

**Shannon Burns. *Childhood: A Memoir*. Text Publishing: Melbourne, 2022. 272 pages.  
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Upon reading Shannon Burns's memoir, *Childhood*, I was immediately struck by the uncomfortable sensation that with this book Burns is breaking one of the unspoken mores of working-class academia—that people who have successfully insinuated themselves into the university system should avoid talking openly about the peculiarities of their upbringing. Academics from disadvantaged backgrounds should keep to the generalities at least, so as not to expose the social and intellectual shortcomings of youth. Even in the supposedly egalitarian halls of the modern Australian university, class remains a complicated web of performance and deceit, and Burns observes that it is often working-class colleagues who are most “dismayed to learn that I had a rougher beginning than them” (12). When the aim of the exercise is to blend in with the children of doctors, solicitors and professors, declaring that you are the son of a sex worker and pot dealer who worked in a recycling facility is at once showing off and giving the game away.

Like Burns, I spent a small portion of my childhood in a women's shelter. My only memories of that short time are being taken to see *Aladdin*—for Burns it is *Home Alone*—at the cinema; tasting McDonald's for the first time; and the image of a boy whose face and body had been badly burned in a housefire. There are more general similarities, too. My brother was arrested for trafficking methamphetamine while I was still in primary school. My sister dropped out of school when she fell pregnant at sixteen. I, too, was an inward, violent and unruly child, though never remarkable for sporting prowess like the boy of Burns's memoir. I suspect we are two of many children from troubled circumstances who identify as being “good at forgetting” (14). A useful tool when attempting to appear middle class is being able to forget that you are not.

There is at least one other major difference between Burns and me. Where Burns is a child of the welfare class, I am thoroughly a child of the working class, and I cannot help approaching his memoir with a degree of the snobbery that comes with such an upbringing. My father, despite a chequered history of violence, alcoholism and domestic abuse, was employed from the moment he left school at thirteen. He delivered bread, painted houses, worked as a panel beater and, when he needed a stable job to secure custody of my mother's children from a previous marriage, began a decades-long career with Queensland Rail. The worst thing a person could accuse my father of was “bludging.” The worst things someone could do were receive welfare or take illicit drugs. Burns knows these prejudices well:

Our working-class neighbours understand us better than anyone else. They have friends and family who formed attachments with people like us, who fell into alcoholism, drug addiction and criminality as a consequence of that tragic misstep, and who now move from house to house without paying their bills, carrying neglected and uncontrollable children wherever they go. (8)

Growing up in a squat, block home in regional Queensland, bordered on three sides by industrial development, I remember being neighbours with families like the ones Burns describes, and the dangers that they represented. The Australian experience of class is fundamental to reading Burns's memoir, but questions remain as to whether there is a readership ready to grapple with such an unflinching—and in many respects unsympathetic—portrayal of growing up in Australia's *lumpenproletariat*.

In contrast to the social conservatism of my own early years, the way of life depicted in *Childhood* is one of prurience, restlessness and violence. There is cruelty here, too, but it is usually the result of overwhelming hunger—for love, for recognition, for food—rather than meanness of spirit. Countless stories of domestic violence, racism and sexual assault intersect with Burns's own narrative of repeated abuse, but they are rendered virtually mundane by the socioeconomic realities of life in Elizabeth North. Despite his repeated efforts to distance himself from these conditions, Burns repeatedly reminds us that his younger self, too, is the sort of boy for whom fighting "is a sociable activity" (41), and who is later "terrified by his ability to find diverse people and situations erotically appealing" (190). For him, survival seems to have hinged on developing a capacity for restraint, a talent for forgetting, and an ability to retreat into literature. It is far from a hopeful vision of triumph over adversity, and Burns suggests that under these circumstances "silence becomes elemental, a shield that serves to fortify my inner world against forces that refuse to see it or threaten to destroy it. I take pleasure in its disconnecting power, the way it separates me from others, makes me less vulnerable" (96). Here, literature serves as a bulwark against the failed narrative threads of reality.

By now it should be apparent that, despite his subsequent successes, the nature of Burns's subject matter does not allow much room for optimism. It does, however, provide fertile ground for literary innovation. In this regard, *Childhood* deftly navigates a constant tension between the unreliable recollections of a boy for whom forgetting means survival and the reflexive narrative demands of the memoirist. The result is an uncanny representation of the act of remembering itself, of "*small, discontinuous fragments, which may or may not be authentic traces of an otherwise forgotten landscape*" (19). This sensation of experiencing the act of remembering itself is heightened by Burns's choice to alternate between first- and third-person narration, and at points the reality of the narrative strains under the weight of his interrogation of the past. Although I still question whether anyone in this country is ready for an accurate literary portrayal of Australia's welfare class, I am grateful for his effort to stitch together the fragments of his own half-forgotten history, not least because it has forced me to engage with my own.

*Wayne Bradshaw, James Cook University*