The Road from Coorain

Jill Ker Conway
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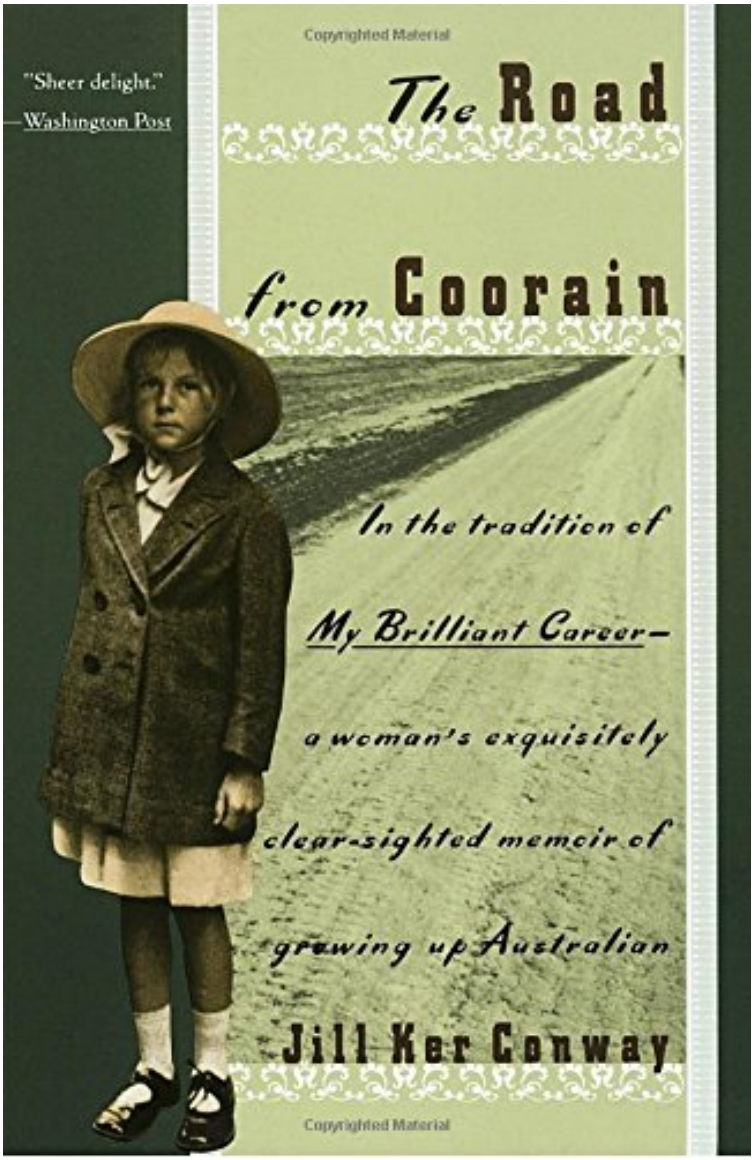

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Jill Ker Conway : The Road from Coorain before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Road from Coorain:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Good start, then very judgementalBy DouginNCSummary: "Cursed be my intellect, affluence, and robust life experiences because there may never be someone so exceptional as to live up to my image of myself."This one book is many books. It is a remarkable recollection of a young life in Australia.

Then, in one of the nine chapters, it takes on a literary bent with brilliant and entertaining use of language. Often, it devolves into segments of self-pity as well as loathing toward others. Does that make it a psychological thriller, a mystery, or a narcissistic treatise? Discuss amongst yourselves and support your ideas, as the scholarly Jill Ker Conway probably charged her students and peers over the years.Psychologically, the reader is presented a person who, through her twenties, couldn't be bothered to hold any work position for any length of time. Whether in law, political administration, fashion, education, or simpler tasks, some aspect of that work was beyond her tolerance. Such attitude is at least partly owed to the affluence that did not require her to work, but that is rarely raised as a factor.The thrilling aspect of the psychological spaghetti in these pages is the roller coaster of angst poured out by the author, with the reader along for the ride. There is family, social, climate, political, historical, and enough other kinds of angst to fill a world's fair. That may be interesting (the angst or the fair), but one tires from a non-stop intake of it.Mysteriously, we learn little depth about any characters surrounding the author other than her father during her astounding telling of early years on the Australian prairie, and of her mother as the anchor (with both good and bad meanings inferred) of her life. There are rarely more than brief mentions of others and name-dropping lists; nary a vignette to develop surrounding characters.I relished the onsetting story set in the unfamiliar Antipodal pastoral land to which the first four chapters were devoted. I was thrilled by bits of artfully-crafted phrasing through that section, which then flourished in most of chapter five and made me feel I was on a journey through life that was discovering literary potential just as it might have evolved for the young lass as her life shifted toward education.Yet by the end of chapter five to the final pages, the clarion call was that of the prototypical picture of the opera singer in preparation for a performance: "Me, me, me; Me, Me, Me!; Me, Me, ME!!" There was sound and fury but too little substance and story to mold a truly interesting tale despite the litany of subject matter that was mentioned.Many readers will enjoy this exploration of soul by commentary. The author presents herself as an interesting character. I might have enjoyed the effort had there been more introspection and less outwardly-focused criticism. There were times when I was ready to recommend this work to a teenage relative in the United States, that she might appreciate another kind of life in another part of the world, presented by someone of intellect. Such desire was not there by the end of the book.1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Growing up on a sheep ranchBy Judy JohnsonThis book, The Road from Coorain, was a great fit for me as I too grew up on a sheep ranch and made a life off the ranch. The experience of growing up on the ranch affected the remainder of my life as growing up on a sheep station in Australia did the author. The isolation brought independence and inventiveness. The writing is descriptive and brings you to the scene--I could smell the odor of the lanolin at shearing time!0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. From the outback to academic excellence.By MH Wellesley-WesleyBeautiful and admirable in courage and lucid introspection. It was interesting to see how someone brought up in the culture of admiration for Oxbridge reacts when confronted with the reality of life in England, and other places in Europe.I also admire Jill's courage in choosing not to drown with her mother, whom she cannot save from herself.

In a memoir that pierces and delights us, Jill Ker Conway tells the story of her astonishing journey into adulthooda journey that would ultimately span immense distances and encompass worlds, ideas, and ways of life that seem a century apart. She was seven before she ever saw another girl child. At eight, still too small to mount her horse unaided, she was galloping miles, alone, across Coorain, her parents' thirty thousand windswept, drought-haunted acres in the Australian outback, doing a "man's job" of helping herd the sheep because World War II had taken away the able-bodied men. She loved (and makes us see and feel) the vast unpeopled landscape, beautiful and hostile, whose uncertain weathers tormented the sheep ranchers with conflicting promises of riches and inescapable disaster. She adored (and makes us know) her large-visioned father and her strong, radiant mother, who had gone willingly with him into a pioneering life of loneliness and bone-breaking toil, who seemed miraculously to succeed in creating a warmly sheltering home in the harsh outback, and who, upon her husband's sudden death when Jill was ten, began to slidebereft of the partnership of work and love that had so utterly fulfilled herinto depression and dependency. We see Jill, staggered by the loss of her father, catapulted to what seemed another planetthe suburban Sydney of the 1950s and its crowded, noisy, cliquish school life. Then the heady excitement of the University, but with it a yet more demanding course of lessonsJill embracing new ideas, new possibilities, while at the same time trying to be mother to her mother and resenting it, escaping into drink, pulling herself back, striking a balance. We see her slowly gaining strength, coming into her own emotionally and intellectually and beginning the joyous love affair that gave wings to her newfound self. Worlds away from Coorain, in America, Jill Conway became a historian and the first woman president of Smith College. Her story of Coorain and the road from Coorain startles by its passion and evocative power, by its understanding of the ways in which a total, deep-rooted commitment to placeor to a dreamcan at once liberate and imprison. It is a story of childhood as both Eden and anguish, and of growing up as a journey toward the difficult life of the free.

From the Back Cover"Sheer delight." --Washington Post"A small masterpiece of scene, memory and very stylish English. I've been several times to Australia; this book was the most rewarding journey of all." --John Kenneth

GalbraithAbout the AuthorJill Ker Conway is a noted historian, specializing in the experience of women in America, and was the first woman president of Smith College.Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.1.THE WESTTHE WESTERN PLAINS of New South Wales are grasslands. Their vast expanse flows for many hundreds of miles beyond the Lachlan and Murrumbidgee rivers until the desert takes over and sweeps inland to the dead heart of the continent. In a good season, if the eyes are turned to the earth on those plains, they see a tapestry of delicate life-not the luxuriant design of a book of hours by any means, but a tapestry nonetheless, designed by a spare modern artist. What grows there hugs the earth firmly with its extended system of roots above which the plant life is delicate but determined. After rain there is an explosion of growth. Nut-flavored green grass puts up the thinnest of green spears. Wild grains appear, grains which develop bleached gold ears as they ripen. Purple desert peas weave through the green and gold, and bright yellow bachelor's buttons cover acres at a time, like fields planted with mustard. Closest to the earth is trefoil clover, whose tiny, vivid green leaves and bright flowers creep along the ground in spring, to be replaced by a harvest of seed-filled burrs in autumn-burrs which store within them the energy of the sun as concentrated protein. At the edges of pans of clay, where the topsoil has eroded, live waxy succulents bearing bright pink and purple blooms, spreading like splashes of paint dropped in widening circles on the earth.Above the plants that creep across the ground are the bushes, which grow wherever an indentation in the earth, scarcely visible to the eye, allows for the concentration of more moisture from the dew and the reluctant rain. There is the ever-present round mound of prickly weed, which begins its life a strong acid green with hints of yellow, and then is burnt by the sun or the frost to a pale whitish yellow. As it ages, its root system weakens so that on windy days the wind will pick it out of the earth and roll it slowly and majestically about like whirling suns in a Van Gogh painting. Where the soil contains limestone, stronger bushes grow, sometimes two to three feet high, with the delicate narrow-leaved foliage of arid climates, bluish green and dusty grey in color, perfectly adapted to resist the drying sun. Where the soil is less porous and water will lie for a while after rain, comes the annual saltbush, a miraculous silvery-grey plant which stores its own water in small balloonlike round leaves and thrives long after the rains have vanished. Its sterner perennial cousin, which resembles sagebrush, rises on woody branches and rides out the strongest wind.Very occasionally, where a submerged watercourse rises a little nearer the surface of the earth, a group of eucalyptus trees will cluster. Worn and gnarled by wind and lack of moisture, they rise up on the horizon so dramatically they appear like an assemblage of local deities. Because heat and mirages make them float in the air, they seem from the distance like surfers endlessly riding the plains above a silvery wave. The ocean they ride is blue-grey, silver, green, yellow, scarlet, and bleached gold, highlighting the red clay tones of the earth to provide a rich palette illuminated by brilliant sunshine, or on grey days a subdued blending of tones like those observed on a calm sea.The creatures that inhabit this earth carry its colors in their feathers, fur, or scales. Among its largest denizens are emus, six-foot-high flightless birds with dun-grey feathers and tiny wings, and kangaroos. Kangaroos, like emus, are silent creatures, two to eight feet tall, and ranging in color from the gentlest dove-grey to a rich red-brown. Both species blend with their native earth so well that one can be almost upon them before recognizing the familiar shape. The fur of the wild dogs has the familiar yellow of the sunbaked clay, and the reptiles, snakes and goannas, look like the earth in shadow. All tread on the fragile habitat with padded paws and claws which leave the roots of grass intact.On the plains, the earth meets the sky in a sharp black line so regular that it seems as though drawn by a creator interested more in geometry than the hills and valleys of the Old Testament. Human purposes are dwarfed by such a blank horizon. When we see it from an island in a vast ocean we know we are resting in shelter. On the plains, the horizon is always with us and there is no retreating from it. Its blankness travels with our every step and waits for us at every point of the compass. Because we have very few reference points on the spare earth, we seem to creep over it, one tiny point of consciousness between the empty earth and the overarching sky. Because of the flatness, contrasts are in a strange scale. A scarlet sunset will highlight grey-yellow tussocks of grass as though they were trees. Thunderclouds will mount thousands of feet above one stunted tree in the foreground. A horseback rider on the horizon will seem to rise up and emerge from the clouds. While the patterns of the earth are in small scale, akin to complex needlepoint on a vast tapestry, the sky is all drama. Cumulus clouds pile up over the center of vast continental spaces, and the wind moves them at dramatic pace along the horizon or over our heads. The ever-present red dust of a dry earth hangs in the air and turns all the colors from yellow through orange and red to purple on and off as the clouds bend and refract the light. Sunrise and sunset make up in drama for the fact that there are so few songbirds in that part of the bush. At sunrise, great shafts of gold precede the baroque sunburst. At sunset, the cumulus ranges through the shades of a Turner seascape before the sun dives below the earth leaving no afterglow, but at the horizon, tongues of fire.Except for the bush canary and the magpie, the birds of this firmament court without the songs of the northern forest. Most are parrots, with the vivid colors and rasping sounds of the species. At sunset, rosella parrots, a glorious rosy pink, will settle on trees and appear to turn them scarlet. Magpies, large black and white birds, with a call close to song, mark the sunrise, but the rest of the day is the preserve of the crows, and the whistle of the hawk and the golden eagle. The most startling sound is the ribald laughter of the kookaburra, a species of kingfisher, whose call resembles demonic laughter. It is hard to imagine a kookaburra feeding St. Jerome or accompanying St. Francis. They belong to a physical and spiritual landscape which is outside the imagination of the Christian West.The primal force of the sun shapes the environment. With the wind and the sand it

bakes and cleanses all signs of decay. There is no cleansing by water. The rivers flow beneath the earth, and rain falls too rarely. In the recurring cycles of drought the sand and dust flow like water, and like the floods of other climates they engulf all that lies in their path. Painters find it hard to capture the shimmer of that warm red earth dancing in the brilliant light, and to record at the same time the subtle greens and greys of the plants and trees. Europeans were puzzled by the climate and vegetation, because the native eucalyptus trees were not deciduous. The physical blast of the sun in hot dry summers brought plants to dormancy. Slow growth followed in autumn, and a burst of vigorous growth after the brief winter rainy season. Summer was a time of endurance for all forms of life as moisture ebbed away and the earth was scorched. Winter days were like summer in a northern climate, and spring meant the onset of unbroken sunshine. On the plains, several winters might go by without a rainy season, and every twenty years or so the rain might vanish for a decade at a time. When that happened, the sun was needed to cleanse the bones of dead creatures, for the death toll was immense.The oldest known humans on the continent left their bones on the western plains. Nomadic peoples hunted over the land as long as forty thousand years ago. They and their progeny left behind the blackened stones of ovens, and the hollowed flat pieces of granite they carried from great distances to grind the native nardoo grain. Their way of life persisted until white settlers came by bullock wagon, one hundred and thirty years ago, to take possession of the land. They came to graze their flocks of sharp-hooved sheep and cattle, hoping to make the land yield wealth. Other great inland grasslands in Argentina, South Africa, or North America were settled by pastoralists and ranchers who used forced labor: Indian peons, Bantus, or West African slaves. On Australia's great plains there were no settled native people to enslave. The settlers moved onto the plains long after the abandonment of transportation from Great Britain, the last form of forced labor available in the Antipodes. As a result, the way of life that grew up for white settlers was unique.A man could buy the government leasehold for hundreds of thousands of acres of grassland at a modest price if he settled the land and undertook to develop it. Others, beyond the reach of government scrutiny, simply squatted with their flocks on likely-looking land. The scale of each holding was beyond European dreams of avarice. Each settler could look out to the vacant horizon knowing that all he saw was his. To graze the unfenced land required a population of sheepherders, or, as they came to be called, boundary riders. A settler would need twelve to fifteen hands for his several hundred thousand acres, but most would live out on the "run" (sheep run) at least a day's ride from the main settlement. The hands were solitary males, a freewheeling rural proletariat, antisocial, and unconcerned with comfort or the domestic pleasures. Their leisure went in drink and gambling, and their days in a routine of lonely and backbreaking work. The main house would be spare and simple also, its roof of iron and its walls of timber laboriously transported from the coast. The garden would be primitive and the boss's recreations would be little different from his hands'. If he shared his life with a wife and children, they lived marginally on the edge of his world of male activity. There was no rain for orchards, no water for vegetable gardens, and no society for entertaining. Women worked over wood stoves in 100 degree heat and heated water for laundry over an open fire. There was little room for the culinary arts, because everyone's diet was mutton and unleavened bread, strong black tea, and spirits. The ratio of women to men was as distorted in this wave of settlement as anywhere in the settlement of the New World.The bush ethos which grew up from making a virtue out of loneliness and hardship built on the stoic virtues of convict Australia. Settled life and domesticity were soft and demoralizing. A "real man" despised comfort and scorned the expression of emotion. The important things in life were hard work, self-sufficiency, physical endurance, and loyalty to one's male friends, one's "mates." Knowledge about nature, the care of animals, practical mechanics was respected, but speculation and the world of ideas were signs of softness and impracticality. Religion and belief in a benevolent deity were foolish because daily life demonstrated beyond doubt that the universe was hostile. The weather, the fates, the bank that held the mortgage, bushfires-disaster in some form-would get a man in the end. When disaster struck what mattered was unflinching courage and the refusal to consider despair.Very few women could stand the isolation. When a settler prospered, his wife and children moved to a distant but comfortable rural town, where there were schools for the children and companionship for their mother. If he did not prosper, she was likely to be overwhelmed by loneliness. Nothing interrupted the relentless routine of hard labor, the anxiety of illness far from hope of help, the certainty of enervating summer heat, frosty winter cold, and the pervasive anxiety of disaster looming. Disaster could strike swiftly-some little-understood disease might wipe out the investment in the flock or the herd; a man or a child could die from snakebite, a tetanus-infected wound, a fall from a horse. Or disaster could set in slowly with the onset of drought. It was ever-present and a woman at home alone all day had time to think about it. Some took despairingly to drink, some fell into incurable depression, others told their husbands they could not endure it and left for the city.The ideal woman was a good manager-no small task with only wood stoves, kerosene lamps, inadequate water, and the nearest store for canned goods fifty to a hundred miles away. She was toughened by adversity, laughed at her fears, knew how to fix things which broke in the house, and stifled any craving she might once have had for beauty. She could care for the sick, help fight a bushfire, aid a horse or cow in difficult labor, laugh and joke about life's absurdities and reverses, and like a man, mock any signs of weakness or lack of stoicism in her children. Everyone knew the most important gift to a child was an upbringing which would toughen him (her) up so as to be stoic and uncomplaining about life's pains and ready for its reverses. The sons of the outback made great soldiers in modern wars because they had been prepared for them since infancy. The daughters lacked such a calling.The

pattern of the year followed the seasons. If the rains came, they fell in the winter. Lambing was planned for the spring, when the grass was at its best, and the last winter showers might have left some tender growth for young lambs to nibble before their teeth developed. If seasons cooperated, the lambs were well grown, able to walk great distances for their food and water by the time the summer set in. In February, before the summer reached its peak, the lambs were shorn, and the faces and withers of the grown sheep were trimmed so that flies could not infest the places where sweat and urine soiled their fleeces. In June, in midwinter, when it was less harmful to move the animals over distances and hold them penned in yards, the grown sheep were brought to a shearing shed and shorn. If there had been an uninterrupted supply of nourishment through the year, their fleece would be seven inches thick, unstained by dust, and carrying an unbroken staple that meant it could be easily combed to spin the finest yarn. If the land they grazed did not carry enough herbage throughout the year, the staple of their fleeces would show a break to mark the point where the food supply had faltered. When the staple was broken it could not be so easily combed, and the yarn it produced, being of less high quality, sold for less. If there were too many breaks it might not repay the cost of producing it.