

Another loss for the art world. The brilliant Robert Hughes.

[Jennifer Higgle on Frieze blog](#) writes warmly on his influence on her career and the realm of art criticism.

Robert Hughes: 1938 - 2012

by Jennifer Higgle



Robert Hughes in 1963

I first came across Robert Hughes at art school in Canberra in the mid-1980s.

His extraordinary 1980 documentary, *Shock of the New*, was screened for us in art history class over one semester and it gave me a sense, for the first time, that art history was not only something alive but something that had a profound relevance to the way you could think about contemporary art. I had never seen anyone talk so vehemently or passionately or eruditely about how pictures – and Hughes mainly talked about pictures – could function, or how they might convey meaning, a sense of place, an opinion. He also made me realize – for at that stage writing wasn't something I was comfortable with – that writing could be as creative as the object it was discussing.

In the years that followed, I kept reading Robert Hughes, and even when I strongly disagreed with him – especially about contemporary art, which he became more and more impatient with – I loved reading him. His writing was never less than seductive and it was also frequently funny, the value of which in the often po-faced world of art criticism can't be underestimated. (He loved Robert Crumb, describing him, with his usual understatement, as 'the one and only genius the 1960s underground produced in visual art, either in America or Europe.')

But of course, he didn't just write about art. As an Australian – some of whose ancestors travelled to Antipodean shores as 'assisted migrants' (as my family jokingly likes to call it) in the 19th century – Hughes's 1987 book on the country's convict past, *The Fatal Shore: The Epic of Australia's Founding* was a revelation to me. Things are very different now, but, when I was growing up, the complicated nature of my country's settlement by the British, along with its indigenous history, was

only ever glancingly referred to. This book quite simply changed the way I thought about where I came from; it gave me a fierce sense of compassion and understanding about the journey so many of my long-ago relatives had travelled.

The last book I read by Hughes was his 2006 autobiography, *Things I Didn't Know*, which my mother gave me a few years ago on my return to Australia. It's an extraordinary book which begins with the near-fatal car accident Hughes had in a remote part of Australia – an accident that inspired him to write his 2003 book on Goya, visions of whom he saw as he lay waiting to be rescued from the tangled wreck of his car, expecting to die. It then travels back to his evolution as a writer and an art critic. It also describes his childhood in Sydney in brilliant, hilarious detail. His old friend Clive James reviewed the book, quoting the following line – which describes one of his aunts who became a nun – as typical: 'At the end of these audiences I would be expected to kiss her, which meant craning my neck to get my lips inside her elaborately starched and goffered ruff, its hive-like cells prepared, no doubt, by some wretched, rosary-clicking slavey of a postulant sister with the kind of iron last manufactured in the 1920s.' You get the idea.

I could go on, but I actually have deadlines to hit, and so I must be off. And I blame Robert Hughes for the fact that I have deadlines at all, because, without his example, I might not have become a writer. He made me realize how interesting, and how necessary, it could be. I am very sad he has died.

'The basic project of art is always to make the world whole and comprehensible, to restore it to us in all its glory and its occasional nastiness, not through argument but through feeling, and then to close the gap between you and everything that is not you, and in this way pass from feeling to meaning. It's not something that committees can do. It's not a task achieved by groups or by movements. It's done by individuals, each person mediating in some way between a sense of history and an experience of the world.'

Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New*

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