

'Expansive, engrossing, beautifully worked and fully-imagined.' Mark Slouka



READING GROUP NOTES

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About the book

Michael and Marjorie Madigan refuse to be interviewed by biographer Sinclair Hughes for his new book *Inside the Lion's Den: The Literary Life of Gilbert Madigan*. This is not surprising as Gilbert is Marjorie's ex-husband and Michael's mostly absent father. He is also Australia's first Booker Prize winner, a feted and much lauded author that the U.K. and U.S. now like to call their own.

Michael cannot escape his father's life and work, and at times his own life seems swallowed by it. His father's success is a source of undeniable pleasure but also of great turmoil.

In a world that increasingly covets fame and celebrity, *Relatively Famous* subtly explores notions of success, masculinity, betrayal and loss, and ultimately what it might mean to live a good life.

About the author

A teacher, writer and freelance editor, Roger Averill is the author of *Exile: the lives and hopes of Werner Pelz*, the novel *Keeping Faith*, and a travel memoir, *Boy He Cry: an island odyssey*.

Exile won the Western Australian Premier's Prize for Non-fiction in 2012, and was shortlisted for the Douglas Stewart Prize for Nonfiction at the 2013 NSW Premier's Literary Awards.

Roger Averill lives with his wife and two daughters in Melbourne, Australia.

Reviews

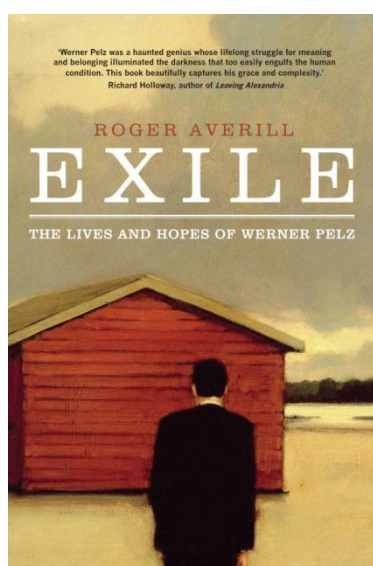
'Expansive, engrossing, beautifully worked and fully-imagined, Relatively Famous is not just a novel about the emotional fallout of artistic genius – though it is that; it's a novel about parents and children and the life-long negotiations – for independence, for approval, for love – that go on between them. If it's true, as the poet Philip Larkin wrote, that "man hands on misery to man," then we're fortunate that Averill is the kind of writer who understands how much more there is to that crucial exchange; who understands that along with the baton of misery comes the potential for understanding, perhaps even forgiveness. This novel, to recall Larkin again, deepens like a coastal shelf, perhaps because of all the life it's gathered to itself.'

[Mark Slouka, author of *Brewster* and *Nobody's Son*]

'Multi-layered and moving. In this intelligently imagined narrative, Averill exposes the tensions and complexities of father/son relationships, and the struggle for identity, with rich and poignant effect.'

[Dominique Wilson, author of *That Devil's Madness* and *The Yellow Papers*]

Previous works



Winner of the Western Australian Premier's Prize for Non-fiction in 2012
Shortlisted for the Douglas Stewart Prize for Nonfiction, 2013 NSW Premier's Literary Awards

'Averill writes eloquently about his Socratic capacity as a teacher. He is a sure-footed guide to the intricacies of Pelz's thought and to its connections with his protean life.'

[Ken Inglis, *The Age*, 18 August 2012]

'At the end, we know this man who lived trying to wrest meaning from every moment, who pursued a truth unbound by orthodoxy, who slipped and fell innumerable times. We can also marvel at the friendship and love between author and subject.'

[Mary Phillip, *The Courier Mail*, August 18-19, 2012]

'Averill digs deep, scours wide. We trust him – trust his integrity in chronicling Pelz's life, trust his not playing haywire with the facts and with us. I think Pelz would have liked the book. And he would have thought the right man got to write it.'

[Maria Tumarkin, *The Australian*, 15 September 2012]

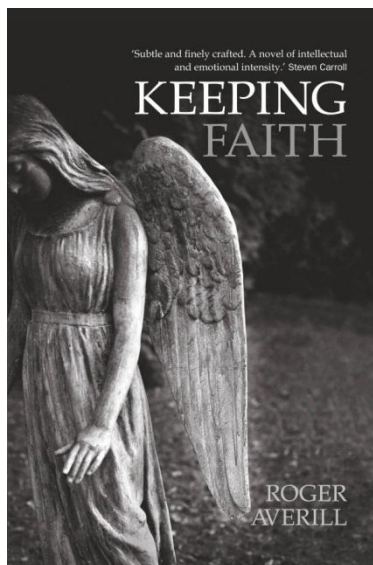
'Averill is a constant but discreet presence throughout the book, as he meets and gets to know Pelz's friends and family, visits his old home in Berlin, and tries to work out what his discoveries are telling him if anything, about Werner, and where the boundaries of biographical decency lie. The prose is as clear as Orwell's pane of glass, though he knows how to use a good anecdote, and the book flows evenly, deeply through Werner's life. ...Averill's quest for the truth about Werner Pelz begins with questions: Can you really understand someone without knowing much of their past? What happens when you do know more? "Might I know more, yet understand less?" He asks and in the spirit of his beloved teacher and friend he has no answer, except perhaps the one that Werner gave in a radio interview not long before he died: the most important thing is simply to go on thinking.'

[Peter Kenneally, *Australian Book Review*, April 2013]

'Averill truly loved Pelz, but he is nonetheless a skilled biographer not blind to the man's flaws ... Averill writes about Pelz's last days with great feeling and compassion. I was reminded about my teacher and about all those who survived the monstrosity of the mid-twentieth century. The book's poignancy stayed with me for long after I put it down.'

[Grazyna Zajdow, *Arena Magazine*, May 2013]

Previous works [continued]



'Roger Averill's Keeping Faith is a gripping debut novel which explores faith: how it can function against all odds in one person, and falter irrevocably in another...'

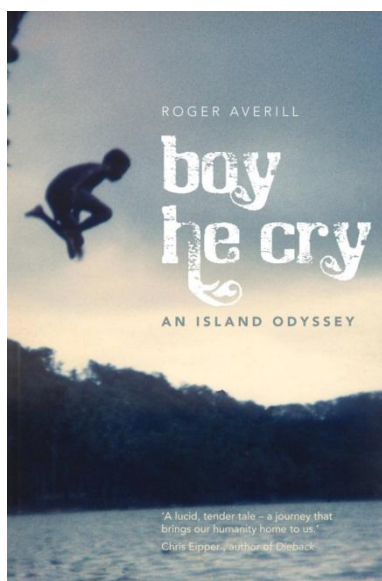
[Gemma Collett, *M/C Reviews*, <http://reviews.media-culture.org.au/>]

'Keeping Faith... is a quiet and resonant piece of work... a fine novel. What is most engaging is the book's directness and unapologetic treatment of faith and loss. There is little room for irony or intellectualized disclaimers here. Averill honours the simple speech and pained questions of the grieving without reverting to rhetoric and knowing winks, trusting his nuanced prose to carry the necessary weight. His diligence and literary intelligence are a reader's reward.'

[Adam Rivett, *Australian Book Review*, March 2010]

'This tender, beautifully written story set in suburban Melbourne is told through the lives of Josh and Gracie Templeton...Although this is a story about the fortitude of faith, and the loss of it, the religious thread fails to detract from the story's gentleness and ability to move. It also is a well-crafted story about family, childhood recollections, love and loss.'

[Robyn Doreian, *Courier Mail*]



'Roger Averill has woven a beautiful, touching tale about his year on a remote Papua New Guinea island with anthropologist partner Shelley...Lasting friendships are forged and the intrepid couple's affection for the islanders, and vice versa, rises above everything in a heart-warming story, simply told.'

[Barry Oliver, *The Australian*, 4 April 2009]

'...[an] excellent, intimate, unassuming travel memoir...As Averill wryly observes, the only thing between this picture postcard paradise and its inevitable repackaging as Club Med are the island's ever-vigilant guardians: mosquitoes.'

[Michael Kitson, *Australian Bookseller & Publisher*, March 2009, Vol 88, No 6]

'...The appeal of the book lies in its simple descriptive honesty. Rarely does Averill pass judgment. Even when, briefly, he worries about a toilet where the faeces go straight into the ocean, he accepts that this is a natural part of the cycle of life.'

[Bruce Elder, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4-5 April 2009]

'An engrossing and touching account of an unforgettable experience.'

[Kate Lockett, *Readings Newsletter*, 5 March 2009]

'...Averill is constantly amazed at the generosity of his friends who have so little, and conversely appalled by the cavalier attitude of some church missionaries towards them. While Averill admires the villagers, the reader is left admiring both him and his wife for their innate humility, bravery and grace.'

Dianne Dempsey, *The Age*, 28 February 2009

For discussion

- Sinclair Hughes's biography of Gilbert Madigan, *Inside the Lion's Den*, is a book within a book. And within Hughes's biography there are other stories [Gilbert's play, books etc.]. What effect does this literary device have on the story overall? And can you think of any other book, film or play that uses this device?
- What symbolic significance does Hughes's biography have of the outer story, and particularly on Michael Madigan?
- After Gilbert rescues a bird from their dog's jaws, the bird pecks Gilbert's finger, resulting in it being set free. Michael thinks '*I am struck that the bird was forced to hurt my father in order to gain its freedom*' [p 10]. What is Averill foreshadowing here? Discuss.
- After high school, Michael becomes a musician, then does a Fine Arts degree and becomes a painter – '*It was, in fact, the last in a long series of missteps made in an increasingly desperate search for a creative outlet independent of my father's distinguished career as a novelist*' [p 18]. Yet later he says he never wanted fame. What does this tell you about Michael's character? Did you believe he never wanted to be like his father? Discuss, taking into account the way Michael withholds – or discloses – who his father is, depending on the situation.
- Commenting on the publication of Gilbert's *The Falling Part*, Michael says '*my father's star rose as high as the small Australian literary firmament allowed; a firmament like the one I saw as a boy projected on the domed ceiling of the old planetarium, mimicking the vaster skies above*' [p 22]. What is he saying about the Australian literary industry?
- Compare and contrast Gilbert and Michael's personalities. Did you find any similarities, or do you see them as totally different?
- In describing the storyline of *Freedom Falling*, Hughes writes '*Artie thought he was fighting for freedom, but Amy's defence of her brother's racism makes him realise that he was only ever fighting fear*' [p 61]. What does this echo in the outer [Michael's] story?
- At one point Michael quotes from an article that Gilbert published in the New Yorker: '*For over fifty years I have worked tirelessly to turn my life into art, to give it a meaningful shape, some beauty, and now that I am nearing its end these woodworms want to reverse all that and turn my art back into a life; an inverted alchemy...*' [p 77]. Consider this quote – if we were to write our autobiography, how much of the image we present to the world would be fiction? How much would we alter, either consciously or subconsciously, '*to give it a meaningful shape*'?
- Averill chose to make Gilbert Madigan jointly win the Booker Prize in 1976, the same year that David Storey's *Saville* actually won it [p 115]. There are a number of similarities between *Saville* and *Relatively Famous*. Discuss.
- Discuss Natalie's and Michael's relationship. When Natalie says '*At least your father had a passion – the balls to follow it. At least he acted!*' [p 149], do you really think she wanted really him to follow a passion, whether it be music or art, or do you think she simply liked the *idea* of him being a musician or artist?
- Discuss Michael's relationship with his father. Compare that to Reuben's relationship with Gilbert. Which do you think is the 'better' son? Why? Discuss.
- Were you surprised to read that '*After marrying Michael Madigan in 1991, the industrial relations lawyer Natalie Farella began a long and intimate correspondence with her father-in-law*' [p 175]. Did this change any of your opinion of Natalie? Did you see this as normal daughter-in-law behaviour, or as a betrayal of Michael? Discuss.

For discussion [continued]

- How much self-awareness do you think Michael has? How accurate is it?
- Aziz [the taxi driver] says '*We left our pasts on the other side of the world and still they came with us.*' [p 188]. Is it ever possible to leave our past behind? Why/why not? Discuss.
- Is Reuben correct in saying that blood transcends all reason [p 191]? Can you think of any time it wouldn't? Discuss.
- Consider Michael's reaction on first hearing the news of Gilbert's marriage to Rosalia, and how it will affect his potential inheritance [p 226]. Is he justified in reacting this way? Discuss.
- Do you believe Natalie betrayed Michael in any way, by having a relationship with Sinclair Hughes? Why/why not? Did she betray Gilbert? Whose was the greater betrayal? Discuss.
- On finding out that Natalie has entered into a relationship with Gilbert's biographer, Michael asks, in a drunken email '*Don't I have a right to refuse to become a character in someone else's imagining?*' [p 234]. Is he correct? Should the members of the family of famous people have a say whether or not their lives become fodder for biographers and/or the press? Does it make a difference depending on *who* is writing about them?
- Is Michael correct in feeling Natalie's attraction to him '*had been intimately entangled with the identity of my father*' [p 242], and that Gil really did want his biography written?
- Michael realises that '*Gil's absence in my life was... a strange kind of presence, one I was not yet ready to lose*' [p 244]. How much impact do you think Gil's absences – and occasional reappearances – actually had on Michael's development? Discuss.
- Do you agree with Michael's decision not to attend Gilbert's funeral? Why/why not? Discuss.
- What is Michael really saying when he states, re his Year Nine class '*I'm trying to free them up, stop them worrying about mistakes. Help them lose their inhibitions. I'm practising. I have to show them how it's done.*' [p 283]?
- Michael states: '*Remembered time is a shuffled deck. What is lived in sequence, as a line, is recalled as a jumble of colliding instances seemingly absolved from the laws of cause and effect, the everyday physics of existence. Only stories make sense of the mess, tracing or retracing meaning into the curlicues of our lives. It wasn't until my own marriage went bad that I revisited what had happened between Mum and Gil, hoping to find in their drama some context or template for my own.*' [p 18] In this – and other instances throughout *Relatively Famous* – Averill plays with the idea that our experiences of time and memory are, at the same time, chaotic, linear and circular. Discuss.
- Throughout *Relatively Famous*, Averill examines the paradox that is one's need for individuality and one's need of relatedness. Discuss.
- Consider biographies versus autobiographies in general. Is the autobiographer simply uncovering facts and relationships that a biographer would not have access to by revealing an inner self, or is he/she deluding him/herself in the sense that there can be no final and complete truth about anyone? Contrast this to the biographer, who can only rely on available 'facts'. Discuss.

Suggested reading

Freedom – Jonathan Franzen [Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010]

Not My Father's Son – Alan Cumming [Canongate Books Ltd, 2015 – memoir]

Poum and Alexandre – Catherine de Saint Phalle [Transit Lounge, 2016 – memoir]

To Become a Whale – Ben Hobson [Allen & Unwin, 2017]

Fathers And Sons – Ivan Turgenev, C Garnett [trans.] [Penguin Classics, 2009 (1862)]

Tell It To The Dog – Robert Power [Transit Lounge, 2017]

Shanghai Dancing: A fictional autobiography – Brian Castro [Giramondo Publishing, 2003]

The Strays – Emily Bitto [Affirm Press, 2014]

Between Them: Remembering My Parents – Richard Ford [Bloomsbury, 2017]

The Kite Runner – Khaled Hosseini [Riverhead Books, 2003]

Nobody's Son: A Memoir – Mark Slouka [W. W. Norton Company, 2016]

The Brothers Karamazov – Fyodor Dostoyevsky, David McDuff [trans.] [Penguin Classics, 2005 (1880)]

Young Hearts Crying – Richard Yates [Dell Publishing, 1984]

Half the Way Home: A Memoir of Father and Son – Adam Hochschild [Mariner Books, 2005]

The Great Gatsby – F. Scott Fitzgerald [Penguin Vintage Classics, 2017 (1925)]

Absence of Mind: The Dispelling of Inwardness from the Modern Myth of the Self – Marilynne Robinson [Yale University Press, 2010 – non-fiction]

Relatively Famous

Roger Averill

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