

[Weather](#) | [Sports](#) | [Forums](#) | [Comics](#) | [Classifieds](#) | [Calendar](#) | [Movies](#)

The art of conversation

When chatting with the art critic Robert Hughes, author of the new biography Goya, it's best to let him fill the canvas.

LENNIE BENNETT

Published November 9, 2003

During a long telephone conversation, Robert Hughes, famous art critic and author of Goya, a new biography of the great Spanish painter, shrugs off the suggestion that he's among the most retentive readers on earth.

"It's just I read a lot, see," he says. "I forget about as much as anybody else."

Right.

Ask him to recite any passage from Macbeth, or any Shakespeare play for that matter, and off he goes, having committed to memory a play a year as a school boy. (He will admit to only partial reclamation of Coriolanus.) He can recite whole tracts of Milton and Apollinaire (in French) and Federico Garcia Lorca (in Spanish). And there are all those cultural references, from John Cleese to John Cage.

Longtime art critic for Time magazine, Hughes, 65, has authored 15 books on subjects ranging from his native Australia (the bestselling *The Fatal Shore*) to modern art (*The Shock of the New*, also a PBS series). His vision tends to be on an epic scale and his unvarnished critiques have mightily offended many people. (Of two contemporary sculptors he quipped: "J. Seward Johnson's is the career that could take place only in America; I don't think Jeff Koons is quite as bad, but then we're debating the merits of dog s-- and cat s--.")

Hughes was badly injured in a head-on collision with another car while visiting Australia in 1999. Recuperating in New York, where he has lived for 32 years, he was summoned back to answer charges related to the accident. He ultimately was exonerated. But enraged at his treatment by the Australian justice system, Hughes sounded off at the prosecutor, who sued Hughes for libel and sought to reopen the case. It all was finally settled out of court.

During the ordeal, Hughes' estranged son Danton, 35, killed himself.

Hughes, once considered a hero, the ultimate Australian intellectual success story, now believes himself to be a pariah in his own country.

The experiences of near death and the loss of his son have given him, he says, "an understanding of suffering which has, in some ways, altered my opinions about people." It has also, he says, "made me far less tolerant of human folly and pretention."

Goya took years to complete. For many of them, Hughes felt blocked. While he was in the hospital, he says he had horrific dreams in which Goya figured as his tormentor. "It was a projection of my fears that I was not

going to be able to write the book, that he was too big for me, and having him take over my dreams in that way - it didn't make the book better but it got the book started after it had been stalled for such a long time," he says. "Part of me was saying, 'I'm scared of this,' the other part was saying, 'Damn it, you're not going to get me down.'"

So how does one interview a brilliant man who has an opinion on any number of subjects? By treating the questions like the fish he so loves to catch, tossing topics out and allowing him to cast his line as far as it will go.

On Australians: "Some Australians have sterling virtues; they're great sportsmen, they have strong democratic impulses, etc., etc., but the other side is the one the expatriate sees and the visitors don't. They're enthusiastic experts in the art of kicking people when they're down. . . . Not all Australians, but journalists, mostly."

On the role of the biographer: "People have false expectations about the degree of intimacy they can achieve with historical figures. . . . I believe in going on what we can ascertainably know from documents. The really important thing about Goya is the work, which is still there in all its plenitude. . . . I'd still love to know whether he f--- the Duchess of Alba or not - it's unlikely for reasons I've enumerated in the book . . . but we don't know and it's no use pretending we do."

On contemporary art and culture: "There's too much art; most of it isn't any good. I remember that great remark of John Cage's: 'When we've got a glut of peaches, we burn the peaches; and what do we do when we've got a glut of art?' . . . I am an elitist and always will be provided we don't define it as inherited social advantage but as talent and will. . . . It would never occur to anyone to question the morality of saying this football player is better than another, but for some reason in the domain of culture and art we're supposed to be all woolly lambs, all equal. It's bulls--."

On his own ego: "The first time I ever saw someone reading *Fatal Shore*, I'd just got on an airplane in Los Angeles and the book had just been published, and I settled into my seat and I saw across the aisle this geezer who had a copy and it was fantastic. He opened it up, then I went back to what I was doing. I looked up from my glass of vino and there he was, profoundly asleep. He continued to sleep all the way to Kennedy (Airport in New York)."

On his wife: "Doris (Downes) and I were married two years ago in the town hall in Barcelona. Apart from being a talented painter, she saved my life, my emotional stability, such as it is."

On being a critic and not being a collector: "When I first moved to New York in 1970 I got myself this loft on Prince Street . . . and sort of wandering home I run into Henry Geldzahler (the late art critic and curator). He says, 'Oh, Robert, I want to see your loft,' so I took him up and we walked out into this filthy wilderness of pipes and cables and stuff and he looks around and says, 'Well, where is it?' And I say, 'Where's what?' And he says, 'Your collection.' And I say, 'Henry, I don't have a collection.' And there was a slight pause and he said, 'You don't have a collection? You're going to die poor.' I thought, 'You little bastard.' Henry was about as close to absolutely corrupt as anybody I've ever known. He lived off freebies. One thing I was determined to do was not to go to my grave saying, 'Here lies one who lived off the bribes of artists.'"

On America: "I've been here 32 years. I'm not ecstatic about the way things have gone in this country. I don't like frenzied right-wingers using up all the air. . . . I've had a great time in America and America's been very good to me, but I can't see any reason for continuing all the time to live in America as if the rest of the world were peripheral."

On his future: "My next project - first I'm going to write a book about the architect Norman Foster, then I'm

going to do what every stupid, middle-aged man does and write a memoir. . . . Probably what I'll do - but don't hold me to this - is go and live in Spain, probably Barcelona, but at this point I just don't know."

On the limits of art today: "I feel that the ability to convey tragedy has deserted painting today for a whole lot of complicated reasons. The main reason is people don't attach the same sort of credibility to painting as they once did. People believe in photographs. (In Goya's time) there was a grandeur of expectation for what painting could do. . . . I think (James) Rosenquist is about the closest we've got to a great history painter. . . . I have a tremendous regard for (Robert) Rauschenberg. . . . But what Rauschenberg doesn't have is that terrible saturnine quality Goya had. He doesn't have the dark side of Goya. If you're going to have a tragic vision, it does make certain emotional requirements of the artist. Irony is the condom of feeling.

On Goya in his own time: "We're in a trough, compared to Goya's situation, and the funny thing is, there was Goya without practically any context, isolated in Spain without any painters around him of comparable stature, nothing to work off of except, as he said, nature and some Rembrandt prints and, above all, his own moral experiences and from this forges a tremendous art that is both tragic and in some respects very classical. People like that are very rare. They're freaks."

On his latest book: I don't think it's my best and I don't think it's not my best. I know it's one of my better ones. . . . It came out in England last month where it defied all expectations by hopping at once onto the No. 4 slot on the bestseller list. It bloody amazed me. . . . Then some geezer said to me - who was it? - oh, it was Salman Rushdie, said, "Why didn't it go higher?" And I said Salman, because No. 1 is the biography of David Beckham and Posh Spice and it's going to be a long time before Goya gets rid of them."

© Copyright, St. Petersburg Times. All rights reserved.