

**Jeffrey, James. *Paprika Paradise: Travels in the Land of my Almost Birth.***

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In 2007, Hachette Australia published the first volume of prose by Australian journalist, James Jeffrey. *Paprika Paradise*, belonging to the genre of travel writing, turned out to be a modest hit in the Australian book market, selling about four thousand copies the first twelve months after publication. Hungarian expatriates formed its main reading public, with their interests propelled by a mixture of nostalgia and a craving for information about today's Hungary.

With its origins in the fifteenth century, modern travel writing assumed a new stance in the twentieth century and, reborn as travel *literature*, it has been luring ever greater attention in the academic world. The genre provides a fertile field for cultural-, cross-cultural-, and intercultural studies, and is under a process of canonisation after the emerging of Travel Writing Studies Centres in the English-speaking world.

In the summer of 2006, Jeffrey, together with his wife and two children, set out to spend six months in Pécs, a southwest city of Hungary, the country he planned to write a book about. Jeffrey's motivation for writing was rather personal. He was not intending to write a travel guide with all the necessary information for the cultivated tourist, concerning posh hotels, "best of" restaurants and "must visit" museums, but as the subtitle, *Travels in the Land of My Almost Birth*, suggests this stay provided an opportunity for him to rediscover his origins. Nostalgia and a hunger for firsthand experience were the two fairies standing at the cradle of the book itself, thus it is not surprising that the first person narrative shuttles in and out of the memoir-, autobiographic-, and novelistic traditions so deeply concerned with the construction of self-identity.

The offspring of a Hungarian divorcee who is apparently a miniskirt embodiment of ancient Nemesis, and a British coal-mining engineer who represents the other extremity of humankind, the sensible, true-born Englishman, Jeffrey had long been standing spell-bound by the surreal and turbulent relationship of his parents, and above all the unaccountably mercurial personality of his mother. The figure of the mother and the land she was born into overlap in the imagination of the author and he keeps "[pondering] the same questions that troubled so many others. Were all Hungarians like this? And if so, how come there were any still alive? More to the point, how the hell did my father, of all people, a man unlike my mother the way a penny-farthing is unlike a cluster bomb get drawn into their universe?" (8).

This enduring puzzle, which serves as the centre of the narrative, remains unsolved for good. There are short-lived happy moments of family reunions turned sour by the mother's Moll Flanders-like economic character, and instants of melancholic

solidarity with the father, who provides bitter insights into untold parts of the family history. “That was one change I noticed in Dad over the years, that certainty he’d done the right thing slowly metamorphosing [. . .] into [. . .] a leaden feeling of guilt that he’d done another man a terrible injustice” (165). This lamentation accompanies the dramatic climax of the narrative, when Jeffrey Sr. reveals that they took Jeffrey’s half-sister and brother from their own father to England, although he had custody of the children.

However, the irresolvable past leaves paths open to other kinds of nutriments for the questing self to feed upon. While preparing for and later perking up from his parents’ visits Jeffrey immerses in the life of the city of Pécs, visiting close relatives:

G: I thought you weren’t arriving until Thursday.

US: Today is Thursday.

G: Really? Oh, well I thought you were arriving on a different day (31).

He learns to play the Hungarian bagpipe, buys an old Skoda Favorit that could “as well have been modelled on a coconut” (77), makes friends with car mechanics, enthusiastic teachers of the Hungarian language, and street tramps strolling about café terraces:

‘Excuse me, sir,’ he boomed. ‘But would you be so kind as to tell me . . .’ he raised a glass shaker to the sunlight, ‘. . . what is in this?’

‘Sugar,’ I said.

‘Sugar? This?’ He stared at the shaker, lines spreading across his grimy forehead.

‘Raw sugar.’

‘Interesting,’ he nodded slowly, appraising the beige crystals. ‘Very interesting. May I taste it, please?’ (65)

With his immensely humanistic approach, Jeffrey succeeds avoiding presentation of these episodes as *encounters of the third kind* with the exotic Other, and provides the reader with the feeling of reliving the narrator’s experiences. These personal momentums assist the narrative self finding the homely world it was seeking.

The text, mastering the generic features of modern travel writing, genuinely blends aspects of the quest for origin and spirituality with historical and political analysis. The short chapters switch back and forth between childhood memoirs and present-day personal experiences, descriptions of the charming countryside and elaborate essayistic digressions into Hungary’s past and present affairs, such as the Trianon conundrum (*The Incredible Shrinking Country*; 113), 1956 and the Nagy Imre show trial of ‘58, the Kádár regime (Now and Then; 123), and the present nonsensical trench warfare between the disastrous leftwing government and the Orbán-deifying right even deepened by Prime Minister Gyurcsány’s rhetorical and moral fiasco at Öszöd (*The Owl versus the Wizard* 39).

Thanks to the montage technique of the narration, these digressions never stand out disconcertingly from the text, as they are always interwoven and contrasted with actual, individual incidents related to them. Just as when Jeffrey and his father visit the House of Terror, a much debated monument of Hungary's totalitarian past (be it for the Nazis, or the Communists), and he is asked, rather rudely, by a security guard to delete the photos he has just taken: "Given the nature of the museum, I wondered whether this severe young man was aware of the irony. Or perhaps, I mused, [. . .], he was there to foster an authoritarian theme-park atmosphere" (136).

The present travelogue's style and language is an excellent representative of a genre that is playfully striving for continual self-definition, so apt to render the post-modern *traveller's* search for identity. A delicate playfulness, irony and language awareness feature this book, such as in the hilarious description of "Emperor Franz Josef—equipped with facial hair that seemed a touch excessive even by Hungary's exuberantly bristly standards—[...], trailing medal-encrusted lackeys and preposterously fur-cloaked, scimitar dragging nobles in his wake [. . .]" (1-2), or an account of the seemingly minuscule adventure of sleeping in one room with one's own father, which turns into a mock nightmare-travel on a train of blurts, eventually dissolving into "an almost magical snore that seemed to tell the short but poignant story of a pig happily rooting about in the rich, wet grass by the edge of a lake, before unexpectedly tumbling in, squealing with panic and, despite desperate attempts to paddle to safety, drowning" (127-28).

The linguistic awareness of the narrator is ever more heightened by the author's good knowledge of Hungarian, conveying an almost tangible air of the natives' language, as well as the peculiarities of Hungarian émigrés' English: "As soon as Ronny had to go to the toilet for the first time, zsup! Your farder jumped straight into the seat next to me" (36); "I keep my promises, ja ja. Jimmykém, [. . .]" (186). [Emphasis in the original.]

Paprika Paradise, this enthralling and sophisticated narrative about Hungary written from the perspective of an Australian eye, is an exceptional specimen of travel writing not concerned with the imperial centre. It well deserves the attention of both students and researchers of Australian and Hungarian Studies, along with everyone involved in the academic field of Cultural Studies not forgetting the casual reader.