Peter Rose, *Rose Boys* (Text Classics, 2013)

*Rose Boys* is republished ten years after its initial influence in Text’s Australian Classics series, a collection of very interesting books whose common denominator is that a) they are written too late to be out of copyright, thus are not in the public domain, so one publisher can have rights to them, and b) they were out of print commercially, or were simply acquired by Text because the firm wanted to publish them. This is very different from the rationale and composition of the Angus and Robertson Classics series, which seems composed solely of books out of copyright, such as Eleanor Dark’s *The Timeless Land*. Thus there are floating around two different definitions of what an Australian classic is: 1) a book written by writers still alive or alive relatively recently that is felt to deserve more attention, or 2) a long-established book in the Australian canon written by a writer long dead and from a fundamentally different era. The point here is, that as Frank Kermode argued four decades ago, defining what a classic is far from simple.

On the other hand, if a classic is defined by Ezra Pound’s dictum about literature, ‘news that stays news’, Rose’s book certainly has remained in the conversation, often being recommended *sotto voce* or highlighted *en passant* in literary conversations. Given, especially, the increased attention to life writing in academic terms, *Rose Boys* is a remarkable book because it presents a different sort of biographical paradigm in Australian literature, one less about the battler who works his or her way up from unpromising circumstances to a life, and a family, irrevocably changed by catastrophe.

Peter Rose is an acclaimed Australian poet, editor, and novelist (the delicious social satire *Roddy Parr* is one of the most criminally underrated books of the past decade). But he came from a family with anchored in a very different pastime: a father who was an acclaimed football player and coach, and a son who sought to emulate him. Nobody from the United States cannot be struck by what I saw on my first visit to Melbourne in 2001: the football culture of Victoria, the local loyalties, more or less each neighborhood having a team, the shared camaraderie of fans whatever their barracking loyalties, the rich culture of lore and storytelling that surround it – all of this is different from American sports. So is the close connection between rural life and urban athletic success, the way the small city of Wangaratta and the remote Nyah West club were stopping places for the elder Rose’s success the way that, in American terms, Anniston was for Ty Cobb, but that one sees seldom now in the US. Yet, with honorable exceptions s such as Steven Carolli,’s *The Gift Of Speed* )concerning cricket, not football however)-Australia does not nearly have the literature of sport that the US does, or even to Canada and UK do; for that matter, where is the Aussie equivalent of the New Zealand writer Lloyd Jones’s *The Book of Fame*? Rose mentions Frank Hardy’s *Power without Glory*, but that really is more to do with politics. Rose’s book is one of the few high-literary achievements to come out of this beloved sport.

This is not to say, though, that *Rose Boys* is a footy book, although the AFL fan will certainly find much of interest. It is a book about family, about illness, and, as the title suggest, above all about masculinity and what happens when it is inflected by pain, damage, and trauma. In 1974, Robert Allen Rose, the football-playing son, was critically injured in a car accident, remaining quadriplegic (although he did regain some limited use of his hands) for the rest of his life. The most athletic of men was at an instant reduced to one of the most helpless, with seismic consequences for himself and his entire family.

A customary trope in a narrative of this sort – football-playing father, football playing and then quadriplegic son, non-football-playing other son who is both poet and intellectual – is to make the non-football-playing intellectual the privileged observer and to have it all be about his self-consciousness. The remarkable accomplishment of *Rose Boys*, its originality as a specimen of life writing, is that, though Peter Rose makes clear who he is, he does not assume the detached standpoint of the quizzical observer. Peter Rose’s identity as a poet is not concealed in this book; one of its most rigorous rewards is the samples of his own and others’ poetry (such as Peter Porter’s) to fill in emotional gaps in the narrative or to express something prose cannot express: for instance Rose’s poem about his classical music-loving, cultivated mother marrying a rural, athletic man, is given pungency by how Rose puts it in the poem: – ‘a bantamweight from the bush’ (23). Rose then winningly comments, ‘Poets lie of course, for the sake of euphony and alliteration. My father was a lightweight, then a welterweight, never a bantamweight.’

In another poem, Rose draws out the similarities and differences between footy fervour and operamania, but emphasises the similarities, with a player’s desire for a championship he did not win compared to an aria in its combination of emotional defiance and narrative inevitability. Art is no more aware than sport; just an alternate arena of suffering and, at snatches, affirmation. Having a poet’s perspective does not give him agency; it is instead a means to respond to the mortality and vulnerability that are at the heart of the book. Peter Rose makes fun of his own lack of prowess at sport in secondary school; he also self-effacingly notes that, when he mentions, at his brother’s funeral, that he is a poet, there is an awkward silence, as the audience is not sure whether or not he is making a joke. Rose came late to poetry – writing his first poem when he was thirty, something not unusual for novelists but rare for poets, so much of whose inspirations has to do with the passion of youth. There is a crackling dryness in Peter Rose’s writing that leads him, for all his nimble wit, to take words seriously, to not trivialise them. His idea of the mission of the writer is above all a conscientious one.

The literary world, like the rest of the world today, is prone to divide people between winners and losers: whose reputation is rising, whose is falling; whose career is going places, whose marooned in a backwater; who matters; who does not. Sport registers these categories more obviously and statistically, but they have suffused daily life these days, in whatever profession. So it is heartening that *Rose Boys* presents Robert Allen Rose – footballer who could never quite follow in his father’s trail of glory during his accident-shortened playing career, than quadriplegic who lived on for 27 years after a harrowing catastrophe – as a winner, and that his family clearly saw him as such as well. R.A. Rose was someone who survived for decades when he was thought unlikely to survive, who loved and cared about others through maintained friendships, made his mark on those who knew him. This is not so much a tale of courage amid suffering as one of somebody committed to being the person he was and knew he could be even under the most daunting of circumstances. The father, R.P. Rose, coach of Collingwood and later Footscray (a franchise now the Western Bulldogs), achieved nothing greater on the playing field than what he managed as carer for his son, being devoted to him throughout, never disappointed, never contemptuous. One saw the same spirit, in a more minor key, with respect to Peter Rose; even when the non-athletic Rose boy is repeatedly relegated to lesser squads at his secondary school, the elder Rose is there to cheer him on. This was a test case for the far greater challenge of his athletic son’s paralysis, in response to which R.P. Rose manifested a quiet, ardent paternal love in a way that is rare in characters, fictional or real. Nor was the only support from the family; a wide and interestingly-depicted circle of friends is ever-present, and even the state, which fully paid for R.A. Rose’s hospitalisation and treatment,

is a force for good here. Those who oppose the welfare state and socialised medicine would do well to give *Rose Boys* a read, for a compelling example in which the presence of the state in subsidising health care was vitally needed.

The story of *Rose Boys* is a direct argument for the necessity of nonfiction narrative as an available genre. A novel would have inevitably shortened the period between R.A. Rose’s survival and his death, made circumstances more melodramatic, made members of the very caring extended Rose family uncaring just for contrast. But the long survival is the marrow of this book: the way life is still worth pursuing for the injured footballer even after the inconceivable horror of all that has happened. The nonfiction frame also benefits the role of Peter Rose, as he is free to be chronicler without any halo of literariness. As a writer in general, Rose has always had what might be called classical virtues of erudition without prolixity and with an often-tart asperity; the title of his poetry volume, *The Catullan Rag*, says it all here. (Although his classicism is laced with emotion and is far different from the customary Australian mode *a la* A.D. Hope). The book’s prose shimmers, but does not distract from the narrative’s being, at heart, what the Australian critic John Wiltshire, coiner of the term ‘autopathography’ for a narrative of one’s own pain, might call a heteropathography, a narrative of someone else’s pain.

This makes its message one of urgency, and Brian Matthews, in his introduction to the volume, does well to emphasise the relentlessness and downward spiral of the book’s narrative. But not all is predictable. A leitmotif of the book is that of mistake. I already mentioned the deliberate mistake of ‘bantamweight’ in the poem, and we should add to that at least two others: when the newspaper reports that the younger Rose is critically injured, Peter Rose notices it was another footballer, Denis O’Callaghan, who was actually in the photograph, conveying, amid shock, a sense of the absurd. Similarly, the scrapbook covering the younger Rose’s athletic exploits has the name and career date span of the father on it. This registering of this odd, quirky detail in the midst of calamity, allows a sense of history and discursivity making their own private jokes even as the splendours and, in this case, the miseries of life roll along. But perhaps mistake is a larger theme in the book: the mistake of the car accident, life as a tragic mistake, filled with great as well as small errors and random changings of course. But there are good chances or turns as well. After his injury, Robert regains some capacities thought lost; his health slightly but measurably improves. Peter Rose does not depict this as pointless suffering, as someone who should rather have been dead. R.A. Rose’s long survival might not have been pleasant for either him or the family and friends who cared for him, but if was a life he demonstrably wanted to live. As different as Peter Rose turned out from the family, the challenges he faced – depression, coming to grips with his homosexuality, carving out a literary-publishing career in a nation not always congenial to such pursuits – are oddly complementary to those his brother faced. Peter Rose makes clear that no matter how aesthetic and recondite his pursuits became, his brother’s story was always at the heart of everything he did. In this, he was only echoing his father, who, though remaining active as a coach for over a decade more, instantly embraced his devastatingly injured son as the heart of his life.

I finished my reread of this book absolutely convinced that *Rose Boys* indeed is an Australian classic, for the elegance of its writing, yes, but even more for how Peter Rose distinctively displays his brothers’ exhibition of an old-fashioned way of out-facing misfortune (271).

Nicholas Birns

Book reviews: *Rose Boys* by Peter Rose. Nicholas Birns. 
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