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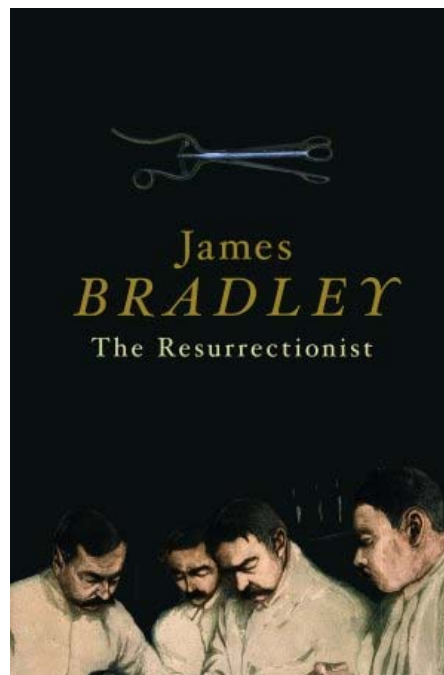
AUSTRALIA

NOTES FOR READING GROUPS



James Bradley

THE RESURRECTIONIST



Notes by Robyn Sheahan-Bright

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THEMATIC & PLOT SUMMARY

Thematic & Plot Summary

'What should I have said to her? That this life is so thin, so small, it might be lost in a moment without thought? That the worst prisons that we build are not of stone, or even space, but of our own making? That nothing done may ever be truly undone?' (p 310)

This novel about resurrectionists (or grave robbers) is at its heart about the death and rebirth of a man's soul. Gabriel Swift, an apprentice anatomist, is drawn into the dark heart of the nineteenth century London underworld, is corrupted, buried alive but then escapes to another kind of death in the colonies, and another kind of new life. His past follows him, as it does all of us. Ultimately, though, he discovers that freedom is to be found in the capacity to accept the fact that we are all trailing our own deaths and those of many others in our wakes. Time is a circle, and as we farewell the dead they become a symbol of the life hereafter, and of the lives which come after, on earth and elsewhere. Some of us have relatively untroubled lives, others are rent with tragedy, but none of us can undo the burden of what we would wish might have been, or as T. S. Eliot wrote:

Say that the end precedes the beginning,

And the end and the beginning were always there

Before the beginning and after the end. T. S. Eliot, 'Burnt Norton'

Gabriel Swift, orphaned when his widowed father dies, is sent in 1826 to London by a guardian to become an apprentice to a surgeon named Poll. To give their anatomy lectures the surgeons must find bodies, and because of the restrictive legislation then in place in England, they were forced to buy their corpses from so-called 'resurrectionists'. Gabriel becomes enmeshed in a complicated human tragedy when the purchase of bodies is threatened by emotional dramas amongst his colleagues, and by the greed and desperation of them all. When he tells a lie to protect the talented young surgeon Charles de Mandeville, he becomes embroiled in a web of deceit and corruption which leads to his downfall. His refusal to take a body which is connected to Charles enrages Tyne, and leads to Lucan 'shopping' the suppliers Caley and Walker to the police. But Tyne is still furious with Gabriel, and is jealous of the powerful Lucan who is Poll's nemesis.

Gabriel is virtually alone in the world, not only because of his lack of family, but because friends are hard to keep. Robert Newsome, a fellow apprentice, is his only true ally but when Gabriel is forced to protect Charles's secret he loses the intimacy they'd had before (pp 114-5). His weekly letters to the guardian who has supported him for seven years lack any real emotion (p 119) and his new 'friends' prove to be drinking companions easily deflected from their alliance to him. His love for Arabella the actress is also fatally flawed by her connections to many of the figures he now despises and by the fact that she too has had to sell her soul for the right to survive. So Swift becomes first an addict to the drugs supplied by the artist Thomas May, and then 'Lucan's man' a grave robber (pp 195-6), and later murderer. Lucan's right-hand man Craven is the intermediary who distrusts everyone, and represents another terrible challenge to them all. Gabriel's love for Arabella is gradually destroyed by his disintegration (p 207) until he takes his leave of her without even saying goodbye (p 255), for his inability to 'set things right again' makes his relationship with her unbearable. Ten years later a man named Thomas May who had been transported to the colonies as a prisoner, is now living as an art teacher reliant on wealthy patronage. His painting is his refuge and when a young lady named Miss Winter becomes his pupil, he briefly hopes for some new connection in his life. But life has a way of catching

up with all of us, and when Robert Newsome (pp 314-6) arrives in NSW he recognizes his old friend, and Gabriel is forced to confront the futility of hoping to bury the past.

This novel explores the idea of death in several ways. 'Surely you have seen enough of death by now to know something of life?' (p 125) Death and rebirth (or new life) are ideas which inevitably relate to various religious beliefs, and the body is described as a 'small cathedral of bone and flesh an obscured divinity.' (p 88) Here death is explored via a number of symbolic devices [see **Writing Style for details below**]:

- Gabriel constantly compares death to birth—when they wash the bodies he says: 'so we wipe the grave from these stolen dead, bring them new into the world.' (p 5)
- **Drugs including alcohol and opium** become Gabriel's downfall but also **symbolically relate to death and dreaming too**: 'my body filled with memory of what has passed, and feeling now only its absence, the knowledge of its loss.' (p 63) When he goes to May's apartment and meets Molly he takes opium for the first time (pp 58-63) and enters a new and darker realm, where he '... drank, feeling myself sink back into its embrace' (p 160).
- **Entrapment is another way to describe both life and death.** 'It is all a prison, can you not see that?' (p 306) Cages are what we make and try to escape from in every day of our lives.
- **Birds** are hugely significant in the exploration of human entrapment and in all the themes of this novel.
- **Symbols of death and birds come together** when Gabriel takes to killing and preserving the birds he paints. The instruments of this new art, arsenic and scalpel blades (p 307) are tools for anatomical experimentation, just as the surgeon's were.

Murder and the capacity of human beings to kill is a central theme too. The Shakespearean notion of 'murder most foul' is challenged in a work which demonstrates the ability we all have to countenance such acts. 'Such a small thing, to take a life. No harder in the end than to draw a tooth or slip a knife into the flesh. I could say I did it because I feared she would betray us... as if in the act I was unmade, and for that space of seconds, still, and free.' (pp 227-8) Gabriel confesses that he had no real motive: that murder became simply 'necessary'.

Nature or nurture? Gabriel is orphaned, which might be viewed as one possible reason for his actions: 'This is what the world is, I remember thinking, a place of absences, and leavings.' (p 25) His relationship with his father was distant (p 24) and his loss of a mother so early (p 171) made him aware that life is a fleeting series of deaths and losses and new beginnings. 'We are each of us alone in this, I think, contained inside the cages of our selves.' (pp 185-6) 'Our parents live in us, I sometimes think, like ghosts, or prophecy.' (p 171) Lucan asks: 'All men are hostages to their natures, would you not say?' (p 42) However, the novel constantly questions the notion that circumstances or background are responsible for some people's actions, by showing how randomly and undeservedly these people become corrupted. This book offers not a criticism of human nature, but is imbued with a deep sense of understanding and sympathy for human frailty.

Despite his lack of obvious compunction for his victims, Gabriel evinces immense self-loathing, rather than guilt—a need to escape from his own reviled body and to become something other than himself. 'I wished that I might go to them, and sit inside, and become once more one of their kind. But I knew that I could not, that I had moved outside the world, and beyond.' (p 239) He sinks first into a drug-induced manic progress towards his own self-destruction and then into becoming a nameless vagabond. 'When I realized I did not know my own name, that where my self had been there was naught but emptiness, I am not sure; all I recall is the confusion of it, the way the unremembered seemed to tremble on my tongue. (p 311-2) When he is transported he fails to reveal his education, preferring instead: 'to be made the lowest among the lowest [which] had a sort of morbid symmetry' (p 299). He becomes 'this half-thing of lies and circumstance' (p 316) and takes another name 'the realisation not horrible, but almost liberating, as if some part of me were left behind by my words' (p 321). He settles into a newly invented life in which 'I found a measure of quiet I had never known' (p 300). For he discovers that 'It is so easy, to forget one's self, to mistake the masks we wear for the truth of us, to become a name which is not our own, to leave a life behind and be reborn' (p 323).

But this is more than simply being about Gabriel's personal self-abnegation for it is also about the nature of the entire population of early Australian 'settlers' to brutally deny

their pasts and to remake themselves as something 'other'. Gabriel writes of 'the denial of those lives, almost as if the silence we conspire to share is itself a sort of violence we do to ourselves. Of course my crime is none that all here are not guilty of' (p 324). When he and Bourke come across a group of Aboriginal people, it's with a total lack of communication, for, coupled with the denials of their past, these early settlers also confronted the constant awareness that they were strangers in this foreign land: 'You have never felt it?' he asks. 'That sense we are not quite real here? That this land is not our own?' (p 265)

' **It is only that we all have secrets, things we would rather were left in the past.** ' (p 309) This novel traces the course of one blighted life, but suggests that we are all trapped in some similar fashion, whether it be in a large way, or a small one—whether as individuals or communities or even nations. We hope for absolution, for freedom from our pasts, but as Gabriel discovers, we're only free when we confront our common mortality: 'And then all at once I do weep, and I think I understand what it is to be reborn, what it is to be remade. So many lives, so light' (p 333).

WRITING STYLE

1. **History underpins this work which although it is a work of fiction, might also be called a work of 'faction'.** Recently there's been a debate occurring in Australian literary pages concerning the tendency by contemporary Australian writers to construct their own creative interpretations of colonial history. Read for example, Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* or Richard Flanagan's *Gould's Book of Fish* or Roger McDonald's *The Ballad of Desmond Kale*. Two recent articles in *The Australian* - Stella Clarke's 'Havoc in History House' *Review* (4-5 March 2006) and 'Novel Views of History' by Helen MacDonald *Review* (25-26 March 2006 pp 14-5) discuss the various academic responses to this sort of writing. The former challenges the critics and praises several recent novels for their imaginative insights into history; the latter (written by a historian who has written on the subject of Bradley's novel) points out that Bradley draws on the famous Burke and Hare murders which occurred in Edinburgh in 1827-28, and challenges the writer's role in relocating this story and yet also using real historical characters such as Surgeon Astley Cooper and anatomist Joshua Brookes in it. But surely fiction is about making things up? Discuss.

2. **Birds, both wild and caged, play a symbolic role in this novel.** Swift's name is that of a bird; as is his nickname, sparrow; he paints birds, and at several crucial turning points in the narrative, a bird creates a moment of epiphany in the thematic developments which occur throughout. Birds also represent the captive nature of all of us. Read for example Chifley's slyly disparaging remarks: 'What is it you see, my little bird?' (p 37) 'Her lover, Sparrow, a man of property.' (p 105) 'Why, Sparrow, you do not take our jests askance?' (p 122) and (pp 132, 4). Then later Gabriel begins to draw the sparrow on the windowsill (p 98) when he's caught by Poll and warned not to waste his talents. Later still he writes: 'Then I see it. The small corpse dark upon the freshly swept cobbles... A small thing a life, so easily broken, and all at once I begin to weep, while above me the men place the mirror on the wagon, and one, with a rag from his pocket, wipes the small mark the bird left upon the glass' (p 252). He reflects on the nature of holding and killing a bird in another powerful sequence in the novel (p 277-9) and Miss Winter, of course, is a trapped bird whom Gabriel wishes to see free, just as he had Arabella. 'I find myself gripped by the desire to ease whatever it is she fights so hard against.' (p 282)

The second part of the novel is called 'The Kingdom of the Birds'. When he is set to brutally hard labour on Tavish's farm, he has another moment of joy when he sees a grey heron: 'the two of us held there in that moment for what seemed a heartbeat or an eternity' (p 300) and begins to observe the other wild birds: 'To watch them rise upon the wing, to watch that lightness of form, was itself a kind of freedom to me, yet this was not all I saw in them: I saw something sharp, and dangerous, creatures who lived outside the realm of man...' (p 300) He goes on to study and draw them and then to kill them too—for the secrets of their forms (pp 300-2). And when his alias is uncovered he goes on a rampage shooting birds before finding that he cannot physically kill the one which survives his shot. (p 316) Later when he's rejected by his pupils, he finds he's lost the heart for taxidermy (p 325) and then he writes lyrically of the perfection of drawing a bird (p 327) and the novel ends with a climactic and powerful reflection on birds (pp 323-3). If there is one image which stays with you after reading this novel (which contains so many grim and violent and dark scenes) it's that of the bird smashed against the glass. The ordinary tragedy which strikes at the heart of us all. Discuss.

3. **Death** is not only the theme of this novel which is literally about people who steal the dead from their graves, but is also suggested figuratively in the language used throughout the book. For example, when May is transported and arrives in the colony he writes: 'After the dimness of the hold, the creaking coffins of the beds in which we lay, the light of the day seemed impossible...' (p 298) Another example is: '...rather I sleep as might the dead' (p 333). Conversely the descriptions of death often suggest birth or new life (see for example the opening page of the novel) or: 'In its womb of glass it hangs suspended' (p 33). What other examples of this sort of sub-text in use of language did you notice? What effect did it have on your reading of the novel?

4. **Structuring a story** to maintain suspense is a critical aspect of novel writing. Here Bradley constructs interlinked chronological stories but adjusts the order in which they are

told; the return to Swift's 'grave' on (p 311) arrests the reader's attention in a dramatic sense particularly since it follows immediately after a significant statement about the novel's themes (see quote at the beginning of these notes). Discuss.

5. **First person narratives** are used to explore the inner psyche but can also be used to keep secrets from the reader, for they consist of a series of personal constructions of the imagined reality, told from one particular perspective. Here, Gabriel tells us his story. How would this have differed if Arabella or Robert had told it, or offered a parallel narrative? Discuss.

THE AUTHOR

James Bradley was born in 1967. Twice one of *The Sydney Morning Herald's* Best Young Australian Novelists, he is the author of two novels, *Wrack* and *The Deep Field*, a book of poetry, *Paper Nautilus*, and the editor of *Blur*, a collection of stories by young Australian writers. *Wrack* won the Fellowship of Australian Writers Literature Award and the Kathleen Mitchell Literary Award, and was shortlisted for the Miles Franklin Award and the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best First Book (SE Asia and Pacific region). *The Deep Field* won The Age fiction Book of the Year Award and was shortlisted for the inaugural *Courier-Mail* Book of the Year Award, the Aurealis Best Novel Award (Science Fiction category) and the Adelaide Festival's National Fiction Award. *Paper Nautilus* was shortlisted for the Australian National Book Council's 'Banjo' Award. He lives in Sydney.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. 'We are born with the dead: See, they return, and bring us with them.' T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*. These lines are quoted at the beginning, suggesting in a tantalising manner that the dead and the living are intertwined. Discuss.
2. Read James Bradley's two previous novels *The Deep Field* and *Wrack* and discuss them in relation to this work.
3. 'There is kindness in you.' (p 318) Is it possible for a killer to be a kind person?
4. Bradley has written a novel which like Peter Carey's *Jack Maggs* is comparable to the work of Dickens in its evocation of this world. This is Dickensian London at its most graphic (for example, the operation conducted on Oliver (p 51) is appalling in the lack of hygiene which is hard to comprehend in our affluent society) and captures the sense of the desperate lives of these poor Londoners in a fashion which is equally powerful. Discuss.
5. Women in this novel are universally victims of the society in which they live. Swift's lover, Arabella, and those she holds most dear—Kitty, Amy and their servant Mary, and then in Australia, Miss Winter, the second love of Swift's life—have no real power and are forced to become whores, or slaves to their family's aspirations for them. Discuss.
6. The subject of resurrectionists or grave robbers is discussed on the Wikipedia website which gives some useful further activities and lists other novels which feature grave robbers. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Resurrectionists>. Choose one of the links there to read some background to this novel. For example, Dickens' character Jerry Cruncher in *The Tale of Two Cities* was a resurrectionist. Read more about the practice of grave robbing, and then discuss.
7. The subject of anatomical experimentation contains an ethical dilemma. See for example the description of 'freaks of nature' (p 17) and Mr Tyne's monstrosities (pp 33-5). Do doctors and scientists still interfere with nature too much?
8. Poll's eulogy on the soul (pp 14-5) is the essence of scientific rationalism. Discuss his arguments.
9. What is lost when we reduce bodies to mere 'meat'—things to be bought and sold? Are the consequences of that reduction purely ethical or do they involve a loss of something more profound? Can the idea of human beings as more than just the sum of our parts coexist with the scientific materialism of Mr Poll or are they fundamentally opposed? Do the book's final pages, and Gabriel's partial redemption, offer the beginning of an answer?
10. Gabriel's childhood memory of a boy killing a cat (pp 205-7) suggests that we are all innately capable of evil and cruelty. 'And then he smiled, and all at once I understood the part I had played in this thing, the heat I felt not that of fear but recognition.' (p 207) Do you think this is so? Is Gabriel's complicity in the terrible acts which come later in his adulthood typical of what might have happened to anyone?
11. Chifley's grotesque dance with the corpses (pp 134-7) is horrifying. And yet we've seen similar grotesqueries in recent media coverage of the behaviour of armed personnel in the Iraq war. Is human nature so debased? Are we capable of literally anything when we think we're not being observed?
12. Although the novel argues that we're each capable of evil, there's also a suggestion that Gabriel had no real option. Orphaned early and at the mercy of his own poverty, perhaps this is why Gabriel is so easily corrupted? Does our background help to determine our futures? Or could he have had an alternative future, if for example, he'd gone away with Robert? Discuss.
13. Gabriel's love for Arabella is spoiled (p 149) before it begins. Discuss.
14. The murky world in which Gabriel finds himself is full of secrets and innuendo, and friendships rest on shifting ground. For example, it's never really explained what sort of

relationship Charles has with the household of Kitty, Oliver and Arabella. Nor do we know what happened to May and Molly. Nor what sort of 'other life' Arabella actually has. Read also for example, Gabriel's description of Charles de Mandeville and Chifley (p 78), or trace the subtle decline of Robert's respect for Gabriel, despite the fact that it is loyalty to Charles which leads to his lie. Is anyone to be trusted in this novel?

15. Read the passage describing Bourke and Gabriel's encounter with the 'ghosts' in the landscape (pp 264-5). Compare this encounter with those described in other works such as Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* or David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon*. How much is Gabriel, as a 'resurrectionist', a metaphor for the nature of the white Australian settler? Discuss.

16. Miss Winter's terrible loss is described like Gabriel's: 'I knew what had happened, that it could not be undone' (p 331). Is this human nature's darkest fear; that we cannot erase the things which are our deepest shames or losses? Discuss.

THE RESURRECTIONIST

James Bradley

Picador Australia

Trade paperback - ISBN: 033042226X

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Sydney NSW 2000

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