

The Experience of Experience

This Crazy Thing a Life: Australian Jewish Autobiography

By Richard Freadman

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Reviewed by Caroline Hamilton

In his essay 'History Talking to Itself' Francis Russell Hart notes that particular modes of autobiographical writing can be related back to specific periods of cultural life. With his survey study of Australian Jewish autobiography Richard Freadman demonstrates that autobiography can be understood as a product of particular *cultures* as well as particular eras. *This Crazy Thing A Life* is Freadman's study of autobiographical writing by Jewish Australians throughout the nation's history.

The subject of Jewish identity is rich territory for the scholar of autobiography: in these life stories there is ever present an attempt to chart and make meaning of the literal and figurative journey to Australian shores. In this respect the Jewish Diaspora is an instructive lens through which to view the complexities of identity, and writing about the self.

Freadman is a scholar of literature, with a special interest in biography and autobiography, and his discipline has influenced his approach and structuring of the collection. The book is divided into three parts.

The first section offers an extensive examination of Australian autobiographical writing in terms of Australian Jewish history and the important contribution of Jewish Australians to our cultural landscape. Interestingly, the bulk of these writings have come to light in the last 10 years or so, a fact that is consistent with the mainstream popularity for autobiography and memoir in the international bookselling market. Freadman does not directly address the recent popularity for life-writing but it is apparent that the autobiographical impulse at work in these Jewish life stories is linked to a drive to document the 'experience of experience'.

To address the reasons for the recent resurgence of interest in autobiography in the mainstream we might speak not of popularity but of *legibility*: the ease (or otherwise) with which we can read and understand the stories of others' lives. While the public taste for autobiographies in recent years is very likely connected to the insistence on the scrutinised, interactive existence encouraged by our modern media, there is a very different kind of 'bearing witness' exposed in Freadman's collection. His work examines the multifaceted experience of

Australian Jews as they grapple with questions of testimony, family history and the Holocaust.

Given that Jews have been in Australia since the First Fleet, Freadman's task is a large one and his approach is comprehensive. Freadman examines Jewish identity before the Second World War and its significant transformation after the postwar influx of central-European refugees. Questions of citizenship and statelessness are examined in the context of what it means to be Jewish from the vantage point of the southern hemisphere.

In the second section of his book, he offers nuanced readings of works by Andrew Reimer, Susan Varga, Lily Brett, Arnold Zable and others. These separate essays are complemented by another on the Makor Library's 'Write Your Story' project, recounting its work in facilitating the writing of autobiography in the community. As if in demonstration of the drive to document collective experience, the Makor Project offers assistance to Jews of all backgrounds and ages to tell their life stories. Through these focused studies Freadman is able to trace out recurrent themes relevant to the genre of Jewish autobiography in particular, and the life-writing form more generally; especially identity issues such as race, gender and sexuality.

Freadman also tackles the problems of autobiographical writing: the question of whether or how language can accurately capture experience. Perhaps most illuminating and useful is Freadman's contention that 'What we call "personal identity" can take a first-person form which refers to the person I take myself to be, but also a third-person form which concerns how others see me.' What makes this study strong is Freadman's ability to move deftly between both the first and third-person identities that together comprise the authors he has chosen for examination.

The last section of the book is an anthology of sorts, featuring extracts from the works of 66 writers and arranged according to particular themes and issues Freadman has covered in his analysis. This is an idiosyncratic and effective approach. Freadman not only allows these writers to speak for themselves but, in compiling such a rich collection of source material, serves to introduce readers to a wide range of excellent, varied life-writing styles.

Of particular interest in the collection is Freadman's focus on the question of 'Australianness' in the context of Jewish identity. Freadman acknowledges this to be a classification almost as amorphous as 'autobiography'. What constitutes an Australian, let alone an Australian Jew? For Freadman's purposes his definition of Australianness is loose: anyone who has spent at least a year or more in Australia is deemed to be Australian. This in itself brings up some interesting questions about the melding of national and personal identity—how much of national identity is a state of mind? How much can it be measured in terms of years, decades, generations? Is geography destiny insofar as identity is

concerned? It would be interesting to revisit Freadman's work in another 10 or 15 years when the landscape of Australia and the figurative territory of autobiography have both been further shaped by technological shifts and global discourses to see just how national, ethnic and personal identities have been influenced by these forces.

This Crazy Thing a Life offers a landmark study of Australian Jewish writing. Freadman's focus offers an entirely fresh approach to Australian life-writing and his study engages with important issues surrounding testimony and truth.

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