

*Gaylene's Take: Her Life in New Zealand Film*

by Gaylene Preston

Te Herenga Waka University Press, 2022.

RRP: \$40, ISBN 9781776920143.

Reviewed by Laurence Simmons

Three mothers dominate filmmaker Gaylene Preston's new autobiography. One is Tui her mother, the person in the family who coped ("she is very strong in me. I have to fight her off constantly but she travels with me always."); another is her mother's mother Elsie ("she had a very personal relationship with Jesus."); then there is Gaylene herself as mother to Chelsie ("my best ambassador."), and towards the end the mother to her own mother suffering with dementia. From her position under neighbours' kitchen tables, the tiny budding artist Gaylene tried to fathom what the mothers were talking about. "I spent a lot of time under the kitchen table, drawing among the legs." She was constantly sent outside because "'her ears were flapping' ... Indeed they were. I was constantly looking for clues. I needed to know why my mother was so unhappy and my father wasn't." (She will eventually make films which attempt to answer this last proclamation: *War Stories Our Mothers Never Told Us* and *Home by Christmas*.) Listening under the kitchen table was the start of her life's work: "I've spent my adult life thinking about stories and their power." The book's distillation of meaning through the figure of the mother is instantly recognised and forever inexhaustible. Everybody has a mother and close to half of everybody becomes one.

The stories and moments are many: starting out with her life as an unfulfilled graduate wife in Cambridge, England, who finds employment in the county psychiatric hospital and inaugurates her 'film life' with the acquisition of an 8mm camera used to film the patients' drama games. Finally, after some indecision, she arrives back in Wellington, and rocks up to Pacific Films in Kilbirnie where she becomes the art director and the only woman on the shooting crew (at Pacific Films she acquires the nickname 'Bruce'). More importantly, Pacific Films is Preston's film school, John O'Shea her mentor and she enters "the great Pacific Films conspiracy. There's them — the 'others', the 'clients', the 'outsiders' — and then there's us." Preston was a quick study, obviously, although not an instantaneous one. She makes a documentary about the making of the film *Utū*. She works with Merata Mita on *Patu*. She works on sales for the Film Commission at Cannes and "realises that film land was a tiny global village, population approx. 2000, ninety-nine percent of whom were middle-aged white men." Cannes confirms her prickly abhorrence of market-driven selection and promotion. Then finally in 1985 along with Robin Laing as producer she directs *Mr Wrong*, "Call a film that, and what do you expect?" There is a constant undertow of comedy in Preston's work even when it is black. Then comes the body of work we best know her for: *Ruby and Rata* (1990), *Bread and Roses* (1993), *War Stories Our Mothers Never Told Us* (1995), *Perfect Strangers* (2003), *Home by Christmas* (2010) and *My Year with Helen* (2017).

"Life is lived in moments," are the first words of Preston's memoir, "It's moments we remember. Like beads on a bracelet." Here is Preston's description of the tortured genesis of her biopic of Sonja Davies, *Bread and Roses*:

As we worked on the scriptwriting, I couldn't find the centre. Sonja's book is a series of anecdotes; it does not accumulate dramatically. These anecdotes insist on being episodic ... What was the story really *about*? ... the last thing to assume — especially when making a biographical portrait — is that the audience is as interested in your subject as you are. Never the case. The storyteller has to make them interested, suck them in. And a film has to be about something. Something beyond just the external

conflicts faced by the central character. The best biographical investigations find the flaws that reveal internal disharmony. Internal conflict is where the real drama lies.

The same problem, I think, dogs Preston's memoir. Her book is a string of beads both anecdotal and theatrical. I was disappointed as a reviewer, hankering for a denser more chronological array to enable a full career analysis. Like some of Preston's films (I am thinking of *Perfect Strangers*), *Gaylene's Take* possesses no unity of composition, only unremitting energy. Every page you turn there are things that engage you, entertaining anecdotes and vignettes; they just don't add up or you find yourself asking where is the internal conflict, what is it really about? The plot is weak, the pages twist and turn, shift focus and point of view, deviations that are perhaps the price or the reward that comes from an obsessive attraction to the disjunctive and the paradoxical, and to the careless decisions made in private life. In autobiography self-exposure and self-justification are the same thing. Chapter by chapter we are tripped into feelings of a vivid personal nature that Preston quickens and manipulates as deftly as Hitchcock might have done. Nevertheless, it is also this contradiction that gives *Gaylene's Take* its dramatic tension. The daringness of her self-assertion, fills us with a nervous admiration and even a thrill at her audacity: defying the police over her 'repossession' of a repossessed car; taking on the Film Commission's script assessor; fighting distributors to insist *Mr Wrong* be screened locally.

Preston's work in documentary owes little to the reigning godheads of contemporary cool — and much to the renegade audacities of one of her first mentors John O'Shea. She shares O'Shea's refusal to respect — let alone play by — any rules not her own. It is in the field of biography that Preston in her working career has excelled (in *Gaylene's Take* the constant presence and self-assertion of her mother Tui; in *Bread and Roses* the arresting career of Sonja Davies; in *War Stories Our Mothers Never Told Us* seven elderly women talking about the secrets of their war years; in *No Other Lips* the peripatetic life of poet Hone Tuwhare). We might think of *Gaylene's Take* as a real-life 'buddy movie' with her mother, grandmother and daughter as protagonists. Like *Bread and Roses*, it is a story steeped in classic working-class reality and ideals; the last page of *Gaylene's Take* is her mother Tui's recipe for sausage rolls. I made some and they are good!

After uncompromisingly emerging as a tough, independent woman filmmaker, Preston radiates qualities of the maternal and has become an influential role model for younger filmmakers. Now 75 and a Dame, she is a friendly fast-talking woman, quick to contradict herself from one remark to the next, who keeps her escaping hair under a "fedora at a jaunty angle", and dresses and looks, in any weather, like someone just in from a brisk winter walk. Making films has not been a refuge for her — she seems to have had no refuges, only respites. Preston's relation to feminism is at once rock solid and practical. Rather than reflect on the peremptory realities of other people, she took them head on, turning their force around and sending it back out. *Bread and Roses* is Sonja Davies' story about illegitimacy and her place "as an outsider within the establishment." *My Year with Helen* reveals Clark's "sheer dogged resilience." At times in Preston's films every frame can feel like a victory, against tall odds of humour fringed with a deadly seriousness. The trials and tribulations of getting *Mr Wrong* to screen in New Zealand; the ordeals of filming *Perfect Strangers* in "wild but predictable" winter in Westland; the "ten-year odyssey" of *War Stories*. By comparison lots of recent New Zealand filmmaking has seemed tame lately. Not Preston's, which, beyond being something to look at, is something that happens to you. Preston's intensity consequently feels unfashionable but she may very well emerge in eventual retrospect as the most influential of our female filmmakers. Her story in *Gaylene's Take* could make for a good movie — as well it may, in sketched outline in your

mind, as you try to navigate this aesthetically fierce, historically informative, and strangely tender autobiography.