
I am a Peter Goldsworthy fan and to date have read, and enjoyed, *Maestro*, *Three Dog Night*, and *Everything I Knew*. Goldsworthy’s collection of short stories, *Gravel*, was my introduction to the author’s work and my favourites from this collection remain ‘The Nun’s Story’ and ‘Shooting the Dog’. My enjoyment of Goldsworthy’s writing derives not only from his storytelling ability but also from his creation of ordinary characters living their everyday lives. As a writer he seems to enjoy taking the unexpected direction, and is not afraid that it may not be the most comfortable choice for the reader.

*Wish* is such a novel. It proved to be divisive among the author’s loyal following and resulted in losing him some loyal fans. The novel’s voice is that of its narrator, J.J. (6). Structured as four books, each one provides a distinctive layer that constructs important segments from a year of his life.

Book One introduces J.J.’s background, his personality, his obsessive nature and his respect for the deaf community and their culture:

I’m not deaf, but I’ve always felt more at home in Sign. Both my parents are deaf. Deaf as posts. Deaf as adders, deaf as beetles. And proud as peacocks. Deaf Pride long before there was a word, or a sign, for it. I learnt to speak with my hands from birth, there was no other way of reaching my parents. (6)

In his thirties, J.J. has recently experienced a messy divorce. He’s drifting through life, lacking in self-esteem, feeling lonely and isolated having moved back to live in his parents’ home. He describes them as ‘two small neat people in a small neat house, most comfortable, finally, just with each other’ (48).

J.J. returns to teaching at the Deaf Institute, where one of his former students, Jeremy Hinkley, is now the coordinator. Jeremy’s patronizing attitude doesn’t help J.J.’s flagging self-worth:

He smiled indulgently. ‘You might notice a few changes about the place, J.J.’

… He leant back, wallowing in his armchair, savouring the sweetness of the moment; his former teacher sitting in his office, cap in hand. … ‘We’ve been developing a different … philosophy.’ … he signed the last word, a half-familiar hand-shape, borrowed from Amesland – American Sign Language. (10)

Hinkley’s body language and personal comments regarding J.J.’s failed marriage and the parting shot ‘to feel free to take some of my classes J.J. … I’d like to think I could be of help’ (12), is not well received. J.J. loves teaching and states that his ‘most satisfying relationships have been with students’ (11), relationships he views ‘as a kind of love … selfless and pure … dependent on a likeness of mind … a journeying together’ (11).

Once more in the classroom, the initially hesitant J.J.’s confidence quickly returns and the class becomes relaxed, responding well to his teaching style. Things are moving along nicely until the entrance of late arrivals Clive Kinnear and his wife Stella disrupts the rapport between teacher and students. The couple are animal liberationists who have enrolled in Basic Sign as they want to be

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1 ‘Animal Tales’, First Tuesday Book Club, Jennifer Byrne [http://www.abc.net.au/tv/firsttuesday/s2288030.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/tv/firsttuesday/s2288030.htm)

able to continue educating their mute ‘adopted daughter’ Eliza (40). Their facility and hunger to learn Sign is a joy to J.J., and as classes progress, they rapidly become ‘teacher’s pets’ (51). A friendship seems to be developing between them and J.J., lonely and vulnerable to their flattery – blissfully unaware, he doesn’t consider they may have another motive. The discovery that they are pursuing him to privately tutor Eliza disappoints even as it intrigues J.J. (105).

As Stella flirts with him, and the coldly self-contained and logical Clive shares ideas and information about his research and writing, Clive and Stella eventually reveal that Eliza is a fully mature, eight-year-old biologically engineered gorilla, liberated from a laboratory where experiments in communication between animals and humans is being undertaken (125). Eliza has been learning basic Sign. Finally J.J. meets the intended pupil. His first reaction is one of awe, but as Stella urges Eliza to perform J.J. is cynical about any real skill (124). Eventually J.J. takes the job.

In Book Two, J.J. and Eliza’s teacher-student relationship develops. It makes for enjoyable reading, even though a corner of my mind retained a sense of disbelief. Eliza proves an adept student, quickly adopting the Sign nickname of Wish (159). J.J.’s no longer drifting: the daily sessions with Wish/Eliza become the high point for him, his enjoyment growing to the point of obsession.

Books One and Two form the larger part of the novel; they’re engaging and contain many delightful moments. Books Three and Four are quite short in comparison but they present the biggest challenge to the reader. I had to take a break from the novel when reading Book Three. In fact I put it aside fully intent on quitting at that point. But I couldn’t let it go, and returned after a day or two to complete the novel. I’m glad I did. These last two books made me feel anger, disgust and deep sadness in turn.

Essentially a love story, Wish explores a love of language and a curiosity about animal intelligence, as well as issues surrounding the ethics and moral dilemmas of animal experimentation.

It looks into the world of the deaf with empathy, although I wondered what the deaf community felt about the context in which such insight is provided (101). The illustrations of hands using Sign, which appear throughout the novel, work well in conjunction with the text. There are passages of almost poetic prose, such as ‘how to write of these things here? How to pin a pair of fluttering hands – the wings of a butterfly, a bird – to a flat page? (6) or ‘the passion, the ballet of eye and brow, mouth and tongue, the little shrugs and body mimes, the complete performance’ (7).

James Bradley’s Animal Farm introduces this Text Classic of the original 1995 publication with a well-put passage:

it is difficult not to be amazed that a world of meaning so different from the one we inhabit lies close at hand … mainstream society’s casual marginalizing of the deaf and their culture … a failure to comprehend the possibility of other, quite different ways of being … as we strive to teach dolphins and birds to speak and apes to sign, our solipsism blinds us to … richly complex worlds of meaning quite unlike our own. (XII)

What is it that makes us human? What differentiates us from animals? Can there be meaningful friendship between humans and animals based on intelligence? Or in the end is it basic instinct that governs? Do animals really think, learn and reason or is it mere repetitious copycat behaviour seeking to please the dominant human? What is, and where should we draw, the moral line-in-the-sand in this debate? Goldsworthy doesn’t attempt answers, he raises ideas, leaving readers to love or hate the novel, but his desire seems to be to provoke readers to think deeply.

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