

**Myth and meaning in the
Sydney Morning Herald's Good Weekend:
an analysis of narrative journalism
Marcus O'Donnell**

4. Case Study 1

**The young prince's nightmare:
a myth of family drama.**

There are two quite distinct but compatible ways to view [the father son] relationship: in terms of intergenerational conflict or in terms of intergenerational alliance...the interplay of alliance and conflict is crucial to any kind of organic cultural development. Conflict and competition between father and son is not always negative, for it indicates change, improvement, progress, vitality, and a healthy check on permanent revolution. The overt alliance provides a frame within which this can happen. (Samuels 1985: 33)

Richard Guilliat's¹ profile of James Packer, *Shadow on the son* (*Good Weekend* May 3 2003), is an intense portrait that uses a folk psychology of family relations – presented here as a naturalised common sense discourse – as a powerful explanatory framework. It draws on traditional models of ruling family dramas with designation of characters by terms such as prince, heir and dynasty. Yet it also draws on contemporary pop-psychology themes such as self-esteem and self-help. It is all played out against the postmodern backdrop of the globalised world of high finance and digital media. It explores traditional and contemporary themes in what I have called family matrix myths.

Guilliat adopts the posture of both psychologist and detective. Packer was not interviewed for this article (although his voice is heard, drawn from other sources) so this is not a confessional article where the reporter draws out psychological insight from his or her subject. Rather, Guilliat assembles his case record like a forensic psychologist, building his portrait from a range of insights offered by those close to Packer. Although Guilliat sets a definite trajectory for the story and provides summary reflections, he largely adopts a traditional journalistic model of allowing sources to voice the major opinions in the article. He is also careful to offer “balanced” multiple viewpoints on most issues. However the article is carefully structured and these balancing devices do not alter the overall thrust of the article: by setting some issues up as under dispute allows him to present others as the product of consensus.

¹ Guilliat is a Walkley Award winning feature writer who has been a *Good Weekend* staff writer for the past five years.

All by myself

The introductory strap sets up the key terms and tone.

Being James Packer was never going to be easy, but since the collapse of One.Tel it's got a whole lot harder. With his father back in control and his own giddy rise to power a distant memory, a question mark lies over the future of the heir to the Packer dynasty. (p.20)

The opening and closing phrases of this par establish the twin dynamics of the article: being James Packer versus being the heir to the Packer Dynasty. This is not just a story about dynastic drama, it is also a story about the contemporary desire for personal identity and self-fulfilment. It also establishes that this is a drama about power and control, it is about hard struggle, it is about the future as well as the present and the past, it is a giddy story of father and son.

James Packer's difference is established in the article's opening sentence. We are told that while "most Australians" were at their "ritual" post Christmas boxing day barbeque Packer was observing a different ritual, he was boarding a flight for a lonely transpacific crossing.

In this opening section, a conspiratorial intimacy is established between author and reader as we spy on the lonely figure in first class, as he crosses the Pacific Ocean towards Los Angeles. This is narrated novelistically without any source attribution. We learn

that Packer is engrossed in the literature of Scientology and that he sucks on a series of paddle pops, “ruminatively”. Guillatt concludes: “For a man who stands to inherit several billion dollars, he cut a rather forlorn figure.”

Guillatt then makes the move from omnipotent narrator to traditional reporter with the claim that “it is believed” that the purpose of the trip was to visit Tom Cruise. “Reportedly” Cruise attended a lavish Scientology party a few days later, “it is not known” whether Packer accompanied him. Back at the LA airport departure lounge we are told that “someone” who saw the “young mogul...lost in private thought” the day he left LA “felt a bit sorry for him”.

This theme of loneliness is emphasised by the next par:

When the jet touched down at Sydney Airport many hours later, it was the middle of the morning, January 1. James Packer had just seen in his New Year, alone at 10,000 metres.
(p20)

Then it's back to the reportorial voice to set up the rest of the article.

It's scenes such as these that have fuelled the overheated rumours that swirl around James Packer in the wake of his personal and business debacles over the past two years. Has he lost the plot? Joined a cult? Been sidelined by his fearsome father? (p20)

The drama will be revealed in a series of scenes, it revolves around the protagonist's mental stability and his relationship with his father who, at his first appearance in the story, is labelled "fearsome."

Guilliatt then contrasts this "lonesome figure" with a number of other images of James Packer: the "swashbuckler who cut a swathe through the business world of the late 1990s"; the man who had an "end of the millennium wedding attended by every A-list powerbroker from Prime Minister John Howard down and finally his current "stereotype," the "idiot son – the kid who lost \$375 million of Dad's money" on the disastrous One.Tel deal.

We are told Packer's very publicly celebrated marriage is over and the gossip columns bristle with "non-stop updates on his ex-wife's love life" and his own experimentation with Scientology.

Then we are back to the father who is always "looming in the background" he's the "patriarch" who has "risen from his deathbed" to take back control of the family company, with James "relegated to second fiddle."

What will happen? These questions have "profound implications" Guilliatt asserts. Will James cash in his chips or will he battle on? Opinion is divided on that one we are told. But "both sides" agree on one thing:

“The whole key to James Packer is his relationship with his father,” says one former Packer executive. “It’s all about proving himself to his father. The whole thing. That’s the key.”
(p21)

This introductory section sets up the dynamics and strategies of the article to follow. We are given scenes, story vignettes and gossip. The introduction of the key characters is emotionally toned: James is lost and lonely, Kerry a fearsome, looming presence. The saga is set in the world of celebrity and big business and we are introduced to the “cult” of scientology, which functions as an ambiguous cipher for both madness and self-help throughout the article.

Psychological truths

Although the remaining sections are written in variations of reportorial style, the shift between novelistic and reportorial strategies in this opening section sets up an interesting tension between that which is easily known, and that which is ambiguous or not known. This tension is carried through the rest of the article.

We are made to feel that even if we do not know the practical details of his business deals or his failed relationship; even if we can’t know what has occurred in the private conversations between father and son; we can know something intimate about the psychological reality of “being James Packer”.

The psychological “truths” presented in the article are taken as givens.

Richard Walsh, a former Packer executive, refers to James’ extension of the family business into casinos and digital media and communications as an attempt to “find a space that he could explore that wasn’t his father’s.” Walsh ends by saying simply, “that’s totally natural”. Guillatt refers at another point to the “familiar scenario of generational rivalry” (p23). In another place he asserts that “of course” love and rivalry “often vie for dominance in father son relationships” (p23). Such family dynamics are taken as self evident, natural and familiar.

The mythic dimensions of the father-son relationship are represented, at one extreme, by the father-destroying Oedipus and at the other end of the spectrum by the child-destroying Cronus. Barry Strauss (1993) has argued that the mythical conflict between Theseus and Aigeus (a myth of an abandoned son who tries to prove himself to his father, a father who mistakenly tries to kill his son, the sins of the father visited on the son and a triumphant reconciliation thwarted by death) had major implications for the development of Athenian democracy which celebrated Theseus as the new’s triumph over the old (Aigeus). This theme of father-son conflict is carried through literature from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* to Steinbeck’s *East of Eden* to Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*.

Freud, of course, used the mythical story of Oedipus as his most famous case study. Watered down versions of many of his concepts, such as the need for a young child to “separate” from the

mother, have become general claims applied to children of all ages and parents of both genders. Pop-psychology variations on Freudian themes have become a standard part of the way contemporary people negotiate self-definition.

As Aldridge (2001) has pointed out such a popular approach, which she terms “confessional culture,” relentlessly psychologises identity and relationships and is part of a raft of changes in media and society that include shifts in public/private boundaries and allocated gender roles. Aldridge argues that one effect of such changes is that “emotional work” – a self conscious discursive “processing” of feelings – which was once regarded as a feminine way of being in the world, is now expected of both men and women.

James Packer’s attempts to negotiate the “familiar scenario of generational rivalry” (p.23) through self-help techniques, learned through Scientology, are presented as part of such “emotional work”. Although disparaged as a “cult” and as a “rambling manifesto” linking current psychological difficulties to an “alien invasion several millennia ago,” we are told that James’ involvement with Scientology is “no great concern to his father who regards it as a fairly harmless self-help tool.”

After recently undertaking courses at the Scientology headquarters, “James is said to be looking better than he has for nearly two years and is currently overseeing the creation of the family’s nascent financial services group” (p.26). This is in marked

contrast to the man who two years ago fled to Europe for two months “wrestling his demons”(p21).

It is not just the family dynamics that are taken as psychological givens but basic personality postures are framed as familiar psychological truisms such as James’ “surface cockiness” being a “mask” for his deeper “self doubt”(p.24).

Family fault line

James Packer grew up conscious of his “dynastic burden”(p.23) and we are reminded at several points in the article that the generational conflict in this family is not limited to Kerry and James.

The relationship between James and Kerry is “built on an unstable fault line, one that runs all the way back to Kerry’s own rough upbringing at the hands of the domineering father, Sir Frank” (p.21). Since the One.Tel collapse that fault line “has been under some seismic pressure.”

Such a lineage of conflict is seen in traditional dynastic tales but is even more resonant with contemporary psychological understandings of family structures and their psychological imperatives. There is, for example, a popular belief that those who are abused will abuse in the next generation.

Other aspects of James’ relationships are cast in familial terms. James is said to have shared a “brotherly bond”(p.25) with One.Tel

founder Jodi Rich. Packer is also said to be easily susceptible to influence.

Living in your father's shadow is not a recipe for self confidence, and many who know Packer say that he is prone to falling under the spell of slightly older guru figures (p.25).

Thus we see James carrying perceived psychological patterns into his future.

The one aspect of family dynamics that is not dealt with at all is how James' mother Ros fits into the family dynamic. Although she is mentioned in passing as "the redoubtable Ros" with a quote from James who once said: "I adore her. I'd do anything for her"(p.24). This is a man's story, a man's world. Only one woman is sourced for a quote and both mother, Ros and ex-wife, Jodhi are present only as ciphers.

The personal not the political

Another aspect of the article's naturalised psychological framework is the psychologisation and naturalisation of the power dynamics of globalised business.

The One.Tel collapse, which is central to this story, is presented as a kind of personal nightmare for the young Packer on his quest for differentiation from the father. The "tech crash" of 2001 which was a defining moment in the new economy that affected many lives – both ordinary employees and wealthy speculators – is presented

here merely as the occasion of “a nervous breakdown” for the young Packer.

As I have already noted even the fateful decision to invest vast sums of PBL money in One.Tel is ascribed to Packer’s personal psychology, which made him susceptible to “slightly older guru figures” such as Rich.

The father-son conflicts of Greek myth or Shakespearian drama are played out among ruling families. The article certainly adopts the language of dynastic conflict and power, even referring to Packer’s dispute with fellow media heir Lachlan Murdoch over Super League as “two young princes” at war. (p.25)

The article leaves no doubt as to Packer’s power, wealth and access but it is an abstract power. The extent of this ruling family’s influence on both government policy and popular culture is left uncharted, even though the aura of dynastic myth conveys a strong sense of authority. In this sense, it could be argued that the article naturalises the shift from traditional political power to corporate power in the globalised economy.

Family stories

Not many readers will confront the particular sort of “dynastic burden” (p.23) confronted by James Packer, however that does not mean that this story will not resonate with readers. As with all myth the fact that the story is writ large does not negate the possibility of basic identification. In many senses the power of

myth is located in the grandeur with which it narrates basic human stories, conflicts and values.

Everyone negotiates family dynamics, everyone negotiates power dynamics and we all live in an increasingly confessional culture where we are expected to do “emotional work” both in public and in private.

Guilliatt explicitly invites the reader to identify with the Packer story, when he presses the reader: “Place yourself, for a moment, in James Packer’s world...”(p.21). The world the reader is asked to imagine is a rarefied one of wealth and privilege but Gulliatt’s ultimate point in this imaginative exercise is: imagine all this, then imagine still living under the shadow of an even more powerful father.

In this sense the reader is invited to identify with the family drama while acknowledging that the feature also narrates the story of an “other” world. The world of Australia’s richest family, of global finance and new media, may be an inviting one for many but it is a world in which most readers will never participate. Stories like this can be read as parables of possibility but in their otherness they are more likely to confirm exclusion and existing power hierarchies. However if the story is understood as a process between text and reader rather than as prescriptive or even indicative, such exclusion may function to ballast pre-existing or perhaps even nascent contrary identities.

It is interesting to note that of the three reader letters published in response to the article, (*Good Weekend* May 24, 2003 p. 8) two

were about Scientology: one condemning and one condoning. The other letter honed in on a quote from one of James' colleagues that the young Packer was fond of saying "He who dies with the most money wins" (p.24). The colleague goes on to comment to Guilliat: "I think that's tragic." The letter writer agrees, he equates this attitude with Scientology beliefs and contrasts this with Jesus saying: "What shall it profit a man to win the whole world and loose his soul."

Thus the process of differentiation works both ways, exposure to other worlds can liberate desire for change or it can confirm the safety of the reader's own position. Here the reader sees only tragedy and reaches out to offer a lesson from his own competing world-view, thus confirming that world-view in the process.

Guilliat's forensic psychology provides a seemingly knowing, intimate portrait of James Packer. He is presented at the beginning as a forlorn, lonely figure and at the end as facing an unknown future. But Packer is also presented as a prince with a fated place within a dynastic story. The traditional myths of intergenerational conflict and dynastic power are set against familiar modern psychological typologies, both are presented as a natural, common sense discourse. While the family dynamics are key, ultimately Packer's story is relayed as a classic modern individualised quest where even the mechanisms of corporate power are abstracted and subsumed under a psychological portrait of individual decision making.

Thus while the article certainly engages with traditional mythic storylines these traditional structures are transformed by the contemporary dynamics of family, power, psychology and global business.