THE opening images of Richard Roxburgh’s *Romulus, My Father* reveal a child watching as his father warms bees in his hand with a light bulb swinging across the screen, and then releases the bees into the dawnscapes outside. The film then cuts to a long shot of a modest farmhouse, in vast empty terrain, and then to the rough interior where the child and the father sit at breakfast. For a few moments one wonders if *Romulus* is to be a throwback to those 1970s and 80s rites-of-passage films, where children were coming of age in rural landscapes: think of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (Peter Weir, 1975), the opening of *The Getting of Wisdom* (Bruce Beresford, 1977), *The Mango Tree* (Kevin Doigford, 1977), *The Man from Snowy River* (George Miller, 1982), *River Towns* (Sandra Sciberras’s *Tinderbox*, [Michael Pattinson, 1983]), and country towns (*Sandra Sciberras’s The Caterpillar Wish* [2006] is probably the most recent).

*Romulus* has points of contact with almost all of these films, and for the reasons I have suggested. Nevertheless, I want to argue that it is much tougher than those earlier films. True, there is a final and utterly convincing moment of affirmation, but along the way much of what is offered is infinitely darker, grimmer, more confronting than any of the other films named above. Its affiliations are less with the pleasures-andsores-of-growing-up school of Australian film and fiction than with such other, more excoriating works as Henry Handel Richardson’s *The End of a Childhood*, in which the child Cuffy Mahony’s life becomes more and more harrowing, or, further afield, Thomas Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure*, where children are subjected to rigours beyond what their years should know.1 Both of these lack the final moment of hope that *Romulus* offers, but, even so, the young Raimond Gaita, the protagonist of *Romulus*, is subjected to kinds of emotional violence to which young children should not be privy.

What *Romulus* also has in common with many – most – of those earlier Australian rites-of-passage films is that it is an adaptation of a literary work. The difference, and it is a difference that matters, is that *Romulus, My Father* is not a novel but a memoir.2 The characters and events that make up the rawly demanding narrative of this work, and that of this film, have their basis in the lived realities of a childhood from which the author has somehow emerged, having come to terms with some bleak truths about those nearest to him. Re-shaping a fictional account is widely acceptable, though there are still those ready to claim ‘It wasn’t like that in the book’; re-shaping a true story, the story of a life, or part of a life, in this case of someone still living, offers a different set of challenges. Of course, selection will be made, and one incident may need to stand for several comparable ones. Decisions such as these are inseparable from the processes of any film adaptation: when it’s a matter of Gaita’s (or anyone else’s) actual story, there may be ethical issues that don’t need to concern the fiction-adapter. In this case, the relations between the child protagonist, Raimond, and his parents, and the kinds of tragedy that hover over them, could hardly be smoothed out in the interests of a more conventional narrative without doing some violence to the actualities of the author/protagonist’s experience.

IF YOU HAVE NOT READ *ROMULUS, MY FATHER*, LET ME URGE YOU TO DO SO AT ONCE. IT IS PERHAPS THE MOST HEARTFELT MEMOIR OF AN AUSTRALIAN LIFE THAT I HAVE EVER COME ACROSS.
Romulus, My Father: Scenes from a Childhood

Brian McFarlane
A Classic Australian Story

If you have not read Romulus, My Father, let me urge you to do so at once. It is perhaps the most heartfelt memoir of an Australian life that I have ever come across, and I’m ashamed to be nearly a decade late in doing so. On one level, it is a riveting account of the post-World War Two ‘new Australian’ migrant phenomenon, out of which ‘old’ Australians scarcely emerged with unblemished credit; on a more profound level, it is the searing story of a child trying to make sense of an adult world which offers him inadequate pointers, though in the person of his father there is a core of integrity which sustains Raimond even before he could articulate this; and it is also a moving study of a child in a particular landscape. The filmmaking team, headed by Roxburgh, producers Robert Connolly and John Maynard, screenwriter Nick Drake and cinematographer Geoffrey Simpson ACS, seem to have had this multi-layered, densely-textured set of significances in mind in the welding of the film’s narrative. It often subverts our expectations, habituated as we are to the clean lines of classical Hollywood, catching instead a sense of how life resists shapely trajectories and is at the mercy of dreadful arbitrariness.

The father-son relationship is established at the outset of the film in the images referred to at the start of this essay. The spartan farmhouse in the unyielding landscape may recall, say, My Brilliant Career, in which another writer-in-the-making spent her formative years, but Miles Franklin’s early years were cushioned luxury by comparison with the crucible in which Raimond (known as Rai, and played by Kodi Smit-McPhee) grappled with the day-to-day exigencies of a childhood in central Victoria. His father, known locally as Jack (Eric Bana) – because insular Australia in the late 1950s/early 1960s couldn’t cope with the exotica of Romulus – works as a smithy making garden furniture, as well as scrap- ing together a living as a farmer. He is a handsome man, and Rai notices the way girls eye his father as they sit in a café, replete with laminex-topped tables at which the customers smoke in that carefree way of the period. As to period, the film’s action is divided by captions which announce SUMMER 1960, then SUMMERS 1961 and 1962. Already, the business of ‘shaping’ the memoir has begun, as its action takes place from a starting point some years earlier.

‘Who is this woman?’ we wonder, if we haven’t read the memoir; this woman who is waiting on the verandah of the house when Rai and Romulus return one day, and Rai rushes forward to meet her. At this point, the film introduces a third – and disruptive – presence into the household. It is Christina (Franka Potente), Romulus’s wife and Rai’s ‘muti’, who sleeps in his bed on her first night back, but engages in vigorous sex with Romulus on the second. Sex, though, is one thing; settling in to domestic life is another; and soon there is a quarrel between Romulus and the wife who has ‘been so busy in Melbourne’. A very unusual and strained family set-up is now in place –
but not for long, because Christina, a depressive, is unable to settle and goes off with Mitru (Russell Dykstra), brother of Romulus’s friend Hora (Marton Csokas), and has a child by him. The implications for Rai’s young life are considerable, as he shuttles between his father’s farmhouse and the rooms his mother, Mitru and baby daughter occupy behind a wine saloon in the town. He loves both parents, responds warmly to Christina’s feminine presence even though she is chronically incapable of looking after him, or the new baby, and deeply admires the father who will slide into insanity when the pressures of his life become unbearable.

What is most moving is the sense of the demands being placed on the young boy. The film, unlike the memoir, finishes with a tentative, hopeful moment between father and son, and this is a reasonable ellipsis, since the rest of the memoir will go on to establish the bond between them. Roxburgh and Drake have dramatized the acuteness of the conflicts in which Rai finds himself, at an age when he can’t actually articulate them. He finds his mother after her first suicide attempt; he tries to mind her baby while she lies listlessly on the bed; he sees her disappearing with an unknown man behind the flour mill, sounds of sex emanating; she comes to visit him at the Catholic boarding school he attends in Ballarat, and her behaviour so embarrasses him that
he asks: ‘If my mother calls again, could you please tell her I don’t want to see her again for the time being’. He witnesses a fight between his father and Hora; there is a moment when he fears his father has gone over a precipice; he sees Romulus in the psychiatric hospital where he seems to have succumbed to utter defeat.

Belonging and Becoming

Along with this ongoing conflict created by the behaviour of the adults around him (and the powerful sense of adult conflict is one of the elements that distinguishes the film from the 1970s films referred to above) is the boy’s attempts to make his own way through these thickets of incipient violence to some sort of clearing where his own self can be forged. He has witnessed terrible things; been terrified by the shooting and burying alive of diseased chooks (perhaps a necessary brutality), knows more about adult sexual duplicity than is good for him, and has been privy to two suicides. Against this, he tries to steer a course of his own in which he will not merely be at the mercy of adults. Rock’n’roll opens up new vistas to him. He watches as a girl dances to its rhythms on the radio outside a shabby house, until her mother shouts: ‘Turn that fuckin’ row down.’ The moment reminds one of how subversive rock’n’roll was felt to be at the time: it was seen as a deliberate act of rebellion by the young against accepted and acceptable adult mores. In Rai’s case, it – rather than the sexual awakening which was central to the earlier coming-of-age films – is his window onto another kind of world. So, too, is the orderly, uniformed St Joseph’s College his father somehow scrapes up the funds to send him to. It offers a kind of protectedness that home has only intermittently and therefore unreliably provided. Indeed, one of the film’s most potent images is that of the child left alone in the isolated farmhouse overnight, while Romulus has taken Christina to hospital after the first suicide attempt. Rai sits alone on the roof as the camera catches him in long shots from several directions as day moves into night.

Hanging over the whole film, as it hangs over Rai’s life, is the imminence of violence, of a child’s fear that adults can’t be counted on, of kids being at the mercy of these unreliable adults, of innocence trying hard to survive the buffets to its fragile tenure; not merely physi-
cal buffets but, as well, having foisted on it knowledge too complex and bitter for its years. The film, by resisting more conventional narrative structures, achieves a remarkable verisimilitude as it charts the rocky course of Rai's development. There are moments of extraordinary beauty when the camera seems to catch the landscape unawares, but these serve equally to reinforce its potential harshness. There are exhilarating moments as the boy cycles off to school on a dusty unpaved rural road, but the beauty of this image is cruelly betrayed later, when, at night on the same track, Romulus rides his motorbike out of control and into a disabling accident. Conversely, there is a moment of heart-stopping grandeur when Romulus and Rai arrive at the rocky ledge at the end of the film which, unlike the earlier moment when Rai has feared for his father, reminds us that the landscape's beauty is also sometimes just that – or that it can at least be the setting for affirmative moments.

Images of Place

For this is a film of utterly memorable images, not just intrinsically lovely or vivid in their composition or in Geoffrey Simpson’s immaculate cinematography, but significant in how they shape our response to the evolving drama of Rai’s childhood against the background of adults often locked in unresolvable tensions. The film is quite unsentimental about the rigours of rural life: the camera catches some of the scraggly glare of
Arthur Boyd’s Wimmera landscapes of the 1950s, but Roxburgh is also alert to the sheer arduousness of the life. The seasonal changes are rendered with unobtrusively telling touches, as in the frozen water in the washbasin, or the early mist of a winter morning or, more strikingly, the burning of a stubble-field. But it is summer that occupies the captions, and that is the season of major hardship. This is not a tale of pioneering hardihood; Australian fiction and film are rich in such stories. In fact, very often – and aptly – it feels more like a European film, like one of those French films of rural life, rather than a softly nostalgic evocation of our own past. This is apt enough, as Gaita’s Yugoslav father (though he thinks of himself as Romanian) and German mother are far from the rural stereotypes of Australian cinema: they are not ‘Aussie battlers’, but migrants making difficult accommodations with each other and with a new country.

The feel for the period is the result not merely of perceptive production design but of an understanding of what Australia was like nearly fifty years ago. The old people who live near the Gaitas and who are kind to them, especially to the boy to whom, typically, they feed scones, encapsulate a benevolent acceptance of the ‘new Australians’; equally, the strange looks Christina attracts when she dances to a jukebox in a café perhaps points to a lingering strain of xenophobic suspiciousness. I didn’t mean to dismiss the production design either: the café, already referred to, is a good example, as are the comfortless Fler chairs endemically found there. Indeed all the details of houses, food, radios, cars and clothes seemed to me impeccably right for time and place.

However, in the end, Romulus, My Father depends more on the quality of the performances, especially those of Eric Bana as Romulus and Kodi Smit-McPhee. The film is brilliantly served by these two. Bana, fresh from such large-scale international enterprises as The Hulk (Ang Lee, 2003) and the idiotic Troy (Wolfgang Petersen, 2004), again shows how intelligently he can inhabit a well-written role. He compels admiration and pity for the passionate, honourable man whom life has often not treated well, and his scenes with the boy (played by Smit-McPhee with an acuteness beyond his years) have an edge of emotional truth quite rare in our films, in any films. In denying themselves the easy gratifications of nostalgia, the filmmakers have won for themselves the tougher rewards of maturity. It is a long way from the ‘rural myths’ that ‘helped Australian films to structure their narratives and to address their local audiences’.2 Romulus, My Father is set in rural hardship but goes deeper and more personally into the pains of coming to terms with displacement, both universal and particular.

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Endnotes