Writing Lives: Revealing Families

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Speakers (click name for bio):

Craig Sherborne

Andrew Riemer

Jacqueline Kent

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The memoirist Shirley Abbott once wrote: “We all grow up with the weight of history on us. Our ancestors dwell in the attics of our brains as they do in the spiraling chains of knowledge hidden in every cell of our bodies.”

In writing about real people – whether oneself in memoir or others in biography – families invariably feature strongly in the text. No-one escapes family life, for good or ill. Families are an essential component of our personal histories and, in the hands of the most memorable life-writers, they are also a window into the social and political milieus that have created us.

Not surprisingly, families featured prominently in the “Writing Lives” session of the 2008 Sydney Writers’ Festival when three Australian writers - Craig Sherborne, Andrew Riemer and Jacqueline Kent - gathered to discuss their latest books: *Muck*, *A Family History of Smoking* and *An Exacting Heart*, respectively. The [Media Department](http://scan.net.au/scan/magazine/print.php?journal_id=59) at Macquarie University sponsored the session.

Craig Sherborne, a Melbourne-based poet, journalist and playwright, opened the proceedings with a short paper that directly tackled the issue of loyalty to family. *Muck* is Sherborne’s second volume of memoir. The first, *Hoi Polloi*, described by Peter Craven as “a pure comic outrage of a book”, outlines the writer’s childhood growing up in his family’s pub in Heritage, New Zealand (I use the word ‘pub’ advisedly here - ‘…don’t dare call it a pub, it’s such a common word,’ directs Sherborne’s mother from the page.)

*Muck* picks up the tale when Sherborne is a teenager surviving a posh private school in Sydney’s Eastern suburbs and a tragicomic homelife. Both books painfully portray the life of a sensitive child caught in an insensitive world - a world marred by varying degrees of violence, bullying and mean-mindedness that will uncomfortably resonate with many readers despite the laughs Sherborne skilfully provokes.

Sherborne is a talented stylist; his words create vivid impressions. Chekhov famously said about writing:
“Don't tell me the moon is shining; show me the glint of light on broken glass.” Sherborne does that. His books do not feature exposition or analysis. Rather he combines the playwright’s ‘show not tell’ approach with the lyricism of the poet, creating farcical scenes to portray his childhood in an immediate, funny and painful way. In the process, his family is skewered to the page.

While Sherborne’s books have received much acclaim, he revealed to festivalgoers that he has been criticized by some readers for betraying his parents, the main characters in his books – his mother who is hilariously depicted as social-climbing, racist and neurotic and his father whose later ambitions revolve around a farm in New Zealand but whose work in Australia is clearly on the shady side of the Randwick racetrack.

Yet, despite himself – or, perhaps, despite themselves – Sherborne’s parents are rendered beneath their awfulness as curiously sympathetic characters. Readers – including this one – can’t help but feel for the damaged humanity of the main characters, nor the frustrated bonds of love that bind them.

When Jacqueline Kent wrote *An Exacting Heart*, a biography of the pianist and human rights worker Hepzibah Menuhin, she was also faced with the problem of revealing the less decorous facts of her subject’s life. Hepzibah Hauser (1920-1981) was one of three children raised in a highly protective Jewish family. According to Kent, it was an ‘emotionally dislocated upbringing’, the Menhuin parents having fled first to Palestine to escape the Czarist pogroms and then to the USA.

In her youth, Hepzibah was groomed as the pianist accompanist to her violinist brother, Yehudi Menuhin. Together, they achieved precocious fame, but at the age of 17, Hepzibah surrendered her celebrity and fled to western Victoria to marry the Australian sheep farmer and pharmaceutical heir, Lindsay Nicholas. After her two sons were born, Hepzibah gradually resumed her international career, soon becoming Australia’s pre-eminent musician.

After a visit in 1947 to the concentration camp Theresienstadt, Hepzibah again turned her back on a stellar music career – and this time on her husband and children too – when she left the marital home to be with Richard Hauser, an Austrian sociologist. Together Hepzibah and Hauser went on to found the Institute for Human Rights Responsibilities and the Centre for Group Studies, later running a human rights refuge from their home.

Kent was drawn to writing about Hepzibah because of a “fascination with those who show great early talent”. She was also fascinated by Hepzibah’s willingness to turn her back on her talent and fame, not once but twice, not only in a search for enduring love, but also out of a need to be of service in a world riven by war, displacement and heartache.

Kent had grown fond of Hepzibah in the four years it took to write the biography and she puzzled over how to handle in print the behaviour of Hepzibah that she found much less likeable than the engaging personality evidenced by the lively letters she wrote to family and friends. The solution, she determined, was to be faithful to the book she was writing – to tell the story as she found it and without judgment.

Andrew Riemer’s task in his book, *A Family History of Smoking*, was different again. His challenge was the difficulty of writing about his family in order to bring a time and place in history to modern consciousness. Using the narrative hook of a family enjoyment of ‘smoking’, Riemer traces the circumstances of both strands of his family living through the end of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, through the gradual rise of anti-semitism to its tragic results in World War II.
Racism and xenophobia are present in all three books - from their beginnings in everyday situations as evidenced in Sherborne’s memoirs, to the effects down the generations as in Kent’s tale. It can be traced through the decisions – sometimes calamitous, sometimes heroic - that the characters make, or are forced to make, in these books. But it is in Riemer’s *A Family History of Smoking* that the devastating results of unchecked anti-Semitism are observed. To faithfully witness this family history, Riemer had only the anecdotes of his surviving relatives at his disposal – no documents, no records of any sort. Only stories – family myths and legends – to the veracity of which he can’t swear; stories related in a language other than English, by people whose lives were lived in another language and culture.

Riemer’s solution to the responsibility of patching together a history from such sources was to forego dialogue and concentrate on anecdotes, striving for accuracy in the absence of documented fact. Despite the distance this sometimes gives his work, this is an important and moving tale, because in the telling of this personal story, he gives a face to that terrible upheaval in Europe in the first half of the 20th century.

After all that his family endured, it was almost a comfort to read his wry observation that, “When, in the late 1940s, my parents and I were exposed to the generally mild xenophobia of suburban Sydney, my father used to say that it was nice to be living where people despised you, not because they thought you were Jews but because you were undeniably foreign.”

Life writing, by its nature, invariably presents the writer with the problem of how much to reveal, particularly of the shortcomings of the people depicted, including oneself. But as Sherborne notes in the *Writing Lives* session, writing is not public relations - for one’s family or one’s culture. Writing about real people must be done candidly, with a primary responsibility not so much to the people written about, but to the book itself and to its readers - both current and future. Paying too much heed to the feelings of others, Sherborne warned, gives rise to an insidious form of censorship. Luckily for us, none of these writers allowed such fastidiousness to silence them.

2. Publisher’s note.
3. P228.
5. Riemer, 2008, p211.

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