

The Land, the Woman, and Another Resolution: Ivan Southall's *Josh*

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In *Writing for Children*, Ivan Southall expresses a number of prickly views relevant to his work, which at the time he was writing the essays he did not feel had been well served by the literary critics – by us. I am naturally reluctant to increase the number of those who willfully misinterpret Southall's writing, although the time has surely come and gone when reviewers are likely to call him too complex for children to read or when a critical review can keep him from a night's sleep. But *Josh* disturbed me and made me feel like a cultural outsider, and many months of floundering around has convinced me that some kinds of context for Southall's work can best serve our panel's audience, in spite of the partial and imperfect truths that I shall undoubtedly be putting forward.

1971 was a year in which American young adult novels were apt to be experimental and, like *Josh*, blurring the edges between the books we now call YA and adult coming-of-age stories in content, ambiguity, and style. It was an era in Australia, as well as in the United States, when youth rebellion and protest of the Vietnam War prompted some social changes that made themselves manifest in children's literature, but not yet in the multicultural or socially progressive directions we might expect. In Australia, as noted in such sources as *Inventing Australia* and *A Nation for a Continent*, it was also a unique era when what it meant to be Australian came to be defined by art rather than by earlier images, such as that of the "heroic digger." Much public, private, and corporate money was spent on art in this era and, apparently, whether a literary work, or a film, or a painting was adulatory or critical toward Australia, it was hailed as art that furthered Australian nationhood and Australian pride. *Josh* is not only a compelling novel, it was the first Australian novel to win the Carnegie Award. Patrick White, an expatriate Australian writer of stature, came home in the early seventies and won his Nobel Prize in 1973. Urban, artistic Australia has importance in *Josh*—and makes it, as much as anything, a novel of its time.

Josh is an unusual book. It is written in stream-of-consciousness narrative form, and it reinvents the relations between the boy and the frontier, between the boy and the "law of the father" in ways I found surprising. The story concerns a 14-year-old poet called Josh, who makes a 4-day visit to his great-aunt, the head of the Plowman family, in a remote rural village settled by his great grandfather, Maximilian Plowman. The novel is divided into sections for each day of the visit, during which Josh interacts disastrously with the village adolescents and some adults, nearly gets drowned by an outraged crowd, and cuts short his stay by walking 100 miles back to Melbourne.

The relationship between Josh and the land is not the testing or the conquering relationship that one might expect in traditional frontier or Bush stories, although that kind of story was part of Southall's repertoire in the decade that preceded *Josh*.¹ Josh comes to the village open and eager for exposure to his family history and a holiday away from his home, even though his mother ridicules the pretensions of his father's family,

but he never makes any headway at all with the setting. For example, Josh keeps hanging himself up on wire fences, is made physically ill and distraught over the local boys' killing of a trapped and screaming rabbit, spends much time hunkering down in shrubs or brambly vines hiding from people, and has two dangerous experiences with the local river. In other kinds of stories, Josh might emerge from his initial difficulties with a more hearty approach to life and, even, might take over his hereditary place as the young squire – fit himself into the Plowman family position as his great aunt upholds it. Conquering the social and physical environment would be, at the very least, a reaffirmation of his pioneer stock. But Josh does no such thing.

In keeping with the kind of story that groups woman with the land as an object of conquest and ownership, there are two young girls in the village whose affections are perhaps at his disposal. The one, Betsy, is described as exciting him a great deal—this kind of frankness was part of Southall's realistic intention and something he was noted for in this era.² And this frontier place makes romance available to a boy of fourteen. As Laura, the other girl, points out, in this village they have sweethearts at ten, and all the young people seem very ready to talk about male/female relations in a territorial way. Josh was not ready for courting situations in Melbourne, but here it seems expected of him.

But, again, rejection rather than ownership is Josh's response, for varying reasons. Young Laura nearly kills herself jumping off the Plowman Bridge in order to impress him or make some kind of statement. He cannot bring himself to be brutal to her, he feels very sorry for her, but she is a predator, though a very vulnerable and pathetic one. Her lies to her male relations—she tells everyone that he dared her to jump off rather than that he pleaded with her not to do it—enflame a local boy to beat him up. Evading Laura, though trying to get her some justice, seems to him to be the best thing to do. Betsy, according to his aunt and public rumor, also likes Josh, something that makes the same worthy local boy jealous. But since she gives no recognizable sign of this, Josh is never able to have even one private conversation with her. Instead, Josh, in spite of his sexual awareness of Betsy, frankly points out to the others that he is too young to be going with girls – would not be allowed to back in Melbourne—and admits rather defensively to himself that he is appalled by her common accent. He keeps reviewing the possibility of getting her to a voice coach and somehow improving her into the object of delight she appears to be. The egalitarian opportunities that the Bush offers along these lines, in other words, are simply not opportunities Josh is willing to take.

Josh's relation with his great aunt (based on Southall's own Aunt Susan)³ is the most important relationship, but as the upholder of the Plowman dynasty hers is primarily a paternal role in Josh's life, as it is in the village. Aunt is a warm-hearted, charitable woman who, because the village is impoverished, pays to send promising local children to the high school and takes a great interest in the young villagers' social and religious welfare. These young people resent Josh's presence in his aunt's house. To some extent, the hostility of the local young people seems to be based upon envy of his membership in a, to them, important family. Then, too, his aunt has talked about his promising literary qualities to others, although she has never met him before he arrives, and they are jealous

of her regard for him and, conversely, resentful that he and his other cousins are living at her expense during their visits. In fact the village children really *are* living at her expense in a number of ways – and, of course, she begged Josh to come.

His aunt's expectation of Josh in his openly dreadful relation to the others is, basically, *noblesse oblige*. She wants him to extend the hand of forgiveness to a boy who has beaten him to a pulp, renounce any potential relationship with Betsy, the young man's love interest, and—ignoring the miserable days he has been spending—join in picnicking and cricket with the lads who nearly drowned him. This is what, apparently, a Plowman does. By doing this, he would be establishing himself on the higher class stratum that the village apparently believes in, and making some kind of peace, at the same time, with the ill treatment he has received. But Josh refuses this too – both the land and the order that his aunt represents are rejected.

In Freudian terms, Josh is apparently refusing to resolve the Oedipal conflict in the prescribed fashion. That is, he is forthrightly refusing to take on the law of the Father and loosen his attachment to his mother's way of viewing the world. To reactionary but weary social scientists such as David Gutmann, the late sixties certainly encouraged hostility to the patriarchal principle, a condition that according to this reading leads to the inability to ever become mature as an adult and a myriad of social problems of a depressing variety.⁴ Josh's great-aunt, as the head of the Plowman clan, is always associated with Maximilian, his great grandfather, and his own father, back in Melbourne. She is also the only parental figure who has ever tried to enforce any expectations on Josh, it appears. She wants him to do the right thing, as she sees it, but she also urges him toward manly sport and less fastidiousness about using chamber pots. She wants to see more easy-going acceptance of life as it comes. She loves his poetry – indeed, she snatches his journal from his luggage to read it the first chance she gets – but as a Plowman, she wonders if writing poetry isn't also an unnatural activity for a lad. Since she is the living embodiment of what it means to be a Plowman – something his mother has been sarcastic about for years – his refusal to do those things she thinks a Plowman must do seems to be very directly to side with his mother and turn his back on his father's heritage, much more firmly expressed in the village than back home.

Additionally, Aunt also belongs to what Josh sees as a very narrow and violent religion, although it is evidently the one that Southall would have endorsed and found comfortable at Josh's age, whatever he may have felt in 1971. The author tells us that as a child and teenager he had perfect attendance in his aunt's and other Sunday schools in order to acquire the book prize at the end of the year (and presumably because he valued whatever he was learning).⁵ Josh, in contrast, has grave doubts about the legitimacy of Sunday school lessons based upon warlike passages in the Old Testament, and raises his mother, once again, to put forward a greater degree of tolerance, peaceful behavior, and East/West ecumenism as a desirable standard. To accede to Aunt's beliefs is to compromise the values that he has learned from his mother and thought through on his own – and compromise is something he refuses to do.

How much Josh is to blame for riling up the inhabitants – a situation that his aunt calls cathartic – and how much is a matter of being misunderstood by people who are dishonest, phlegmatic, and narrow-minded is left in question within the novel. From Josh's point of view, perhaps, he is being presented with a kind of binary opposition that he refuses to get involved in: why, exactly, *should* he change his own notion of the fitness of things or accept someone else's view of what maturity may be? Questioning adult values and family status quo is surely not only age-appropriate for Josh, but also a product of the novel's late sixties, early seventies era.

On the other hand, Josh seems in part to be guilty of rigidity that anyone with experience is going to realize will probably not work in daily life. He is fiercely loyal, for example: even when he is mad at his great-aunt, he is aghast that the village boys might be making mild jokes about her behind her back. He doesn't have the experience or the knowledge to know that theirs is a kind of love-hate relationship because of her financial sponsorship of some of the young people, but sees it only as a case of hypocrisy and vile disloyalty. But he doesn't simply explain his position; he takes the annoying position of judging without confronting – that he cannot explain this situation to his aunt without possibly hurting her feelings makes the situation even more complicated. Josh is also absolutely against others being hurt – he is not going to consider killing rabbits an option under any circumstances and hates the local teacher for once having questioned poor Laura's honesty when she made up a poem—but the hurt feelings that he litters in his own wake, while not always his fault, are indications that someone else might have managed better. His refusal to explain—his insistence that people believe the truth about him when they hear it—could easily have gotten him killed. He refuses to defend himself against the boy, Will, when he pummels him into a ditch due to dishonest accusations by his peers. Will seems to be a decent person; he is not unnaturally upset to find that he has sent Josh to the hospital entirely without cause—but this doesn't bother Josh at all. He refuses to tell the enflamed athletes who throw him into the river that he cannot swim (as well as that there are reasons for his refusal to play cricket) and distresses the whole crowd who never expected to be doing murder – who may, in fact, have *thought* that they were initiating him into the community. He gets their respect by this stoicism, but at a dreadful cost.

The strength of the book comes from Southall's characterization. I believed in all these people so strongly that I could hardly bear to read some of the chapters. But it also comes from Josh's self-realization of his hopeless ineptitude in this alien environment. It is his wry acknowledgment of his shortcomings, as well as frustrations, in the stream-of-consciousness narrative that make the book complex and sometimes funny and also shows us the potential that Josh might have as a poet. That Josh is a *writer* is important to the novel.

It is at this moment that I will take the risky step of raising the spectre of outside literary examples, not as work that I think Southall was influenced by, but as works that tell us that there might have been something in the water in that decade. The first is Ayn Rand's *Fountainhead*, the second a novel called *The Vivisector* by Patrick White, the Australian Nobel laureate, which was published the year before *Josh*. Both of these

works deal with the subject of what it takes to be a creator – in one case an architect who is designing a skyscraper, in the other, a painter. Both of these novels were bestsellers – Rand’s 1945 novel became a classic film almost immediately, and had a special 25th anniversary edition celebration in 1968. It was a dominant work in my high school and college years in the middle to late 1960’s in the United States, and I am positing a similar influence in Australia. Patrick White’s novel has a main character that in many ways resembles Howard Roark, the architect in *Fountainhead*. Roark, of course, blows up his skyscraper because its design was compromised by a steering committee, is exonerated in court for his brilliant exposition of what it is to be a noble independent human being, and ends up with the new uncompromised skyscraper, the complete humiliation of the tycoon who paid for both, and the exuberant love of the tycoon’s wife – a woman whom he originally raped. Hurtle Duffield, the vivisector, like Roark, adheres to his own rules of social behavior, as well as a unique artistic vision, and uses his own as well as everyone else’s lives unflinchingly to further that vision. He dies, finally, on the scaffolding before his last work, having clawed the beatific vision from his life experiences in an unexampled way. He is celebrated within the book for this purity of principle: his youthful lover states, “I prefer to think of you as the father of anything praiseworthy that will ever come out of me” (494).

While both works were not, of course, written for child audiences, they have obvious appeal to the ardent spirit. The court scene in *Fountainhead*, which includes the stirring lines: “Degrees of ability vary, but the basic principle remains the same: the degree of a man’s independence, initiative and personal love for his work determines his talent as a worker and his work as a man. Independence is the only gauge of human virtue and value There is no substitute for personal dignity. There is no standard of personal dignity except independence” (714) are some of the most satisfying wish-fulfillment lines ever written for a youth bent on asserting his superiority to the standards around him. The musings of the dying Duffield about the stagnant others: “free to read newspapers, open letters, answer doorbells, waste their lives yarning on the telephone—happy human beings who hadn’t preserved themselves for a final statement of faith they probably wouldn’t be capable of making” (552) similarly reinforces the superiority of the creative spirit and the nobility of the dedicated life, a life that could easily be taken as selfish and cruel. It is tempting to think that Southall’s novel is, in a way, a kind of wry look at what happens when a young person acts like the heroes of these Romantic novels.

Josh’s situation points up the weakness, to some extent, of *Fountainhead*, which combines noble thoughts with emotional unlikelihood. Josh is a poet. He is very sensitive to the feelings of others as well as ironic at his own expense in his internal monologues, and so his independent judgment and dedication to his poetry keep falling prey to the uncomfortable situations and hurt feelings so majestically ignored by Roark. People do not, at his youthful stage, automatically bow to his superior dedicated life – there is an overwhelming messiness about his inability to do anything at all with the “human beings who hadn’t preserved themselves for a final statement of faith” that is painfully humorous. At the same time, his superiority does seem to be upheld. Although like White’s novel *Josh* may involve some classism, the hero’s superiority is based upon his determination to take poetry passionately and to assume, as these other works do, that

how he lives determines how valuable his poetic vision will be. As in *Fountainhead* and *The Vivisector*, there is a dominant creative work looming in the background. His grandfather's enormous and, in this impoverished setting, ludicrous railroad bridge inspires Josh and Laura in their independent actions.

Josh obviously differs from the books John Stephens discusses in his current *The Lion and Unicorn* introduction about the ideologies in contemporary Australian books that praise the need for autonomy while simultaneously encouraging the need for harmonious interaction with community.⁶ Here the village youngsters combine wholesome, healthy Digger qualities of "living in the day" and "not looking much under the surface" with widespread dishonesty and parochial limitations. Walking back to Melbourne is not a retreat from the Bush; it is good sense for a cosmopolitan person.

Josh's time-sensitive image of the Australian as artist rather than as amiable egalitarian laborer, however, also encapsulates another older ideology that all of us recognize from popular nineteenth-century works, but which amazes, a little, in this context. Like Hertle Duffield, like Goethe's Faust, it is not only that the artist must live for his art and use the people and experiences that come his way to further that end, alone. He will also, by this means, have what Kate Douglas Wiggin called "the inestimable advantage of sorrow."⁷ Lying at the heart of *Josh*, and all over the autobiographical essays of Southall, is the assumption that an artist must suffer in order to write. In the essays, Southall makes it clear that his childhood and the early days of his first marriage were filled with serious hardship and deprivation, yet he also recounts an amazing story of a party experiment with something like a ouija board that mysteriously located an abandoned mining shaft with real gold in it on his property. He tells how he reluctantly--to be agreeable to his guests--trudged the proscribed steps, identified quantities of the mineral in the mine, and subsequently filled in the shaft and disguised the location. When faced by potential wealth at a time of extreme poverty, he says "I viewed it as a choice between the easy way and the hard way, between gold or fulfillment. It might have been something else entirely, but that was how I viewed it" (87). Josh's first public mentor, a school-visiting poet, might have been Southall himself. The old war hero looked at Josh and said, "You've got to get hurt. . . if you want to write books. When you cry you cry for someone else. When you laugh you laugh at yourself. When you're cruel it's your own life you tear to bits" (62). Walking to Melbourne, a morass of hurt and awkwardness behind him and within him, Josh is now better prepared than he was before to be a poet. Josh has wrested something of value out of his holiday experience, after all: suffering. And, as a person who can laugh at himself when continually wearing motley and bells, he has also achieved some manhood in the novel's terms. While not able to easily dismiss the community dismay he leaves behind, I perceive a quirky grandeur in Southall's vision, a vision soon replaced in young adult novels by decades of suffering unredeemed by holy purpose.

Notes

¹ For discussion of the Bush in Australian children's literature, including Southall's *Ash Road*, see McVitty (Bush) and Lees and Macintyre (Bushfire).

² See, for example, Lees and Macintyre, 397.

³ *Journey of Discovery*, pp 41-44.

⁴ “The Paternal Imperative.”

⁵ *Journey of Discovery*, pp 64; 72-3.

⁶ *The Lion and the Unicorn* 27.2.

⁷ *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*, page 33.

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