Professor Raimond Gaita is a distinguished philosopher, Foundation Professor of Philosophy at the Australian Catholic University and Professor of Moral Philosophy at King's College London. His interests include reconciliation, collective responsibility, genocide, the Holocaust and education. He is the author of many philosophical texts (A Common Humanity: Thinking about Love and Truth and Justice; The Philosopher’s Dog; and Good and Evil in Absolute Conception) but is best known to NSW teachers for his biography, Romulus My Father which is one of the choices of prescribed texts for the Area of Study, Belonging.

What does belonging mean to you?

First, I'll say something about the concept, then in my answer to the second question I'll say something about its application to me. People have a sense of belonging to a group (to a family, church, neighborhood, town nation and so on) when they can identify with that group in ways that enable them to say that 'we' did this or that, even though they may not have done or even taken part in the events they refer to. In some of my writing, especially those concerned with nationhood and the idea of collective responsibility, I have called the use of that 'we' “an expression of fellowship” distinguishing it from a ‘we’ that merely records that one belongs with others to a particular group. It goes with pride in the achievements of the group, though, once again, one may have done nothing oneself deserving of pride. So a young Australian might say with pride, “We fought at Gallipoli and in World War 2 against an evil tyranny”. Just as importantly, however, as I argued for many years in Australia in connection with the injustices committed against its Indigenous peoples, if one believes that one can justifiably feel pride for the achievements of one's political ancestors, then one must also be prepared to feel shame for their crimes. Thus, if one believes that one can justifiably say, “We fought at Gallipoli” though one was not even born at the time, one should be prepared to say with former Prime Minister Paul Keating, “We took the traditional lands, committed the murders, took the children”. To wish to feel proud without accepting the need sometimes to feel shame is to fall victim to that false love of country that we call jingoism. If a sense of belonging is to be clear-sighted, therefore, it must be constrained, and in submission to that constraint be deepened, by the universal requirements of justice insofar as they are inseparable from a sense of common humanity with all the peoples of the earth. In every human being one must see a fellow human being. (This is one of the deepest lessons I learnt from my father and Hora, not because they said it, but because they lived it.) I have spoken at some length about this, because, as you will see, it is important to what I have to say about the fact that I was born in Germany and go there often.

You were born in Europe, grew up in Australia and now you live in England. How important is place for you in establishing a sense of belonging?

I have a deep love of central Victoria where I lived for ten years between the ages of four and fifteen – a love for its landscape and its people. I have written about this in Breach of Trust: Truth, Morality and Politics (Quarterly Essay 16) and also in a talk I gave first in Barcelona when the Spanish translation of Romulus was launched and later, in an expanded version, in Maldon (a town in Central Victoria).

My father disliked the landscape (he always spoke of the beautiful trees of Europe) and though I grew to love it, I saw it partly through his eyes, or perhaps more accurately, through that aspect of his character that I called his...
“European fatalism”. From that perspective the light and the summer colours of Central Victoria appeared to me to have a beauty inseparable from tragedy. Many people have said that they hear a distinctive voice in my work. Insofar as that is true, that voice was formed, growing up as I did in the landscape of central Victoria, with my Romanian father, with his Romanian friend Pantelimon Hora, haunted by my German mother and with the Anglo Celtic men and women who farmed it and worked in its towns.

Since the end of 1972 I have lived in England, though for family reasons I took leave from my post at King’s College, University of London and lived continuously in Australia for six years between 1993 and 1999. Since ‘99 I have lived half the year in Australia and half the year in England, in London. My father died in May 1996 and in 1997 I wrote Romulus, My Father, finding my roots in Central Victoria again to a depth that took me entirely by surprise.

I love Britain (England really) and admire it greatly, but I do not feel British. When in England I do not say that we did this and that. I say that you did this and that. One reason I admire Britain is because it stood up against Hitler’s Germany, probably the most evil regime in history. Thinking about that regime, and especially about the Holocaust, has profoundly affected my political and intellectual development.

As has the fact that I was born in Germany to a German mother a year after Germany was defeated. Her four brothers fought in the war, all on the Russian front. Whenever we are in England my wife, Yael, and I have Christmas, usually in Germany, with my aunt Maria. Yael is Jewish. Her family on her father’s side was, with the exception of her father and a cousin, murdered in Auschwitz. Maria was very close to my mother and though she was only fourteen, helped look after me when my mother couldn’t. (Recently she told me of how strangers on the street or on the tram looked at her with fierce disapproval because they assumed I was her illegitimate child.) Maria and I are very close, as are Maria and my wife. I assume that I have said enough to indicate how emotionally complex my relationship to Germany inevitably must be – to its past and its present and, of course, because of its great cultural achievements, to its past before Hitler came to power. Yet though German is my mother tongue (I spoke it until I my early teenage years) and although I still respond warmly to it, especially (for obvious reasons) when it is spoken by a woman in what is called High German, I do not feel German. In Germany too, I do not say “we”. Yet, I feel European. No doubt this is partly because my father and his friends who came from many parts of Europe thought of themselves as European as well as Romanian, Polish, Italian and so on. From early childhood, therefore, I had a sense of Europe as more than only a geographical area made up of various nations.
And though I knew at the time that Europe had recently been torn apart by murderous hatreds, I also knew that the peoples – certainly the immigrants – of the nations that comprised it identified with it as a distinct object of allegiance. As a child that was important to me.

Perhaps more important, though, is the fact that as an adult I have been profoundly shaped by Western culture, by its philosophy, its literature and its art (in the most general sense which includes literature, poetry, film and architecture) – mostly in other words by what is called (often disparagingly) its high culture. Because all these things are fundamental to my life, to my sense not only of what I am but also of who I am, I am morally, culturally and intellectually Western to the core. But being Western to the core makes my relations to Germany even more complex. The fact that the Holocaust was initiated by the most culturally sophisticated nation in Europe at the time raises the most seriously disturbing questions possible about the connections between high culture and an even elementary decency.

The deepest value of a culture lies, I believe, in its spiritual resources, which of course, include its moral resources. After the Holocaust it was impossible for anyone who thinks as I do to believe, flatly, in the superiority of Western Culture. That is partly why I argued for many years for what the previous Australian government disparaged as merely ‘symbolic’ reconciliation. Let me quote something I wrote about this in an essay entitled ‘The moral force of reconciliation’ published in Coercive Reconciliation (Arena Press):

It was not much more than 50 years ago that the great anthropologist W H Stanner wrote that Aboriginal culture possessed “all the beauty of song, mime, dance and art of which human beings are capable”. The discovery by many of the Western intelligentsia of moral or spiritual depth in practices and beliefs that had previously seemed to express only the superstitions of scientifically backward savages is one of the finest achievements of the latter half of the twentieth century. It amounted to a capacity to see (as Stanner saw) in black cultures an ever-deepening responsiveness to the defining facts of the human condition – our mortality, our sexuality, our vulnerability to misfortune – and therefore to see them as cultures form which we could learn.

We learn best when we converse, I believe. That, at any rate, is what the example of my father and Hora taught me. But to converse one must speak with a particular voice, or to adapt a marvellous line from Isaac Bashevis Singer, one must – certainly every writer must – speak from an address.

It needn’t be from one address. I have three, but they are all in the West.

What do you think belonging would have meant to your father?

He was born in 1922 in a small village called Markovac in what was then called The Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (In 1929 King Alexander I changed the name of the state to Yugoslavia - land of the southern Slavs.) Markovac was on the border with Romania and was in effect a Romanian village. Romanian was his mother tongue and all his life he considered himself a Romanian. Yet he took virtually no interest in Romanian (or Yugoslav) politics until the wars that followed the break up of Yugoslavia. Though he thought of himself as Romanian and, as I say in the book, first sought out Romanians when he arrived at the workers’ camp in Baringhup, his sense of national identification was highly attenuated.

He did not feel deep affection, let alone love, for any country. Certainly he didn’t feel Australian, but like many immigrants he valued the tolerance and freedom he found in Australia. Though he was sometimes hurt and chagrined by the condescension shown to him and to other ‘New Australians’ as immigrants were then called, he knew only too painfully the difference between condescension and thoughtless humiliation and the bitter hatreds that had torn Europe apart. And as I say in the book, when he first returned to Yugoslavia he was
appalled by the lack of civility he encountered there – a feature, sadly, of many of the countries that lived under communist rule. Officials of all sorts tended to treat those whom they were supposed to serve with discourtesy that often verged on contempt. Also, corruption was rife. He returned from that trip rudely awakened from his nostalgic recollections of Europe to develop a much enhanced appreciation of life in Australia and the qualities of the people who made that life possible. But it is true that he longed all his life for the conviviality and the generous hospitality that is a feature of many of the poorer countries of Europe. You will understand, therefore, why I become upset when I hear students say that Romulus, My Father exposed the racism directed against immigrants in 1950s Australia. Obviously many of them have been taught this by their teachers, who seem not able to distinguish racism (suffered by the Aborigines and by Asians) from the relatively mild xenophobia directed then against European immigrants.

What would belonging have meant for your mother?

I think she felt that she did not belong anywhere. From her early teens she was always restless, always wanting to be elsewhere. Perhaps that was even then an expression of what later was clearly mental illness. Certainly she was, then and always, a deeply troubled soul. It was she, not my father, who wanted to leave Germany. For reasons that I think I make clear in the book, and that the film also makes clear, she felt estranged from Australia. It was mad of my father to hope that she should settle for even a year or two at Frogmore, the derelict farmhouse in which my father and I lived and which she sometimes visited and from which she always fled. In a letter to me after he had seen the film, Alex Miller wrote (rightly I believe, of my mother rather than only of the film’s portrayal of her):

*Your mother was superbly portrayed and in fact I felt I understood and ‘experienced’ her anguish. She seemed, of all of them, to be the one truly displaced person, the one who was out of her place and locked into the gulag of a cultural desert of a kind that was a torture for her, and where the others were able to compromise and to find some useful connection to the reality of their surroundings she flinched from everything she saw and touched. And that her family eventually flinched at contact with her, particularly the little boy, had something of the inevitability and grandeur of true human tragedy in it. Her story alone would have made the film utterly memorable for me. Her tortured...*
RAIMOND GAITA ON ROMULUS, MY FATHER AND BELONGING

life and her eventual despair and suicide moved me deeply and I think of her now as someone I once knew who suffered a similar fate. She was an exile in a way that none of the others were. I had not seen this before and I believe it is part of the greatness of the film to have given it to us.

Nonetheless my mother didn’t want to return to Germany, not even after Mitru killed himself. She felt she had nowhere to go and that there was no one to whom she could turn. My father offered to pay her fare, but she declined his offer, made many times, I believe. I did not know this when I wrote the book. My aunt told me a couple of years ago.

As a child I was conscious of the disdain many people showed to my mother because of the way she treated my father and Mitru and because she did not properly care for me or for Susan and Barbara, the children she had with Mitru. Now as an adult I read the same disdain for her in many reviews of the film, especially ones from America. This pains me deeply. (You can imagine, therefore, how glad – grateful in fact – I am that Alex responded as he did.) Very often the hostility presents as a concern for her victims, me primarily. The concern is sincere, I suppose, but it is pernicious because it suggests that my mother was such a bad mother and wife that she was not deserving of my father’s love and kindness or even the love of her son. Such concern is no kindness to a child on behalf of whom it is expressed because it can never be a kindness to a child to undermine its love for its parents by suggesting its parents are not deserving of its love. No one is undeserving of love, not because every one is really deserving of it, but, because unlike admiration or esteem, real love, deeper than both, has nothing to do with merit or desert.

How did your childhood affect the way you see the world?

I’ve already spoken of the importance of the landscape to my sensibility, to the kind of writer and thinker I am.

Many people who have read my philosophical works say that Romulus, My Father enabled them to see more clearly “where I was coming from”. Robert Manne said at its launch that anyone who understands the values I celebrate in Romulus, My Father will also understand why I have spent much

of my philosophical life elucidating Socrates’ precept that it is better to suffer evil than to do it. He is right, I think. (An edited version of his speech can be found at <http://home.vicnet.net.au/~abr/FebMarch98/manne.html>. The literary critic David Parker also has interesting things to say about this at <http://www.lifenarrative.net/articles/articles-2.html>.

I learnt from my father and Hora how important example is to one’s understanding of values. From them I also learnt what moral seriousness could be. I say in Romulus that I have never known anyone who lived as intensely as they did, the belief that nothing matters in life so much as

Frogmore Filmset. R.Gaita
to live it decently, nor anyone who despised so fiercely all pretence to status and prestige. They were morally serious and sometimes morally severe, but they were not judgemental in the sense that implies that they might disdain anyone or turn their back on them. Nor were they puritanical, not, at any rate, before my father became mentally ill. Indeed, one of the reasons I wrote the book was to celebrate the sensuous, virile, summer-coloured humanism that they lived and taught me in those early years at Frogmore before tragedy struck, first with Mitru’s suicide. Most of all, though, I learnt what it is to be grateful for one’s life, what it is, indeed, to see life as a gift. That might seem strange given the evident pain of my childhood, but it is bitterness rather than pain that turns one against the world, and I had no reason to be bitter. The world appeared to me in the light cast on it by the goodness my father showed, in the fact that he never responded to Vacek with a trace of condescension (nor did Hora), and in his compassionate responsiveness to my mother and Mitru whose need was often desperate.

Your world was very much a male one – how has this affected the way you belong in the world?

I don’t think it has. I think that friendships between men tend to be different from friendships between women and between men and women, but many people think that. And as I said in my book, I grew up with a marvellous example of what friendship between men can be. Much of my life, however, has been shaped by women – by my wife, two daughters and stepdaughters obviously, all of whom I love and admire deeply. Most of the modern writers who have influenced me are women – Simone Weil, Hannah Arendt, Iris Murdoch, for example. I have very close and dear male friends and also very close and dear female friends. Most significantly perhaps, and given my childhood you might think most strangely, is the fact that since I was a young man, I have believed that women tend to be finer than men – more generous, more compassionate, less moralistic, more courageous, indeed, altogether more impressive. I know that people say that Romulus, My Father is a man’s book or at any rate, a book that celebrates men and their virtues, especially as those virtues show in friendship. But people also say, and I’m glad that they say it, that my mother haunts the book. Her tragic life certainly haunts me. More and more I am aware of how deeply she suffered, how desperate her loneliness and sense of abandonment must often have been.

There’s sparseness in the language of your book with the only respite being the descriptions of the scenery, and yet words are your trade. Was this a conscious decision? Would you write the same book today as you did in 1998?

I wrote the first draft in three intense weeks and revised it in another three weeks. (It developed out of the eulogy I gave at my father’s funeral. It was published in Quadrant in September 1996 and is reprinted in Richard Walsh (ed) Great Australian Eulogies [Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2008].) In those weeks of revision I wanted to cut out every unnecessary word. Of course I didn’t succeed, but that was my aim because I had come to think of the book as a kind of tragic poem. In the book I say that tragedy depicts affliction with calm pity. I hoped my book would do the same. It couldn’t do it in prose that has flab on it. I don’t think, however, that the lyricism in the book is limited only to the passages that describe the landscape. Nor do I think that the passages that are not in any sense lyrical are thereby without feeling, or that they lack the power to move people. I’m encouraged to believe that by the reviews of the book and by the many emails I get about it.

I wouldn’t write it differently, which does not, of course,
mean that I don’t see its faults. It’s the kind of book you write once and then leave alone, even in your head.

But I don’t consider myself to be a Writer, not with a capital ‘W’, not in the sense in which a novelist or a poet is.

**What do you think about your book being studied under the theme of belonging?**

I would prefer it to be studied as it was in Victoria (and still is, I think) under no category. Certainly I would not like it to be treated as essentially a book about immigrants to Australia, as though it were, in essence, a book of social commentary. Of course I don’t mean that the fact that my parents and the Horas were immigrants should be treated merely as a background to a story that reveals and reflects upon other aspects of their lives. Blurs on the covers of books should usually be disregarded, but the blur on the cover of the paperback editions of *Romulus, My Father* (other than the film tie-in edition), captures important themes of the book well, I think:

> *Romulus, My Father is about how a compassionate and honest man taught his son the meaning of living a decent life. It is about passion, betrayal and madness, about friendship, and the joy and dignity of work, about character and fate, affliction and spirituality.*

**What are your views on the film version of your book?**

The film is truthful to the spirit of the book, I believe. Screenwriter, Nick Drake and director, Richard Roxburgh made, I think, a film of heart-rending power and delicate beauty. It is superbly acted, beautifully photographed and directed with eloquent restraint. But I will not affect critical detachment from a film in which a beautiful young boy declares that he is Raimond Gaita, from Frogmore, Victoria. Instead I’ll quote Helen Garner’s judgement: “I can’t think of a single Australian movie with such a dense and complex emotional texture. I know I will never forget it.”

Some people prefer the book, others the film. Each has virtues that the other lacks and faults that the other lacks. I think that when one points to the virtues and faults of each, one should resist the temptation to sum up in order to judge which is better, the book or the film. There is, however, a criticism of the film that has sometimes been voiced that I think is mistaken. It says that the Romulus of the film lacks the gravity possessed by the Romulus of the book. That’s partly true, but the Romulus of the film is the young Romulus and the young Romulus of the book lacks the gravity of the old Romulus. As, of course, was the case in life. Eric Bana plays Romulus superbly. In fact I can’t think of anyone who could play him better. (I wrote an indirect response to that criticism in The Age (http://www.theage.com.au/news/film/the-humanity-of-my-father-romulus/2007/06/21/1182019281500.html) I also wrote a long essay entitled ‘Romulus, My Father: From Book to Screenplay to Film’ which is published by Currency Press as an introduction to its edition of Nick Drake’s screenplay.)

**Because this is for English teachers, what do you remember of your English classes at school?**

I had wonderful teachers at Melbourne High School in my final year at school, both for English and for English Literature. In year twelve when I read *King Lear* under the inspired guidance of David Niven, one of Victoria’s finest English teachers, I was actually frightened by Lear’s cry, “O let me not be mad, not mad, sweet heaven; keep me in temper; I would not be mad.” For the first time I was struck and disturbed by how great tragedy can depict the most heart-rending affliction without a trace of evasion, yet achieve a terrible beauty. From my own experience, I knew the authenticity of Lear’s cry.

**Further References**

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