
Memoir holds the position of poor second cousin when juxtaposed to the more authoritative task of remembrance that autobiography entails. Autobiography is historically constrained to tell the *story of a life*, meshing the author’s life with that of others as refracted through the mirror of history/his-story. Memoir only requires the author to tell of *stories from a life*. He/she can choose which stories to tell and how to construct the telling and thus bring greater fictive licence to bear upon the narrative. For Marcus Billson the question of whether memoir is literature is evaluated through ‘the structure and depth of the memoirs represented world’ and by how well the memoirist persuades the reader of the coherence of ‘a life fully lived’.

*Mug Shots: A Memoir* titles Barry Oakley’s slim volume as well as declares its genre. As far as his personal life is concerned, Oakley is the husband of Carmel (described as ‘life support’ in his brief dedication) a father of six and a grandfather. Even if measured in years alone, octogenarian Barry Oakley has lived a full life. Oakley’s career is also one of significant literary influence accompanied by an unwavering commitment to Australian writing. My first encounter with Oakley was through his editorship of the literary pages of *The Australian*, a position which he embarked on in 1988. Rightly proud of his contribution to Australian letters, Oakley cites his entry in *The Oxford Literary History of Australia*: ‘The book review section of the Weekend Australian became a necessary reference point for opinion and judgement, especially during Barry Oakley’s editorship from 1988 until 1997’ (225). Once he realises that the book review is ‘an art form in itself’ Oakley purges the paper of ‘those who couldn’t do it’ (194). High order, diplomatic gifts are obligatory: ‘Literary editors operate like escort agencies. Matchings need diplomacy (is A a friend or enemy of B? Wasn’t C an ex-lover of D? Didn’t E once get a bad review from F?)’ (194). Oakley’s rendering of the politics of editing the literary pages of the country’s only national daily is both absorbing and acerbic. Along the way, there are encounters with local and international literary luminaries such as: Geoffrey Dutton, Gore Vidal, Mordecai Richler, Murray Bail, Sidney Sheldon and Joseph Heller and many more – all cleverly and sometimes caustically portrayed. Oakley knows the monster: ‘Writers are solipsists who believe their work is a nebula at the centre of the universe. (I know – I’m one myself.)’ (197).

As far as Barry Oakley’s own writing is concerned he is most admired for his work as a dramatist. In the 1970s, through his association with the legendary Australian Performing Group (APG), Oakley is part of the renaissance of Australian theatre. His plays were performed at La Mama during a time when ‘La Mama gained strength and standing as playwrights – Hibberd, Romeril, Williamson, Buzo and many others – saw their plays evolve’ (92). Oakley’s descriptions of suburban, left wing, and creative anarchy in 1970s Melbourne is peppered with joyous satire. As a collective, the APG sheltered a diverse group of leftist ideologues: ‘family hating dopesters, communitarians, anarcho-surrealists, insurrectionary feminists with matching head gear … Their heroes were the three Ms: Marx, Marcuse and Mao’ (110). As a ‘Catholic father of six who’d worked in advertising’, Oakley believes that for the APG he represents the ‘Enemy They Had to Have’ (111). Yet,

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in spite of ‘antiquated middle class’ ways, Oakley’s plays achieve success – both at the box office and with the critics. By way of example, Oakley’s Bedfellows, which premieres at the Pram Factory in 1975, is a hit and tours nationally, and in 1988 the radio adaptation of Oakley’s drama, The Feet of Daniel Mannix is awarded an AWGIE.2 Meantime, Barry Oakley also finds the time to write fiction and some of his better known novels are: Craziplane (1989), Let’s Hear it for Prendergast (1970) – which wins the Cook Bicentenary award, A Salute for the Great McCarthy (1970) and Wild Ass of a Man (1967). But tall tales of the mishaps and tortures of personal literary birthing form only part of Oakley narrative. Literature as a full time occupation is rarely viable and as a father of six Oakley is always under pressure to make ends meet. Consequently, he has diverting tales to tell about his other occupations which have included: high school teacher, university lecturer, advertising copywriter, theatre critic, copywriter for Department of Trade and Industry, head of the writing workshop at the Australian Film and Television School, Writer/Producer – of ABC Radio Drama and Features, as well as writer-in-residence at various universities. The cavalcade of characters he encounters along the way presents a Who’s Who of Australian post-war literary and cultural history: Vincent Buckley, Frank Hardy, Barry Humphries, Frank Thring, Gerald Murnane, Peter Carey, Jane Campion, P. J. Hogan, Max Gillies, Alex Buzo, Max Suich, Dinny O’Hearn, Robert Drewe, Clive James, Frank Moorhouse, Bob Ellis, Frank Devine, and many, many others. Oakley’s personal story features but is delicately drawn (a devastating mid-life separation from Carmel is glossed over – no high drama here).

Certainly, there is much that is humorous in Mug Shots and supports review quotes like ‘achingly funny’ and ‘funniest memoir’ which feature on the back cover. But this is a multi-layered memoir and Oakley’s real success lies in the deftness with which he interweaves life stories that are alternately sad, witty, poignant, nostalgic, jaded, and sometimes tragic or occasionally damning – as is his judgment of Manning Clark: ‘a historian who didn’t let the facts interfere with his theories, a poseur in an absurd high hat. A great dramatiser not only of history, but also of himself’ (212). As to a reader’s judgment of Mug Shots? Billson’s evaluative criteria quoted at the beginning of this review requires that ‘the structure and depth of the memoirs represented world’ needs to be both believable and engrossing. In Mug Shots, Oakley’s journey, from repressed suburban Catholic in post-war Melbourne through the cultural upheaval in the 1960s and 1970s and its mandatory rites of passage (including sojourns in London and Sydney and Catholic disavowal) fully persuades the reader not only of ‘a life fully lived’ but also of a life of its time. In my opinion, Mug Shots would be an excellent starting point for any syllabus that addresses the social, cultural and literary influences in post-war Australia. Towards the memoir’s end there is some luminous writing when Oakley (now reconciled with Catholicism) vividly describes the spirituality of old age: ‘as the body threadbares, intimations of a folded inner self packed as if for a journey – a journey that even for the Christian is mysterious, even terrifying’ (227).

Memoir is a literary genre whose purpose is the reclamation of the self. Hoisting a metaphorical flag that names, delineates and rescues the territory of the embodied life, it performs a sort of psychic land claim. The self is the main character in the story and it is this personality who narrates the life. Merging fact and memory, this ‘self as the writer’

2 The AWGIE awards are presented annually by the Australian Writers Guild and recognise excellence in writing for radio, screen, stage and television.

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assumes an omnipotent presence outside of the work. Thus, the purpose of memoir
/autobiography for such a separated self – main character, narrator, and omnipotent writer
– becomes an act of integration, whereby the author arrives at a version of a self that he
can publicly own. Consequently, the act of performing autobiography/memoir becomes as
significant as its public reception. As a reader, I was grateful to Oakley for undertaking the
journey and performing the act of memoir that is Mug Shots.

Eleni Pavlides