

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 young 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 mooching 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 undefended 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

Raimond Gaita and Kodi Smit-McPhee, 2 June 2006. © Jeffrey Mikkelsen.





must be the axe for the frozen sea within us." Reading it, with its stiff, passionate dignity and its moral demands, can smash open a reader's own blocked-off sorrows. Out they rush to meet those that the book relates.

For a movie to be drawn from this memoir, the tale would have had to be taken apart, and the pieces picked up off the floor and compressed into a new configuration, without the one element that holds it all together on the page, makes sense of it, and redeems it: Gaita's unique narrating voice.

It's an intellectual's voice, a philosopher's, fastidious, restrained, wary. It's wonderfully serious, and terrified of being sentimental. At times it quivers with a suppressed, righteous anger. It can be disdainful, lofty to the point of chilliness, as when he refines and yet again refines his father's beliefs and motives, holding them away defensively from what he imagines the reader might lazily suppose there to have been: *no*, it wasn't *this*, he keeps insisting — it was *that*.

And then suddenly it will relax and open out into an image of sensuous joy: "roads specially dusted to match the high summer-coloured grasses"; or a blunt domestic fact: "the chickens came into the house and shat in it"; or a quiet statement of breathtaking simplicity and humility: "I know what a good workman 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."

How can film match this striding, all-creating, all-encompassing thing, the voice?

I saw Gaita emerge into the lobby after the preview. He looked vague, and numb. I would have liked to make a comradely 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," shouts Gaita over the rattling of his loose-jointed old ute, "how much more beautiful it is round here when there's grass."

But up here near Baringhup in Central Victoria, where Gaita 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, nasty, plate-shaped pads of pale green, fringed with sparse hairy spines.

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

We park and set out on foot towards the granite boulders among which Romulus Gaita's friend Vacek, a harmless hermit, made himself a fortress. I spot a baby cactus sprouting insolently from a dented stone.

"Eww, gross," I say. "It is growing out of bare rock." "You thought it was mere hyperbole, didn't you," says Gaita.

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 philosopher's head with its white hair and glasses, Gaita is a small, agile fellow, a rock climber from way back. Up he goes, smooth as a lizard. He leans down to me.

"Get your toe in there, see?"

I obey. He reaches down and grabs my hand.

"Now," he says, "you just *run* up it."

Somehow my other foot gains a purchase on the granite. He lets go my hand and suddenly I'm running. I bound up the damn thing. In four light springs I'm standing on its flat top, not even out of breath. I glow with relief. Gaita 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 plains, across which a vast, leisurly body of air is forever passing, have carried for Gaita since childhood an unabashedly transcendental meaning.

"I needed the film-makers," he shouts as the ute rattles along, "to understand how utterly fundamental to the story the landscape was. They saw it at all hours of the day and night — they fell in love with it. The first time Nick Drake [the British poet who wrote the screenplay] came to

Baringhup, 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 partly clouded. The land is grey, grey, grey, raked and bare. But its bones are glorious — low contours under colossal, purifying skies.

"Now," he yells, "you're about to see what drought really is."

We bounce over a rise and down the side of a large, lumpy, broad, grey valley, a couple of kilometres across. Right at the bottom lies a small, narrow body of water, sausage-shaped and murky. Its steely surface ripples in the wind. Gaita 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 puddles?

"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 are sitting in the ute 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 Gaita, his wife Christine, their small son Raimond, and their friends the brothers Hora and Mitru all the way down here from Bonegilla migrant camp in 1950. And now it's empty. The water, like the grass, is gone.

I stare about wildly. "What's that small building, right up at the top?"

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

Gaita and his wife Yael have recently built a house on a bare rise only eight kilometres from Frogmore. 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, Gaita and I sit on the veranda, drinking wine. He spreads out on the table a sheet of old black and white photos.

"Here's my father's real ironwork," says Gaita, "rather than the garden settings he made for a living in Australia." It's a beaten iron sign hanging on the façade of a building in Europe; so intricate and deft that it looks like something in nature, the flourishing tip of a branch.

Like Kodi Smit-McPhee's face, the family 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 mad." It's a tiny square head shot of a man from a Dostoevsky novel or a gulag; a dark face, thin, clenched, with blazing eyes and up-tilted chin.

The striking picture of Romulus Gaita 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 Gaita is played in the movie by the German actress Franka Potente, who's blonde and strong faced. The real Christine, the photos seem to show, was tiny, almost delicate, with curly dark hair that puffed lightly on a breeze. In the book Gaita describes her as "highly intelligent, deeply sensuous, anarchic and unstable." She plainly suffered from a mental illness: she heard voices, was self-destructively promiscuous, and aroused violent passions in men. In her son, whom she repeatedly left in the care of his father and Hora, she inspired an unassuageable longing; when she came back, and lay depressed in bed all day, unable to do the work of a wife and mother, he had to creep into the bed beside her, to bask in the warmth of her body.

"I was always afraid Richard Roxburgh would romanticise my mother," says Gaita. "He was very struck by these photos. But I don't think he does."

In fact Potente 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 decency 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 Dykstra as Mitru, the sublime Smit McPhee as Raimond, and Marton Csokas 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 veranda, "had read the book, and so had the young fellow who was labouring for him. One day towards the end of Hora's life I brought him up here to have a look at the building. I told the builders he was coming. And when Hora 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 Hora take it?" I ask.

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

On Sunday morning the magpies are shouting when we set out in the car on what I am beginning to realise is 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 Reservoir labourers were accommodated, and the ramshackle hall opposite it, where dances were held and films shown. We visit his primary school, at which "Professor Gaita" has recently instituted two awards: one for intellectual achievement, and the other the Romulus Gaita Prize for Kindness: "though I did wonder," he says, nor quite joking, and I'm not quite sure if I should laugh, "if it might be a *corrupting prize* – that kids might try to be kind for the wrong reasons."

And then we head for Frogmore. He parks beside the bitumen 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 trudged in her heels and waisted cotton dress, carrying her little suitcase, coming back to try again with her husband and son 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, in Germany." His tone is carefully neutral. "She thought she would have a city life. When I brought my aunt Maria here from Germany a few years ago, she didn't say much. She just cried. To think her sister had had to live in such a place."

We climb through a wire fence. There's a small dam.

"Is this where you chucked your dad's precious razor?"

"This is the real dam," he says, "in which my father's real razor still lies rusting. Not long before he died he asked me again what happened to the razor. I just shrugged."

"You never told him? You held out for 40 years? What a power struggle!"

He looks surprised. "I suppose it was." He puts his head on one side, and gives his rare, endearing smile.

The house was demolished in 1969. The place where it stood is now just scraped-looking dirt strewn with old-fashioned brown beer bottles and studded with pieces of broken cement, rusty iron and smashed crockery. A crumbly patina of sheep shit coats everything. We mooch about with our eyes on the ground. I long to pick up a piece of the china and put it in my pocket, but one does not steal souvenirs from shrines. A large lump is starting to form in my throat.

In the dirt near the fence lies the metal head of a spade, rusted away into a graceful curve like a palm tree. I pick it up by the shaft and hold it out to him.

"Look. How beautiful."

"That," he says in a non-committal tone, "is probably the one with which we buried Orloff." In sentences of perfect syntax, as formally as if he were reciting a liturgy, he relates how the dog, which had taken a ground glass bait, managed to drag himself as far as the outside of the wire fence, and died there.

"My father lifted him over the fence, so that he could be buried on the right side. It was the first time I ever saw my father cry. The only time we ever cried together was beside the grave of Orloff."

Looking down at the unmarked ground where the bones of Orloff lie, I feel my self control begin to slip. There's a loud squawk above our heads in the pine tree. We look up with a start. Two brilliant white cockatoos glide down from a high branch in a big showy curve. I glance at Gaita. Down his cheek is pouring a sheet of tears.

"I know it's silly," he mutters, wiping them away with the back of his hand, "but for a second I thought it was my cocky Jack. They can live for 80 or 90 years, you know."

We stand there in silence, in the steady wind, heads down, hands in our pockets. He drifts over to a huge pine



that has toppled beside the dam. Its bare upper branches, trained sideways by decades of wind, look like thick grey hair streaming. Its roots are in the air, but its lower branches are still putting out cones and fresh green needles. The symbolism of this is so obvious that we can't even look at each other.

Once we have inspected the collapsing shed on the nearby farm, where Romulus Gaita laboured over a forge at his ironwork, and once we have peered 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 morning is gone.

As we drive into Maryborough, I spot a white towler on a bushy hilltop.

"What's that?" I say, making conversation.

"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 steers 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 pram" – a scene in which the boy Raimond, trundling a pram 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 marked *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.