

Feral Tracks



The first version of *Feral Tracks* was a novel written in the style of a travelogue, a story fused from the day-to-day accounts of a journey. Following the novel's release, Asylum Films bought the rights to make a movie based on the book. Under the astute guidance of Asylum's director Richard Hearman and with the invaluable collaboration of Simonne Overend, I was able to rewrite *Feral Tracks* as a screenplay that told the story in less than two hours. The talented Cate Kennedy also made helpful storyline suggestions after the screenplay's first draft. Although it was not eventually made into a movie – a common fate for too many Australian scripts – the screenplay inspired this newly rewritten version of *Feral Tracks*, which I hope you enjoy all the more.

Euan Mitchell

Also by Euan Mitchell

Making Noises

Feral Tracks

The novel adapted from the screenplay

by

Euan Mitchell

the vulgar press

Published by The Vulgar Press
PO Box 68, Carlton North, Victoria 3054.
www.vulgar.com.au

Distributed by Dennis Jones & Associates
Unit 1/10 Melrich Road
Bayswater, Victoria 3153, Australia.

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National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry:

Mitchell, Euan, 1961 – .

Feral tracks: the novel adapted from the screenplay.

1st ed.

ISBN: 9780980665123 (pbk.)

For secondary school age.

Hitchhiking – Runaway children – Australia – Juvenile fiction.
A823.3

Cover design by Les Thomas from a concept by Kate Curtis.
Typeset in Sabon 10.75/14.4
Printed in Australia by Griffin Press.

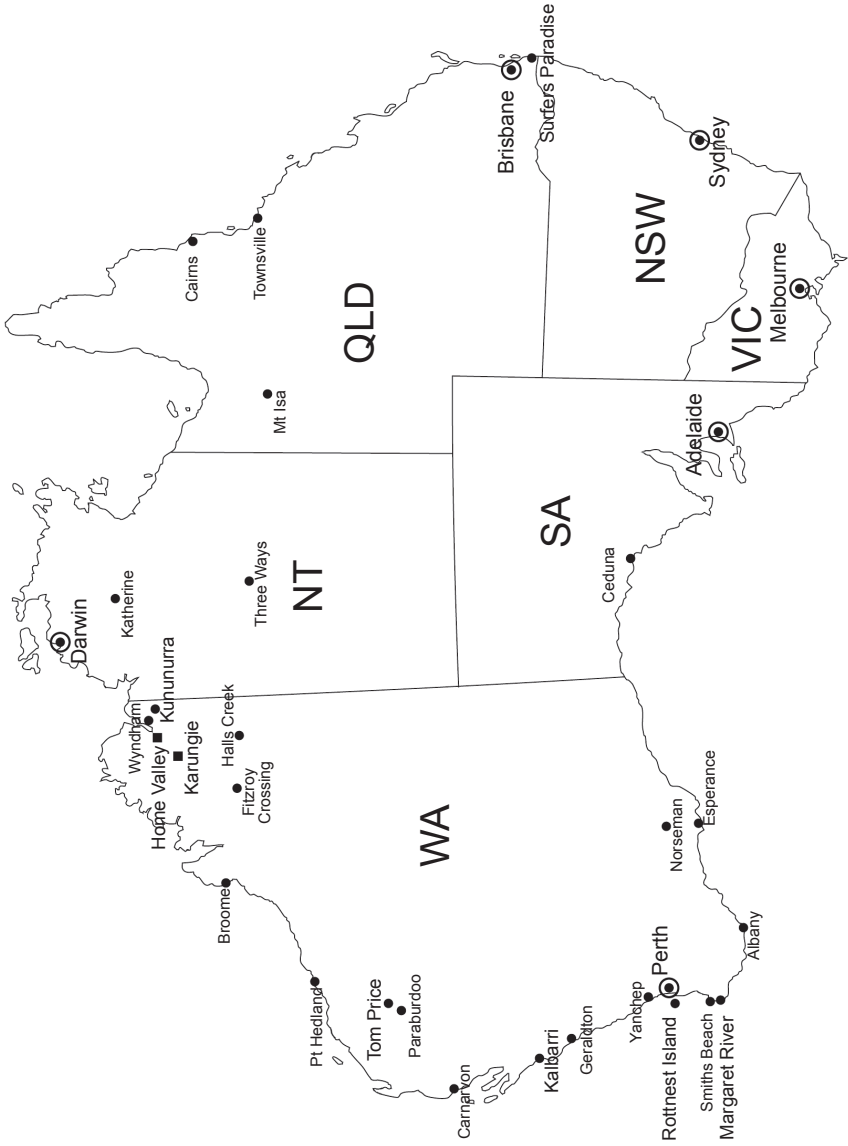
Although this novel is based on a true story, it contains certain characters and events that are fictional.

Special thanks to: Tracey Mitchell, Ian Syson, Dennis Jones, Les Thomas, Richard Hearman, Simonne Overend, Cate Kennedy, Marilyn Small, Margaret Cooke, Kate Curtis, Ella Curtis, Ben Brooker, Liz Corbett, Dr Robin Hunter, Samson Macaulay, Bronwyn Cran, Andrew Funston, Nicholas Flanagan, Josephine Roxburgh, staff and students at Box Hill Institute, Victoria University, Monash University, and Harry, Lauren and Fergus Mitchell.

Dedication

To my family and all the people who gave me a lift

Key Locations in *Feral Tracks*



First Taste







feRal fLight

FERAL means ‘domesticated gone wild’. And that was pretty much our plan for the summer holidays. We were going to do everything our parents feared their sixteen-year-old boys would do. The list included: drink, smoke weed, drink some more, and in the right company, have wild sex at beach parties after surfing ourselves stupid.

It was Boxing Day and me and my best friend were being driven to the airport. We were about to catch a plane from the suburbs of Melbourne to the wild west. The *real* wild west – Western Australia and its capital, Perth. They say it’s the most isolated city on the planet and soon it’d be the base for our hitchhiking ‘surfari’. Anyway, we were desperate to get away from home, to escape The System and go feral before we had to start the grind of our final year at high school. The year when so much would be at stake.

We were sick of hearing how Year 12 would ‘make you or break you’. The whole spiel about our careers, our futures and our bloody ‘life options’ all riding on the following year’s results, like a roller-coaster we’d be lucky to keep a grip on. ‘But don’t let the pressure get to you.’ Yeah, sure.

‘Daniel!’ a voice barked. My daydreaming was shattered. It was Dad. He was at the wheel of our family Holden with Mum sitting quietly in the passenger seat. All Christmas cheer had been spent. The turkey, the carols and the stupid paper hats now seemed as distant as Grandpa’s memories.

‘Yes, Dad?’

‘Are you listening to me, Daniel?’

‘Yes, Dad.’

‘So you’ll do that for me?’

‘Yes, Dad, I’ll remember to say “Thank you for having me”.’

Dad shook his head, making a frustrated noise somewhere between a sigh and a snort. ‘You’ve got no idea what I just said, have you?’ He was used to me stonewalling him. What the olds didn’t know about our plans wouldn’t hurt them or our chances of stepping on that plane.

I looked across the back seat, over the head of my little sister Fiona. She was zoned out listening to her music. She was also sitting between me and my best friend Nick. He was staring out his window at the suburban sprawl alongside the freeway. I could see Nick’s face reflected in the window. He was trying not to laugh. When he saw I was looking at his reflection, Nick rolled his eyes in the direction of Dad.

The bark continued. ‘Will you do your mother and I the *common courtesy* of ringing us as soon as Nick’s mother picks you both up from Perth Airport?’

Dad didn’t like Nick’s mum, Paula. He thought she was a bit beneath him because Paula was divorced and liked a glass of wine or three. Dad was a church-going teetotalter, or ‘wowsers’ as Paula called him. But I think the truth was that Dad didn’t like Paula because she stood up to him.

Something my own mum never seemed able to do. Or me for that matter.

‘Yes, Dad. Promise.’

We took the exit from the freeway to the airport. I could feel my heart pump quicker as we drove into the car park in front of the terminal. Freedom from the family was only metres away. As soon as Dad pulled into a parking bay, Nick and me jumped out and took our surfboards off the roof racks. Dad opened the boot and hoisted out our rucksacks stuffed with camping gear.

Mum began airing some last-minute doubts as we walked to the departure area. She was mainly worried about what me and Nick would eat during our month away. ‘I suppose you’ll be living on hamburgers most of the time?’

‘Mu-um...’ I said, shaking my head. Okay, it was a fair enough question for a mother. But it showed she had no idea what skills Nick and me had learned over the past two years of pitching a tent down the coast most weekends. Not that I would actually want Mum to know anything about us that she didn’t have to. ‘We can cook for ourselves. You know, you’ve seen our compact kero stove.’

‘That little thing?’

‘It’s enough to boil and fry on,’ I said.

Nick added, ‘And some camping areas will let you build fires.’

Mum still wasn’t convinced. ‘But what do you cook?’

‘Heaps of stuff...like snags, pasta, fried rice, vegies and if we’re feeling real lazy we heat up a can of baked beans.’

‘Oh, I see,’ Mum nodded, but I sensed she wasn’t too happy that her cooking was no longer an essential service.

That's one of the many weird things about parents. They spend years telling you how to do things for yourself, from tying shoelaces to taking a part-time job, then they can be miffed when you show some independence. You think they'd be pleased.

'Now, you two, make sure you stay out of trouble,' Dad warned.

Another fair enough thing for a parent to say, especially the old man. But, really, he was still annoyed about Nick and me booking our non-refundable plane tickets after only a 'maybe' from each mother. Dad liked to have control of final approvals. He'd love to find a good excuse to sink our plans. But stuff him. Serve him right for hardly being around, working such long hours. Besides, me and Nick had earned our own money doing a crappy cleaning job before Christmas. We'd even paid our stinking taxes. Our budgets had left no room for any accessories – just basic camping and surfing gear. So if we weren't breaking any laws, why couldn't we spend our money how we liked?

'Don't worry,' Nick said with a grin, 'I'll make sure we stay out of trouble.'

'*That's* what worries me, Nick,' Dad replied, not amused.

Nick and me laughed off Dad's anxious look. Mum couldn't bring herself to say anything more and was reaching for her tissues. My little sister was still listening to her music as she checked out some airport shops.

Dad always cut things short when Mum started crying. He liked a 'stiff upper lip'. So a few quick kisses and handshakes later, Nick and I were left at the check-in queue, pleased to be off the leash.

Our next challenge wasn't until we were in the air and

the trolley dollies were setting off on their drinks-and-eats routine down the plane's aisle.

Nick nudged me. 'Dan, order two beers when they get to us.' Me and Nick never usually had to buy booze. Helpful classmates mostly bought it for us because nearly all of them were a year older – we'd both skipped Prep.

'No way,' I said, keeping my voice low. 'They're not gonna believe we're eighteen.'

'They can only say no.'

'True...' I had to think for a second. 'But you're taller than me, so you order them.'

'We're sitting down, dickhead, and anyhow your voice is deeper.'

We carried on like this in tense whispers for what seemed like ages. When our turn finally came, the lady looked at me first. I said, in a voice that I hoped wasn't *trying* to sound too deep, 'Two VBs, thank you.'

To Nick's and my amazement, her smile stayed fixed, she opened two cans of beer and just asked for the money. We couldn't give it to her quick enough.

Maybe she thought we looked eighteen, maybe she just didn't want any fuss or fallout from a 'no'. Whatever the reason, we fancied our chances of repeat business.



onLy a couPla DrINks

NICK's mum Paula was waving at us. She and her special friend 'Max the Millionaire' were waiting at our arrival gate inside Perth Airport. She looked great for her age – stylish blonde hair and make-up just right. Still doing acting jobs to help put herself through teachers' college, following her divorce three or four years back. Still charming men like Max – who looked a bit like Colonel Sanders with his white hair, goatee and spectacles, but beefed up with an open-neck shirt and chunky gold chain.

There were two sides to Paula, though. One was nice, the other was scary. Nick and me were going to make a big effort to stay on her good side. No way did we want her knowing we'd sunk a few cans before our orders were questioned. Damn chief steward.

So we were walking and talking as straight as we could while we approached the happy couple. Paula was beaming with excitement, and tanned from two weeks in Perth staying with her sister and brother-in-law. Max even looked pleased to see us or perhaps it was just how satisfied he'd been with his Christmas presents.

Paula threw her arms around both Nick and me. However, that's when her smile took a downwards turn.

We may have covered our behaviour but apparently not our smell. Paula was suddenly quiet and cold – a nice cop ready to turn nasty. Max was left to fill in the awkward silence with polite chatter, like a tap-dancer on thin ice.

A bad memory flashed into my head.

Nick and I had returned after a party one night to find Paula desperately cleaning blood off the rear wooden stairs up to their first-floor flat. During a drunken argument, Paula had beaten her rich banker boyfriend senseless with a metal meat-tenderising mallet. His nickname was ‘Harry the Hand’ on account of his left arm being withered by polio when he was a kid. Nick and me didn’t like Harry the Hand much, but it was a brutal way to be put in hospital. We imagined poor Harry’s hand flapping uselessly as he tried to fend off Paula’s blows.

I obviously had a lot to learn about love because Paula, having beaten Harry the Hand unconscious, then found super-human strength to drag him down the back stairs to her car. She risked her life – and everyone else’s on the road – to drive Harry to hospital. Then she drove home again before anyone could say ‘Blow into this breathalyser’. Paula reeked of booze when we found her scrubbing the blood off the back steps and calling for our help to clean up.

That’s why you didn’t want to meet the ‘other’ Paula. Especially not at Perth Airport when you’ve had a few yourself.

So while we were picking up our luggage then walking out to the car park, Max tried to smooth over the tension with a long but entertaining explanation about why West Australians were known as ‘sandgropers’. Something to do with a state boasting huge deserts, miles of sandy beaches and the effects of too much drinking. This helped to relax us, as though Nick’s and my current condition was simply

a way of fitting in with the locals. Paula even forced a smile every time Max looked her way.

Max the Millionaire's car lived up to his nickname. A gleaming, gold-coloured Lincoln convertible with a white leather-covered hood. A *goddamned* 'Yank-tank' looking like a modern-day gold chariot. It was a hot, sunny Perth afternoon so Max hit the button to retract the Linc's roof before we climbed in. He told us to wedge our surfboards in the back seat so they stuck out behind. We wondered if he was always this good-humoured about surfboards in his limousine. I wanted to ask if his car had a hidden cocktail bar. It probably did but now wasn't the time.

As we cruised out into the sandy suburbs of Perth, Max asked us how things were over in 'The East'. It was funny to hear our side of Australia being referred to as though it was somewhere near China or Japan. But understandable, I suppose, from a sandgroper's point of view.

It wasn't long before we reached the beautiful, wide Swan River. There were yachts and motorboats dotting the blue, sweeping views across to the city centre and – true to its name – no shortage of swans. Black ones. There was even a billboard for a beer called Swan Lager. These people obviously took their swans seriously.

Our route led us past the leafy university and into the neat little suburb of Nedlands. This was where Paula's sister and brother-in-law lived, and their house was going to be the base for our surfari over the next month. Max politely declined an invitation from Paula to come inside. He knew to leave while things were still reasonably civilised.

We all waved goodbye from the front lawn while Max drove off.

As soon as Max's Lincoln was out of sight, Paula's smiling façade dissolved into a scowl that flashed with a

meat-tenderising fury. ‘How dare you two turn up in such a disgraceful state,’ she hissed. Then more loudly, ‘How could you humiliate me like that in front of Max?’

Nick was cool. He didn’t raise his voice but wasn’t going to take a backward step either. ‘Humiliate you? We were really polite to Max.’

‘You’re pissed and you smell like bloody little breweries!’

‘Look, the hostie gave us each a free can by mistake – so what’s the big deal about a coupla drinks?’ That was Nick thinking on his slightly sloshy feet and I was extremely thankful it was him standing up to his mum, not me.

Paula’s tone became sarcastic. ‘How many “free” cans, did you say?’

‘One each.’

‘Oh, spare me the bullshit,’ she snapped. ‘Do you think I’m an idiot?’

Somehow I found it reassuring to hear a parent swear. It made them seem more human. My own mum never swore and although my dad’s savage yelling could be frightening, his words never sank much below ‘damn ignorant mongrel pig’.

Then Nick went too far. ‘Well, *you* can bloody talk – any more booze and you’ll lose your other kidney.’

That was it. You didn’t need to be telepathic to sense a thousand metal meat-tenderising mallets suddenly rising as one behind Paula’s eyes. As their battle cry began to ring out across Nedlands, we ran from the front yard and sprinted for our lives down the street as Paula tore after us.

What a great way for a couple of Easterners to introduce themselves to this nice Perth neighbourhood. I wondered if our hosts were at home, waiting for us all to walk in their front door with presents?