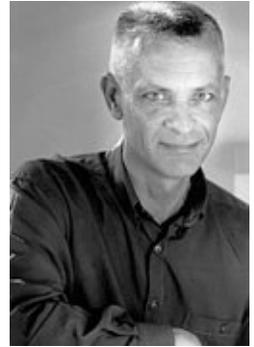




## Dessaix, Robert (b. 1944)

by Leland Wheeler

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Robert Dessaix. Image courtesy Simon and Schuster.

A self-described dilettante, Australian translator, editor, essayist, travel writer, and novelist Robert Dessaix did not publish his first book until he was fifty. Two novels later he is recognized as an important voice in Australian gay literature.

Born on February 17, 1944, he was immediately adopted by Tom and Jean Jones, a middle-aged couple from Sydney. Dessaix grew up in a lower middle-class neighborhood and describes a mostly solitary childhood. After the deaths of Jean Jones and Tom Jones, in 1969 and 1971, respectively, Dessaix adopted the surname of his birth mother.

His interest in language, especially Russian, exhibited itself early. When he was ten or eleven, he bought a small Collier's Russian-English dictionary. He studied the language at night classes and eventually with a tutor. He learned Latin and French in school. He was interested in artificial language and learned Esperanto and Interlingua. Dessaix also invented his own language, based on Indo-European rules of grammar, for an imaginary country he created, complete with its own government, social order, and religion.

In 1965 Dessaix earned a degree from the Australian National University in Russian and French and began working on a Master's thesis on Soviet Literature. In 1966 he went to Moscow State University as a graduate exchange student. Throughout most of the 1970s he taught Russian Studies at ANU and New South Wales University. He also translated a number of Russian books into English.

In 1968 Dessaix met the woman he would marry in 1970. A few years later the marriage finally ended when she, having moved to New Zealand for a new job, asked him not to return once he had helped her settle in. Devastated, he resumed his teaching position in Canberra.

Dessaix's first homosexual encounter--in his twenties with a young man he met in Paris--nauseated him. During his marriage Dessaix recognized that he was attracted to men, but never acted on the desire. After the dissolution of his marriage, however, he moved to Sydney in 1978 and submerged himself in the gay subculture there, including bars, cafes, and bathhouses.

In 1982 a personal ad Dessaix had placed was answered by Peter Timms, who has been his partner ever since.

From 1985 until 1995 Dessaix worked for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation as the producer and presenter of an interview show called "Books and Writing." This is how Dessaix became known to most Australians.

In 1994 Dessaix published the autobiography *A Mother's Disgrace*, which recounts his childhood and his time studying in Russia, but mostly concentrates on his quest to find his birth mother and the relationship they developed.

*A Mother's Disgrace* was followed in 1996 by the novel *Night Letters*. In the novel, a man, R., having been diagnosed with an unnamed illness (which can be inferred to be AIDS), takes a sojourn to Italy. Divided into three parts--the Locarno, Vincenzo, and Padua letters--and influenced by Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, the book is composed of twenty letters that R. writes during his travels in Italy.

The letters are extremely conversational and full of details about the people R. encounters; they incorporate stories these people tell him, descriptions of towns he finds himself in, and many philosophical discourses. One of the characters he meets is a Professor Eschenbaum who is a tourist with a sexual agenda, not unlike one R. might have indulged before his diagnosis.

The letters often ramble from topics as diverse as Patricia Highsmith's wild driving, Bruce Chatwin's incredible beauty, Professor Eschenbaum's take on why Cassanova was a dangerous figure, to R.'s own interpretation of Hieronymus Bosch's heresy in his painting "The Garden of Earthly Delights": through shameless sexual indulgence men and women might regain the paradise they enjoyed before the Fall. The letters also reveal R.'s state of mind and how the diagnosis of his illness has affected him, especially his concept of time and what is important.

*Night Letters* was adapted as a stage play by Susan Rogers in 2004.

Dessaix's second novel, *Corfu*, was published in 2001. The novel opens with the narrator in Italy meeting a lover, William, who is to accompany him back to Adelaide, Australia. With no explanation, the narrator immediately has misgivings about this plan and on the pretext of buying a pack of cigarettes, leaves the hotel room and abandons William there. Eventually, the narrator ends up in Corfu where he has rented a house for two months from the Australian writer, Kester Berrick. While rummaging through Kester's belongings, the narrator discovers a picture of Kester and William sunning naked on a rock and a postcard announcing that William will be visiting at any moment.

The narrator is soon adopted by the community of expatriates on Corfu, a colorful assortment of people. Through flashbacks we learn of the beginning of the romance between the narrator and William, when they were both involved with a London production of Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*, and the difficulties that ensued. William finally makes it to Corfu, but the narrator and he decide not to continue the romance.

To lift their lives out of the ordinary, a desire the narrator thinks all people entertain, to have something unexpected happen, like the naked Ulysses surprising the maiden Naussica, he and William convince the expatriates to stage a production of Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*. In an epilogue, the narrator returns to Corfu to visit Kester Berrick's grave.

Both novels display Dessaix's mastery of language. Through his narrators Dessaix is able to showcase his interest in a great many topics and especially his love of Chekhov, although the novels are liberally peppered with other literary allusions as well. The novels established Dessaix as a serious voice in gay literature.

Dessaix is also the editor of *Australian Gay and Lesbian Writing: An Anthology* (1993), and *Speaking Their Minds: Intellectuals and Public Culture in Australia* (1998). In 1998 he published (*and so forth*), a collection of short stories, essays, literary criticism, and travel pieces. The book is evocative and provocative and emphasizes the themes he explores in his novels, especially intimacy, art, death, and how to lead a meaningful life.

Dessaix's latest publication *Twilight of Love: Travels with Turgenev* (2005) won the Margaret Scott prize awarded by the University of Tasmania. It records another journey. Here Dessaix retraces the path taken by the nineteenth-century Russian writer Ivan Turgenev as he pursued with unwavering devotion the married

opera singer Pauline Viardot. Dessaix also comments on contemporary Russia now overrun with Western corporate culture. As in his other books, in *Twilight of Love* Dessaix constantly shifts from background and foreground; and like his other books, it is also distinguished by entrancing prose.

Dessaix's writings feature lost, psychologically crippled people who have intimacy problems. They are uncertain if love is even possible. His characters live with the awareness of death and seek to use art and beauty as means of making sense of the meaninglessness of their existence.

Dessaix has been open about his positive HIV-status for the past ten years. He and Timms now reside in Tasmania.

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