

# TELL ME OF YOUR RAGE

by TOM HOLLOWAY

A response to:  
*Do Not Go Gentle*  
by Patricia Cornelius



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First published in 2015  
by Currency Press Pty Ltd,  
PO Box 2287, Strawberry Hills, NSW, 2012, Australia  
enquiries@currency.com.au  
www.currency.com.au

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ePub ISBN: 9781925210835  
mobi ISBN: 9781925210842

Series Editor: Toby Leon  
Cover design: Miranda Costa

Publication of this title was assisted by the Copyright Agency Limited’s Cultural Fund.

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## Author's Biography



TOM HOLLOWAY's work has been staged extensively both in Australia and internationally. His plays include: *Beyond the Neck* (2007, winner AWGIE Award for Best Stage Play); *Red Sky Morning* (2007, winner R. E. Ross Trust Development Award, 2009 Green Room Award Best New Writing for the Australian Stage); *Don't Say the Words*, which was shortlisted for the 2009 NSW Premier's Play Award, and the Young Vic/Theatre 503 Season Award; *Love Me Tender* which was nominated for the Western Australia Premier's Book Awards and the 2011 AWGIE Award for Best Stage Play; *And No More Shall We Part*, winner of the 2010 AWGIE Award for Best Stage Play and the 2010 Victorian Premier's Literary Award; *Fatherland*, which was invited to Munich Volksbuhne's Yung Og Radikal Festival, Munich; and Tom's latest play *Faces Look Ugly* which premiered in 2011 at the Århus Teater Denmark and was the winner of the 2011 Max Afford Fellowship. In 2011 he was also a winner of the British Council's Realise Your Dream Fellowship.

Tom was a Contributing Artist to *Gambling* at the Soho Writers' Theatre, London in 2010 and a resident writer with Soho Writers' Theatre in the same year. He wrote the libretto for *Make No Noise* – an adaptation of the film *The Secret Life of Words*, produced by the Bavarian State Opera at the 2011 Munich Opera Festival, for composer Miroslav Srnka. He has also collaborated with Matthew Lutton on a staging of Schubert's *Die Winterreise* for Thin Ice, Malthouse Theatre and the Brisbane International Festival.

## TELL ME OF YOUR RAGE

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Dear Captain Scott,

Over the last two years I have been researching your race against the Norwegian, Roald Amundsen, to be the first to the South Pole. You see, I'm writing a libretto for an opera about the two of you, so I've been reading and rereading your diary from that fateful journey in an attempt to get under your skin. That's my job with something like this. I need to imagine what it feels like *to be* you. I have some questions if you don't mind?

Your diary is written incredibly well. It is articulate and detailed, but the things that interest me the most about it are the things that are not said. You were a very British man writing at a very British time and of course you were always writing the diary with the aim of eventually publishing it, so the language is formal and the narrative is tailored in a certain way. Although I understand all this, I yearn to read about your emotional journey on the adventure.

You worry about Amundsen. You also worry about his dogs. If these things made their way into a work written for public consumption, what was your fear really like? I imagine it was tenfold. Crippling, perhaps? Was he ever out of your thoughts? Did you feel haunted by him?

He told you, in just a few short words in a telegram, that he was threatening everything you'd worked so hard to achieve. That must have been an incredible blow. Sometimes when I'm stressed or trying to deal with big things in my life, I feel the weight of these things constantly. When I exercise I get worn out more quickly. I can only manage a slower pace and I struggle to get into a proper rhythm of movement; I'm just running

pointlessly around a park. When you were struggling through the ice and snow of Antarctica, gales ripping at your skin and sun blinding your eyes, how could the fear of Amundsen not weigh you down even more?

Another thing I notice in the diary are the subtle clues that point to tensions with some of your men, especially Captain Oates. He seems to be a gruff man, full of complaint. At times you do attempt to praise him, but once again the fact that your true feelings are evident in your public record suggests I can barely imagine how tense things really were. How did it feel to be constantly undermined in life-and-death situations? Whenever he points out that ponies are not the right animals for this journey (something you too eventually realise), what does it do to you? You are responsible for the safety of others and here is a man reminding you of the mistakes you have made – often at the most perilous of times. That must have been difficult.

Can you tell me about going to the toilet when it is minus forty-five and blowing a gale outside your tent?

When you had to slaughter the ponies for food, and suddenly the endless white was stained red with blood, how did that feel? Were you relieved because they were signs of a terrible mistake you'd made in bringing the wrong beast of burden? Were you heartbroken because of the emotional connection you'd developed with those stubborn but loveable creatures? Did you feel responsible for the end they faced so far from the Russian landscape they'd always known?

Did their blood bring any kind of premonition to you?

I know this might seem a little crass, but how did you all endure so long without sex? Did you all endure so long without sex?

In such conditions, I imagine the warmth and embrace of

another human is something you yearned for, no matter who they were or which gender they might have been.

I would love to hear your honest feelings when you saw Amundsen's black flag as you approached the Pole. Your life's work ... those recent months of struggle and pain ... What was it like?

Perhaps it was only the hope of victory that drove you through the darkest times, and suddenly it was gone, one small black flag shattering everything. Can you tell me what that was like for you?

And what about watching Evans die? For days he deteriorated. Perhaps it was a knock to the head when he fell, or perhaps it was scurvy, or the injury to his hand. We'll never know, but seeing a human slowly crumble is devastating no matter what the cause. I can't imagine how it was in Antarctica having just been beaten to the Pole. And knowing it could well be the fate of the rest of you too... Would you mind telling me about that?

But, of course, one of the biggest things I want to ask you about is facing your own death. You watched all the other members of your Pole party die ... Well, you didn't actually see Oates die, but you might as well have. Especially with the putrid smell of his rotting leg pervading the tent each time you stopped ... There had been Evans, Oates, Bowers and probably also your closest compatriot on the journey, Wilson.

Tell me of that final moment. You'd crossed out the line 'give this journal to my wife' and replaced it with 'give this journal to my widow'. You'd written letters to her and others. You'd written of your son. But then in the final moments, as you reached out and put your arm around Wilson, what were your last thoughts? Your wife, Kathleen? Amundsen? Your own legacy? Wilson? Or were they of nothing at all? Were your last

thoughts mundane? Perhaps about your sleeping bag?

Anyway, I wish you could answer these things for me.

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Dear Dr. Homeshaw,

Hi Mum. It's now been a little over three years since you died. I think about you all the time ... Of what you might think of this and that ... But also of what certain aspects of your death were like for you. There are some questions I would like to ask, if you don't mind.

Before I do, though, I want you to know I have your diaries. Some from when you were young and some from when you were sick. They sit in a drawer in my bedside table. I haven't read them yet. For some reason I can't bring myself to do it. Perhaps they would answer some of these questions for me. Well, probably not, but they might help me imagine what the answers would be.

You died in your mid-sixties of cancer. I know we talked a little about facing death at the time and, to be honest, I'm incredibly thankful that we did. I'm thankful we had the kind of relationship where I could ask you how you felt about death. But looking back on those conversations I am aware you were my mother and so might have been saying things you thought I wanted to hear. I don't mean you were being dishonest, but I do wonder if you held some things back to protect me. At times you told me you were ready to die, that you couldn't face the pain any longer, but in some ways that was comforting to me, because by then we knew you were going to die and so knowing you were ready for it meant that when it came, I could be relieved.

‘This is what she wanted’, I could tell myself.

But I also got the impression that sometimes you were scared of death. The way you would rage ... Was that because you were scared? It’s very understandable if you were. I mean, really, how could you not be? I guess I just wish I’d made it clear that it was okay to me if you were scared. I just wanted it all to be as easy as possible for you. I didn’t want you to have to worry about what I thought or what anyone else thought either.

Oh, Mum. I bought a house a couple of days ago. It’s the first time I’ve ever done such a thing. I bought it with my partner Kate, who I love very much. You never met her and you’ll never see my home, but you will be part of it, I can assure you. Buying a home has left me with such mixed emotions. At times I had resigned myself to never being able to do such a thing, but now it has happened. I wish you were here to see it in person. I wish you’d got to meet Kate. She’s very smart, and very funny, and very loving. I think you would have liked her. And our house has two gardens. One out the front and one out the back. We’re going to plant vegetables. And herbs. We’re going to plant lots of both.

Anyway, the main thing I want to ask you about is to do with a particular moment in your final days. You’d moved from Magnetic Island into palliative care in Townsville. My stepfather Malcolm and I were doing shifts sitting with you and we were all hoping you could hold on until my sister Penny could arrive from Sydney. By the way, thank you for holding on. You don’t know how important that has been to the rest of us. But there was a period where I was sitting by your bed for a few hours. You seemed asleep, or at least unconscious. I had just been sitting silently next to you, but then, for some reason, I spoke your name. You answered in what was almost certainly a slurred ‘Yes’. I didn’t know what else to say. You see, I suddenly realised I’d just been sitting there silently, thinking you were not

conscious, when perhaps you had been the whole time. And if you were, what did my silence give you? Why wasn't I talking to you? Telling you I loved you? Reading your favourite books to you? Playing your favourite music for you? How could I just sit there silently instead of doing all these things for you?

So, I guess my question is, were you there through all of that, or did my saying your name wake you from something? If you were there the whole time, what did you actually want from me? Would you have preferred to hear my voice or some music or even the radio? Or did the silence give you a kind of peace? Can you tell me? It's just that if I find myself in that position again with another person I love a great deal, I want to know the right thing to do.

And finally, remember that moment when Penny arrived and she had made a photo album of your life on her computer and we all sat around and looked at photos of you? For the first time in days you were awake and could talk to us. Again, thank you for that. It probably took a lot of effort, but you gave us a memory that has helped us all immeasurably.

Anyway, so we were looking over these photos of you that Penny had collected and I just wondered ... in those last moments ... or later that day, as you slept before leaving us, what was your impression of the life you had led? What were you proud of? What did you wish you had done better? What were the things you would miss the most and what were the things you were happy to see the back of? I guess I'd just like to know how you felt about the life you lived.

Yours sincerely,

Your son, Tom Holloway

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Dear Ms. Cornelius,

Hi Patricia. So, Currency Press have asked me to write a response to your play *Do Not Go Gentle*. Initially I wasn't sure if I should do it, just because I was concerned I was supposed to do a critical analysis and I'm a playwright, not a dramaturge or a critic or anything like that. I was daunted at the thought of taking on such a task without having the skills and knowhow to do it. I thought it would just make me look inept and end up being of no benefit to you or anyone else.

But your play affects me in a range of ways and it seems to speak directly to some significant elements from my life over the last few years. This means that although I wasn't sure about writing a response, I also didn't want to pass up the opportunity to reflect on some of those intense connections.

Firstly, I've spent the last couple of years researching the story of Scott and Amundsen and the race to the South Pole for a libretto I'm writing for an opera. Isn't it an amazing story?! When I first read Roland Huntford's book *The Last Place on Earth* I was convinced Scott was a self-involved fool who had made one bad decision after another, whereas Amundsen was a clear-thinking hero who could do no wrong. This view also helped me feel good about aspects of my personal life. You see, I was married to a Norwegian and spent a few years leaving in Norway. Although the relationship came to an abrupt end, Norway had gotten under my skin. I had learned a little of the language and experienced both the stark wonder of a winter and the warm beauty of a few summers. I wanted Amundsen to be victorious because I wanted Norway to be victorious.

I'm also a British citizen, because my mother was English, but I've always felt ambivalent about my dual citizenship. It's hypocritical of me. I love having the passport and use it often, but I've always had a chip on my shoulder about 'the mother country'. I think this comes from being Australian. Just as a

child feels towards their parent, I feel very close to the UK and yet I'm always happy to see it brought back to earth. When this happens I can roll my eyes and say 'Derr'. Huntford's book gave me permission to do just that.

Although, is Britain perhaps more Australia's step-parent than birth-parent? Anyway, as I read Scott's diary a number of times, and Amundsen's diary a number of times, and as I read more and more biographies on both of them, my views changed. What emerged was that the defining characteristic of each of them is that they were flawed. This excited me greatly, because their flaws made both Scott and Amundsen human, and once they were human I could start to understand them.

I wonder what drew you to Scott's story. You often write about masculinity and so it shouldn't be surprising you were drawn to a story of men journeying through a wasteland, but still I wonder what brought you to it. Are you a lover of history? Of exploration? Of Antarctica?

In my more lyrical moments, I like to think that people like you and I are explorers as well. We search through our own thoughts and actions, as well as those of others, in an attempt to discover more about the human condition. Sometimes I am forced to explore what is unknown to me and because of this, I often feel scared by my work. I feel out of my depth. Ignorant. Pathetic. And I'm constantly asking myself why I do it. 'You know you're not up to this, Tom. You know you're not good enough, so why do you bother?'

Do you have thoughts like this too? How do you push past them and keep working? Do you think Scott had them? What tactics do you think he would have used? When I think about what it must take to be an explorer, the first things that come to me are courage and confidence, but do you think that you actually need a lot of self doubt? I mean, otherwise why would you do it at all? What would drive you to such extremes if

it weren't the acrid urge to self-immolate? In my less lyrical moments I see myself as doing something very selfish and I tell myself I should just get over my own ego and do something real with my life. Being an artist is a very selfish choice, don't you think? So much time staring at one's own navel ... So much time having to defend the relevance of one's work ...

What about you? Do you feel like this? And do you ever wonder if Scott had thoughts like these too? He soaked up immense resources at a time when Britain was already preparing for war. How much selfishness must it take to seek those resources, let alone succeed in acquiring them?

Anyway, apologies for getting a bit wankerish there.

The other thing that made me want to reflect on your play is that my mother died three years ago. She died of cancer and it was a gradual decline. Well, that's not altogether true. It was a decline over a few years, but it came in fits and spurts. Death is not gradual. There is not one simple move from life to death. It is scrappy, like a street fight between two untrained brawlers. I didn't expect that. One moment Mum would seem to be at death's door, and then the next it was as if she was weeks or months away from it.

Surely this is what it was like for Scott too? His writing distances me from his true emotional state but there are signs of this messy decline. At one stage he talks of having little hope, then after one warm meal he seems to be riding high again. But how could those weeks, from seeing the first black flag right up to his death, not have been messy? Confused? Clumsy?

And his battle to continue to communicate seems to be a sign of this too. Although each entry gets shorter, he did all he could to keep writing. At times this seems like it was easier for him than others, but surely it must have been a battle. He had so little energy and there was so much risk to his life, and yet

he kept writing. Do you think he saw this as his only chance at any kind of survival? Perhaps he realised he could not save his skin and bones so he tried to save his name and legacy? Writing can be a fight, can't it? It is almost always a messy process. Sometimes you are on top of it and sometimes it is on top of you. Perhaps the process of writing and the process of dying are similar: a scrappy brawl until a final moment of saying enough is enough?

There I go with the wank again.

Like with Scott's diary, your play is beautifully written. But also like Scott's work, I wonder what sits behind the words. These are, after all, words to be spoken and heard, not read. I didn't get to do that. I was living in Norway when the play was produced, and I wonder what I am losing through reading the words instead of hearing them from the mouths of these women and men playing ... well ... women and men, in various orders.

What is sex to you? And gender? Are these things black and white, or grey? They permeate all your writing but, in this work specifically, was it perhaps questions of sex that drew you to Scott's journey? A group of heterosexual men (well, at least there were none of the group that were openly gay that I have read about) living together with no partners in love for a year and a half on the frozen ice ... Perhaps it was the position Scott was found in, with his arm draped over Wilson, that first drew you to his story. These are certainly things I have wondered about in my own research on the group.

You write with such poetry, the way Scott writes with such formality, but what is the mess behind your poetic words? There were moments reading it when this became clear. Moments when I felt I was experiencing a truth of life in a way I hadn't thought of before. These, I believe, are the kind of moments we all yearn to create and your play is littered

with them. I found Wilson particularly moving. Then there were also times when the structured, planned nature of your language left me feeling distanced from the mess. I struggled to connect with what was going on. I didn't feel part of the lives I was witnessing. But then I was reading and not seeing. I was removed from the context those words had been written for. And I also know I was probably letting my own prejudices get in the way. Whether I am reading Cornelius, Hewett or Shakespeare, I feel the distancing effect of poetry. I know this says more about me than the writing, and I don't like this aspect of myself – basing my judgement purely on my personal views on poetry rather than on the true merits of each work. It's no good.

The play was so very successful and yet also such a struggle. You deservedly won award after award, and yet major Australian companies wouldn't produce it. I can't help but think of Scott seeing that first black flag of Amundsen. He had made it to the Pole. He had achieved so much, and yet the feeling must have been bittersweet at best.

You have written a beautiful play that conjures flashes of real and heartfelt truth, and these things can only ever exist in flashes. Although many would believe truths to be timeless and solid, I believe they can only live for a moment. Blink and you can miss them. This means capturing them through words is an incredibly difficult task. I hope you feel immensely proud of doing that.

Although if you're anything like me you'll only feel relieved. And the play's life to date must leave you feeling ... what? Perhaps dissatisfied?

Amundsen won the battle to get to the South Pole first, but the war for a legacy? That is undoubtedly Scott's. For the rocks alone that Wilson discovered, proving that Antarctica had once

been a landmass of lush forest, Scott's journey has influenced the world in many more positive ways than Amundsen's. That bit of Norway infecting my blood makes me want to say the opposite, but I cannot.

Your play is timeless. Its themes are timeless. Its language is timeless. It will influence audiences for years and years to come. Thank you so much for writing it.

Yours Sincerely,

Tom Holloway

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We have always believed in theatre that raises more questions than answers. So each month we're going off script—beyond the page and behind the stage—to speak with a respected Australian playwright about the depth and breadth of a single work. That's one play in thirty minutes with insights straight from the source.

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<http://www.currency.com.au/notinprint.aspx>



Copyright Agency’s Reading Australia website has been live since October 2013 and has already engaged thousands of teachers Australia-wide with its free resources for primary and secondary students.

‘We developed the website and the resources with the specific aim of getting Australian literature back into schools’, says Copyright Agency’s Cultural Fund Manager, Zoë Rodriguez.

The First 200 list of works on the Reading Australia website was chosen by the Australian Society of Authors’ Council after considerable debate and discussion.

‘Teacher resources have so far been developed for 21 titles (10 primary, 11 secondary) in partnership with the Primary English Teaching Association of Australia, the Australian Association for the Teaching of English and the English Teachers Association NSW, with another 20 secondary resources already commissioned and due on the website before the end of June.’

The teacher resources include classroom activities, assessments and links to the new Australian curriculum. In addition, the secondary resources include an introduction to the text from high profile authors and artists, such as Libby Gleeson, David Berthold, Melissa Lucashenko, Malcolm Knox and Alice Pung.

‘The extra funding, which will begin in the new financial year, will rapidly expand the free resources for teachers with 20 teaching modules related to books for primary students, 40 for secondary students and 30 for tertiary students’, Ms Rodriguez says.

‘It’s a tremendous commitment to Australian authors, publishers, teachers, students and general readers. We feel Reading Australia will put adored, but sometimes forgotten, Australian books back on people’s radars, beginning a whole new love affair with some of this country’s finest authors.’

**Visit the Reading Australia website:**

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Copyright Agency’s Board is authorised by Copyright Agency’s Constitution to allocate 1.5% of its income to development projects that will support the Australian publishing and visual arts industries

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