

Granville Allen Mawer review of Hugh Crago, *All We Need to Know: A Family in Time*

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If Hugh Crago were, in the fullness of time, to be selected for an *Australian Dictionary of Biography* entry, one to be based exclusively on information contained in his autobiography, it would read something like this.

Hugh Crago, university lecturer, counsellor and autobiographer, was born in 1946, probably at Normanhurst, Sydney, the first of three children of Albert Ian Hamilton Crago, school inspector, and his wife Gwen, née Sanders. He was educated at Ballina Primary School, Grafton High School and the University of New England (BA with first-class honours in English, 1968). While reading for a postgraduate degree at Oxford he married Maureen, whose parents lived in north-west New South Wales. The Cragos would have two daughters.

In 1972 he returned to Australia to teach English literature at the College of Advanced Education, Wagga Wagga. Increasingly sceptical about the relevance of literature to life, he began reorienting his courses towards communication. He and Maureen commenced training as marriage counsellors and in 1979 they decided to seek professional qualification as counsellors and family therapists. At the Antioch New England Graduate School, New Hampshire, they were supervised in two years direct clinical experience.

Crago returned to Wagga to practice his new profession. At about this time, in his mid-thirties, he conceived the idea of writing his own 'emotional history' and that of the two preceding generations of his family, focusing on relationships, feelings and values. It became 'an obsession' (p. 40). A decade later he had a quarter of a million words of manuscript and a publisher wanting to reduce it by two-thirds. Not until 2016, aged seventy, did he find a way to restructure and reduce it to publishable length. In the interim he had doubled his own experience of life and relationships while many of his older informants/subjects had concluded theirs.

After seven years at Wagga he took charge of a small youth refuge in Southport, Queensland, for two years. In 1991 he returned to teaching as a junior lecturer in human development at Griffith University's School of Education and subsequently taught counselling at the School of Health at the University of New England. Unable to secure a tenured position at either university, in 1998 he became academic program head at the Jansen Newman Institute, Sydney, which privately trained intending counsellors and psychotherapists. At all three institutions his insistence on academic standards put him at odds with management.

In 2004 he was appointed to a part-time senior lectureship at the University of Western Sydney. By the time he retired in 2012, he was confident that he had successfully rebuilt the university's counselling program. In retirement he continued to research and publish on counselling and storytelling, the latter finding another outlet in the form of poetry.

These bare bones are all the basic life data that can be gleaned from Hugh Crago's autobiography. That he omits to share with his readers the maiden name of the woman to whom he has been married for half a century should be sufficient warning that this is not going to be a conventional autobiography—it is not. The author tacitly accepts the Socratic prescription that the only things that make a lifetime worthwhile are the seeking of wisdom about oneself and others.¹ It makes for highly self-absorbed autobiography but, as the subtitle proclaims, the book has wider ambitions. This is a family memoir, or more strictly one man's memoir of his family. He describes it as an 'emotional history of three generations' (p. 122). Ultimately, it is a search for self in the most genetically intimate of human contexts.

The title is taken from Keats, who was denying the relevance of any knowledge that did not contribute to an understanding of truth and beauty. The author uses it as an ironic comment on secrecy in families and their unwillingness to confront uncomfortable realities. In his prescription the only cure is a good airing, in which everything that can be known becomes known and understood. Socrates had the same ambition but, where his sphere was the whole matrix of human interaction, Crago looks to understand the universal through the particular: 'In the individual life we see the wider pattern of the family, and in the family, we see the entire human race' (p. 247).

The core family comprises Crago's grandparents, Albert and Ethel, their children and one of their grandchildren, the author. Earlier generations are more selectively tapped. The author's siblings and cousins and the generations that followed, including his own children and grandchildren, are omitted. While the stated reason—privacy—is entirely legitimate, it denies readers information that would permit them to test the central thesis of the book, which is that family traits are handed down by nature and nurture (p. 231). The price of publishing such information is on display in Crago's analysis of his 78-year-old wife Maureen. What to him is honesty many would call insensitivity and disregard. She is said to have read every successive version of the book but to have queried only the amount of 'self-display' on his part (p. 4). One can only hope that she gave final consent to publication before her mental acuity 'slowed' (Crago's term), particularly as he records that periodic 'mental fog' had been one of her ailments from an early age (pp. 197–98). The life experiences of two other individuals beyond the core family are also examined. One is Henry Lawson, the author's first cousin at two removes

1 Plato, *Apology* 38a, 5–6.

and here a study in unrealised potential, alcoholism and mental illness; the other is John Wesley, whose Methodism set the moral and behavioural tone in Crago's family and, in its emphasis on self-examination, deeply influenced Crago himself despite an early loss of faith.

Most of the family information was gathered by interview, either face-to-face or over the telephone, and supplemented by correspondence. The interviews were not taped but brief notes taken at the time were written up immediately afterwards quoting the exact words used. Initially confident that 'telling the whole truth was the only way to go', he was unprepared for the sensitivities of his relatives:

When I showed them the chapters that were most relevant to them, a few recoiled in dismay, angrily telling me I had 'completely misunderstood' their father, mother or in-laws, even though what I had written was closely based on what I had been told—sometimes by the very person who was now so upset. Other relatives said nothing at all. I am pretty sure they thought it was dreadful stuff but did not want to hurt my feelings by saying so. The only ones who praised the book were one or two cousins so distantly related that they could read it without taking the bad bits personally. (p. 8)

Reading between the lines, among the dismayed in-laws might have been Maureen's parents, which would account for their absence. It is so complete that we are not even allowed to know their names.

The traits that Crago identifies as common in his family are high anxiety, high sensitivity and high reactivity. Despite his reticence about succeeding generations, he claims to know several individuals among them who display the same configuration. 'More than that it is not appropriate for me to say', although he hopes that those who recognise themselves may be motivated to find out more about their genetic inheritance and what it might mean for them (p. 224). As specific family advice it is not of much help because, as Crago concedes, that temperamental combination is found in a substantial proportion of the population.

The chances of becoming a subject for biography are probably enhanced if the sitter has already painted a self-portrait. Hugh Crago's exhaustive treatment of his inner life, the most difficult part for a biographer to access, would make him an attractive topic. Few people would be prepared to share as many private hopes and fears with a stranger. That he is willing to do so is because of his confidence in the redemptive power of psychotherapy. A trained counsellor himself, and one who underwent psychoanalysis for several years (it uncovered no trauma), he found the 'melancholy self-knowledge' with which he emerged to be comparable to the personal salvation that Methodism promised others in his family: 'in both there is the sense of forgiving and being forgiven, being freed to live more contentedly and wisely in the future' (p. 187).

His therapist pointed out that a rigid determination to tell the truth at all costs—‘the stuff of martyrdom’, as paraded by his hero Sir Thomas More—might be a kind of narcissism. Crago writes that after an internal struggle he conceded the point, but it took the limited form of accepting that he might have sacrificed his chance of worldly success in order to preserve the purity of his beliefs. In this context, pressing on with a warts-and-all autobiography might be interpreted as denial of the point, doubling down against already foregone career opportunities. Apparently oblivious, the author asserts that what all narcissists have in common is a thin skin—the inability to accept criticism.

The book is thematic with a structure derived from Bach’s preludes and fugues, a nod in the direction of Crago’s 10 years of classical piano training as a child. The chapters, with titles like ‘Difference and Dissent’, ‘Loyalty and Betrayal’ and ‘Sanity and Madness’, have identical subdivisions, viz. *In My Time*, which sets out the author’s experience; *In Family Time*, which looks for the same or similar experiences in the family’s past; and *What We Need to Know*, in which the author analyses the common threads. The last 2 chapters are entitled ‘Personal Reflections’ and ‘Theoretical Considerations’. One of those theoretical considerations is assortative mating, in which individuals select partners for their perceived similarities. Against it is the contradictory notion that opposites attract, the dynamic of Crago’s own courtship and marriage:

[it] may seem like a contradiction of assortative mating, but I don’t think it is. We may well see advantage in teaming up with someone whose strengths and weaknesses complement our own (and vice versa), but we are not drawn to just anyone who seems to ‘complete us’ in this way. Rather, I think we are drawn to a particular combination of difference and similarity, only the differences are usually easier for us to ‘see’ than the similarities. The first differences we perceive in our chosen mates are desirable differences. We want to be with that person because we admire the ways in which she or he can do what we ourselves cannot, can be the person we are not. Further into the relationship, of course, those same differences often become irritants. Now we may find ourselves wishing that our mate could be more like us. (p. 232)

From this, drawing on Freud’s insight that we tend to be attracted to an individual who reminds us of one of our parents, Crago goes on to hypothesise a genetic basis for such attraction. Even a dissimilar partner may in time prove to share key characteristics of the seeking partner’s parents. In this way, families replicate their gene pools. Paradoxically, the desirably different partner is similar to someone else in the family whose genes are not carried by the seeking partner or carried without being manifested.

The philosophy of the book is determinist and its atmosphere dense and claustrophobic. Even nominative determinism is invoked, leading to the unlikely suggestion that 2 Johns in the family who suffered from low self-esteem might have acquired it from exposure in school to the historical reputation of Bad King John. A similarly long bow is drawn in speculation that the author's unwillingness to learn to drive emulated an assumed similar unwillingness on the part of a non-driving favourite grandmother.

The book is engaging in its candour and illuminating, if speculative, in its reflections; what it lacks is perspective and distance. The readers to whom the manuscript was submitted appear to have been unable to contribute much of the former (unless their input was ignored). Lack of distance, on the other hand, is an inescapable limitation of autobiography: taking the long view would have required him to defer completion until some years after his own demise.

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