

Clancy Departs Dog Eat Bone World: Richard Freedman remembers Laurie Clancy

RICHARD FREADMAN
La Trobe University

One of my first sightings of Laurie was in a framed photo in the old Eagle Bar at La Trobe University. Entitled ‘The Coach,’ the photo featured a young and rather fit-looking Captain Coach addressing his players at the quarter or three-quarter time break. The players, it has to be said, look completely uninterested in proceedings; but according to the picture’s caption Laurie is pulling out all the rhetorical stops. The caption reads:

Senior Lecturer in English Laurie Clancy urges on the football team in mid-1969
with accounts of existentialism and the thinking of Kierkegaard.

Laurie was one of those naturally funny people. Great company and a marvellous droll wit, he could also be hilarious without meaning to. Tall and angular with huge ruckman’s hands, bulbous eyes and a ‘bog-Irish’ face, he often looked abstracted, as if on the way to, or perhaps recovering from, a hangover. And indeed this was not infrequently the case. Laurie, as they say, liked a drink. One of his fictional characters, taking a leaf out of his author’s book, frames the motto *‘in vino veritas’* for himself. A refugee from a stern Catholic childhood, Laurie the writer could still put liturgical Latin to good use.

An appearance of slightly shambolic approximation about Laurie was both accurate and misleading. Ann Blake, a colleague from the early days in the La Trobe English Department, remembers slapstick-like instances of Clancy absentmindedness over details like lecture times and venues. But she also remembers this same colleague coming in to work early, tapping furiously at an old portable typewriter whence issued a steady stream of novels, stories, reviews and opinion pieces. Beneath the laconic exterior Laurie was a man of high ambition and high accomplishment. He published four novels, three volumes of short stories, four works of literary scholarship, a book length introduction to Australian culture, and a vast, as yet uncounted, number of literary reviews and occasional pieces. He was one of several important early La Trobe academics who won the University its enviable and ongoing reputation as a home for public intellectuals. Laurie was equally at ease publishing in refereed literary journals, the *Bulletin* and the *Sun*. Left-wing, always a touch home-spun, and a passionate Richmond supporter, he viewed the High Theory that permeated his academic domain of literary studies from the 1980s onwards with bemusement and even suspicion.

Laurie made a lasting contribution to the La Trobe English Department (now Program). He played a major part in the introduction of courses in Australian literature in the early 1970s (a move spearheaded by John Barnes). In addition to a great deal of effective team teaching with colleagues on big undergraduate courses he designed and taught an innovative course in Contemporary Literature which continued, with revisions that reflected Laurie’s wide reading in late twentieth century fiction, until he retired from La Trobe in 1994. Hugh Underhill, who sometimes took seminars in the course with Laurie, says: ‘What stands out for me, indelibly still, are Laurie’s easy friendliness towards and never-failing solicitude towards his students, his way with anecdote or an amusingly apt riposte, and his egalitarian no-nonsense manner with us all.’ He was indeed immensely popular with students, some of whom became personal

friends, and a thoroughly congenial colleague. Former Head of Department, David Rawlinson, recalls Laurie as ‘having an influence for balance, openness and common sense in the Department, never single-mindedly of one line, always independent and his own man.’ In a poem, ‘Hospice Time,’ written during Laurie’s final weeks, Max Richards writes of meeting in a dream ‘Laurie, my old colleague, / ambling, genial as ever, considerate.’ A particular Clancy skill was specially honed for staff meetings. When things became fractious Laurie would sit like a Buddha, apparently oblivious to the tensions in the room. At the crucial moment he would divest himself of a droll aside, showing that he’d been tuned in all along and that he judged it time to help combatants take themselves a touch less seriously.

His training at Melbourne University had combined historical scholarship and an emphasis, à la Leavis, on the close, morally-focused readings of canonical literary texts. Laurie’s most extended critical work, *The Novels of Vladimir Nabokov* (1984), is in fact a deeply serious discussion of that novelist’s ethical vision, prose style and narrative techniques which sees the novels as motivated by a perception of ‘the intolerability of existence and the consequent necessity of transcending it’ (41). This book is an admirable example of the kind of literary criticism (S.L. Goldberg’s *James Joyce* is the best known example) in which Australian academics brought Leavisite critical methods to bear upon texts that Leavis would never have admitted into his select, morally strenuous canon of great works. Some of Leavis’s moral preoccupation is apparent in *The Novels of Vladimir Nabokov*, but Laurie’s understanding of the ‘moral,’ as of what constitutes ‘responsible art,’ is far more flexible than Leavis’s.

A rapid reader with a powerful memory, Laurie was able to survey vast fields of modern and indeed earlier literature. This encyclopaedic capacity enabled him to produce *A Reader’s Guide to Australian Fiction* (1992), an unfailingly lucid survey of around 150 Australian writers. The book’s typically accessible introduction reflects his deep learning in things Australian. It also shows a preparedness to draw upon recent critical and theoretical approaches to literature where appropriate, notwithstanding his reservations about some of them.

Many of the entries in *The Reader’s Guide* reveal reflect Laurie’s ‘insider’ knowledge of novelistic art. *The Wildlife Reserve: A Tale of One Campus* (1994) has the distinction of being La Trobe’s first—and, thus far, only—campus novel. This one, like *A Collapsible Man* (1975), winner of The Australian National Book Council Award, and *Night Parking* (1999), is essentially comic in tone. It contains some vintage Clancy lines: Terry Shaw, young academic and the protagonist of *The Wildlife Reserve*, cautions his wife Penelope about academic politics saying ‘It’s a hard, vicious world of dog eat bone’ (81). One chapter in the same novel describes a cricket match between loyalists of two literary magazines—a description based on the annual *Overland v Meanjin* cricket match in which Laurie was a regular ‘participant.’ As the game gets under way ‘The field echoed with the click of arthritic knees’ (27). At their best the comic novels read like the work of an Australian Irish Catholic Saul Bellow—if there can be such a thing—the minds of the libidinous self-thwarting male protagonists buzzing with ideas and manic inclinations. But the most successful of the novels, in my view, is the deeply researched and sombre *Perfect Love* (1983), a family saga set in the first half of the twentieth century and written predominantly—and sensitively—from female characters’ points of view.

Though Laurie is perhaps best known for his novels, I do not think that this is where his greatest strength as a writer lay. The comic novels often depend too heavily on lustily-drawn but thin characters and their freewheeling plots tend to lapse from the ludic into the ludicrous. The main characters in *Perfect Love* are more substantial but they come to us per medium of an unproductively self-conscious narrator who is inclined to over-direct his cast.

The short stories, however, are another matter. In this genre Laurie writes like ‘a natural.’ You sense the influence of Chekov, Joyce, Hemingway and Lawson in these taut, lean but subtly incisive narratives. He mastered the shape and tempo of the classic short story—the modulated flow of narrative energy as the tale shifts from a relaxed, concise setting of scene, into deepening complication, thence to dénouement which fuses recognition, ongoing puzzlement and residual disturbance. Late in life Laurie revised and collected about 100 stories in a file entitled ‘Collected Stories.’ The majority of these had been published in journals, newspapers or in his three collections of stories, *The Wife Specialist* (1979), *City to City* (1989), and *Loyalties* (2007). There are many stories of Catholic childhood and school years; some about university life and the literary life; some interesting pieces that draw on his year in the US on a Harkness Fellowship in 1970 and on later travels; and, as we shall see, some very touching narratives of later life. The most complex and numerous stories concern love, sexuality and the politics of intimacy.

The stories of Catholic childhood are among his most accomplished and powerful writings. In ‘Mother Raymond’ a man, James, returns to visit his old school. After tea, Mother Raymond proposes that they visit the church to inspect the Stations of the Cross. ‘James,’ we read, ‘was to be spared nothing. He gave her his arm, in a grotesque parody of courtship, and felt through the black garment the deracinated flesh and bones, like the claw of a dead chicken.’

The stories are rich in those pithily memorable sketches that are the staple of short fiction. A university student, Sam, working in the Dromana Pub during the summer holidays, is struck by the appearance of another barman:

Ron, who wore a pair of white football shorts and a grubby red singlet with ‘Alcatraz’ printed on it, sweated heavily as he worked. He was of short, stocky build and the most hirsute man Sam had ever seen. A trunk of thick black hair grew down his torso and disappeared into his shorts, its limbs spreading across his chest and round the back where they met again at his spine. He was proud of this evidence of virility and took every opportunity he could to remove his shirt. From time to time, in between customers, he talked in a low monotone about himself. (‘First Love’ 1)

Ron’s narcissism is an unembellished version of a state that the stories often disclose in more sophisticated male protagonists—academics, writers, reflective members of the educated classes. Laurie could write the range—from pub staff to the professoriate.

In general terms this narcissism is a matter of ‘self-preoccupation’ which in a heavily autobiographical story called ‘My Sister Catherine’ he sees as a common trait in his family. More specifically though—and this is where Laurie’s writing becomes highly complex—the stories (and novels) present this as a predominantly male thing which has deep sources in male sexuality. One of the things that fascinated him about Nabokov was ‘the weight’ that the ‘theme of sexual obsession holds in the author’s (Nabokov’s) creative imagination’ (*The Novels of Vladimir Nabokov*, 103). Laurie’s own writing too is often infused with ‘sexual obsession.’ This can take various forms. One, which involves a kind of sexual summing-up of female characters’ physical attributes, is a version of what feminists call ‘the male gaze.’ Narratives in which this gaze is not tempered by irony or other traces of authorial self-awareness are bound to date, and deservedly so. Another and more interesting manifestation of sexual obsession involves what we might now term the politics of intimacy, but which in Laurie’s case is better described as

the ethics of intimacy. By this I don't mean a set of moral prescriptions about how intimacy should be conducted—nothing could be further from the ethos of this writing—but rather a preoccupation with the way libido can sabotage ethical impulses in people who would count themselves, and be counted, 'decent,' and can even bring such people undone. Laurie's work tends to reflect a distinctively Australian notion of decency as a predominantly male, egalitarian and self-effacing virtue (without a capital V), but the libidinal male ego in his stories is often regressed, narcissistic and amoral.

Here two of the titles of the short story collections speak volumes: on the one hand, we have the rather sinisterly entitled *The Wife Specialist*; on the other, *Loyalties*. The first of these titles is entirely fitting: most of the stories therein concern sexual treachery—often adultery—and deceit. Other stories which do not appear in the first volume have similarly unsettling titles: 'Sweet Deceit Comes Calling,' 'The Wife Specialist.' While reading through the 100 tales I was struck by how many of them fall into this category. Struck and surprised. After all, as a friend, colleague and citizen he was a man of strong principle. What was all this sexual treachery about? Old friends who knew Laurie better than I (I met him 1991) would probably be able to shed more biographical light here than I can. Clearly the transition from a sexually repressive Catholic childhood to the libertine climbs of the academy and the literary world of the 60s and 70s could breed a kind of 'sexual obsession.' But this isn't sufficient to explain the intensity of the stories' concern with sexual deceit—an intensity that is reflected not just in the number of stories that circle around this issue, but in the fact that in one variant of this Clancy theme a man is betrayed by a close or even best friend who has an affair with his wife or girlfriend. The protagonist of the story 'The Wife Specialist' writes of a dinner party: 'I have relaxed the marital tensions of all six of my friends' wives here at the table.' Aussie mateship is apparently no match for the discreet charms of the bourgeoisie?

In an unpublished and I think loosely autobiographical story entitled 'An Admirably Civilized Separation,' the protagonist, Leo, feels guilty about his 'compulsive philandering,' not least its impact on the children who must endure the resultant breakdown of his marriage. Significantly, the story also contains a *Lolita* moment. When he goes to see one of his new partner's daughters in a school play, as he finds himself 'Gazing at the half dozen beautiful, half-formed bodies of those twelve year olds in their skimpy outfits as they swayed lasciviously, Leo had to repress a shudder of perverse desire.' Laurie writes of *Lolita* that 'repellent though the events are with which it deals, Nabokov makes of them a triumphant assertion of human love,' albeit one 'founded in perversion and ending in the destruction of the lovers' (102). Whatever one agrees with this or not (I don't find it convincing) it has to be said that we don't find much by way of 'a triumphant assertion of human love' until very late on in the Clancy *oeuvre*. Certainly in the stories, 'love' seems to be too darkly implicated in disturbed forms of 'desire' to be 'triumphant.'

The best of the stories impel the reader to think about the many forms that desire can take—as a prologue to and expression of love, as a threat to love when sexual attraction wanes, as a drive that might be intrinsically immune to satiation, thereby precipitating ceaseless repetitions of longing, fleeting fullness, emptiness, and longing again. Again, at their best, they prompt reflection on desire's darker, occluded origins in the need for control and possession, and desire as anger in disguise. 'Goose Girl,' a fine story in *The Wife Specialist*, ushers us into these darker places as man, in bed and repeatedly dreaming and waking on a rainy day, is caught in disturbing oscillations of desire, insecurity, fulfilment and resentment. After a nasty dream about his dead father he wakes up and looks hopefully to see whether his wife, Barbara, is in the kitchen:

He felt his forehead, hot and burning with exhaustion, and felt the hot tears still on his cheeks. Through the doorway to the kitchen he could see the knife on the marble bench. What looked like hundreds of dead ants were clinging to the knife but they were only dried tealeaves. He lay panting and sweating for a few seconds, his heart beating with impossible rapidity, ashamed of his own foolishness.

... He lay still for a long time, trying to think about this.... Then he reached a hand out to the side of the bed but Barbara was not there. She was not home yet and he lay still in the bed, thinking of where she was, of where he knew she was.

In the less subtle stories sexual treacherousness tends to function as a psychological, even a demographic, *donnée*, a narrative premise rather than the subject of narrative exploration. Sometimes this is because, as in ‘The Wife Specialist,’ treacherous impulses are laid bare as a vivid target for dark satire; elsewhere, perhaps, it is because Laurie himself didn’t finally quite know what creatively to make of the dis-loyalties that continually solicited his imagination. In a writer like James sexual treachery is often a harbinger of a larger metaphysical condition, a manifestation of Evil. But Laurie isn’t that kind of writer, and occasionally the shallow moral tawdriness of his characters can lack dramatic interest and resonance.

His last narratives shift, as one might expect, to aging and illness. Some of these, like ‘Dogs’ (2008), grumpily bemoan the claustral rhythms of retirement; in others, however, a note of reflective consolation surfaces. The Clancy family has been blighted by cancer, and when his younger brother Paul succumbed to the disease Laurie published a moving autobiographical tribute to him (albeit under the guise of ‘fiction’) entitled ‘Eleven Things I Know About My Brother’ (2009). Of the brother’s reaction to his terminal diagnosis Laurie writes: ‘I have often wondered since my brother died, how I would spend my last months if placed under a similar sentence.’ Alas Laurie’s grace and fortitude were to be tested all too soon—in 2009 he was diagnosed with a form of throat cancer that is hard to detect early and spreads fast. Chemotherapy and surgery were unavailing and he spent his remaining months without his voice and taking food through tubes into his stomach. To say that his manner of leaving the world became him would be an understatement. He was his old warm, engaged, droll self, albeit just in whispers, when friends came to visit. When briefing old mates John Timlin and Brian Matthews about funeral arrangements the instructions, according to Brian, went as follows: ‘He didn’t want this occasion to be dead serious. As he put it, he would do the dead bit, we had to do the jokes.’

Laurie spent time assembling his stories in the file of 100; he also wrote a remarkable new piece, an untitled final testament and testimony, an auto-eulogy, as it were, that his son Joe read at the funeral. In this superlative last narrative he is in his pomp. Recalling that at one stage during the illness his doctor had reported that recent tests have shown that his liver had made a complete recovery he notes that this made ‘me the first Clancy male to pass over with a healthy liver!’. Troubled by post-operative build-ups of phlegm he consults ‘the Australian world expert in phlegm—a Phlegmish Master as it were’. He concedes that ‘I would have liked a few more years, just a few, but alas it was not to be. I had 67 wonderful years which is more than anyone can ask for, and was afforded the opportunity to say goodbye, something which escapes many.’ He writes movingly of the way his relationship with Neelam, the companion of twenty years whom he married during his final months, deepened during his illness. At this last hour comes something that really does read like a ‘triumphant assertion of human love.’ Neelam’s care for him during the illness

broke things up inside me all over again that I thought had been settled for some time.

In short, I fell in love all over again but on a new and deeper plain. I discovered that I could give myself up to love in a way I never had before because I was certain my feelings were returned. I could be as sentimental as I liked. I could moon about like some crappy-faced teenager and not feel the slightest embarrassment. And that gave me a glorious feeling of liberation.

Through it all another love persisted: parked in front of the TV in track pants or a dressing gown he'd watch every game Richmond played, taking particular interest in the 'young kids' who would have to lift the team from the condition of abject mediocrity it had generally been in since its glory days in the 1970s. Now indeed something remarkable happened—a something that is best told with the aid of a dialect of English to which Laurie and friends often defaulted: Footallese.

Suddenly the 'Tiges' (Richmond Tigers) were on a roll. 'Cuz' ('disgraced recovering drug addict Ben Cousins') started to get the pill in the middle. Kids who could not bloody play started to. 'Brilliant young forward' 'Jumpin' Jack Riewoldt was hanging off clouds taking 'specgies' in the goal square. In four glorious weeks the results were:

Round 12:	Sun June 13	Richmond	19.12	126	West Coast Eagles	11.11	77
Round 13:	Sat June 19	Richmond	15.15	105	Brisbane Lions	12.14	86
Round 14:	Sun July 4	Richmond	14.5	89	Sydney	12.13	85
Round 15:	Sat July 10	Richmond	15.10	100	Fremantle	11.15	81

'The Tiges are back in town' proclaimed the commentators.

Like the Tiger of old
We're strong and we're bold

intoned fans in euphoric renditions of the club song. All was well; all manner of things were well.

And then, suddenly, the wheels, which has been spinning on good will, momentum, youthful promise and a lick of grease, all fell off at once.

In Round 16, 16 July 2010, the Tiges were thumped by the Kangeroos to the tune of 50 points (7.11.53/15/13/103).

'Tiger bubble bursts' trumpeted the headlines.

'Like the Tigers of old' intoned the knockers and the cynics. But it didn't matter any more. As the commentators are apt to say late in one-sided games, before 'returning you back to the studio', it was 'all academic now,' because the Big Fella had departed this dog eat bone world on Friday 16 July.