

TLC Showcase

DAVID TURNER

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Introduction to A Song

A Song is a character story, biographical fiction.

The main character is James.

He remembers his childhood in a gritty inner-city suburb of Sydney during the years of the Second World War. His father, Laurence, a butcher, and his mother, Matilda, a chronic asthmatic, have the task of raising their five sons and one daughter. Because of Matilda's deteriorating health, at the end of the war the family change their city life to be among the first settlers in an outer bush suburb, where the air is cleaner. This life is chronicled until the death of both parents, when James is then old enough to leave the home to begin his university course in architecture.

The book then moves through the 'Halcyon Years' of the narrator's successful career as an architect and his marriage that fails when his wife leaves him for another. In 1990 he quits Australia to begin a new life, which begins a new chapter, in Paris. From here he ventures out to many exotic parts of the world. This new chapter of his life includes meetings with remarkable people. It is other people that interest us most. Photography becomes his passion and so each new adventure is also a new photo challenge.

It is difficult to make an objective assessment about one's own work. You can think it is good but you never really know.

One evening in Paris I attended a reading by a newly-published young Irish. Afterwards I asked how she got started because I had been working on my own story by then. She mentioned The Literary Consultancy as an organisation who could make an assessment of its worth and, if good enough, maybe recommend it to a publishing house.

TLC received my work and after careful consideration gave me helpful advice. Notwithstanding various questions my reader left me to consider in the re-draft of my book, regarding structure and form, I was invited to have an extract of my story showcased, which for me is an honour and very encouraging.

A note from Jude Cook, David's TLC reader:

When I first encountered David's work, his prose stood out as very accomplished from the start. Certain sentences, or paragraphs, were as good as many of the writers I could tell he revered (Theroux, Lawrence Durrell, William Trevor). There was much vivid and lyrical description of the natural world in Australia, the South of France, and India; and of the urban in the Paris and New York. What I advised David to work on was a real sense of integration between the often brilliant and nuanced paragraphs, vignettes and varied experiences, and the narrative as a whole. *A Song* is sui generis. Is it a Bildungsroman? A meditation on ways of seeing? A travelogue? Or a straight novel? It will be fascinating to read the next draft of *A Song*, and follow the development of a very promising book.

A Song by David Turner

Extract

A vague presence in the home is Aunt Bess. With nobody else willing to take her in she one day landed on our doorstep. Wearing a blue dress and muddy gumboots she was drenched to the bone. She had walked a mile from where a tow truck had dropped her. It was six in the morning. With only a half-filled suitcase and something edible in a brown paper bag she tapped on the door.

"Oh, no," my mother said when she saw her through the window.

I had never heard of her.

You could tell by her features that she must once have been quite beautiful, and it was said she had been a good dancer, but now she was just skin and bones. She had made a lot of money gambling on horses and men, but, unfortunately, squandered much of it on opiates and Barossa Pearl – a bubbly pink wine. Destitute and lonely now she drank only cold black tea.

And she never wore slippers, nor, apparently, any underwear, just her bare feet and a pink satin dressing gown. She sat as still and pale as a marble statue, never saying a word, her legs crossed, her eyes darting about or staring back in on herself as if listening to something that was or wasn't there or, without blinking, at the veins that seemed to stand out on the backs of her hands. The face in the mirror scared her – the putty-coloured skin, the wild sad look in its eyes, the mouth sometimes smeared with lipstick trying to smile, the hair unruly. From the table I stared with fixed fascination at the way she squashed and screwed each cigarette, then the thumbs and fingers wrestling to roll another, then the disarray of broken matches, and the threads of tobacco that clung to her lips. Feeding the hens and collecting eggs would have given her something to do but she didn't understand.

"We can't keep her," my father declared.

One morning, after a fit of despair in the bathroom, pills scattered everywhere, she was carried off in an ambulance.

Her slippers were later discovered hidden in the biscuit tin.

Ah, those days, the ones you think about when you can't go to sleep – some unwanted

fragments that dissipate swiftly, like the one that day of my classmate Phillip Whalen when running for the bus he slipped and fell, the wheel running over his hand, the imprint of the tread, his face white as a plate – too horrible. Memories like that never properly go away, like scars (do they belong to us or do we belong to them?), the best we can do is to keep them at bay. Others persevere and become vivid ... that incident with my father, for instance, a few days after my sixteenth birthday – the shame mostly. That was a miserably unhappy period – the new school wasn't going well, my mother's health was getting worse, the boredom of living in the bush, another black eye after sticking up for myself in the paddock after school, no girls.

"I feel rotten," I said, moping around the house one day, I couldn't help it. My father, in a pair of shorts and a singlet, a hammer in his hand, was in his early forties by then and developing a paunch. He was sitting on the back step cobbling the boys' shoes.

"Buckle up son, get over it," came the rebuke. "Now go and do the dishes."

Standing at the sink I could see the back yard had gone to weeds, rusted sheets of iron and leftover timber stacked against the garage (its floor stained black with sump oil), the cockatoo in its cage squawking its head off (its wing clipped in case it ever managed to escape), several flies lying comatose on the window sash (their repeated head-butts against the pane), the washing-up water warm and greasy, a day of a heat wave.

At that time doing some interstate trucking, my father thought a few days break from school might give me some respite and help to improve my morale. We would drive up to Moree in the far north west of New South Wales, a small grazing town, and to make me feel more the man he wanted me to be my father had me sit with a .22 rifle on my lap. "In case we see rabbits," he said. Well, a definitely unforgettable experience it was: I marvelled at the vastness and flatness and emptiness of the parched red desert floor, the huge void of silence, suspended primordial time; the east-west highway that ran straight for hundreds of miles with only a single diner and petrol station; road signs with names of towns hundreds of miles away; the red dirt roads that cut their way north past tall grain stores, abandoned mills and sheep and cattle stations, the wake of billowing red dust we left behind; sunsets aflame in the western sky, and then at night the extravagance of scintillating diamonds that seemed like pin pricks into the light of the Universe. There were kangaroos by the thousands, and huge flocks of emus that scattered with fright. But what I remember most of all was that day when squatting at the roadside ahead was one kangaroo, a joey, and how when we slowed down and stopped beside it my father said to shoot it.

"Shoot it? Why?" He commanded me, "Go on shoot it! Shoot it!" wanting to teach me something, I guess. I shot it. We pulled off. When I looked back, the poor creature, still standing, was swaying from side to side. My father leaned to the radio and snapped off the idiotic chatter of a disk jockey. Then there was silence again, and the desert, and a terrible feeling of shame. For five days we had breakfasts together and slept in the truck but we didn't talk about it. His big hands heavy on the steering wheel, his mind numb with tedium and fatigue, unshaven, we didn't talk about anything, we couldn't. I see him sometimes in the grey mist of memory and ask him again and again, why?

My story takes root, however, one night on the second floor of a dark-brick tenement in a gritty inner-city suburb of Sydney. I was only about three years old at the time so it's a long leap backwards:

In my memory the room is dark and full of silence, only the robotic tick ... tick ... tick of a clock, sometimes a rustle – an insect perhaps, or a small rodent – the sporadic swish of cars and their lights that flashed across the ceiling; again the darkness; a bumping sound, whispers; the door to the landing opens and is gently closed, footfalls on the stairs; the curtains swelling and ebbing with a breeze, and my fright when something with wings and claws suddenly broke free from the silence. Lying there alone in the discomfort of wet sheets I longed for my mother's warm embrace, I yearned for the morning light.

Crawling on the Dining Room floor I could feel the vibration of footsteps and hear from behind the glass-fronted dresser the rattle and tinkle of crockery. I skulked under the table among chairs where in a burial ground of dust I discovered flies, inspected them between my fingers, muttered to them, and once tasted one, only once.

I remember the main road was busy with trams and buses. Below us was an engineering workshop where in the gloom of dim bulbs machinery clanked and hammered all day long, and welding rods fizzed and showered sparks; the smell of grease and grime is still vivid. Beside us, on one side, was an old stone church, which gave weekly service, and on the other, set back from an asphalt car lot, an austere black-glass-fronted parlour with gold Gothic print: KINSELLA, FUNERAL DIRECTORS, which also gave weekly service – in one door, and out the other. Across the road was a rowdy pub, above it a window sign saying Billiards, and nearby, Mister Douglas's cake shop that sold vanilla slices.

One Sunday morning after a church service a small group of worshippers (simple pious folk), and the Reverend Donnelly (a kind face), all feeling relief from the sun's golden warmth, were smiling and nodding to one another, dark patches of sweat forming beneath their armpits. Near the doorway there was a mysterious incense-sweetened boxy odour of old-age decay. I could see in the cobwebbed gloom the bright colours of tinted-glass, and down past the rows of pews, near the altar, I could make out a man stripped naked, thin and deathly white, nailed to a cross.

The trams, too, were nightmarish. They came round a bend then bore down on me like great limbless monsters, heaving from side to side, clanging their bells, and clashing their antennae with wires that sparked and sizzled. Their footboards and handrails were always too high off the road and their wheels just inches away from my toes. My mother had to lift me up, urgently, before they pulled away, Clang! Clang! And it was horrible living next to a funeral parlour, peering through the paling fence at someone being carried dead in a box then slid into the back of a hearse, the people outside bowed in black, whimpering, overwhelmed by grief.

This time in my memory, again as a toddler, I am being wheeled to my father's butcher shop in a stroller – a wooden-framed contraption like a miniature deck chair with spoke wheels. Each morning my mother would take her husband his Thermos of tea. To enter the back lane I was pulled backwards up the three steps, the heavy sagging gate then scraped closed behind us. It was a quiet narrow lane with tall paling fences along each side: on the right were small backyards, sometimes pegged with washing, one gate with a thick hand-painted 6 on it, and on the other side the grounds of the church and the fig trees over. The lane turned to the left, still the high palings as far as the main Darling Street.

"Good morning, Mrs. Turner, and how is the little man today?" asked Mrs. Fairweather from her gateway.

I loved being steered on my morning outings like this.

Punctually, at 10.30, the same two fat men sitting on the same public bench were smoking their pipes. They were veterans of the First World War. They each wore grey sweat-stained hats and grey waistcoats, one with a silver watch-chain, the other with a crutch and only one leg. They talked mostly about the war that was raging across the front pages of all the newspapers. The Americans had just entered, Dresden was flattened and the Nazis were in retreat. One of them once produced a penny from behind his ear then blew on it to make it disappear. With a click of his fingers he brought it back. He then offered it to me as a gift. I looked at my mother

and she smiled a nod of approval. At the kerb there was a horse trough and two magnificent chestnut Clydesdales. They'd just made their deliveries from the Goods Yard to the Grain and Produce store and so were damp with salty sweat, the smell of wet leather (still to this day I can evoke both of those smells). As they slurped gallons of water through their thick rubbery lips their bridles jingled and their tails swished away the menacing flies. My mother lifted me and curiously, while stroking the bony box of one's forehead, it dropped a yellow mound of sweet-smelling stench on the road. Non sequitur. Under the horse trough was a dogs' trough. Many dogs roamed the scorching asphalt streets of Rozelle in those days searching for smells, their tongues hanging out like red rag, thirsty. Their fighting – snarling, bighting, ripping one another apart like that – was a terrible, frightening thing for a young child to experience. The winner would then go to claim the nearest telegraph pole, and to prove it was his, raise a back leg and scribble his signature all over it.

The barrowman who sold fruit on the Woolworth's corner was an excitedly happy handsome young man who spoke a funny accented English. His name was Tony, one of the many European migrants who flowed into Australia during the 40's and 50's. He liked Matilda and made sure she got the best quality.

"Buongiorno, Tony, va bene?"

"Ha, Mrs. Turner, I keepa these tomatoes specially for you."

"Pomodoro," he said, responding to her inquiry, which was her way of being friendly and welcoming.

"Ciao, bambino," smiling down on me, "sei bellissimo," and then offering me something rich red and apparently meant for eating.

"Fragola," he said.

I smiled at my first word in Italian and tasted my first delicious strawberry.

"Arrivederci, grazie, a la prossima."

One day on the busy main street we wheeled into Woolworths and bought some skeins of wool and colouring books and pencils. The Greek's fish and chip shop smelled of deep-sea frying, and the cake shop, displaying vanilla slices, smelled of sugar-sprinkled sponges and hot buns; trams and cranked-up old cars rattled by. The acid air pollution stung my eyes and the heat that radiated off the asphalt made my face red.

Laurence Turner, the butcher, was popularly liked in Rozelle because he had a way with his customers. He was tall and strong, roguish with rugged good looks, normally easygoing, and he could be playful and make the ladies laugh.

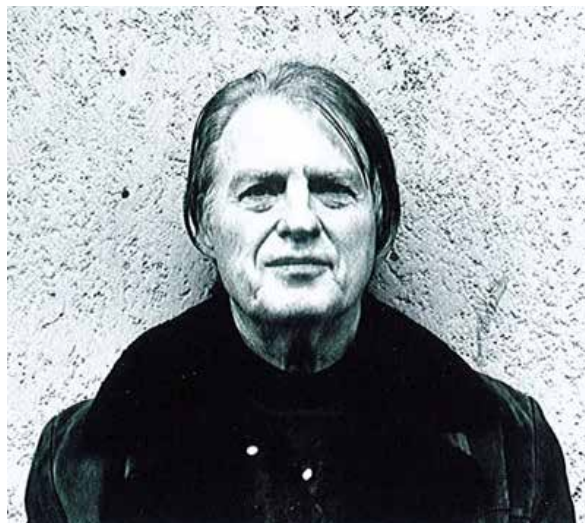
"Tender, lady?" proffering a cut of prime sirloin, frowning, indignant, "Tender? It's as tender as a lady's heart," he would say. And with the children he sometimes teased them with a pig's head.

Other young mothers, who were also his customers, also wheeling strollers, greeted Matilda, and between them they would gush. They shared all they knew about raising children. I, meanwhile, at the same eye level as my peer, making my inspection up and down with silent curiosity, wondered what all the fuss was about. My father's tea was getting cold.

On arriving at the shop my father showed his delight and lifted me, gave me an abrasive kiss, threw me fearfully high into the air then let me down to crawl on the floor. It was a soft, thick yielding carpet of pine-fresh sawdust – for sensitive young hands the texture was exquisite. I crawled to the refrigerated display cabinet to cool my face on the glass and was confronted with folds of tripe and lumpy pink sausages. My mother was laughing as she picked me up, and there the memory of being wheeled to my father's butcher shop fades. But wait, there is the bicycle ring of the cash register too, and the wooden chopping sounds of the wooden chopping block.

About the Writer

I made my living as an architect in Australia. Since my retirement in Paris I have at last found the time to read all those books that got bookmarked and were never finished. They were novels mostly, nearly all by acclaimed writers. I love reading and have developed an appreciation for good storytelling. My all-time favourite short story teller (not his novels) is William Trevor. Photography has improved my acuity.



To improve my appreciation I involved myself in the process to find out just how difficult it must be – lots of keenly observed things on the backs of envelopes, that sort of thing. So where once I was writing to improve my reading I find now that I am reading more to improve my writing. I have never been read (except long letters to my daughter for the last 25 years), let alone anything published.

As a writer one learns to think clearly and speak simply, and also how passionately one can feel in the process. The computer is a wonderful editing tool.