'What a treat it is to read a writer at the top of her game'
DAILY TELEGRAPH

LIFESCAPES

A Biographer's Search for the Soul



ANN WROE

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Daily Telegraph

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Church Times

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Peter Hennessy

‘A rare and beautiful book . . . If you want to experience a mystery – how the world’s soul moves under the skin of this reality – read this book’
Kapka Kassabova

‘Ann Wroe is a poet of the particular. Her prose, as tightly woven as a rush basket, frequently breaks into song. *Lifescapes* is a masterly celebration of the world, and of the peculiar and glorious predicament of its inhabitants’
John Banville

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ANN WROE

Ann Wroe is the Obituaries editor of *The Economist*, and has written its weekly obituary for almost two decades. She is the author of eight previous works of non-fiction, including biographies of Pontius Pilate (shortlisted for the Samuel Johnson Award and the WH Smith Literary Award), Perkin Warbeck, Shelley, Orpheus (winner of the Criticos Prize) and St Francis. She lives in Brighton and London.

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Contents

Preface ix

I OUTBREATH

1 Possessing 3
2 Seizing 27
3 Indwelling 53
4 Returning 77

II INBREATH

1 Possessing 107
2 Seizing 131
3 Indwelling 158
4 Returning 182

Obituary Subjects in Order of Appearance 198
References for Quoted Works 201
Acknowledgements 209
Permissions 211

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Preface

In 2009 I wrote an obituary of a fish. In my twenty years of doing obituaries for *The Economist*, this marked a departure. But it was August, news was slow and the weather was hot; so, sitting in my shed at the bottom of my north London garden, I imagined myself instead in the silty depths of a lake near Peterborough.

The fish was Benson, a carp – probably a she – who was, for a time, the most famous fish in England. She weighed twenty-nine kilograms and had died, it seemed, from eating too many uncooked tiger nuts. She was a gourmand but also a paragon of loveliness. So it flowed on:

> In her glory days she reminded some of Marilyn Monroe, some of Raquel Welch. She was lither than either as she cruised through the water weed, a lazy twist of gold. Her gleaming scales, said one fan, were as perfect as if they had been painted on . . . Her lips were full, sultry or sulking, her expression unblinking; she seldom smiled. Yet the reeds held fond memories of her friend Hedges, her companion in slinky swimming until she, or he, was carried away in 1998 by the waters of the River Nene.
>
> Abandoned, she ate more. Cubes of cheese, scraps of luncheon meat, bread crusts, Peperami, dog bis-

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cuits and tutti-frutti balls all came down invitingly through the water. She sampled most of them. Of course she was not fool enough to think they came from heaven. Carp are cunning, a very fox of the river, as Izaak Walton said. She could see the lines, and at the end of them the trembling shadows of Bert, or Mike, or Stan, spending an idle Sunday away from the wife with a brolly and a can of beer. Often she continued to lurk, roiling the mud to conceal herself and basking in her own scaled beauty, as carp will. On hot days she would rise to the surface, glowing and tantalising, with a lily-leaf shading her like a parasol. She played hard-to-get, or the One That Got Away, nudging the line before drifting down towards the dark serene. But then, just for the hell of it, she would take the bait.

The first hookings hurt horribly, the whole weight of her body tearing her tongue like a razor blade. But over the years she got used to it, and her leathery mouth would seize the bait as a prize. Hauled to the limelight, she was admirably unfazed . . . She had her picture taken with Tony, owner of her lake, who confessed to *The Wall Street Journal* that he had 'quite a rapport' with her; with Ray, who caught her at two in the morning, disturbing her beauty sleep; with Matt, of the shy smile and the woolly hat; and with Steve, who ungallantly told *Peterborough Today* that she felt like 'a sack of potatoes' and was 'available to everyone'. She was not, but at least fifty people held her, or gripped her, for a moment or so, uncomplainingly,

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she nestled in their arms before she was lowered to her element again.

It was news to me that fish could be caught and released so often: that, in the end, they might even let themselves be caught. It made me look differently at the anglers sitting with their tea-flasks and nylon bivouacs by the Hampstead ponds, just waiting for the weed-or-water ripple that might give their prey away. How much easier, I thought, than my job: trying to catch human lives, week after week, in 1,000 words.

One day, I suppose, science will announce what life is and how it began – if it began. Until then I have been grappling with a mystery, perhaps the most fundamental of all: the nature of this force, which, as Shelley put it, our bodies 'enshrine for a time'. The word 'enshrine' confirms that even for Shelley, who was no believer, it seemed ridiculous to think of life, that 'astonishing thing', as merely physiological and mechanical. It seems equally absurd to me.

Instead, I think of my work as catching souls. It is the best word I know for the unique and essential part of ourselves, our self-conscious and transcendent core. I happen to believe in the soul as a concept. Many of my subjects did not, and I would never dream of foisting that belief on them. My surmises are my own. Nevertheless, it is soul that I go looking for. Or, to put it another way, real life.

Over the years I have tried many ways of ambushing life, in long form or short, from a quick haiku to

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doorstop biographies. All the attempted snares and traps come in for consideration here. Many of my conclusions I have drawn from my subjects; more from life itself, as it springs surprise after surprise. One thing is certain: from our point of view, life always gets away.

And then returns. And then returns.

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I

Outbreath

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1. Possessing

The village was tranquil flint-and-brick, shaded by great trees. My friends and I had made a detour there to get a watch repaired. The house we needed stood at the bottom of a steeply rutted lane; just beyond the gate was a stand of jams and chutney for sale, with dewy bags of fresh watercress. It was mid-July, sunny and hot. The jovial watch-mender invited us to have tea outside, and we chatted for about an hour. But my attention wandered sometimes to another presence, almost invisible, silent, busy.

Before we saw her she had run away,
the little wife,
leaving a section of the watercress
in pale neat swards
among the rioting grass, blaze-dandelions,
    exultant birds –

Sun-dazzled greenhouse panes had hidden her,
bent with her knife
over the dancing, sparkling stream beneath
his swelling shirts –
now in the kitchen she shakes bunches out
under the spurts

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of an ungovernable tap. Outside
we drink and laugh;
inside, past shelves of jam- and chutney-jars
washed, dried and shone,
she keeps her head bowed to the endless job
that must be done,

her silent life,
the little wife.

That poem was sheer presumption. All I knew of 'the little wife' was a stainless-steel knife left in a watercress bed; a plastic washing line; an unruly tap; and shelf after shelf of empty shining jars. All I saw of her was a dark, bent head and bird-like body, perhaps Malaysian. Yet from these few things a life seemed to form, and not a happy one. I heard years later that the watch-mender had died, leaving her nothing, and she had fled from the house and the village as if they were a prison. When I next passed the house, the watercress beds and the stand had gone. Instead there were footballs and a gaggle of ducks.

My pursuit of lives often proceeds this way. Chronologies, ancestries and even achievements may reveal curiously little about a man or a woman. On the other hand, the smallest things may offer vital clues. A brass letter-opener, a much-mended cardigan, a favourite word – a line of jars – may catch them much more sharply. The more other people are brought in, with their own assessments and perspectives and their bland praise, the more the particular life escapes. It becomes a studio portrait where the subject stands stiffly against a backdrop of

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mountains or sea, with the photographer's own props on the table and a scrubbed expression, album-ready.

Life is far less formal. One friend of mine is best evoked by a tennis racket thrown on an unmade bed and an end of *baguette* studded with raw garlic, his favourite snack. Another, from primary school, is remembered by her leg brace, a box of thirty-two different crayons and the dance of iron filings on a magnetised piece of paper – a wonder she showed me as we perched on the fire-escape. Two maiden aunts are summed up in the immense privet hedge that towered outside their French windows, and in willow-pattern plates laid with slices of cold mutton. Hats are eloquent: the broad-brimmed bush-hat of a Zimbabwean friend, sported proudly in the Welsh rain; the snappy panama of a colleague in Virginia, worn with a seersucker suit that breathed the antebellum South; or the hard pill-box adopted by Great-Aunt Edye, complete with a veil as scratchy as herself. I like to think I am summed up in my favourite jacket, frayed away at buttonholes and elbows, collar and cuffs, because it smells of rain and the hills, and each bramble-snag records some scrape or other.

Handwriting seems a giveaway: a signature that shrinks into a corner, a bold Pentel scrawl, hungry descenders that grab the line below. But there is eloquence too in a favourite mug (Spurs, James Bond, an abstract print), the arrangement of tools (precise, graded, disordered), a pair of glasses (flamboyant, sober or wire-rimmed as Harold Pinter's were, worn slightly askew, as if thrust on in a rage). When I think of yet another great-aunt, it is cake that catches her.

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With wrinkling mouth
Aunt Fairy
blows upon her tea,
suspicious as a sheep
that steps towards the hay
heaped in a metal pen,
pulls out a strand or three –
but then shoves boldly in,
with loose lips
swallowing down before
she tastes the Rich Fruit cake
too briefly on her plate,
and butts back in for more.

I might also have focused on her hanging-down stockings, or the slanting, wide-legged walk caused by her bad hip. But it was cake that caught her: one sort in particular, sprinkled with Demerara sugar and damp with boiled fruit. She spoke the very word as if she chewed and tasted it, with a half-laugh of relish that life could contain such delicious, succulent things.

When we left that café (in Brighton, decades ago, near the Pavilion) life clung to her teacup and plate and the disarranged cushion on her chair. It tends to do so. A glove dropped in the street still trembles and gesticulates with the presence of its owner, who was fumbling in a bag or distracted by some thought as the bus drew up. A Roman perfume bottle of tarnished blue-green glass evokes not only an eyebrow, a lip, a delicate wrist, but some woman's fantasies of beauty. A shoe, even from

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centuries ago, water-dark leather crushed out of shape, nonetheless preserves the weight of a foot and the care of fingers fastening. After modern disasters, when people run away, they tend to shed their footwear for greater speed. When the Israelis pursued the Egyptians in the rout that ended the Six-Day War in 1967, they came across a part of the desert littered with panicking shoes.

Another shoe, a trainer, lay for months on a half-roof in Gower Street in London. From the street you could not see it, so no one removed it. It looked like the tossed-away remnant of some fight between young bloods, but it was small; it had belonged, perhaps, to a child of eight or nine. It was not high-fashion, as the fashion was then: cut too low on the ankle, too thin on the tongue, and without a showy button to inflate it. But it looked new, with smart diagonal flashes on the uppers and the regulation trailing laces. Some boy would have put it on each morning, struggling over the knots, perhaps late for school or being urged on by friends on bicycles; he would have felt a sense of achievement as he tightened the loops, standing a bit straighter afterwards. Some careworn mother, too (ghost hovering beside ghost), would have been pestered to make this purchase, now gone for nothing. The discarded trainer still sang of all this: pride, sacrifice, waste.

On Brighton beach far scruffier fragments lie among the pebbles. Just litter, you could say: scraps not yet harvested by the man who wanders among the deckchairs with a grabber and a black bag, moving to the sounds of old Motown from the waking-up pier. Each fragment is sea-rubbed, insignificant, but each suggests a life. That

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unravelling piece of green nylon rope came from a fishing boat, probably attached to a lobster creel, perhaps lost overboard on some day when the sea blew up rough and sou'-westerlies were lashing the skipper in his soaked, slick rubber overalls. His frustration is in it. That blue cap came from a sun-block bottle shaken by a ponytailed girl over shoulders already too plump and pink, which would be really sore the next day, but she didn't care. That fifty-pence piece, dull with salt and air, was part of a small girl's ice-cream money, whose loss she wept over with hot tears while her mother scolded her. (It reminds me of another coin, darker and far older, picked up among the weeds in the Circus Maximus in Rome: a *quadrans* of Nerva dropped, as I instantly imagined, by a slave going for bread, desperately feeling in his tunic for it, tensing for a whipping.) Even the stones, when I pick them up, carry the grooves of past collisions and the movement of old fire.

Beyond them the sea sighs in and out, eroding, disposing: in Paul Valéry's words, *toujours recommencée*, always starting again.



Pontius Pilate, whose life I wrote, had to be caught from pieces not much larger than these. Gospels and histories record certain deeds, even some alleged words, of the Roman governor who crucified Christ. But of the man almost nothing is known. The volume of Tacitus has gone that might have mentioned him. His daily reports to Rome (the tedious duty of all governors) have disap-

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peared. His career before Judaea is a mystery. The hard evidence that remains is a handful of coins and a broken dedication stone.

I bought myself one of Pilate's coins for Christmas, from a shop opposite the British Museum. It is a *prutah* from the year of the crucifixion, the second-smallest of the coins he minted in Judaea; it might have bought a handful of figs. It is bronze, now turned dark green, thin with age and wear. The symbols are ones he would have chosen: on the obverse, a *lituus* or augur's staff, a sign of 'superior' Roman religion and Roman good fortune; on the reverse, a victorious, fruitful laurel branch. On both symbols the bright, coppery bronze still gleams in places through the patina, giving them just the effect Pilate wanted them to have. This little bit of power and propaganda was all his own, and as close as we can get to the life of him. But the dedication stone, too, tells some of his story: that he described himself not as an administrator but as a *praefectus*, a mounted military man.

From these hints, and from common Roman things, I tried to build him up: the inauspicious days marked in red on his calendar, the faint whiff of shellfish dye in his toga, his homesickness for news-sheets and fried snacks seized from a street-stall, his joy in chariot-racing (*Go, Greens!* or *Go, Blues!*), his mouth-freshening pastilles in the morning; his superstitions, as a man who took auguries, about birds, storms, left-handedness, a trip on a step. I boldly surmised that he might have shared the Roman taste for the strange luminescence of decaying things, and for the colour of dried blood. A sort of hologram

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