

A superior kind of banality

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"I write when I come to the edge of a chasm" ... Robert Dessaix.

ROBERT DESSAIX laughs when asked how he would classify his latest book, *Arabesques: A Tale Of Double Lives*. "There isn't really a good word is there? If you can come up with one, I'd be really pleased," he says, in his clipped, theatrical voice.

It's unusual for Dessaix to be lost for even one word. The 64-year-old Sydney-born writer has spent his life immersed in language. A teacher of Russian at Australian universities, he switched careers at 40 and became a broadcaster for a decade on ABC radio's Books and Writing program. At 50, he became a writer of books and essays. He is currently penning one on humbug for Melbourne University Press.

What has stumped this skilled phrase-master is a suitable label for a book in which he criss-crosses emotional, personal and philosophical landscapes, as well as geographic ones. "A conversation about travels and reveries", as he says in his introduction, might do. Less pithy but more accurate would be: "Travels with some friends in the footsteps of famous French author Andre Gide."

"The publisher likes the word memoir," Dessaix says, "because sales and marketing know how to spell it. So they call it travel memoir and I suppose it is. [But] I'm really travelling in my head as much as through the world."

To confuse matters, his text is encased in a handsome, illustrated album of photographs, old postcards, maps and assorted travel memorabilia.

Dessaix doesn't go on the road with Gide as a biographer or as the kind of cultural tourist who tracks down plaques on buildings. "I travel in order to experiment with who I am," says Dessaix, who lives in a large house near Hobart. As he moves around, from Portugal and France to Algeria and Morocco, he muses, questions and imagines. Love, eros, intimacy, friendship and marriage are in his sights - and he stalks his quarries like a man making a nature documentary about a rare and exquisite beast. Dessaix, like Christopher Isherwood, is the camera.

In *Arabesques*, he turns his lens on to a grand man of French letters who died in 1951, at the age of 81. Gide dominated the French literary and political stage for most of his life and won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1947. His books include *Fruits Of The Earth*, *Strait Is The Gate* and *The Immoralist* and are reflections on his own life, an examination of his conscience and an account of struggles with his strict Protestant upbringing.

"When I first learnt that Gide was a Protestant it fascinated me," Dessaix says. "To stay a Protestant between the wars was actually quite difficult. There was a lot of pressure on people to convert. In those days, Catholicism was seen as the protector, the embodiment of European civilisation. With Europe collapsing after the First World War, the only way to keep it on its feet - and I am sure the present Pope is putting forward the same argument now in the face of Islam - [and] to keep European values alive, was to return to the Church."

Dessaix was also drawn to Gide's Protestantism for personal reasons. Dessaix's father was a lapsed Catholic with "a Catholic mentality" and his mother had a strong Scottish Calvinist

background. Dessaix was very aware, even as a child, of the huge difference between the two. "I feel that Catholics have had all the storytelling. The brutal nun, the alcoholic Catholic family - Catholicism produces all sorts of stories and Protestantism sounds so dull."

Dessaix says he is neither Protestant nor atheist, "just confused". But he sees in himself Protestant traits and believes there is drama in being a Protestant that is almost never talked about.

"It really explains even your choice of socks. You must not buy socks in order to impress anyone because as a child you learn that God cannot be impressed. You buy good, serviceable socks. If someone gives you nice socks, that's lovely. It is a whole mentality and I saw it in my house.

"You have this notion of sufficiency, which I don't think that Catholics quite have, and it's misunderstood as a kind of asceticism. It's not asceticism, it's the notion that you must not be greedy for what is not given to you. You must not desire what is not given to you." Gide, as it happens, was given a lot. He came from an educated, wealthy Parisian family descended from Huguenots. He grew up possessed of an analytical mind, a super-size ego and a late-developing homosexuality. Oh, and he had a wife.

This mesmerising mix mirrors aspects of Dessaix's life. He has been married to a woman and, like Gide, writes about his life, subjects as intimate as his adoption as a baby and being diagnosed HIV positive as an adult. But there the resemblance ends. Most obviously, Dessaix has been in a long-term relationship with the writer Peter Timms. Gide, on the other hand, remained married to his cousin, Madeleine Rondeaux, until her death - though they never consummated the marriage. Their marriage blanc was a source of great pain to Madeleine and great strength for Gide.

"I approve of what he did once he married but I think it was a mistake to get married," Dessaix says. "But there, again, you have a reflection in my own life - I also got married. People should be able to intensely love someone without bonking them. There should be many arrangements and I think in some ways this is a very beautiful arrangement. It just happened to work better for him than for her."

Not all his readers would approve, as Dessaix does, of Gide's actions as a gay man who stayed married, and he is aware of that. "Women often feel the other way around. That's why I gave the character Miriam a voice to say so [in *Arabesques*]. I didn't want readers who do disapprove to feel they were being shut out. But I, by and large, think that if you got married at the end of the 19th century and were homosexual - and you more or less had to get married if you lived in that [Gide's] kind of family - your options were very limited for leading a full life. And that's the solution he found and, let's be frank, that's the solution most of my readers will find."

In *Arabesques*, Dessaix swirls and spirals around the varieties and possibilities of love, as well as other subjects. "How to travel well, how to have a beautiful life, the importance of divesting yourself of the clutter of your life, the importance, from time to time, to be naked, how you can be married and homosexual at the same time and whether anyone has to suffer from it" is how he sums them up.

He lighted on Gide as a prism for exploring these motifs at a confronting time in his own life. "I write when I come to the edge of a chasm of some kind and I feel I've got to leap over or I'm going to fall into it. The only way I can leap is through words. It's the only skill I've got, the only thing that can give me wings."

When Dessaix ran into the brick wall of HIV, he went to Venice and wrote Night Letters. With Arabesques, the chasm was even more existential: "the feeling that I was sinking into a kind of banality. That life was becoming unbearably banal," he says. "And Gide is good on the question of banal. He has said there is a superior kind of banality that we can aim for and there is just banality. And so I thought I would aim, with the help of Gide, at a superior kind of banality."

So does Dessaix like Gide? He makes throaty indecisive noises, then says, "I do. I admire him. But I don't think I would ever become an intimate friend of his. He was a very difficult man and I think there was a narcissism about him that he would not have denied. He was hard to draw close to. He would have pushed me away, I am sure.

"But he intrigues me a lot, so I feel we have encounters. I feel the book is a series of encounters with him." It seems we have finally defined Dessaix's writing.

This story was found at:

<http://www.smh.com.au/news/entertainment/books/a-superior-kind-of-banality/2008/09/26/1222217489978.html?page=fullpage#contentSwap2>