

The uses of experience

Leon Garfield

Résumé: *Leon Garfield explique ici brièvement comment l'expérience joue un rôle déterminant dans la conception de son oeuvre, surtout ces expériences les plus anciennes, comme les visites aux Kew Gardens, qui jalonnent son enfance.*

Of all human emotions, perhaps the deepest and the most universal is the fear of being found out. Consequently, when I was asked to write about my own life and experience in relation to the books I have written, my first impulse was to invent a biography which would be somewhat more distinguished than the furtive slithering down the years, like a ball on a pin-table, impelled more by the force of gravity than anything else, that my own life seems to have been. So I considered the books that I had written and tried to concoct a life in keeping, a life that would include the odd scrap of piracy, a great deal of thieving, some half dozen murders, a ghost or two, and enough sharp practice to slice up the laws of the land like a loaf of bread. For a while, I was encouraged by the recollection of meeting a reader who said that I was exactly as she had imagined me from reading my books. Whether she saw me as a waif or a cut-throat, I do not know; but it was only after prolonged thought that I began to question the solidity of her judgement, and to have the gravest doubts as to whether I myself could ever fit comfortably into the world I had made. No, I decided at length. I would not feel at home.

I looked into my very first published book, (the four novels and countless short stories that I had written before that had been stored in a garden shed where they had been burned by a jobbing gardener, who proved himself to be a better literary critic than ever he was a tender of the soil!) I repeat, I looked into my first book and wondered what sort of figure I would cut on a pirate vessel, in a tropical rain forest and in a slave auction. I wondered at my temerity in setting the incidents of my story in places and circumstances so far removed from my own meagre experience. My knowledge of ships extended no further than what could be gleaned from reading a sailing manual, a visit to a maritime museum, (where I learned which end was the poop) and a trip across the English Channel to the island of Jersey, (most of which I spent in the bar). The nearest I had ever got to a tropical rain forest was a visit to the large greenhouse in Kew Gardens, where I pricked myself on a cactus and spent several hours morbidly convinced that the spikes had been deadly. And

my only acquaintance with auctions--slave or otherwise--was a most unhappy occasion when I found myself bidding, with lunatic abandon, for a certain Lot 191, which, in the face of tepid opposition, I acquired, only to discover that it consisted of a pair of broken candlesticks, provenance unknown, two pink wine-glasses, alleged to be Bohemian, and badly chipped, and a singularly repulsive china group that, in the distance, I was sure had been Derby. It wasn't. I departed from the auction several pounds poorer in pocket and spirit, and left my purchase in a public lavatory, being ashamed to take it home.

Such, then, was the personal experience that lay at the heart of those wild adventures. And yet it proved to be sufficient for my purposes. Each of those insignificant events that had befallen me, acted like the grain of sand in an oyster, that irritates the creature into producing a pearl; or, in my case, several sizeable chapters. It was, I know now, the essential difference between what the gardener had so perspicaciously burned and what, eventually, a kindly publisher was prepared to risk money on.

My first writings were merely playing with words; and I blush to recall them. And yet, in a way, I suppose those flowery excesses were necessary. It was my way of learning my trade. I was like an apprentice who must learn to sharpen and care for his tools before ever he is able to use them.

Perhaps it was the wrong way round? I mean, learning how to say something before ever I had anything to say. But then, I find that I tend to mistrust those burning geniuses who burst into print without ever having learned how to write. As a rule, I can make neither head nor tail of them; and often feel a sense of humiliating inferiority when I read critics who find profundity in what, to me, is no more than muddled obscurity. A little grammar never hurt anybody; and, as a rule, third and fourth attempts are an improvement on the first.

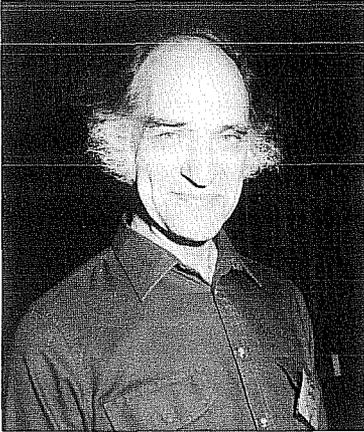
But to return to the uses of experience. I remember, when I was at school, I was always told that I should never write outside my own experience. Depressing advice for an ambitious schoolboy whose experience of life was, to say the least of it, limited; and where that experience exceeded the limits of what was considered acceptable for a fourteen-year-old, it was of a variety that I felt reluctant to set down. It was not for many years that I realised what the admirable advice I'd been given really meant. It was, of course, the grain of sand. . . that vital speck of personal experience that must lie at the heart of an imagined structure. I found it in my first published book; and, after that, it wasn't so much that I never looked back, but that I never stopped looking back! Incidents from my youth and childhood became a splendid plundering ground. In my second book, I made extensive use of my father. He had died some years before, and I was only just beginning to get to know him, through the efforts of several gossipy aunts. It turned out that he hadn't been at all how I'd imagined him, a stern, dignified figure of unimpeachable rectitude. He had, instead, been a charming philanderer and a businessman so inept that his

failures were more spectacular than most people's successes. He became a Godsend. The book dealt with a family of strolling players, and my father appeared as the father of the group, a pillar of respectability, supporting absolutely nothing. Since that time, he, and most of my family have appeared in all my books, though, I am thankful to say, they have never recognized themselves.

As a matter of passing interest, I have always considered that this first realization of the fallibility of a parent marks the first step into truly adult life. I have never been able to accept that it is the knowledge and experience of sex. To me, the knowledge and experience of sex mark little more than the knowledge and experience of sex. I think that *David Copperfield* is a far more adult work than, say, *Emmanuele*. If sexual experience was really the criterion of wisdom, then Casanova would have been one of the wisest men who ever lived, which, even the most cursory reading of his memoirs would contradict. The luckiest, maybe; the wisest, never!

To return to my subject. Little by little, in book after book, I used up my family, a collection of quite ordinary people whom I happily exaggerated into fiction. Sometimes, I admit, I passed beyond the confines of delicacy and good taste. For instance, I remember a melancholy occasion when I visited my brother in hospital, where he was mortally ill of a brain tumour. I remember noting the peculiar physical effect of his condition, which resulted in his confusing the orders of words, and his inability to place a spoon accurately into a teacup. I was, at the time, engaged on a completion of Dickens's *Edwin Drood*; and, within a week, I had made use of the experience in depicting the last night of John Jasper, before he was hanged. A gloomy tale, but one that I hope shows how personal experience permeates almost every scrap of a writer's work.

Nevertheless, the actual experience that has given rise to any particular flight of the imagination is, generally, known to the writer alone; and it can be misleading to attempt to divine a writer's actual nature from his work. Let me remind you of Stephen Leacock's penetrating analysis of the nature of Shakespeare by means of shrewdly selected quotations. As nearly as I can remember, it occurred in his *Businessmans guide to literature*: Shakespeare was a drinking man he surmised, e.g., "What wouldst thou have?" (*Timon of Athens*, Act 4. Scene 3)... "but not to excess"..."Hold! Enough!" (*Macbeth*. Act 5. Scene 8).



Leon Garfield

Leon Garfield has produced a long list of