
Nichola Garvey review of Kerrie Davies, *A Wife's Heart: The Untold Story of Bertha and Henry Lawson*

(St Lucia, Qld: University of Queensland Press, 2017), 243 pp., PB \$29.95, ISBN 9780702259661

'A wife's heart must be the tomb of her husband's faults'. This nineteenth-century viewpoint in essence proclaimed that, as you have made your bed, so you must lie on it. However, Bertha Lawson, wife to celebrated Australian writer, Henry, did not just 'put up and shut up'. She railed against her husband's alcoholism, filed for legal separation and brought their two children up on her own.

Much has been written about Henry Lawson, 'the poet who created mateship. The Dickens of the Bush. He's been mythologised, anthologised and analysed. Bertha has been forgotten'.¹

There has also been much written about Henry's mother, Louisa, an early feminist and publisher and an outspoken campaigner of women's rights—particularly of women who found themselves in bad marriages. Ironically, it was Louisa who in 1890, six years prior to Henry and Bertha's meeting, wrote an editorial titled, 'The Divorce Extension Bill or The Drunkard's Wife', and coined the phrase, 'a wife's heart must be the tomb of her husband's faults'. Louisa tolerated no man who lacked in his duty as husband. Despite this, she was no friend to Bertha and showed very little empathy towards her daughter-in-law, whose husband, her son, was a drunk.

A Wife's Heart, by Kerrie Davies, started out as her own personal memoir for her PhD in literary journalism at the University of Sydney. At some stage in her early research, Davies stumbled across Bertha's story. Seeing similarities in their respective statures as single mothers married or formerly married to artists with unpredictable employment and fluctuating parental commitment, Davies sets out to compare and contrast their experiences. Her aim is to bring light to an untold aspect of Lawson's life and, through memoir (both hers and Bertha's), to document some self-exploration and understanding of her own life.

1 K. M. Davis, 'Mrs L, A Work of Literary Journalism, and Exegesis: The Poetics of Literary Journalism and Illuminating Absent Voices in Memoir and Biography' (PhD thesis, Department of Media and Communication University of Sydney, 2017), 20.

The book is based on a selection of letters between Henry and Bertha. Adding to this are letters from friends of the pair, as well as later memories and memoirs. Some of Henry's poems and stories, which are considered to be autobiographical, are also used as evidence in time. Finally, Davies punctuates the narrative with her own personal anecdotes about present-day domestic life.

A Wife's Heart begins by showing the application made by Bertha Lawson for her legal separation from Henry, dated 1903. The very next page is an affectionate letter from Henry to Bertha. In the first chapter we switch to the present and the author introduces herself as a character within the book and as narrator.

Davies makes clear from the start that she is on the side of Bertha, the ex-wife, whose ex-partner is hopeless about paying child support. There is an honesty within Davies's opening chapters; she does not try to pretend that she is anything other than in the camp of the spurned wife. (Was it Freud who first posited that all biography is in some way autobiographical?) Davies shows her kinship throughout the narrative by comparing the failures of their respective husbands and the slack that each of them took up in response.

Davies takes the view that Henry was shielded from due criticism because of his situation of being (a) a man and (b) a famous author whom the public wanted to put on a pedestal. While Davies's own husband is not a celebrated artist she does wonder why it is so easy for men, in today's society, to get away with being absent fathers in all the physical, fiscal and emotional senses of the word.

Davies's work is ground-breaking in its focus on Lawson's life between the sheets. It tackles the oft-neglected 'history of emotion', of what goes on behind closed doors, the lifting of the bedcovers, with close attention to marital satisfaction and its constant bedfellow, marital disappointment. It is easy to understand why historians err on the side of caution when it comes to documenting the highly subjective realm of marital tit for tat. There are always two sides to the story. Although in this case it is more Bertha's side that Davies is on.

With scant and fragmentary evidence of the Lawsons' lives an impediment, Davies seeks to bolster the narrative by interspersing her own experiences. As a reader, although I am happy to be carried along and allow the pretext that she and Bertha share a fate, some of the examples with which she pairs herself with Bertha do not exactly match up, so that we might be talking about a domestic incident versus a career example, whereupon I find myself wondering, *where's the connection here?* While the book does offer something new in the extensive work on Lawson, it has its limitations.

The presentism within the narrative is distracting. When Davies compares her life to Bertha's she is comparing from a present-day perspective—a kind of, 'I know what I've had to go through, I can only imagine how much more difficult Bertha's life

was'. Yet we do not know whether Bertha's life was typical or extraordinary. What percentage of mothers worked outside the home? How many were educated and what were the social norms of the day? Bertha was a career woman; how many women at that time could claim that? In its drive to tell the viewpoint of the disappointed wife (I kept *my* promise, Husband!), the book overlooks the importance of setting a story in its historical context.

With questions of context playing at the corners of my mind, I was often jolted out of the narrative with the author's delivery of present-day perspectives. It is one thing to overtly choose to pull the reader back and forth in time, but it is quite another to be able to pull this technically tricky writing skill off. I was often happily ensconced in the Bertha–Henry story only to be yanked out of my reverie, and then often not rewarded for the change. I found myself wondering why, if the author is going to the effort of contrasting her own marital life, she would not do it in a more compelling, and revealing, way. I wanted to ask: *Why are you holding back? Give of yourself and I will come with you.* Without Davies's commitment to the exposé of her own life in the story the reader is left wondering, *well what does it add? Anything at all?*

Perhaps the most distracting aspect of the book was that I was not sure what it was trying to be. On a functional level, with its lack of a contents page, chapter headings and dates of letters (which were, at times, out of order with the chronology), it shied away from signposting the story. On a more fundamental level, I was left wondering, *what is it? Is it a biography, life writing, memoir, an untold story?* It does not fit neatly into any of these categories, certainly not in a way that would withstand serious scrutiny.

So Davies is experimenting with genre; the references to her own life may be authentic and verifiable but we are not entirely sure. Of course, Hayden White suggested that historical and biographical narratives are a poetic process and:

Verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much *invented as found* and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences.

Biography and memoir are literary genres and any boundary blurs. In this case, I think the biography could be written without the memoir. For all the questions of genre—categorisation, context and delivery—I found myself drawn back to the historical story (and is not that the litmus test of whether a book is any good or not?). I found myself always wanting to go back to the Lawsons' lives in *A Wife's Heart*. It did take me on a journey, to life at the turn of the twentieth century, a journey of early married life with all its hopes, that somehow seemed to mirror Henry's career, so promising at first, wasted at the end. I did get a sense for Henry, lovable and hopeless, and for Bertha of whom, little by little, the reader's view is transformed.

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