

Richard Freadman, *Stepladder to Hindsight: An Almost Memoir* [Melbourne: Hybrid Publishers, 2016]

I'm prone to cringe when I hear the word "memoir," because too often those that make the bestseller lists constitute the junk food of contemporary letters. Frequently these sensationalizing memoirs seem to be engaged in a race to the bottom, competing for the unsavory distinction of who suffered the most childhood misery, who had the most severe substance and sexual abuse problems, the worst parents. Richard Freadman's "almost memoir," fortunately, is none of the above: instead, it's a superb—deeply thoughtful and humane, wonderfully literate—reflective autobiography in the tradition of Augustine, Montaigne, Rousseau, and Nabokov. A well-known student of life writing with a major philosophical study of Western autobiography (*Threads of Life: Autobiography and the Will*, 2001) and Australian Jewish autobiography (*This Crazy Thing a Life*, 2007), Freadman also made his mark as an autobiographer with *Shadow of a Doubt: My Father and Myself* (2003), a probing and poignant account of his father's troubled life, due to his living in "the shadow of unrelenting [self] doubt" [17]. A signal instance of "the subgenre . . . of the Son's Book of the Father" (15), *Shadow* examines with considerable analytical finesse his middle-class, secular Australian-Jewish father's sense of a failed life due to his severely damaged self-esteem and the burden it placed on his son. Writing his first memoir was also his way of coming to terms with that burden, a kind of auto-therapy in which he acknowledges his own depressive tendencies--what in his new memoir he calls, using Churchill's term, "the Black Dog"—to conclude with the liberating realization that "depression and anxiety don't dog me in the way they did my father" (281).

*Stepladder to Hindsight* still bears the imprint of his father's troubled life, but has a much wider remit as it examines the course of his own from childhood to the threshold of old age. In our postmodern age, what could be potentially more of a straightjacket or more tedious than a conventional life narrative from point A (birth) to point X (the time of writing)? Freadman eschews such a straight-line format, offering instead a kaleidoscopic late-life Bildungsroman and coming-of-age self-analysis deeply—and problematically—informed by the existential awareness of Montaigne (who is invoked several times in *Stepladder*) that "no one is arrived at himself" (252). His "loose chronological sequence" which "focuses on moments, phases, and people in [his] life" is also richly relational, dwelling on his family, friends, and mentors in what he aptly characterizes in the Preface as a "hybrid writing of myself and others" (2). As an academic, he brings to his retrospective self-reflections a wide range of literary and philosophical references, from Augustine and Aristotle to Shakespeare and Whitman, but never by way showing off, and always in light of his broadly liberal and humanistic imagination as it dwells on the fundamental question of what constitutes a life well lived.

After stressing his "many-faceted being" in his Preface and offering a helpful list of "Key people in the book," Freadman focuses in eleven chapters on different aspects and periods of his life. In the ironic retrospect of the first chapter, he's clearing out his university office after having taken early retirement and "reviewing the professional life that was coming to an end" (9). As his older self looks back on "that feverishly ambitious, anxious, muddled earlier one," he raises, by way of a playful comparison with George Eliot's frustrated scholar, Casaubon, the existential dilemma that is the inevitable lot of any honest autobiographer looking back: "how much do I know—I mean, *really* know—about how to live, forty years later?" (11). Well, as it turns out, quite a bit. In the final short section, which is really a postscript, he mentions the death of his mother, speculating that "perhaps at the last

frontier of life she had achieved that Stoic's 'contempt of death' in which Montaigne believed so deeply--'dying' being 'the greatest work we have to do,' the hardest work, the one requiring most maturity, wisdom and spiritual equanimity." Like all reflective autobiographies, Freadman's is proleptic as well as retrospective, as he adds, "in my sixty-fifth year I think a lot about this" (283).

The remaining nine chapters present a wonderfully thoughtful--at times humorous, at times probing philosophical, psychological, and existential depths, but always complexly nuanced—narrative and thematic self-portrait, from the housebound asthmatic six-year-old too shy and tongue-tied when his father arranges for him to meet his hero, Ron Barassi, star of the Melbourne Football Club, to the academic at the height of his professional career who has flown to New York where he and his family "were to celebrate my sixtieth birthday with friends" in a rented mansion "on Long Island" (251). Even in that late life coming-of-age celebration with a great dinner reminiscent of the one in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, the seasoned professor-writer acknowledges that he is still restless ("I never quite feel that I've checked in, come to rest," 252). In a major confessional turning point, he faces his lifelong "inability . . . to be simply and delightedly *there*" and voices his resolution for the future: "I dreaded death, but that wasn't my main concern. What I did not want was to go on living so little in the moment." His gathering realization that "what was needed now was a giving-over, an Augustinian letting-in of light" (275) makes for the provisional but epiphanic high point of Freadman's life narrative.

One of the signal strengths of this very sophisticated and intricate set of autobiographical essays is the delightful modulation of tone and variety of subject matter. There's the third chapter's self-deprecating and hilarious account of his hapless attempts to learn to play golf, and covertly trying to cut through the back fence of the golf course and install a gate so he can have direct access to the fairways from his backyard. There's the proud father relishing his teenage son's successful venture into American football. There's the fourteen-year old schoolboy, "defiant and furious" at the "constraints" of his Church of England school for boys" (72), and how an inspired ex-Jesuit teacher turned the aspiring rebel into a School Prefect. In the same chapter Freadman shifts to another mentor, this time when he's an undergraduate at Brandeis University and falls under the spell of Allen Grossman, "the most inspiring, charismatic and unusual teacher there" (81) whose impact makes him decide to become an academic. There's the long sixth chapter, cast in a postmodern key with Sterne and Beckett as narrative reference points and focused on the neurotic intellectual trying to come to terms with his challenge as a slow reader seeking to fathom the neurological explanation of this as well as his periodic fits of "cognitive fatigue" and migraines. There's his encounter in chapter 7 in a Hong Kong sauna with an American doctor who is a racist but for whom he feels some sympathy because of his open-heart surgery; there's a delightful long chapter by Freadman the animal lover about the different dogs in his family and what a central role their companionship has played in his and their lives.

Most impressive of all is his extended tribute to a female mentor ("Renata"), by far the longest chapter in the book. The mother of his best college friend, she takes the insecure young Australian student under her wing, offering, during long sessions on her Long Island couch, both quasi-maternal guidance and friendship: "I met Renata at a time when I felt vulnerable, unsure, sometimes panicky," and this "mentor-friend" became "a steadying, wise, reassuring, and immensely important figure for me" (188). In his sensitive and sympathetic biographical reconstruction of her life—the Jewish-German girl and her emigration with her parents to the U.S. when the Nazis come to power, and her and her family's life in a new world—Freadman's moral imagination reaches across the generational and gender divide to fully comprehend and appreciate the human complexity of a beloved person to whom he is

deeply indebted. His biographical profile of Renata's life and family includes substantial excerpts from her unpublished autobiography, a project in which he played an editorial role. Thus in the layered complexity of this chapter, we have an autobiography (Freadman's) that contains a biography (Renata's) that contains segments of another autobiography. Yet even as he develops this generous and beautiful reconstruction of a life, he is aware of the limits of the project: "I write about my mentor-friendship with Renata and aspects of her life as a woman in a spirit of inquiring fondness and appreciation, comfortable in the knowledge that, not least because I am a man writing a woman's life, there is much that I cannot and do not need to know" (227).

By extension of that "cannot," even in the best reflective autobiographies, there is in the end always much that the autobiographer cannot know about himself or drag into the light consciousness. But in the aptly titled *Stepladder to Hindsight*, Freadman goes a long way to probe the complexities of the human psyche in the exploration of his own—and also to reflect, in both ethical and psychological terms, "how to live, how to flourish" (128). And even if we agree with his prefatory disclaimer, "this is not the story of a famous life," we cannot for a moment credit his assertion, "I have done nothing special" (1). Quite the contrary case is made by this splendid *Almost Memoir*.

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