

Foreword

When Aram was nine, his cousin Mourad – just about the same age and just as penniless – turned up outside Aram’s window with a living, breathing *horse*. Aram records:

“I stared first at my cousin and then at the horse. There was a pious stillness and humour in each of them which on the one hand delighted me and on the other frightened me.”

This was taking place, naturally, in Fresno, California, or the immediate vicinity thereof. It is a region of the world known to every enthusiast of Saroyan as the home of America’s Armenian community, which you are about to enter, reader, between the years 1915 and 1925, conducted by hand of Fresno’s favourite son. Saroyan is favourite because of the enchantment of his writing about the folk he utterly knows, and their place, since there he utterly belongs.

“The ditches were dry most of the year, but when they weren’t dry, they were roaring. As the snows melted in the hills the ditches began to roar and from somewhere, God knows where, arrived frogs and turtles, water snakes and fish. In the spring of the year the water hurried, and with it the heart, but as the fields changed from green to brown, the blossoms to fruit, the shy warmth to arrogant heat, the ditches slowed down and the heart grew lazy. The first water from the hills was cold, swift, and frightening. It was too cold and busy to invite the naked body of a boy.”

This is sweet writing by any measure: tight with information, nothing wasted, sharp in detail, touched with imagination, promise and joy. Saroyan makes every one of us quite sure that we too can – if only we can observe, and listen, and unbutton –

write. It is a blithe gift. Saroyan discovered it early, and honed it. The style carries a charm redolent of the remembered America of the inter-War years, nurtured by such journals as *The Atlantic Monthly* and *The New Yorker*.

The scale is necessarily small, yet what's written leaves the reader with the sense that he or she has read all that one needs to know on this occasion. Hence Saroyan is at his best in his short fiction – long-shorts like *The Assyrian*, based on the Armenian diaspora's most famous and mysterious figure, Calouste Gulbenkian, gems like the miniature story *The Leaf Thief*, or the gently yet unerringly moulded vignettes belonging to one another in a single volume, which comprise *My Name is Aram*.

Capuchin Classics brings back *My Name is Aram* as Saroyan's most enduring book-sized work in the conviction that this a voice, and eminently a *tone* of voice, that future generations deserve to hear. Saroyan is quenchlessly tolerant, not to say indulgent, of the caprice of humanity, the way we are. His delight is in his fellow man's frailty and absurdity, as (of course) they grow older, visible above all to the astonished child. The stories of *Aram* are of childhood: William Saroyan never quite lost the child's view of the world around.

This gift took its toll amid the harsher realities of his own adulthood. Born in 1908, he was the son of the owner of a small vineyard who soon went bust. Saroyan was taken into an orphanage at the age of four, though fairly soon reclaimed by his mother. He broke through to recognition as a writer in his twenties, with his novel *The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze* (1934). At the age of thirty-one his Broadway play *The Time of Your Life* was a Pulitzer winner and the New York Theatre Critics' Circle choice. Novels, plays and stories continued to flow. In 1943 he married the actress Carol Marcus who bore him a son, Aram, and a daughter; yet the marriage did not survive Saroyan's drinking and gambling and had ended within the

decade. The couple were to re-marry, but disillusionment came anew even more swiftly. Carol soon married the actor Walter Matthau, from the Hollywood world they all knew Yet contrary to what one might suppose, the writer Saroyan did not flourish in Hollywood.

The scene darkened, privately, in later life. In common with many a fellow writer in America, where the creative figure is seen as a species somehow “other” by the general run of educated society and, hence, is irretrievably icon-ized, Saroyan was perhaps a voice of true originality which, by expectation, gets later trapped into self-pastiche. Such could be argued in the case (for instance) of Tennessee Williams or Ernest Hemingway, Saroyan’s near contemporary who once bit back at Saroyan’s ribbing of him with characteristic viciousness. The 1960s began to forget him, notwithstanding a flow of memoirs. He died at 72, in 1981, unfairly undervalued; and his ashes were buried half in Fresno and half in Armenia itself. His poet son Aram Saroyan’s account of him in his book *Last Rites*, was moving but shot through with pain.

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January, 2009