

David Reynolds. *Swan River*. Picador, 2001.

Review by Gillian Dooley for Writers' Radio, Radio Adelaide

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*Swan River* by David Reynolds is a family memoir covering four generations of the Reynolds family, a story of the love and cruelty, childhood memories and adult failings, to be found in any family's history over the span of a century or so.

The Swan River of the title is not the river in Western Australia but a town in Manitoba, Canada, a place notably deficient in both swans and rivers. The Reynolds family is English, and the author is a retired editor and publisher based in London whose Australian connections are only that he worked with Richard Neville on *Oz Magazine* in the 1960s, and that he was once briefly and unsuccessfully in love with an Australian girl.

At the centre of this book are the author's father and grandfather, and his life-long project, pursued without urgency, to understand them and the paths their lives had taken. A child of his father's old age, many years younger than his half-brothers and sisters, he grows up close to his father, while deploring his violent and angry outbursts against his mother. Happily, he is able to maintain good relations with both parents after the inevitable divorce, and his father fosters David's interest in his grandparents, Tom and Sis. There are diaries of Sis from the years shortly before and after her marriage, and letters from Tom, who was banished to Canada after losing his job.

It is a sad story: Sis had married Tom on the rebound from a devastating love affair with a man she eventually discovered to be married already. Tom, no

doubt sensing that he was second-best, developed a serious problem with alcohol, which he tried but eventually failed to overcome. After the death of their three-year-old daughter from diphtheria and the loss of his job, he left the family and never saw his son, then eight or nine, again. After a few destitute years in London, he migrated to Canada to work on the railway and died there of TB four years later, in 1910.

The son, Cliff, grows up to be a writer of some shortlived success. When the author, David, is born, he is already fifty-six and has been married three times. David describes him affectionately – bearing in mind that this is written some thirty years after his death – as witty and energetic, a good father but an impatient and inconsiderate husband. His decline into old age and his death after a stroke is movingly told, its effect on the twenty-year-old author sensitively recorded.

The narrative of his forbears is interwoven with the story of David's childhood and youth, ending with the death of his father in 1969. His friendships and youthful infatuations, dabbings in political radicalism and mind-altering drugs, encounters with flower-power and psychedelic art, are all carefully chronicled. The years between his father's death and his eventual journey in 1998 to Swan River, where his grandfather spent his final years, form no part of the book. This long-postponed trek to discover the few remaining traces of the man about whom he had spent much of his life speculating forms a satisfying ending to his narrative.

But *Swan River* is overlong and sometimes dull. One can't help being a little cynical about the first book of someone who has spent his career in publishing – is the book being published entirely on its own merits? The story is

sad but unremarkable – a typical tale of intolerance for Tom’s alcoholism and, perhaps, the other less definite but equally disastrous mental and emotional problems suffered by his son, Cliff as a result. It is, nevertheless, a leisurely sort of book. David seems to have all the time in the world at his disposal to describe clothes, meals and interiors from thirty and forty years ago. The writing is competent and clear without any special style or flair. It would be a better book, I think, shorn of about a hundred of its 350 pages. All in all, it is a likeable, but hardly compelling, read.