



Journey of discovery with Gide

A biography offers insight into its author, finds **Christopher Bantick**



Allan Massie, in his occasional column, Life and Letters in Spectator magazine, had this to say about biographies:

“The best biographies are sympathetic. Their authors don’t gloss over their subjects’ failures and faults of character, but they don’t seek to do them down”.

In some ways, Massie’s comments fit Robert Dessaix’s journey with French novelist Andre Gide in his recent book *Arabesques*. It is a lush and visually arresting publication. The off-white matt paper, restrained illustrations and measured text coalesce to make a memorable reading experience. But it is also a curious book.

Arabesques is part memoir, part reassessment on Gide as a substantial literary figure, part biography, part travel journal and part reflection by Dessaix on the changes and chances of this fleeting world. It is something he puts this way in the book’s introduction: “Andre Gide’s autobiography, *If I Die*, I first read as an adolescent while working in a Sydney bookshop.

“Gide then shadows me throughout the book, giving shape to my own thoughts on religion, love, ageing and why we travel. My encounters with Gide are a prism, as all our best conversations with friends are, ordering my thoughts on

subjects of vital importance to both

Dessaix pours tea in his sitting room in Hobart. Did he expect to discuss some of the areas *Arabesques* broaches when he journeyed with Gide? “Well, yes I did. I wanted to discuss Protestantism as I don’t think anyone does in this kind of book. I wanted to talk about what it means to me. I put Christian in the last census but I’m confused about faith. I wanted to talk about how people live, what I would call a good life. I am interested in such questions like what is happiness? And what does ageing mean?”

Structurally, *Arabesques* retraces Gide’s steps and in doing so, Dessaix references this against his own life. It is a technique that works superbly.

Gide, the 19th and 20th-century French writer, died aged 81 in 1951. He won the Nobel prize for literature in 1947.

Is Dessaix a kindred spirit? In part, yes. But by book’s end, Dessaix shows the distance between them. Even so, they remain friends. This

is clear as Dessaix travels, as did Gide, to places such as Algiers, Morocco and Biskra. Miasmatic-like Gide is present as Dessaix ponders his French literary companion.

Dessaix has much empathy with Gide. Still, he does not allow the book to become hagiography. He is far too skilled a writer for that. He introduces subsidiary characters to

give voice to the reader who may disapprove of Gide’s sexuality and attraction to children and young men. He stayed married to his cousin, Madeline Rondeaux, until her death, but never consummated their marriage.

Over the journey of the book, Dessaix brings us into a close awareness of Gide as a man, thinker, writer and lover. Still, he says that he finds he needs to “defend this man”.

“We live in times when people are concerned about paedophilia, where they were not concerned about this so much in Victorian times. People were allowed a certain intimacy with children and they were not thought of as being dangerous. People are now almost hysterical about this. I think this is, in a way, because we have lost a kind of innocence,” he says. “The interesting thing was that no one ever complained about Gide’s behaviour. It is a difficult subject but I wanted to say he was not a bad man.”

While readers will glean much about Gide from Dessaix’s travelling in pursuit of the resonances of his life, it is what Dessaix says about the process of seeing who we are through journeying that takes the book beyond a literary meander. He says sometimes you need to leave home to see your life: “When I travel, I need the distance to make a judgment about how I see my choices. If you do that from a



Muslim country, where I can't read the street signs or have a conversation with anyone, you can really look at yourself."

Arabesques by Robert Dessaix (Macmillan, \$49.95). Dessaix will be a guest at the 2009 Perth Writers' Festival. For further details visit perthfestival.com.au.



Kindred spirit: Arabesques author Robert Dessaix traces the life of Andre Gide while referencing his own. Picture: Neil Newitt