ROMULUS MY FATHER
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PRE-READING
Literary Context through reviews

Review 1: Romulus My Father by Richard Johnson
http://www.abc.net.au/rn/arts/atbooks/gaita.htm

Review 2: “An unfortunate life” by Laurie Clancy
The Age August 15, 2005

After reading these reviews answer the following:

1. What historical contextual material do you need to access to develop your understanding of Gaita’s memoir?
2. What insight about Romulus and his sense of self and identity does the text provide?
3. What thematic arguments can you draw on from this review that relate to the concept of belonging?
4. What does the reviewer suggest about style that would link the text to the concept of belonging?
5. What does the reviewer suggest about the genre of the text and how does the genre present opportunities to examine the concept of belonging?
6. What questions does the reviewer engage with that impact on the conceptual nature of belonging?
7. What language did you find challenging in the review?
8. How would you apply this review to developing your understanding of Gaita’s text?
9. How effectively does the reviewer provide you with a basis for studying Gaita’s text?

Historical context

Links to Migrants and Bonegilla

Reading

Collecting Notes
Different ways of belonging in Romulus My Father:
As you read the text think of these ways of belonging. Use these to collect notes or quotations about belonging. You might want to add not belonging as a heading or something else that you find as you read.

Background to the book
This book begins with a disruption to belonging; war and the move from one country to another. At the same time it is about the past that Romulus (and implicitly his son Raimond) belong to because there is a sense in the novel that we belong to our past.

While the story starts as a migrant story it goes beyond this and is in fact an exploration of identity and what it is that makes us who we are. The migrant story allows access to two worlds: that of Australia centred on the land and that of Europe building on centuries of philosophy. Raimond’s world may be one of poverty, masculinity, isolation and often despair but it is also one of celebration and achievement. It is about living in an ethical
universe where every life, human and animal, is valued. These ideas emerge in the philosophical discussions with Hora and in the actions of Romulus.

What we also see in the book is the danger of despair resulting in mental decline. It is not only Raimond’s mother but also his father who are subject to mental illness, which can also be seen as a symptom of the choice not to belong or the feeling of not belonging.

Ultimately this book, written after the death of the author’s father and developed from the eulogy given at the father’s funeral, is a panegyric centred on Romulus whose life and thinking formed the basis of his own son’s life.

Close Reading of text

Chapter One

Focusing on language

1. The opening paragraph is written using only third person pronouns. How does the use of these pronouns place you as the reader in terms of the syllabus statement: ‘a responder may experience and understand the possibilities presented by a sense of belonging to, or exclusion from the text and the world it represents’?

2. Examine the use of verbs in this same paragraph. How do the verbs shape the tone of the passage in terms of belonging or not belonging?

3. The change from objective personal pronouns ‘he’ and ‘his’ to the subjective personal pronoun ‘my’ in the following paragraph presents what sense of ownership and belonging by Raimond Gaita?

4. List the use of verbs, adjectives and adverbs on pages 1 and 2. Provide a paragraph discussion of how these language features create tone and provide insight into the details of the historical context that develops the reader’s understanding of the protagonist, Romulus Gaita.

5. Read the paragraph that begins on page 3. Examine how the language used reveals Romulus’ religious context and provides insight into how his religious context is inferred as developing his sense of identity and belonging both to family and to God.

In your response identify and explain the relevance of the grammatical and figurative features in the abstract terms: ‘pious,’ ‘reverence,’ solemnity,’ ‘institutional religion’ and ‘anti-clericalism.’

6. Identify the language on page 3 that suggests the value of education to Romulus. How do these paragraphs infer the transference of this love of learning to the composer, Raimond? How does this transference demonstrate an aspect of belonging?

7. Identify a range of language features on pages 4 and 5 - both grammatical and figurative - that connote the author’s pride in his father. How does this sense of pride suggest a belonging in terms of the passing on of work ethic and personal values?

8. Identify the verbs, adverbs and adjectives used by Raimond Gaita to describe his mother and his father (pages 5 to 7). How do these language features suggest the author’s emotional response to his family and present the innate sense of belonging he feels to both parents?

9. Complete a close reading and language analysis of pages 7–10. Identify the key language used by Gaita and how this language challenges readers to understand the author’s personal provenance and sense of personal identity as embedded in the experiences of his parents.

Summing up

Evaluate the effectiveness of this chapter in presenting an orientation to Gaita’s memoir. Discuss how the text relates to the key dot points from the syllabus:

- how the concept of belonging is conveyed through the representations of people, relationships, ideas, places, events, and societies that they encounter in the prescribed text and texts of their own choosing related to the Area of Study
- assumptions underlying various representations of the concept of belonging
- how the composer’s choice of language modes, forms, features and structures shapes and is shaped by a sense of belonging
- their own experiences of belonging, in a variety of contexts
- the ways in which they perceive the world through texts

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the ways in which exploring the concept and significance of belonging may broaden and deepen their understanding of themselves and their world.

Writing in response to the ideas in Chapter One
‘Childhood as we now know it, a space apart from the adult world, a life of its own, did not exist in that part of the world at that time. As soon as they were able to, children contributed to the maintenance of their families and to the welfare of the village.’ (page 2)

Consider the meaning of the quote provided and then explain how Raimond Gaita has presented the complexities that lie within the notion of belonging.

Chapter Two
Focusing on the migrant experience
Belonging (or not belonging) to time and place
Genre
Chapter Two, in similar fashion to Chapter One – begins with an emphasis on the use of pronouns to establish a context for the reader. Discuss the use of the personal pronouns ‘we’ to begin this chapter and explain what Gaita is developing in terms of a collective migrant experience. How does the use of ‘we’ establish the genre of this text? Consider the differences between between memoir, autobiography and biographical narrative.

Time, place and migrants
- The opening paragraph establishes the historical and geographical context of Gaita's initial migrant experience. Locate Port Melbourne on a map. Compare the port with images of Romania and suggest how the geography may have had an impact on the emotional and psychological aspects of belonging or not belonging, hope or fear, which may have been experienced by migrants.
- What political context did migrants such as the Gaita family enter into Australia? Provide evidence from the text and test against official records of the migration process in the 1950s. The text states that the migrants were sent to places ‘of the government’s choosing’. How could this present the irony embedded in assimilation practice and developing a sense of belonging or not belonging for the migrants?
- Read the research material on Bonegilla. To what extent is Gaita’s family experience typical of other migrants? Locate evidence from the research booklet and sites provided and analyse how the language used by the migrants in relating their experiences suggests notions and perspectives of belonging or not belonging.
- Discuss the way the following language presents insight into the paradox of belonging.
  - ‘assisted passage’
  - ‘migrant reception’
  - ‘clearing camp’
  - ‘government’s choosing’
  - ‘sent’
  - ‘stayed’

Read Peter Skrzynecki’s ‘Migrant Hostel Parkes 1949–1951’. To what extent do the poetic devices express similar ideas and responses to the migrant experience similar to that of the Gaita family?

Research the locality and geography presented by Gaita on pages 12 and 13. How does Gaita provide insight into belonging or not belonging through a sense of place? What does the text then suggest about locality as an aspect of belonging?

The final three lines on page 12 and the first two paragraphs on page 13 present information about the historical community of Baringhup. Identify and analyse the effectiveness of the language in revealing the notions of belonging that are presented...
in terms of community, history, memory and change.

• Gaita refers to war on page 14. How does this affect the migrant experience?
• Close analysis of paragraph 2 on page 14 beginning with ‘Though the landscape…’ How is Gaita using the landscape to express the physical, literal, psychological and metaphorical isolation, segregation and alienation of the migrant experience?
• On pages 14–16, Gaita uses a range of language devices to describe the need for Romulus to locate other Romanians. How does the language used to describe the friendship established in these chapters suggest assumptions about language, likeness and common experience as imperatives to either belonging or not belonging?

• The large paragraph on page 16 presents significant arguments that relate to the displacement experienced by migrants. How does the language expose physical, emotional and intellectual displacement experienced by Romulus Gaita and other migrants?
• Pages 16–19 introduce the complex relationships between Romulus Gaita and his wife and Raimond’s relationship with his mother, Christine Gaita. Provide a close analysis of the language used on these pages that expresses the lack of belonging and communion that exists in both the marital and parental relationship between the Gaita men and Christine.

• Compare the language Gaita uses in the final paragraph on page 17 with the language he uses to describe his father in Chapter One. How does the reader develop an understanding of Raimond’s loyalty and sense of protection and reverence for his father? How does this reverence establish Raimond’s sense of security and belonging?

Chapter Three
Focus on place and belonging

Read the article “From Frogmore” by Helen Garner (The Monthly May 2007, No. 23 http://www.themonthly.com.au) to give you more understanding of the place.

This chapter explores the concept of place and location as a notion of belonging. Identify the verbs, adverbs, adjectives and abstract nouns used to describe the location of Frogmore in a table.

The quintessential qualities of the Australian landscape are insightfully explored in Chapter 3. After completing the tables, develop an analysis and evaluation of how Gaita has used language about the landscape to provide insight into:

– assumptions about belonging that underlie Gaita’s representations of landscape
– how we, as readers, can explore the way language can allow us to belong to a text,
– how the chapter provides us with opportunities to explore a world beyond ourselves
Use the following quote as the basis of your analysis:

Though the landscape is one of rare beauty, to a European or English eye it seems desolate, and even more than forty years my father could not become reconciled to it. (page 14)

Extend your thinking
Belonging and security

Read from ‘My father worked shifts…’ to ‘I would have coped without the dogs’ (pp29-30). Research the concept of the lost child in the Australian Gothic literature of the late 19th Century. After completing your research read Henry Lawson’s ‘A Child in the Dark, and a Foreign Father’. (http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Triangles_of_Life,_and_other_stories/A_Child_in_the_Dark,_and_a_Foreign_Father39)

1. What are the similarities between the texts in terms of language used and the theme of isolation and displacement being presented?
2. How has Gaita used the Australian Gothic genre, implicitly, to develop his representation of belonging in terms of childhood fears and insecurities?
3. How does each text present security?
4. How does each text expose alienation?
5. How is the child represented in each text in terms of the language devices and how do these devices shape tone?

Read the passages about Raimond’s relationship with his mother on pages 31-34.

How does the language used by Gaita suggest a sense of belonging or not belonging in terms of parental responsibility and security?

1. How does Gaita use language to represent the relationship between Romulus and Christine in these pages?
2. How effectively does Raimond Gaita allow readers to understand his emotional relationship with his mother and how it reflects his personal sense of belonging to her as a parent?
3. How does Gaita use language to present the psychological belonging experienced by Christina? Even though Gaita is quite critical of his mother, inferred through the use of verbs and abstract nouns used to describe her actions, how does the text suggest the impact of mental illness as a significant aspect of belonging?
4. What empathy can be derived for Christina through this chapter? How is she perceived by the range of characters in Chapter 3 and how do you, as a reader, empathise with the significant concerns of mental illness as a means of alienating and displacing individuals from family, community and broader society?

Writing Exercise

Write an essay that compares Romulus My Father and Lawson’s ‘A Child in the Dark, and a Foreign Father’.

Chapter Four

Focus on belonging to people

1. How does the language of the opening paragraph suggest the paradox of belonging in terms of Raimond Gaita’s parental relationships?
2. What sense of new belonging is presented by the concept of routines and security?
3. How do Gaita’s anthropomorphic representations of ‘Jack’ (from page 35 to page 41) provide insight into the concept of belonging in terms of freedom, and trust? Discuss the verbs and adverbs used to create the freedom, and trust. Discuss the verbs and adverbs used to create the character of ‘Jack’ and his sense of belonging in Raimond’s world.
4. How does Gaita use language to suggest the dichotomy of ‘Jack’ belonging to nature but preferring the company of humans?
5. In the syllabus dot points you are required to determine how you can, by the language, develop a sense of belonging ‘to the world of the text’. How successful is Gaita in establishing this notion of belonging?
6. Page 42 to page 47 presents the complex relationships that surround Raimond, his parents, Mitru, Hora and individuals from the surrounding district. Locate at least one textual reference for each character that demonstrates how they experience belonging or not belonging in the context of the text as a whole. Deconstruct for grammatical and language features and write a sustained paragraph responding to: ‘The notion of belonging is best evidenced through the individual and interdependent characterisation presented by Gaita’s descriptions’.
7. How does Hora’s dialogue with Raimond’s mother on page 47 explore the notion of
belonging as one of responsibility and sacrifice?

8. How does the euphemism 'sailing close to the wind' present insight into the intimate and integral nature of the relationship between Hora and Raimond?

9. Read pages 48 and 49 and list the values treasured by Gaita's father. How does his discussion of his father's values suggest the innate nature of belonging he experiences in his personal development of identity?

10. Pages 52–56 examine belonging through notions of: work and identity, material belongings, conformity, social class, nationalism, patriotism, community and familiarity. Present a deconstruction of at least one textual reference for each notion.

Chapter Five

Focus on rebellion/not belonging

1. Pages 57 and 58 provide characterisation of the relationships Raimond forms beyond his family unit, specifically with Miss Collard. How does the language reveal Raimond's forming of a connection with her and what sense of belonging does she fulfil?

2. How does the chapter provide contextual information that demonstrates Gaita's belonging to time and place?

3. Page 59 presents insight into Gaita the philosopher. There is distinct evidence that he wants to belong to something much greater than himself and the world he is limited by. How does the language reveal these ideas?

4. Pages 59–60 suggests that belonging has complex notions of rejection and through this a sense of identity is located. Present your ideas on how these ideas are conveyed through the language of the text.

5. Present a discussion and analysis of the way Gaita explores generational belonging on page 61.

6. Discuss how two aspects of visual imagery have been created by the language on page 61.

7. Page 63 presents ideas that belonging does not depend on common agreement on all matters. How does the language used by Gaita reveal insight into the paradox of belonging and not belonging?

8. Page 69 presents evocative imagery of Gaita's childhood. How effectively does this language assist you, as the reader, to belong to the world of the text?

9. The final paragraph on page 69 presented the idea of not belonging through displacement and discomfort, contrasting it with stability and security.

10. When Gaita states 'Inclinations to delinquency ran strong in me' what is he suggesting about youth and belonging or not belonging? What might he be rejecting and why?

11. On pages 72–73, Gaita explores the concept of belonging through language. Why is this significant for migrants and the sense of belonging in a new country?

12. On page 73 Gaita refers to 'Hora's openness to the voices of others'. What does this exclusivity suggest about belonging?

Chapter Six

Belonging to age and time

1. Read this chapter closely. What is Gaita suggesting about the powerlessness of childhood? What language reveals his vulnerability?

2. The chapter seems to suggest a rejection of Christina by Raimond. Could it be argued that Raimond, the child, and Raimond the adult, have never been able to come to terms with the loss of his mother in terms of fidelity, mental illness and responsibility?

3. Could it be argued that Raimond's glorification of his father, in contrast to the descriptions and commentary of his mother suggests idolisation of one and demonisation of the other? Present textual evidence to support your response.

4. How do the paradoxes and ironies of both belonging and not belonging related in this chapter present you with opportunities to understand your own experiences of belonging and not belonging?

5. Present a discussion of the complexity of having sibling relationships explored in this chapter. What is Gaita suggesting about his experience of not belonging to family through the instability his mother?

6. Mitru's death suggests the true displacement individuals experience. How could this chapter be used to present insight into the
philosophical underpinnings of the need for love and community established in Maslow’s hierarchy of needs?

Chapter Seven
Belonging to self
1. Chapter Seven explores the importance of ‘spiritual equilibrium’ to maintaining identity and self respect. How does Gait reveal insight into the notion of belonging or not belonging in his representation of the impact of Mitru’s loss on Romulus and Hora?

2. Pages 98–101 provide deep insights into how work built and sustained Romulus’ identity and sense of personal belonging. Provide three textual references, deconstruct for language features and suggest the importance of work in sustaining identity as a form of belonging.

3. What was the importance of ‘karacter’ in developing Raimond’s personal sense of self and identity?

4. Read pages 101–104 closely. What is Gaita suggesting about his mother’s displacement as innate in an Australian community context? What values did she lack and how was she rejected by the community surrounding Raimond and Romulus?

5. This chapter suggests that belonging is quintessential; it helps us understand the past where values were instilled, freedom was established and cherished, identity was innate and love and comfort were essential to understanding self and our place in the world. How can you relate to these concepts and apply them to your related texts?

Chapter Eight
Not belonging
1. This chapter is evocative, frightening and emotive. How would you analyse the way Gaita expressed his love for his mother in his representation of her illness and its impact on his life?

2. Discuss the concepts of alienation and loss Gaita experiences in this chapter. Provide textual references and analyse for grammatical and language features to support your response.

3. What is the educational context presented in this chapter and how does it create connections and belongings for Gaita?

For class discussion: In what way/s is mental illness a statement of not belonging?

Chapter Nine
Belonging and education
1. What does Gaita suggest, on page 115, is the importance of retaining family connections to establish and sustain a sense of personal belonging?

2. What role does bureaucracy play in establishing displacement and alienation on page 116?

3. Compare the concept of bureaucratic intervention in this chapter and Gaita’s text as a whole with Skrzynecki *Leaving Home*.

3. What is the educational context presented in this chapter and how does it create connections and belonging for Gaita?

Chapter Nine
Belonging and conformity
1. What does Gaita suggest, on page 115, is the importance of retaining family connections to establish and sustain a sense of personal belonging?

2. What role does bureaucracy play in establishing displacement and alienation on page 116?

3. Compare the concept of bureaucratic intervention in this chapter and Gaita’s text as a whole with Skrzynecki *Leaving Home*.

4. How does Raimond’s revelation of his father’s ‘insanity’ (page 117) create a discussion on the impact of relationships on the loss of self realisation and stability as notions of belonging?

5. How does Gaita use language to convey Romulus’ vulnerability as evidence to present arguments relating to belonging?

6. Discuss the isolation and estrangement that is geographical, social and emotional for the characters in this text. Make specific reference to the language on page 119.

7. Discuss how Gaita explores conformity as a notion of belonging on page 119?

Web Links
Robert McLean, “Raimond Gaita – telling his story, his way.”