VINTAGE

GRAYSON PERRY

WENDY JONES

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About the Book

‘I was a child who was a cuckoo in the nest,’ Grayson says. In his bedroom not a scrap of wallpaper showed: every inch was covered with pictures of aeroplanes, and every surface with models. Fantasy took over his life, in a world of battles ruled by his teddy bear, Alan Measles. He grew up. And in 2003, an acclaimed ceramic artist, he accepted the Turner Prize as his alter-ego Clare, wearing his best dress, with a bow in his hair: another dream made real.

Now he tells his own story, his voice beautifully caught by his friend, the writer Wendy Jones. Early childhood in Chelmsford, Essex is a rural Eden that ends abruptly with the arrival of the violent milkman who becomes his stepfather, leading to constant swerving between his parents’ houses, and between boys’ clothes and women’s clothes. But as Grayson enters art college and tries awkwardly to fit in – ‘I used to go to the Taboo nightclub in a black suit with skin-tight Lycra trousers and a jacket two sizes too small’ – he starts to find himself and at last, in his early twenties, he steps out as a potter and transvestite.

Direct and down to earth, stuffed with insights, imagination and wit, and with illustrations of Grayson’s own work, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Girl* is both a mesmerising read and a lifeline for all young boys who hug their dreams to themselves.

About the Author

Wendy Jones is a writer, a special needs teacher and founder of the underground literary club ‘Peach’.

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For Philippa and Flo. G.P.

For Solly, whose frequent naps made this book possible. W.J.

WENDY JONES

Grayson Perry

Portrait of the Artist as a Young Girl

FOREWORD BY
Martin Gardner

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

‘*Eyes as big as saucers*’
Hans Christian Andersen, ‘The Tinder Box’

PREFACE

WENDY JONES

Grayson would arrive for the interviews, stride into the hall, take his crash helmet off in the sitting room, sit down in the kitchen and want to begin.

He was open, sometimes shockingly, sometimes hilariously, so. I don't think any subject matter bothered him, he would talk about anything, reveal anything, but he was concerned to be exact and there were many pauses on the tape where he was thinking. He was very clear on the details of his life.

One evening, six years ago, while we were sitting round his kitchen table, I had said to Grayson, 'I could do your biography,' to which he replied, 'All right, then.' It was just a spur-of-the-moment idea. We had met in 1997 through a therapy centre where his story had been one among many, no stranger than the others, only more wittily told and with the embellishment of nice dresses. He liked clothes and I liked clothes. And I liked his honesty – which made him insightful, hilarious and vital. And he was up for talking about anything. He was a lot of fun.

So the next week I turned up without a tape recorder and Grayson got his big, black, blingy ghetto blaster from upstairs and we sat in the sitting room to begin. As neither of us had a mike and as the mike on the ghetto blaster was all of a centimetre big, and not very good, Grayson had to speak with his mouth up next to it. It was all rather trying, but we felt it went well enough. A few weeks later I turned

up at his cottage in Sussex, again without a tape recorder, and Grayson lugged his music centre down from London and sat bent over double, talking into the aforementioned ghetto-blaster mike, and told me the next instalment of his life. Unfortunately, the ghetto blaster failed to record and there was much ‘bloody’ and ‘fucking’ and ‘pigging’ from the interviewee. So I went to John Lewis and bought a cassette voice recorder.

I thought if I listened very intently, if I gave my whole attention without judgement, all would be revealed. It wasn’t actually the case, but it was a noble idea. I sat in complete silence for a good many interviews until Grayson told me about the horse collar.

I wrote the book and it sat in a tin on my shelf. Then one Sunday afternoon on the train back to London he mentioned, ‘I might be up for the Turner Prize this year.’

So I went home and took out the manuscript. ‘You *are* going to get a digital voice recorder, aren’t you?’ Grayson said.

We decided to cover the first twenty-two years of Grayson’s life, until he made his first plate, which marked his birth as an artist. We sat at the table and drank what Grayson called hippy tea and got on with it. Grayson arrived ten minutes early on one or other of a selection of bicycles and motorbikes, one of which looked like something that Danger Mouse rode. Although Grayson’s manner was relaxed and he was a bit of a chirpy, cheeky chap, he was very disciplined, always punctual and highly focused. This was a man who, despite appearances, didn’t muck around.

During the interviews Grayson appeared almost physically malleable. It seemed that sometimes he would look like a First World War pilot, then a medieval minstrel, then a housewife suffering from ennui, then an elegant hurdler. He was always morphing – I hadn’t come across that before and I doubt I shall see it often again.

Hearing the same story six years later, it was clear that Grayson had become more confident. This time it was a softer telling; funnier and – although I doubt he would like it said – more forgiving. It was a past formed, fired and polished into something smooth. Once he said that it was only now he was realising how much he owed the art world, cleared his throat, went to get a drink of water, then came back and changed the subject.

Afterwards he would talk about what he had been doing, where he'd been the night before, the pot he was making, the apple-green dress he was having made for Claire to wear when she went to meet the Queen, the art student who'd turned up on the doorstep with a compilation tape – he thought Grayson might particularly like track nine as it was about masturbation. It seemed that, almost weekly, he became more successful and more demands were made upon him. It was both a delight and a strain. But this newfangled life was still peripheral to the making of his pots and the ideas he was decorating them with.

Halfway through the process Grayson read a rough draft, many thousands of words too long and said he lay awake that night thinking, 'What have I done?' I was surprised that this exhibitionist soul, so happily naked both physically and emotionally, might have reached a wall and found a space within that wasn't for revealing. There was also the gravity of revealing other people's lives. We talked about paying the advance back, letting the book go. We both understood that this was Grayson's version, that people from his past had their versions too.

The night he won the Turner Prize, Grayson, his daughter and I spent a quiet quarter of an hour wedged in a poky corner of Soho House with the party going on around us. Flo and I were trying not to sit on his dress. Grayson said 'I can't believe it' quite a lot of times and, 'I'm just trying to stay grounded.' He took the cheque out of his

handbag and we looked at it and said that it was quite a lot of money, wasn’t it?

Since that night I have often heard him say ‘My life is like a fairy tale’ and it is: a lost parent, a step-parent, chores, banishment, apprenticeship, adventures, then eventually finding himself in a dress at a ball.

PROLOGUE

GRAYSON PERRY

'*What Kind of Man Has Made this Kind of Art?*'

'Oh the fucking, fucking, bloody, fucking, pigging … it's this stupid microphone, I'm going to leave it like that. I'm just going to sit here and hope that it records.'

This book is about the engine that drives me as an artist now. When people are looking at my work, I would like this book to sound as a hum in the background, the hum of my artistic engine. It is a portrait of the artist; it is what kind of man has made this kind of art.

I have been reading Hans Christian Andersen's biography: his tales are autobiographical in varied ways. I sympathise with him in that his psychology seeps out, often undiluted, often unchanged, into his fables. I thought about this recently while decorating a vase called *Internal Conflict* because I was referring to a drawing I did as a teenager. It was a black-and-white sketch of a giantess towering over a street scene. I imagine parents on the school open day were looking at the art display area and whispering, 'Look at his drawing, he's fucked up!' I see the chattering parents nudging each other and agreeing, 'The mad boy in the class!'

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IT’S NOT UNUSUAL

THE CO-OP MILKMAN was a charmer, good-looking and dark: Elvis meets Tom Jones. And Tom Jones was my mother’s favourite, ‘It’s Not Unusual’ and ‘The Green, Green Grass of Home’ frequently boomed out of the gramophone. The milkman was doing his round on our council estate. The first time I met him was on a cold, windy day – the front door blew open, smacking me in the head. I have a very strong memory of his silhouette against the light before being whacked and knocked over. It was a sign of things to come.

My mother danced with my father at a Broomfield Youth Club Social Evening. They dated and married in 1957 at the church in Broomfield, which is near Chelmsford in Essex, when she was twenty-one and he was twenty-three. I don’t know what my mother’s motivation was for marrying my father: perhaps she fell in love. My father was a decent man, when they met he would have been fresh out of the RAF, and I imagine he seemed a very capable provider. He was a keen photographer and there were pictures of them on their honeymoon in Scotland. They set up home in a council house in Acorn Crescent behind Chelmsford museum. When she got married, she immediately left her job as a solicitor’s secretary to become a housewife; she could have had a career, she was intelligent, but it wasn’t the done thing. I was born in St John’s Hospital in Chelmsford on 24 March 1960, at ten to seven in the

morning and, apparently, I was a good baby, i.e. quiet. I don't have any pictures of myself as a baby because all the photographs my father took from that time were burned by my mother or stepfather when they expelled my father's memory. I don't know a great deal about my parents because I haven't had much of an adult relationship with them; I'm unclear about their history; I only have word-of-mouth and fantasy.

In the autumn of 1964 my mother was a housewife, I was four and my sister was two. My father was working for Rayrolls engineering factory in Chelmsford and also had a part-time evening job as a wine waiter in a local dinner-dance restaurant called, appositely, the Lion and the Lamb. One night my father unexpectedly came home early and, when he turned the corner into our road, he saw the milkman's car – which was very noticeable, being a powder-blue E-type Jag – parked outside our house. He knew whose car it was and he must have put two and two together because it was late at night. Instead of challenging the man then and there, he drove back round the corner, pulled over and waited, then came home after the milkman had gone. The next morning he confronted my mother. She put her hands up in the air, proclaiming, 'Yes. I love him. And I want to live with him.'

My father upped sticks and went back to live with his mother. He returned a few weeks later although his wife was still carrying on her affair because both families were begging him to stay with her for the sake of my sister and myself. It was during the Easter holiday of 1965 that my father discovered my mother was pregnant by the milkman. The milkman had three women pregnant at the same time. He was married already – he had a wife who lived nearby – and he was having an affair with a teacher and they were both pregnant.

Surprisingly, there was no real animosity between my dad and the milkman. My father went for a drink with him

over which the milkman said to him, ‘I want you to bring up the child as your own.’ He must have been panicking with three lots coming along at once. Perhaps he was thinking, ‘If I can park one of them off with the gullible husband …’ Maybe the milkman turned on his charm, reckoning he could persuade my father that this was a good thing, but my father wasn’t having any of it.

When he found out about my mother being pregnant he’d had enough, that was it, he was gone. The evening he left, I was in my mum’s and dad’s bed; I used to get into bed with them, as kids do. It was a hideous, solid bed that my father had made, with a beige Formica headboard and built-in bedside tables – my mother slept in it for years afterwards. It was dark when my father came to say goodbye. He whispered, ‘I’m going to go on holiday now.’

Some time afterwards my sister and I went for a day trip with our dad to Dungeness power station because he wanted to show us where he was working. I can remember exactly where we were when the question came up, so it must have struck me forcefully. We were driving past Sandon High School, it was dark and I was sitting in the back of the car when he asked, ‘Do you want to live with your mother or your father? You’ve got to choose between me and your mother.’ I remember not knowing what to say; my sister was three and I was five; we were unable to make a choice. It was an impossible bind because my mother was my mother while my father had already flown the nest and was an unknown quantity. It was too painful to consider. I mumbled, ‘iwanttostaywithmymum.’