

How to let go

Late thoughts of a puckish performer

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You know what Lewis Hyde is like: puckish, playful, a performer. In *The Gift: Imagination and the erotic life of property* (1983), *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, myth and art* (1998) and *Common as Air: Revolution, art and ownership* (2010), Hyde – a professor of Creative Writing at Kenyon College and the recipient of many of the usual exceptional American awards (a Guggenheim, a MacArthur “Genius” Fellowship) – found a way of writing about creativity that combined an interest in the arcane with an understanding of global cultures and a commonsense approach to artistic practice. David Foster Wallace famously described him as “one of our true superstars of nonfiction”. According to an adulatory profile in the *New York Times*, in 2008, *The Gift* was “adopted as something like the theory bible of the Burning Man festival”, The Fountainhead for hipsters.

Hyde’s were big-ideas books, in the era before the current reign of the all-conquering Big Ideas book. He was a poet and a self-styled boundary-buster, and the books were exhilarating and exhausting, for Hyde as well for readers. Syncretism, after all – as mythographers, ecumenists and conspiracy theorists can doubtless testify – can be awfully tiring. After the big books, Hyde admits in his most recent short one, *A Primer for Forgetting*, he grew “weary of argument, tired of striving for mastery, of marshaling the evidence, of drilling down to bedrock to anchor every claim, of inventing transitions to make the native jumpiness of my mind, of defending myself against imaginary swarms of critics”.

A Primer for Forgetting is styled as a new departure, for a writer now in his seventies, “an experiment in both thought and form” that “seeks to test the proposition that forgetfulness can be more useful than memory or, at the very least, that memory functions best in tandem with forgetting”. It’s hardly an original proposition, and as for the form, what we have is a miscellany of “citations, aphorisms, anecdotes, stories and reflections”, which is in fact now a kind of default style in cultural studies: Hyde, a pioneer, here reads rather like a latecomer. “I decided to build on my scrapbooks rather than mine their content for a more conventional narrative”, he explains. The trouble with the scrapbook principle is that what you produce can seem pretty scrappy. This book contains lots of gobbets from Nietzsche, John Cage, Kierkegaard, Borges – the usual dog-eared suspects. And even the aphorisms read like scrag-ends: “Every act of memory is an act of forgetting”; “We dream in order to forget”; “Live steeped in history but not in the past”.

Suddenly, occasionally, unexpectedly – as in Hyde’s previous books – things come together and it all takes off. A tangent turns out not only to be momentarily fascinating but also significant and revealing: a simple, brilliant application of the work of Ernest Renan to the importance of forgetting in nation-building is beautifully complicated by a reading of Benedict Anderson’s reading of Renan; affectionate recollections of Hyde’s parents, Lem and Betty, and of his older brother, Lee, and sister, Edith, who died aged eighteen months when Hyde was six, show

themselves to be profoundly consequential (“To this day I feel that those I’m close to may simply slip away”). Lem was “a fixer and a tinkerer”, whose detailed notes on attempts to mend the washing machine might usefully stand as a metaphor for Hyde’s own procedures: “I took apart most of the Bendix to fix the valve which got in trouble with rust. I know all there is to know, now, about mixing valves in Bendixes”.

When Hyde fully opens up the valves, the book really starts to flow, in particular in lengthy reflections on two terrible episodes in American history: the story of Charles E. Moore, a nineteen-year-old tortured and killed along with his friend Henry Hezekiah Dee, also nineteen, by the Ku Klux Klan in 1964; and the Sand Creek massacre of 1864, when Colonel John Chivington and the Colorado Cavalry attacked a Cheyenne and Arapaho settlement, murdering men, women and children. Hyde uses these episodes as test cases for his ideas about the redemptive potential of forgetting – and to his great credit, when he puts them to the test, his ideas are shown to be pretty flimsy.

Hyde admits that he was initially attracted to the story of Charles Moore’s brother, Thomas, who served in Vietnam and in the first Gulf War, and who undertook a search to find his brother’s killers in

David Ridgen’s documentary, *Mississippi Cold Case* (2007). Thomas subsequently forgave one of the Klansmen involved. The story seemed to confirm Hyde’s vague notions about forgetting being a choice, an important stage in a long process. But, Hyde acknowledges, Thomas Moore’s is just one single example: “one person guilty, one person apologizing, one person forgiving ... What about a legal system that allowed a century of American apartheid, that allowed county, state, and federal law enforcement to ignore two murders for forty years?” Well, what about it? The question goes unanswered.

Turning to the Sand Creek massacre, which he regards as a significant example in the history of American conquest and colonialism, he elaborates along lines most of us will have predicted, that the “work of forgetting” has to involve “claiming or creating agency such that you, the people saddled with history, can work on the past rather than have the past work on you”. Paradoxically, in the end, *A Primer for Forgetting* is a book about Lewis Hyde refusing to forget, and encouraging others to recall.

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