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BOOK REVIEW

Accidental Elder

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Unrequited Love: Diary of an Accidental Activist, Dennis Altman

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The unrequited love foregrounded in the title of Dennis Altman's memoir refers to his attachment to the United States, an attachment that in some ways reflects the postwar relationship between Australia and what until recently we were calling 'the world's remaining superpower'. Altman's recollection of his and, more generally, Australia's unreciprocated passion for the US stays true to his longheld conviction that the recording of personal experience should incorporate political analysis and vice versa. Altman's interests rove far beyond this not-so-special special relationship, however, gathering up multiple manifestations of the global and local sexual politics with which his name is now associated. Altman became involved in the gay liberation movement while living and studying in New York in the early 1970s and his *Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation* (1971) was one of the most sophisticated accounts to emerge from that movement. A long and celebrated career as an academic, writer, and activist in gay politics and AIDS organizing followed. Altman's books have mainly continued his interest in sexual politics and include *The Homosexualization of America* (1982), *AIDS in the Mind of America* (1986), *Global Sex* (2001), and *The End of the Homosexual?* (2013). He has also published on the more 'general' Australian political scene, including a previous book *51st State?* (2006) that also tackled the relationship between Australia and the US. A regular contributor to venues such as *The Conversation* and ABC Radio, Altman remains one of Australia's most consistently insightful and interesting political commentators.

Unrequited Love follows an earlier memoir, *Defying Gravity: A Political Life*. Described here as 'rather self-indulgent' (xii), *Defying Gravity* is more conventional in form, moving chronologically through significant life events in order to reflect on the social transformations

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wrought by gay politics and the growth of multiculturalism in Australia. The diaristic form of *Unrequited Love*, on the other hand, takes us from Trump's election in November 2016 to January of this year, with the events, people, and places recorded triggering brief reminiscences and reflections on shifts in politics and culture over Altman's adult life. The narrative trots briskly back and forth between decades, affording glimpses along the way of a myriad of intellectual, political and literary notables whom Altman has known, including Susan Sontag, James Baldwin, Gore Vidal, Christos Tsolkias, Julia Gillard, and Gough Whitlam. Altman handles the diary format deftly, providing a wealth of astute observations about the continuities and disjunctures between past and present. But the digressive form doesn't allow for a lot of explanation or depth of analysis. I wondered, for instance, why Altman takes such exception to Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn, two 'grumpy old men' who deal in 'recycled rhetoric' (141), when they seem to embody the ideals of the social democracy that he elsewhere tells us have been his consistent political philosophy (154). I found myself swept up by the verve of Altman's storytelling, but often craving more detail.

Altman makes many dry observations on the ambivalence and lop-sidedness that have characterized both his and Australia's transactions with the US. His thrill at being awarded a year-long appointment as Chair of Australian Studies at Harvard evaporates when he discovers 'it is virtually unnoticed' there and that appointees 'struggle to persuade a handful of students to find Australia interesting enough to enrol in a subject' (6) (the Chair is not Harvard's initiative but was Australia's gift to the US for the 1976 bicentennial). On the international stage, Australia is 'the dependable smaller brother, who gets forgotten when the real guys show up' (x). This little brother complex was also revealed when the AIDS crisis hit. As Altman notes, although Australia developed much more constructive policy responses to the pandemic, Australians eagerly took up American symbols, such as the Quilt, and even formed a division of the radical protest group ACT-UP. But while Australians 'remain fascinated by the American story of the epidemic, they show almost zero interest in ours' (xiii).

Yet if these investments in America sometimes seem misplaced, they have often been galvanizing. A couple of the times in the book Altman touches on the story of the American origins of what he calls his 'accidental' activism. Sharing an apartment with the painter Adolph Garcia in New York in 1970, Altman is introduced to radical gay circles—a new and exhilarating world, in which politics and friendship and sexual adventure merged in the possibilities of a complete transformation, a world in which being homosexual would be both central and unremarkable' (96). The way Altman tells it, this '*Sliding Doors*' experience (39) of being in the right place at the right time steered him into his extensive involvement in gay and AIDS politics, though one senses he underplays his own energy and initiative.

The passages on international AIDS research and advocacy combine heartfelt engagement and dispassionate observation. Altman has a keen eye for 'the churning mix of altruism and ambition' (48) that characterize 'the AIDS world' (47) as well as its sometimes bemusing connections to celebrity glamour. He recalls, for instance, brief encounters with Elizabeth Taylor, Miss America, and the Queen of Bhutan. Yet he also writes movingly of how engagement in AIDS activism 'engendered new passions, alliances, skills, that brought together the most remarkable group of people I've had the privilege of knowing' (33). As he relates in the book, it was his engagement with AIDS networks in Asia that led to a loosening of his orientation toward America. Subsequently, Altman has become one of the key advocates of an internationalist perspective in sexuality studies, an academic field still dominated by unthinking US-centrism.

The roiling dysfunction of the Trump administration and the relentless cruelty of Australia's offshore detention system form backdrops to the period narrated, but the battle for Australian marriage equality is the political event given the most consistent attention. Altman's ambivalence about this issue focuses the ongoing elaboration of his reservations about changes in sexual politics. The world of contemporary queer politics is not the world envisaged by the gay liberationists, for whom 'equality' meant 'a sense of community for others who were oppressed and a desire to radically transform society' (89). The marriage equality movement 'seems bent on assimilation into society as it is, and brave talk of creating new forms of family and community have largely disappeared' (89). As Altman notes, the criticism of monogamous coupling made (and lived) by the sexual liberationists of the 1970s, who 'recognised that love, sex, and companionship were not necessarily all found in the same person,' have little resonance for those who organize under the slogan 'love is love' (100). When victory for marriage equality comes, Altman winces at the 'element of kitsch' (116) that marks the celebrations. He notes that the passing of legislation is a largely symbolic decision, with little practical effect compared to the decriminalization of homosexual acts and anti-discrimination legislation. But he also recognises the importance of symbolic politics, which can galvanize collective energies and lead to 'the possibility of enormous change' (116).

The possible and the unpredictable are leitmotifs of Altman's reflections on politics, sexual and otherwise. Looking back on the past four decades of queer life, Altman notes that 'the great shifts, at least in Western countries,' have been HIV/AIDS, same-sex marriage, the Internet, and 'the new assertion' of trans identities—none of which were imagined 'in the heady rush of early 1970s gay liberation, which should make us cautious about assuming we can foresee the next frontiers' (209). Altman soft pedals the treatment of the trans issue by the liberation movement, however. At one point he discusses with a young queer friend *The Death and Life of Marsha P. Johnson*, a documentary about a New York trans activist who worked with gay liberation and AIDS organisations. Altman notes that his friend is 'thrilled to discover the role of trans* leaders in the gay liberation movement' (65), but he doesn't mention that the film also covers the hostility of many gay and lesbian activists toward trans people, and the exclusion of trans interests from activist initiatives. He does concede that the earlier conviction of 1970s gay liberationists and feminists that 'transsexuals, as we called them, would disappear as gender roles became less restrictive, and people accepted various forms of sexual desire, reflected a much simpler understanding of gender than has proven the case' (92). Admitting to not understanding much about the trans experience, Altman nonetheless registers 'the range and subtlety of how people understand their gender' (21). On #MeToo, Altman acknowledges the mischaracterization of much 'predatory sexism' as 'sexual liberation' during the post-1960s period (211), but also worries about the possibility of 'new puritanism' (100) and voices 'unease at the way in which careers can be totally destroyed by allegations of behaviours that are offensive but not criminal' (211).

Doubts about recent developments in sexuality and gender politics notwithstanding, Altman finds himself lionized as an 'elder' by younger activists and academics at various events throughout the two years of his diary's duration—a situation he appears to find both disconcerting and touching. Altman's experience contrasts with the complaints of his friend, the English art historian and AIDS activist Simon Watney, who, when Altman visits him, 'frets about the amnesia of the gay world and touches on the fears we all have as we age, that we are forgotten by new generations hungry for recognition and intent on discovering the world for themselves' (34). Altman writes that activists of his and Watney's generation 'often forget how like' those younger generations 'we once were, that we too dismissed anything that

happened before we experienced it, as unimportant' (34). Reflective comments like these jostle intriguingly throughout the book with a fair amount of quarrelsomeness (maybe Altman sees something of himself in those grumpy old men Sanders and Corbyn).

Enriched by the insights afforded by a lifetime of activism and scholarship, yet pronouncedly up-to-date in its concerns, this unique memoir deserves a wide audience. Even—or maybe especially—when I found myself distanced from Altman's views, I felt consistently rewarded by time spent in the company of a writer of such bracing intelligence. Altman's occasional complaints about ageing notwithstanding, *Unrequited Love* is energized by an infectious enthusiasm for thinking and living that shows no signs of flagging.