Surviving a Father

Joy Hooton

Renée Goossens

BELONGING: A MEMOIR

ABC Books, $27.95pb, 284pp, 0 7333 1244 6

RENÉE GOOSSENS, born in 1940, is the youngest daughter of the composer and conductor Sir Eugene Goossens. Married three times, he had three daughters with Dorothy Millar, and two more with his second wife, and Renée’s mother, Janet Lewis. His third marriage, to Marjorie Foulkrod, was childless. It is characteristic of this memoir that Renée Goossens remarks early in the narrative that she never met one of her half-sisters and that it was decades before she met the other two. Her life seems to have been marked or scarred by a series of disappearances on the part of significant family members and by unexplained absences.

Ostensibly privileged, Renée endured periods as a child and particularly as an adolescent that were often as emotionally bleak as Albert Facey’s. The two are polar opposites in terms of class, but the comparison with Facey could be extended to the style of this memoir, which makes a similar impression of artless record. This form of writing works well when Goossens is describing the strange behaviour of adults from a child’s point of view, enhancing the overall impression of vulnerability to obscure forces that seemed benign yet were malign in effect. But it becomes less effective later in the narrative, which is not focused on these primary experiences.

On the one hand, Renée’s adored father encouraged her love of music and especially opera, and inspired her with pride in his genius; on the other, he was mostly emotionally inaccessible. He was no doubt the most important figure in her childhood, but, like most of the other adults in her life, he remained baffling. Even later, when a scandal involving pornography forced him to leave Australia, and when he was reduced to working mainly in Eastern Europe, his few postcards to her were confined to surface details about his life. Renée learned about his disgrace in 1956 — belatedly and second-hand. Later, she discovered something of the truth from newspaper files. She learned of her father’s death from a radio announcement while she was in hospital recovering from a car accident. Fortunately, Belonging features some generous individuals outside the family, who provided support during Renée’s subsequent devastating misfortunes. Eventually, she won through to independence and returned to Sydney. Her memoir will fascinate readers interested in Australia’s musical history, as well as general readers of life-writing.

Archived at Flinders University: dspace.flinders.edu.au