

Published in the *Evelyn Waugh Review*.

“His Best Heresy: *Born-Again Skeptic & Other Valedictions*, by Robert Murray Davis.: Norman, OK: Mongrel Empire Press, 2011.

Reviewed by Richard Greene, University of Toronto

“I began as Paul Pennyfeather ... and ended ... as the peripatetic Basil Seal, of whom it’s said ‘No one minds him being rude, but he’s so teaching.’” So says the highly educational Robert Murray Davis in his new collection of essays, which doubles as an autobiography. Now, most readers of Waugh Studies will know Bob Davis personally or professionally. I certainly do, and must declare that I am under an obligation to him—he has twice reviewed my work and, better still, he has approved of it. And it did not cost me a nickel in bribes.

Davis was once told that he had an “irony deficiency,” but readers will rejoice to discover that he is most certainly cured. Apart from his scholarly work, he is a poet and novelist. He has learned to write a polished, economical prose, which offers deceptive vistas of smooth water—there is a rip-tide of bemused ferocity under most of these pages.

Nothing could be more certain to kill conversation than to say you are an academic. Ask me--I know. But Davis tells the story of a life spent mostly at universities—he studied at three and taught at nine. He is perfectly content to talk about an existence most people find boring. In a sense, he is rappelling down the side of the ivory tower. However, not everyone wants to hear about the life and opinions of an English prof. Or as one woman put it to him, “You people are warped! Graduate school warped you people.”

There is doubtless some truth in that, but Davis stands his ground as a critic, a reader and a writer: “Past seventy and still active, that’s not what I do. It’s who I am.”

The first section of the book looks at Davis’s early years in Kansas and Missouri, his growth into an intellectual good ol’ boy and then, as awareness rippled outward, something more impressive still and not quite categorizable. Davis credits his entertaining and adventurous mother for instilling self-confidence in him, and one can see that she cut no corners there. He thinks that she would have been disappointed by the failure of his marriage, his departure from the Catholic Church, and his refusal ever to read David Copperfield. His father was a quieter figure, conservative and somewhat melancholy. Davis says that his father managed to teach him by example that he was not the best card player in the world, and so “Saved me a lot of money and trouble.”

A section on “Recoveries” takes us through his quarrels with the bottle, the wife, the Church, and the bookshelf. He presents himself, with equal measures of sorrow and whimsy, as an addictive personality: “moderation doesn’t seem to work for me or my family, all of whom seem to have only two switch positions: ‘off’ and ‘test to destruction.’” He is, of course, speaking chiefly about booze, but it reminded me that for all his wisdom on many subjects, Bob Davis is not equipped to talk about religion. After long years of Jesuit piety, the switch flipped, and now he is agin’ it. However, in one of the drollest essays, he talks about the accumulation of books as if it were an eating disorder, culminating in “bibliographical love handles.”

My favourite essay is on his involvement in “masters swimming”—for which, think of Mark Spitz with a knee replacement. It is the sort of thing you take up when the corporeal love handles keep pace with the bibliographical ones. He describes friendships imbued with a curious mix of competition and sympathetic encouragement. But is this Davis’s element? A casual swimmer wanders into his lane and they collide: “I reared up and said ‘Jesus Christ’ in a loud voice and prepared to go on. ‘Don’t be angry,’ she said, and I thought, ‘If I wasn’t angry, I couldn’t do this to myself.’” And there are more problems: “two other members of our relay team got divorced since our last Nationals, so there may be a correlation between a failing marriage and dedication to masters swimming.” Here, we are in the deep end of sadness.

Throughout this book, Davis reflects on what it means to write well. For over a generation, scholars have been encouraged to prattle in polysyllabic codes. Davis thinks of himself not as an academic (he rejoices in his emeritus-ness), but as a writer in the same trade as Evelyn Waugh, Graham Greene, or John Steinbeck—whose names come back again and again in these pages. In a certain way, prose style is Robert Murray Davis’s best heresy. In this amusing, thoughtful, self-revealing book, he is driving nails into a door, and we should honor him for it.