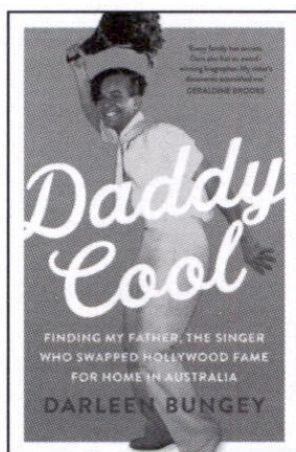


MEMOIR

Sweet Man

Unriddling a mercurial father

Tali Lavi



Daddy Cool: Finding my father, the singer who swapped Hollywood fame for home in Australia

by Darleen Bungey

Allen & Unwin

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“I must remember accurately,” I told myself, “remember everything accurately so that when he is gone I can re-create the father who created me.” This is Philip Roth exhorting himself while witnessing his declining father bathe in *Patrimony: A true story* (1991), a memoir that opens when Herman Roth is diagnosed with a brain tumour. The book, tender but also brutal, slips between the present and the past. Philip Roth, after all, is the writer. The matter of accuracy feels particularly perilous when the subject is the writer’s parent, if the intention is not to write a hagiography. It takes a particular kind of courage to countenance a parent’s failings when not motivated by revenge.

Darleen Bungey's literary pursuit of her father is taken up from the other side of his death twenty-six years ago. The driving force is an attempt to understand him, a sometimes troubled man whose past as a famed singer was elusive to her. *Alice in Wonderland*, a story she has vivid memories of her father reading to her at night when she was six years old, frames the book. She professes that 'words were important to him'; his delivery of the wondrous tale is perfectly pitched, like the songs he sang. By the book's close we realise that this intimate performance is a love song to both his daughter and his delight in words. The book's epigraph comes from Alice herself, 'Who in the world am I? Ah, that's the great puzzle.'

Bungey's search revolves around her American father's life before he settled down with his fourth wife, her mother, Gloria, in suburban Sydney. As the subtitle attests, the life he lived as Robert Ahern Cutter was startlingly different from the one he pursued as Lawrence, or Lawrie, Brooks, a name adopted in 1939, in his early thirties, to remake a reputation tarnished by a fractious divorce and an accident.

Daddy Cool often sits more comfortably in the realm of biography than of memoir. Bungey is adept at this form, having previously written award-winning biographies of two colossal Australian artists (*Arthur Boyd: A life*, 2007, and *John Olsen: An artist's life*, 2015). She contemplates whether those earlier biographies may have originated from the unarticulated desire to 'unriddle' her father. An affecting *Wonderland*-inspired refrain plays across the book when Bungey frets at the limits of her investigative skills, 'but I was too late'; evoking the perennially late white rabbit. She chides herself for not finding out more when Lawrie was alive. Gloria did not openly speak about her husband's early life and marriages, while Lawrie rarely referred to his past.

There are cameos by a string of screen and music legends, including Peter Finch and Bing Crosby; a second wife who was both screen siren and a genuine femme fatale. Audiences clamoured to hear the 'Sweet Man'. The writer's preoccupations sometimes work to undermine the pleasures she accrues in uncovering stories of Lawrie's glamorous past and all that shimmering bedazzlement. Why did she not know more about her father, whose singing, both private and public, was not secret? Her more distressing concern is the origins of his darkness. Lawrie, in both of his iterations, had a fondness for alcohol with ruinous consequences. This is where the portrait takes on a chiaroscuro effect; the darkening influence of drink on his family is painful, casting looming shadows. The knowledge that Gloria's own mother was

an alcoholic makes it worse. There is the struggle to reconcile this version of her father with the one that is loved.

Why did Bungey not know more about her father, whose singing, both private and public, was not secret?

The origins of Lawrie's fractured psyche lie in his childhood. He was conceived in an apocalyptic landscape; the 1906 earthquake and fire destroyed much of San Francisco. But it is not the only fault-line in his upbringing. Two weeks after his birth, his much doted upon brother died at the age of two. The grief shattered his parents' marriage. In their divorce case, the judge proclaimed them to be 'guilty of moral turpitude' after hearing evidence of affairs, and removed the young Robert to his grandparents' care. Although they were a source of stability and love, forever after he was in pursuit of his beloved father.

As art flowed through the veins of the Boyd family, music and particularly words were, and continue to be, Lawrie's family's mode of expression. Lawrie's medium was manifold: songs, stories, and copious letters, including a close epistolary relationship with his firstborn American daughter, Miki. The impulse to write has been inherited by both Bungey and her younger sister Geraldine Brooks. Their mother, too, had a knack for writing.

Initial suspicions of Gloria being a parochial housewife too concerned with her neighbours' regard are quickly disabused. One of this book's delights is to behold her vivifying presence. Gloria's story is of a young woman who became highly successful at broadcasting in the 1930s and 1940s and whose witty, lively character was as charismatic as her husband's stage presence. Their relationship, when not beset by Lawrie's bouts of drinking, was characterised by warmth. While Lawrie might have 'shed a life of glamour and travel for a packed lunch ... a nine-to-five job', the setting was in the quieter mode, not in his life partner.

Lewis Carroll's classic opens with a prefacing poem, 'All in a Golden Afternoon'. There are various golden periods depicted in *Daddy Cool* – of Hollywood and radio – but it is the writer's golden age of childhood, of being loved by her father and mother, that is the most halcyon. For Lawrie Brooks, her subject, the restorative influence of his last family's love is positively amber-hued. ■

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Gloria van Boss and Lawrence Brooks after their engagement in 1946