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CLIVE JAMES

UNRELIABLE

MEMOIRS



UNRELIABLE MEMOIRS

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North Face of Soho

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Brilliant Creatures
The Remake
Brrm! Brrm!
The Silver Castle

VERSE

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Opal Sunset: Select Poems, 1958–2008

TRAVEL

Flying Visits

CRITICISM

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Visions Before Midnight
The Crystal Bucket
First Reactions
At the Pillars of Hercules
From the Land of Shadows
Glued to the Box
Snakecharmers in Texas
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On Television
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As of This Writing
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Cultural Amnesia



UNRELIABLE MEMOIRS

Clive James



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to
Rhoisin and Bruce Beresford
and the getting of wisdom

Andromache led the lamentation of the women, while she held in her hands the head of Hector, her great warrior:

‘Husband, you are gone so young from life, and leave me in your home a widow. Our child is still but a little fellow, child of ill-fated parents, you and me. How can he grow up to manhood? Before that, this city shall be overthrown. For you are gone, you who kept watch over it, and kept safe its wives and their little ones...

‘And you have left woe unutterable and mourning to your parents, Hector; but in my heart above all others bitter anguish shall abide. Your hands were not stretched out to me as you lay dying. You spoke to me no living word that I might have pondered as my tears fell night and day.’

Iliad, xxiv, translated by S. E. Winbolt, from *The Iliad Pocket Book*
Constable 1931

CONTENTS

*Like America, Only Different:
Preface to the American Edition*

Preface

1. The Kid from Kogarah
2. Valley of the Killer Snakes
3. Billycart Hill
4. The Force of Destruction
5. Enter the Flash of Lightning
6. Dib, Dib, Dib, Dib
7. Eros and the Angel
8. The Imitation of Christ
9. Milo the Magnificent
10. The Sound of Mucus
11. A Prong in Peril
12. All Dressed Up
13. Let Us Rejoice, Therefore
14. Basic Training
15. Very Well: Alone
16. Fidgety Feet
17. That He Should Leave His House

LIKE AMERICA, ONLY DIFFERENT: PREFACE TO THE AMERICAN EDITION

MODESTY, NOT CONCEIT, demands that I proclaim the success of this book in Britain and Australia where it was first published in 1979. Modesty, not conceit, demands that I also proclaim the book's continued popularity in both countries ever since. The modesty comes in with the consideration that the book got almost nowhere in America: not at first publication, and not afterwards, in the thirty years separating then from now. There are small, cultish groups who know about *Unreliable Memoirs*—apparently there is a coven at *Slate* magazine who use lines from it as call signs, like members of the French Resistance—and the occasional individual, such as Liesl Schillinger at the *New York Times Book Review*, has gone into print to confess fandom. But public advocates remain few, and earlier on there was almost nobody.

When the book first came out in the United States, my friend Dick Cavett liked it, and invited me on his show to discuss it, but he rather depressed me by saying, before we went on the air, that the book had no chance in the United States. 'Nobody here knows where Australia is.' My American publishers are convinced that things might be different now, but I wonder if they are right. I couldn't help noticing that Donald Rumsfeld, when giving his Dadaist press briefings during the early stages of the Iraq campaign, rarely seemed to remember that the Australians had sent troops to the battle. He remembered the Poles, but there were people of Polish descent in the United States, and they had a vote. Even President George W. Bush could remember the Poles. The Australians, however, were still nowhere.

ANOTHER INITIAL PROBLEM, from the American angle, might have been that the book harked back to a lost paradise. Growing up in a Sydney suburb after World War II, my generation of children could play in the street with reasonable safety and were even allowed out at night unescorted. By the time I wrote the book, both the British and the Australians were nostalgic for such a vanished idyll. But for most Americans the idyll had not yet vanished: the small-town paradise of Booth Tarkington was cherished as a reality, and there were still parts of New York where you could play stickball until dusk. So why the fuss about the lost innocence of youth? There was also the consideration that some of the innocence I depicted was pretty foul. In *Portnoy's Complaint*, masturbation in the adolescent male had been a provocative topic, but in my book it was taken for granted as a harmless competitive event. I thus conveyed a moral insouciance which Americans might have found shocking, had they read that far. Some of the reviewers did read that far, and found me incurably frivolous.

But now, in the new millennium, a new dispensation has arrived, even for America. A childhood without electronic toys is long enough gone to be longed for, and not even the stalwarts of the Christian Right would nowadays believe that a child's imagination could be squeaky clean—in fact, especially not them. In those terms, I should hasten to add, it still seems to me that the young hero of the book is not a sociopath, a natural delinquent or an incipient libertine. He is just young. When I first set pen to paper, I could remember him. Even today, I still can. In my own case, the extent to which the child was father to the man continues to astonish me, and I suspect the same is true for any other man, and for women too. In that regard, I believe I wrote a true book. It is full of exaggerations; there is a lot of editing for effect; but the emotions are exact.

Only recently equipped with my first pair of long trousers, at the movies I died of love for Audrey Dalton in the 1953 version of *Titanic*. Ever since, that primal vision of beauty has governed my affections, and I have harboured a murderous envy of Robert Wagner. And even Audrey Dalton was only a pale echo of a young creature I had previously seen at our vacation hotel when my trousers were still very short indeed: ambushing her in the corridor was the first brave moment of my life, and typically I got it all wrong. It's the same with every other revelation of inadequacy in the book. Trial and error was the only way I ever found out anything, and almost always there was an error. I should never have called in the other boys to take turns diving off the cupboard onto my bed while my mother was out. When the bed broke, I should never have tried to rig it so that it looked as if it were still intact: it was a Watergate moment, in which the cover-up compounded the crime. I should never have built the giant go-kart that destroyed the garden of the area's most powerful woman.

On the other hand, if I had not dared to do these things I might never, later on, have dared to do anything. And always there were the reassuring surroundings of suburban life, an atmosphere that breathed solace even for tragedy. My father had never come home, but home was a solid reality: a loving mother, a benevolent climate, and a brick bungalow in a quarter of an acre of land. Along with hundreds of British magazines like the *Illustrated London News*, our hall cupboard was stacked with the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Life*, *Collier's*, *Look* and *Reader's Digest*. In *Reader's Digest* there was a regular feature called 'Towards More Picturesque Speech.' I suppose I was influenced, just as I was influenced by the penny loafers that Gene Kelly wore in *An American in Paris*. Though there was nowhere in Sydney where you could buy a pair of shoes like that, I knew that I was born to wear them.

BUT UNRELIABLE MEMOIRS isn't an American book, because it was written by someone born and raised in another country, a country superficially like America and yet profoundly different. If that is still a problem, maybe the book itself can now hope to be part of the solution. Here is the story of how it is possible to be a citizen of a country which, like America, is free, prosperous and speaks English, but which, unlike America, has a small population and is not a world power. Since the arrival of the white colonists in 1788, Australia has always had a British heritage, but during the American occupation in World War II—when the United States came to help us fight a battle that it would have cost us everything to lose—it was confirmed that we had an American heritage as well, and my generation grew up under the influence of both cultures, with the similarities to the United States becoming more and more pervasive.

The young protagonist of this narrative grows up reading British school stories, but he dresses up in the masks and capes of the heroes of American movie serials, and finally the movies are always the decisive influence. At the time when *Rock Around the Clock* was first released, the bunch I hung out with looked, or anyway hoped they looked, pretty similar to American teens, and, with due allowance for our nasal accent, even sounded similar. Australia had begun its recent and painfully self-conscious history of worrying whether it might not be turning into a parodic American client state. But that concern has always been misplaced, because it can't happen.

On the plane of fact, rather than in the airy realm of cultural theory, it was the difference between the two countries, and not their similarity, that became more and more startling, and the difference resided precisely in that discrepancy of scale, which finally dictates that Australia, short of physical power, must rely on influence instead. In times of trouble, the United States can send the Screaming Eagles. Australia must send Cate Blanchett. My money is on the Aussies, but I wouldn't expect the majority of Americans to agree. Sometimes Australians feel that if they came from Kazakhstan, the Americans would understand them better. As things are, the Americans, to the limited extent that they think about Australia at all, have to grapple with the concept of a country which feels just as blessed

as America but largely refrains from instructing God to renew the blessing at every opportunity. ~~America still thinks it is the world. Australia knows that it isn't. Knowing that, it can get on with the~~ job of proving that the American dream is not necessarily the only dream there is. One of my original hopes for this book was that it might set some of that proof on paper. My parents, doomed to have their lives ruined by a quirk of history, hoped that their little son might grow up in a free world. He did, and a lifetime later it is still his duty to say that America, though an essential part of that free world, is not the whole of it. There is a world elsewhere: or anyway there was, back there when my memories began.

—London, 2009

PREFACE

MOST FIRST NOVELS are disguised autobiographies. This autobiography is a disguised novel. On the periphery, names and attributes of real people have been changed and shuffled so as to render identification impossible. Nearer the centre, important characters have been run through the scramble or else left out completely. So really the whole affair is a figment got up to sound like truth. All you can be sure of is one thing: careful as I have been to spare other people's feelings, I have been even more careful not to spare my own. Up, that is, of course, to a point.

Sick of being a prisoner of my childhood, I want to put it behind me. To do that, I have to remember what it was like. I hope I can dredge it all up again without sounding too pompous. Solemnity, I am well aware, is not my best vein. Yet it can't be denied that books like this are written to satisfy a confessional urge; that the mainspring of a confessional urge is guilt; and that somewhere underneath the guilt there must be a crime. In my case I suspect there are a thousand crimes, which until now I have mainly been successful in not recollecting. Rilke used to say that no poet would mind going to gaol, since he would at least have time to explore the treasure house of his memory. In many respects Rilke was a prick.

Premature memoirs can only be conceited. I have no excuses against this charge, except to say that self-regard is itself a subject, and that to wait until reminiscence is justified by achievement might mean to wait for ever. I am also well aware that all attempts to put oneself in a bad light are doomed to be frustrated. The ego arranges the bad light to its own satisfaction. But on that point it is only necessary to remember Santayana's devastating comment on Rousseau's *Confessions*, which he said demonstrated, in equal measure, candour and ignorance of self. However adroitly I have calculated my intentional revelations, I can be sure that there are enough unintentional ones to give the reader an accurate impression. I had an absurdly carefree upbringing. If my account of it inspires disapproval, that can only serve to help redress the balance. One doesn't expect to get away with it for ever.

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