

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

John Sutherland, *Lives of the Novelists: A History of Fiction in 294 Lives* (Profile Books, 2011)

John Sutherland's *Lives of the Novelists: A History of Fiction in 294 Lives* is an entertaining 800-odd page literary history, which is simplistically structured in chronological order according to birthdates and gives informed profiles of carefully selected novelists taken from all walks of life and all parts of the English-speaking world. It is therefore a delightful treat to find the oft-neglected postcolonial writers (Salman Rushdie, Chinua Achebe, Alice Munro, V.S. Naipaul, Margaret Atwood, Rana Dasgupta, not to mention three Australian novelists) rubbing shoulders with the more classical names that are regularly put on high school curricula.

Patrick White's vanity preened itself a little when he reported in a letter to Marshall Best that Anthony Burgess made the following statement at the 1970 Adelaide Festival: 'A country is only remembered for its art. Rome is remembered for Virgil, Greece for Homer, and Australia may be remembered for Patrick White.'¹ If Professor Sutherland's *Lives of the Novelists* is any proof, Australian literature is still epitomised by Patrick White, a prestigious role he now has to share with J.M. Coetzee (if one is inclined to accept him as an **Australian** novelist) and Peter Carey. David Malouf has obviously been left out in the cold for some reason, but I suspect that he will not come whining to Professor Sutherland about it.

Perhaps the 294 deceased and living novelists in the spotlight will be grateful to this Booker Prize judge-cum-critic for giving them additional exposure (even though all writers under consideration are renowned enough to dispense with that extra bit of lionising), but I doubt it. Sadly enough, in our age which saw the spectacular professional advancement of the celebrity writer – an age in which authors are more read about than read –, giving media exposure to the private lives of authors seems to be the safest way to ensure that people will take a vested interest in literature. But there is a fine line between spicing up what would otherwise be a tedious 'biographical run through the novel in English' (792), and proving how efficient 'the bitchiness of literary London' (771) is.

Engrossing though it is, *Lives of the Novelists* has the poor taste of mixing what should remain within the private sphere of authors with a cursory analysis of their works. The author of this bulky book of literary profiles contends that his writings have 'been sustained by the belief that literary life and work are inseparable and mutually illuminating' (xii). While I must admit that getting to know the personality and ideas of authors through interviews – which are part of what we call 'l'építexé' in French – may shed new light on their works, I fail to see how J.M. Coetzee's excessive privacy, Salman Rushdie's strained relationship with his father, and Peter Carey's 'acrimonious divorce from Summers' (740) illuminate the meaning of their literary output. More disturbing is the fact that Sutherland occasionally impersonates social commentator² Lionel Pantaloon, an obnoxious character in Roald Dahl's *Vengeance is Mine* (1980), when he speculates that Saki, a.k.a. Hector Hugh

¹ In David Marr, ed., *Patrick White. Letters* (Sydney: Random House, 1994) 361.

² Take it as a euphemism for 'gossip columnist'.

Book reviews: *Lives of the Novelists: A History of Fiction in 294 Lives* by John Sutherland. Jean-François Vernay.

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Munro, 'was homosexual and, possibly, pederastic' (277). One wishes Sutherland had taken a leaf out of Julian Barnes's book by maintaining a 'dignified silence [...] about private things' (751). In addition to these invasions of privacy smacking of sex-related gossip, which will undoubtedly help *Lives of the Novelists* hit the bestseller list, some provocative statements – such as 'Orwell's status as a writer of novels is debatable, but Orwell's status as a non-fiction writer is unimpeachable' (431) – will shake literature-lovers out their reading routine.

Covering such a broad range of novelists will inevitably lead to the inclusion of minor mistakes, not to mention the updates omitted because *Lives of the Novelists* appears to be a compilation of bits and pieces Sutherland wrote as a columnist and critic. One guesses that the Patrick White entry was originally written in the early 1970s, given that the author mentions 'White's **recently** published *The Vivisector* (1970)' (519, emphasis mine). However, the profile has been partly updated because the author does acknowledge the existence of David Marr's biography as recommended reading. But I doubt that Sutherland has actually read *Patrick White: A Life* (1991) because, as I have made clear in my article on *The Twyborn Affair*, the discreet White has never been interested in queer activism and never got involved in the Gay Rights Movement.³ So where did Sutherland read that 'Over the next quarter century White would, from time to time, make known his liberal sentiments on [...] gay liberation' (522)?

This mixed bag of selected Anglophone writers ranging from classical novelists (like John Bunyan, Samuel Richardson, Henry Fielding, Nathaniel Hawthorne, etc.) and Nobel Prize winners (such as Patrick White, Toni Morrison, J.M. Coetzee) to more commercial fiction writers (Ian Fleming, Michael Crichton, Stephen King, to name a few) shows clearly, in a somewhat postmodern fashion, that no attempt is being made to enshrine writers or even to create a hierarchy of sorts. Rather, it seems likely that the worldwide popularity of the carefully picked names will vouchsafe the commercial success of *Lives of the Novelists*.

All reservations aside, and if Sutherland's dubious techniques (i.e. the inclusion of muck-raking scandals and provocative assertions) are effective enough to stimulate people into reading (more) fiction, I can only wish him success with *Lives of the Novelists*, a book that duly pays tribute to his prolific literary career. In a short epilogue probing the new directions in fiction with the rise of the digital age, the author optimistically prophesises 'a better sense and utilisation of the whole territory of fiction' (797). Perhaps he would have been better employed setting an example with *Lives of the Novelists*.

Jean-François Vernay

³ See Jean-François Vernay, 'Male Beauty in the Eye of the Beholder? Guys, Guises and Disguise in Patrick White's *The Twyborn Affair*, *Transnational Literature* Vol. 4 no. 2, May 2012.