

# Davies on Self-Discovery

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## **The Journey of Self-Discovery**

I ASKED Joan what she was reading, about a year before she died. She said she was re-reading the novels of Robertson Davies, which she regularly did, because he's such a rollicking good storyteller, and, as she believed his literary vision important, she wanted to understand it better. That's the highest praise an author can receive from a reader; especially one suffering chronic illness and nearing the end of her life. As we discussed Davies, and his literary vision, we agreed Australians can learn a lot about colonial and post-colonial Australia—particularly the evolution and devolution of its Anglo-Celtic character—from his quintessentially Canadian stories.

Davies writes about the distinction between knowledge and wisdom, fundamental to any journey of self-discovery, and about an invisible immaterial world alongside the visible material world, which is terrifying but beautiful and full of wonder. He believes humans can discover this other world through religion, and many do, but he also believes the arts—visual, performing, fine, and literature—are another path too. He has a proviso about religion and the arts, though, which each novel reworks in its distinctive way. He believes a rupture occurs whenever the Western mind focuses on reason as its primary means of verifying its truth claims, ignores symbolic communication—particularly the signposts of allegory, metaphysics, myth, and legend—and avoids the realm of feeling. The goal of self-discovery is wholeness, which is achieved through a right balance of rationality and irrationality, or sense and sensibility, or conscious and unconscious; and a right balance isn't a scientific achievement.

This territory isn't unique to Davies. Since Western civilisation began, it's been explored through many ideological discourses and aesthetic styles, whenever philosophers and storytellers enter into dialogue and occasionally make rival truth claims. Joan was taken aback when I said Patrick White covers similar territory as Davies, in his late-Modernist way, since she had always supposed White was antithetical to Davies and wasn't inspired by his work. Having sown the seed, I didn't labour the point, and this essay attempts to honour Joan's fascination with nine celebrated novels that form Davies' three famous trilogies.

### **The Salterton Trilogy**

IN HIS FIRST novel, *Tempest-Tost* (1951), Davies portrays a cross-section of contemporary Canadians living in a small provincial city. Salterton has seen more history than most Canadian cities, its tranquillity isn't easily disturbed, its real character is beneath its surface; put another way, its collective self-consciousness belies its collective unconscious. The protagonists are involved with an amateur theatre company, which decides to stage *The Tempest* on the grounds of a local estate. Davies gives many of them an emblematic horizon, chosen from among the normative secular and religious horizons which form the Western imagination. The story is about how these protagonists interact, and how their emblematic horizons clash, as they struggle to stage Shakespeare's play. The novel and the play are both meta-fictions which throw light on each other in interesting ways.

One protagonist is a maths teacher, Hector, who's portly, single, and approaching middle age. Hector's father, a depressing failure of a Presbyterian minister, died poor when his son was fourteen. Hector's mother, as steeped in failure as his father, with little character of her own, made motherhood an unnecessary ordeal. While Hector respected his mother, and always cared for her, he found it hard to place her on any pedestal of motherhood or womanhood. He lapsed from his parents' religion (the Reformation), embraced the gods of planning and common sense (the Enlightenment), and became a self-disciplined and self-controlled stoic with no time "to be young, or to invite his soul". As a result, many important things were driven "down into the cellarage of his mind" where they were forgotten.

Hector, for many years treasurer of the amateur theatre company, has never acted. For some reason, which belies an unacknowledged feeling, he uses planning and common sense to secure the role of Gonzalo, the honest old counsellor, without understanding why he wants to act now in his middle age. Once cast, he falls in love with Griselda, a rich young woman of eighteen, eldest daughter of the estate, who's been cast as Ariel. For the first time in his life, he dreams that a beautiful woman, lightly clad, leans towards him tenderly and speaks his name.

For much of the novel, Hector behaves like a chivalrous knight, remaining in the background, nursing an unrequited love for his beautiful lady. He senses danger when he sees another man, Roger, who's been cast as Ferdinand, using planning and common sense a different way: to seduce Griselda. Hector can't see that Griselda is neither a victim nor an idealised woman on a pedestal; in spite of her youth, she can take care of herself.

The play comes together quite well, under the direction of Valentine, an archetypal wise-woman, who grew up in Salterton but spent many years as a

professional actor and director in New York. Hector's emotional crisis comes to a head on opening night. He moons about and his acting is atrocious; half-way through the performance he sneaks away to a shed, on another part of the estate, where he hangs himself. The rope snaps and the suicide fails; he's eventually discovered unconscious on the shed floor. When he regains consciousness Valentine comforts him and arranges for him to be taken into the estate's mansion where the only available bed for him is Griselda's.

Valentine asks Griselda to visit Hector in her bedroom, so they can discuss what has happened. Griselda doesn't love Roger and was never aware that Hector loved her. Now that Hector knows Griselda is safe from Roger, he's happy to move on knowing he will never love her in the same way again. He doesn't need to, though, since this stage of his journey into self-discover no longer requires it; but his Romantic vision isn't abandoned altogether, as the novel's ending makes clear. Griselda begins their final exchange:

"I'd better go now. But I don't want you to think I don't know what a lot of trouble I've made for you."

"It was nothing."

"But I couldn't know, you see."

"Of course not. You couldn't know."

"And it wouldn't really have done, would it?"

"No: I see that now. It wouldn't have done at all."

"Well, goodnight, Mr Mackilwraith."

Hector looked up into her serious face, and for the first time in weeks, he laughed. After a puzzled moment, Griselda smiled.

"Good-night, Hector."

She leaned forward as she had done in that first dream, and kissed him. Then she turned out the lamp, and closed the door behind her.

Hector slept.

What will he discover in his dreams?

SHAKESPEARE'S *Romeo and Juliet* is the leitmotiv of *Leaven of Malice* (1954), Davies' second novel. That didn't occur to me until Prokofiev's ballet score started playing in my head, halfway through reading it, and wouldn't stop. The novel begins with a false engagement announcement published in the Salterton newspaper on

Halloween. The announcement—that Veronica Vambrace will marry Solomon Bridgetower on November 31st, a day that doesn't exist—stirs an enmity between two families that are, in an understated way, the Montagues and Capulets of Salterton.

Veronica Vambrace is the daughter of Professor Vambrace, head of the classics department at the local university. The professor is Canadian-Irish; during periods of stress his histrionic temperament bounces between two roles: the well-born Celt and the wild-and-romantic Celt. At other times, he's a secular creature of the rational Enlightenment, deeply opposed to his wife's Catholic faith which he never allowed his daughter to be raised in. To the casual onlooker, Veronica's life appears unendurable, but, as it's the only life she has, she wouldn't exchange it for another. Although she's vaguely pleased to be of Irish blood—from both her mother and her father—she finds it increasingly difficult belonging to such a psychologically divided family as she negotiates young adulthood and embraces thoughts of independence and marriage.

Solomon Bridgetower, a young literature academic trained in Cambridge, is the son of the late Professor Bridgetower, an eminent geologist, who died when Solomon was twelve. His mother, the elderly invalid Mrs Bridgetower, is an educated but xenophobic, anti-communist, anti-fascist woman, who would have benefited from a professional career had she not become a wife. The Bridgetowers are wealthy. Together with Griselda's family, the Websters, they represent the closest thing to an Anglo-Saxon establishment in Salterton. Although Solomon is Cambridge trained, and from loyalist stock, he isn't an anglophile, doesn't suffer from cultural cringe, and hopes to make a name for himself in the emerging discipline of AmCan: American and Canadian Literatures.

The enmity between the Vambraces and Bridgetowers began many years earlier, when Professor Bridgetower was elected dean of arts; an office Professor Vambrace felt was his by right, especially since Bridgetower was a scientist. Vambrace has always been convinced the election was a plot—on the part of a considerable number of unknown persons—to do him out of his rightful dignity, mock him, and bring him into disrepute. When the false announcement is published, he sees it as another attempt to disgrace him through his family. Much of the story is devoted to his paranoid and comic-tragic attempt to sue the newspaper for libel, and uncover the plot against him, but the leaven of malice that drives the novel—the malice in every human heart—is a moral dilemma beyond the power of the law.

Veronica is a dutiful daughter; her problem is her father's patriarchal Canadian-Irish hold over her. Solomon is a dutiful son; his problem is his mother's matriarchal Canadian-English hold over him. They are not in love with each other—

indeed, Solomon has been carrying a torch for Griselda for several years, while Griselda doesn't love him and has always mocked his relationship with his mother—but they are thrown together as unlikely allies: struggling to manage the fallout of the false announcement, coping with their emotionally needy parents, and working around the enmity between their families.

They do fall in love eventually, which may never have happened without the false announcement, but they face another dilemma: how can they get married, with no money, and no prospects, in the face of so much parental opposition? As a well-wishing friend of theirs insists:

“Put first things first. Get married, and plunge into all the uproar of baby-raising, and loading yourself up with insurance and furniture and all the frowsy appurtenances of domestic life, as soon as you can. You'll survive. Millions do. And deep down under all the trash-heap of duty and respectability and routine you may, if you're among the lucky ones, find a jewel of happiness. I know all about it, and I assure you on my sacred honour that it's worth a try. Come on! You know how all this will end up. You'll act on instinct anyhow; everybody does in the really important decisions of life. Why not get some fun out of it, and forget all the twaddle you'll have to talk in order to make it seem reasonable, and prudent, and dull.”

And that's what they do.

THE NEWLYWEDS suffer for taking that plunge. In Davies' third novel, *A Mixture of Frailties* (1958), they're manipulated into living with Mrs Bridgetower until she dies from a bad heart a few years later. Their problems don't end with her death, though, as she rules them from beyond the grave. Under the terms of her will, Solomon is given a one-off legacy of one hundred Canadian dollars, and, according to the terms of the will, not only must he live in his mother's mansion, he's required to maintain it out of his salary as a junior lecturer.

The rest of Mrs Bridgetower's capital—over one million Canadian dollars; a lot of money in the 1950s—is used to establish a Trust to educate young Salterton women who want to follow a career in the arts. She isn't to be more than twenty-one, her scholarship is to last until she's twenty-five, when another young woman is chosen. She's to be trained in Europe, and be maintained in the best circumstances, so she may bring back to Canada the intangible treasures of European tradition. The

trustees are the dean of the Anglican cathedral, an old spinster friend of Mrs Bridgetower, and Solomon. The Trust can be only be wound up if Veronica gives birth to a male heir, who is to be christened Solomon. Mrs Bridgetower's grandson shall inherit her estate; although her own son—the boy's dutiful and long-suffering and studiously overlooked father—will have a life interest in it.

Most of the novel is about the Trust's first venture, and a young woman's journey into self-discovery. Monica Gall—a play on Gael or Gaelic—is working class, belongs to a non-denominational sect, and sings in the sect's gospel choir. Like the sect's message, the choir's repertoire is “pseudo-religious twaddle”, or “music in the service of cant”, which “primes the pump of sweet self-pity, mingled with tremulous self-reproach and a strong sense of never having had a square deal from life”. She has a good voice, which needs to be trained before it suffers irreparable harm; she also needs to get in touch with her Celtic roots.

Monica is sent to England to train under a celebrated conductor, Sir Benedict. He begins by suggesting a distinction between bardic singing under the sign of Eros, which once distilled life and captured the beauty and delight people once found in life, and sexual singing under the sign of Thanatos, which has become a substitute for life by churning up emotions people hadn't felt before. Some of the Romantics are to blame, he says, even though not all Romantics are, and he convinces her to train as a bardic singer. She needs to get in touch with her feelings without becoming swamped by her feelings. That's not as easy as it sounds.

In the following years, Monica becomes a Celtic phoenix, rising from the ashes of the Reformation and the Enlightenment in their most dissociated forms. She's transformed under a range of tutors and blossoms into a very good singer. She falls in love with Giles, one of those tutors. An undiscovered composer of genius, he's also an ungrateful user, self-destructive, and incapable of mature love. He produces *Lantern*, a journal that criticises critics—of literature, theatre, painting, and music—who are, without exception, men of mean capacities and superficial knowledge, but he can't cope with criticism himself.

Monica becomes his mistress, although he treats her badly. She creates a stable environment which allows him to compose an opera, *The Golden Asse*, and she bankrolls its production from her large scholarship. It's a success, and is compared with *The Magic Flute*, but when he's criticised for poor conducting, he's consumed by an unfocussed desire for revenge and gasses himself. Her first thought, on finding his body, is that she drove him to suicide, but her instincts are for self-preservation rather than guilt. Sir Benedict becomes her confessor, and proposes to her, although he's old enough to be her father.

The novel ends with Monica's return to Salterton, where Solomon reflects on what's happened:

“Mother cared too much about having her own way; result—a remarkable artists gets her start ... an extraordinary opera gets its first production. Neither of them things Mother would have foreseen or desired, to be truthful. She just wanted us to feel the weight of her hand.”

Veronica gives birth to a healthy son, prematurely, after wrestling with her mother-in-law's malicious spirit in the middle of the night. Both Monica's return and the birth of an heir occur around Christmas: the memorial of another incarnation. The will is fulfilled. The spell is broken.

### **The Deptford Trilogy**

THE CONSEQUENCES of another premature birth dominate Davies' fourth novel, *Fifth Business* (1970), an allegory of twentieth-century Canada, which could also be an allegory of twentieth-century Australia. The novel begins in the village of Deptford, with a quarrel between two boys. Percy's new sled won't go as fast as Dunstan's old one. Humiliated and vindictive, Percy hides a stone the size of a hen's egg in a snowball and throws it at Dunstan, who ducks. The snowball hits Mary in the head and sends her into labour. Her premature son, Paul, struggles for life. His childhood is lived in the shadow of his mother's progressive madness, until he's abducted by a child-molesting drug-addicted magician, Willard, passing through Deptford with a travelling circus. Dunstan and Percy and Paul are of “the company of the twice born”. Each rejects his beginning and becomes something his parents couldn't foresee.

Dunstan's life is devoted to exploring the individual and collective unconscious, the relationship between history and myth, and the lives of the saints. He keeps the memory of the snowball alive, regards Mary as a fool saint, and eventually becomes her guardian. He watches over Paul, until the abduction, and is the first person to teach the boy magic tricks. He loses a leg in the trenches during World War I and is awarded a Victoria Cross for heroism. He loves Leola, the town beauty, for many years, but eventually loses her to Percy. He never marries. His career is teaching in a boarding school, and, although he fills the role of headmaster with distinction during World War II, he's never promoted to the position. He's the only Protestant contributor to *Analecta Bollandiana*, a prestigious quarterly review on critical hagiography.

Percy's life is devoted to himself and he operates purely on the conscious level. He forgets hiding the stone in the snowball, or throwing it, and wouldn't have cared

about the consequences had he remembered. A rich young ruler on the rise, he becomes an officer during World War I but never goes to the Front. In peacetime he greatly increases his family fortune and eventually becomes immensely useful to both Canada and Britain—economically and politically and diplomatically—during and after World War II. He marries Leola and they have two children, a boy David and a girl Caroline, but she can't keep up with his social aspirations and eventually dies a broken and lonely woman. His second wife, Denyse, is a social climber. Together they scheme to have him appointed Lieutenant-Governor of their Province.

Paul's life is devoted to becoming a master of illusions. He's the son of Amasa, a failure of a Baptist minister, and Mary, who's unsuited to be a clergy wife. The stone in the snowball brings him into the world prematurely, he struggles to live, he's an outcast who's never accepted by the locals except Dunstan. He never dwells on his abduction, though, since he naively initiated it. He remains loyal to Willard, who teaches him the tricks of the magician's craft. When Willard dies, Paul matures as an artist, assembles his own troupe, changes his name to Magnus, and becomes an international celebrity. In Europe he meets Liesl, an ugly but rich bisexual woman who's an archetype for something important in the unconscious. Magnus and Liesl meet and befriend Dunstan in Mexico on one of his hagiographical pilgrimages.

At the end of the novel, Percy meets Magnus for the first time. They're in Dunstan's study, during Magnus's first tour of Canada. Mary's ashes are brought down from a shelf. The stone is on the desk; it's used as a paperweight. Dunstan tells the story of the snowball. When Percy objects, Dunstan explains:

“I'm simply trying to recover something of the totality of your life. Don't you want to possess it as a whole—the bad with the good? I told you once you'd made a God of yourself, and the insufficiency of it forced you to become an atheist. It's time you tried to be a human being. Then maybe something bigger than yourself will come up on your horizon.”

Humiliated and vindictive, Percy attacks Dunstan, but makes the tactical error of referring to Paul's “miserable mother”, thus dismissing the reality of Mary and her son. Magnus calms them down and asks Percy for a lift to his hotel. Percy is found dead the next morning. Magnus and Liesl leave the country. Dunstan finds his paperweight missing and has a heart attack. When he recovers, he receives a postcard from Liesl begging him to join them in Switzerland, where his journey into self-discovery continues.

THE FOCUS of Davies' fifth novel, *The Manticore* (1972), isn't Dunstan's continuing journey into self-discovery, but Percy's son, David, a hard-drinking middle-aged celibate barrister, who's called to the scene of his father's drowning in Toronto. Percy's car is dragged from Lake Ontario, he's sitting in the driver's seat, his eyes are wide open, his hands are on the steering wheel in a vice-grip, the stone is hidden in his mouth. Traumatized by the mystery of his father's sudden death—he suspects murder, the authorities conclude suicide—David seeks help.

Part One, "Why I Went to Zürich", explores David's motives for choosing Jungian psychoanalysis. In his words, "The Jungians had two negative recommendations: the Freudians hated them, and Zürich was a long way from Toronto." He's shocked to discover his analyst is a woman, Johanna, who encourages him to talk about the events around his father's death. As his story unfolds, we discover how hard it was for him to cope with identifying the body, managing his step-mother's desire for a pseudo-state funeral, and being executor of his father's will—which he's left out of since he's been a disappointment as far as his father's dynastic ambitions are concerned; as in *A Mixture of Frailties*, the family money will return to David's legitimate son and heir, should he ever have one. Once his need for *anamnesis* is established, he enters the next phase of psychoanalysis: looking at people he knows, looking at people he doesn't know but who are portions of himself, looking at what he's remembered, looking at things he thought he'd forgotten, looking deeper into that part of him which isn't unique but is part of humanity's common heritage.

Part Two, "David Against the Trolls", explores the scope and limit of Jungianism as a prism for exploring David's unique unconscious and persona. Through his journal, and Johanna's observations on his *anamnesis*, he learns he's a thinker not a feeler, and he recognizes, slowly, that people aren't archetypes; they are people. He gradually identifies the way his ego has projected the "comedy company of the psyche" onto others: his shadow onto the brother of his lifelong family retainer, his friend onto the stuffed bear of his childhood, his anima onto the Jewish girl he loved as a young man, his magus onto his blind genius of a law tutor at Oxford. The only archetype missing is his great mother, who remains hidden, since his inner-conflict is with his great troll, his father, who did so much conscious good and caused so much unconscious harm, between throwing the stone hidden in the snowball and dying with the stone hidden in his mouth. Eventually, Johanna feels David no longer needs to be guided in his *anamnesis*, can continue his analysis himself, and become stronger and more independent. David, who's still a rationalist, isn't convinced and wants their relationship to continue.

Part Three, “My Sorgenfrei Diary”, accomplishes what Jungian psychoanalysis can’t. David leaves Zürich for a holiday in St Gall, where he meets Dunstan and Liesl, who invite him to her magnificent enchanted castle, Sorgenfrei, which means free of care. Dunstan is Liesl’s permanent guest, and Magnus, the master of illusions, is also there preparing for another world tour. David is still burdened, he still wants to know how Percy died, the individual and collective damage Percy has caused is still unresolved.

Three important things happen at Sorgenfrei. First, Liesl takes him deep into a hidden cave, where our ancestors once experienced awe and the numinous in bear worship, and where she now worships. When he tries to escape from the hidden cave, he’s possessed by the spirit of his forebears and literally shits himself—that is, he gets in touch with his shit—which gives him the strength to move on. Second, the next day, Dunstan gives him a gingerbread bear, so he can eat his father’s sins. Third, later that day, Dunstan takes him for a walk to a nearby precipice and asks whether he still has the stone found in his father’s mouth. David takes the stone from his pocket and gives to Dunstan, who:

“... raised his arm high, and with a snap of the wrist threw it far into the valley. In that instant it was possible to see that he had once been a boy. We both watched until the little speck could no longer be seen again the valley dusk.”

This happens on Christmas Day, Jesus’ birthday. David is now free to return to Canada and grow into the fullness of his humanity.

THE SIXTH novel, *World of Wonders* (1975), is the story–history–myth of Paul the boy, who became Magnus the man, which unfolds in the genre of magic realism, rather than the genre of psychoanalysis, as it’s a philosophical commentary on freedom and necessity not a psychological commentary; whenever we’re tempted to cast Paul as a victim, Magnus reminds us of his ego and agency. As Davies is a hermeneut, framing is important: nineteenth century versus twentieth century, Romanticism versus Modernism, vaudeville and proscenium arch versus cinema and camera lens. The text is a film about the life of a famous nineteenth century magician, Robert-Houdin, whom Magnus portrays, which is being made at Sorgenfrei. The sub-text which gives Magnus’s performance depth is his personal story–history–myth, which he tells to the director, producer, cameraman, Dunstan as historical consultant, and Liesl their host who remains in the background.

During Part One, “A Bottle in the Smoke”, Magnus tells the story–history–myth of Paul’s ten years with the travelling circus between 1918 and 1928. Some of his listeners assume he isn’t telling the truth as they believe autobiography is self-serving; at best faction, at worst fiction. “I did not run away with the show; the show ran away with me,” Paul says, which means his obsession with the Bible—the focus of his childhood indoctrination—conspired with his obsession with the magician.

If his decade with the travelling circus was a period of hellish abuse, perhaps it was no more hellish or abusive than his life as Mary’s son back in Deptford. His relationship with Willard can be read as a magic realist representation of Hegel’s master–slave dialectic, and his relationship with Happy Hannah, the bible-bashing fat lady, can be read as a magic realist representation of the Protestant worldview. These influences, Athens and Jerusalem, or Hellenism and Hebraism, are powerful forces to be reckoned with in the Western imagination, and Paul reckons with them quite well. A gypsy fortune teller prophesies bad luck for the travelling circus, which will be good luck for Paul, provided he’s smart and keeps his eyes open.

At the beginning of Part Two, “Merlin’s Laugh”, the film is in the can. Magnus and Dunstan and Leisl travel to London to see it. On arrival, Magnus continues with the next stage of his story–history–myth. After Willard dies, Paul joins the theatre company of Sir John and Lady Tresize, the first persons he admits to loving. Sir John was the most popular Romantic actor of his day; an egoist with a Celtic surname, who fought against Modernism to maintain a nineteenth century idea of theatre in the twentieth century: “He believed devoutly in what he did; he believed in Romance, and he couldn’t understand that the concept of Romance was changing.” Paul eventually becomes Sir John’s double, which means getting inside him, learning his rhythm, and becoming him rather than simply imitating him. This movement beyond mimesis—and ongoing loyalty to the Romantic tradition—is the source of Paul’s creative power. Although it’s the twilight of their career, the Tresizes take their theatre company on a long winter tour of Canada with their most successful repertoire. On this tour Paul encounters his native land and is reconciled to all of it except Deptford. On their return to London the Tresizes retire and eventually pass away. Paul moves to Switzerland, where he’s absorbed into Leisl’s world and becomes a famous magician.

Part Three, “Le Lit de Justice”, takes place in a large bed at The Savoy, as a bed is the best place “for a philosophical discussion, an argument, and if necessary a show-down”. Dunstan and Magnus and Leisl are nicely tucked up. Dunstan wants to know how Percy died; he’s always suspected Magnus killed Percy for revenge. But Magnus admits to owing everything he’s become to Percy throwing the stone in the

snowball, and makes the counter accusation that Dunstan had the real motive for killing Percy.

According to Magnus, Percy took his own life, once he realised that being Lieutenant-Governor meant the end of his freedom of choice. His only real choice was to abdicate, as his friend and hero Edward VIII had abdicated, since he believed Edward's abdication "took guts". So Magnus didn't murder Percy, but neither did he stop Percy from committing suicide, as he says:

"Was I the man to fret about the end of his life when he had been so cavalier about the beginning of mine?"

Even Magnus, the egoist, the master illusionist, believes God is not dead and God is not mocked.

### **The Cornish Trilogy**

IN HIS SEVENTH novel, *The Rebel Angels* (1982), Davies gradually moves another eponymous Maria away from a pursuit of knowledge towards a pursuit of wisdom. Knowledge, refracted through the prisms of the Renaissance and the Reformation, is associated with the university. Wisdom, refracted through the prisms of whatever the Renaissance and the Reformation are supposed to have subjugated or erased, is associated with a realm beyond the university, an institution that "retains a strong hint of its medieval origins". In Maria's case, the pursuit of wisdom begins when she embraces her Gypsy heritage, from which she's been trying to escape, and falls into the orbit of Arthur Cornish, a rich and powerful man whose first and last names have Celtic associations.

Maria is a doctoral candidate whose subject is Rabelais. Her middle name is Magdalena, which suggests she's possessed by devils, and her surname is Theotoky, which suggests she's a potential God bearer. But she can't bear God, or represent the Divine Sophia, until she comes to terms with the rebel angels in her life, all of whom are associated with the university. Hollier, a paleo-psychologist who's vicariously interested in what motivated the ancients, represents the positive aspects of secular humanism. He's supervising Maria's doctoral research and she's in thrall to him. McVarish, a Renaissance historian who's also vicarious, in a more narrow and limited way, represents the negative aspects of secular humanism. Darcourt, a priest-academic, represents Anglo-Catholicism, which to Davies is the most holistic expression of Reformation religion. He's also vice-warden of a residential college within the

university, and, near the middle of the novel, he hosts a dinner in its senior common room.

At this dinner, eighteen professors, plus Arthur Cornish and a representative of the Canadian government, eat at a high table shaped like a coffin. Two rebel angels are absent. Froats is a controversial academic who's conducting ground-breaking research into human excrement, which may bridge the gap between the sciences and the humanities and recover subjugated knowledges. Parlabane (evil speech) is a failed philosopher-monk-genius with a dissolute and destructive but highly seductive character. If the Fall is from the Word—a fall that keeps occurring within language and the knowledge that makes us human—Parlabane is the most fallen and, and the most rebellious one.

While Parlabane represents the Devil—a character of fundamental importance within the human psyche—he has something important to teach Maria: about how to be herself and not someone else, about the tree of her life, about how the roots of her tree are larger than its crown, about how her roots should nourish her crown. Maria's roots are revealed to us in her mother, Oraga, and her uncle, Yerko, Gypsies who run an eccentric boarding house in one of Toronto's wealthier suburbs. They also run a smelly secret business in the basement, as luthiers, restoring old and sick violins, by encasing them in dung, and making new violins, which they invest with the romance of age and sell as authentic old ones. They are the Romantic counterparts of Froats.

Hollier and McVarish and Darcourt are co-executors of the late Francis Cornish's will. He was Arthur's rich uncle, an eccentric patron of the arts, who owned an unknown and undiscovered manuscript by Rabelais. McVarish has hidden the manuscript, for petty egocentric reasons, and denies having it. Hollier wants it, for noble altruistic reasons, so it can become the focus of Maria's doctoral research, launch her on a significant academic career, and contribute something significant to Renaissance scholarship. Parlabane, who's been secretly servicing McVarish's sexual fantasies, murders him one evening, during one of their nocturnal rituals, and retrieves the manuscript before killing himself. But Darcourt prevents Hollier from appropriating the manuscript for Maria, and for Hollier himself, as it forms part of the Cornish bequest.

At the end of the novel, Maria and Arthur marry in Darcourt's college chapel. Hollier toasts her health at their reception:

“She is surrounded at this moment by her two families. Her mother and her uncle, who so clearly represent the splendid tradition of the East and of the past, and by Father Darcourt and myself, who are here

as devoted servants of that other tradition [the university] which she has claimed as her own and to which she has brought great gifts ... Those of you who know of Maria's enthusiasm for Rabelais will understand why I wish her happiness in words for his: *Vogue la galère—tout va bien!*"

Darcourt puts it another way: "Maria. Let your ship sail free."

THE FRAME OF Davies' eighth novel, *What's Bred in the Bone* (1986), shortlisted for the Booker Prize, is a biography of Francis Cornish, which Darcourt is writing to support a cultural foundation that grew from Francis's will. Arthur, with Celtic affinities bubbling away in his unconscious, is the Foundation's head; Maria, with Gypsy affinities bubbling away in her unconscious, is a wise background presence. Tensions emerge in the first chapter, once Darcourt voices misgivings about the authenticity of old master drawings Francis left to the National Gallery; he has a hunch Francis drew them himself. The rest of the novel tells Francis's story: his history, his myth, what's bred in his bones.

Francis's story begins in the small town of Blairlogie. His maternal forebears, the McRorys, are poor Catholics who migrate from Scotland in the 1850s and do well in the New World. His maternal grandfather, Hamish, makes his fortune in lumber and finance, maintains strong links with the Liberal Party and the Roman Catholic Church, and is what we now call aspirational. He's made a life senator, and, after much diplomatic to-ing and fro-ing, he arranges for his eldest daughter, Mary-Jacobine, to be presented at Court. After the presentation, feeling both elevated and depressed, she orders a bottle of champagne, shares it with a footman, and becomes pregnant.

A respectable Englishman from Cornwall, Major Francis Cornish, who has a good name but no money, and is looking for an advantageous marriage, offers to marry Mary-Jacobine in return for a financial settlement, an executive role in the McRory family business, and an agreement that all children with his name will be raised Anglican. After the child is born, the Cornishes move to Blairlogie where the Major becomes an asset to the McRory empire and a good husband to Mary-Jacobine. The child fathered by the footman is retarded and develops microcephaly. A gravestone in the family plot tells the world he died young but in fact he's hidden away in the attic where he's cared for by trusted servants. Another son, our Francis, grows up among this potent mixture of influences—reforming and counter-reforming and deforming—during which the McRory empire is re-branded with the Cornish name for the sake of social expediency. How can Francis construct a mythology of wholeness from all this?

Francis begins by observing the real world, and teaching himself to draw it realistically, using Furniss's *How to Draw in Pen and Ink* (1914). In the words of the omniscient narrator: "You must develop an eye; you must see everything in terms of line and form. Andrea del Sarto was no Raphael, but he could correct Raphael's drawing; you could aim at drawing like del Sarto even if you hadn't a hope of being anything better than a Harry Furniss—which wasn't the easiest thing in the world to be, either." Francis's subjects are wide ranging, and include corpses being prepared for burial, but one thing is uppermost and demandingly powerful in his young mind: he wants to draw his older brother, hidden in the attic, who's part of what's bred in his bones.

Francis eventually leaves Blairlogie to study at Oxford, where he's recognised as an authentic aesthete, and where he comes under the influence of Saraceni, the world's foremost restorer and authenticator of old masters. He tells Saraceni of his desire to become a painter, although he's not inspired by Modern artists. Saraceni encourages him to find his legend, his personal myth, rather than imitate Moderns who aren't right for him.

Like his father, Major Cornish, Francis becomes an intelligence officer during World War II. His cover is working for a wealthy German aristocrat, in her castle, restoring her collection of old masters. Saraceni is there too as his master and fellow co-restorer. During his time in Germany, Francis paints an allegorical painting in the mannerist style, *The Marriage at Cana*, which is eventually accepted as the work of an old master, but is actually a representation of Francis's myth of wholeness. His retarded and microcephalic older brother is portrayed as the angel hovering over the figures in the painting:

"Thus it was, when Francis came to die, he had pretty well made up his accounts with all the principal figures in his life, and although he seemed to the world, and even to his few close friends, an eccentric and crabbed spirit, there was a quality of completeness about him that bound those friends tighter than would have been the case if he had been filled with one-sided know-nothing sweetness and easy acceptance."

Finally accepting that Uncle Francis was a master copyist, not a forger or faker, Arthur and Maria begin accepting applications from needy geniuses, and give Darcourt the go-ahead to complete the biography.

THE CENTRAL theme of Davies' ninth novel, *The Lyre of Orpheus* (1988), is the Cornish Foundation's first venture: extravagantly bankrolling the completion and production—faithful to the early-nineteenth century style—of an incomplete opera score, *Arthur of Britain, or the Magnanimous Cuckold*, which Hoffmann was composing when he died. Four sub-themes are woven together: the completion of the score by a damaged music student, as her doctoral project, and her resultant healing; the writing of an appropriate libretto, faithful to the period and true to Hoffmann's intentions, as he hated the preliminary sketches proposed by his librettist Planché; the cuckolding of Arthur in the novel, which parallels the cuckolding of Arthur in the legend; the deliverance of Hoffmann from Limbo, where he's been since 1822, following the successful staging of the opera more or less as he conceived it, thus vindicating his belief in transcendence through art, and in an authentic Romanticism over and above a superficial Romanticism.

The completion of the score occurs under the sign of the unconscious and its realm of feeling. The doctoral candidate, Hulda, is a filthy, anorexic, and slightly crazed genius, whose personality has been damaged by her mediocre and ultra-conservative Lutheran parents, who see themselves as victims and are psychological manipulators. She's abandoned this damaging environment, which represents the worst features of the Reformation, but is rudderless. She's been exploring very Modern paths in composition but has become interested in the Romantic tradition of the early-nineteenth century. The Foundation arranges a special supervisor, or musical midwife, from Stockholm. Gunilla, the Liesl of this novel, is a bisexual archetype who represents something important in the unconscious, and who exerts a positive influence over Hulda.

The writing of an appropriate libretto occurs under the sign of the conscious and its realm of reason; music can give life and feeling to an opera but it can't tell a tale. The task devolves to Darcourt, as priest and academic and biographer, who represents the best features of the Reformation, and whose instincts and detective work unlocked the mystery of Francis's history and myth. Simultaneously the Merlin of the novel, and the Fool of its Greater Arcana, he now needs to unlock the mystery of what kind of libretto will be faithful to Hoffmann's intention and deliver the composer from Limbo. After discarding unhelpful suggestions from knowing but uninspired fellow academic experts, he keeps his own counsel and turns to Sir Walter Scott for inspiration.

The opera is realised by Geraint, a man with a career to make in the theatre, a Welshman who's handsome and egocentric and Celtic and Byronic. Arthur likes Geraint and has appointed him to produce and direct the opera, through which he hopes to launch the mission of the Foundation. Maria's dislike of Geraint coincides with a

crisis of identity, as Arthur's loving wife, as one of the Foundation's trustees, and as a stalled doctoral student unable to progress her thesis on Rabelais. Who is she? What's her role? Thus the Excalibur and Grail themes—and the Romantic relationship of Arthur and Lancelot and Guinevere—are reworked in a contemporary way: Arthur gets mumps and becomes infertile; while he's away on a short business trip, Geraint steals into Maria's bedroom in the middle of the night, wearing Arthur's robe, and silently gets her pregnant; both men have a crisis; the woman has an epiphany; they all learn important lessons about the mystery of life and move on.

From an audience perspective, *Arthur of Britain, or the Magnanimous Cuckold* is a huge success. Hoffmann, who's been observing the struggle to complete and produce his final unfinished opera, is on the whole satisfied with the result. He believes it's a musical drama performed with a unity of style and intent impossible in his time. But he's not jealous. He doesn't feel a true Romantic fervour in Hulda: "as we knew it who first felt its pain and beauty; we, of whom it was my luck to be among the foremost." He's a creature of his time. He misses elements in this production "that were familiar, rather than good."

"I have watched *Arthur* brought into being, I have watched the complexities it has introduced into so many lives, and, as an artist, it becomes me to know when enough, even of one's own art, is enough."

A piece of unfinished work brought Hoffmann to Limbo. Now that *Arthur* is done, and as far as he's concerned is sufficiently well done, he can finally move on. His aesthetic ideology has been fulfilled.

## **THE END IS THE BEGINNING**

I WONDER whether Joan achieved a better understanding of Davies' novels before she died. I hope she found what she was looking for. They're like the scriptures of the sacred canon: the more you return to them the more you learn about what really matters, what's of fundamental value, what the difference between knowledge and wisdom is, how the anglosphere once operated and may still operate, who we are as persons and people, how we understand, how we grow and mature.

This brings us to the question of the secular canon: that elephant in the room. That subject is too large to discuss here. It's still worth opening a discussion, though, about whether Davies is a canonical author and what makes his novels canonical literature. I touched on the complexity of that discussion earlier, in suggesting White covers similar territory as Davies. If that sounds far out it's because the secular canon is

far out. Some readers engage with Davies and disengage with White, and vice versa, for a whole host of reasons.

These two authors have vastly different temperaments and are very different storytellers. That said, they share similar ideological views about the Reformation and the Enlightenment, even though they package those views in different aesthetic styles. They both conduct the post-metaphysical interrogation of classical metaphysics which is one of the defining features of the twentieth-century novel, and which—in their similar and different but always self-conscious ways—intends to be literary.

Most importantly, they share a largeness of vision.

~ THE END ~