

*The Grass Catcher: A Digression about Home*

Ian Wedde

ISBN 978 0 864739384

Victoria University Press, 2014

Reviewed by Mark Williams

I read Ian Wedde's memoir over Christmas 2014 on Waiheke Island, where I had been taken on holiday as a child sixty years earlier, delighting in his non-judgemental evocation of the 1950s—that culturally embarrassing decade that was a paradise to grow up in. In his account of a Blenheim childhood I encountered echoes of my mother's recall of her childhood there in the 1920s. For the baby-boomers this is a defining literary registration of our era from within the lucid recall of a major writer of our generation. Sargeson's or Frame's New Zealand childhood worlds are distant now, and it is engaging to recognize a collective narrative not mired in puritanism or poverty. *The Grass Catcher* is a welcome generational story of place, community, and language.

Literary biography in New Zealand has expanded since the 1970s as a generation of foundational authors have become canonical, translated from the person glimpsed at writers' festivals into large, even multiple volumes. In both memoirs by the author—notably of Sargeson and Frame—and those entrusted to approved biographical authorities—Sargeson and Frame again—one has felt at times, that the author was being protected as well as disclosed. I think by comparison of David Marr's biography of Patrick White and of White's autobiography, *Flaws in the Glass*, where unflinching honesty about the human failings of the man produces a brilliant and uncomfortable meditation on the sources and mechanics of the artist in psychology, sexuality, family, the wounded self.

White himself permitted, even encouraged, such disclosure by his biographer because he felt that his faults were inseparable from his art. Ian Wedde is far less lugubrious and unappealing than the bitchy, patrician White, but his autobiography, *The Grass Catcher*, is the closest we have to a similarly uncompromising probing at the sources of art in the self and its failings as well as its delights. It is also, like the others, concerned with memory and its wayward paths to knowledge, and with narrative as a means of sense-making that is both deceptive and illuminating. These concerns are especially central in all the Frame biographies, but Wedde displays a singular lack of fuss, unease and caution in connecting the divagations of selfhood to those of art.

Mothers are often dominating and even dangerous in authors' lives. Sargeson's was famously the vehicle of national puritanism; Frame's both ushers the artist-in-the-making into ecstatic concentration on the quotidian and later signs her over to the doctors for 'treatment'. Wedde's mother is far more central and captivating than his agreeable, paler father, Chick. Like White's, who also sends her offspring to school in England, she is glamorous but disappointing and distant. Linda is beautiful, complex, clever, hard to retrieve but inescapable, and deeply associated with the unmappable parts of memory and consciousness that goad the child into the initially secretive practice of writing.

Writing poems as a schoolboy is compensatory for various dissatisfactions centred on Linda, but this is too narrowly to personalise the reach of memory in *The Grass Catcher*. Wedde continually observes how memory's unreliability as well its accuracy fashions consciousness. He theorises about and worries at memory, distinguishing between substantiated and interpretive memory. The narrating voice, researching the past, is continually thwarted by the 'amalgam of inherited memory, romance and fact-checking'; he describes his guide, memory, as 'that untrustworthy engine of consciousness'. It leads him and us on a Kiplingesque narrative in which adventure and discovery are accompanied by mysteriousness. The self is glimpsed, almost discovered, but is somehow just outside the frame. This is a biography in which the

photos are usually not of the subject but of places, others, buildings, ancestors—triggers that prompt both narrator and reader through the layers of an unreliable palimpsest.

The book is full of sallies into philosophy and narrative theory, but there are also continual reminders of the corporeal and the quotidian—‘the vivid, pleasurable, particular world of phenomena’. In this book, real memories come with smell. Memory is associated with and triggered by smell, but not as a delicate Proustian ushering back of the mature self to some treasured past moment. Wedde’s memorial goads are characteristically *unsanitary*—listening to a girl toileting, his brother’s halitosis after tonsil removal, even his mother’s dress drifts with the smell of shit. Memory here is an instrument of distaste and rage, with a Swiftian insistence on the cloacal.

Wedde has often been the joyful celebrant of life, birth, sex, adventure but there is a balancing harshness in his work, associated with this cloacal vision, that gives rise to satire and to a righteous indignation grounded in the terribly wounded body of a Palestinian in *Sonnets for Carlos* or the mess made of the Pacific from nineteenth-century whaling to contemporary fast food in *Symmes Hole*. This capacity to celebrate life and fiercely condemn human deprivations of our fragile world is not wholly sourced in personality, but does somehow owe to the disruptions and traumas of childhood, especially associated with the mother, both beautiful and captivating.

The Wedde that emerges is both cast adrift by his parents as a child and deeply attached to his twin brother, mates and children. He works his poetry into the book with lovely wry affectionate pieces for his sons and their comings and goings. In family also he probes at the origins of writing poetry. The imagination and the womb are not so far apart as the writing consciousness travels through life, from childhood’s sensual immediacy to adult retrospection.

Sexuality is not as matter-of-fact as in C.K. Stead’s accounts; it has at times a quality of intensity and strangeness that catches its enormity in the consciousness of late childhood slipping into adolescence, after that ‘brief ephemeral carnal innocence of childhood’ looking back from adult knowledge of sexuality: the shitting game, the aroma of the mother’s ball-gown (a sensuality Patrick White would have recognised).

What an extraordinary story this, so different from the usual account of a provincial growing up, so unconfined by nationalism yet so minutely attentive to parts of New Zealand. So much is acutely observed here from the gardening obsession of middle New Zealand to expatriate life in Pakistan or Alvar Aalto and the 1950s dream of modernism in architecture. And so few photographs manage to suggest so much. Wedde is a terrific reader of photographs. But the ones we are given are not especially illuminating; we crave access to the boasted fullness of the trove. What counts, however, are the layers of emotion that attach to them from elsewhere; the way they reverberate; the sense of narrative memory threaded through things, moments, images.

How to write about the self ‘objectively’, viewing the failings with equal interest to the glittering successes? C.K. Stead’s accounts of his early years—biographical, fictional, essayistic—for all his crisp clarity in presenting the young man’s inexorable progress, cannot quite transcend an anxiety about where the writer stands in relation to other writers. White’s memoir is wholly free of this note because success in any sphere is less interesting to him than failure, and less likely to provide the necessary irritation that gives rise to art. Wedde’s *Grass Catcher* is, I think, as fine a study of the authorial self as *Flaws in the Glass*, not just because his subject is approached by way of his flaws but also because it is such a rich, complex study, not so much of memories, as of memory itself—that medium of consciousness in which we both make and lose ourselves.