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Complete Life Writing Reviews
(in one file for download/print)

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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 such as Steven Carroll’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

One sultry morning in Darwin, hemp-wearing army wife Amy Silva grips a trembling fist around two pink lines on a plastic stick. Struggling to come to terms with her rampant fertility, disillusioned with a haughty obstetrician and infuriated by an inordinate amount of peeing, Amy finds solace in a decision to homebirth. After all, it worked for the cavewomen, right? But as a tropical cyclone threatens to whip down the main street, Amy finds herself facing more than biology. (Back Cover synopsis)

This debut novel by Kim Lock tackles the contentious issue of a woman’s right to make an informed choice regarding her care during pregnancy as well devising an agreed birth plan. A work of fiction, the novel’s light approach does not claim to be authoritative and but slots nicely into the Chick Lit genre.

The central character Amy Silva is living with her childhood sweetheart and now long-term partner, Dylan Brooks. Dylan serves in an army artillery unit that is stationed in Darwin.

The humour in the novel is quirky and it contains many funny moments as the story moves between Amy’s present situation and flashes back to moments in her early life. As a structure it works well, making sense of Amy’s reactions and understanding of her personality as she works through the upheaval of her unplanned pregnancy. Her first lesson in the facts of life is laugh-out-loud material:

> The first person to enlighten me with the details of human reproduction was an unfortunate-smelling boy in my grade five class whose name was Barry White – the irony of which would only occur to me when I was almost fifteen. (44)

The liberal sprinkling of expletives as well as colloquialisms and nicknames Australianises the language of the novel. The mind-boggling array of nicknames thrown at Amy by way of introduction to other army wives is wonderful:

Karen – Packo’s missus, Phillipa – Wayne’s missus, Sarah – Clockface’s missus (Clockface? Seriously?) Beth – Big Man’s missus and Charlie – Bricky’s missus. (100)

An ironical moment occurs as Amy recounts the first time she waits for Dylan’s return to Darwin from an overseas army exercise:

> I had noticed a camera close by, the huge black lens trained in my direction. My stomach had flip-flopped as I glanced about, convinced the cameraman’s focus was elsewhere. But as my gaze had returned to the camera, warily, he had poked his head from behind the viewfinder, winked at me, then dropped his eyes to my chest, giving me a pointed stare … across the modest swell of my breasts had been a large black peace symbol. (118)

Though not a radical militant alternative life-styler Amy is aware that some of her views are at odds with army life.

The author is married to an RAAF serviceman and is familiar with the love of gossip that Amy hates most about army life and social gatherings; the ‘You’ll Never Guess Who Did What To Whom’ (9) syndrome. The patriarchal life of the army – the obedience to orders – syncs with Amy’s attitude towards the requirements of the medical profession as she begins her pre-natal visits.

Amy and Dylan’s return to celebrate Christmas with their families in the picturesque and bustling township of Woodend in regional Victoria introduces Amy to the home birth option as a viable alternative. The idea takes a firm hold and back in Darwin Amy does her research and meets with a potential midwife. It seems to be an alternative better suited to Amy than the regular urine samples, ultrasounds, and seemingly endless tests that make Amy view the medical process as more concerned with assessing her and her unborn baby for errors than informing, fostering and building self-assurance (76).

The homebirth idea takes firm hold and her resolve to take on a midwife and walk away from the most sought after obstetrician in Darwin (74) is a turning point in the novel. Tensions mount for Amy but rather than giving in, she just digs in her heels and deepens her resolve (209). Dylan, the usually supportive partner, becomes obstinately opposed fearing for her safety at the birth.

Darwin looms large throughout this novel. Having lived there, the author brings to life the community that is Darwin and the quirks of its weather – The Wet and The Dry. She manages convey the heat and the stifling thick- aired humidity as the city swelters through the monsoon season. We can almost hear the annoying buzz of the mosquito inviting us to swat it before it draws blood. We can visualise the dark thunderclouds that promise rain that doesn’t come, or feel the relief when rain does come and relax to the thrumming on the roof as the cicadas serenade outside. The fury of a cyclone, flinging debris, street signs, lids from barbecues, uprooting trees, hurling small rocks like pellets from a shotgun, is well depicted. And as people and emergency personnel emerge and begin the process of checking that no-one has been severely injured and begin to clean up the mess Darwin is ‘scrubbed up beautifully after Tropical Cyclone Kaitlyn tap-danced through her streets with the grace and eloquence of a rhinoceros’ (294).

It takes a cyclone, a phone call that cuts off mid-sentence and a wild drive into the a cyclone as it ramps up its power before the estranged couple reach a point where they can actually listen to and understand each other.

The birth of Amy’s baby at home is beautifully written and is graphic in its telling, which may prove to be a little too much information for the squeamish. It is a very moving, magical and empowering moment for Amy and Dylan so have the box of tissues handy if you are the emotional type.

If any criticism is to be made it is in the stereotyped cliché of the by-the-book medical profession and the equally so view of a relaxed hippie-style midwife. The medicos don’t stand a chance and the midwife is a winner even before she is required to perform. However, a balanced view is not the purpose of this particular story: it is, in the words of Noni Hazlehurst, ‘A beautifully drawn portrait of a woman seeking empowerment’ (Front cover blurb). Criticism aside, I enjoyed it too.

Kay Hart

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’.¹

*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,

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’s 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, Gerard Murnane, Peter Carey, Jane Campion, P. J. Hogan, Max Gillies, Alex Buzo, Max Suich, Dinny O’Hearn, Robert Drew, 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’

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

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
 Apparently these exchanges aren’t thrust out into the world by some vigilante hacker to
demonstrate a moral vacuum at the heart of capitalism, but are actually ‘leaked’, as it were,
by the authors themselves. For this oddity, a range of explanations present themselves. A
theory I would have liked to confirm is that the book is an epistolary novel, in which the
authors surrender their true identities to the demands of plot and comedy. Sadly not. True,
Auster does at one point announce that he dreamt of having sex with his mother. And,
discussing Auster’s objections to something in which Jonathan Franzen seems to deprecate
the novel, Coetzee feels moved to tell Auster that irony is a possible move where novelists
are involved. But one would be unlikely to confuse these amusements with anything in
Wodehouse. Are Auster and Coetzee on the level when they reflect on what to do about
Palestine and the Financial Crisis? Coetzee suggests that we deal with bad numbers by
making up good ones, before going on to say that such proposals are clearly the ravings of an
economic ignoramus. What he doesn’t add is that they also constitute the official policy of
the Bank of England (‘Quantitative Easing’). Is this satire? Maybe, safe in Australia, he
doesn’t know the awful facts.

But I doubt very much anyone will buy the book as a way of working out how to
proceed with banking reform. Likewise Auster’s suggestion, which I feel sure we’ve heard
before, that in order to secure peace in the Middle East the Jewish population of Israel might
be granted the state of Wyoming. If these chaps are on the level, perhaps the level they are on
is the field of wit. Or is it baseball?

Why is speculation about Sport the perennial fall-back topic of these discussions? Is
this choice of topic something to do with the fact that both Men are Men? Possibly, but their
exchanges in that line include much which as chat in the pub would be enlightening after a
fashion, and starts to look a bit odd when actually written down. Auster: “if husband and wife
do not figure out a way to become friends, the marriage has little chance” (8). Same letter:
‘Can men and women be friends? I think so. As long as there is no physical attraction on
either side’ (8). These remarks qualify as evidence of intelligible worries, or as illuminating
humour, but are perhaps not the sort of coherent summation we might want in a thesis. So I
hope no one buys this book to interrogate these chaps about their theory and performance of
gender. The world being what it is, some will. But that these men obsess about Sport is vastly
underdetermined by the mere fact of their maleness, and perhaps more convincingly
explained by the fact that each is, in their letter-writing, a specialised kind of Sportsman. For
often enough Sport is what they are having, in batting theory and anecdote to and fro. Sport
then becomes a topic of this intellectual Sport because the Sportsmen are interested – but not
indecently so – in what on earth they are up to, and whether there is any use in it. A question
in the background: is this competitive display of literary acuity a culpable waste of time? No,
is the answer we want to arrive at. So, as any intelligent letter might, each missive makes a
claim for interest and erudition on the subject at hand, lobbing the ball over the net for the
other chap to bat back. It isn’t clear whether they had from the start an eye on some umpire,
Dear Reader, but the play is impressively clean; Sporting in the old sense. They don’t reply to
an illuminating ramble with anything like ‘what tosh!’ or ‘you must be pulling my leg’.
Instead they give, say, some competing view leavened with Plato. Coetzee: ‘our desire to be
held in honor by our peers ... [is] a spur to excellence’ (11).

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A book like this might constitute a defence of decency. A flaw is that one might prefer friendship to making friends. I mean, ‘making friends with Bill’ is sometimes describable as ‘trying to impress Bill’ or ‘trying to seduce Bill’ or one of these other trying and indecent phrases. So I found these letters more decent as it seemed the pair had got beyond any preliminary trying, and got on to a few points of likely interest for established chums in the same line of business. Finally, they started to say something about their lives as writers, and I became converted to the conversation roughly when Auster mentioned Tommaso Debenedetti. Debenedetti was last in the newspapers for a series of hoaxes in which, through impersonation of various individuals on Twitter, he got the media to treat as authoritative false claims about the death of the Pope, etc. An earlier stunt in this vein: fictive ‘interviews’ with American Authors, published in Italian newspapers as the real thing, and ascribing to the interviewees various silly views, possibly belonging to Debenedetti. How far this was satire or publicity for further fictions I don’t know, but it seems that Auster and Coetzee were both of them victims. (Maybe ‘serious’ interviewers were also victims). So, one use of the book under review is as an indirect response to Debenedettism, to coin a phenomenon. If policy positions on the financial crisis and Palestine are going to be speculatively and/or fraudulently attributed to our more prominent Novelists anyway, irrespective of whether they actually form settled opinions on these topics, well then, they might as well publish their own account of themselves. Coetzee:

We live in an era in which it is really only the law of libel that holds back would-be writers like Debenedetti from turning us ... into characters in their fictions, making us mouth sentiments and perform actions that might amuse, upset, repel, or even horrify us. If projects such as this flourish, then ultimately the pseudoselves that have been created for us, with their blessedly uncomplicated opinions, will come to reign in the public consciousness, while our ‘real’ selves and ‘true’ (and tiresomely tangled) opinions will be known only to a few friends. (143)

That ‘tiresomely tangled’ might be read as a term of praise cognate with ‘nuanced beyond the capacities of journalists’, but could alternatively suggest ‘disappointingly muddled’; Coetzee might be saying that those who fictionalise novelists into Sages are liars, because real people’s ideas about anything other than their special areas of competence are often pretty muddled – and authors are real people. That allegation would have a larger target than Debenedetti. Indeed, while not exactly Salingers, the pair make a sustained attack on the fascination readers have developed for the literary interview. Debenedetti is apparently the end point of a continuum of unreliability in these things, and it isn’t only the journalist that might be the trouble. Coetzee:

You ask whether I have had the experience of giving an interview and then being unable to remember what I had said. Not exactly. But I have often felt oppressive boredom as I listen to myself mouthing off in interviews. To my way of thinking, real talk only occurs when there is some kind of current running between the interlocutors. And such a current rarely runs during interviews. (110)

It’s a good point worth chewing, and a proof that the current of truth does sometimes run through these letters, for all the seductions of Sport.

David Robjant

Fiction allows coincidence to flourish, but in real life coincidence can give rise to questions that get revisited over and over, with the conditional perfect as its unassailable syntactic expression. Our ‘What ifs … ?’ acquire their most touching dimension in personal accounts, but asked within fiction such hypothetical questions feel rather pointless. For instance, no one will ever ask themselves what if the protagonists of Michelle de Kretser’s brilliant winner of the 2012 Miles Franklin, *Questions of Travel*, had never met?

In contrast, memoirs and factual accounts of personal experiences allow readers to engage with texts in ways fiction cannot afford us. There is a certain rawness to autobiographical texts, a blunt assertion of terse, unmediated feelings which is not masked behind words. It is this powerful statement that gives them a value that no work of fiction can approach. Their poignancy and truthfulness can be well beyond the literary and touch a different kind of nerve in us.

You will no doubt remember the images of the tsunami that affected Eastern Japan in 2011. You will also remember that black tongue of water rushing inland, devouring and destroying everything in its path. It is not too difficult to make a connection between such images and the many terrible stories of personal grief and despair such a catastrophe caused. In my case, having suddenly seen that dark tongue surge between my feet as I tried to flee from it in Samoa, on 29 September 2009, the March 2011 Japanese images were a most unwelcome reminder of the event that took my daughter Clea’s life. As in Sonali Deraniyagala’s case, despite their horror (‘As much as they horrify me, I want to see the meanness of that black water as it crumples whole cities in its path. So this is what got us, I thought’ [202]), the TV images transfixed me.

Sonali lost her husband Steve, her two sons Vikram and Malli, and her parents on the morning of 26 December 2004. Born and raised in Sri Lanka, Sonali studied economics at Cambridge and Oxford, married a highly educated, open-minded East Ender and gave birth to two handsome boys. They had always agreed that Sri Lanka should be a second home for their family, so whenever they had a chance they would travel and spend time in Colombo or, preferably, in the Yala National Park. They were due to check out of their hotel a few hours later, but the Indian Ocean trapped them, like so many others, on that woeful day.

*Wave* tells her story, or rather two stories so powerfully interconnected that they cannot be dissociated. After the tsunami struck and upended the jeep they were attempting to escape on, Sonali somehow was able to grab a tree branch in the muddy debris-infested mess the lagoon near the beach became. She was rescued and driven to a hospital. All her family had perished, as well as her friend Orlantha, who had been staying at the same hotel. As the days went by, whatever little hope there was of finding family members among injured and displaced survivors vanished.

There is no sentimentality in her restrained account of the hours after the catastrophe and the days that followed. The shock, the terror, the immense void the tsunami had struck in her life are all brought to us in simple, outstanding yet awful frankness: ‘Was it real, what just happened, that water? My crumpled mind couldn’t tell. And I wanted to stay in the unreal, in the not knowing’ (16).

There is no self-pity either throughout the pages that tell of the months and years afterwards. Of how the bodies of her parents, her two boys and Steve were finally found: ‘Steve and Malli were identified four months after the wave’ (47). Or of how she retreated...
from the world and was watched over constantly by relatives and friends: ‘Sometimes I
would drag myself into the kitchen – maybe I can slit my wrists – but someone would steal
up behind me. Besides, they had hidden all the knives’ (43-4). Of how she finally gave in to
alcohol (and pills) after initially refusing it:

I feared it would blur the truth of what had happened. I had to be vigilant. … Then
suddenly every evening I was drunk. Half a bottle of vodka down by six p.m., never
mind that my stomach burned. Then wine, whiskey, whatever I could stumble around
the house and seize. I’d swig from bottles, no time to get a glass. (53)

When Sonali was finally able to leave her relatives’ house in Colombo, she went back
to her parents’ house, the now empty home away from home where her boys had spent many
happy times. Emptiness is all around her, and also inside her, so she searches for her family
there, trying to make sense of herself: ‘in this stillness, sterile with the odor of varnish and
paint, I hunted traces of us’ (66). When her brother decides to rent it out, she began to hassles
the Dutch family that had moved in. Grief, of course, had taken hold of her desperate mind:
‘the house, it anchors me to my children. It tells me they were real. I need to curl up inside it,
now and again. But my brother could not comprehend any of this’ (77).

She went back to the beach in Yala, to the remains of the hotel, obsessively searching
for something she knew deep inside she was never going to find, yet she felt drawn to it.
‘Dust, rubble, shards of glass. This was the hotel. It had been flattened. There were no walls
standing, it was as though they’d been sliced off the floors’ (70).

Sonali returned to London in 2006. She had been away for nearly two years. But it
took her almost two years more to walk back into their home, to walk back into her previous
life, the one that was meaningful. There she sees the piece of pyrite Vikram had bought at the
Science Museum the weekend before they left for Sri Lanka:

My eyes cannot focus on any one thing in this playroom, but the Fool’s Gold, this I
can see. And the two red schoolbags, hanging on the door handle as always. I pick up
the rock and press it tight into my palm. But I can’t touch those schoolbags, each one
now a scalpel. (95)

The life that once was hers in that home, the life that used to hold her self together, is gone.
Yet the past is still there:

When I lie in our bed the power of their absence assails me. The sheets have not been
changed since Steve and I last slept on them. I haven’t been able to bring myself to
wash them, and so I sneeze all night. […] On Steve’s pillow, the one his head hasn’t
touched in nearly four years, there is an eyelash. (105)

It is good and reassuring to know that friends rallied around her and were
unconditionally supportive. From conversations I have had with parents whose children have
predeceased them, it seems that it is not unusual for grieving parents to find themselves
surrounded by a wall of silence. Raw pain can feel way too much to handle.

It would be unfair to Sonali to think of this astonishingly sincere and blunt account as
something with which she sets out to make the reader feel uncomfortable. Sonali does not
seek to unsettle, because no one could be more unsettled than herself. It takes a brave person
to write what she has written and in the direct way she tells it. But let us not forget that it takes a brave reader, too. *Wave* is a reminder of the personal horrors behind mass tragedies, but it should be remembered as a courageous tribute to her husband Steve and her two boys, Vik and Malli.

As her reader, I am grateful for the way Sonali brings their boys and husband back to life within her pages. Despite her inescapable grief and desperation, *Wave* charts her incredibly painful journey from a state of near-craziness to some sort of normalcy, a journey many grieving parents will no doubt relate to.

As a society, we should be able to come to terms with the grieving. Perpetuating the misconception (perhaps the myth?) that ‘Grief is a frightening condition, and at its extreme is like the sun: impossible to look at directly’, as Teju Cole does in his review of *Wave*, does very little to support the grieving. The image Cole employs may sound apt, perhaps even beautiful, but grief is a human feeling, and as such it is natural. Why should it frighten you?

**Jorge Salavert**

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<http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/books/2013/03/sonali-deraniyagala-wave-review-teju-cole.html>, accessed 10 August 2013>