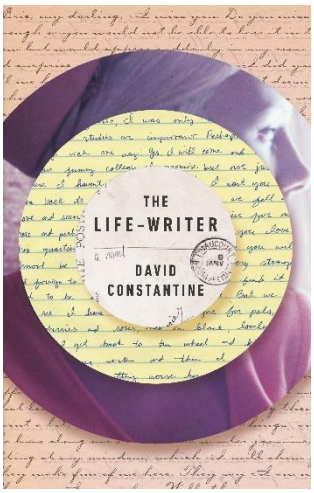
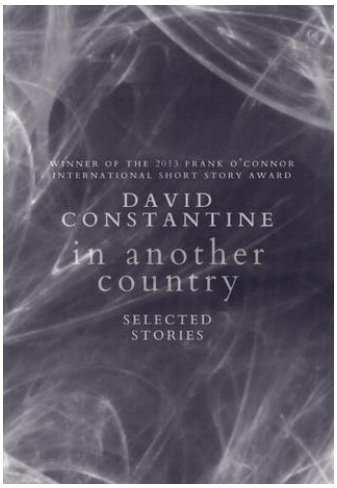
David Constantine, *The Life-Writer*
David Constantine, *In Another Country: Selected Stories*





David Constantine's fiction is full of ghosts. Not the supernatural kind that lurk in gothic mansions or scare unwary visitors in graveyards; rather, his novels are haunted by people whose presence persists though they are absent, who are undead because they live on in memories or stories. Theirs is a quietly human, not divine or heroic, immortality: they have no fame, no public memorials, no grand accomplishments, only their own singular experience. In Constantine's hands the poignancy of their passing is mitigated by their intangible persistence, which creates uncanny but often comforting continuities between past and present.

These continuities are at the heart of Constantine's novel *The Life-Writer*, published in the U.K. in 2015 and just released in North America by Biblioasis. It begins abruptly, as Eric is dying—his identity and circumstances only gradually come into focus. Eric's is a good death, as far as that is possible; he and his wife Katrin are able to spend the necessary time focusing "on where and who they were and what they were doing in the present tense."

Eric's strongest wish is to leave nothing "that still needed to be mended or forgiven" between him and Katrin. "Was there any such thing?" It seems not. But there *are* gaps in her knowledge of him, and very near the end he is overcome with the urgency of filling them in: "Listen to this, he said, gripping hard at her hand," and tells her of a joyful trip he once took to France. "Was ever anybody happier than that?" he asks; "think of me then, Katrin, never forget me then, that lad gaily assuming the land and its roads and traffic would never be anything but kind to him." "There's more, he said, so much more, I've hardly begun"—but Eric dies leaving the rest of the story untold. Harrowed by grief, Katrin becomes obsessed with finishing it, with bringing "his early years into the years she must now live without him."

Katrin's immediate motives are intensely personal: she wants to keep Eric in her life and to understand her place in his. Her research project, however, is also a variation on her professional work: Katrin is a "life-writer," a biographer, with a particular interest in artistic failures, "men and women who have the allure, the passion, the structures of imagination, the longings, the disappointments, the hectic ambition, the devotion, the folly, the grief of their great contemporaries, but not their talent." Eric had urged her to continue this work when he was gone, but after his death, he's the only one she wants to restore: "No life interested her but his, his life was all she wanted to call her own."

Drawing on a cache of letters as well as on memories shared with her by Eric's old friend Daniel, Katrin does reconstruct the story—not just of Eric's trip to France but of his affair with the glamorous and mysterious Frenchwoman Monique. Constantine elegantly weaves recollections and archival excerpts together with the narrative Katrin herself creates; cumulatively, a vivid picture of Eric's past is brought into being by this dual feat of imagination.

In the winter of 1963, known as the "Big Freeze," for instance, Monique visits Eric at Oxford. Fifty years later Katrin, writing, watches people passing outside her window:

> How present they are, and how she attends to them. Yet present also and even more intensely in her vision are her two lovers back then, back there, in the cold, so cold the watery city's veins and arteries slowed, halted, froze, took on the character of paths and lanes so that for trespassers a new world opened up.

In the present Katrin recreates for them, Eric and Monique walk along just such a path, on the frozen Thames:

> She takes his arm. Everything is hushed. . . . There is not a breath of wind, not a fluster, and their own breaths survive in a visible form barely one inch, barely two seconds, outside their mouths. Pressing Monique's arm against his ribs, Eric has an intense feeling of her warmth and of his own, it seems to him a triumph in itself that they are upright, going forward in silence, on ice, in snow, and that through and through they are warm, their two hearts beat, their blood does its rounds, they employ their legs against the natural inclination of the buried water.

Constantine's beautifully meticulous, subtly rhythmic prose makes the scene present, in turn, for us: we see and hear with the lovers as they literally yet magically "walk on water," the flush of their heat radiating across the crystalline landscape. This is what Katrin wanted, or thought she wanted: to write Eric back to life.

But *The Life-Writer* is not really about Eric and Monique. Rather, their romance lets both Katrin and Constantine reflect on memory and story, love and death. Katrin learns, for instance, that the reality of Eric's life will always elude her. In his death "he had stillness, a dead stillness, a cold stillness," but

> since then he has moved continuously like clouds, shaping up and unshaping among all the facts and possibilities of his mortal life. All her writing has done no more than broach his life.

Research does not solve the problem: the more she learns about Eric, the more unstable his story becomes. To his sister-in-law Sheila, for example, "Eric is accidental and peripheral," an individual instance of a truth Katrin comes to see as fundamental: "our centres are very different, our circles do intersect but not, after all, very fully." Ultimately, this fluidity is for the best, as "fixing is a way of death." The real value of life-writing lies in the process, and by resisting closure it undoes "the delusion that there might be an end to it and a final shape."

And even if other people's lives are indeterminate, they are not inaccessible. Constantine repeatedly draws our attention to the multitudinous ways they can reach and stay with us. Katrin's writing is one: "People will read you," Eric says before he dies, "and take these lives of yours into their own." Memory is another: Eric's friend Daniel says wonderingly to Katrin that fifty years after their trip to France, "I can still recall faces, phrases, tones of voice, of people I encountered. . . . You go your separate ways, you will never see them again, but bits of their lives will lodge in you forever."

Eric also gives Daniel a physical reminder of that trip: some coins that were given to Eric, and which he passes on to Daniel. "In a rush, like that of the stars themselves," Daniel recalls,

> [Eric] told me it all, and to finish, like a conjuror, his *pièce de résistance*, he sat up, produced the pouch and tipped its silver into my cupped hands, so that I should have the feel of it, he said, the cold slither and heaping, and never forget it, the gift from back then, on a hilltop under the stars.

The coins pass at the end into Katrin's hands, bright, tangible symbols of the consoling perpetuity she sought for her beloved.

For all their diversity of topic and tactics, the stories collected in *In Another Country* also return us again and again to this idea that we can carry other people with us, in defiance of distance or loss. Constantine's stories often catch people in a moment of crisis, so they show traces of grief and alienation as well as of love and hope: the continuities that emerge are not always healing, and bonds can falter and fail. "An Island," for instance, is built of letters sent as "a sort of

courtship. Not pleading that you will love me, only hoping you will remember me." This proves a faint hope, and the story itself ends with despair rather than reconciliation. Even this failure, however, tacitly asserts the value of connection by leading us to mourn its absence—something we also feel acutely in "The Mermaid" or "The Shieling," in which dreams of beauty painfully abut reality, or in "Tea at the Midland," which explores the moral difficulties of a world in which wreck and rescue can be hard to tell apart.

In some stories, though, salvation is more than a wish. "Strong Enough to Help" shows a lonely old man haunted by recollections of his grandmother, her presence so strong it's as if she's in the room with him:

> Her words were still in the air and he knew with a thrill of something akin to fear that there was a gap before them, a space, and into that space, before he could question it, with a shock of cold, with a starting of tears, came the words that belonged there: Sit thee down, lad. And that was it, her exact tone. The white-haired old woman in a shawl, the friendly mongrel laying its head across her feet, her left side faintly warmed by the few coals, she looked up at him as he came in and he stood there and, having kissed her on the cold smooth forehead, still stood there, at a loss no doubt, seeming unsure, and looking up she said: Sit thee down lad.

In that moment she is more real to him than his doorbell ringing, but that ring turns out to herald another relationship, improbably but delicately joyful, that might fill the gap between his past and his present isolation.

In "Memorial," a teacher's formal service is "a poor thing," but his influence inspires intimacy between two mourners, former students who recall how he saved them, how he "directed [them] into plenitude." "It was the rush of learning," says one;

> It was the gathering force of the pentecost of learning blowing through me body and soul. Things he showed me then, enabled me to see and to go on seeing and see more and more elsewhere and down the years when he would not be there to show them.

This intangible legacy is his true memorial. In "Asylum," Constantine plays on the dual meaning of the title to conjure up some comfort in the midst of tragedy—and invokes the power of his own art form as a means to safety. "First the story, Madeleine," says Mr. Kramer, counselling a young woman scarred by her own fear and self-hatred: "First comes the fiction."

That small phrase might be Constantine's manifesto: every perfectly placed word, every resonant image, marks him as a writer's writer, but also as one who has his reader's aesthetic and moral engagement fully in mind. His sentences do not flow smoothly but are built painstakingly,

moment by moment. Their lack of ease is a demand for our attention, an insistence that we read as his stories propose we should think: both deliberately and sensitively. In the deceptive evenness of his tone, Constantine is reminiscent of Alice Munro, and he has the same tendency to surprise you with a stab to the heart, or to fill you with sudden quiet reverence for unexpected beauty. Even when his subject is suffering, his prose reassures us that better things are possible, or at least imaginable; like Eric's silver coins, his words, tipped into our minds, promise that the moment itself is not all there is.

Originally published in *The Quarterly Conversation* (Fall 2016)