

Summoning the lightning

Francesca Sasnaitis

THE MAN ON
THE MANTELPIECE:
A MEMOIR

by Marion May Campbell

UWA Publishing
\$24.99 pb, 232 pp, 9781760800031

In 1952, Marion May Campbell's father was killed in an apocalyptic accident when his World War II RAAF Dakota was knocked out of control by contact with a waterspout and was 'unable to effect recovery'. There were no survivors and little wreckage. The outmoded Dakota was on loan to the CSIRO to conduct experiments in artificial rainmaking that required flying into turbulent cumulonimbus clouds. 'Rainmaking is the work of the Devil,' his daughter heard. Had the radio physicists on those flights discovered how to make it rain over drought-stricken areas of Australia, they would have been hailed as heroes. As it was, his grieving widow received a nasty anonymous letter intimating that the crew got what they deserved for 'interfering with nature'.

Readers will not find the cosy chronology of a life in *The Man on the Mantelpiece*. In her fiction, poetry, and academic writing, Campbell contin-

ues to interrogate the self in relation to contemporary literary practice. The few known facts of her father's life provide the barest scaffolding for unravelling her ideas. In a theoretical incarnation of a chapter from the memoir, published in *Offshoot: Contemporary life writing methodologies and practice* (UWAP, 2018), Campbell clarifies: 'You don't write out of plenitude. You write to summon the lightning through which the missing might crackle', thus serendipitously providing *The Man on the Mantelpiece* with a fitting epigraph.

For readers unfamiliar with the term, life writing refers to a hybrid genre that blurs the conventions of literature and memoir, fiction and non-fiction. It is a form replete with contradictions and connections. Composed of disparate fragments, repetitions, coincidences, and failures in memory and communication, it embraces invention, speculation, embellishment, and emotional truth in favour of empirical proof. It encourages 'marginal' writing that demands concentration and commitment of the reader. If it is like Campbell's experiment in excavation, it rewards with ravishing, extravagant prose.

For Campbell, the 'inaugural scene, from which writing sprout[s]' (Hélène Cixous, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, 1993) is the death of her father Frederick 'Fred' William Campbell. He is the handsome, uniformed fellow sporting a handlebar moustache, transposed from the mantelpiece to the book

cover. The author does not provide an easily devoured narrative of her search for the 'truth' behind his disappearance, but delivers information as it might occur to a child, the daughter of a vanished father. Minus the moustache, the cover photograph could be mistaken for a portrait of the author in drag.

Campbell was four when her father died; scarcely a memory remains to her. She is reliant on the keeper of the archive, her elder sister, and on the facts 'little sister' gleans from official records. She compensates for unreliable memories and a paucity of documentary evidence with 'rumours, supposition, the strange comfort of conspiracy theories', and her gift for pouring herself into scene and character. She has had practice. As the 'orphaned' daughter, she tries to transform herself into the dead father, partly to console her bereft mother, Roma, but also as a way of knowing him. 'I dress myself in myth,' she says, and clothes herself in her parents' personalities, trying on their early lives and intimacies. Campbell finds signs of love, longing, and relationship in their few remaining photographs. Her 'reading' may be fanciful, but who can say if it's incorrect?

The photograph on the mantelpiece acts as one springboard. Later, ghosts find their way back into the text through allegory and dream. Are the Enchantress and Ventriloqueen a manifestation of lover, mother, or daughter? One or all? Each holds the author in thrall. Bitter Roma would rather kill herself

The Australian Book Review Fellowship 2019

A unique year-long contribution
to the magazine worth \$10,000

Applications close 10 December 2018