



MAESTRO

PETER GOLDSWORTHY

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**Teacher's notes on *Maestro*
Prepared by Kay Perry**

Biographical Background

Peter Goldsworthy was born in 1951 in Minlaton, South Australia, and grew up in various South Australian towns and in Darwin. When asked, in an interview, to recall a particularly significant personal memory Goldsworthy responded “the moment of illumination in my case might be my arrival at Darwin airport at two am on a wet season morning in 1966”. Arrival in Darwin, the reader may note, is also significant in the life of Goldsworthy’s fictional character, Paul Crabbe.

Goldsworthy graduated in medicine from the University of Adelaide in 1974 and has since combined medical practice with a busy writing career.

Peter Goldsworthy’s Place in Australian Literature

Peter Goldsworthy is one of the more prolific of contemporary Australian authors, having published two novels, four books of poetry and numerous works of short fiction. He has received many awards both for his poetry and his prose.

Sequence of Events

Maestro tells the story of Paul Crabbe, the son of music-loving parents, who arrives in Darwin at the age of fifteen. Paul’s parents arrange for him to take piano lessons from Eduard Keller, the “maestro” of the title. Paul is curious regarding Keller’s past in wartime Europe but knows very little about him. The relationship between teacher and student is not an easy one, and, although Paul makes progress under Keller’s tutelage, other interests eventually distract him from serious musical study. Years pass. Paul marries and has children. Although he works as a musician, he does

not feel that he has achieved his full potential. As time goes on, he attempts to learn more about his former teacher. He visits the dying Keller and tries to come to terms with what Keller has meant to him.

Setting

The main action of the novel takes place in Darwin before the advent of Cyclone Tracy. Paul's father sees Darwin as a philistine place and quotes Banjo Paterson who described it as a "city of booze, blow, and blasphemy" (p.9). It is, he believes, a refuge for social misfits "a town populated by men who had run as far as they could flee" (p.17). For this very reason, Darwin provides the ideal haven for Eduard Keller, a man who is concerned to distance himself as far as possible from the circumstances of his former life.

Unlike his father, Paul responds enthusiastically to Darwin, noting "that world and I were moulded from the same substances" (p.114). For him, it is a "sun-drenched town of lush gardens, scents, and sexuality" (p.74). It is not long before the adolescent Paul begins to experience a conflict between his sensuality and the demands made on him by the disciplined life of a serious music student.

Significance of Title

"Maestro" is a term usually reserved for musicians of the highest accomplishment. It seems unlikely to apply to an unprepossessing, alcohol-sodden piano teacher living above a beer garden in a "town of drunks" (p.8). Paul's early impressions of Keller are not favourable, and Keller is, likewise, unimpressed by Paul. "The boy is too given to self-satisfaction", he states, "the self-satisfied go no further" (p.43). It is gradually revealed, however, that Keller has a most respectable musical pedigree and was, at one time, a pianist of distinction. Keller attempts to impart his knowledge to Paul but Paul strikes out on his own prematurely, preferring to hit the European competition circuit rather than spend extra time refining his skills. At the end of the novel Paul is dismissive of his own ability, suggesting that his playing falls short of the very best: "a second-rate perfection is all I have any hope of attaining" (p.148). Paul never achieves the status of maestro. Keller's pre-eminence remains uncontested.

Style and Structure

Maestro takes the form of a retrospective narrative which both begins and ends with a focus on the narrator's relationship with his music teacher, Eduard Keller. As an adult, Paul Crabbe looks back on his formative, early experiences in Darwin. He is trying to come to terms with the choices he made as a younger man inhabiting "a foolish, innocent world, a world of delusion and feeling and ridiculous dreams" (p.149).

Paul tries to give an accurate account of his past but he acknowledges that total accuracy is unattainable: "To describe the world is always to simplify its texture, to coarsen the weave" (p.14). One of his earliest admissions as narrator is that he will not attempt to reproduce the idiosyncrasies of Keller's speech. It is important that Keller should be established as a figure of some dignity and authority. Goldsworthy clearly wants to avoid any stereotyping of Keller, hence the avoidance of "comic-book parody" (p.3) in the representation of his speech.

Characterisation

Despite the presence of various interesting secondary characters, the focus of the text is firmly on Paul and Keller. Keller is particularly enigmatic. His real identity is a matter for speculation within the Darwin arts community. As Paul comments, “various theories, half truths and slanders were bruited about, often totally contradictory, and always extreme” (p.29). Keller attracts these rumours because of his exoticism within the Darwin context and because he refuses to speak of his wartime past. Paul imagines he may be a former Nazi but the truth is far more sobering. Keller has, in a sense, been complicit with the Nazi regime but not in the fashion that Paul imagines. As a result of the guilt he feels for his actions, he has erased his former identity and gone into self-imposed exile. He has even amputated his little finger and renounced the powerfully emotional music which used to give him the greatest pleasure. To him Liszt and Wagner are purveyors of “cheap tricks” (p.74). He is profoundly distrustful of Viennese culture and states, “Nothing...could ever make me homesick” (p.45).

Paul enters the text as a “skinny, unathletic, irredeemably smug” (p.25) fifteen year old. He resents Keller for forcing him to go back to musical exercises which he believes he has already mastered. As he continues to study under Keller, their relationship deepens. Keller signals this change by making a present to Paul of a priceless Czerny manuscript. Paul sees this gift as opening “a door, a narrow emotional chink” (p.64). It seems as if Keller may be ready to share some part of his past with Paul but, on the one occasion when he attempts to, Paul lets the potentially cathartic moment pass because his girlfriend is waiting for him downstairs and he is impatient to be with her. As Paul matures, his contact with Keller lessens but he retains his curiosity regarding Keller’s past. What he eventually learns about Keller leads him to think that Keller pre-war and Keller post-war “were not the same man, in a sense” (p.140). Paul’s quest to understand Keller shifts, in the later stages of the novel, to a quest to understand the man that he, partly as a result of Keller’s teaching, has become. Like the death of a parent, Keller’s death forces Paul to reassess himself: “Now I was faced with myself for the first time: Paul Crabbe, greying, dissatisfied, fast approaching mid-life, my backside stuck to a minor chair in a minor music school” (p.148). Though he has not matched Keller’s musical accomplishments, Paul seems to be his natural successor in terms of disillusionment.

Thematic Concerns

To some extent, *Maestro* conforms to the conventions of the *bildungsroman*, the novel which traces the growth and development of a central character. *Maestro* is distinctive, however, in that Paul Crabbe’s maturation is seen through the prism of his relationship with Eduard Keller. Thus, the seemingly central character must share the reader’s attention with another character at least equally, and possibly more, important.

Both Paul and Keller participate in the major themes of the text which include the conflict between dreams and reality, the significance of self-image to adult life, and the power of the past within the present. They both make difficult, sometimes misinformed, choices and are forced to live with the consequences of their actions. It seems, at times, as if Paul is a younger Keller, set to repeat, in his own fashion, the emotional mistakes of the older man and unable to benefit from his guidance. Keller

aims to teach Paul more than just music. He would, for instance, willingly give Paul access to his collection of grimly illuminating scrap-books if Paul's father would permit it. Paul's association with Keller teaches him to look beyond stereotypes and to question the surface reality of things. Nevertheless, Keller's influence is not necessarily altogether benign. It is possible that Keller has made his student too much in his own image, "teaching a self-criticism" (p.148) without limits and without a constructive purpose. Paul does not seem to be, as David Copperfield puts it, the hero of his own life. The volume which purports to be his memoir is, after all, titled *Maestro* with reference to Keller. Inevitably, the reader must arrive at a personal evaluation of the impact of Keller, for good or ill, on Paul.

Exploring the Text: Questions and Activities

1. Look up Gilbert and Sullivan, Czerny, Liszt and Wagner in an encyclopaedia or dictionary of music. What characterizes their respective musical styles? (You might also like to listen to recordings of their work).
2. What does music mean to various characters in the text?
3. Consult a history of the Arts in the Third Reich (see titles listed in Further Reading). Do the experiences of Eduard Keller relate to those of other musicians?
4. Speaking of himself in relation to his parents Paul says he was "their crossbreed, their mulatto" (p.16). What sort of relationship does he have with his parents and does it change over time?
5. When Paul notices the concentration camp tattoo on his wrist Keller tells him, "There were many camps...their name is always the same" (p.111). Why does Keller say this?
6. "The relationship between Paul and Keller is so overwhelming that Paul's other relationships (with Rosie and his peers) are never explored in detail". Do you agree?
7. Late in the novel Paul states, "Keller was bad for me, the worst possible teacher: revealing perfection to me, and at the same time snatching it away" (p.148). Do the negatives of Keller's teaching outweigh the positives?
8. Would it be fair to say that both Paul and Keller need to learn the lesson of self-forgiveness?
9. What is the relevance of the Heinrich Heine poem on p.145? Do you think Keller would like it or not?
10. After Keller's death, Paul concludes "a great man had died, whatever the crimes he felt he had committed" (p.146). How do you judge Keller?

Related Resources

Mephisto (1981) This film, directed by István Szabó, tells the story of an actor who believes that he can remain uncorrupted whilst furthering his career under Nazi rule.

Further Reading

The Twisted Muse: Musicians and Their Music in the Third Reich Michael H.Kater (Oxford Univ. Press: New York: 1997)

Music in the Third Reich Erik Levi (Macmillan: Basingstoke: 1984)

The Ironic Eye: Peter Goldsworthy's Fiction Andrew Riemer (1993)