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This is the author's radio script of this article.

*The Red Highway*. Nicolas Rothwell. Black Inc, 2009.

Reviewed by Gillian Dooley for Writers Radio, Radio Adelaide, recorded 16 May 2009.

In *The Red Highway* Nicolas Rothwell continues his exploration of the deserts of central and northern Australia, an exploration as much of the landscape within as of the geographical terrain. In the inimitable mixture of memoir, history and reflection he established in *Wings of the Kite Hawk*, he takes us to unfrequented, remote reaches of the country, places of strange and lovely and sometimes deadly enchantment.

Returning to Darwin in 2005 after a year spent as a foreign correspondent in the Middle East, an experience referred to only obliquely but one he clearly needed to recover from, Rothwell sets off on a series of journeys to re-establish himself:

Those days ... were ones of grief and emptiness for me. I was still possessed by the routines of war; my old surrounds seemed at once too familiar and quite foreign; I could see no pattern or path ahead in life – and if I made frequent journeys then, it was only in the hope that movement, any movement, might help me find my way back into the country. (244)

These journeys, often made in the company of one old friend or other – a kangaroo shooter, a lawyer, Kimberley socialite, a 12-year-old aboriginal girl – alternate with stories of earlier times, when explorers travelled ‘beyond the contours of established maps’ to find an answer to ‘the question that lay hidden in every explorer’s heart: how to perish, how to face death – marooned, in silence, alone’ (215). Stories of death abound: the death of heroic white explorers, the death of a dingo at the hands of one of his companions, the boasted deaths, over the years at the Wyndham abattoirs, of more than 2 million cattle: ‘My thoughts ... had been stilled by that figure. It fell

through me like a stone' (133). And a final ghostly vision of a ship of death, on the seas off the northern coast of Western Australia.

*The Red Highway* is a melancholy book but its tone is not unremittingly lugubrious. The conversations he reports are scarcely natural; wordy and philosophical, often rather dreamlike. He often plays the part of a slightly mocking sophisticate – one friend remarked on his 'tone of melancholy', and Rothwell replied, 'Of course. ... It's important to stay in character' (182). Some of these encounters could best be described as droll, like that with a French Canadian priest he met in Jerusalem, who had happy memories of a youthful visit to the Aboriginal community at Kalumburu, but was now distressed to witness the street cats preying on sparrows: "I don't know," I said, ... trying to choose my words with a degree of care, "that life in a remote Aboriginal community would really have been ideal for you." Others have a surreal quality: researching the life of Czech art collector and anthropologist Karel Krupka in the Fisher Library in Sydney, he is reproved for allowing his tears to fall onto a manuscript. The attendant tells him, 'You're not allowed to be sad, in a library, or an archive. ... that's not the way it's meant to be. Archives are where things live on, and memories triumph. This is where the pain of the past is redeemed – and sadness falls into its place.'

Though bracketed beginning and end with atmospheric black and white photos by Peter Eve, the book is full of visual imagery we are permitted to see only in our mind's eye. Photographs of people and places, paintings, and natural landscapes are evoked but no illustrations are provided. The result is a longing to see what Rothwell sees, though it is accompanied by the conviction that the eye of the beholder is all and it will never appear so magical in its reality as when the hypnotic passages of his prose transport us there.