

Bruce King

An Interesting Life, So Far

Memoirs of Literary and Musical
Peregrinations

To Adele

Bruce King

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Memoirs of Literary and Musical Peregrinations

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Preface

An Interesting Life; an autobiography

My title comes from a time when Adele, my wife, was diagnosed with advanced lung cancer and was told by the surgeon that she had only a few months left to live. She said something to the effect that it had been an interesting life. She need not have been so resigned. After telephoning friends and other doctors around the United States we found in the same city and hospital a surgical team that decided it was best to do an emergency operation and removed one of her lungs. That was over two decades ago and she is still living, swimming, dancing, having sex and I think enjoying life.

I had not much thought about our lives before that, but I began to see that it could be regarded as interesting, especially as over the past decade friends have suggested that I write an autobiography. They included a Nobel prize in literature laureate, and one of the most famous black professors of literature in America. A well-known professor of English and black literatures in France said I was the best scholar of my generation (which seemed ironic as I was then as often unemployed, without any university job) and knew famous writers from around the world (which was true). I had taught at universities in England, Scotland, Canada, Nigeria, France, Israel, New Zealand and the United States and written or edited some early books about Indian, Nigerian and Caribbean literatures. I sometimes even heard from people who remembered my earlier books on English seventeenth-century literature, and there were a smaller group of scholars who claimed to have been influenced by an article I had written about West African High-Life music (supposedly the first essay on the topic).

I could not see how to write about my life, as I did not want it to consist of bragging about people I had met or the self-justifications and complaints that fill many autobiographies. I was not a celebrity, a rock, TV or movie star, I avoided limelights. I was known in several small areas of research, but not too many people. I was a literary critic

and who would want to read about that and my seemingly endless futile attempts to fit into the academic life.

Besides, I wanted to write about other sides of myself that I considered more important, such as my life-long involvement with music or that somehow my social dancing was highly regarded wherever I lived. African women would tell my wife that I was a great dancer; on the streets of Indianapolis, New Orleans, and Paris there were people who stopped us to mention that they admired our dancing recently at some club. Even in our eighties when slow and arthritic we would be asked by young couples to change partners and dance with them. I thought of ourselves as the Old Smoothies. We had been asked were we retired Broadway dancers. How could I write about that or even about my cooking of which I was proud. In Paris we knew the best new inexpensive restaurants and some of the best chefs. Young Parisians said that they would never know Paris as we did. That was my new accomplishment, but it was not the sort of thing for an autobiography.

I tried several times. Once I began with the years when I was a student at Columbia College and would regularly sit in as a drummer at Felton's Lounge, Harlem, with the great blues musicians Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry. That was a decade before other young whites began playing with black blues musicians, a period soon followed by many famous white blues bands. I thought I would tell about when Brownie's brother Sticks thought I was trying to steal one of his women and threatened to cut off my balls. "She's bread, man, bread".

The story would continue with me a student in England going to a party in London where Brownie was being feted and my annoyance that the drummer would not let me play. Didn't he know I was Brownie's drummer? I did not know that I was annoyed with Charlie Watts, soon to be famous as the drummer for the Rolling Stones. Decades later Brownie was performing at a white folk club in Detroit (I was then teaching at Windsor University across the river). He said to blind Sonny something like do you remember Bruce that "white boy" who used to play drums in New York. Then the story would move on to Auckland New Zealand when we had to return from holiday to

Christchurch where I was a professor of English and my daughter Nicole was in school. Brownie and Sonny would arrive for a festival a few days after we left and my daughter stunned me by asking why I thought I should have stayed on to greet them at the airport. She was not born when I knew them in New York.

Still later I was working on a biography of Derek Walcott and interviewing a black patron of the arts in Harlem who mentioned that she was born, I think it was, above Felton's Lounge. I told her I regularly sat-in there during the early 1950s and was asked what a "white boy" like me was doing there. I thought it would make a good way to start a "white boy's" autobiography, but when I looked up on Google some of those whom I thought of as very minor musicians I had played with during that period I discovered that they were not so unknown and had later opened for the Rolling Stones in New York and were often written up in the *New York Times*. Had all the seeming minor characters in my life later become famous? I felt deflated and gave up.

Some years later I tried once more to write my autobiography. An important friend in my youth, who had introduced me to Sonny, Brownie, and other musicians, was a black trumpet player with whom I had gone to school and who had tried to blow up the Statue of Liberty and been sent to Sing-Sing. This seemed a good way to begin an autobiography. I remembered that I had known two other revolutionary "bombers", but as I tried to recall the other two I once more felt this a dead end to pursue.

One, almost comically, was a Scots who placed explosives in postal boxes in sympathy for Irish Celtic nationalism and spent time in prison for it. As I had met him so briefly in Mallorca, where we were spending the summer as usual in Deia (yes the Deia of Robert Graves and other writers as well as such groups as The Soft Machine and Gong), he really could not be included. The other, a South African who fled to Israel, where you guessed it, I was a visiting professor, was now married to an American, had children and was a respected university professor of African literature, an expertise we shared as I had taught at three different Nigerian universities for a decade and edited the

first book about Nigerian literature. My South African friend no longer seemed revolutionary, although the American government continued to regard him as a threat and would only grant him visiting visas to speak at conferences. I invited him to speak on my Modern Language Association special panel about Nadine Gordimer, which formed the core of a book I edited, and dedicated to him, by which time he had died.

To explain his story would have involved the stories of others including a famous labor historian who had been his revolutionary leader, whom I had met when we were both giving lectures in Amherst, and the complicated relationship he had with his family. I now knew the son, a poet and translator, in Paris where I lived. As for my trumpet player threat to the Statue of Liberty I became so befuddled trying to trace his life after his having served prison time, and the ways in which he had become an unlikely hero of American Black revolutionaries, that I felt this was not the way to go. Either I did not really know my famous people or I knew them for a short time and was puzzled trying to see them in more depth.

Then not long ago when I was finishing my third book about Indian literature (which for me means literature written in English) and wondering whether to move on to Pakistani literature, several younger people I knew said that I should write about my life. I kept saying that I had tried and failed. While retelling a story about Allen Ginsberg and the Beats reading in Paris during 1958, which I attended, in which I had a different, minor, part than that portrayed by literary historians, I could see that my listener's eyes were widening; this was a fabulous time before she was born. Aha, how to start that autobiography. So I began with that and intended to move on to another amusing story about asking Ginsberg in Tel-Aviv about his Calcutta contacts as I was returning to India to do research for my second book about Indian poetry. As Ginsberg was surrounded by admirers I, streetwise, got behind him and whispered what I wanted. He appeared to ignore me but at the end of the evening he nodded to me to follow him and his friends to a café where they were eating. I quietly sat at the end of

table until he told the person across from him to make room for me. After telling me who to see in India he said that space is needed for others and I was dismissed.

This would move on to stories I was told in Calcutta about him drinking tea while his well brought up Indian literary friends learned the ways of prostitutes. There also could be related stories about a minor but culturally significant group of Indian Bengali writers, the Hungryalists with whom Ginsberg became involved as had I. Later while my wife was teaching at a university in Muncie Indiana I had unintentionally assembled the largest collection of Hungryalist materials that writers kept sending to me. The main significance of this movement was that it represented the provincial lower classes outside of Calcutta. They wrote badly in English, a language they did not know, as a protest against the literary and cultural refinement of the Bengali elite. I had become the one who knew their history, had interviewed them, and had copies of their works. I had even attended a seminar in Calcutta concerning their social significance.

One day I had a letter from a student at Bowling Green University who to my amazement was writing an undergraduate dissertation about the Hungryalists—his teacher Howard McCord edited some of the obscure American literary magazines that had published Indian literature during the 1960s. I told him I could not take time or afford to photocopy everything. Later he turned up at our door with a taxi waiting to take him to a photocopy shop and then back to the private airplane that (I forget) he rented or owned, which I thought would be a proper American conclusion to my story of the impoverished Hungryalists protest movement's afterlife in the American mid-west.

But, always but, as I began to write about the Ginsberg and the Beats poetry reading in Paris I felt I had to explain why I was in Paris, that I was then studying at Leeds University, England, why I was at Leeds after leaving Columbia, and soon I was writing about my high school teachers, my home town, my family, origins, a regular Victorian biography of a kind that I had often mocked, but what I could I do? This was the story that would become my autobiography whether I

wanted it or not. I knew enough about writing to know that when material starts coming you do not block it, do not even question it; later you can edit and try to structure it, but once a dam burst open you would be flooded and had little choice of what was given unless you lied. Even someone like me can imagine he has been seduced by a muse, perhaps rather the muse of foolishness than poetry.

What follows is the result. It has much more about origins, social distinctions, pride, fears, and about being a Jew than I would have chosen, but that is of interest even though it lacks the texture of fiction. Writers I know claim that the borders between fact and fiction have become indistinct, but not for me.

Bruce King
Hvar-Paris