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# Barbara Hanrahan

## A Biography

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# *Barbara Hanrahan*

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## Chapter 1

# Origins

In 1963 Barbara Hanrahan from Adelaide, eccentrically dressed in an orange teddy-bear coat, was on her way to Britain to take up a position as a student at the Royal College of Art in London. Her autobiographical novel *Sea-Green* begins with a description of the narrator Virginia's agonised parting from her mother and grandmother: 'Now, as the ship slips away we climb to the highest deck. "The Maori Farewell" comes fuzzily from a loud-speaker; streamers slope into the water.' At the wharf in Melbourne, the *Fairsky* had seemed large and ominous to Barbara too, though she was yet to suspect what personal confusion lay ahead. She was merely torn between the pain of separation and a longing to get away, to further her career: 'She left it all, and went away to England on a boat.' As it pulled out, with the streamers fluttering in the wind and stretching until they broke she could barely discern her family, mere dots below her:

suddenly the two faces sink back, turn anonymous as all the rest. That sheaf of straining white is nothing to do with me. And proves it, further, by merging with larger blackness, snuffing out completely. For a time lights trail us ... then they too are gone. Only night is left.

These streamers, before they finally snapped, were her final ties to those she loved.

Barbara was, naturally, uncertain about what London would be like. Though the choice to sail had been her own she suffered, missing what Barbara liked to call 'the three who were important'<sup>1</sup> to her: her mother, grandmother, whom she called Nan,<sup>2</sup> and her great-aunt, Reece. Part of her wanted to remain in her childhood



Barbara Hanrahan on the ship that took her to England  
(STATE LIBRARY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA PRG 961/30)

world forever. While on her way to a new career in London, Virginia, Barbara's narrator in *Sea-Green*, dreams of her Adelaide life:

A dead room, a safe room: mock-leather that almost looks real, three-piece draped in tasteful chintz, china flamingoes teetering in a pea-green bower, the child Virginia safe for ever in dotted Swiss in a frame of scalloped gilt.<sup>3</sup>

Barbara wishes to be framed and fixed in time like the photographs of her on the family mantelpiece. This is a central motif of Barbara's life, the wish to return to the safe world of her childhood in Rose Street, Thebarton, in Adelaide. The details of the room Virginia describes may be satirised, but Barbara's essential self-perceptions are present: 'For always, in the presence of that house full of memories she existed merely as a child; could function on no other level.'<sup>4</sup>

Virginia is based on Barbara. It is obvious that fiction, by its

very definition, cannot be taken as an exact representation of reality, yet Barbara's autobiographical novels, of which there are four, are so close to the actual events of her life that it is hard to tell what is fiction, what fact. She used female narrators who are barely distinguishable from her, artfully playing with facts, altering the order in which events actually occurred: but a substratum of truth remains. Confusion between reality and the imagination was to be the key to much of Barbara's writing, lending it a peculiar and distinctive atmosphere.

In 1963 Barbara was timid, emotionally immature and insecure. She had lived in a close-knit family circle in a working-class suburb. It seems surprising that the narrator of *Michael and Me and the Sun* would soon be fronting up for her first sexual adventure in London wearing a nightdress and pants trimmed with appliquéd butterflies, made by Nan, her grandmother, but this was based on fact.<sup>5</sup> Barbara had taken her mother and Nan with her, in her heart.

Barbara's feelings about the family she had left were part of a powerful emotional agenda. The first factor in this was the absence of her father, Bob, who had died when she was a year and a day old. As Barbara's narrator in *Michael and Me and the Sun* states:

always, right from the start, there'd been this other person who wanted to be like my dead father – wanted not to care about the little things ... That part of me got free when it made the prints, and had made me feel I had to get away.<sup>6</sup>

Bob Hanrahan's absence left a gap in Barbara's life up to the early 1970s (when she left Australia for England), which no one had been able to fill. In the 1940s, in the outdoor lavatory of the house in Thebarton, the young Barbara Hanrahan would quiz her mother Ronda about her dead father Bob, 'my father who never was'.<sup>7</sup> Her mother would have to accompany her to the outside toilet at night, a frightening journey in the dark and answer Barbara's questions. The hallway seemed very long. It is not clear why their conversations had to be secret. Perhaps Nan did not like to have Bob mentioned in the house. Whatever the reason, the ritual drew Barbara and her mother close. Returning, Ronda would strike a match and, Persephone-like, lead her daughter back from the gloom: 'I clasped her hand', Barbara later wrote in her fiction, 'for the path seemed

longer, the darkness darker, the dining-room farther away ... we began the journey back'.<sup>8</sup>

Barbara Hanrahan was born in Adelaide in 1939. Her father, who had worked in the Holden bicycle workshop, had died of tuberculosis. This absence was a significant feature of Barbara's early life. It haunted her. There were still objects in the home that had belonged to him, as described in an interview:

My father had left behind a scarf and a silver cup he'd won for football. His hairbrush with some of the bristles missing – that was part of him too. These material things were still there, and it seemed curious to me that the people who'd owned them, who were supposed to be more real, had gone.<sup>9</sup>

She later said his death meant 'that I grew up in a household of women – three women, no men at all ... he was always there, mixed up with me to think about. But my father was dead. The death thing is there from a very early age'.<sup>10</sup>

Later in her life, Barbara did all she could to find out more about her father. She repeatedly told interviewers that he had been a handsome man, and she described him in her fiction as having 'looked like Tyrone Power'.<sup>11</sup> He looked charming, and he was. The lively stories about Bob as a young man delighted her. His friends' nickname for him was 'the Czar'. But a young man who turned cartwheels in the road in front of an oncoming tram, and who preferred pubs to home life, sounds like 'one of the boys', a rather irresponsible figure. Barbara, however, did not see him in a critical light, and put the anecdote into a short story called 'The Czar', then into another, 'Dream People'.<sup>12</sup>

The stories about Bob were told from her mother's viewpoint in many, sometimes exhausting, sessions. First, Ronda had told Barbara how she and Bob first met, and in 'Dream People' it reads:

Ray Shegog took her to a dance at the King's Ballroom ... he just sat there reading the racing pages of the News; he didn't seem to take any notice of anyone. But after a while he asked her to dance and they both lived at Thebarton, so they went home together on the tram. She started going out with him to the pictures and for walks down



Bob Hanrahan, Barbara's father  
(STATE LIBRARY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA PRG 961/30)

the Beach Road where they'd have a lemon squash spider in the shop opposite the billiard hall for a treat.<sup>13</sup>

After Ronda is made Belle of the Ball, the story relates with painful honesty, 'when he took her home he wanted to do it round the side of the house – he said it was a proposition not a proposal'.<sup>14</sup> Eventually they marry, the young man again showing disregard for his young wife's finer feelings. 'They were married in the Registry Office, [in Barbara's novel *The Scent of Eucalyptus*, this is altered to Holy Trinity on North Terrace] and she thought it terrible when he went and played football in the parklands afterwards.'<sup>15</sup> 'Dream People' describes how the young man – still not named by the narrator – had been living at home with his father, his mother having moved out to live with Aunty Agnes. More of his background is divulged:

He'd won a scholarship to the Christian Brothers' College in Wakefield Street, and when he'd left school he'd gone for a white-collar job in the Railways, because it was a big deal to get into the Government in the

Depression. He had the qualifications, but they reckoned his eyesight was bad and wouldn't let him in ... He was so disappointed he took a job at Holdens in the machine shop and wouldn't look for a better one.<sup>16</sup>

This then was Bob Hanrahan, more or less as Ronda had seen him – a rather selfish, fun-loving young man, something of a failure – but Barbara loved him exactly as he was, and passed no judgement on him.

In 'Dream People' the baby – in real life, Barbara – arrives, after which the couple move to stay in a hotel in Light Square in the city, where one of the young man's friends worked in the bar. This meant that Ronda was neglected and somewhat frightened: as the story tells it: 'Nearly every day she walked home to her mother in Rose Street, with the baby.'<sup>17</sup> They go back to living with the husband's father (Grandfather Hanrahan, in reality) in Dew Street, Thebarton. Not long after, the husband dies and the details are pathetically and starkly narrated:

One night when she was there, he told her to take the tubes out of his nose and shift the [gas] cylinder – he kept at her till she did it, and then water shot everywhere and the nurses came running. One day they called her in because he wasn't expected to live, but when she got there he was sitting up reading the racing page. He was very thin, his nose and eyes stuck out, he looked like a parrot. He said he was too young to die, but he died the day after the baby's first birthday. For ages after she couldn't bear to look at a parrot and she couldn't be in a room with anyone coughing, it made her feel like screaming.<sup>18</sup>

This was, in essence, the true, slightly sordid and melancholy story of Barbara's parents when they were young, set in the bleak post-Depression working-class Adelaide background to which they had belonged: a hasty marriage, a poor young couple without a home of their own, her birth which largely went unheeded by the father, his untimely death.

The names of Barbara's parents are not given in the stories. It is as if Barbara needed, even in 1987, to distance it, to write it down as fiction – it was hurting her to tell it even then. Bob Hanrahan was

no saint. Indeed Ronda's account of him places him in perspective, and balances Barbara's persistently romantic one. Ronda said that if he had lived he would not have been much of a father to Barbara, having shown her little attention in the first year of her life. Barbara was never to see it in this light. As a child she persisted in idealising him, while linking him with death. He had been the first 'death' figure in her life, and death was to become a major preoccupation in her work.

In *The Scent of Eucalyptus* the writing about her father is strained: 'I had a father, but he died. Three months after that I was in a hospital too. I tricked them – lived; came home to five.' She expresses doubt about her father: had he ever existed? Taken to the cemetery by her grandmother, she reflects:

I stood before the slab that bore his name – and it was my name. I gazed at the letters and they were grimed with dirt (the railway was very near). The willows were too – and was he ever a lover, ever my father?<sup>19</sup>

The insecurity Barbara expresses here, via her narrator, pervaded her life. If she never knew the man who helped bring her into being, how could she even exist? Many years later, when Barbara was terminally ill, she found comfort in the thought that she would soon rejoin Bob. This idea inspired her work. Barbara said in 1985, 'my father is dead but he's utterly alive to me ... because he's dead, because I never knew him – it makes him so much more potent than if I had. He stalks through my mind, I feel I'm speaking to him, writing for him'.<sup>20</sup>

Barbara also valued the memory of Bob for the Catholic connection that she believed he had brought into her life, seeing him as her abiding link with the Catholic Church. This was largely in her imagination. In fact she had very little contact with that church during her childhood. This idealisation of her father's upbringing became fictional inspiration:

My father had a picture of the Madonna: blue robe, strawberry heart, rose garland, wicked dagger, pleats of light, limpid gaze, hooping halo. She held an Easter lily in Her hand; She lived safe in a celluloid frame and a cellophane square. My father had a Child's Manual of



Barbara's mother, Ronda Wisbey  
(STATE LIBRARY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA PRG 961/30)

Devotion, presented to him by his mother, bought from Pellegrini & Co., Publishers to the Holy See.<sup>21</sup>

From an early age, Barbara was fixated on re-imagining her birth, frustrated that she could not remember it. On page one of her first autobiographical novel, *The Scent of Eucalyptus*:

My mother hedged about my birth: said she found me in a rose. And I believed her – saw myself pink and perfect as a rubber dolly, added some modest gauze, even a little crown ... My mother lied – that rose-birth wasn't true. I was born the same as any other.<sup>22</sup>

Shortly after Bob's death, Barbara and Ronda went to live with her paternal grandfather in Dew Street, Thebarton, then moved in with her mother's mother, Iris Pearl Goodridge, (Nan) and Iris's





Nan in her garden at the Pemberton Street house

sister 'Reece' Nobes at 58A Rose Street, only a short distance away: these three women became Barbara's 'three who were important'.

The first of the 'three' was Barbara's mother who, according to Barbara's diary, in which she often exaggerated, suffered a nervous breakdown after her husband's early death. It was true that Ronda must have had a difficult time and was not mistress of her home, as she lived with her mother, 'Nan', perhaps for economic reasons. She got a permanent job in the advertising and art section of a big Adelaide store, John Martin's, so the everyday care of Barbara was probably undertaken by Nan, to whom the child became strongly attached. But she was also close to her mother, the relationship, as later described to Jenny Palmer in a *Bulletin* interview of 1982, being more that of sisters; Barbara slept with her, forming half of what she later described as a pair of spoons. She writes, perhaps melodramatically, in a novel, 'My mother was elusive. I did not possess her ... I wanted her as the other, when I felt her up against me in the bed'.<sup>23</sup>



PLATE I

*Snake*