

# Malcolm Allbrook review of:

## Gabrielle Carey, *Falling Out of Love with Ivan Southall*

(North Melbourne, Vic.: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2018), 106 pp.,  
PB \$29.95, ISBN 9781925801538

During the 1960s and '70s, Ivan Southall was close to being an international superstar. Born in 1921 and living until 2008, the Australian author, an exponent of a genre that came to be known as 'young adult fiction', published 23 books, which sold in the hundreds of thousands, and were translated into over 20 languages. He remains the only Australian recipient of the Carnegie Medal, which he won in 1971 for his novel *Josh*, thereby joining such luminaries of the Anglosphere as C. S. Lewis, Walter de la Mare and Mary Norton. In Australia his books were virtual fixtures on school English curricula, which was when I first encountered them. *Ash Road* (1965) made a deep impression on my adolescent mind, so much so that I was inspired to read the third volume of the trilogy, *To the Wild Sky*, published in 1967. I never quite managed to get to *Hills End* (the first of the trilogy), nor did I ever get around to reading any other Southall books, but to one who had only recently arrived in Australia from recently independent Uganda, I still recognise the books as a vital part of my acculturation.

They captured the imagination, so much more honest, even raw, than the fare I had consumed to that point. The Enid Blyton children in the *Famous Five* and the *Secret Seven* seemed tame and controlled by comparison, more like scouts and guides, and so very English. Southall's characters spoke like the kids around me, and in some ways they taught me a little about being Australian. There was something compelling about their impossible predicaments—caught in the path of an unstoppable bushfire, left alone in an airborne light plane after the pilot inconveniently died—that was simultaneously horrifying and alluring. Would my siblings and I respond so heroically if the adults in my life suddenly disappeared? It took Southall some time to arrive at the formula that would cement his popularity. He had published nine books by 1962 in a series of Biggles-style dramatic adventures featuring a superhero pilot, Simon Black. As he told the oral historian Hazel de Berg, even though they sold quite well, he found them unsatisfying: 'Typical of the time but mimicking the books I had read as a child. All I was doing was perpetuating the old British imperial myth' (p. 16). In the *Hills End* trilogy, however, the protagonists are children who, even amid disaster, are capable of escaping insurmountable odds to survive flood, bushfire and accident without the protection and guidance of adults.

Reading *To the Wild Sky* as an eight-year-old, Gabrielle Carey, like many others, was deeply influenced by Southall. In fact it was this book that brought her 'fateful, deliberately difficult' (p. 5) decision to become a writer. She wondered if she had ever corresponded with the man who inspired her decision, for, as she relates, as a compulsive letter-writer she had written to many of her literary idols, and it was likely that Southall was one of them. At the National Library of Australia, the Southall archive includes 25 folders of letters from young fans, and although a letter from Carey was not among them, her quest soon changed. No longer was it a mild curiosity motivated by self-interest; she became enthralled by the archival evidence of Southall's young readers' devotion, and this to one who was often 'reviled by his critics, and accused of racism, sadism, and even raping the child mind' (p. 6). The remarkable aspect about this trove of letters was the care he had taken not only to organise but to respond thoughtfully and directly, sometimes at length, to each correspondent, signing off 'your sincere friend'.

The title of this little book, though, is an apt precursor of the course of its narrative. Starting with her desire to discover more about Southall's life in an 'effort to understand the person behind the books' (p. 47), Carey soon finds herself becoming disillusioned with her childhood hero. She discovers that, at a time when he was devotedly writing to his thousands of child fans, his own family life was in ruins, his marriage failing and his three children 'locked out of his study and largely out of his life' (p. 52). His son Drew recalled that he and his siblings were forbidden to go anywhere near their father while he was working; they couldn't be heard, or even be seen through his study windows. Southall left everything to do with family life to his wife Joy, his sole responsibility to put a roof over their heads: 'I used to wish that my father would beat me up because at least it would have been some contact' (p. 53).

Thus the contrast between Southall the writer skilled at expressing emotion on paper and Southall the person distant from his own children is an ambiguity that Carey seeks to understand. But the books that meant so much to her as a child now provide little succour. In fact she almost hates *Hills End*, the book that had so inspired her as a child:

I now find Southall's writing frustrating in style and substance. He is preoccupied with boys and masculinity, his protagonists are perpetually misunderstood, the adults relentlessly bullying and ignorant, and his tone winey. Worst of all, there is not even a modicum of humour. (p. 98)

Yet she discerns something appealing about Southall's uncompromising determination to earn a living from his writing and, more importantly, to be true to his calling. He had discovered, as Carey concludes, 'his true talent: the ability to write books in which his young readers could recognise themselves, a pleasure that he had sorely missed while growing up' (p. 60). But to do this, he felt compelled to be solitary, to spend almost his whole life thinking or writing in silence. 'In a sense,'

writes Carey, 'his books ... can be seen as reflecting his continuing struggle with conventional Australian masculinity.' She thinks that, had she met him, she might have found this characteristic appealing: 'the emotional, over-sensitive, slightly tortured sole; the gentle man in a world of boofy blokes' (p. 70).

At 106 pages, *Falling Out of Love with Ivan Southall* is a short but vibrant and attractive book, which makes no claim to be a biography. If it must be classified, it can perhaps be described as a biographical memoir, more about the author's life with Southall, and what she might learn as a writer from one who was dedicated to his art, but whose books have largely fallen from public attention. She is interested in her subject as an emotional being, but biographical detail, even though utilised with flair and skill, is subordinate to her desire to understand her subject, particularly his ability to connect with his readers at an emotional level, while remaining disconnected from his own family to the point of sterility. Unlike the subject of Carey's previous book, Randolph Stow (*Moving among Strangers*, 2013), it is difficult to imagine a resurgence in popularity of the many works of Ivan Southall. Possibly his legacy will in the future draw the interest of other biographers, joining Stephany Evans's 2006 work, *The Loved and the Lost*, currently the sole Southall biography, published just before his death. Or perhaps not. Sometimes an author is only relevant to his own times, and becomes an anachronism. As Carey discovered, those who once loved Ivan Southall may never return to the fold.

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