

Eloquent episodes

In his tender tales of the lives of individuals, Arnold Zable aims to reveal the human face of history, he tells **Diane Stubbings**

To me, it's a great privilege," says Melbourne writer Arnold Zable, "to be a conduit for the stories of extraordinary people." Drawing on the experiences of partisans and refugees, musicians and migrant workers, Zable's latest non-fiction work, *Violin Lessons*, reflects on what it means to survive. "It's amazing how resilient people can be," he says. "How much they have to offer because of what they've witnessed; because they are, in a way, the unseen by-products of world events.

"Each story in *Violin Lessons* is really the tip of an iceberg," he reflects, "and beneath each story lies a huge underbelly of history. The people in these stories have been deeply affected by history, whether that presents itself in terms of their dreams, or feelings of deep, deep guilt and confusion, or in their resilience, their stoicism and courage. In telling their stories, I hope I'm taking the reader away from the usual ideological conflicts that world events tend to be reduced to, and instead showing the human face of history."

Violin Lessons culminates in "The Ancient Mariner", Zable's powerful and moving account of the journey from Iraq to Australia of Amal Basri. A refugee on the ill-fated SIEV X, Basri clung for 22 hours to the corpse of a fellow-passenger in shark-infested waters, before finally being rescued. And in telling Basri's unimaginable tale, Zable manages to bring an immediacy – a beating heart – to an issue that is all too often reduced to a matter of mere politics.

"I have written many stories," Zable recalls, "but I have never felt the weight of getting a story right as I did when I was writing Amal's story. I promised her I'd tell her story. Mind you, she told the story very eloquently herself to many audiences, and she was greatly loved. But then, in a cruel irony, after what she'd survived on the ocean, she died of cancer. I felt I had to do justice to her story, to who she was. I had to re-enter the great friendship I'd had with her."

Zable found his way into Amal's story through the music of Umm Kulthum, the beloved Egyptian singer whose funeral in 1972 was said to have been one of the largest gatherings in human history. Amal had listened to Kulthum's music as a child, and this, along with the walks she and her father took along the banks of the Tigris, had been one of her earliest memories.

It was in Kulthum's music, the way she sang, that Zable discovered the mirror of Amal's voice, the way she had of telling her story. "The way she sang, how she went from quiet beginnings and built up and built up and built up, and the rhythm of the storytelling, it was like an incantation. It was very much the way Amal told a story," Zable recalls.

What Zable is careful to do throughout the stories, but particularly in that of Amal, is to allow his characters their own distinct voices. "It's important," he says, "to tell stories in such a way that the voice is the voice of the character whose story you've witnessed. That's why I allow large sections of the stories to be almost monologues. But then I have to also draw it back and bring it back to my own voice as the narrator, so it's a balancing act."

There is in Zable's stories a gentleness, a quietness; a deep respect for life, for its torments and its splendour. He is a subtle presence in these lives he chronicles, framing their stories and offering to the reader a context in which to hear what these people have to say to us. "I much prefer," Zable says, "to be the type of storyteller who is a witness, who is passing through and observing the events around them, stepping into the story only when I feel it's necessary to make the sort of connections that I feel need to be made."

Zable stresses the importance of a writer being a "participant observer", a notion he first discovered when he was a graduate student at Columbia University in the early 1970s, studying under the influential cultural anthropologist Margaret Mead. It was a term Mead used to describe her own immersion in the populations she was working with, and one that reflects something of Zable's own approach to writing. "Life comes first, the story second," he says. "If you allow life to come first, then a deeper story will emerge out of that living."

Many of the stories in *Violin Lessons* have their foundations in Zable's determination to live life "at the grass roots", the tales "emerging from conversations and from working with people and being with people. What unites this collection is that each story has been sparked by something that happened on my travels or by people I've met, and I've thought, 'I have to tell that story one day.'

"Primo Levi wrote about what he called eloquent episodes," Zable continues, "a kind of episode that can shift your way of seeing things, and in each of the stories there's at least one eloquent episode. For example, what triggered 'The Partisan's Song' was a beautiful story I heard from a man in Melbourne. He was there the night that Hirsh Glick wrote 'Never Say', the poem that would become the anthem of the Jewish resistance in World War II, a song I'd grown up with. The man told me how they'd descended into a cellar and Glick had read the poem to them in that astounding environment – a makeshift

table, candles lighting the cellar. And I knew as soon as I heard it that I'd have to tell that story."

Similarly, "The Music Box" discovers within the simple gesture of a man taking a music box from a shelf the unravelling of a marriage. Another story, "Capriccio", takes its inspiration from a moment during Zable's travels across Eastern Europe when he was walking through a forest. Among those with him was a violinist, who pointed out

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that the resin or sap from the conifers "provides rosin, what you need for the bow to work smoothly and for the violin to produce its music. But the resin is also what years later solidifies into amber and traps the past."

This note that juxtaposes music with lives bound by history is sustained through the entire collection. In the title story, "Violin Lessons", Zable draws together the tale of a young Iraqi boy – inspired to take up violin lessons when he hears gorgeous music coming from a house he happens to be passing – with his own lessons as a



Photo: Meredith O'Shea

youngster in Melbourne, and the hidden truth of his teacher's life.

Employing his own memories of working as a fruit-picker near Lake Geneva, Zable offers in "Bella Ciao" the resonant image of an elderly migrant woman – herself once a partisan – singing a song of the resistance as she struggles to keep up with the other workers. In other stories, such as "A Chorus of Feet", the music is as simple as the sound of footsteps in Venice, of people walking through a car-less city, and within this rhythm, "a rhythm that allows you to think", Zable finds the story of Signor Marcello, whose family converted to Catholicism in order to save themselves from the Nazis.

In "The Dust of Life", the haunting notes of a bamboo flute are the poignant coda to a tale of children orphaned and displaced by the war in Vietnam. Here, the music exists "outside and beyond history", and it's this sense of music as a means of negotiating "the terror and beauty that we call living" that is a recurring theme. "I found a way out," one character says of his music, "an escape from the curse called history."

Zable is a deceptively simple writer, and that is one of the strengths of *Violin Lessons*. There are no writerly flourishes, no ostentatious embellishments that are allowed to get in the way of the story. These are lives lovingly rendered; tender tales that remind us of the people – the individuals – who daily struggle to survive the hand that history has dealt them.

In one of the stories in *Violin Lessons*, Zable muses, "Perhaps this is the storyteller's illusion, an innate longing to make sense of life's fragility and chaos, to contrive order out of what is in reality a play of chance. Does it matter?" he eventually concludes. "Perhaps it is enough to tell the story."

• Diane Stubbings has worked as a writer, researcher and academic.

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