand. At other times this figure appears to be an Aborigine, visited by his mother, who is Serbian (a reversal of the equally unlikely visitation of Djumala to Wongar on the Victorian railways described in the preface to *The Last Pack of Dingoes*). The story draws extensively on myth and fable and is at times almost bewilderingly dense. It is, with its focus on the time of Wongar's childhood, evidently the novel he had originally set out to write in Belgrade in the 1950s.

B. Wongar's literary activity slowed after *Raki*; the memoir *Dingoes Den* is his only major publication since. He still divides his time between suburban Melbourne and Noojee, where he keeps several dingoes. His critical reputation is strong internationally, but in Australia, both popularly and critically, he is largely overlooked as something of an oddity and has never commanded a popular readership.

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