

## Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

**STEPHEN HAROLD RIGGINS, *The Pleasures of Time: Two Men, A Life*. Toronto: Insomniac Press. 2003, 310 p.**

In the sublime film *Memento*, the character of Leonard Shelby, suffering from short-term memory loss and seeking his wife's killer, avers, "memory isn't perfect; it's not even reliable!" when another character challenges his ability to complete his task. Leonard Shelby could recall vast swaths of his life prior to his head injury— the injury that caused his condition— but his more recent life was an agonizing, senseless pastiche of the ongoing. Leonard Shelby was, as such, a tragic figure, one whose tragic flaw was a lack of any ability to form a coherent narrative of this life any longer. All he possessed were disconnected, and fleeing, snippets.

Yet, when we remember our own biographies, do they consist of coherent narratives in the first place, even among the non-brain-damaged? The "story" posed in *The Pleasures of Time*, a sort of biography by and about Stephen Riggins of Memorial University, seems more in line with Shelby's experiences and indeed reads more like the fleeting, disconnected, ethereal experience of remembering that really does capture how we recall our own lives. To cite another film that I reflected on when reading this book, the "agony of forgetting" that was the leitmotif of Alain Resnais' *Hiroshima Mon Amour* is also, perhaps unintentionally, a theme in Riggins' work as well: Riggins has pieced together thirty years of journal entries, research notes (including texts of interviews with Foucault and with his own life partner), photographs, and, one must assume, unrecorded reminiscings. These expose, interesting though they are, the imperfection of memory and, at the same time, the "agony of forgetting" and attempting to encapsulate the lives of the author, his partner, and a generous cast of other characters in and out of family, academia, and his partner's work with circuses. The result is beautifully evocative and, unless you're Riggins presumably, more than a little confusing. But such is memory.

I was eager to review this book because I am, like Riggins, a gay American expatriate now on a sociology faculty at a Canadian university. We are moreover both from Indiana (I am, however, not from the prosperous and, by Indiana standards, genteel world of Riggins' Bloomington, but from the dirty, poor and, by Canadian standards, dangerous world of the "da Region," the industrial area southeast of Chicago) and are even both partnered to men who are themselves immigrants into Canada, mine from Trinidad, Riggins' from France. I mention all this to evidence one of the inferences one can draw from Riggins' work and indeed of much good

qualitative research, that concerning the unavoidable quiddity, the uniqueness, of lived experience. Riggins and I might share much socio-demographically, but this does not mean that our biographies will be identical; they are in fact incomparable. Riggins' book is a dynamic portrait, and while like many biographies it does emphasise how history, society, culture and personal experiences are unavoidably intertwined, the story that emerges from among those nested forces is a unique one. And it is, to a point, an interesting one.

I say "to a point" because it is perhaps inevitable that Riggins' work comes off as self indulgent, and Riggins' relating of some conversations is simply not how people talk, this despite his insistence on the importance of conversation. These dialogues are clearly idealised, fitting perhaps in a Merchant-Ivory film, but not in a real world except for the most overbearing of persons. When Riggins writes that his partner says to him, "You have hair like a grasshopper, ears like an earthworm, ladybug eyelashes, a butterfly mustache, a spider nose and caterpillar eyes," (p. 148) it is difficult not to roll one's eyes and let out a loud, "Oh, Mary, get over yourself!" Having said this, this is a unique, rich work that will appeal to those interested in queer theory, cultural studies, biography/autobiography, and, of course, Stephen Riggins.

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