

# The Perils of Memoirs

Aviva Tuffield

Gaby Naher

*The Truth about My Fathers*

Vintage, \$29.95pb, 333pp, 1 74051 164 6

Cliff Nichols

*I'm Hungry, Daddy: A True Story*

Bantam, \$21.95pb, 330pp, 1 86325 383 1

Shirley Painter

*The Bean Patch*

HarperCollins, \$21.95pb, 310pp, 0 7322 7421 4

THESE THREE MEMOIRS share a central focus on fathers: Gaby Naher's is a meditation on fatherhood, Shirley Painter's is about surviving an abusive one, while Cliff Nichols's relates his life as an alcoholic and unreliable parent. They are also all part of the current flood of life-writing appearing from Australian publishing houses. Drusilla Modjeska, writing recently about the failings of contemporary fiction, argued that creative writing courses since the 1980s have produced a spate of postmodern first novels that were 'tricksy and insubstantial', deconstructing narrative at the expense of well-developed plots and characters. These courses may also account for much of the current memoir boom, feeding the demands of our voyeuristic culture. But publishers have a responsibility to readers to tame the genre's self-revelatory excesses.

Gaby Naher, with two novels to her credit, is the most polished writer here and produces a work of literary non-fiction that blends biography, memoir and family history. The impetus behind Naher's book was to gain insight into her adoptive father, Daddo: 'I need to know how Daddo — the world's most exceptional father — was fathered.' *The Truth about My Fathers* traces Daddo's early life and that of his father, Ernst, and ultimately records Naher's own search for her biological father. Naher's 'father quest' takes her to Switzerland, Daddo's birthplace, to research his parents' early lives and marriage, to Dublin, where Daddo's family moved in 1923 prior to their emigration to Australia in 1927, and to North America to find her French-Canadian natural father. Throughout this journey, she wrestles with the question of what constitutes a 'real' father: is it nature or nurture? In trying to understand what made Daddo such an excellent one, she uncovers the truth about Ernst, who disappeared early from Daddo's life, and left him with 'father shame', a sentiment Naher comes to share regarding her biological father.

Written in short chapters, Naher's narrative constantly shifts from past to present, and continent to continent, interweaving Daddo's family history with scenes from her own life. Despite its fragmented structure, Naher assembles the shards of her story into a vivid, if stippled, portrait of three fathers. Although having clearly undertaken extensive historical and archival research, Naher, like Modjeska in *Poppy*, unobtrusively imagines events in her characters' lives for which there are no actual records, inventing their thoughts and specific experiences. Naher comes to realise that even some inherited family 'truths' cannot be verified by the archives — 'I begin to entertain the prospect of family history as a seamless blend of fact and fiction' — and her fictionalising seems to have its own register of truth.

The book ends with a moving account of Naher nursing the dying Daddo, who has been proven, beyond a doubt, as her 'real' father, supplying the unconditional love and support that this relationship implies. *The Truth about My Fathers* is essentially a paean to Daddo, and Naher's success lies in convincing readers of his remarkable compassion. Although this is a personal and emotional book, it is rarely self-indulgent and, for that, Naher should be congratulated.

Shirley Painter's *The Bean Patch* is in the tradition of memoirs of childhood neglect or even abuse. Some of these, despite their dire subject matter, are beautiful works of literature, such as Andrea Ashworth's *Once in a House on Fire* and Paula Fox's *Borrowed Finery*; others are less accomplished (consider Dave Pelzer's trilogy starting with *A Child Called It*); many have become bestsellers.

Painter's memoir emerges from years of therapy and, more recently, a creative writing course. Painter is eighty-three, and this is her first published work. As her book's cover blurb informs us, she has defied the odds to survive childhood at all: 'When she was four years old she was so badly injured she was pronounced dead and taken to the morgue.' *The Bean Patch* is an account of growing up with an abusive, at times murderous, father. Painter has learned her writing lessons well. At the outset, she states that, while she could have tidied up her memories to present a chronological

account, it might have produced a 'very flat narrative'. Instead, she has chosen to present 'the same gaps, the same clues, and the same dilemmas as I had, so that the effect would be the same: What's going on?'

*The Bean Patch* opens with a Prologue, reported in the third person, recounting two events involving a 'little girl' that assault the reader with their cruelty, and whose relevance and place in this life story will gradually become apparent. From then on, the memoir is related in the present tense by our first-person narrator, Emma Wiltshire — Painter has altered names to protect the guilty. Given that, as a child, she was hospitalised a number of times and was still sent home, there must be other guilty parties beyond the diabolical father.

Painter successfully recaptures a young girl's voice and the innocence, incomprehension and fears of childhood. In her early years, Painter experienced and witnessed extreme violence, while being starved of praise and affection. The nature of her physical and sexual abuse is hinted at throughout, but only gradually revealed — never explicitly. Eventually, the full picture comes into focus, but, for much of the book, these violations, like Painter's memories, are repressed.

The stream of consciousness aspect to Painter's narrative should have been reined in: some anecdotes have a rambling quality. Similarly, there are some frustrating and unhelpful ellipses, leaving us unenlightened by such phrases as 'but I can't go on'. The indiscipline of Painter's writing is especially evident in Part Two where she describes the first of the therapy sessions that resulted in the eventual recovery of memories, and which are then recorded in spasmodic bursts, with repetitious information. That one's memory works in a certain way is not sufficient justification for a book's shape. Good memoir-writing requires selective and crafted re-remembering.

Despite its flaws, Painter's memoir is a real achievement. She has managed to tell of her violated childhood without exploiting her readers' emotions or seeking their pity. Moreover, her reluctance to expose the complete litany of abuse prevents *The Bean Patch* from becoming voyeuristic.

Cliff Nichols, at seventy-four, is another first-time author and survivor. He, too, could have been better served by his publisher. *I'm Hungry, Daddy*, a story of growing up in Sydney during the Depression with an alcoholic mother and itinerant father, and of Nichols's own battles with alcoholism and poverty, has a certain charm. If we judge memoirs by their ability to revivify a time and place through personal experiences, *I'm Hungry, Daddy* succeeds. Nichols recaptures the flavour of his life on skid row as a frequently homeless alcoholic who leaves a trail of failed marriages and children in his wake — except for one daughter, Helen, whose plea supplies the book's title, and who accompanies him on much of his tortuous journey towards eventual recovery.

Nichols writes with disarming honesty, and a certain wit, about his life before and during his alcoholism, his travels with Army bands, and his various drinking haunts and companions. Only towards the end does his book descend into self-help platitudes and cringe-making self-indulgence. His publisher should have removed the full text of the vows for his fifth wedding ceremony and the round-up of the whereabouts and occupations of his large extended family.

In these confessional and therapy-driven times, with audiences' fascination for talk shows and reality TV, memoirs are likely to continue to be written and sought by publishers, and some real gems from the genre have been added to the Australian literary canon in recent times. But their extravagances need to be checked — and the word 'inspirational' should be banned from promotional material.