

*Shameful Autobiographies: Shame in Contemporary Australian Autobiographies and Culture*

Rosamund Dalziell

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Reviewer: Susan Sullivan OP, Sophia Adelaide

This title cannot fail to attract readers who browse in bookshops in the current Australian climate. I found it a compelling book. On the one hand the idea of shame drew me; on the other, autobiography and Australian culture always fascinate me.

We have much to be ashamed of as a nation. Whether it is the policy on mandatory sentencing, the denial of the existence of the Stolen Generations or the forcible removal of Kosovo refugees back to their war-torn homeland; all of these situations lead some Australians to be ashamed of what is happening in this culture.

Dalziell's examination of a collection of autobiographies brings together a broad range of well-known nineteenth and twentieth century Australians. These texts refer to our colonial origins and their impact on the Indigenous culture and the waves of migration which have since shaped Australia to be a multicultural society. Dalziell has also included more universal issues of illegitimacy, homosexuality and secrets about identity which also contribute to Australian culture at the end of the twentieth century. She shows how there is a tone of shame underlying each of the autobiographies that she discusses. The stories point to the rich diversity of Australian society and alert the reader to the possibility of recognising our common humanity rather than rejecting difference and opting for the dominant status quo.

Rosamund Dalziell's research is thorough and her text comprehensive. Her book draws on many different disciplines including literature, psychology, sociology, ethics and philosophy. Her argument is strengthened because of this interdisciplinary approach.

She examines the origin of the word 'shame' and makes a distinction between it and the concept of guilt. She explores many theories of shame, including those of Darwin, Freud and Erikson and draws on the work of social scientists. She also links the genre of autobiography to the Western tradition of confession. Finally Dalziell discusses the function of the text between writer and reader and in so doing invites us to contribute to the process of engaging with her in examining the Australian culture from this perspective. I found this invitation confronting; it gave cause for reflection: on the one hand coming to terms with the phenomenon of shame, and on the other, the role it can play in each of our lives. In this work Dalziell provides me with a framework to understand the issue of reconciliation which we as a country find so difficult to face. As she writes in the introduction, 'Shame is an unpleasant and painful emotion and an experience of being ashamed is generally one to be avoided at best or at worst forgotten.' (p. 7) Is it any wonder that we cannot say sorry, and for many Australians this issue is something with which we are unwilling to engage ?

To analyse shame in contemporary Australian autobiographies and culture Dalziell uses Erikson's definition of shame. He writes, 'Shame supposes that one is completely exposed and conscious of being looked at, in one word self-conscious. One is visible and not ready to be visible.' (p. 7) She also sees shame as part of the European tradition of autobiography and argues that it has its origins in confession. She looks at this from two perspectives: as a sin or offence and as a declaration or statement of principles closely related to testimony. The autobiographies that are discussed in Dalziell's book contain at least one of these characteristics. Further, Dalziell's choice of Australian autobiographers enables her to demonstrate the impact that the phenomenon of shame can have on a culture as a whole. In all of the autobiographies discussed, Dalziell shows how the writers are weighed down with situations which make for painful stories, stories which are not easy to confront. I had not thought of Kathleen Fitzpatrick, Robert Dessaix or Germaine Greer as writing their stories from the perspective of shame. Rather, here are people who represent privilege, the arts and the feminist movement. They are all people who exert some influence in our society. According to Dalziell, it is this very fact which enables them to reveal their pain. She argues, 'If shame is a response by the powerless to unavoidable humiliation and abuse, then a shamed individual or group would be likely to embark on autobiographical writing only when in a less powerless situation.' (p. 258) This also applies to the two other groups discussed by Dalziell, namely Indigenous writers of autobiography and Jewish migrants whose experience of shame originates from the Holocaust.

It is easier to see Indigenous autobiographies as being about shame because isn't that one problem of our time; namely, what one section of the community has done to the other? Dalziell demonstrates that in this context shame is much more complicated. Her sources are numerous and include Ruby Langford Ginibi, Margaret Tucker and Glenyse Ward, Charles Perkins and Sally Morgan. She refers to many autobiographies of Indigenous people and uses their stories to show how childhood shame is likely to be perpetuated, again referring to Erikson's developmental theories. Further, she explores the critical problem associated with literary collaboration between Indigenous and non-Indigenous writers and draws on Mudooroo Narogin's study of contemporary Aboriginal literature which examines how this collaborative work can itself be a source of shame. Finally, through writing their stories Dalziell suggests that as a group of Indigenous Australians their work is testimony to their people; their writing is indeed transformative.

For people like Morris Lurie, Amirah Inglis and Andrew Riemer, whose families are from Eastern Europe, the immigrant experience is about difference, dislocation and the impact of the Holocaust. Their stories conjure up another great wave of pain which must surely impinge on their new country.

The desire for each autobiographer to be healed of very different but painful stories inevitably raises the issue of reconciliation. While Dalziell has not made it her main focus, she links it with shame when she says, 'For reconciliation to be possible, the shame related to the experience of oppression, both that of the oppressed and the oppressor, must be confronted and addressed... This dimension of telling lives is one of which Aboriginal narrators are often very much aware. (p. 171)

I ask myself what has happened to me, the reader of this text? I have enjoyed meeting again most of the writers of the autobiographies cited. What speaks more powerfully to me, however, is the voice of Rosamund Dalziell as she analyses the phenomenon of shame from many perspectives and invites me to grapple with what her thesis challenges Australians to confront. The power of her reflection about shame leads me to reflect, to ask questions and make connections: How has this nation been shamed? Are the autobiographies of some Australians suggesting that we as a nation are beginning to feel in a strong enough position to tell our story and own our shame? Or are we content with the status quo in which the acceptable is reduced to someone who merges in with the crowd? At what point are we, as Australians, in writing our autobiography?

Such questions suggest there is a need for us as a nation to work through our shame with a view to arriving at a point of transformation. Often what Dalziell says about an individual could be applied to Australia. I refer in particular to her comments on when a story of shame can be told and how the status of one's birth impacts on one's life. She could be speaking about Australia's non-indigenous origins.

'Status resides not so much in legitimate birth into a family of high social standing, but in knowing the full and accurate story of one's family, antecedents and birth, and being able to tell that story, including the rediscovery of forgotten or concealed participants and the reconstruction of suppressed narratives. The act of rediscovery and reconstruction ensures continuity as long as the story is told.' (p. 111)

Despite my litany of current shaming situations at the beginning of this piece, I find this book hopeful. Dalziell's reflections, arising out of her understanding of shame, her empathy with the individuals whose stories she examines and her extrapolating from their situations to make universal particular situations, are powerful. By describing the journeys embarked on by the autobiographers and demonstrating how this very process is itself developmental, I believe that Dalziell is suggesting that confronting one's shame is an organic event and can only happen when the time is right. It has been right for Robert Dessaix, Germaine Greer, Ruby Langford Ginibi and Morris Lurie, and their stories have contributed towards their healing. Can we hope that these stories point to a readiness for us as Australians to listen to the diversity, to embrace the difference and ultimately for us to tell many more stories of our origins? Hopefully we will 'rediscover' and tell our story, confront our shame and work through to a new position of transformation. For as Dalziell says in another place, while 'shame operates as a mechanism for impeding the telling of such stories... where the stories are in fact told, shame may become a revelation of both self and society, and society may be transformed.' (p. 269)

While this book is challenging and complex, reading it is a rewarding experience which I heartily recommend.