

His Story: A Novel Memoir

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and

“Fish Out of Water”

By

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**Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

The University of Western Australia

2008

Abstract

His Story takes the form of a fictive but autobiographically based investigation into the child and young adult I used to be, and follows that protagonist into early adulthood. It tries to show the damage done to that character and the way in which he damaged others in turn. As Hemingway said, *We are all bitched from the start and you especially have to hurt like hell before you can write seriously*. More importantly, the main protagonist is somebody who became concerned with, and cognizant of the main political and social events of his day. His life is set in its social context, and reaches out to the larger issues. That is to say, the personal events of the protagonist's life are recorded alongside and set in the context of the major events taking place on the world stage. The manuscript is some sort of hybrid of novel, autobiography, and historical and social document. As Isaac Bashevis Singer said, *The serious writer of our time must be deeply concerned about the problems of his generation*. In order to make *His Story* effective in sharing my ideas and beliefs, and, of course, in order to protect the innocent and more particularly, the guilty, it is created in the colourful area that is the overlap between memory and fiction. When we tell the stories of our lives to others, and indeed, to ourselves, we prise them out of memory's fingers and transform them into fiction. *To write autobiography well*, as E.L. Doctorow said, *you have to invent everything, even memory*.

“Fish Out of Water” uses carefully mined extracts from extensive interviews conducted with ten writers: Brian Aldiss, Paul Bailey, John Berger, Malcolm Bradbury, Dick Davis, John Fowles, Barry Hines, Donall MacAmhlaigh, Roger McGough and Peter Vansittart. I decided to look at the memories these ten disparate writers shared with me of their childhood and young adulthood to see whether or not there were any common threads that led to them becoming serious and successful writers, and to see how this compared or contrasted with my own experience. These extracts reflect the process of self-discovery and re-discovery triggered by the writing of the main component of my PhD, my autobiographical novel.

FISH OUT OF WATER

Nigel Gray

I remember the galling loneliness of my adolescence, from which I do not seem to have completely escaped. It is the sense of the voyeur, the lonely, lonely boy with no role in life but to peer in at the lighted windows of other people's contentment and vitality.

*John Cheever*¹

It seems to me often that I'm sort of looking from a window at something at a great distance and wondering what it is. But I'm not willing to actually go into it.

*Ann Tyler*²

I remember having a self as a child who was completely hidden from the world of adults and teachers and people around me.

*Ann Munro*³

If I had my way, I'd lead a Pynchon or a Salinger existence and become completely anonymous.

*Tim Winton*⁴

¹ John Cheever, *The Journals*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1991.

² Marguerite Michels, 'Ann Tyler, Writer 8:05 to 3:30', *New York Times*, 1977.

³ Ann Munro, 'Bringing Life to Life', interviewed in *The Atlantic Monthly*, 2001.

⁴ Murray Waldren, 'Tim Winton: Into The Blue', in *Literary Liaisons*, 1997.

Introduction

I have been a professional author for more than thirty-five years. I've earned far less and worked more unsocial hours than I would have as, say, a bus driver. I have had far more rejection than I have had acceptance. Even successfully published material that has received critical praise has often also attracted unkind and sometimes even spiteful criticism. For me, creating something out of nothing is a conjuring trick that I find arduous, difficult and emotionally draining. Writing is not something I love. (Would the bus driver be expected to love driving the bus?) So, people reasonably ask me, why do I do what I do? 'There isn't anything else I can do,' I say. Which, while being true, is not a satisfactory answer. What is it, then, that causes some people to become authors?

I don't know why I do what I do. But I did begin to wonder how much of this part of my destiny was to do with having been (and in a sense, as someone living by his art, having chosen to continue to be), a fish out of water, an outsider, a person who did not and does not fit in. Some years ago, longer than it seems, actually – life speeds up as you get older, or perhaps time shrinks like the human body (my son insists that I am getting smaller with age) – when I lived in England, I carried out a number of recorded conversations with ten disparate writers of my acquaintance. I transcribed and edited the material (editing myself out of the conversations) and submitted it to the authors to ensure that they were recorded as saying what they meant to say. (The bugbear of being interviewed is that interviewers nearly always garble what you actually said.) Sadly, the publisher of the proposed book, a one-man operation, got into financial difficulties and ceased trading while the book was in production, and went into property development (although it appears from the internet that in the meantime he has revived his publishing efforts – perhaps I may receive some royalties after all). However only 300 copies of the book, *Writers Talking*,⁵ were sold, and so this wonderful mine of material was for all intents and purposes wasted. So here was an opportunity to use material that came straight from the horses' mouths, so to speak, rather than having to rely on research from second-hand sources. All of the tapes are in my possession, and will, by and by, be donated to the British Library or some interested academic institution.

⁵ Nigel Gray, *Writers Talking*. London: Caliban books, 1989.

I'd like to introduce a small digression here with regard to the value of these interviews in relation to written autobiography. There has been some controversy recently questioning the veracity of works that authors have claimed as autobiography, as opposed to autobiographical fiction. I'm thinking of books like *Running with Scissors*⁶ and *A Million Little Pieces*⁷ rather than total fakes such as *Forbidden Love*.⁸ I would suggest that it is quite difficult for a fiction writer when writing autobiography to restrain him or herself from exaggerating a little, or embellishing or understating or overstating or adding colour. I don't know if anyone has analysed in depth the difference between a written account that is convincing and one that is suspect. For myself I never doubted the veracity of the autobiographical references in Vonnegut's fiction, for example. On the other hand I read the 'autobiographies' of James Frey and of Augusten Burroughs with some scepticism before there had been any public condemnation of them. In his autobiography, *The Twinkling of an Eye*,⁹ Brian Aldiss writes about having a sexual relationship with the school nurse when he was a boarder at a public school. His account in the book doesn't ring completely true to me, whereas there was no part of his boarding school experience as told to me that I found less than convincing.

Writers Talking consisted of interviews with ten male writers of my age or older. They talked to me about their lives and their work. They came from very varied class backgrounds, and they produced very different sorts of work. Some were highly successful. Some less so. But they were all serious writers who produced material of high literary quality. What particularly interested me in relation to this dissertation is what they might have had to say about, not their writing, but how they came to be writers. It presented me with an opportunity to revisit the tapes of those interviews to test my thesis that the feeling of being an outsider might be a common factor in the early years of this sample of very different authors. Unfortunately, I didn't pose this question to them, first because it wasn't a theory that interested me at the time, and second because I tried not to direct the conversations but to allow them to go wherever my interviewees took them. I'm sure that a lot of the value of the interviews lies therein, because the information that is revealed comes from off-the-cuff conversations with a friend, and not from thoughtfully and artfully constructed written autobiography. It

⁶ Augusten Burroughs, *Running with Scissors*. New York: Picador, 2003.

⁷ James Frey, *A Million Little Pieces*. New York: Random House, 2003.

⁸ Norma Khouri, *Forbidden Love*. Sydney: Bantam, 2003.

⁹ Brian Aldiss, *The Twinkling of an Eye*. London: Little Brown, 1998.

should be noted that the material in this dissertation and the material published in the book come from the same source, and so much of what is presented here might well also be found in *Writers Talking*.

But first, let me introduce Kurt Vonnegut.

Kurt Vonnegut

While ruminating on the 'creative' part of my Creative Writing degree, I began thinking about the way in which people tell the stories of their life. It seemed to me that my own story was not important enough to be a stand-alone record of what had happened to me and what I had done. I realised that my life was insignificant in relation to the world in which I lived, less consequential than a flea in a camel's fur, and yet it was the one unique story that was mine to tell. I decided therefore to try to see the story of my life in the political and social context in which it took place.

Given that I suffered (and caused) a great deal of unhappiness in my early years, I wanted to avoid a document that was full of self-pity (even though, as a child and a young adult I was very good at feeling sorry for myself). I decided that the best way to present painful incidents was through humour, albeit humour that was sometimes decidedly black. Given the appalling and catastrophic mess that humans have made and are making of their societies, it was clear to me that this was also an appropriate way to portray incidents on the greater stage. Kurt Vonnegut said, 'Humor is a way of holding off how awful life can be, to protect yourself.'¹⁰

Because of this decision, I realised that I needed to distance myself from the protagonist of my story – from myself, in other words. But also, when I brought to mind this person that I was, it didn't seem to be me at all, but rather some other person, even though it was someone that I had once known intimately. Which is why I decided to tell my story, 'his story', in the third person. I thus became an observer of my younger self, and as an observer, like someone looking at a friend's relationship or marriage that is bound to fail, certain things become obvious that are not apparent to the actor involved. One of the things that became clear to me was that I had always been a fish out of water – an outsider, if you like.

¹⁰ Kurt Vonnegut, *A Man Without a Country*. New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005, p.129.

Given that I was in the privileged position of being a friend of one of the (to my mind) giant's of twentieth century literature, the American novelist Kurt Vonnegut, it had always been my intention to base some of my dissertation on him, despite the fact that the dissertation had to relate in some way to my autobiographical novel, and Kurt Vonnegut had never written an autobiography, and he had told me that he had no intention of ever doing so. He had, in fact, often included, wittily and teasingly, acknowledged autobiographical material in his work, most famously, perhaps in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. It begins: 'All this happened, more or less. The war parts, anyway, are pretty much true. One guy I knew really *was* shot in Dresden for taking a teapot...I really *did* go back to Dresden...in 1967...' ¹¹ and so on. And in a memorable passage (I am tempted to say 'back passage') Vonnegut has his protagonist, Billy Pilgrim, enter a latrine in a German prison camp.

'An American near Billy wailed that he had excreted everything but his brains. Moments later he said, "There they go, there they go." He meant his brains.

That was I. That was me. That was the author of this book. ¹²

Vonnegut did playfully subtitle *Palm Sunday* ¹³, and *Fates Worse than Death* ¹⁴, two of his collections of speeches and other bits and pieces, 'autobiographical collage', but there is very little autobiographical content in them. The Prologue of his novel *Slapstick or Lonesome No More*, begins:

'This is the closest I will ever come to writing an autobiography. ¹⁵

This is a typical bit of Vonnegut nonsense. *Slapstick* is in fact a novel about a character called Dr Wilbur Daffodil-II Swain, who is, in Vonnegut's words, 'this terribly old man in the ruins of Manhattan... where almost everyone has been killed by a mysterious disease called 'The Green Death'. ¹⁶

While it is true that Vonnegut reveals all sorts of titbits about his adult life in a number of his books, he says very little about his childhood. The note about the author that appears in a majority of his novels begins: 'Kurt Vonnegut was born in Indianapolis in 1922 and

¹¹ Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five*. 1969. London: Panther, 1972, p.6.

¹² Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five*. 1969. London: Panther, 1972, p.86.

¹³ Kurt Vonnegut, *Palm Sunday*. New York: Dell, 1981.

¹⁴ Kurt Vonnegut, *Fates Worse than Death*. New York: Berkley Books, 1990.

¹⁵ Kurt Vonnegut, *Slapstick or Lonesome No More*. 1976. London: Vintage, 1991, p.1.

¹⁶ Kurt Vonnegut, *Slapstick or Lonesome No More*. 1976. London: Vintage, 1991, p.13.

studied biochemistry at Cornell University. During the Second World War, he served in Europe...¹⁷ Childhood is a closed chapter about which he has little to say. The ace up my sleeve, as far as this dissertation goes, was that I had planned to visit New York to talk to Kurt, specifically about how much of a fish out of water he had felt himself to be during his early years. He had certainly given intimations of this, long ago, when we were having lunch together in a café on the corner of the street in Manhattan where he lived, but at that time it was just a friendly chat about this and that, and I no longer remember clearly what it was he said. And sadly my planned visit to New York did not take place because Kurt had an accident in late March 2007, and he died on April 11. So fate, while not worse than death, at least involving death, had stolen my *piece de resistance*. All that was left to me, was to scour his writings to glean what little relevant material there might be therein.

Vonnegut's childhood was not a happy one. In a Playboy interview, included in *Wampeters Foma and Granfalloon*s, Vonnegut says: 'there are sad things from my childhood, which I assume have something to do with my sadness.'¹⁸ In *Slapstick* he says, 'And perhaps because I was so perpetually intoxicated and instructed by Laurel and Hardy during my childhood during the Great Depression, I find it natural to discuss life without ever mentioning love.'¹⁹ In *Fates Worse than Death* he writes: 'I had had some really lousy times in high school'.²⁰ In *Bagombo Snuff Box* he says, 'I am sixteen. I come home again from yet another lousy day at Shortridge High School.'²¹ And in *Jailbird* we find this: 'an air of defeat has always been a companion of mine.'²²

(This melancholy was never to leave him. He suffered bouts of depression throughout his life, and he says that he was the second member of the American branch of his family to spend time in 'a laughing academy'.²³ When I first met him he was seeing a doctor once a week. 'Depression really had me,' he says in *Wampeters, Foma and Granfalloon*s.²⁴ He even projects his depression onto most writers. 'Fiction writers are not customarily persons in the best of mental

¹⁷ Kurt Vonnegut, *Bagombo Snuff Box*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1999.

¹⁸ Kurt Vonnegut, *Wampeters, Foma and Granfalloon*s. New York: Delacorte Press, 1974, p.254.

¹⁹ Kurt Vonnegut, *Slapstick or Lonesome No More*. 1976. London: Vintage, 1991, p.1.

²⁰ Kurt Vonnegut, *Fates Worse than Death*. 1990. London: Cape, 1991, p.93.

²¹ Kurt Vonnegut, *Bagombo Snuff Box*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1999, p.4.

²² Kurt Vonnegut, *Jailbird*. 1979. London; Granada, 1981, p.10.

²³ Kurt Vonnegut, *Fates Worse than Death*. 1990. London: Cape, 1991, p.41.

²⁴ Kurt Vonnegut, *Wampeters, Foma and Granfalloon*s. New York: Delacorte Press, 1974, p. 252.

health.¹²⁵ And again: 'Overwhelmingly, we [writers] are depressed, and are descended from those who, psychologically speaking, spent more time than anyone in his or her right mind would want to spend in gloom.'¹²⁶ (He was referring particularly to his mother, and well, yes, he could have been talking about my mother, too, who had a habit of putting her head in the gas oven – although there were never enough shillings in the metre to do the job.)

I would suggest that this sadness in his early years would certainly create an awareness of being a child apart, would certainly cause a feeling of being outside what he might consider a normal childhood. But there were other ingredients, too.

In *A Man Without a Country*, Vonnegut writes: 'As a kid I was the youngest member of my family... My sister was five years older than I was, my brother was nine years older than I was, and my parents were both talkers. So at the dinner table when I was very young, I was boring to all those other people. They did not want to hear about the dumb childish news of my days.'¹²⁷ In *Fates Worse than Death*: 'In the household of my childhood and youth, my sister Alice... was the maiden and our father was the elusive and spookily enchanted unicorn. My only other sibling, my own big brother went to MIT, and I could never catch him... our mother was going insane.'¹²⁸ And in *Palm Sunday*: 'My father had few gifts for getting along famously with me. That's life. We did not spend much time together, and conversations were arch and distant.'¹²⁹

So it seems reasonable to claim that Vonnegut was something of an outsider even within his own family. (Incidentally, it would appear that that lack of warmth and physicality had a deep and lasting effect on him. In *Slapstick* he says, 'One time, on his twenty-first birthday, one of my three adopted sons... said to me, 'You know – you've never hugged me.'¹³⁰)

Another thing that would have made him feel different from other kids, and estranged within his own family, was his mother's growing insanity. In *Failbird* he writes, 'My mother, as I have said *ad nauseam* in other books, had declined to go on living, since she could no longer be what she had been at the time of her marriage – one of the

¹²⁵ Kurt Vonnegut, *Wampeters, Foma and Granfalloon*. New York: Delacorte Press, 1974, p.92.

¹²⁶ Kurt Vonnegut, *Palm Sunday*. 1981. London: Cape, 1981, p.128.

¹²⁷ Kurt Vonnegut, *A Man Without a Country*. New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005, p.1.

¹²⁸ Kurt Vonnegut, *Fates Worse than Death*. 1990. London: Cape, 1991, p.27.

¹²⁹ Kurt Vonnegut, *Palm Sunday*. 1981. London: Cape, 1981, p.59.

¹³⁰ Kurt Vonnegut, *Slapstick or Lonesome No More*. 1976. London: Vintage, 1991, p.2.

richest women in town.¹³¹ Having been brought up with servants to wait upon her, 'my mother... could not even cook a breakfast or sew on a button.'¹³² And in *Palm Sunday*, 'Mother, who was half-cracked, used to speak of the time when I would resume my proper place in society.'¹³³

The family's drastically changed circumstances which so effected his parents, particularly his mother, could not but have had a huge effect on Kurt Junior as well. Kurt's Uncle John wrote a family history that is reproduced in *Palm Sunday*. Uncle John writes: 'By the time K came along to his adolescence, the family was in financial trouble. He knew only the hard times of the 1930s, He was taken out of private school after the third grade, and sent to public school No. 43 and then Shortridge High School.'¹³⁴ Realising that everything is relative, this was something that Vonnegut (who became a socialist) didn't make a fuss about. He said to me one time that he was always aware of the fact that so many others had it harder than he did 'We were at least as well off,' he wrote in *Palm Sunday*, 'as most of the people I went to public school with.'¹³⁵ And, in *Fates Worse than Death*, he says, 'I am not about to speak of soup kitchens... We never missed a meal during the Great Depression.'¹³⁶ Nevertheless, as a rich kid, formerly educated in private school, there can be no doubt that he felt like a fish out of water in public school No. 43.

And that was not all. Kurt Vonnegut was a German-American. Listen to this: 'But the delight [my] family took in itself was permanently crippled, I think, by the sudden American hatred for all things German which unsheathed itself when this country entered the First World War, five years before I was born.'¹³⁷ Writing about German culture, and then the Great Depression, Vonnegut said, 'We lost thousands of years in a very short time – and then tens of thousands of American dollars after that, and the summer cottages and so on.'¹³⁸ And this: 'anti-Germanism in this country... so shamed and dismayed my parents that they resolved... to make me ignorant and rootless as proof of their patriotism.'¹³⁹ And this: 'One reason I feel the need to be funnier on paper than most of my colleagues is that I have a German name, which can be counted on to remind almost any sort of American for at

¹³¹ Kurt Vonnegut, *Jailbird*. 1979. London; Granada, 1981, p.8.

¹³² Kurt Vonnegut, *Jailbird*. 1979. London; Granada, 1981, p.10.

¹³³ Kurt Vonnegut, *Palm Sunday*. 1981. London: Cape, 1981, p.58.

¹³⁴ Kurt Vonnegut, *Palm Sunday*. 1981. London: Cape, 1981, p.54.

¹³⁵ Kurt Vonnegut, *Palm Sunday*. 1981. London: Cape, 1981, p.58.

¹³⁶ Kurt Vonnegut, *Fates Worse than Death*. 1990. London: Cape, 1991, p.31.

¹³⁷ Kurt Vonnegut, *Slapstick or Lonesome No More*. 1976. London: Vintage, 1991, p.4.

¹³⁸ Kurt Vonnegut, *Slapstick or Lonesome No More*. 1976. London: Vintage, 1991, p.5.

¹³⁹ Kurt Vonnegut, *Palm Sunday*. 1981. London: Cape, 1981, p.21.

least a microsecond of German enemies in two world wars. I myself, a prisoner of war of the Germans, am so reminded for at least that microsecond when I hear a German name. I was on *our* side.¹⁴⁰ Yes, Vonnegut grew up a German in America between the two great wars that pitted America against Germany. And in the second of those wars he was an infantryman in the American army fighting in Europe against the Germans. Clearly, a man could hardly be more a fish out of water than that. Until that is, he became an American prisoner-of-war in Germany and was then bombed by the Americans.

Before he went into the army, Vonnegut was a student at Cornell University. In a speech he made there after he'd become a successful novelist, he said, 'It was not Cornell's fault that I did not like this place much. It was my father's fault. He said I should become a chemist like my brother, and not waste my time and his money on subjects he considered so much junk jewelry – literature, history, philosophy.'¹⁴¹ His Uncle John's 'Family History' tells us, 'He was sent to Cornell University with specific instructions not to waste time or money on 'frivolous' courses, but to give full attention to practical studies, principally physics and chemistry and math.'¹⁴² So here he is, a fish out of water again, wanting to study the Arts and being forced to study science – and flunking out.

I think I've made my point. But wait. What do you say, Kurt Vonnegut?

'That is how you get to be a writer, incidentally: you feel somehow marginal, somehow slightly off-balance all the time.'¹⁴³

There, I could have just quoted that one sentence, and this dissertation would have been a whole lot shorter!

Before we leave Vonnegut, there are a couple more things which, though not particularly relevant, I would like to share with you. Vonnegut once said to his friend Saul Steinberg, the *New Yorker* cartoonist, that there were some novelists that he (Vonnegut) could hardly talk to because it was as though they were in two very unlike professions. Steinberg replied, 'There are two types of artists, neither superior to the other. One responds to life itself. The other responds to the history of his or her art so far.'¹⁴⁴ This explains why some writers are more suited to Creative Writing degrees than others. For me, coming

¹⁴⁰ Kurt Vonnegut, *Palm Sunday*. 1981. London: Cape, 1981, p.182.

¹⁴¹ Kurt Vonnegut, *Palm Sunday*. 1981. London: Cape, 1981, p.63.

¹⁴² Kurt Vonnegut, *Palm Sunday*. 1981. London: Cape, 1981, p.54.

¹⁴³ Kurt Vonnegut, *Palm Sunday*. 1981. London: Cape, 1981, p.65.

¹⁴⁴ Kurt Vonnegut, *Fates Worse than Death*. 1990. London: Cape, 1991, p.193.

from the former group, writing the dissertation portion of this PhD is like wading through deep, slurping, energy-sapping sinking-sand while the incoming tide of the deadline is approaching faster than a galloping horse. What a pity it is that I didn't go to a more visionary institution like the University of Chicago. Under the rules of that university, 'a published work of high quality could be substituted for a dissertation.'⁴⁵ So twenty years after leaving Chicago, Vonnegut was finally awarded an M.A. in anthropology on the strength of his novel *Cat's Cradle*.⁴⁶ So it goes. Even so, he claims that his prettiest contribution to culture was his original master's thesis in anthropology which was rejected by that University. 'It was,' he says, 'rejected because it was so simple and looked like too much fun. One must not be too playful.'⁴⁷

Nevertheless, let me share with you one of Kurt's favourite jokes (one of my favourites, too). A diner complains to the waiter that there are needles in his soup. The waiter says, 'I'm sorry, sir. That's a typographical error. It should have been noodles.'

Ten authors

I realise that one swallow does not make a summer, and even two are not proof enough. That is to say, the fact that both Kurt Vonnegut and I were, in a number of ways, outsiders in our early years is not sufficient evidence to support a claim that having been a fish out of water is a common experience of many authors. So allow me to present the ten authors referred to in my introduction.

The first of my interviewees was Brian Aldiss. He is a prolific author with more than eighty books to his credit. He is best known as perhaps the UK's leading science fiction writer, whose numerous titles include *The Malacia Tapestry*⁴⁸ and *The Helliconia Trilogy*⁴⁹. Brian Aldiss is the recipient of numerous international awards for science-fiction writing including a Kurd Lasswitz Award (Germany) and a Prix Jules Verne (Sweden). He has been awarded an OBE for services to literature.

⁴⁵ Kurt Vonnegut, *Palm Sunday*. 1981. London: Cape, 1981, p.101.

⁴⁶ Kurt Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963.

⁴⁷ Kurt Vonnegut, *Palm Sunday*. 1981. London: Cape, 1981, p.312.

⁴⁸ Brian Aldiss, *The Malacia Tapestry*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1977.

⁴⁹ Brian Aldiss, *Helliconia Spring*. London: Grafton books, 1983.

Brian Aldiss, *Helliconia Summer*. London: Grafton books, 1984.

Brian Aldiss, *Helliconia Winter*. London: Grafton books, 1985.

His family were tradespeople – big fish in a little pool – in a small country town in mid Norfolk where his grandfather had a department store: furnishers, drapers, mens' outfitters, tailors, undertakers, furniture removers. His grandfather was a self-made man – 'a tough old bastard', according to Brian, who was addressed as 'Guv'nor', even by his two sons and their wives. Aldiss, in his pre-school years loved that shop. He said it was like living in Gormenghast. It formed a complex series of rambling buildings with all kinds of odd people cached away making hats, or suits, or bits of furniture, or stoking great subterranean boilers. He had the free run of this place, and he could escape. He told me, 'I was small – I could hide in cupboards. There was a warehouse with rooms full of coconut matting and lino, and you could get in between them and have dens, and play pirates and God knows what. The staff would always fool around when they could – knotted dusters would be thrown. It was pure joy.' He, with his mother and father, lived in a flat over part of the shop. His mother, in his words, 'didn't do anything. She just swanned around looking after the house. We had maids and we lived quite well.' His parents would think, 'If he's not in the house, he's in the shop.' They could never keep tabs on him. 'Those early years were full of excitement and freedom and fun,' he said. 'It always seemed to me that I was the luckiest of children to have this marvellous place to explore.'

Then came his first exile. When his sister was born he was sent away to live with his grandmother for six weeks. In his autobiography, *The Twinkling of an Eye*, published in 1998, he wrote, 'My grandmother's house was to me what the blacking factory was to Charles Dickens. So greatly did that enforced stay fill me with guilt and dismay, that I dared speak of it to no one until I was well into adulthood.'⁵⁰ But there was a second exile to come. His parents sent him away to a prep school at the age of eight. 'At the age of eight,' he said, 'you're still on nodding terms with your teddy bear. That shop was the paradise I was exiled from.' In his autobiography, *The Twinkling of an Eye*,⁵¹ published in 1998, he wrote, 'To be exiled from it was to experience a burden of inexpressible loss. Of that loss I could speak to no one.' From school, he returned home for holidays, but, he says, 'I was estranged. There was a kind of division, and paradise was spoilt. I don't know if my mother realised how awful my school was. One doesn't, at the time, say anything. There's an extraordinary secrecy to small boys, and loyalty to you-know-not what.'

⁵⁰ Brian Aldiss, *The Twinkling of an Eye*. London: Little Brown, 1998, p.105.

⁵¹ Brian Aldiss, *The Twinkling of an Eye*. London: Little Brown, 1998, p.67.

It was a severe ordeal to go to this place and be incarcerated without toys, to be separated from your parents, to go through this whole rigmarole of a school that was obviously a descendant of Dotheboy's Hall – the conditions were awful.' And in *The Twinkling of an Eye*, he goes so far as to say that the school 'spelt spiritual death for me'.⁵²

So, it seems that at the age of eight, Aldiss became an outsider, exiled from his place in the world, and parted from his family and everything that was familiar to him. And even from then on when he returned at holiday times he continued to feel estranged. He felt that he didn't belong there or fit in there any more. But even before he went away to school, he was something of an outsider from his own family. 'To be honest,' he said 'I'd always felt that I was disowned by my parents. As a small child I was threatened, if I did anything wrong, with the withdrawal of love. My mother would say, 'Then I shan't love you any more.' And she would run away. She'd just blow, sometimes taking my baby sister with her, just to frighten me. It works. It's a most cruel thing to do to a child. My father and I had little communication. I think he thought whatever he'd gone through was the proper thing for me to go through. They had no sensibility.'

After his prep school Aldiss was sent to two minor public schools. He would never, he told me, send his sons to board. 'At public school I was good at holding my own, but I was never happy.' He says in his autobiography that going away to school was always accompanied by a feeling of dread, a feeling that he was being kicked out. But coming home for holidays, shyness overtook him. He was not at ease with his parents. There was a sense that only reluctant space had been made for his tenure.⁵³ And he quotes from 'Tirocinium', a poem by William Cowper, a hymn against public schools. After the miseries of term, the pupil returns home:

A disappointment waits him even there:
Arrived, he feels an unexpected change,
He blushes, hangs his head, is shy and strange,
No longer takes, as once, with fearless ease,
His fav'rite stand between his father's knees,
But seeks the corner of some distant seat,
And eyes the door, and watches a retreat,
And, least familiar where he should be most,

⁵² Brian Aldiss, *The Twinkling of an Eye*. London: Little Brown, 1998, p.18.

⁵³ Brian Aldiss, *The Twinkling of an Eye*. London: Little Brown, 1998, p.120.

Feels all his happiest privileges lost.⁵⁴

He said that he owed the first public school he went to, age eleven, no affection at all. He was considered eccentric. He was known as 'The Professor'. He had a microscope, and a little pocket telescope. He used to buy aeroplanes that were powered by elastic bands, and once he fixed one up in his locker so that when the door was opened a propeller started whirring and lights came on. He made various little gadgets like that. But he didn't like the school. So, at school, where he was an outsider from his family, he became an eccentric child, 'the professor', an outsider also within the school.

Then, rather like, Vonnegut's experience, the family fortunes took a nosedive. He was moved away from his home in Norfolk and dumped down in Devon, and sent to a minor public school on Exmoor. 'I was completely uprooted,' he wrote in his autobiography. 'The distance between East Dereham and West Buckland was too great.'⁵⁵ His father bought a sub post office and grocer's – a little corner shop, where he worked all hours for little reward. But, according to Aldiss, his father never recovered from the family catastrophe. It overshadowed his life.

Aldiss joined the army at the tag end of the Second World War. He said, 'After such a petit bourgeois upbringing, once you went into the army one of the shocks was to meet guys from the real world. There was only one other guy who'd been to public school, Eddie Breeze. And there was a delightful fly-boy from Birmingham, a good Brummy whose father had a bicycle shop, whose name was Lions. Lions could look after himself. So could Breeze and I because we'd had this horrid training – it was easier in the army than at public school. But the other poor guys were lost. A lot of them had never been away from home before. They were homesick; they were cursed out all the time; they couldn't make their beds (mummy had always made their beds). The army was a nightmare for them. For us it was fine. At six o'clock prompt, Breeze and Lions and I would be bullshitted up, and out to the gate and down into town.' So here again, Aldiss, apart from two mates, is an odd man out. He says he was not 'officer material'. On the other hand, he doesn't fit in with most of the other ranks that he finds himself among, 'the guys from the real world'. He told me that public school had taught him one thing, and that was to be a snob. 'For instance,' he said, 'at school I would never admit that my

⁵⁴ William Cowper, 'Tirocinium'.

⁵⁵ Brian Aldiss, *The Twinkling of an Eye*. London: Little Brown, 1998, p.22.

father managed a sub post office. (Oh dear, it's humiliating to say it, but I never would admit that.) But then equally, in the army, I would never admit that I had been to public school.'

He was sent to Burma, and was then truly outside his class, his culture and just about as far outside his country as it is possible to get. He said, 'I was depressed for a lot of the time until I got in the army. I went to the Far East and thought, 'Well, all right, to hell with them. I'll live my own life from now on.' By then he'd made a conscious decision to take on the mantle of outsider and wear it defiantly. 'That was a kind of freedom,' he said. He spent four years out in the Far East. 'One learnt to grow up and enjoy all the pleasures and vices of adult life far from any supervision. There was also the chance to see the kind of lifestyle that Asiatic races enjoyed. And the sun shone most of the time. You were out in the monsoon, it would turn off like a tap, your clothes would dry on you; everything would be fine again. I thought the climate was great. I loved the place, though, as common soldiers, we were treated like dogs. One was sandwiched between what we know as the British Raj and the Indians. And who are the soldiers' friends? – priests and whores. We lived on a kind of dirt level. I liked Burma a lot. Then spent a year in Sumatra. I liked the people there immensely. Life was rather good there – better in some ways than in England. And I did form a resolve that I would write a novel to tell people what it was like.'

When he came back to England, the England he knew as a kid had gone. He returned in 1948 to a harsh, gritty, post-war world. 'About the only job you could do in North Devon,' he said, 'was to be a ploughboy. I didn't see myself in that role. I didn't know what the hell I wanted. I didn't know where I was in society. I suppose if you wanted to take a psychoanalytical view, you would say that I was really a displaced person – much more so than I realised.' So there you have it: a displaced person, an outsider, a fish out of water.

Paul Bailey is a novelist whose titles include *At The Jerusalem*⁵⁶ and *Gabriel's Lament*⁵⁷. His first novel brought him honours from the Arts council of Great Britain and The Author's Club, as well as a Somerset Maugham Travel Award. He is the recipient of an E M Forster Award, and winner the George Orwell Memorial Prize. Two of his novels have been shortlisted for the Booker Prize.

⁵⁶ Paul Bailey, *At the Jerusalem*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1967.

⁵⁷ Paul Bailey, *Gabriel's Lament*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1986.

Paul Bailey's father was a road-sweeper and dustman. His mother worked in service all her life – until she was well into her late seventies. Doing a day's work was the most important thing in her life. His father was much older than his mother, who was Bailey senior's second wife. Paul felt very self-conscious as a boy because all the other kids in the school had youngish-looking parents and he had a very old father. But it was his father, Bailey told me, who encouraged him to read. 'He used to read to me from *Nicholas Nickleby*,⁵⁸ Bailey said. 'No other books – just that one. I don't know where he got it from. He didn't read it as a sequence; he just read funny bits out of it. Otherwise there were no books in our family.' It was his dad he spoke to more as a child, Bailey said. They used to go for long walks together, and to the zoo and places like that. They were a staunchly socialist family – his father hated Conservatives. His mother was a bit of a snob because she worked in high-class service. His father used to send her up about the 'nobs and toffs she worked for.'

Bailey was conceived after his mother thought she'd been through the menopause, and his brother was already grown up. And then his father died when Paul was eleven. Bailey's father had two children by his first marriage, and one of them attended the funeral. Bailey found it very strange to suddenly meet a half-brother who was fifty when he himself was only eleven.

After his father's death, he said, he was in perpetual warfare with his mother. His brother and sister were content to do as their mother said: 'Don't think above your own immediate horizons.' But Paul fought with her ferociously about it. During the long summer holidays he was 'plonked on' an elderly Scottish couple. 'I think this is where my (some people say, morbid) interest in old age comes from,' he said. 'When I came to write about old people I didn't ever see them as a sort of separate species – as a child I'd been surrounded by old people.' So it is clear that, as well as being conscious of being different from other boys in school because of the age of his parents and siblings, this experience also made him to some extent an outsider within his family – a feeling probably exacerbated by being deposited with this other old couple for long periods of time.

It wasn't until he went to grammar school that he started reading seriously. He was encouraged by an English master to read all sorts of things outside the curriculum. He delighted in the study of Shakespeare

⁵⁸ Charles Dickens, *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby*. London: Chapman & Hall, 1839.

at school: 'saying all that wonderful language – that gave me a kick.' He was encouraged to act. He was in the school play every year, and always played the lead, and by the age of thirteen he'd developed an ambition to become an actor. He lived in the upstairs of a terraced house in Battersea. The woman who lived downstairs used to take the piss out of him. It was odd for a fifteen-year-old boy in that social environment to be spouting Shakespeare. 'I used to get sent up rotten,' he said, 'and I had a nickname which was 'Bleedin' Macbeth'. I don't know where that interest came from. My mother's side of the family were all plodding, country people. They didn't have any interest in anything remotely literary or artistic.'

There were only two boys in the school with whom he felt any sympathy. One was amazingly well read. Bailey says that he has never met anyone so intelligent. The boy came from a broken home, and he was a manic reader, never without a book. Bailey, himself, would carry a book around, but this boy was *never* without one, ever. 'He was reading *Crime and Punishment*⁵⁹ and stuff like that at fourteen,' Bailey said. 'I didn't get round to reading that till I was in my twenties.' And there was a Jewish boy, who was subjected to the all-pervasive anti-Semitism that went on. He was extremely musical and Paul used to go to concerts with him.

Bailey liked poetry. He started with Keats, Wordsworth, very much the romantic things, and he used to learn Shakespeare off by heart out of sheer pleasure. His English master encouraged him to learn a poem every day. At the age of fifteen, before he'd left school, he'd got a scholarship to go to drama school. 'I fucked up all my academic work in the last three years of school,' he said, 'almost deliberately actually, because I had this appalling confidence that I was going to be a very successful Shakespearian actor.'

Obviously, his love of literature and in particular his love of Shakespeare, set him apart not only from his peers in school and his family, but from the people in his milieu, such as the woman downstairs who dubbed him 'Bleedin' Macbeth'. He says that there were only two boys in the school with whom he was sympathetic – one who read demanding adult literature and always had his nose in a book, and the other, a Jewish boy, who was a music lover and concert goer. You can well imagine how these three were regarded by the rest of the boys at the South London school, and that they would certainly have been

⁵⁹ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*. Moscow: The Russian Messenger, 1866.

treated in ways that would accentuate their feelings of being fish out of water.

Paul told me that he hadn't been happy about his homosexuality, that he was not one of those people who took to it like a duck to water. He felt immensely guilty for many years. Like many young homosexual men, confused by the pressures of a homophobic society, he went on having friendships with girls – 'trying to get there,' as he put it. And then, when he was in his twenties, he experienced a great moment of truth. He'd thrown himself onto the bed with a woman, and was simulating passion, and she said, 'You're not really interested in this, are you?' And he said 'No.'

He was a young homosexual at a time when hatred towards homosexuals was widespread and often brutal, and in fact when homosexual acts were still illegal. It was difficult for homosexuals to meet each other back then. When he was in his teens he used to think that the magic day would come when he wouldn't be 'like that' any more. He'd read about people who had crushes at school, and he thought he might grow out of it. 'There is a theory that gay people are adolescent in some way,' he said, 'but having met so many heterosexuals who are retarded I don't feel any qualms about that any more.' The gulf between Paul Bailey and his family and peers was exacerbated by his love of acting, and more especially, by his homosexuality. His mother thought actors were disgusting creatures, rather poncy, and sexually ambiguous, and all that horrified her. His brother, he said, used to put a heavy hand on him and say, 'You don't want to do that for a living.' Bailey added, 'I can truthfully say that my brother and I really loathed each other.'

All his ambition to become an actor faded as soon as he became one. He went to drama school when he was sixteen, and lingered in the profession for about eight years. Two years after he left drama school he got a big part in a new play by Anne Jellicoe. After that it was downhill all the way. He walked on at Stratford, and had some good understudy parts, but although the other people who were understudying seemed to get the chance to go on, he never did. And he saw actors at close quarters: he saw their vanity; their lack of interest – he didn't enjoy being stuck amongst them all day. Being at Stratford was the most miserable year of his life. There were only two people in the entire company whom he could have a conversation with about books or politics or anything interesting. Even as an actor he didn't fit in. A fish out of water at school, at home, in his sexuality, and even in the theatre.

John Berger is an intellectual who is celebrated as an art and social critic as well as a writer of film scripts, poems, short stories and novels. His fiction includes the novel *G*,⁶⁰ which won the Booker Prize, and the trilogy *Into Their Labours*.⁶¹ He has been awarded the George Orwell Memorial Prize.

After an early childhood in which he made no emotional connection with his parents, from the age of seven, Berger was sent to a series of boarding schools. Those schools, he said, and his being sent to them, had a very deep effect on him, but it is not something he likes to talk about. 'I don't have much to say about them,' he told me, 'because, in a sense, it has all been said. Maybe the schools I was sent to were rather special: they were centres for educating the children of army officers, police superintendents, clergymen. They were exactly what you would expect them to be. If you want to know about them you can read Musil's *Young Torless*⁶²; you can see Lindsay Anderson's film *If*⁶³ (although the reality was much harsher than what they show in that film). I've often asked myself why I haven't written about that experience. But what the British ruling-class did to its own children doesn't seem to me to be very important on a world scale, even though, in fact, it destroyed most of those children.' How he managed to survive his school years without himself being destroyed or without being moulded into a typical public school product is something, he said, that he didn't understand. 'I suppose, from an early age I was – not physically, but spiritually, if you wish – alone. To tell the truth, up to the age of sixteen I can't recall anybody who meant anything very much to me.' He says that the British public school system damaged most its children so that they were almost mad. His sense of reality was so far removed from theirs that he felt that if he had not distanced himself from them *he* might have become mad. Clearly he was an outsider within his own family, and then was driven physically outside it, into a situation that he found totally alienating, a situation where he was very much a fish out of water.

From the age of nine he wrote a lot of letters to his parents and to other people from whom he was separated. And the writing of those letters was important to him. He felt a need to recount his experiences, but to put it on paper was the only way of talking about it. There was no

⁶⁰ John Berger, *G*. London: Wiedenfeld & Nicolson, 1972.

⁶¹ John Berger, *Pig Earth*. London: Writers and Readers, 1979.

John Berger, *Once in Europa*. London: Granta Books, 1989.

John Berger, *Lilac and Flag*. London: Granta Books, 1990.

⁶² Robert Musil, *The Confusions of Young Torless*. Vienna: Wiener Verlag, 1906.

⁶³ *If*. Director: Lindsay Anderson, 1968.

real person he could actually talk to. And then, gradually, these writings became letters that were not sent, or sometimes poems, sometimes stories based on his experiences. 'It was,' he said, 'the only way I had of trying to make some sense of what I could see, and what I was experiencing, and then, what I saw others experiencing. He sent some of his poems to Herbert Read, and Berger used to always carry in his pocket Read's letter of response,. 'It was,' he said, 'a kind of identity card'. In a sense, a proof of his difference.

After school, and a couple of years at Art College, he was conscripted and spent eighteen months in the army. Because of his class and schooling and background (his father was an infantry officer) he was judged to be 'officer material', but like Brian Aldiss, he felt estranged from that class and remained in the 'other ranks'. He says it was not for him to be any longer a part of the bourgeois world. He refused to become an officer because he'd seen how that class was educated. Many of the kids who went to the schools he'd attended became professional army officers, and he wanted nothing more to do with that world or that class. Their alienation, he said, profoundly alienated him.

Like Brian Aldiss, in the early months of training he found himself, for the first time in his life, among 'other ranks': young working-class men, who had spent the first eighteen years of their lives very differently from him, but whose company he preferred. 'My small gift for writing at least was useful because, sometimes, they would ask me to write letters for them to their girlfriends or to their parents. They would tell me more or less what they wanted to say, and I would write. These were kids who had been at school before the war. A quite significant minority of them had difficulty in writing, and some were illiterate. How they considered me,' he said, 'I really don't know.' It's probably easy enough for ordinary people to guess how they would have looked upon him. However much he wanted to be part of their world, he would have remained to them an outsider.

Eventually he left England to live on the Continent because he says he felt more at home on the Continent – or to put it another way, he didn't feel at home in England: he didn't fit in.

Malcolm Bradbury, best known for his novel *The History Man*,⁶⁴ was a prolific author, television scriptwriter and critic, who combined his literary work with his career as an academic – he was Professor of

⁶⁴ Malcolm Bradbury, *The History Man*. London: Secker & Warburg, 1975.

American Studies and ran the famous Creative Writing course at the University of East Anglia, where I was awarded an M.A. in Creative Writing in 1985. He was made a CBE, and was later knighted for services to literature.

Bradbury was born with a heart condition which meant that he couldn't play games or join in most children's activities, and that left him on his own a good deal. The result was that he turned to books as an alternative world, and he became a great reader. So in his case it was a medical problem that caused him to be an outsider as far as his peers were concerned.

His parents were mildly bookish. His father belonged to libraries: he was a typical user of the old Boots Lending Library, the old private libraries where you paid threepence a week to borrow books, and he belonged to the Mechanics Institute Library in Nottingham, and he used to take young Malcolm in there to read the newspapers and magazines. Bradbury's mother read quite a bit too. And although she didn't influence the sort of things he wrote, Bradbury said, 'she certainly encouraged me in the sensitivity which is part of the repertoire. That had to do with the fact that if you were what used to be called 'a delicate child,' and that was the phrase applied to me, you tended to get treated 'delicately', and you played that role.' It goes without saying that little boys can be rather cruel to the delicate child. During the war his father was moved around a lot on his job. This probably exacerbated the problem because it meant that over and over again he was the new kid, an outsider in a new place. He was attached to his mother and found her a tower of strength, but he was often sent away to live with his paternal grandparents – severe, dour Methodists. These separations from his mother, this compulsory move outside his family unit, made him miserable because he experienced them, he said, as being exiled.

After the war, Bradbury became one of the first of the Butler Education Act kids. He benefited from a free grammar school education, something his father had missed. Then came the question of university, something his father knew little about, and had some mild suspicions of. Bradbury said that it was like the story written up by Richard Hoggart in *The Uses of Literacy*,⁶⁵ where the opening doors of the university became, for the Scholarship Boy, the opportunity for a kind of advancement from the lower middle-class background. That marvellous book analyses in depth the way that sort of young person

⁶⁵ Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1957.

remained an outsider within the university, and the ways in which the university estranged him from his home and his community.

Dick Davis is a scholar of Persian literature and a translator as well as the author of seven volumes of poetry, including *In The Distance*⁶⁶ and *Seeing the World*⁶⁷. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. His many honours include the Heinemann Award, the Ingram Merrill Award, the AHS Translation Prize, an Arts Council of Great Britain Writers' Award, a Fulbright Travel Award, the Ferdowsi Award, and awards from the British Institute of Persian Studies and the Persian Heritage Foundation. He is Professor and Chair of the Near Eastern Languages and Cultures Department at Ohio State University.

Dick Davis, of the writers dealt with in this dissertation, is probably the one most conscious of his 'outsiderness', or at any rate, the one most honest about it. He was aware that his grandmother was somehow different, but he didn't realise that she was Italian until he was in his late teens. She hadn't been interned during the Second World War (when England was at war with Italy), although most Italians in England were, but she always had a very strong Italian accent which was a source of embarrassment for Dick's mother. Dick's mother, clearly afraid of being considered an outsider, never learnt to speak Italian, which seemed odd to Dick, and she never visited to Italy. Davis said, 'I don't think she ever got over being part Italian and it was, as it were, hidden from me.'

The family moved around a great deal when Davis was a boy. 'It was a very dislocated, upset childhood,' he said. He always had a sense that things weren't permanent, which forced him in on himself. When they went to a new place he didn't have anybody to play with so he'd just sit at home and read. He said, 'I think I lived, from about the age of eight or nine till after I left university, in a kind of fantasy world of what I read.'

There were a lot of books in the house. Both parents read a good deal. There was a time when his mother read poetry to him. It was not the quality of the poetry that interested her but what the poems were about. It seemed to young Dick that she was getting an immense emotional charge out of them. 'One was a poem by Longfellow called *The Slave*,' Davis said, 'which in its own terms is a good poem, although it's easy to laugh at it because it's so over the top. It's a kind of lament

⁶⁶ Dick Davis, *In the Distance*. London: Anvil Press, 1975.

⁶⁷ Dick Davis, *Seeing the World*. London, Anvil Press, 1980.

about an African Prince, dying on a slave plantation in the Caribbean, looking back at his home across the ocean. It's written in very rhetorical, colourful language, but it was written with some intensity, and clearly my mother identified with it.⁶⁸ She'd had an unhappy childhood, and the poems she read were about people who had been maltreated or had had a bad deal out of life, and she used to sometimes cry while she was reading them. His mother didn't spend much time with him, so those moments were very important to him. The poems seemed to upset her; on the other hand they seemed to comfort her. It was a kind of emotional focus for him, and so he was attracted to poetry from very early on, often without understanding it.

Davis went to thirteen different schools, which gave him a feeling of not belonging to any particular community, and also of being fearful of the new communities he moved into. Because of this he became both fascinated by, and afraid of what was different or alien or strange. He decided, when he was about ten or eleven, that the way to deal with this fear was to meet it head on; to try to enjoy what was different. For example he used to try to take on the accent of the new place – although that didn't work. More and more it became important to be accepted by the teachers. The way to do that, he found, was to know more than the other kids, and so he became a very studious child, and he tried to be a teacher's pet – something that he realised was pretty obnoxious from the point of view of other kids.

From fourteen to seventeen he remained at one school where two English masters devoted a lot of time to him and guided his reading. He read D H Lawrence and James Joyce, Dickens, and modern poetry. Then he went to university to read English. He was lucky in that he got from a comprehensive school to Cambridge and felt he was very well taught there. On the other hand he felt very out of place, and his feeling of going into environments where he didn't belong was very accentuated. His, second year was a bit of a write-off, he told me. He had a nervous breakdown and spent a lot of time in mental hospital.

As soon as he left university he went to another society completely. He said, 'I think I was running away from England because I felt I couldn't fit in in England.' He went to Greece, and then to Italy, and then America for a while, and then Iran for a long while. 'All the experiences I had after university,' he said, 'were sort of alien experiences, especially in the Middle East. They weren't experiences that English

⁶⁸ Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, 'The Slave's Dream'.

people could immediately relate to. This is a problem in my poetry. I tried to solve it by writing about being a stranger, or about not fitting in, or about travelling. A lot of my poetry is about that. I realised that there weren't many things that I was any good at. I might be good at writing, and a writer it seemed to me could go anywhere. Writing seemed to be a way of getting through life while staying in my head as it were, which is what I wanted to do.

'There's a quote in a poem by A E Housman that I remember reading as an adolescent, and feeling, 'That's exactly right – that's what I feel about the world.' It's nothing very special but it's always been my private little motto as it were.

I, a stranger and afraid
In a world I never made.⁶⁹

Those two lines are very much what I feel about things. That Man, in general, is a stranger in the world, and because he's a stranger, he's afraid. And all the evil in the world, I feel, comes out of that fear, out of that inability to trust.'

John Fowles was one of the best selling serious writers of post-war Britain. *The Magus*⁷⁰ had a huge cult readership, particularly on the US campuses. *The French Lieutenant's Woman*⁷¹ won him both the Silver Pen award and the W H Smith Literary Award.

Fowles thought that he was lucky having been brought up in an environment that didn't encourage art. He believed that creating a sympathetic artistic environment for children was a fairly sure way of guaranteeing they would not become artists – or, at least, artists of any value. His father worked in the City of London, where his grandfather had a flourishing tobacco business with several shops selling imported Havana cigars and expensive briar pipes. Fowles' father did have a certain artistic streak in him: he liked Beethoven, and German lyric verse, perhaps surprisingly given that his life was deeply scarred by three years in the trenches during the First World War and his having been wounded there. Later in life, John discovered that his father had written a novel about the First World War. It wasn't very good, and it was a painful thing for John to have to tell him that nobody would publish it.

⁶⁹ A E Housman, 'Last Poems'.

⁷⁰ John Fowles, *The Magus* (revised edition). London: Jonathan Cape, 1977.

⁷¹ John Fowles, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1969.

Fowles' mother was not artistic in any creative sense. Her ancestors were country people: preachers and small farmers in the west of Cornwall. On his father's side his great-grandfather was clerk to an attorney, but it was his grandfather who rose as a businessman.

As a child he didn't at all like Leigh-on-Sea and the life they lived there. He felt like an outsider in that world and he began to read to escape from it. A major interest all his life was natural history. Living in the middle of suburbia, he used to have an absolute craving for everything that the whole conurbation of Southend wasn't. During the Second World War, when John was in his early teens, he lived in a village in Devon. He had a gun and a rod, and he could roam and poach. Again he was able to escape from a world in which he did not feel at home. But after the war his father insisted they return to Essex.

Fowles was sent away to a prep school, and then won a scholarship to a public school, where he was a boarder. He became head boy of the public school and did fairly well, but felt he was pushed into languages while he wished afterwards that he had gone into science. He was reading the set book French and German classics (Goethe, Racine, and so on) by the age of fifteen, and he felt that, because their worlds were so remote from that of an English public school in wartime with all its austerity and brutality – the fagging and beating, they represented an escape from a world that he was not happy in. Fowles kept, 'as a memento of the kind that punishes you,' he said, 'what we used to call, 'The Beating Book'.' It recorded the number of boys he had beaten. He told me that he had to cane boys almost every day: as head boy he was responsible for the discipline of the entire school of six hundred boys. 'The private person,' he said, 'escaped into the books.'

He studied French under an old man to whom he later felt profoundly grateful. 'Every public school has one really good master like him,' Fowles said, 'usually despised and disliked and laughed at by the other masters.' On the day it was announced that Fowles was to be head boy, this master came to see him and made a very determined attack on the whole idea. He said, 'You're not who you think you are. You don't know who you are, and I thoroughly disapprove of your being head boy.' He tried to persuade Fowles to say no; and Fowles wouldn't. And the master gave him a present of *Lyra Celtica*,⁷² an anthology of Welsh and Irish verse. 'I think it was the first time in my life I'd read Yeats, and ancient Welsh poetry,' Fowles said. 'I knew of, course, what he was

⁷² Sharp and Matthay (eds.), *Lyra Celtica*. Edinburgh: John Grant, 1932.

saying: 'This is the kind of person you are – you're in this book.' He knew that becoming a head boy in a system of which, he often told us, he generally disapproved, was wrong. He was absolutely right: but it took me many years to realise that fully.'

Fowles began to revolt against his background at the age of nineteen, after he left school and went into the Royal Marines. Gradually he realised that he'd been very heavily brainwashed. The Royal Marines were very useful for him because, he told me, 'I did very badly in them.' He did become an officer, but, he said, he was not comfortable in that role, he didn't fit in, and he passed out bottom of the course. The captain in charge called him in when the officer list was announced and said, 'I can tell you now, I'd give anything to be able to fail you, but your headmaster has spoken to the Commandant General of the Royal Marines.'

Fowles hated the Royal Marines. 'The Corps is a very bullshit, rule-obsessed, tradition-obsessed body of men,' he said. He remained at the pre-commando training school on Dartmoor. 'It was supposed to be the worst job in the Marines,' he said. 'You were meant to hope you went aboard a ship, beat the retreat, and all that rubbish. But we lived most of our life on Dartmoor and we were, to a rather unusual degree, in charge of what we did ourselves. I enjoyed that life because it was a very healthy one, and even more because one got to know Dartmoor and its natural life very well.'

At the end of his conscription he could choose between going to Oxford University or staying on in the Marines. He confessed to being torn, but then one day Isaac Foot (the Lord Mayor of Plymouth) came to the camp, and Fowles was appointed his ADC to look after him. Fowles put it to him and Foot said, 'Anyone who would give up a chance of going to Oxford for this, is mad.' That was very important for him, because here was a person who was famous in Devon life and whom Fowles naively thought would say the opposite. The next day he put in for early demobilisation. He went to Oxford, and there at last he was in an environment where the arts were 'normal'.

Fowles believed that going abroad was very important in the making of writers. It was important to choose, if you like, to become a fish out of water. So after Oxford he went to teach for a year in a French university. Then he took a job teaching in a school in Greece, which is where he began writing fiction.

Barry Hines is a novelist and television dramatist. His best-known novel, *A Kestrel for a Knave*,⁷³ was memorably filmed by Ken Loach as *Kes*. He is an Honorary Fellow of Sheffield Hallam University.

Hines dad was a miner. His mum was a housewife. He had a conventional working-class childhood. 'It's a curious area, South Yorkshire;' he told me. 'It's a strange juxtaposition of the industrial and the rural. Hoyland Common was just a collection of two-up-and-two-downs, with a little council estate on the side, and a pit at the bottom of our street where my dad worked. It was very close to Barnsley and Sheffield and Rotherham – yet it was surrounded by woods and fields.' Most of the time when he wasn't in school, Hines escaped into that countryside.

The fathers in his neighbourhood worked down the pit or in the steelworks in Sheffield or Rotherham. All the mums were housewives. 'It was very much a man's world,' Hines said. 'It was all very physical. Work was always dirty and dangerous. My grandfather was killed down the pit when I was seven. It was a rough sort of background. The heroes were fighters and sportsmen; and when we were older we were judged by how many girls we were knocking off, or how much beer we could drink.'

His dad wasn't concerned about academic success. He had left school at fourteen and gone to work down the pit, whereas when Hines' mother was fourteen she went into service. She had seen the middle-class at first hand; she knew what they were like, how ambitious they were, and saw the way that their children were treated. 'Like a lot of working-class people,' Hines said, 'she wanted her children to become middle-class, to 'do well for themselves', as they always say.'

'When you look back on your life there are milestones,' Hines said. The first milestone for him was passing the Scholarship and going to a grammar school five miles away, while all his school friends went to the secondary modern school just five minutes walk away. He suddenly found himself a fish out of water among children from a very different background to his. 'I never fitted in at grammar school,' he said. 'I never felt like an academic boy. I was a very aggressive boy at school. The teachers and most of the middle-class children seemed to be 'on the same side', they seemed to know all the rules. I loathed most of the subjects, and what made it worse was that when I came home at half-past four or so, my mates were out playing. They'd done for the day.'

⁷³ Barry Hines, *A Kestrel for a Knave*. London: Michael Joseph, 1968.

I was supposed to spend the evening doing homework.' The only thing that made it tolerable for him was Games and PE lessons. He wanted to leave school as quickly as possible, but his mother insisted that he stayed on and sit his 'O' levels. Then he went to work at the pit for a while as an apprentice mining surveyor. It was in the office. He was on the staff. 'It seemed apt,' he said, 'for a mediocre grammar school boy.'

All the time he was at school he wanted to become a professional footballer. He was a good player – but he wasn't a star. So he thought, 'What's the next best thing to be? Why not become a PE teacher?' It seemed to him a pretty cushy sort of job. It didn't seem like work. At school he'd seen the PE teacher in his shorts in the field in summer, or playing basketball, or joining in the football games, and he thought, 'God, he gets paid for that.' So he went back to school, sat his 'A' levels, and ended up at Loughborough teacher training college.

Donall MacAmhlaigh was an Irish writer whose novels were written in the Irish language. Consequently he is little known outside Ireland although his first book, *An Irish Navvy*⁷⁴, was translated into English by Valentin Iremonger, one time Irish Ambassador to Britain. Later, he himself translated *Schnitzer O'Shea*⁷⁵ into English. He won the Hennessy Literary Award, an Irish Post Award for Literature, and the Oireachtas Award for fiction.

Donall MacAmhlaigh was born in a village just outside Galway City. His father was a professional soldier – a Limerick City man, who had been through the entire First World War, and afterwards was in the old IRA, in the East Clare Brigade, in the War of Independence. After that he gravitated to the Free State Army, though, according to Donall, he was always very happy to say that he never saw a shot fired in anger in the Civil War. They moved about the country, because MacAmhlaigh senior was transferred back and forth between Galway, Kildare, Limerick, Cork and Kilkenny. Like Malcolm Bradbury and Dick Davis, Donall MacAmhlaigh had a disrupted childhood. Moving about from place to place meant that he was continually a stranger. During the 1930s they didn't see the worst of the times, but then, during the war years things were pretty bad. Donall had to abandon his education at a relatively early age and go to work for ten shillings a week in the woollen mills.

⁷⁴ Donall MacAmhlaigh, *An Irish Navvy*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964.

⁷⁵ Donall MacAmhlaigh, *Schnitzer O'Shea*. Kerry: Brandon, 1985.

His parents never had much formal education but both of them were avid readers. His mother had a reasonable grasp of what had literary merit and what hadn't. His father was less discriminating. He read novels by Denis Wheatley, and Rafael Sabatini (*Captain Blood* and that sort of thing), as well as decent literature at the same time. They were both fairly familiar with the classics, with Dickens and people like that. 'Even working-class people without any formal education read a lot more in those years,' MacAmlaigh said. 'Certain literary allusions wouldn't be lost on them as they would on many well-educated people today.'

His family weren't Irish-speaking, but as a child in Galway he heard it spoken by adults, and so, when he began to learn it later on, it came to him pretty easily. All the children in the village, he told me, spoke English. The parents consciously spoke English to them. They didn't want them to be, as they saw it, burdened with Irish. But from a very early age MacAmlaigh acquired a taste for it – from as young as five or six. As a young adult, he spent three years in an Irish-speaking battalion – he thought of it as his finishing school.

Donall never lived with his father for any length of time. 'He was away so much,' Donall said, 'that eventually, when he came out of the army, his arrival home was regarded with something like dismay by myself and my mother. It was the intrusion of a stranger. I suppose we resented him because we didn't know how to relate to him. Quite honestly, I never did relate to my father except over a few drinks. That was the only time the ice was broken; the only time we had some sort of common ground. That was very common in rural Ireland. The father and son might work in the hayfield all day and exchange a few remarks, but there was always an uneasy feeling. Perhaps it was to do with a sort of sexual repression – because the man you were working with was your progenitor or something.' MacAmlaigh said that he was about sixteen before it dawned on him how he came to be, and he was smitten with shame, horror, revulsion and sadness. 'My God! How could people's parents be guilty of such an act!' 'To be fair to the Church,' he said, 'it doesn't officially teach that – but it's like a concomitant.'

As a young man, he stood around street corners in the evenings, often without even fourpence for the pictures, sometimes longing for a pint of beer and not having the money for it. 'We'd become cadgers even if it wasn't in our nature,' he said, 'because there were a lot of chaps coming back from England with money. We'd 'plámás', as we say in Ireland: we'd flatter them shamelessly for the few odd pints we'd get off

them. It's given me a lasting insight into the young unemployed. I can understand why they would steal – because of the feeling of not having what other people have; of being outside the pale in a sense.'

Yes, and that feeling of being outside the pale, of being an outsider from respectable society, also extended to the romantic and sexual areas of his life. 'A girlfriend was out of the question,' he said. 'A girl's father would say, 'Let him get a job first, before he thinks of keeping company with you.' We got to know a different type of girl – unfortunates, I would call them: orphans, or girls who'd had a difficult upbringing, or who'd been sent to work for the nuns. Very often the poor creatures were wronged. I remember one night, meeting a girl, and I said, 'Shall I see you home?' She said, 'I'm starved.' I said, 'I'm hungry too.' So we put our money together and we bought a small loaf. And we ate the loaf sitting on an old shelf of rock over the back of the house where she was a servant. It seemed a kind of oddly sacramental thing to do.' A striking symbol, really, of being excluded, of being literally outside.

MacAmlaigh didn't want to go to England. Interestingly, *An Irish Navvy*, was first published in Irish with a title that translates as *The Diary of an Exile*.⁷⁶ Valentin Iremonger says in his preface to the English edition, 'It will be seen that Mr MacAmlaigh, in his first years in exile, speaks with some bitterness of the necessity that made him leave Ireland to earn a living.'⁷⁷ And when MacAmlaigh first arrived in England, he thought, 'My god – how will I stick it?' The place seemed so insipid and boring to him and uninteresting. His initial impression was of how illiterate, on the one hand, English working-class people were, while on the other hand they seemed to have a level of sophistication that the Irish lacked. 'I would say that even middle-class Irish people had a certain naivety about them, a certain sense of wonder which was lacking in English people. The English were bursting with self-confidence – we went to the other extreme: the chip on the shoulder. I didn't seem to have a lot in common with them. I couldn't relax with them or enjoy their company very much. The kind of thing that most of the English lads did – play skittles, or throw darts, or talk endlessly about football – didn't interest me in the least. It seemed to me that we were on a different wavelength completely.'

He said that most Irish people who had settled in Britain, and seen their children grow up there, could never give their hearts to the

⁷⁶ Donall MacAmhlaigh, *An Irish Navvy*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964.

⁷⁷ Donall MacAmhlaigh, *An Irish Navvy*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964, p.viii.

country in the same way they could to Australia or New Zealand or some place like that, because of the history, and the thing in Northern Ireland. 'You just can't shrug them off and say that we make too much about them: the loss of the Irish language, Irish culture, the planned, systematic Anglicisation of the Irish, the ill-treatment of the Irish over centuries, all these things. On the other hand you couldn't blame the ordinary working-class English person for them. I certainly haven't got any anti-English feelings, and if I had, I hope I haven't got a shred of them now. The 'British' thing, the idea of British domination and all that, I do dislike. You still see examples of the chauvinism (we saw examples during the Falklands). We have that feeling, on the one hand, of a certain amount of gratitude, if gratitude isn't misplaced, that we got work here when we couldn't have got it at home, and that on the whole we've lived reasonably well here and not been subjected to anything worse perhaps than the Irish joke. On the other hand, there's the fact of finding ourselves in a country we might perhaps rather not be in.' MacAmlaigh became a permanent outsider, living and dying in exile.

Roger McGough is a hugely popular poet, first coming to prominence in *The Mersey Sound*⁸ – a collection he shared with Adrian Henri and Brian Patten. He has published nine collections of his verse for adults including *Holiday on Death Row*,⁹ and twice that number for children. He has been awarded an OBE and more recently a CBE and has been honoured with the Freedom of the City of Liverpool.

Roger McGough was born into a Catholic family of Irish descent. His mother's name was McGarry. She had eleven brothers and sisters. On his father's side there were eight brothers and one girl. They lived in a working-class area in north Liverpool called Litherland, near the docks at Seaforth. Roger had one sister.

He was never subjected to violence as a child, but was expected to be mannish or boyish. His father was very masculine, a very strong man, who always wanted Roger to be a footballer. He wanted his son to be strong, and he wasn't. He was not good at the things boys were supposed to be good at, even like trying to help his father mend things, or help decorate. His father used to get impatient with him because he used to mess everything up and go away. Sensitivity wasn't regarded as a virtue. Roger remembers crying once when he was 'too old to cry'. 'I

⁸ Adrian Henri, Roger McGough, Brian Patten, *The Mersey Sound*. London: Penguin, 1967.

⁹ Roger McGough, *Holiday on Death Row*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1979.

suppose in an artistic family.' Roger said, 'they might have realised they'd got a sensitive child and encouraged him, whereas I don't think that was recognised. It was looked on more as an illness.' He got nervous twitches and psychosomatic illnesses. All of this set him apart from his family and his peers.

As the only son, a lot was expected of him. He was expected to do well educationally. His was the generation that was supposed to produce the big achievers. He was the first of his tribe to go to grammar school, the first to go to university. He felt lost, alone with no one to advise him what to do, or how to do it, or how to behave. He felt like a fish out of water within his home, and in the educational situations in which he found himself. 'I was in that generation that was growing up just after the war,' he said, 'that achieving generation that included the Beatles, David Hockney, Barry Hines, John McGrath and all those people who became successful in fields in which their fathers hadn't dared trespass.'

His dad worked on the docks. All his paternal and maternal uncles worked on the docks. None of them had had a good education. They had all had to leave school at thirteen or fourteen, so they wanted achievement for the next generation. His mother enjoyed reading and imagined she had a flair for writing, and she encouraged him. When he went to the library, his father used to ask him to get a book for him. His father was afraid of libraries; he was embarrassed about going in; he didn't know how they worked; so he'd ask Roger to get a book – about the sea if possible. Sometimes Roger would bring him back one he'd had before and he'd say, 'It doesn't matter. I'll read it again.'

Roger McGough went to the local primary school and then to St Mary's College, which was a well-respected and highly disciplined Irish Christian Brothers grammar school. It was fiercely Catholic and quite repressive in many ways. In the eyes of a working-class family like his the best thing you could be was a priest, and after that a doctor would be very good, and then a lawyer. Probably a teacher would be all right. So that was the level he was supposed to aim at. He was interested in and enjoyed painting and drawing, but a choice had to be made early on between Latin or Art. The ones who weren't considered to be so clever were the ones who went to Art. If you were good at Art you were supposed not to be academic. He would have loved to have done Art and gone on to Art School, but pressure from home excluded him from doing what he wanted to do, from being who he wanted to be.

At university he did French. He read some of the French poets, and what struck him was not the poetry but the fact that it was a way of life. He suddenly realised what art was, what painting was, what writing was – it was people devoting themselves to something with an almost religious intensity. 'I suppose,' he said, 'I was an outsider, I always felt very much an observer, and when I read the poets, and about their commitment, I certainly felt something in concert with them. I realised what I was – I was a poet. So I started writing poetry. I suppose that's a funny way round really.' Even then, once he'd started feverishly writing poems, he felt that he couldn't submit them to the university poetry magazine. 'It seemed to be full of Latin words and very literary-scary sort of poetry. It was very much a class thing: there was no way I could write for that. All the poems I published were in the university newspaper. I was scared of the poetry establishment, I suppose. Instead of just sending poems off to magazines, it took me a while to think I was good enough. I used to think, 'They'll find me out.' I lived in central Liverpool, Liverpool 8, which was the area where lots of students and villains and painters and prostitutes and professors lived. It's a very small area, but unique in a way; so I met everyone who was around, which included Adrian Henri and Brian Patten and lots of others. Although I was still an outsider, suddenly I felt I belonged to a group.'

Peter Vansittart's twenty-five (mainly erudite and historical) novels have earned him high praise and low sales. Perhaps his most successful book is the anthology, *Voices From The Great War*.⁸⁰ He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature.

Vansittart's father died before Peter was born. 'I have not the least idea what he did,' Vansittart told me. 'I suspect nothing very much. He must have been very young – I think in his early twenties. My mother never mentioned him and soon married again. Although I'm fascinated by history, I have no sense of family. My mother (though she wouldn't have been pleased to hear it) played very little part in the growth of my imagination, such as it is.' He didn't see much of her. Those were the days, in the class that he inhabited, when, apart from coming down for half an hour after dinner, children didn't see their parents much. She would go out to meet friends for coffee about eleven, then probably spend the afternoon playing tennis or golf, would be out to dinner two or three times a week, or out playing bridge, or dancing.

⁸⁰ Peter Vansittart, *Voices from the Great War*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1981.

She thus contributed little to his development. 'We were never close,' Vansittart told me. 'To the end of her life I found it very difficult to talk to her about anything that mattered. As an intimate, she didn't exist; nor as an influence, other than that she sent me to certain schools and chose my nursery governess.'

In his memoir, *Paths from a White Horse*,⁸¹ Vansittart says, 'I never knew the inner relations between [my governess] Miss Howe and my mother who, like all her friends, paid, I dare say very stingily, to have me kept away from her as much as possible.' One evening there was a furious row downstairs and muted ferocity lingered for days. And then, 'Miss Howe vanished... I owe her much and am sad never to have heard from her again.'⁸² Clearly Vansittart was an outsider as far as his family was concerned, but the greater emotional trauma for him was obviously the disappearance of his governess.

From when he was seven, his mother and her husband lived abroad most of the time. So he was parked out, both in boarding schools and in other people's houses. He said that he used to get his full share of misplaced sympathy – a wretched child sent away at seven to a terrible boarding school! He spent many holidays with a country doctor and his wife in Devonshire. He said that the doctor and his wife were too busy to bother about his daily routine: they were wise, generous, and they trusted him. He had almost total freedom to go where he liked, to read what he liked. He would cycle up to twenty-five miles for a game of tennis or a cricket match, or to explore hills, villages, moors. There were books all over the house. 'I sometimes felt, 'Vansittart said, 'that the doctor and his wife had taken very literally Bishop Heber's remark, that a gentleman always buys three copies of any book: one for his library, one to read himself, and one to give away to his friends. (If that was taken literally today of course,' he added, 'authors would have less to worry about.)'

His first school was an old school (which still exists) reaching the end of a regime. For the first two years it was very Victorian; a good deal of bullying; very harsh hours of work. It was a tough, even primitive regime. As this was his first school, he had nothing to compare it with, and assumed that the whole child population suffered exactly the same way that he did. In 1930 the school changed, in the sense that the neo-Victorians retired and much younger people took over. They lived in a Queen Anne country house with enticing woods, ponds, meadows,

⁸¹ Peter Vansittart, *Paths from a White Horse*. London: Quartet, 1985.

⁸² Peter Vansittart, *Paths from a White Horse*. London: Quartet, 1985, p.16.

and there was a new atmosphere of frivolity, and a fruitful experimental amateurishness. 'It now seems to me,' he said, 'that I had the best and the worst of private school life – the light and the dark – which taught me that there is no single principle in the universe: the creative and the destructive fight each other, and existence tends towards cycles. I learnt that however despairing I am, and of course I despaired at times, because of some sort of balance in the universe, things will change sooner or later: no doubt later, often much later – but change they will.'

He got a scholarship to Oxford but wasn't happy there. He realised almost at once that he wasn't a scholar. He didn't stay long and didn't take a degree. 'I have an impatient nature,' he said. 'I can't spend too long at any project. If I'm writing a sentence, my mind is already on to the next sentence. Half way through writing a book, I'm thinking about the next one. This is not what scholarship is about, and the themes which interested me and which I would have liked to have explored thoroughly, tended to be foreign themes: the rise of Fascism and Communism; the French Revolution; the reasons for Rome's collapse – but I was lazy, particularly about learning foreign languages. I was interested in what, in those days, I'd have called 'ideas' – I think, today, I would simply call them notions. I don't think I've ever had a single idea in my life, but I did realise that my limitations as a scholar could be used quite usefully for fiction.'

He'd begun working before he went to Oxford. He'd got his scholarship a year before he should have done having been sent in as a trial run. And much to his annoyance he was taken away from school on the grounds that there was no point in spending more money as he'd already done what he was sent there to do. He did a bit of tutoring and a bit of school teaching. When starting the latter he was eighteen, and he was paid his term's fee in advance, which was ten pounds. I'll let Vansittart finish the story. 'There followed a common enough though disagreeable event – within two days the money had disappeared. I went to the headmaster in some irritation and said, 'Look, somebody's swiped my ten pounds.' The headmaster, by no means pleased with me, called the school together and declared that until somebody owned up there'd be no half-holidays. This of course was a disaster, because even the staff had to work extra hours, and all the school cricket matches were cancelled. I was at once extremely unpopular. After about seven weeks of this misery, I put on an old coat that I hadn't worn for many weeks – and found, of course, the ten pounds had been there all the time. So then a rather interesting moral problem presented itself. I didn't have the nerve to

announce my discovery, so we sweated out this miserable term to the end, and to this day, in Leicester Square, on Hampstead Heath, on Brighton Pier, old timers come up to me and say, 'I remember you. Weren't you responsible for that awful summer term...?'

Well, I guess he certainly made an outsider of himself there!

And one of the things he said to me could probably be said about all the authors featured in this dissertation. 'I have always been,' he said, 'in an unheroic way, an independent spirit, never taking kindly to regimentation or orders.'

Personal experience

I am a descendant of the unwanted and unloved. My father was illegitimate when illegitimate was not a good thing to be in the bigoted Protestant north-east of Ireland. He never knew his mother or father, or even his name. (I am very conscious that Gray is merely a label I have been tagged with. The Grays, the rightful owners of the name, are a horrible Paisleyite mob, and are no relations of mine.) My father's birth was never registered and so, as a young adult, bureaucratically he didn't exist (bureaucracy doesn't recognise flesh and blood). Strangely (I didn't know this when I decided to migrate to Australia), he had wanted to come to Australia, but was unable to get a passport because he didn't have a birth certificate. I never saw him again after the family disintegrated when I was twelve months old, and he died of polio when he was only thirty-two.

My mother was one of eleven children from the same mother, discarded like damaged produce as they came off the conveyor belt and scattered around a number of Children's Homes. She was trained to be a servant and at fifteen became a kitchen maid for Lord and Lady O'Neil. My parents met as teenagers in a field in which my father, an unpaid farm servant was working, and instantly had a roll in the frost. They lived in a farm shed in which, I, the second of three unwanted children, was born. During the war, they ran away to England where my father's skills were needed (England's own young men having been packed off into the military). The third child was born there, and the three of us were distributed into foster care. Looking back, it has always seemed odd to me that, my mother and her siblings were not kept together, and that the pattern was repeated with us.

I must have been a difficult child because none of my foster parents would keep me for long. I went into an appalling Boys' Home run by monsters, and by and by was taken away by a stranger who claimed to be my mother. To this day I don't know why. We loathed each other on sight. I used to pray to God to make her die in the night. (My prayer was not answered and so I soon came to realise that there was no one up there.) The poor woman was (understandably) disturbed, irrational and violent. She was anaemic, lonely and abused, and lived in poverty in sordid bed-sitting rooms with an emotionally disturbed child who peed his pants every day and wet his bed every night. There was no hot water, or even running water. The only thing running was his nose. I don't suppose anyone read fairy stories to her when she was little, but if someone had done so, she could have sued them for misleading advertising.

School didn't agree with me. Nor I with it. There used to be a saying, much bandied about when I was young, that school days were the happiest days of your life. I found this idea incomprehensible and ridiculous. Peter Vansittart once said to me that the real problem of teaching is how to love not only the unlovable but the unspeakable. As a spokesperson for the unspeakable I have to say that I can't remember a single teacher who (understandably in my case) made the effort. I was loathed equally by students and teachers alike, and was punished pretty well daily by both. To be fair, I have to say that I wouldn't have liked me, either.

Nowadays, in Australia, as a writer of children's stories, I sometimes visit schools in remote Aboriginal Communities. While reading stories, I am usually festooned with children who are in desperate need of love and affection. Despite knowing this, it is hard not to cringe when my arms and legs are being decorated with snot, or when, with arms hugging around my neck, death-rattle coughs explode in my face.

A friend once showed me two transcriptions, side by side. One was an interrogation by a Nazi officer of a British POW from an episode of the television series, *Colditz*,⁸³ and the other was an interview by a sympathetic educational psychologist with a troublesome and under-achieving black kid in New York. What was striking were the parallels. In each case the person without power was refusing to cooperate – sometimes by remaining silent, sometimes by pretending

⁸³ Brian Degas, *Colditz*. London: BBC, 1972-74.

not to understand the question, sometimes by giving deliberately misleading or blatantly false answers. To some kids, teachers, like police or magistrates or parents, are the enemy. There's a joke about an Irishman on a television game show during the time of the recent Troubles in the north of Ireland. He said 'Pass,' in response to every question he was asked. Then a voice in the audience shouted out, 'That's right, Paddy, tell them fucking nothing!'

In high school I was never a member of any group, or clique or club. I had no friends. My mother had married and, if that coupling could be called a family, it was certainly one that I was not a part of. After leaving school, I engaged in various petty criminal activities in company – but was never a part of the teenage criminal fraternity. Similarly, as a motorbike boy I was never a member of a motorbike gang. I knocked around for a very short while with a diddicoi, but was never embraced by his gypsy mates. Conscription ended a few months before I would have been called up. My two weeks in an army camp was proof that if I had been, it would have been a disaster, and I would never have fitted in there. The family of each of two girlfriends tried (for some misguided reason) to inveigle me into their clutches, but I resisted that. My predatory nocturnal wandering (the sad searching for love in the wrong places) was conducted alone or with one mate, from whom, of course, I separated as soon as he or I struck lucky. When I was nineteen I went abroad (with the intention of ending up in Australia) and bummed around on my own in Europe for a couple of years. Even when, later in England, I became heavily involved in street politics, I never joined any political group or organization. Later, I went to university as a mature student, which set me outside the general first year population of school leavers, and although it was a residential university, I always chose to live outside. I was always out there marching to my own drum, which was often a painful place to be, as I was more often than not pelted from all sides by missiles and abuse.

(Bring on the violins.)

I once wrote a little verse called *Long Lonely Road*.

Run, boy, run,
 don't look back,
 there's the bogies from your childhood
 breathing down your back,
 don't matter where you go,
 how far or how fast,

you'll be shadowed by your shadow,
overtaken by your past.

The shadow's ugly,
it's all deformed,
it's been twisted about
since the day you were born,
and you hate its guts,
but you can't get through
because your shadow, boy,
is fixated on you.

Run, boy, run,
run like the wind,
your loneliness tells you
your father sinned:
he fucked your mother
dressed in black –
you've got a priest and a policeman
on your back.

Being conceived
is the ultimate crime,
and you're gonna be punished
till the end of time,
so run like hell
till you're out of breath,
though there's no way you can win
this race to death.

Run, boy, run,
you're in the human race,
so keep on running
from place to place,
but you'll never escape,
though you run like a hare,
because wherever you go –
you'll still be there. ⁸⁴

⁸⁴ Nigel Gray, *Come Close*. London: Journeyman Press, 1978, p.14.

The many interesting differences among the authors featured in this dissertation, speak for themselves and there is no space here to look into them further. My intention was to see whether there was anything common to them all, and I think it is interesting to note the many and various ways in which the contributors might be seen to have been outsiders – each an outsider in his own fashion.

I can relate to much of the experience recorded here. I was separated from the country of my birth and my family when I was twelve months old. I never saw my father again. I had a disrupted childhood being moved around a great deal. I was very conscious of not fitting in to foster homes and schools. And later, when I went to live with my mother who was by then a stranger, there was no intimacy or affection between us. In schools and homes I was always very much a loner, an outsider. Although I had been cut off from my roots, and had no relations or place to return to in Ireland, I never ever felt English or at home in England. Indeed, it was only when I came to Australia when I was in my 40s that I first, and at last, felt at home. Like Peter Vansittart (and indeed, all of the writers interviewed), I was always an independent spirit, never taking kindly to regimentation or orders. And like Brian Aldiss, I was aware of being a displaced person. I didn't know what I wanted to do. I didn't know where I was in society. When I was nineteen I went abroad for a couple of years, and then intended to migrate to Australia – until an unwanted pregnancy anchored me to England.

I have a vivid memory of an incident that occurred when I was seven years old. During a school holiday a girl in my class, who lived in the same street as I, had a birthday party to which I was not invited. We lived in a street of terraced houses without front yards. On a cold November afternoon, miserable with heavy and incessant rain, prematurely dark with low black cloud, I walked up and down the street, passing and re-passing her house, peering through the front parlour window at the kids enjoying the party in the warmth and brightness – literally an outsider from the fun and games, the food and companionship inside (which brings me back to the quotation by John Cheever with which I opened this thesis, where he writes of himself as 'the lonely, lonely boy with no role in life but to peer in at the lighted windows of other people's contentment and vitality'). But also, because I had escaped through the upstairs window of the room in which I had been locked while my mother was at work, and because I was unable to get back in, I was an outsider from the place (I wouldn't call it at home) in which I lived.

Dick Davis has a couplet that is particularly relevant to how he feels about himself. If I were to choose one, it would be this striking image from a memorable poem by a poet whose work I don't, for the most part, like:

I should have been a pair of ragged claws
Scuttling across the floors of silent seas.⁸⁵

Much has been written about outsiders in literature, that is to say, about those that were forced to take on that mantle by circumstance such as Anna Karenin⁸⁶ or Sarah Woodruff,⁸⁷ as well as what you might call 'natural outsiders' such as Tom Jones,⁸⁸ Huckleberry Finn,⁸⁹ or Ignatius J Reilly.⁹⁰ My particular favourite of the former is Ince Memed in the novel *Memed My Hawk*,⁹¹ by Yasar Kemal, in which a peasant boy is forced by tyranny outside his family, his village, his milieu, and takes to the mountains to become a Turkish Robin Hood figure. When it comes to natural outsiders, I felt enormous empathy for McMurphy in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*⁹². In fact, the strength of this identification led to an amusing incident. I lived with a woman, let's call her Blanche, who was a singer in a band, in a Victorian terraced workers' cottage. I'd told her that morning that it was obvious to me that she was having a sexual liaison with Bill, the leader of the band. I was sick at the time with the flu, and was sitting up in bed (a mattress on the floor) in the attic room, reading. Two floors below, unbeknown to me, Bill had turned up and Blanche had invited him into the sitting room where she said to him, 'Nigel knows about us.' At that moment, McMurphy was wheeled into the ward having been lobotomised. My fury was released in a drawn-out animal roar, and I began punching the lath and plaster wall, lumps of which were crumbling and falling onto the bed. Down below, the internal walls of the house began to shake. Blanche blanched. Bill turned pale and said, 'I'd better go,' and scurried off.

This is a testament to the power of literature, but is of course a diversion. I wanted to make the point that my enquiry is not into the outsider in literature, but the outsider as creator of literature. But

⁸⁵ T S Eliot, "The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock", in *Prufrock and Other Observations*. 1917. London: Faber, 1961. p.14.

⁸⁶ L N Tolstoy, *Anna Karenin*. London: Penguin Books, 1954.

⁸⁷ John Fowles, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1969.

⁸⁸ Henry Fielding, *Tom Jones*. London: Penguin Classics, 1985.

⁸⁹ Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. London: Puffin Books, 1953.

⁹⁰ John Kennedy Toole, *A Confederacy of Dunces*. London: Penguin Books, 1981.

⁹¹ Yashar Kemal, *Memed My Hawk*. London: Collins and Harvill, 1961.

⁹² Ken Kesey, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. London: Methuen, 1962.

thinking of *McMurphy* does remind me of a Japanese saying: 'If a nail is sticking up you must hammer it down.' My own feeling is that these authors, and many like them, are individuals who had the inner strength to survive that attempt to impose uniformity and acquiescence. Society needs its rebels and writers as much as its bus drivers and accountants.

This sample is too limited and my word allowance too small for this to be offered as anything more than an interesting notion, a starting point, possibly, for further research. I am not proposing this as a universal truth. But I would suggest that there is something more than coincidence revealed here. Perhaps a feeling of being alienated, of not fitting in, of being a fish out of water, is an important ingredient in the making of an author.

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