One day in 1997 my father was sitting in his car, stopped at a red traffic light. Before the lights turned green, a tree fell on his car, crushing it. It made the evening news, and today a photograph of the wrecked vehicle is on the wall of the study in my parents' house. What can one say in the face of such a silencing image? My father was lucky to get out alive (but not lucky to be there to begin with). It took half an hour to free him from the car and he spent months in hospital. There was little ‘meaning’ to the event. It was random, violent, and left indelible marks on my father. How does one make sense of such an event? It is a crisis, but not the kind of turning point we expect from fiction, or even autobiography. There was nothing moral in character about it.

My father not only survived, but continues – after a long, difficult break from normality – to live a normal life. The event might not be ‘meaningful’ as such, but it has been incorporated into the narrative integrity necessary for a sense of identity. The response of others (family, carers, supportive neighbours) highlighted the difference between misfortune and the goodwill it engenders. We hope that a crisis can become meaningful by making us grow. But what does growth mean, and how does one incorporate the meaningless event into the meaningful narrative life?

Peter Rose’s Rose Boys offers some answers to these questions by
dealing with an even more shocking and debilitating event: the car 


crash in 1974 that left his brother, the 22-year-old Robert Rose, a 


quadriplegic. This had profound effects on Robert, his wife, and his 


family, and the family is central to understanding Robert's life. Peter 


and his brother were the sons of Bob Rose, the famous footballer and 


coach of Collingwood. Robert's career as a professional sportsman (as 


VFL footballer and first-class cricketer) was underway at the time of his 


injury, and the crash made front-page news. Robert's story is still 


remembered by many, and not just high-profile sportsmen and politi-


cians. Peter Rose also entered the public world, but in a different way: 


as a poet, as a publisher with Oxford University Press, and most 


recently as the editor of Australian Book Review.


Understanding implies knowing where to start, and Rose Boys is 


replete with beginnings. There are at least four: the page of epigraphs, 


followed by oracular, self-reflexive, and then historical beginnings. The 


oracular beginning describes a dream. In it, Rose works for a small-


town library, which stands between the blood bank and the football 


oval. It is on fire, while down the street a boy in a block of flats is 


'clearly the oracle because of his uncanny vision'. He describes the 


events in a jocular fashion, and finally 'he takes pity on me and 


addresses me directly'. At this point the author recognizes his brother.


This obliquity is not characteristic of the book. While critics of 


Rose's poetry have commented on its elliptical style, Rose Boys is excep-


tionally lucid. Rose has developed a style that tries to make itself 


invisible, as if the story could occupy a space 'beyond' interpretation. 


This is suggested in one of the work's epigraphs, Joseph Butler's obser-


vation that 'Everything is what it is, and not another thing'. Such a 


thought could suggest the difficulties faced in coming to terms with 


trauma. The 'self-reflexive' beginning might also dramatize this. The 


author is looking through his brother's scrapbooks which contain news-


paper clippings about the accident. Everything is what it is, but an 


artful digression veers the story away from the crash to a 'historical' 


beginning: the 1970 VFL grand final. This game has achieved mythical 


status, at least in the states where Australian Rules is important. Bob 


Rose was coaching Collingwood when they lost a seemingly unlosable 


game to Ron Barassi's Carlton.
Rose notes the irony of calling such an event 'tragic'. Discussion of the game and the riotous party afterwards leads to brief histories of Rose’s parents, who in the course of the narrative come across quietly, but convincingly, as truly heroic. Bob Rose started playing football for Collingwood when he was a seventeen-year-old from the Mallee, having already had a brief boxing career. Rose’s reticent mother, Elsie, joined the Ordnance Revue Company when she was sixteen and began a singing career that ended with her marriage to Bob Rose (against his wishes). In 1955 the family moved to Wangaratta where the author spent the early years of his life. In these pages Rose evokes a sense of historical depth with the most skillful economy.

These digressions and renewed beginnings (which include an account of Robert’s sporting career) serve to delay the key event of the book. In fact, though, the event is never left alone. The narrative repeatedly returns to the accident, pondering the ways it figured and disfigured the lives of Robert, his wife, his daughter, a friend injured in the accident, and his family. The book is an extended meditation on an event that lasted ‘a second or two in time’, a newspaper phrase that Rose picks up on. Rose’s emphasis is a kind of realism since the event – however long it lasted – existed in Robert’s body for the remainder of his life.

The sense that these are experiences that exist in Rose’s brother and those around him is profound. This might be unsurprising, since our phenomenological language depends on metaphors of internality. At life’s most basic, we are in space and time. But internality more specifically underpins most forms of life writing. In autobiography we look inside ourselves. We think of memory as something inside us that keeps things of us inside it. Biographers are expected to discover what it was like to be in their subject’s shoes. For Rose the challenge is all the more marked because of the radical alterity of someone living with quadriplegia. The sense of crisis and ‘familial alterity’ can be seen in other autobiographical works to do with brothers, such as Jamaica Kincaid’s My Brother (1997) and Jay Neugeboren’s Imagining Robert: My Brother, Madness and Survival (1997). The latter shares Rose’s desire to write about his brother’s experiences (no matter how alien) as his brother’s own.
Significantly, then, *Rose Boys* is marked by an obsessive interest in what it means to be in something. Rose’s remarkable gift for representing situations as though from within can be seen in a brief description of the emotional strain Robert’s accident engendered. ‘One evening Dad got home after a solo visit and sobbed in my mother’s arms. There was nothing anyone could say. Then he composed himself and ate his warmed-up meal. (We ate in shifts, half-heartedly)’. The poignant banality of the parenthetical comment gives an acute sense of what it was like to be in such circumstances. In part, then, being in something is about appalling constraints: being in circumstances beyond your control, or being in a damaged body. Consequently, the conditions of being in Robert’s mind and body are constantly observed, if never quite realized. The connections between autobiographical observation and medical observation may account for the author’s occasional anxiety about his project. But being in something can also be enabling, seen in the fact that the Roses are manifestly immersed in deep familial and social contexts. Their sense of identity is heavily dependent on their being in a family, in a sports club, in relationships and so on. More ambivalently, Robert is also in various institutions, and the nexus in those institutions between power and communication is a major part of Rose’s story.

There is a sense of ambivalence in Rose’s affiliations, too. He’s no sportsman, despite playing keenly as a child, and despite the masculine milieu of his father and brother he is attracted to female company. ‘While my schoolmates went off to the Bowl to hear Billy Thorpe or to discover sex on back beaches, I went to Elwood for superior female talk.’ While his artistic interests and homosexuality are never ‘issues’ for his family, there remains a sense that, for a time at least, Rose felt ambivalently about his birthright as a Rose boy and about his psychology (that is, ‘internal’ make up). This is suggested in the ambiguity of who ‘the Rose boys’ are. They are, alternatively: Peter and Robert; Peter, Robert and their father; their father and his brothers; and most significantly, Bob and Robert, father and son. Robert and Bob not only share a name, but also an almost-fraternal link: ‘With my mother, we went to the football and the cricket — any contest in which “the boys” were appearing’. There is also a burden in belonging to this select club:
'I was a boy. I was a Rose. I could cope', Rose writes, detailing a time when coping was more apparent than real.

Rose’s need to write this book is surely tied up with these issues. When he asks, ‘What exactly is the message of Robert Rose?’ it is because he believes the message is one he ‘somehow never fully heeded’, which he now must do, so as to overcome his own ‘eternities of maladjustment’. This might seem another model of autobiography-as-therapy, but *Rose Boys* is more complex and outward-looking than that. Firstly, it offers a profound insight into life with quadriplegia (and it alerts readers to the Robert Rose Foundation, a charity for people with spinal cord injuries). In addition, in its use of interviews and Peter Rose’s diaries, it is a work of dialogue, with others and with past selves. In this it articulates one of the conditions of autobiography of crisis as described by Susanna Egan in her study *Mirror Talk: Genres of Crisis in Contemporary Autobiography* (1999). While many have seen crisis as central to autobiographical expression, Egan considers how unresolved crisis (a crisis one is still in) is a defining feature of contemporary autobiography. Such autobiography is inherently dialogic and generically heterodox, incorporating elements of fiction, history and so on. In addition, such autobiography not only finds strategies to ‘untrammel the subject from discursive helplessness’, but is also notable in its ‘foregrounding and emphatic presence of the body’.

Such writing suggests a model of life writing that goes beyond the simply therapeutic model. As Egan notes, ‘Mirror talk begins as the encounter of two lives in which the biographer is also an autobiographer’. All this, of course, describes *Rose Boys* perfectly. To know his brother, Rose must know himself. To make him talk, to know when he ‘addresses me directly’, Rose must himself talk. And this brings about what is – for me – the most notable feature of the work: its affect. Theorists rarely discuss emotion in autobiography, and this autobiography is deeply moving.

While we might sometimes ask why such works are written and read, critics far less often ask why they move us. This is partly because of a suspicion of vague subjectivism in the response. *Rose Boys* clearly asks us to engage in it as an emotional experience. This experience, of course, doesn’t simply ‘happen’; it is the product of
rhetorical strategies. This, then, produces an opposing suspicion, which is to see the emotional experience of the book as factitious because it is the effect of rhetorical organization.

When reading *Rose Boys* the sense that we are in an emotional experience is most profoundly felt in the section describing Robert's death. Reading this was an extremely moving experience for me, and I have subsequently wondered what this means. Is it simply that the events related are so sad? They are sad, but our response is partly determined by the way the events are narrated. By using detail to produce empathy and insight, Rose makes us see the events as emotional events. He does this by mixing an objective distance with a deeply empathetic imagination. For instance, Rose's description of his mother, suffering insomnia: 'At 4 a.m. so as not to wake Dad, she rang the hospital, unable to wait any longer. She is told by an unfamiliar voice that Robert is well. 'She knew it wasn't true. It was another mistake. They were multiplying. The gods were sporting with them now. She sat there amid the shadows, watching the silhouettes in the garden. Parrots began their wake-up calls. The large house creaked around her, with its empty bedrooms. There wasn't even a dog to keep her company'. This is a kind of poetry, a poetry of seeing into the meaning of the smallest things during the most important of events.

Rose's skill doesn't make the emotional experience of this factitious. Rather, it shows that attention – the writer's, the reader's – is required when trying to understand another's life. Writing *Rose Boys* is an act of mourning, just like plaiting floral wreaths, or tending to a grave. But *Rose Boys* isn't only a work of mourning. Rose's portrait is a homage to his brother, but it is also a moral act, since the moral dimension is never far off in a story such as Robert's. How others respond to his injury is a kind of test, and people are judged by how much they care. Robert's parents' care is unstinting, unquestioning, unequivocal. Those who fail in their response are those who turn away, who refuse to recognize Robert: the few sportsmen who didn't visit, the few journalists who used his story for cheap sensationalism; the politicians who allow medical institutions to crumble.

One of the strengths of *Rose Boys* is its simplicity. It deals with ordinary people coping with awful, but not unknown, events. These
events are narrated without complicated theorizing. But as this is a book about families and emotions it is also a difficult book. This is most apparent in the brief, fugitive moments concerned with Rose’s own self-representation of how he coped and cared. Clearly, when considering the moral issue of response, how the author responds is central. There is the ambivalence, already noted, of his role as a Rose boy. There are the moments of anxiety regarding his sexuality and difficulty in finding a partner. There are also moments of resentment brought on by the sufferings of the parents. ‘Part of me – consciously, subconsciously – resented the demands Robert inevitably made on them. Part of me wanted it to end, I suppose. Sons fear for their parents as much as for their brothers. But I was sickened by my disloyalty’.

Loyalty, the emotion that holds together families and football clubs, is the key virtue here, and Rose is very strict upon himself in the regard. Rose also notes a sense of guilt, inevitable in the circumstances, over the fact that he is well and his brother is not. Indeed, the year after Robert’s accident, so despairing for him, turns out to be one of Rose’s best. Late in the book, Rose describes going home, past the hospital Robert is in. ‘I thought about him lying there while the rest of us were out and about enjoying ourselves. The unfairness of it, the undeservedness – his torment, my dispensation – haunted me’.

Rose’s dispensation, his blessing, is haunting not only because it manifests the unfairness of Robert’s situation, but also because it gets in the way of Peter recognizing his brother. Moral issues, then, do not easily offer a ‘solution’ to the trauma. Rose Boys shows how memory and representation, rather than judgment, are keys to coping with trauma and loss. This is apparent in the way that various accounts of accident in Rose Boys show how trauma demands self-representation. The year after Robert’s accident, one of his peers, the footballer Neil Sachse, became a quadriplegic after an on-field accident. Many years later Rose visits Sachse, as did his father, a little earlier. ‘Dad told me that Neil had wanted him to see a video of the collision at the Western Oval. I wondered how many times the Sachses had watched it since 1975’. There is a similar impulse at work in the way Terry, Robert’s ex-wife, deals with her own serious motor accident. ‘By the time I saw Terry in July 2000 she had made a good recovery. She showed me photographs
of the battered Range Rover and of herself in intensive care.

Robert's newspaper clippings; Neil Sachse's video; Terry's photographs; my father's photographs: what do they mean? They too are forms of autobiographies of crisis. They offer not only proof that 'I was in that', but also 'I got out' (however damaged). Rose Boys is far more than the literary equivalent of a photograph of a smashed car, but it includes something like that. If Rose's book is a narrative version of these memorials to trauma, his memorial has more than the visceral power of shock or pity. Rose's achievement is extraordinary because it manages to be both a homage to his brother and family and a critique of the events, of the emotions that it engendered. He lays bare both the crashed vehicle, and the delicate, immensely strong bonds of familial love, personal strength, and individual quiddity. And it is memory that allows these virtues to exist, to counter the weight of despair and guilt. The work of memory is Rose's response to the 'meaning' of his brother's life. Rose's powerful book is about finding words to describe those events that leave us in silence.

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