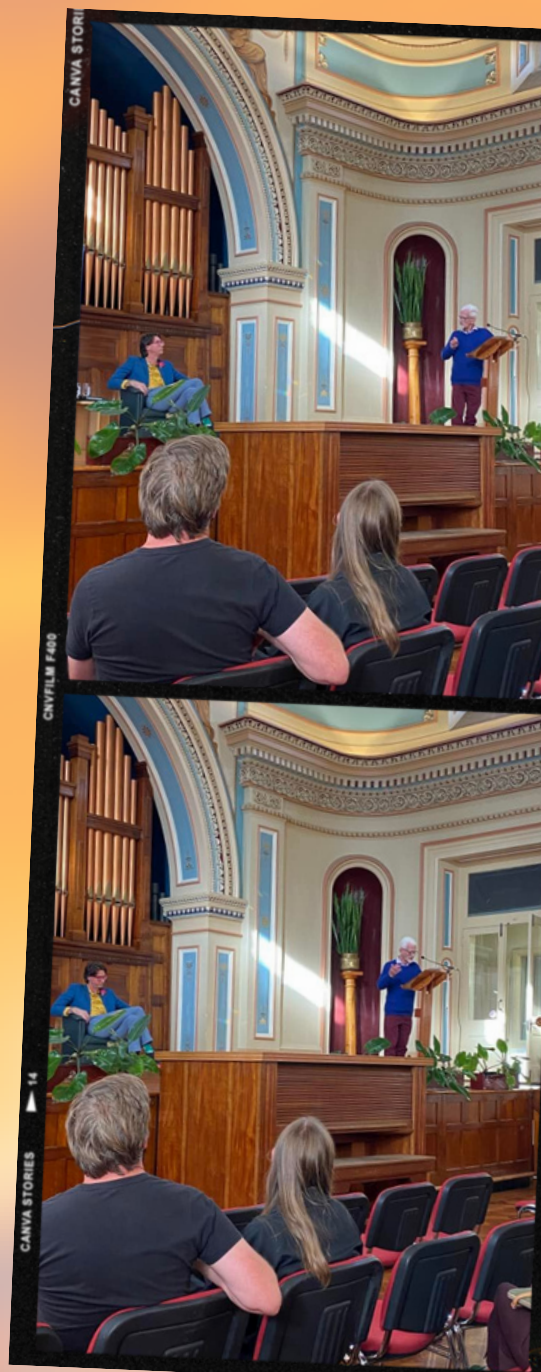


# ROBERT DESSAIX'S SPEECH AT THE LAUNCH OF ADAM OUSTON'S *WAYPOINTS*

What an exciting new novel *Waypoints* is!  
What a performance, what a vaudevillian extravaganza,  
what a high-flying *swoop* up into the empyrean ...  
and I mean 'the empyrean',  
the realm of pure fire, according to the ancients,  
the highest part of heaven ...  
after all, the performer, the vaudevillian, the *swooper*  
(if you will),  
(or the *narrator*, if you did English I)  
is a fire-eater,  
Arthur Bernard Cripp ...  
who breathes, spits and swallows fire in a family circus,  
and is married to a flying-trapeze artist, Alison.  
Almost everyone in this novel flies,  
not always with a happy ending ...  
not Cripp's demented father, of course (now on oxygen),  
or his mother, a contortionist and psychic  
(née Hobsbawm), now dead,  
but everybody else.

But we all know the *author*  
is Adam Ouston (né Ouston, his father's here tonight) from  
Geilston Bay,  
although I keep wanting to call you Cripp, Adam,  
you embody Arthur Bernard Cripp in my eyes,  
and I salute you, Adam Bernard Ouston Cripp,  
this novel is a triumph –  
infuriating from time to time, but a triumph. Honestly –  
all stream-of-consciousness, tip-of-the-tongue hyperbole aside.

To be utterly frank, I was prepared to dislike it –  
I flicked through it the day it arrived  
and found it was all in one paragraph –



I mean, Marcel Proust (Valentin Louis Georges Eugène Marcel Proust)  
has long sentences,  
but nothing that trails *on quite this scale*.  
Yet you seduced me. I loved it, right to the last word.  
Who else in Australia is writing about dangerous ideas with such a fecund *literary*  
imagination as yours,  
With your sense of playfulness,  
your readiness for linguistic hijinks,  
your considered gloom (what else can I call it)?  
I can't think of anyone at all ...  
some fine writers, obviously, some towering talents,  
quite a few high-flyers and risk-taking acrobats for that matter,  
but none of them (I think) doing *this*.  
Who else could discuss motherboards,  
a Boeing's electronics, and also look at a guttering match  
to remark on the 'mesmerising snakelike swagger of the smoke'?  
Very few, if anybody at all.

I am quite awestruck and gobsmacked  
(to quote Arthur Bernard Cripp on another subject entirely –  
the Cloud, as a matter of fact,  
which isn't a cloud at all, it turns out,  
like many other things here,  
which turn out to be other than they seem) ...  
I am quite awestruck and gobsmacked by this ...  
*endless goldmine* of curiosities and bagatelles  
that come together  
(in a novel about falling apart *infinitely*) ...  
*come together* miraculously,  
although there are no miracles,  
*come together* mysteriously,  
although everything can be explained *in the end*,  
to tell me things I don't want to know  
about being mortal right now.

In the normal course of events, Adam Cripp,  
I wouldn't want to know anything very much  
about the things you home in on  
in this riveting paragraph that is your whole novel.  
*In themselves*, I mean.  
Why would I?

Take Lord Percy Douglas, for example,  
who pops up at one point,  
gold prospector and tenth Marquess of Queensberry,  
with his vague links to Oscar Wilde (of all people),  
exploring caves in Coolgardie and then heading across the Australian desert towards Halls  
Creek;  
or take compulsive masturbation in Germany  
before the war;  
or the marital ups and downs of  
Captain Zaharie Ahmad Shah,  
pilot of the Malaysian airlines flight that disappeared over the Indian Ocean in 2014;  
or mind-uploading / or whole brain emulation  
in the brave new transhuman world to come;  
or the Iranian-American futurist  
Fereidoun M. Esfandiary,  
who prophesied that if you can just last till 2030  
you will be able to choose immortality,  
it will be possible for you,  
(and so for well over half this room here tonight),  
although he himself (Fereidoun M. Esfandiary)  
died in the year 2000;  
or take the endless stream of information about the  
tinkering, assembling, disassembling, refining, tightening, tugging, testing, eyeballing and  
hammering that went on every day as his team put together  
the aircraft Houdini (Harry Houdini, illusionist)  
had brought out from England  
for his attempt on the record for controlled flight  
on Australian soil in March 1910.  
The 18th, by no coincidence.

These are some of the smaller things in your paragraph  
that do not interest me *in themselves*.

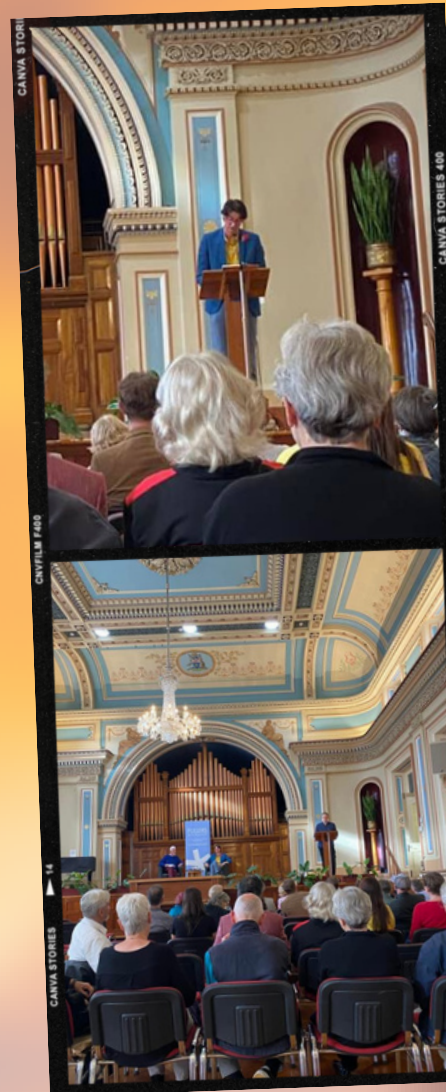
Yet in the event they engross and grip me,  
they clutch at my soul,  
by which I mean that part of me that peers ahead  
into what I do not know, and have a fear of,  
while holding tight to what I *do* know  
(and I do know some things) ...  
all these small things spellbind me *in your telling*.  
Such panache.



Your language casts a spell, you see,  
although nobody believes in spells any more,  
especially your narrator,  
it taps into the rich storytelling English /  
of writers we've all read, indeed dwelt on all our lives – it's rooted English, this English of  
yours,  
yet it sways and bends, delights and amuses.  
This sounds easy, but I know from experience  
– as do half of us here tonight –  
that it's not.  
Above all, though, I am gripped because ...  
well, because this stream of bagatelles I've just mentioned  
eddies around one deep whirlpool of unknowing  
in an age when everything (surely) is known,  
even the chemical composition of clouds on planets  
a billion light years away:  
the whirlpool of unknowing that sucks us all in  
is the disappearance of Malaysian Airlines flight MH370 on 8th March 2014.  
Even the narrator Arthur Bernard Cripp's  
attempt to emulate Harry Houdini's flight at Diggers Rest near Tullamarine ... today, 18th  
March, 2010 ...  
is floating in the maelstrom of this disappearance.  
Houdini – born Erik Weisz (with a 'z') in Budapest,  
called Erich Weiss (with an 's'), and Harry Weiss,  
and Harry Houdini, and simply HH,  
a gift to you and your cascade of oddly connected facts,  
Harry Houdini, vaudevillian,  
who is celebrated as the first to execute a controlled flight over Australian soil  
(although he was not the first),  
rose into the *unknown* in his French boxkite (technologically speaking)  
but did *not* disappear.  
MH370 rose into the *known* and did disappear –  
into the utterly unfathomable.  
This is impossible. We know everything.  
Nothing is unknown. Soon – if we can last to 2030 –  
our brains will all be plugged into the great universal brain,  
(not quite the Buddhist ideal, surely)  
that knows and is everything.

There will be no mystery, no awe,  
Yet this happened. We know so much about it,  
yet not everything.  
We still want to know.  
Arthur Bernard Cripp wants to know.  
We are terrified of loss.  
We are falling apart,  
not just our careers but our very civilisation is stalling, like vaudeville (actually) – where is  
vaudeville now? – like old stunts, like Houdini,  
we're going out of style, we've **had our day**.  
We have, like the great escape-artist, Harry Houdini, *seen through our own act*.  
Harry Houdini, by the way, never flew again.

I think this theme of seeing through our own act at last –  
as artists – is vital at this point in history and unresolved.  
It's not decadence, really, that has us mired in trivialities,  
that is boring us half to death;  
not just the tyranny of the machine,  
or alienation from the natural world  
that leaves us feeling flat and pointless,  
like a jigsaw the cat has sat on;  
instead it is the sudden flood of infinite universes  
of knowledge and experience, I think.  
Delight is still possible ...  
indeed, on television these days  
delight is mandatory, we'll laugh at anything,  
but wonder has largely fled or faded  
(at least as Arthur Cripp sees it)  
leaving us unawed (that's with a 'w')  
and ungodsmacked,  
leaving us with plenty to say,  
an infinitely expanding number of things to say  
and ways to say them,  
about everything from tadpoles to black holes,  
but a shrinking number of *ravishing* ways to throw light on the world.  
SBS has been reduced for the umpteenth time to *Mysteries of the Sphinx* and *Secret Scotland*  
(for God's sake) to keep wonder alive, or at least twitching, inside us.



It's not just a matter of struggling to be innovative nowadays – you don't have to be first, as Adam says in *Waypoints*,  
Houdini wasn't first to execute a controlled flight in Australia, and it doesn't matter, it was Houdini who filled us with wonder and ravished us and is celebrated (wrongly) on the plaque at Diggers Rest just north of Tullamarine.

Adam's achievement, it seems to me, lies in reconciling the explosion of knowing with the ravishment of unknowing: stories may be infinite, he says, like his own stream of consciousness, like the caves in Coolgardie that several of his characters (real and imagined) explore ... the stories never peter out, but our time here is not infinite. Well, exactly – there you have it. And art – and I would say a good life – spring out of eyeballing this contradiction, whatever Jeff Bezos believes and Fereidoun M. Esfandiary once thought possible.

When I read that line in Adam's book (about the clash between the infinite and our time here) I went for a very long walk.

And now, before I ask Adam to read a page or two for our enjoyment, may I just say that I hope, Adam, like Houdini, you reappear over and over again, throwing off the shackles of what is permitted and what is fashionable. I hope there are many waypoints yet in your journey, not to oblivion (of course), but to fame and infamy, a journey stretching well beyond 2030 ... but you may have to play it by ear a bit, by the look of things, Mr Esfandiary's prediction may have been premature. Meanwhile, I congratulate you and invite everyone here to applaud your achievement on this special day.