

# TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

## Giulia Giuffrè, *Primavera, or the Time of Your Life* (Coogee NSW, GAG Enterprises, 2011)

This is a generous book in every sense – in size, time-frame, ideas, images, dramatis personae. Giulia Giuffrè's ambition, conceived some 20 years ago, was to create 'an encyclopaedia of everything in my life that was important to me, written 'with head and heart' (xvi). It is a memoir of childhood, interspersed with meditations and a comic version of that form characteristic of seventeenth-century literature, the 'anatomy,' or division into parts for the purpose of analysis. Giuffrè delights in lists of all kinds, from popular songs of her childhood to parts of the body and their associations; one chapter takes the form of a questionnaire, with answers appended; there is an immense bibliography – almost a parody bibliography – of items ranging from Freud to G.K. Chesterton, to Truby King, to Rousseau, to the Billy Bunter books, and so on and on.

An encyclopaedia of a person's life is bound to be hefty. This book is so large I had to rest it on my book seat (last used for reading *War and Peace*). Self-published, it is a beautiful book, with fine paper and print. It includes images of memorabilia, like children's notes and cards, as well as family photos. The dust jacket suggests a scrapbook, with its simulacrum of a brown paper cover, complete with name sticker and a favourite picture secured with Sellotape – in this case, of course, an image of Spring, Primavera. Subjects range from love and marriage to death and funerals, from childhood reading, rituals, games and school experiences to the life of the body. Each of the 21 chapters is characterised by a colour and a scent, and these, together with the lists of experiences, songs and stories often act as triggers for a reader's own memories of childhood – one of the many pleasures of this altogether original book.

An important strand of the book concerns Giulia Giuffrè's Italian-Australian inheritance. This is not just a matter of food (though there is a loving inventory of types of pasta and sweets) but of dialect, proverbs, gestures, music. On both sides, her family were migrants of the pre-war period – her mother's family at the turn of the twentieth century, her father and his brother in the 1920s. Many of them 'married out', so that by the time Giulia and her siblings come on the scene, there are numerous aunts and cousins with Anglo names, as the extensive family tree shows. Family rituals, while mainly Italian (Sicilian and Neapolitan, specifically) include a good deal of middle-class Anglo-Aussie as well.

'Written with head and heart': *Primavera* features the philosopher at the kitchen table, that rare combination of the everyday and the great questions of life, love, pain and death. As a memoir of two childhoods – the author's and her children's – its principal subject is inseparable from that of motherhood. Giulia is the link between the two childhoods, and her presence as mother of her son, Orlando, and daughter, Sophia, is central. Extraordinarily in a book published in 2011, there is no hint of conflict between the mother's outstanding intellectual achievements (University Medal, Oxford PhD, university teaching) and her total devotion to parenting. Devotion to mothering, really: stories of the children's father's involvement in their growing up are few and far between, and so the currently fashionable term 'parenting' seems inaccurate. Fifty years ago that might have been

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usual, but today it is rare. Giulia can be witty about it – ‘Mothercraft [is] akin to witchcraft,’ she writes (527) – but it is serious wit: when she writes of the power of the mother, she really means it.

To my ear, much of the general talk about parenting and related matters lacks this witty play. It has the tone of self-help literature, at once instructive and intimate. Perhaps the intrusion of that narrative tone is inevitable, given that self-help books have constructed the prevailing discourse of today’s parenting talk. As a possible countervailing discourse, there is surprisingly little imaginative fiction about childhood from the mother’s point of view (though some of Helen Garner’s early stories come to mind). Giulia’s somewhat didactic reflections on mothering sit oddly beside her wild and funny anecdotes about her relationship with the children, and their impossibly clever talk, as when daughter Sophia, aged nine, accuses her mother of writing ‘as an act of vengeance’ and demands royalties for her contributions to this book (462).

Any author who stretches her range to include so many different genres and subjects under one cover would be hard pressed to devise a narrative voice that could readily modulate from one to another. In *Primavera* the narrator/compiler Giulia and Giulia the character in her own stories are not always distinct voices. This is often an issue for authors of memoir and autobiography: one self is writing from her present position of knowledge, the other inhabits many past selves, from infancy up to yesterday. Most memoirists use ‘I’ for both, but in this book the more distanced third person is used. ‘Giulia’ is a character as well as narrator/compiler/kitchen table philosopher. Giulia the character is an inveterate rule-maker, as well as taxonomist of experiences, and much of the comedy of the book springs from her acknowledgment that life’s contingencies – not to mention those two stropky children – keep foiling her attempts to impose order.

The submerged story of how this book came about is, I suspect, to be found in occasional references to the fact that the author had cancer, and a series of punishing treatments for it, before she was 40, when her children were very young. ‘From then on,’ Giulia writes, ‘no day would pass without her thinking of death and life’ (561). At that time she had a dream, which she interpreted as ‘telling me that I could find a path back to life by *remembering* all my children, including myself’ (xvii). Such a confrontation with her own mortality must have been the spring of necessity, where the passion to make this book originated. It is a courageous as well as a literally fabulous achievement.

**Susan Sheridan**