

BOOK REVIEW

'Acute Misfortune—The Life and Death of Adam Cullen' by Erik Jensen

(Black Inc, 2014)



ACUTE INDIGESTION

What are the words that spring to mind when you hear the name Adam Cullen? Archibald prizewinner? Of course. Then... drug addict, alcoholic? In the small community where he lived and died, we knew him in many guises, not only as an artist celebrity.

What is it about celebrity—particularly in the arts—that can turn us to jelly, wobbling pathetically in our normally held values about respect for all living creatures, about speaking the truth, about kindness and common decency? We prefer to see our idols through rose-coloured glasses; we're unwilling to discern their faults, prepared to forgive almost anything. In fact Adam Cullen wanted us to know him as a bad boy, but not *that* bad! Not the vomiting, trashing and killing image. The public badness had to be carefully stage-managed with words and images. Cullen was no great enigma, the puzzle is why in spite of what we knew we tolerated, even venerated him, and played the game by his rules.

Erik Jensen's new book 'Acute Misfortune—The Life and Death of Adam Cullen' (published by Black Inc)—arouses our curiosity once again. It is just over two years since the artist died and this may well be the very last

Photo of Adam Cullen by Julian Wrigley

'It will take me some time not to be haunted by certain images.'

ripple of interest and he will be seen for what he was—his legacy will not be celebrated but he will instead be buried and forgotten: an unremarkable artist, a liar, a pathetic addict and alcoholic and, in the eyes of many, an unspeakable man who tortured and killed creatures for his own sadistic pleasure. Many tried to help Cullen and gave him friendship, but his drive to self-destruct was overwhelming.

Jensen's book is compact. It is the quality of the writing which gives the book its appeal and readability. There is a Prologue comprising an illuminating correspondence with Dale Frank who asks Jensen: 'Are you attempting to make a sad figure something he was not, doing an 'Archibald' on his character after his death? Adding to the mythology that is already cliché artistic? The basic fact was he was just one young artist among many.'

Sections are succinctly headed Death, Persona, Art, Mother, Drugs, Archibald, Father, Sex, Court. The cover offers inviting comments from those whose opinions we respect: David Marr says: 'Fierce and spellbinding'; Christos Tsiolkas: 'A marvellous, propulsive, intelligent read' and Helen Garner: 'The terrible force of the painter's rush to self-destruction is matched all the way by the writer's calm mastery of his story'...

Jensen tells how Cullen asked him to write his biography, saying that Thames & Hudson wanted to publish this. It is 2008, and a youthful Jensen, only 19, had written an article about Cullen which the artist liked and contacted Jensen. Within a week Jensen had moved into Cullen's spare room and begun a series of interviews. It gradually became evident to Jensen that there was no publishing contract but he nevertheless continued to spend time with Cullen, staying with him in his cottage in the Blue Mountains, going with him on shooting expeditions, participating in the drinking sessions and apparently all the while keeping notes in shorthand. We learn this from the appreciation he expresses in the book to his teacher of shorthand. 'Your lessons are on every page,' says Jensen.

When it all becomes too sordid, too intense and Cullen's interest in him too personal, perhaps sexual, Jensen makes his excuses and leaves. Some time later he learns of Cullen's death and finds himself weeping.

The title 'The Life and Death of Adam Cullen' gives the impression that this is the definitive biography but Cullen was obsessed with fame and Jensen was not the only person Cullen asked to write, photograph or film his story. Other scenarios may yet emerge. Perhaps similar, perhaps different.

Jensen says his book is not about the art but about the person, although it includes many examples of Cullen's

art. Jensen says: 'I am not writing about Adam because of his art, although that was obviously why he called me in the first place. I am writing a character study in which art—in the end—is not the most important party.' Not, Jenkins agrees, how Cullen perceived things. To Cullen art—in the end—was his downfall, his 'acute misfortune.'

It is hard to imagine just how Jensen has managed to quote Cullen at such length. Did he excuse himself and go to the loo and scribble down interesting comments during their drinking sessions or did he make copious notes openly? He says elsewhere that he has used his notes to reconstruct their conversations. 'Biography is a strange task. It is part therapy, part reconstructive surgery,' he writes in *The Guardian* blog. In the book there is an altogether lop-sided dialogue: we aren't given Jensen's reactions to being deliberately pushed off a speeding motorbike or when he was accidentally shot—incidents which he sees as Cullen 'testing' him. But isn't this simply how bullies behave? Did Jensen lie there whimpering or did he scream and shout at Cullen? At the time he was shot, even Jensen says he too had had a bottle of vodka and that it was an accident.

Photographer Peter Adams tells how he was almost shot accidentally by Cullen when he was taking photos of Cullen and a mate. Drunk in possession of a weapon—sounds familiar. Jensen is taken with the idea that he is being 'tested' and that he passes.

Jensen's portrait of Cullen rings true, but as the supporting character in the book Jensen remains in the shadows. We are left wondering to what extent Jensen was an active participant. The publisher says the book has been written as 'a spare tale of art, sex, drugs and childhood, told at close quarters and without judgement'. Is a spare tale one in which the author ensures he is well out of the picture? Sparing on detail? On one occasion Jensen sleeps in the car because he fears being shot by bullets thrown into the camp fire, but we never hear him say, 'Hey Adam watch it!' Frankly I would have had more respect for Jensen if I had heard him say, 'Hell Adam, do you want to kill us both!'

Now we're getting into the great 'non-judgemental' debate. No matter how non-judgemental a writer, a journalist, attempts to be, however neutral, everything Cullen says to Jensen will have been a response to Jensen's demeanour and the situation. Add to that the fact that Jensen thinks Cullen was probably in love with him, a much younger man. A pretence not to judge Cullen (if that is actually possible) could also be seen as influential on the nature of their relationship, clearly flattering to Cullen. It seems Cullen was performing to Jensen's receptive audience, hoping that Jensen also cared for him. By his omissions Jensen leaves the impression he is trying not to be seen

too much as betraying Cullen. By leaving Cullen, Jensen was clearly making a judgement.

There are occasions in the book when Jensen manages to insert the odd tweak or poke, offering a hint of what he really thinks or a revelation about someone that might not be especially welcome. He takes pleasure in letting us know how (after, as he describes, passing Cullen's physical 'tests' by not running away) he gradually unravels Cullen's lies and invented history and reveals his make-believe criminal life. By relating how he tells Cullen, Jensen wants us to know that he's not completely gullible, not entirely unquestioning.

Cullen contrived an image of himself as 'the real deal'. It wasn't so much his art which put him on a pedestal for his younger acolytes, but the idea of his wild, cruel, aberrant and criminal lifestyle. Ultimately even the excitement of that image could be too powerful, particularly when Cullen's demands threatened to drag a young admirer into his murky life: '...his phone calls would quickly become too much and his demands too taxing—the overtures to come immediately on unplanned hunting trips, to pick up grenades for him from a store on George Street or heroin from a man in Darlington.' Jensen is referring to people like Ben Quilty and other young artist admirers at the time but Jensen too takes the same route.

We generally look up to our idols—we want them to rise to our expectations. With Cullen's Archibald Prize-winning portrait of David Wenham in his portrayal from the Anita Cobby inspired film, 'The Boys'; many viewers (and perhaps even some among the Archibald trustees) thought they were looking at a portrait of Diver Dan with sun bleached, tousled hair, the much loved character from an earlier TV series—not the murderer.

In the book Jensen's description of Cullen's funeral is masterful and opens his story. It is, says Jensen, 'a funeral of friends who have become acquaintances, spurred back into friendship by death'. He notes Cullen's final drug dealer, with 'stringy hair and a stringier girlfriend' who is forced to sit with the journalists and barrister Charles Waterstreet's eulogy which would later serve a dual purpose as his weekly column in the *Sun-Herald*.

Waterstreet: 'You can map his ascent into the heaven of professional life—and descent into the hell of drink, drugs and addiction—and his re-ascent into heaven in his later years: before the Archibald with David Wenham and the smiling, fresh-faced boy wonder he was ... later becoming the swashbuckling huntsman, always a gentleman, that he presented.'

Jensen was personally revealing in a blog in *The Guardian* online which described some of the juicier parts of the book. The reader must now ask some questions. Why has this side of Jensen not been reflected in the book? Is it possible that we're not getting 'the real deal' from Jensen?

Later in the book, in the story about Cullen's last court appearance when Waterstreet represented him in return, we are told, for the portrait Cullen had painted of him for another Archibald, Waterstreet presents the case that the great quantity of weapons and firearms which an intoxicated Cullen has been arrested for in possession were to be used in the legitimate pursuit of his art. 'This day was a day where he was going to create, I'll say, a legitimate work of art.' 'The vodka he drank was in aid of some misguided artistic inspiration.... He was a collector of firearms, obviously.' Then, 'He had them for curiosity value'... and so on.

Most of those present, even those who had provided Cullen with redeeming references, could see the defence for what it was. Someone from the Humane Society International had even written 'to take partial responsibility for the charges, having suggested Adam produce work with a 'dodging bullets' theme for an upcoming charity auction. 'I can't help but feel slightly responsible,' Verna Simpson wrote, 'for Adam having firearms in his car.'

It will take me some time not to be haunted by certain images. There are so many. One, horribly, of Cullen with his friends lassoing a kangaroo and then chain-sawing off its tail and watching in hilarity its unbalanced attempts to jump without a tail. I will never forget a friend, Cullen's neighbour, telling how she was awakened one night by the dreadful sounds of Cullen bashing a fox to death in his garden. Some believed—possibly because it was too painful not to believe—his line that the vast quantities of animal parts he kept were road kill, that the birds he shot in his garden had died flying into windows.

Are we so naive or just cowards?

At the end of 2013, just over a year after Cullen's death, an article entitled 'Adam We Hardly Knew You' was published in the first issue of *Oz Arts* magazine. It quoted an article in *The Streetwise* (Peter Adams & Alan Lloyd) describing in Cullen's own words his pleasure at looking into the eyes of animals as he was 'executing' them and artist John Ellison's attempt to confront this sadistic and cruel side of Cullen by challenging him to a public fight.

It seems extraordinary to the many who were aware of the man behind the public figure that the litany of horror stories of animal torture extending for so many years are likely to be airbrushed from Cullen's story. In my view a couple of observations about animals cruelly treated made by Jensen doesn't let him off the hook. Is Cullen's obsession with torturing and killing animals so insignificant? Less relevant to his story than say his relationship with his mother or his lies about his criminal past?—both subjects thought worthy of inclusion amongst Jensen's vignettes.

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