

## Book review

**David Robbins 'Walking to Australia: 21<sup>st</sup> century excursions into humanity's greatest migration'. 2018. Johannesburg: Porcupine Press. 371 pages. No photos. SA ISBN: 978-1-928276-92-0 UK ISBN: 978-1-9123-6250-9.**

**By Dr. Vanessa Wijngaarden**

When David Robbins traverses the continents from his mother country in South Africa to his autistic grandson's home in Australia, he imagines himself tracing humanity's first and greatest migration, a 20 000 year journey that took place 85 000 years ago. Travelling by modern means, sleeping in hotels and dining in restaurants, he certainly does not replicate the journey on foot, but relies on eight years of intermittent excursions to key locations along the route, although he is not granted access to all. His informants on the way are mainly tourist guides who accompany him to musea and historical sites, but whose personas, personal stories and insights nevertheless come alive. The book is a journey of a man looking for roots and connections, as he is longing to find a safe place, a home in the turbulent world. Troubled by the natural disasters and widespread atrocities of modern times, he contemplates the divine - the overarching power of destruction, judgement, life and love - and the diversity and unity of all people. Robbins skillfully combines his literature research regarding the history of mankind with informal interviews and entries that remind of research diary and auto-ethnographic explorations. He has thus produced a timely intervention, which seems to draw from and appeal to the questions, insecurities and hopes of people from a wide variety of backgrounds and geographical locations, creating cross-cutting ties that, through all the diversity, acknowledge humanities' interconnectedness.

With the great success of scientific *TED talks* and academic journalism in online newsrooms such as *The Conversation*, it has become clear that academics have several things to learn from journalistic accounts. Many researchers would love to impact and reach a wider public with their findings, and academics and non-academics alike would agree that scientific texts would be easier to engage with and understand if their overall style were to be improved. Journalistic outputs are more focused on reaching an audience, and this wider audience has the potential not only to become informed, but also to provide critical insights and additional data. Beckett, director of the London School of Economics think-tank at the Department of Media and Communications, has argued that journalism can be part of academic research, as its 'core functions' of 'observation, investigation and deliberation ... can fit into academic research paradigms [and] add dynamism to the often preconceived and over structured thought processes that the Academia encourages' (Beckett 2012). Can academic writing be fashioned towards a wider public without sacrificing their level of contextualization, reflection, rigourousness, transparency and accountability?

The book by Robbins certainly includes researched facts, generally mentioning their sources, and combines a diversity of viewpoints. However, scarce in formal referencing, still containing some typographical errors, and mainly based on the knowledge of passers-by, the book cannot be treated as a peer-reviewed analysis of the lives and whereabouts of the first anatomically modern humans. The relevance of the publication for academic research lies mainly in its potential to be used as primary research data, while at the same time pointing to a variety of interesting discoveries and relations. Furthermore, as a work of literary art it has the ability to inspire researchers into thought experiments and explorations of new avenues to make sense of humanity. As opposed to most

academic writing, the journalistic account gives writer and reader a much greater freedom to explore, blend and combine insights coming from informants, literature and the own imagination, and offer compelling narratives that accomplish a sense of 'being there'. There is no incentive to water down subjective insights or experiences in order to appeal to an ideal of presumed objectivity. This facilitates for deeply honest and imaginative accounts, through which the reader is positioned deeper inside the story, thus connecting and becoming part of the characters, the narrative, and ultimately, perhaps, is changed by it.

So how does Robbins impact his audience? The mystery of how the inner and outer worlds are linked is a theme running throughout the text, symbolized most poignantly by Aboriginal Wanjina paintings with big eyes and their heads embellished with arrows of thought. It is reflected in the book's narration strategy, where often outside events and circumstances, like the landscape and weather, are used to reflect the inner sentiments and insights the writer shares with his readers. One of his main concerns is how to deal with the sensory overload as we live 'as tiny participants in the great and astonishing continuum' (p363). He flirts with the idea of having a 'trip switch', like his autistic grandson seems to have, but also explores the different avenues of faith his informants seem to employ, finding parallels whether these are rooted in Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, pantheist or animist traditions.

The writer engages in deeply empathic discussions of current and historical natural disasters and religiously inspired violence, and the details of how these have affected the people he meets. This is balanced with open hearted explorations of the deep beauty, virtues and significance of nature and religious ideas for these same people, creating an enormous space for the universe, God and faith to simply 'be'. Although the writer is disturbed by visions of divine punishment and the 'end of times', he is certainly not judgmental regarding the divine ('Sanghyang Widhi, or Indra, or God, or Allah, or Jehovah, or Ahuramazda' (p337) or believers. In his eyes, the various cultures, historically as well as currently, have so much in common because people are the same: They have a 'common instinctive heritage or ritual, myth, and art' (p38), a 'furniture' as he likes to call it. The ability to dream, to imagine, to have faith, are part of this 'furniture' that is already in the brain when one moves in, having developed in the instinct of humanity throughout its long development, 'the inherited memories build into the blood of human beings' (p96), comparable to how an otter baby who has been reared by a dog effortlessly catches a fish the first time it sees a river.

As he travels the world, Robbins finds 'a buoyancy in the spirit which seems ... the supreme gift of the human imagination. No wonder human beings had become so adaptable: it was because we could imagine, we could hope, we could keep back the void beyond the fragile web of life to which we cling' (p305). Throughout the book, he imagines, dreams, visits, interacts, reads and records, but nonetheless at the end of his journey on the beach of Australia, his search leaves emptiness and dissatisfaction. The tension between the inner and the outer world remain. His book was based on the extrapolation of a presumed 'desire of humanity to be sure and to find safety in the truth of things' (p66). Neither his fantastic meditations nor his serious journalistic research exposed this 'truth of things', but then, neither would a scientific exploration have achieved this.

Journalism entails 'a way of viewing and writing about the social world for the public benefit. [It] is a means of fomenting conversations in the public domain about events and issues of immediate public interest' (Tomaselli & Caldwell 2002: 22). Robbins' compelling account draws in a wider public

to reflect on the state of humanity, creating a tangible context in which events like political and religious violence from Phnom Penh to Bali, and natural disasters from volcanic eruptions to tsunamis, are being revisited. His approach takes his audience beyond the official facts about these eventualities to address the underlying contexts and share the perspectives and experiences of the people involved.

As is common in journalism, Robbins is committed to seek 'the truth', but by making use of a set of procedures that is not geared towards reflection upon his own research method. This journalistic approach to research is described by Tomaselli and Caldwell 'as a kind of "ask and you will get" set of practices' (2002: 23). However, they argue that a deeper reflexive approach is provided by media studies, which is committed to studying 'how meaning is made (by journalists, for example), interpreted (by readers) and circulated in society as a whole (by communities)' (Ibid.). This gives journalists the opportunity to produce effective accounts, as they can favor sensitivity to the particular profiles of the audiences they produce for. Academics can certainly improve their writing by enhancing audience sensitivity, and journalists can improve their research skills by learning academic strategies. However, finally these two forms of research and writing should remain separate entities that complement each other, in order to prevent compromising the strengths of the strategies and objectives of each realm.

## References

- Beckett, C. 2012. *Can journalism count as an academic research output?* Polis. London School of Economics and Political Science. December 12. Available from: <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2012/12/12/can-journalism-count-as-an-academic-research-output/>
- Tomaselli, K.T. & Caldwell, M. 2002. Journalism Education: Bridging media and cultural studies. In: *Communicatio* 28 (1). Pp. 22-28.