

*Making an Elephant: Writing from Within* by Graham Swift (Picador) R320

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Graham Swift introduces this collection of essays, interviews and occasional pieces with an interesting comparison between his fiction (novels such as *Waterland*, *Ever After*, *Last Orders*, *The Light of Day* and, most recently, *Tomorrow*) and this book: "As an author who's favoured the intimacy of the first person over the 'authorial' third person, I'd regard it as a mark of achievement if in my work the author seems to vanish ... This book tries to show the other side of the coin."

It would at first sight seem paradoxical that "the intimacy of the first person" should bring about the disappearance of the author; but readers of Swift will know that the first person in his novels is not a surrogate for the author. Rather, Swift uses all his art to enter into the consciousness of characters very different from himself.

This collection, then, promises glimpses of the man behind the novels, or from whom the novels in a sense emanate: hence the subtitle "writing from within"; for in spite of the impersonality he strives for, Swift says, "writing ... constantly brings you up against yourself and surprises you with the discovery of what you have inside."

But anybody expecting startling revelations of the lurid life behind the fiction will be disappointed: Swift is no DH Lawrence, Scott Fitzgerald or Hemingway; he has lived, he tells us, for the last twenty-five years in the same house in London with the same wife (the Candice to whom the novels and also this collection are dedicated); he gets up at 5.30 in the morning, makes a pot of coffee, and starts writing. Although he recalls with affection any number of people he has known, there is not a shred of gossip here, no startling revelations or ill-humoured cavilling. The closest he comes to even a slight reservation about a fellow-writer is the mild observation that Salman Rushdie, with whom Swift and his wife spent their Christmases in the years of the fatwa, "may have been dominant company". Less charitable souls might have put this more strongly. So what on earth, given Swift's total lack of rancour, can there be of interest on "the other side of the coin"?

The answer is, of course, that interest need not be a matter of big-game hunting or small-time whoring: it's less a matter of the experience reflected on than a function of the quality of mind that reflects on the experience. And Swift's mind, ruminative, perceptive, receptive and gently wry, serves him admirably in registering, with unfailing humour and generosity, a variety of experience ranging from backpacking in Greece to fly-fishing in Devon.

And, above all, writing and writers. Interesting as are Swift's reflections, say, on rivers, his readers will naturally attend more closely to his thoughts on his own writing and writing in general. And whatever Swift's lack of rancour, he is never merely bland and anodyne: a sharp critical intellect is constantly at work, and if he here chooses by and large to exercise that intellect on works he admires, that is not because he admires everything he comes across. We get a glimpse of an antipathy, for instance, in his reference to magical realism: "The term has now long passed its sell-by date, and was fairly bogus in the first place ... The real magic ... of fiction goes much deeper than a few sprinklings of hocus-pocus." Given Swift's own brand of realism, with its loving attention to the textures of common life, it's not difficult to see why he should shy away from what he clearly regards as a cop-out – but readers of Marquez and Allende may balk at Swift's strictures.

Less potentially controversial, and highly relevant in this season of literary prizes, are Swift's recollections of the 1983 Booker Prize award dinner, when his novel *Waterland* was short-listed (J.M. Coetzee, "serenely absent", was the winner). Swift concedes that "A writer these days has to be either foolish or sublimely aloof not to accept that some extra-authorial hoop-jumping will help his book reach readers." But, in the face of the crassness of the event, he is moved to remark: "You cannot give something more prestige while turning it into more and more of a circus, or bring credit to writers by making public fools of them."

Much of this book consists of recollections and appreciations of some of the writers Swift has known and/or admired. Of those he didn't know, he writes with passion and affection: Isaac Babel and Michel de Montaigne. Of those he did know and in some cases still knows, he writes with a warmth clearly based on an easy companionableness at odds with the usual notion of the internecine squabbles of writers: Kazuo Ishiguru, Ted Hughes, Caryl Phillips and the aforementioned Salman Rushdie.

Film, too, puts in an appearance in Swift's pieces on the filming of *Waterland* and *Last Orders*. He is clearly much happier with the second film than the first, in which the American director, Stephen Gyllenhaal, transposed chunks of the action to America – chunks which, crazily, were filmed in Britain. But even here Swift's evident affection for Gyllenhaal mutes what must have been a galling experience.

There is much more in this collection than can be encompassed in a short review. Buy the book and relax into it. It's the best company you're likely to have all weekend.