Hanif Kureishi’s *My ear at his heart*: ‘when a writer is born a family dies’

Susie Thomas*
Independent Scholar, Brighton, UK

This article explores the ambiguities, ironies and ethical dilemmas of using real people in fiction and the relation between memoir and fiction. After looking at how this debate has surfaced as a theme in Hanif Kureishi’s fictional works, the author examines his memoir, *My ear at his heart: reading my father*, and concludes that Kureishi’s memoir provides an important perspective on his earlier work and constitutes a valuable addition to the literature of family life, identity and migration.

‘If the ghost of a man’s own father cannot be allowed to claim his attention, what can, Sir?’ (Charles Dickens, *Great expectations*)

‘We travel with a corpse in our cargo.’ Ibsen is saying here that the dead—dead fathers…—are as potent, even more potent, than actually existing ones … How do you kill a dead father then? (Hanif Kureishi, *Something to tell*)

In his directly autobiographical essay about racism, ‘The rainbow sign’, Hanif Kureishi said that he had to begin writing it in the third person to deal honestly with painful experiences (Kureishi, 1986/2002, p. 53). Of his novel about marital breakdown, *Intimacy* (1998), widely assumed to be confessional, Kureishi said, ‘I am not the text’ (Yousaf, 2002, p. 25). Given that he initially employed a mask to tell the truth in the former, and tells the truth behind a mask in the latter, to what extent is Kureishi justified in insisting that his fictions should not be read autobiographically? Conversely, one might also ask: what are the social and psychological dynamics involved in the desire of readers and critics to identify the author in his works?

Kureishi raises this question at the beginning of *My ear at his heart: reading my father* (2004b):

As a young man, if I discovered a writer I liked, I’d look out for anything written about him. He or she, as well as the work, then became the subject, the source of the words. If he liked hats, I would think about getting a hat; reading about Scott Fitzgerald always inspired me to go to the pub. The fact is, the place writers and artists hold in the public imagination exists beyond their work. (p. 16)

*24 Upper Wellington Road, Brighton, East Sussex BN2 3AN, UK. Email: thomassusie@hotmail.com*
Although Kureishi seems to be acknowledging the legitimacy of readers’ interest in the author’s biography, at the same time he mocks such an interest as jejune and reductive—a matter of hats and pubs—something readers should outgrow. But the teasing, self-referential quality of much of Kureishi’s work might even seem to encourage such extra-textual identifications. A writer in the short story, ‘This was then’, for example, has written ‘with urgent persistence, an uninhibited memoir of his father. The book spoke of his own childhood terrors, as well as his father’s vanity and tenderness … Before publication, he was afraid of being mocked; it was an honest book, an earnest one, even’ (Kureishi, 1999, p. 68). Advance notice of My ear at his heart, perhaps, and an indication of how he would like it to be read.

But it is never only the writer’s life and terrors that find their way into fiction; there is always collateral damage. ‘Why did you take parts of me and put them in a book?’ asks the former lover of the writer in ‘This was then’ (Kureishi, 1999, p. 74). Turning from autobiography to biography, one might question the ethics of using real people in fiction. Kureishi’s writing has often dealt with the possibly exploitative nature of such representations. He expresses reservations in ‘Some time with Stephen’ about using his former girlfriend, ‘Sarah’, as the model for Rosie in Sammy and Rosie get laid (1988): ‘She has started to call the film “Hanif gets paid, Sarah gets exploited”’ (Kureishi, 1988/2002, p. 193). Karim’s first moral dilemma in The Buddha of suburbia (1990) is whether he should use Changez (which he does) to create the character of Tariq in Pyke’s improvised play after he has been forbidden to do so: ‘If I used the bastard, it meant that I was untrustworthy, a liar’ (Kureishi, 1990, p. 186). It is not only that the writer has the power to trap others in his descriptions of them but also that the suffering of others can simply become material. The suggestion that Kureishi himself was exploiting the Asian community surfaces early on in his career in his play Borderline, in which a young writer is challenged about his work: ‘It’s subtle with suffering. Whose suffering, Haroon?’ (Kureishi, 1981/1992, p. 148). And there is no more devastating critique of the writer’s humiliating exposure of others, particularly women, than the former lover’s outburst in ‘This was then’:

You’re omnipotent and self-sufficient in that little room with your special pens that no one’s allowed to touch … You were always retreating to that womb or hiding place. What made me cross was how you placed the madness outside yourself—in me, the half-addicted, promiscuous, self-devouring crazy girl. Isn’t that misogyny? (Kureishi, 1999, p. 75)

The implication here seems to be, not merely that the writer is exposing others, but that he is projecting aspects of himself onto others, which is arguably a more serious distortion. The writer in the story looks startled but has no reply.

The way the theme of exploitation surfaces in Kureishi’s work may have a touch of qui s’accuse, s’excuse about it. Nonetheless, it should be remembered that writers have often been ruthless; the closer the relationship, the more ripe for betrayal in print. Nora Barnacle was horrified to read of the intimacies of her life with James Joyce in the short story ‘The dead’, but few now would wish it had not been written. So if writers expose others in order to write the truth as they see it, one can only say that it
had better be good (otherwise it is morally on a par with ‘kiss and tell’). However, even the argument that exposing others in fiction is ethically legitimate if it is of a high aesthetic standard is debatable since such a representation may be more wounding and enduring than one that could be dismissed as, say, one-dimensional and caricatural. Does it help if the writer exposes himself in the same cause, as Joyce did, as Kureishi has done? It would still have to be acknowledged that the writer, at least partly, controls the exposure, as those he exposes do not.

Kureishi’s most recent works, the play *When the night begins* (2004a), his film *The mother* (2003) and the memoir *My ear at his heart*, constitute a change in direction. Where previously he had explored the political ramifications of writing about race, class and gender, these probe the issue of representation for its psychological implications: the unreliability of memory and competing versions of the family myth. *The mother* is about a mother and daughter who disagree about their shared past; the mother is the sexual rival of her adult daughter (who is, not incidentally, a failed writer). Moreover, *When the night begins* raises, for the first time, the possibility of a mutually beneficial relationship between writer and real-life source. In the play the stepfather of a recently widowed young woman insinuates that the screenplay her husband planned to write about her experience of sexual abuse was exploitative, but she replies categorically: ‘We were useful to one another’ (Kureishi, 2004a, p. 34).

But the most profound exploration of whether using other people as material is justified is found in *My ear at his heart*. This memoir is based on Kureishi’s reading of two of his father’s unpublished novels: ‘An Indian adolescence’, which his father wrote during retirement, and an earlier novel, ‘The redundant man’, which Kureishi recalls having first read in the early 1980s. Kureishi describes these manuscripts as ‘a legacy of words, a protracted will’ (p. 1), and *My ear at his heart* is an attempt to come to terms with his inheritance: ‘this has become a quest, for my place in father’s history and fantasy, and for the reasons my father lived the semi-broken life he did’ (p. 29). The legacy is both a burden, as his father’s long illness had been a burden (‘How can you live your life when your father is failing to live his?’ (p. 12)) and a gift: ‘as I spin my words out of his words, stories out of other stories’ (p. 94). The anxieties about exploiting others surface again: ‘I feel guilty about what I am doing to the family. By what right can I do this? Who does father, or anyone, belong to?’ (p. 94). But there is also the belief that in reading and writing about his father’s novels he is acting in accordance with his wishes. Kureishi says he stopped reading his father’s work after the age of about 16 but, eleven years after his father’s death, when he discovers the manuscript of ‘An Indian adolescence’, he is able to engage with it in a way that his father would have appreciated: ‘I suppose a book becomes a real book if even just one person opens it and tries to receive its communication’ (p. 10). His father had wanted Kureishi to find a publisher (‘You are knowing all these damned people, yaar!’ (p. 96)) and with *My ear at his heart*, in a sense, he has: ‘Father has at last received from me what he wanted when he sat down to write each morning: his stories have been read, pored over, lived with, become the subject of conversation’ (p. 194). *My ear at his heart* is a testament to his father’s perseverance as a writer; it is an act of homage. But at various points in the memoir, Kureishi is
critical of his father’s work, admits that he is ‘rewriting’ it (p. 77), answers back (p. 114) and becomes ‘furious’ (p. 117). He is particularly angry at seeing himself fictionalised in ‘The redundant man’, a novel that explores how alien his father felt in England and how estranged from his son, and in which the young Kureishi appears as a ‘brown cockney bum’ (p. 111). At about the same time, Kureishi’s father also wrote a play called ‘Grocer and son’ in which ‘the son steals from the father, robbing the shop till, for which the father beats him up. The son flees the family, which devastates them. Without the boy there is no purpose’ (p. 117). If, as seems possible, Kureishi’s father saw his son as having stolen the success due to him, then this play about a rebellious son destroying his family is a dramatisation of Roth’s dictum: ‘when a writer is born a family dies’.

The fury Kureishi feels on reading ‘The redundant man’ is not only about seeing himself unflatteringly caricatured, but also about what he considers his father’s self-hating self-portraiture. Although Kureishi seems to find the story before he joined it, ‘An Indian adolescence’, less ambivalent reading, he tends to summarise rather than quote extensively from it. This may be a protective strategy, intended to show his father’s writing at its best, but it also reveals a complete editorial control:

_They’ve turned out, in my retelling, to mean more than he thought they meant. He’d be surprised and annoyed, amazed even, by what his work has become in my head, by how little dominion he has over the fate of his words, even as he puts his side of the story._ (p. 195)

There is, it seems, no end to the rivalry between father and son as writers, except in the negative sense, that his father cannot reply: death has indeed no dominion. Or does it? My ear at his heart is a ghost memoir, with the son haunted, trying to write a story about meeting his dead father, still dreaming of him (p. 177). Part of Kureishi’s purpose in writing My ear at his heart may well have been an attempt to lay his father’s ghost to rest but he discovers that a ‘dead father is even more potent than an existing one’ (Something to tell, unpublished manuscript).

It is not only the unresolved anxiety about exploitation which resurfaces in My ear at his heart, but also the difficulty of distinguishing between auto/biography and fiction. It could be argued that there is no clear-cut distinction between the two genres: any biography or autobiography is inevitably selective, shaped, subjective and therefore fictional. Kureishi himself concedes that, despite having ‘studied [his] parents at close quarters’ for many years and engaging in this ‘research’, his memoir ‘is probably closer to fiction than [he] would like to think’ (p. 13). It could also be argued that fiction, while allowing greater scope for the imagination in the transformation of facts, cannot help but be informed by autobiographical experience. Writers tend to resent their work being read autobiographically, on the grounds that this is both reductive (limits the meaning of the text) and minimises the artistry or craft. In attempting to get to the heart of his father’s story, to understand the ‘wound’ from which he suffered, Kureishi finds himself in the paradoxical position of reading his father’s novels as memoir masquerading as fiction:
Although dad’s book is written in the third person, switching occasionally, by ‘mistake’, into the first, I have to say it seems inevitable that I will read his stories as personal truths, if not in the detail then in the feeling. It annoys me, as it might any novelist, to have my own work reduced to autobiography, as though you’ve just written down what happened. Often, writing isn’t always a reflection of experience so much as a substitute for it, an ‘instead of’ rather than a ‘reliving’, a kind of daydreaming. The relation between a life and the telling of it is impossible to unravel. Still, whatever my father has made, I will be reconstructing him from these fragments or traces, attempting to locate his ‘self’ in the imaginings or scatterings. (p. 15)

It is a major irony that Kureishi, as a reader, approaches his father’s novels in a way that he would doubtless object to if his own fiction were raided for its autobiographical content. It seems he has no alternative: ‘But where else could you look?’ (p. 15). In ‘The critic as artist’, Oscar Wilde said: ‘Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask and he will tell you the truth’ (1890/1969, p. 389). If, as I suggested earlier, Kureishi has found it safer to wear a mask in order to write about painful experience, it may also be the case that he prefers to confront his father by penetrating the mask of his father’s fiction.

From a Freudian point of view (which is increasingly the lens through which Kureishi views family life), it matters less whether an event did or did not happen, than what the fantasy reveals about unconscious desires. Kureishi speculates that ‘perhaps father needed it to be a novel because it contained so much truth. In order to speak, he required the disguise of character and imposed narrative’ (p. 16). ‘An Indian adolescence’ tells the story of 16-year-old Shani, his older brother, Mahmood, his religious but emotionally distant mother, Bibi, and the stern patriarch, Colonel Murad. Kureishi assumes these are portraits of his father, whose nickname was Shannoo, his uncle Omar and his paternal grandparents. The novel begins as they leave the luxurious family home in Poona in order to move to Bombay where Colonel Murad has bought a soap factory. Kureishi speculates that ‘An Indian adolescence’ is novelistic in the sense that his father was one of twelve children but he ‘cleared out the rest of the family in order to concentrate on one particular brother, on one representative tension’ (p. 18): namely, intense sibling rivalry. It recounts Shani’s first humiliating experience of being in love, with a girl he believes prefers his more confident and dashing brother, and Shani’s first sexual encounter. The prospect of reading about this seems to make Kureishi nervous: ‘I have to say it is disconcerting to be entering a brothel with your father’ (p. 53), and he notices that in his father’s novels, love and sexuality are always separate. Shani is an endearing if troubled character, who feels unloved by his mother, inferior to his brother and terrified of his father. ‘An Indian adolescence’ is a novel about class and Shani’s guilt at being from a ‘privileged, comfortable’ home as he passes through the slums of Bombay teeming with ‘the sick, the poor, the crippled and the homeless’ (p. 24). It is also about colonialism and the complications of being educated in British schools but opposed to British rule and of being a Muslim rejected by Hindu nationalists.

One of the key scenes in ‘An Indian adolescence’ is a ‘massive demo’ against the British in which Shani plays a heroic role. Kureishi sums up the plot in a way that elides the distinction between reality and fantasy:
So far in the course of this story, Shani has moved from one city to another, lost his virginity to a prostitute, been responsible for burning a policeman to death, saved a friend from arrest, and kissed the girl he is in love with. He is proud that he has taken part in India’s freedom struggle, which is his own in more ways than one. And he has shown, in the written day-dream we have just read, that he can be brave. (p. 64)

There is simply no way to know whether these events occurred or are a fantasy—a retrospective substitute for actual experience.

As additional ‘research’, Kureishi compares his father’s Bildungsroman with his uncle Omar’s memoir, Once upon a time, which deals with the same period. After reading ‘An Indian adolescence’, Kureishi wonders if his father’s ‘wound … the feeling of defeat and inferiority that he tried to overcome by becoming a writer’ (p. 39) was ‘the powerful and furious envy’ (p. 38) of his brother. In the novel, Mahmood/Omar is handsome, clever, confident—the parents’ favourite son. In reality, Omar Kureishi went on to become a distinguished journalist and cricket commentator (cricket is political—beating the English at their own game (p. 33)), who seems to have lived a glamorous and successful life, in contrast to Kureishi’s father who remained an unpublished novelist while working as a clerk in the Pakistan Embassy. Opening Once upon a time, Kureishi finds it clear that his uncle’s ‘temperate, witty’ voice will tell a very different story from the tortured adolescence of his father: ‘Omar begins by saying that the British Raj—“founded on the certainty of a racial and moral superiority over the natives”—will be the central character of his account of pre-Partition India. His book will be concerned with a political link, and with what power does to those who have it and those who don’t’ (p. 31).

According to Omar Kureishi, theirs was a happy family: ‘there was no sibling rivalry’ (p. 36). Like most family memories recounted by different siblings, there is little similarity between the two:

Omar, in his account, doesn’t recall any of this going on [himself as favoured son, favoured lover], but then it isn’t his intention to give us the low-down on the family conflicts. For him, emotional strife is focused around colonialism and cricket. It is the British, not the father or the brothers, who have the power he wants to escape. It is into ‘the British’ that he puts the bad things. (p. 39)

Kureishi does not try to judge which of these two accounts of the family is true: his father’s and his uncle’s stories are inevitably different; the successful brother does not feel any rivalry, the insecure brother smarts under the sense of inferiority. But the reader of My ear at his heart may wonder if the disparity between the two texts undermines the possibility of getting to the heart of the matter through reading.

According to Omar Kureishi’s memoirs, there was no ‘wound’. However, he did seem to concede that his brother’s was a ‘semi-broken’ life, when he was shown ‘The redundant man’, the tragic novel about an Indian immigrant in London: ‘It’s about him, Omar said to me later, with some sadness’ (p. 95). But Omar Kureishi seemed to believe that the problem was not the family in India; if there was a wound it was self-inflicted. One could only deduce from Once upon a time, that Kureishi’s father had made a mistake by settling in England and was deluding himself by wanting to become a writer. The brothers’ paths diverged for good when Omar Kureishi
returned to Pakistan in 1953, full of enthusiasm for his new country: ‘I had come to Pakistan by choice, not for what the country could do for me but what I could do for the country’ (p. 89). He had a vocation and before long became a celebrity. His brother, meanwhile, tried to break free from his past: ‘Dad never went to Pakistan, not even for a holiday. He never saw his mother again. Rejoining his family would be too difficult’ (p. 49). He wrote about Pakistan instead and ‘made his own empire’ (p. 100) in the London suburbs, where he was never completely at home. Writing, in a far more problematic way, was his vocation too.

It may have seemed to Omar Kureishi (and to others in the family) that his brother was not being realistic and that if he ‘forfeited his fantasies’ (p. 85), he would lead a fuller life. Literature, writing or reading it, can easily become a substitute for living. But Kureishi speculates that if his father had been persuaded to give up his art ‘he might have succumbed to mental illness; his writing and perhaps its very failure kept him going and hoping, kept chaos and anxiety away’ (p. 85). Kureishi’s father’s life raises the question of what it means to be a writer: do you become one because you sit at your desk every day? Or because you have readers? In Virginia Woolf’s most moving portrait of the struggling artist, Lily Briscoe, in To the lighthouse (1927), what counts is that Lily has her vision and finally manages to get it on the canvas, even though she knows that it will be rolled up, stored in a dusty attic and never seen. Woolf suggests that to continue, despite self-doubt and without recognition, may look to others like the futility of the talentless pretender, but it might also be proof of integrity. As Susan Sontag (2005) said of the unpublished Russian novelist, Leonid Tsypkin: ‘Writing without hope or prospect of being published—what faith in literature does that imply?’ (p. 4).

My ear at his heart is not only about understanding his father, but also about Kureishi’s own development as a writer. As a naturally ‘rebellious son’ (p. 114), the fact that this vocation was mapped out for him by his father caused a problem. Kureishi quotes from his diary of 1970: ‘The idea is for me to stay in my room all the time’ and he comments: ‘This was my father’s wish for me—one he made when he thought I should become a writer—and it was already the only place I felt safe’ (p. 5). Even now he writes: ‘Sometimes … I think I go to my desk only to obey my father’ (p. 10). But the model of the writer’s life that he learned from his father set up a sterile opposition between writing, safety and reclusivity on the one side, with living, danger and other people outside the door. His father wanted him to write but he could not write what his father wanted: ‘father’s approval of my words would make them difficult to produce’ (p. 157).

Adrienne Rich defined matrophobia, not as the fear of one’s mother, but the fear of becoming one’s mother; in a similar sense, Kureishi seems to have suffered from patrophobia. In order to become a writer without becoming his father, Kureishi identified with his uncle Omar Kureishi. To have stayed under his father’s influence would have condemned him to the role of ‘weak, little brother’ that his father had been forced to play (p. 44); but to ally himself with his uncle felt like a betrayal: ‘It must have been difficult for my father to see me fascinated by a man he was so rivalrous with … [an] unexpected and painful form of infidelity … a son with his
uncle, your own brother’ (p. 129). Kureishi’s uncle is described as ‘a boaster and show-off’ (p. 43), ruthless, pleasure-seeking and successful, the antithesis of his steady, responsible, suburban father (pp. 127–128). One of the discoveries that Kureishi makes in *My ear at his heart* is that he put the two brothers, one ‘effective’ and one ‘useless’, with the son moving between them, into his first film *My beautiful laundrette* (1985), which he began writing while staying in Karachi with his uncle. The son in the film becomes successful when he leaves his father’s sickbed and comes under the patronage of his morally ambiguous uncle, a move that the father comes to resent as rebellion and betrayal. Although it might not appear immediately convincing, the same father/uncle/child triangle occurs in *The Buddha of suburbia*, with Anwar weak and defeated and Haroon, although often described as ‘useless’, managing to get to a more glamorous, sexually exciting life in central London. The role of the rebellious child is clearly seen in Jamila’s conflict with her father, who is bedridden but nonetheless determined to control the course of his daughter’s life. Kureishi’s question in *My ear at his heart*—‘How can you live your life when your father is failing to live his?’—is also Jamila’s. Jamila’s solution, of ‘rebellion against rebellion’ (Kureishi, 1990, p. 82), of apparently conforming to her father’s dictates but in reality finding a way to live her own life, is a parallel to Kureishi’s own struggle to become a writer (the path his father had set him on) but on his own terms.

The work of differentiating himself from his father, as a man and as a writer, seems to have been effected through a series of identifications with transgressive avuncular figures both in real life and his reading. *My ear at his heart* records the process through which Kureishi managed to get out of the room-of-his-own, where he could not in fact write, because the room was, symbolically, his father’s. Whether he looks to older male friends, his actual uncles, male mentors, or hero-worships a series of dead and living writers, these rebellious ‘uncles’ are seen in direct opposition to his father. Kureishi’s father was ‘the boss in our house’ and was very controlled (as if he had ‘an internal parent, giving commands’) but the writers Hanif Kureishi admired as a young man—‘Henry Miller, say, or Kerouac, or even De Quincey, and music heroes like Charlie Parker or sportsmen like George Best—seemed to represent a desirable anarchy’ (p. 100). A persistent theme in the memoir is an attraction to rebellion and disorder (represented by Omar) and an equally powerful terror at the possibility of self-destruction (learned from his father). He begins *My ear at his heart* by announcing that ‘whoever else was in it, I decided right away that the focus would be Chekhov’s work’ (p. 2) but he does not, in fact, get around to Chekhov until almost the end of the memoir. Chekhov, who is greatly admired by Kureishi, was his father’s favourite writer and thus could not be an ally. Chekhov’s great subject was uselessness, frustration, neurosis: ‘His characters, not unlike my father, were looking for an ideal way to live, which they believed, when they found it, would render them happy at last. From a certain point of view their lives seem futile’ (p. 172). Moreover, these ineffective characters are often women (p. 172). But Kureishi’s reading was a search for corroboration of his rebellion and for direction about how to be a man.
After he failed at cricket, his father’s first ambition for him, Kureishi hoped this failure was defiance rather than defeat and he turned to Camus: “‘What is a rebel?’ asks Camus, himself a keen sportsman. ‘A man who says no; but whose refusal does not imply a renunciation. He is also a man who says yes as soon as he begins to think for himself’” (p. 45). Kureishi’s rejection of the suburban life is confirmed by Cheever’s stories of ‘the psychic cost of such contentment’: ‘Cheever makes it clear that complacency is impossible and, anyway, undesirable. The attempt to make an entirely safe environment—coffee without caffeine, war without killing, sex without contact—can only diminish life’ (p. 83). While at university, Kureishi is ‘struck forcibly’ by J. S. Mill’s Autobiography, particularly the chapter entitled, ‘A Crisis in My Mental History’ (p. 153). He notes that Mill was ‘brought back to life’ by his father’s death: ‘Though he could barely admit it, Mill took pleasure in the thought that the father’s realm had been attacked. At the same time he knew beyond the father’s order there were no instructions. Leaving the father’s house was to venture out alone’ (p. 155). Mill, who had been tutored rigorously by his father, must have seemed a precise counterpart. Kureishi goes on to record: ‘I felt a similar liberation to Mill’s when I opened Sartre’s autobiography, Words, where I read the sacrilegious line, “I loathe my childhood and all that remains of it …”’ (p. 155).

The identifications and debts that Kureishi records (to editors such as Jeremy Trafford and Bill Buford) were not just about receiving ‘useful recognition’ but about finding his own voice, his own subject matter (p. 158). Although ‘class, race, fucking and farce’ would now be considered quintessential Kureishi preoccupations, writing about sexuality seems to have been experienced as a taboo for some time. Kureishi began by writing short stories and plays (often centred on class and race) but his first screenplay, My beautiful laundrette, was a major turning point: ‘Stephen Frears, the film’s director, had helped me considerably as a writer by encouraging my sense of fun and scurrility. “Make it dirty,” he’d say’ (p. 163). When Kureishi came to write his first novel, The Buddha of suburbia, perhaps his greatest debt was to another rebellious, scurrilous writer, Philip Roth. As a Jew from an immigrant family who refused to write PR for American Jews, Roth was a novelist Kureishi could identify with in many ways:

Philip Roth’s novel The Ghostwriter is, among other things, a book about two writers. Having read one of the young protagonist’s stories and been appalled, the boy’s father takes him aside and says:

‘This story isn’t us, it isn’t even you. You are a loving boy. I watched you like a hawk all day. I’ve watched you all your life. You are a good and kind and considerate young man. You are not somebody who writes this kind of story and then pretends it’s the truth.’

‘But I did write it. I am the kind of person who writes this kind of story!’ (p. 159)

In an essay on women and writing, ‘Professions for women’, Virginia Woolf spoke of the necessity of killing the Angel in the House, of exorcising the mother’s voice which has been internalised by the daughter (Woolf, 1931/1979, pp. 58–59); Roth is, essentially, offering the same subversive advice to sons in The ghostwriter: ‘when a writer is born a family dies’. Roth’s work demonstrated to Kureishi the value of producing ‘words my father didn’t like’ (p. 157). He sent Roth the first chapter of
The Buddha of suburbia and his praise seems to have been another necessary validation.

The split between authoritarian father figures and rebellious uncles is most clearly seen in the contrast between Kureishi’s attitude to Philip Roth and V. S. Naipaul. As a ‘minority’ writer who had managed never to be patronised or marginalised, Naipaul might have been an obvious early role model for Kureishi but it is not until a year after his father’s death that, ‘still on the look-out for fathers’, he goes to visit him in Salisbury:

I was anxious about seeing him. There was no Pop or bawdy in Naipaul’s work; he lacked Roth’s sexual fizzle and 60s attitude; he seemed depressed, an out-of-place immigrant wandering around the postwar city unable to find a door he had the nerve to walk through. (p. 169)

During Kureishi’s youth, Naipaul would have been too much like his father; it is only during the almost suicidal breakdown Kureishi suffered after his father’s death that he seeks out a substitute.

As genial (and willing to thrash him at tennis) as Naipaul turned out to be, Kureishi’s ‘transitional father’ was not to be Naipaul but Freud and, in particular, Kureishi’s Freudian analyst:

Freud’s method was ... a deconstruction of authority, of fathers, dictators, leaders and our need for them. Freud’s friend and one of his first colleagues, Sandor Ferenczi, wrote about putting the analyst-father in the place of both the real and imaginary father. This would be a transitional phase as you learn to live without the consolations and prohibitions of authority. In the end, looking at all possible cures, it is love that cures: love of knowledge, love for the group and group leader, and, in analysis, love for the analyst, who redirects you away from yourself into a new love for the world. (p. 176)

This is the moving conclusion towards which My ear at his heart makes its way the resolution of the conflict between uncle, father, son: ‘one with his name on numerous published books, the other—dad—a relative failure in that respect, while his son writes this book, trying to bring everything together’ (p. 179).

Although My ear at his heart takes place in British India, modern Pakistan and post-Imperial London (all aspects deserving of more attention than there is space to give them here), it is above all a family story. Does this mean that it is too personal? That it only has significance for those readers who happen to be concerned with Kureishi’s biography? Those who would consider buying a hat if they thought he wore one? Is it too idiosyncratic to be of wide-ranging relevance? The answer to these questions is clearly no. The memoir traces the different roles of the father within the family and how each generation tries to figure this differently and in reaction to his predecessor. The grandfather is autocratic, stern, the layer-down of the law; Kureishi’s father is determined to be closer to his son, more involved, committed, and the relationship is compared to that of siblings, even if Kureishi sees himself cast as the younger and weaker brother. Towards the end of the memoir he meditates on what kind of father he himself can be and his own reluctance to be authoritarian. He suggests the possibility that he can be more like a mother because
of the space that feminism has opened up for men in the family (p. 196). As he insists, these questions are political and universal:

This speculation about fathers isn’t only local: there is a profound relation between the sort of families that exist in a particular society—the family ideal, as it were—and the kind of political system that’s possible. (p. 195)

Eugene O’Neill fashioned some of the most powerful literature about family life—about being alive—from a father who was an authoritarian ham actor, a dope-addicted mother, an alcoholic brother haunted by responsibility for a dead younger sibling and a son trying to make some sense of it through his writing. Indeed, ‘dysfunctional’ families, as they are called today, have been the lifeblood of literature ever since the House of Atreus. From his own family story Kureishi is enriching the blood bank even though, as I suggested earlier, there may be real-life casualties in the process. If there is a criticism that can be made of My ear at his heart, it is the one that he himself makes: ‘we don’t hear enough from the women’ (p. 109). But that is not a criticism that can be made of Kureishi’s work in general.

Notes on contributor

Susie Thomas (PhD, London) studied literature at Ulster University and Royal Holloway College. She has lectured on British literature to American students in London for 20 years and has run classes on creative writing for the universities of Pittsburgh and Minnesota. She has published scholarly articles on a wide range of British literature and a monograph on Willa Cather (Macmillan). Her most recent volume is A reader’s guide to Hanif Kureishi (Palgrave, 2005). She is currently completing a book entitled Burning books: encounters in the post-war London novel.

Note

1. Unpublished manuscript of Kureishi’s work in progress quoted by kind permission of the author. I would also like to thank Nicolas Tredell for reading a draft of this essay and for his many helpful suggestions.

References

Kureishi, H. (1999) This was then, in: Midnight all day (London, Faber and Faber), 64–91.


