

HHR Society Short Story Award presentation

Wheeler Centre, 9 November 2014

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It must be half a century since I last read *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*.

As with all mighty tomes of youthful reading, I had thought about it, as it receded into the distant past, with a feeling, most of all, of self-congratulation: it was huge, it was mighty, and *I had read it*.

To tell the truth, my memories of it were blurry and impressionistic, though studded with painfully bright points – for example, Mahony at Queenscliff, in deep mental and spiritual trouble—the way he walked with his eyes always fixed on the ground ‘so that passers-by should not use them as spy-holes.’

Over many years, my tastes changed. I didn’t think I would ever read the trilogy again. Yesterday, sprawled on the couch in the heat, thinking about what to say today, I picked up my copy and skimmed the introduction. Yep – I remember all this – Ballarat — the goldfields –yep, yep, yep. But then I turned the page to the opening of the novel. My God. In the very first sentence *a man is buried alive*.

The rotten earth collapsed, bringing down the roof in its train. The digger fell forward on his face, his ribs jammed across his pick, his arms pinned to his sides, nose and mouth pressed into the sticky mud as into a mask; and over his defenceless body, with a roar that burst his ear-drums, broke stupendous masses of earth.

That is writing! I was thunderstruck. I could not put the book down. I sank into it and lay there absorbed for the rest of the afternoon and into the night.

My feeling for HHR ran alongside my fifty-year friendship with the late Axel Clark, her biographer. Axel was diagnosed with a brain tumour in 1980. He lived another twenty years, sometimes ill enough for further gruelling surgery, sometimes stable, sometimes in fine fettle; but through all these changes, he worked. He was the least complaining, the sweetest-tempered, the most devoted and determined person I ever knew.

In the late 1990s, while he was working on the second volume of the biography, we drove together one day from Melbourne to Sydney. He suggested we stop at Chiltern so he could show me the HHR house. I forget the season, but I remember the weather as dull and clouded, with a cool wind. We had come on the wrong day. The house was not open to visitors. We stood in front of it and looked out over the grey lake in silence. Then in a low voice he said, ‘Bleak, isn’t it.’

I think this was the first time he acknowledged to me the tremendous load that he was hauling—his long, long illness, its draining effect on his life spirit; his weariness; his struggle to finish the work. And outside that closed, locked old house I had my first sharp physical sense of HHR's childhood, how anxious and difficult it must have been, and what she had to fight free of. Very soberly we drove on.

Early this morning I leafed through volume 2 of Axel's biography and came upon a little scene that he quotes from HHR's memoir *Myself When Young*.

She was describing a time when she was trying to write *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* and 'felt wretchedly inadequate to the task.'

'I had got to a part that stuck me: try as I would, I couldn't get it to move. I felt cross and tired and generally disgruntled. And one day I vented my irritation by flinging out, "I don't know I'm sure how I ever came to write *Maurice Guest* – a poor ignorant little colonial like me!" My husband glanced up from his writing table and said in his wise, quiet way, "But emotionally very experienced".

This is the point from which I can step across the gap of time (and form) that lies between Richardson's vast canvas and the short stories we're here today to praise.

The chief thing that struck me about the stories was the sense that their writers are, like HHR, 'emotionally very experienced'. They work with great depths, and breadths, of human longing and sadness and joy. I was moved by them, and found it very hard to rank them. I would draw up a list of winners, but find that when I woke next morning their order had somehow shifted overnight, for reasons I was hard put to articulate.

I loved the writers' ease in the world of family, the different angles on which they went at this age-old scene of struggle and love and rage and sometimes of triumph. There was some very fine observation of children, of their suffering and jubilation, and also their ferocity. Powerful psychological insights were delivered with such a light touch that I hardly felt them until they zapped into my nerves and tingled there.

I was impressed by the writers' tackling of pain and the fear of death; their delight in the material world, its preciousness and beauty, and what they could make it mean; the growth of love, the blessing of forgiveness, the endurance of the unendurable. I admired their authority, their quality of stride – and how they could be funny in a way that was not intended to make a reader laugh so much as to save her (and the story's narrator) from despair.

The work shows a high level of technical skill: fine handling of structure; the ability to move elliptically through time; judicious withholding of information, and the release of it in tiny unexpected surges, or gentle sprays. In one story in particular, the difficult matter of class is laid bare.

In another, I envied the writer's ability to apply the technique that Freud said a psychoanalyst must use, in listening to patients – something he called 'evenly suspended attention'. The writer of this story kept my sympathies hovering between her characters in the most exemplary and disturbing way.

It's a long time since I have tried to write a short story; but being as I am very interested in compression, I learnt a great deal from these works.

The whole experience of reading them has been a joy to me. I thank the writers for the pleasure they've given me, and the example they've set. The bar is high and I read their work with respect and admiration.

If I may, I'd like to end with a single sentence from Jennifer Down's winning entry, *Pressure OK*, to describe the mood I was in after I had read the stories. She's talking about a widower who's just been to the theatre with his grown-up daughter to see a great Australian play. They've parted with an awkward affection, and he's walking back to the station. The sentence consists of only ten words. It seems so simple, but it leaps with poetic energy. It's modern, it feels like now, yet it might also have been describing one of poor Richard Mahony's rare moments of tranquillity and hope. I would kill to have written it. Here it is:

His veins were warm and all the stars were out.