From Frogmore, Victoria

UNDERSTANDING RAIMOND GAITA BY HELEN GARNER

Last winter on a plane to the Mildura Writers' Festival I happened to sit next to Raimond Gaita. Like many people who have read his memoir Romulus, My Father, I felt I knew him better than I actually do. I asked him if it was true that Eric Bana was going to play Romulus in the movie adaptation that I'd heard Richard Roxburgh was directing. He opened his laptop and showed me some stills: the replica of Frogmore, the crumbling weatherboard shack of his childhood; Bana riding a motorbike with a plaster cast on his leg; a rangy boy running and laughing in a dusty yard. The movie-Raimond looked about nine. He had a face so open that it hurt to look at it.

"His name," said Gaita, "is Kodi Smit-McPhee."

"Did you go to the shoot?"

"I kept away," he said. "I thought my presence might throw him off. He might think, Is this what's ahead for me?" He gave a small laugh.

“But near the end I went. Richard introduced us. We stood and looked at each other. We both cried. He said, 'I've lived your life for the last three months.' And then for an hour he wouldn't leave my side."

There's a brief scene, quite early in the movie, in which Raimond is moshing along a street and sees a teenage girl dancing wildly to a record on her front porch. He calls out and asks her the name of the singer. She tells him it's Jerry Lee Lewis, from Ferriday, Louisiana. "And who are you, when you're at home?" she asks coldly. The screen fills with the boy's eager, unbearably smiling and undependable face. "I'm Raimond Gaita," he says, "from Frogmore, Victoria!"

At that moment a faint sound rustled through the first preview audience: half laughter, half sigh.

Gaita was in the cinema that evening. I wondered how he would sit through this new telling of his childhood, a version over which he had little or no control.

It's a story of suffering: obsessive love, sexual betrayal and jealousy, abandonment of small children; violence, madness and despair; two suicides, repeated acts of forgiveness and loyalty that are nothing short of heroic; and threaded through all this, the miraculous blossoming of a child’s intellect.

The book changed the quality of the literary air in this country. People often take an unusually emotional tone when they speak about it, as if it had performed for them the function that Franz Kafka demanded: "A book
How can film match this stirring, all-creating, all-encompassing thing, the voice?

I saw Gaia emerge into the lobby after the preview. He looked vengeful, and much. I would have liked to make a comically gesture, but I didn’t understand what the movie was doing to me, so I bolted for the train. I cried all the way home, and on and off for days afterwards.

"You can’t imagine," shoots Gaia over the nutshell of his loose jointed ute, "how much more beautiful it is round here when there’s grass.”

But up here near Baringup in Central Victoria, where Gaia is showing me the sites of his childhood story, the grass is gone. Drought has stripped the ground naked. Its surface is worn out, grey brown velvet. The paddocks are infested with a plague of wheel cactus, rusty, plate shaped pads of pale green, fringed with sparse hairy spines.

"The stuff’s out of control," says Gaia. "And it can grow straight out of a rock."

We park and set off, foot towards the granite boulders among which Romulus Gaia’s friend Vacek, a harmless hermit, has made his self-fortress. I spot a baby cactus sprouting insidiously from a dinted stone.

"Eeww, gross," I say, "It’s growing out of bare rock.

"You thought it was mere hyperbole, didn’t you," says Gaia.

This is the first time I’ve ever heard anyone use the phrase “mere hyperbole” in conversation. Before I can remark on this, which I’m not at all sure I’m going to, we fetch up against the first boulder.

Despite his grand philosophy’s head with its white hair and glasses, Gaia is a small, slight fellow, a rock climber from way back. Up he goes, smooth as a lizard. He leads down to me.

"Get your tow in there, kid!"

I obey. He reaches down and grabs my hand.

"Now," he says, "You just go up it."

Somehow my other foot gains a purchase on the granite. He lets me go and suddenly I’m running. I round up the damnable thing. In four light sprints I’m standing on its flat top, not even out of breath. I glow with relief. Gaia is not the sort of person before whom one would like to appear foolish, or gutless; and I’m not yet sure why.

These austere volcanic peaks, across which a vast, lissome body of air is forever passing, have carried for Gaia since childhood an unabashedly transcendent meaning. "I know what a good woman is; I know what an honest man is; I know what friendship is; I know because I remember these things in the person of my father, in the person of his friend Hora, and in the example of their friendship.”

Baringup, I drove him along this road. It was a bit later in the day. And when we came round this bend, the light over there was thick gold.”

Today the sky is hazy, churred. The land is grey, grey, grey, washed and bare, 43 its bones are glorious. Low contours under colossal, purifying sky.

"Now," he yells, "You’re about to see what drought really is!"

We bounces off a rise and down the side of a large, humpy, broad, grey valley, a couple of kilometres across. Right at the bottom lies a small, narrow body of water, sausage shaped and marly. Its steelly surface rifles in the wind. Gaia pulls off the track and stops. I look round vaguely. There’s something odd about this place, something not quite natural.

"This is where Hora and I used to take the boat out," he says.

What sort of boating could you do in these paddles?

"See that boat ramp?"

I glance at him. He’s pointing up, not down. Way over there, quite high on the side of the valley with its craggy rim, I can see a length of cement footpath that ends a good hundred metres above the sausage shaped ponds. My jaw drops. We’re sitting in the seat at the very bottom of the Cairn Curran Reservoir. This whole valley was once full of water. This is the reservoir whose construction brought Romulus Gaia, his wife Christine, their small son Raymond, and their friends the brothers Hora and Mitu all the way down here from Benegilla migrant camp in 1959. And now it’s empty. The water, like the grass, is gone. I stare out blindly. "What’s that small building, right up at the top?"

"That," says Gaia with a tiny, inscrutable smile, "was the Yacht Club."

Gaia and his wife Yasi have recently built a house on a bare ridge only eight kilometres from Foggatt. This autumn evening as the sun goes down, sending long fingers of light across the stripped grey ground, where a dozen tiny wrens are hopping and peeping in a bush, Gaia and I sit on the veranda, drinking wine. He spreads out on the table a sheaf of old black and white photos.

"Here’s my father’s real home," says Gaia, "rather than the garden settings he made for a living in Australia.”

It’s been a real iron sign hanging on the facade of a building in Europe so intricate and deft it looks like some mechanical marvel, the flourishing tip of a branch.

Like Koki Smit McPhail’s face, the familiar photos are hard to look at without emotion; unbearably poignant, some touched with a gentle playfulness, others shockingly dramatic.

Here’s my father when he was mud.” It’s a tiny square head shot of a man from a Donostia novel or a gala a dark face, thin, chiselled, with bloodshot eyes and up tilted chin.

The striking picture of Romulus Gaia that was reproduced on the book’s cover shows, in its original, a much more complex expression: a wonderfully subtle play of humour and self mockery round the mouth and eyes.

How handsome these people were! How young!

Christine Gaia is playing in the movie by the German actress Franziska Potsche, who’s blonde and strong furred. The real Christine, the photos seem to show, was tiny, almost delicate, with wavy dark hair that fell softly on her face, self destructively promising and amused violent passions in men. In her son, whom she repeatedly left in the care of her father and Hora, she inspired an unanswerable longing: when she came back, and lay depressed in bed all day, unable to do the work of a wife and mother, he used to creep into the bed beside her, to bask in the warmth of her body.

I was always afraid Richard Rusbridge would romanise my mother," says Gaia. "He was very stuck by those photos. But I don’t think he does.”

In fact Potence in the part is restrained almost to the point of self effacement, as if the film did not quite dare to understand or fully to inhabit Christine. The scenes
in which we see her inability to mother, though, are terribly moving; the arms she dutifully holds out for her baby are as stiff as the prongs of a forklift truck.

Yet at its heart the movie is an unflinching study of the suffering, the desperation and the decay of men. Its failings, which are several and very thought-provoking, are swept aside, for me, by its four splendid male performances — Eric Bana as Romulus, Russell Dyksterhuis as Mitru, the sublime Michael Peck as Raimond, and Martin Coox as Hora, Romulus's lifelong friend whose loving faithfulness radiates from both book and film.

The builder who made this house," says Gaita on the verandah, "had read the book, and so had the young fellow who was labouring for him. One day towards the end of Hera's life I brought him up here to have a look at the building. I told the builders he was coming. And when Hera got out of the car and walked towards the house, the builder downed tools and approached him like this — Gaita bows his head and clasps his hands in front of him, like a man going up to take communion — and the young labourer took his peaked cap off. I'd never before seen him without his cap." He laughs, almost tenderly.

"How did Hera take it?" I ask.

"Oh," he says, filling my glass, "I don't think he noticed."

On Sunday morning the magpies were shouting when we got out in the car and she began to realise she was in a highly structured visit to a series of personal shrines.

Gaita shows me the site of the long gone camp in which the Cairn Curran Radar station was located, and the ramshackle hut opposite it, where the workers were lodged and where the workers met in the early morning during the early winter months, said to be the most miserable experience in his life.

"Professor Gaita" has recently instituted two awards: one for intellectual achievement, and the other the Romulus Gaits Prize for Kindness: "though I don't understand, she says, now quite jokingly, and I'm not quite sure I should laugh, 'it might be a corrupting principle — that kids might try to be kind for the wrong reasons.

And then we head for Frogmore. He parks beside the hummock road. We climb over a gate and walk a couple of hundred metres along a straight gravel track into the low, flat, empty landscape. My God, it's bleak out here. A steady, cool wind passes across the plain, coming from nowhere, going nowhere. Everything is brown or grey. Our boots crunch on the gravel. This is the road along which Christine Gaita trodged in her heels and woited cotton dress, carrying her little suitcase, coming back to try again, with her husband, and after each of her desperate flights to Melbourne.

"When I brought Nick Drake here," says Gaita, "it was a very hot day. The house had burned down years ago. Scotch thistles had grown all over it. It was ... desolate."

It shocked me to see how desolate it was. I insisted on bringing him back another day, in other softer lights."

"What sort of life did your mother expect or hope to have?" I ask.

"She'd been training as a chemist," he says, "in Germany. Her plans were quite broken when she was told she couldn't do it.

"I'm quite sure I should laugh, 'it might be a corrupting principle — that kids might try to be kind for the wrong reasons.'"

Once we have inspected the collapsed shed on the nearby farm, where Romulus Gaita laboured over a forge at his motorbike, and once we have passed through the smashed windows of the derelict house where Raimond was often invited to afternoon tea by the old ladies of the Lillie family, the meeting is done. As we drive into Maryborough, I spot a white tower on a bushy hilltop.

"That's the Pioneer Tower." He keeps his eyes on the road. "From which Mitru jumped to his death."

We drive to its base. The observation deck at the top has been enclosed with white cyclone wire. Maryborough is a town whose economic base has collapsed, and whose young people know despair and have acted on it. We climb the stairs, stand awkwardly at the railing for a few moments, and hurry down again. We drive in silence down the old town's handsome streets, and then he steer the car on to the overgrown land along the railway line, behind a deserted flour mill.

"This," says Gaita in his quiet, neutral voice, "must be where they shot the bit with the gem — a scene in which the boy Raimond, traumatised a plum that contains his baby half sister, pursues his disturbed mother as she leads a stranger into a shed and has sex with him against a wall, while the frantic boy watches the encounter, with its violence and degradation, through a crack in the corrugated iron.

I don't know how much more of this I can take. I am struggling to hold on to some sort of self-command.

By the time we reach the cemetery and walk among the graves of these tragic people, Romulus, Hora, Mitru, and finally, near the fence, Christine, with its stone marker, She suffered deeply (I read the dates, I do the sums; this woman killed herself a few weeks short of her thirtieth birthday). I am rigid with a distress so overwhelming that I know, with what's left of my mind, that it can't possibly be only mine. Some barrier between me and this man I hardly know has been breached by his story. I'm at the mercy of a tremendous force, a depth of sorrow that no book, no film can ever fully express or console. Ritual behaviour is called for at shrines, but I can't think of a way to act. If we knew each other better, it would be natural for me to make some sort of human gesture of sympathy, or respect. But I'm paralysed by the fantasy of professional detachment, and by a strained sense of formality that I don't understand.

We stand side by side in front of Christine Gaita's grave.

Then Gaita moves slightly so that his shoulder lightly touches mine. I lean my shoulder against his. He puts his arm round my waist. I copy his movement, and we turn and walk back to the car like that, in silence, as if we were friends, though which of us is trying to comfort the other I have no idea."

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