

# A Memory from the Agent

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I began acting as Laurie's literary agent in the late 70s when I sold his second book, a collection of wonderfully satirical short stories under the collective title *The Wife Specialist* which Hyland House published in 1979.

I was a New Zealander, based in Sydney. Laurie, along with Barry Oakley, introduced me to Melbourne's writers, intellectuals, humorists, eaters and drinkers and to Australian Rules Football which is now one of my abiding passions. Fortunately, in those days Laurie's Richmond Footie Club was doing very well.

We always had a lot to talk about: literature, Australian letters, politics, the role of the Irish Catholics in Australian history—a very foreign concept for me since in New Zealand there were few Irish and few Catholics, the dominant religion was Protestantism, and I was the grandson of an Anglican vicar and with a poet father who trained for the church.

Fiction was Laurie's great love and I have the fondest memories of his wonderful *Perfect Love: A Novel*. It was published in 1983 by Hyland House, and paperback rights were sold to Collins for their Fontana imprint (1985) and later, much to Laurie's delight, we sold Swedish rights. We didn't sell any other translations and thought perhaps the Swedes had mis-read the title as *Free Love: A Novel*. It is full of great humour, humanity and compassion and showed a sensitivity Laurie never quite achieved in his other works of fiction. The combination was 'Perfect' in this novel.

The short story was where Laurie excelled and he kept writing and publishing them even after the flush of interest from publishers was on the wane. Short story collections became hard to sell in the late 80s and this is still so today, with some exceptions.

To my mind, the strongest collections of his stories were *The Wife Specialist* and a decade later *City to City* published by the University of Queensland Press in 1989. These two collections and *Perfect Love* are my personal favourites in which I felt strongly that Laurie was on top of the form. Later stories and novels became, I think, long struggles to get into a final and publishable shape and in the end they were imperfect.

I'm sure Laurie would disagree with this but I remember vividly the many many drafts of the satirical/comic university novel *The Wildlife Reserve*, which I eventually sold to Angus and Robertson in 1994, and *Night Parking* 1999. Comic novels about one's own profession, written while still in that profession, are notoriously difficult to pull off and the bench mark is still *The History Man* by Malcolm Bradbury (1975) and its equally successful movie adaptation.

On a personal level we always talked about our sons as we both became fathers in the same years and both had two boys. He was enormously proud of them and delighted in the role of fatherhood to his boys and step-fatherhood to Neelam's girls. My wife and I remember one balmy summer evening sitting in our backyard—I think he was in Sydney for a couple of guest lectures at Sydney University, my wife's old stamping ground—listening to the news of his

family and his adventures in Barcelona teaching Australian Studies. It was in Barcelona, much to his embarrassment, that his pocket was picked—wallet and maybe passport—by some Catalan youths or gypsy women on La Rambla, a renowned spot for the unwary traveller. Why they thought they would get away with attacking a guy of Laurie's physical presence is hard to imagine, but they did and Laurie was not pleased! This incident is immortalised in one of his later short stories, 'In Barcelona' where the sum of 70,000 pesetas is mentioned.

In my 40 plus years' career as a literary agent I've represented three physically large Australian male writers—Clancy, White and Williamson—but Laurie had the biggest heart: he was a gentle giant, unsentimental but with a dry and quick wit which very often caught me unawares, much to his delight.

Trips to Melbourne to see clients, publishers, theatre companies and film/TV producers always included an evening with Laurie and often Neelam and included one or two nights of hospitality at Herbert St, Northcote. Laurie and I shared a love of cricket though I never had to face a ball bowled by him, thank heavens—it would have been terrifying coming down from that height at any speed. AFL was also a frequent conversation topic—his team was his beloved Richmond Tigers while I embraced the Bloods when they became the Sydney Swans.

In later years when we'd meet for dinner in Melbourne, Laurie always had a bottle of champagne ready to freshen the palate with before the meal.

To those who knew him well, Laurie was a dedicated carnivore though I'm sure once he and Neelam got together his intake of greens and other vegetable matter did increase. On one visit he took me to a new restaurant he'd discovered which he assured me was a carnivores' delight. The owner-butcher and chef (I think he may have been Belgian) cooked only meat and baked potatoes—if any customers wanted greens or a salad they'd have to bring their own. The large slabs of top quality beef, lamb, pork etc were available for inspection towards the back of this restaurant in a refrigerated butcher's display cabinet. Once ordered, the chef would cook the meat to perfection and bring it out on a large serving platter and fork the meat onto your plate. The servings were huge and the meat melted in the mouth. Red wine to wash it down was, of course, an essential part of the meal.

I believe this restaurant no longer exists but I often wished that I'd had an opportunity to introduce Laurie to a similar carnivore's restaurant in Wellington called *The Green Parrot* on the ground floor of a building on the corner of Taranaki and Wakefield Streets. I knew it well in the 1960s as I worked as Educational Publisher for the publishing firm Reeds on the fifth floor of that building. A few years ago my wife and I had a meal at this food institution—it still serves the biggest T-bone steaks, pork chops, sausages and mashed potato but with salad.

Laurie sent us a copy of his collection of stories entitled *Loyalties* inscribed and dated: 'To Tim and Lea, loyal friends over many years, Laurie Clancy. 23 January 2008' and I'm very happy with that.

I know Laurie wrote his own eulogy and it is as well-crafted a piece of writing as his very best fiction but with a tinge of sadness, a heartfelt sense of the power and joy of love and of knowing the truth of it.