

# Brad Fraser, *All the Rage: A Partial Memoir in Two Acts and a Prologue* [book review]

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“Cleanse my heart [...] give me the ability to rage correctly.”

Joe Orton, *Diaries*

In late May, 2021, shortly after the publication earlier in the month of Brad Fraser’s memoir *All the Rage*, a shocking discovery of 215 unmarked graves of students was made on the grounds of the former Indian Residential School in Kamloops, British Columbia, Canada. Indian residential schools in Canada date from the late nineteenth century and were instituted by the Federal Government and administered by Christian churches, mainly the Roman Catholic Church. Their purpose was to assimilate Indigenous Peoples into Canadian society by wiping out their language and culture and replacing them with English and with European culture. On May 31, a few days after the horrific discovery, Brad Fraser tweeted his response: “Dear Canadian Politicians: Many of the people involved in the residential school system are still alive. When are they going to be prosecuted for manslaughter and murder? Start with the Catholic Church please.” Brad Fraser is descended on his mother’s side of his family from what in Canada are called Métis, people of mixed race descending from Plains Indigenous peoples and Canadians of French descent. He once told an interviewer, “I am a queer mixed-race person from a rough background.” Fraser’s response to the discovery at the Indian Residential School in Kamloops is just what one would expect from the author of *All the Rage*, whom the *Canadian Theatre Encyclopedia* has labeled a “maverick gay playwright.”

In 1956, playwright John Osborne, one of the angry young men of the fifties, changed British theatre forever when his play *Look Back in Anger* opened at the Royal Court Theatre in London. Canada had to wait a generation for Brad Fraser to do the same for Canadian theater. At the premiere of his breakout 1989 play *Unidentified Human Remains and the True Nature of Love*, several people walked out at the midway point in act one where a woman kisses her lesbian friend. “That delighted me,” reports Fraser. “I’ve always felt that theatre the right people walk out of is theatre that matters.” “Any good play has elements that make you uncomfortable,” he said in an interview about his most recent play, *Kill Me Now*. “Isn’t that the whole point of going to the theatre?” Early in the AIDS epidemic, an interviewer asked Fraser, “Do you have to be so angry all the time?” To which he replied, “Yes. I do. It’s the only thing that keeps me going while everyone around me is dying.”

*All the Rage* tells the story of how an angry young Bradley Fraser successfully channeled the anger arising from an upbringing in an impoverished family, in which he endured emotional, physical and sexual abuse, to become the award-winning Brad Fraser, one of the most important playwrights, gay or straight, in Canada and the world: "I knew that my upbringing had instilled a tremendous anger within me," he writes at the end of the Prologue, "and that if I didn't find a way to channel that anger constructively it would end up directed at those around me or myself. I also knew it would trap me in the world I came from. Creative activities had always been the best way for me to channel my negative emotions and I knew my salvation would be with them." *All the Rage* tells a story that sexual outcasts of all kinds can identify with and that the straights who have cast them out can learn from if only they would read and absorb it with open minds and receptive hearts.

Playwright Fraser is a gay political activist whose politics takes place in a darkened theater where the creative imagination rules, just as the subconscious does in dreams. Although not autobiographical, his plays nevertheless come from a place deep within his psyche. "All my plays have come from very personal places," he reveals in the introduction to *Martin Yesterday* (1998). That play, which premiered at Toronto's gay theatre, Buddies in Bad Times, was, he writes, "going to be my response to the psychic trauma [...] I'd had to endure because of my sexuality." It is perhaps Fraser's angriest play, certainly as angry as Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart* (1985). "I wanted *Martin Yesterday* to be the most honest play I could write," says Fraser. "I wanted to create something that accurately reflected the gay world that many of us were living in, with all of its squalor and questionable behaviour. I wanted to talk about the self-hatred and abuse of emotion I saw in our community, and I wanted to talk about the straight world's control of how we felt about ourselves and each other and how we let them get away with it by co-operating in their societal narrative rather than creating our own."

Fraser's anger is also evident in his dissatisfaction with the state of the theatre, especially in Canada, when he was emerging as a new voice. Assessing the early responses to *Unidentified Human Remains*, his first hit and most produced play, he remarks: "Reactions to the play among those working in the theatre were varied. A lot of the old guard were flummoxed by the show's popularity. There was something about it that threatened them, which probably had to do with every character in the play being under thirty, but also had to do with a traditional sense of class decorum within the theatre which I'd just roughly butt-fucked with my play." Fraser's innovations were not simply a matter of offensive content. "I wrote *Remains*," he says, "to challenge the ways we usually created theatre." At the same time that Fraser has been committed to renovating theatre conventions, to 'make it new' in Ezra Pound's clarion cry to artists, he is also aware of his relation to antecedent playwrights: "All playwrights echo within one another," he acknowledges. For example, *The Ugly Man* (1992) was inspired by *The Changeling*, a Jacobean tragedy by Thomas Middleton and William Rowley. He is an admirer of the gay English playwright Joe Orton. Fraser never attended university, but he is familiar with the history of the theatre and aware of his complex relationship to it. As a playwright, Fraser moves easily between the literary tradition and popular culture.

Almost all Fraser's plays have been influenced by popular culture. "In my childhood dreams," he confides, "I'd always imagined myself to be the illegitimate love child of Wonder Woman and the Empire State Building," The plot of *Remains* was inspired by the popularity at the time of movies about serial killers, and the original subtitle of *The Ugly Man* was "A Gothic Horror Melodrama." An early play, *Chainsaw Love*, was a hit at the Edmonton Fringe Festival. *Remains* opens with a choric recounting of a Gothic urban legend, "The case of the headless boyfriend."

Reviewers frequently criticized Fraser's plays because the characters were not "likeable." "One of the main criticisms of *Remains*," he recalls, "was that the characters weren't 'likeable' enough. I had no idea what this meant [...] I never looked at characters in my shows through the lens of likeability, but rather in terms of complexity and nuance. Who's likeable in *Hamlet*? Who's likeable in *Oedipus Rex*? [...] The Canadian theatre's obsession back then with likeability drove me crazy, so I decided I would challenge it with a play [*Remains*] driven almost exclusively by plot. All the characters would serve the storyline and none of them would be 'likeable.'"

*All the Rage* is not narrowly focused on Fraser the playwright. It's a compelling narrative of Fraser's life as a gay man and cultural critic. He is not afraid to acknowledge how he can be as unlikeable as his characters. His failed personal relationships are openly acknowledged: "In Toronto I despaired because of my lack of a lover or life partner. I prayed for the right guy to come along who was ready to share the madness that was my life at that time. In truth I was in the worst possible position for having a boyfriend. I was too full of myself. My inspirational bulletin board that I'd curated for so many years was no longer filled with ideas, images and articles for further inspiration for my work, but covered in articles about me and photos of me." He has little tolerance for political correctness and the absurdities of identity politics: "The negative feedback [to his plays] wasn't entirely from the right. There was a contingent of university grads redolent of developing identity politics who insisted the 'sex and drugs/hard living/hard talking' world I depicted was not conducive to the creation of aspirational queer/feminist role models. When I explained that I wasn't writing role models, I was writing characters for popular culture, I was denounced as callous to the minoritarian representatives I was writing about, I found it hysterical that people who could afford to go to university would lecture me about privilege. For me, there is no more fascistic an impulse than to try to limit anyone's imagination, and I refuse any such attempt under any circumstances."

*All the Rage* is a memoir for a wide range of readers. Every young person who aspires to be an artist should read it. Everyone who wants to better understand how potentially self-destructive anger can be transformed into art should read it. It's required reading for critics and scholars who want to understand the arc of Fraser's career up to 1999. And everyone who wants to understand the compatibility of political activism and artistic vision should read it.