

Stephen Mansfield. *Australian Patriography: How Sons Write Fathers in Contemporary Life Writing*. London, New York, Delhi: Anthem, 2013, 222 pp.

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Stephen Mansfield speculates that so many sons have recently written about their fathers partly as a result of two features of the 1950s: the relative absence of fathers (because of the economic demands of the post-war years) and the baby boom itself. At a certain age, the boomer sons began to look back over their lives, in the process, realising that they needed to try to discover those distant fathers, he suggests. The resulting works are ‘auto/biographies’—autobiography of the son and biography of the father—and, at the same time, ‘relational autobiographies,’ self-portrayals that privilege a relationship with a significant other. Having been born in the late 1950s, it was appropriate enough that I began reading *Australian Patriography* in the plane on the way to visit my aged father in a nursing home in Taree. As well as it being a very thoughtful and useful analysis of an important sub-genre of life-writing, there is much in this book that resonated for me, personally.

Mansfield’s chief focus is works by men born in that post-war period: Richard Freadman’s *Shadow of Doubt* (2003), Raimond Gaita’s *Romulus, My Father* (1998), Robert Gray’s *The Land I Came Through Last* (2008), John Hughes’s *The Idea of Home* (2004), and Peter Rose’s *Rose Boys* (2001). They are well-chosen examples, most of which have had a significant popularity and/or impact over the last fifteen years.

It was Freadman’s memoir that inspired this project, and, like Freadman, Mansfield regards the exploration of the intergenerational masculine relationship in Edmund Gosse’s *Father and Son* as ‘the first relational autobiography of a father by a son’ (18). *Australian Patriography* begins with a detailed analysis of this paradigmatic text, including a couple of perhaps slightly tangential discussions that are, nevertheless, of interest to the student of Australian cultural history: an account of Peter Carey’s reworking of elements from the Gosse book in *Oscar and Lucinda* and a discussion of *An Anglo-Australian Family* by Fayette Gosse, a vague relative by marriage of Edmund. Also preparatory to the main analysis is Chapter Two’s examination of Hal Porter’s *The Watcher on the Cast-Iron Balcony*, whose representation of an absent-present father is similarly paradigmatic, even if the vehemence of Porter’s ‘staggeringly uncharitable’ account of his father’s last days is hardly typical (47-48).

Whether the fathers are fortunate or unfortunate to have become the subject of their sons’ reflections is one of the questions running through *Australian Patriography*, which keeps a constant eye on the ethics of the new power relation where the father, once the authority figure, is now at the mercy of the son’s exposition of the relationship. In the baby boomers’ auto/biographies, Mansfield finds the full range from elegiac treatment of the father in the case of Gaita’s *Romulus, My Father*, though ambivalence in Hughes’s *The Idea of Home*, to outright denunciation in Gray’s *The Land I Came Through Last*. Although drawing on a relatively small sample, he concludes, quite reasonably, that the ‘dominant mode’ of the Australian books by sons about fathers is ‘the ambivalent representation of the father’ (194).

The title of this book uses G. Thomas Couser's term 'patriography', which was originally coined to designate memoirs of fathers written either by sons or daughters. In choosing to examine only the books of sons and in focusing on such a masculine relationship, Mansfield is very aware of the danger of expunging the maternal, 'as if the last half-century of feminist theory never took place' (9). In fact, he recounts the disquiet felt about this by some who heard his paper on *Rose Boys* at a recent autobiography conference, and he also notes that some readers of Peter Rose's book were particularly interested in the portrait of the mother (193). As that self-awareness would suggest, questions concerning Australian masculinity are another of *Australian Patriography's* concerns, and it returns at several points to consider what the books it examines might reveal about the place for a writer within conceptions of 'idealised masculinity' in Australia (12).

Mansfield's study began as a PhD thesis at the University of Sydney, and evidence of its roots remains, for example, in the surveys of critical responses to a number of the books under consideration. In the case of Gosse's *Father and Son*, this section is reasonably lengthy. Perhaps for a general reader, that might be a drawback, but for anyone who would consult the book reviews section of *JASAL*, it is very valuable.

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