

John Hughes

20 - ORANGE CAKE: 1 cup butter or margarine
1/2 cup sugar 3 eggs 3/4 cups flour 1/4 tsp. salt
1/2 cup pinch salt 1 cup milk 3 tbsp. finely-chopped
orange and 2 tbsp. orange juice.
Mixing: 500 g. sifted icing sugar 1/2 cup butter
1/2 cup milk 1/2 cup orange juice.
Put in the butter and s.
Bake 350°.
Salt and
the mix



Hughes has been published in HEAT Magazine, edited by Ivor Indyk, and runs Sydney Grammar's Creative Writing Group and Extension Two English at the school.
(From Wikipedia.)

The idea of home

John Hughes

Book Summary

The idea of home

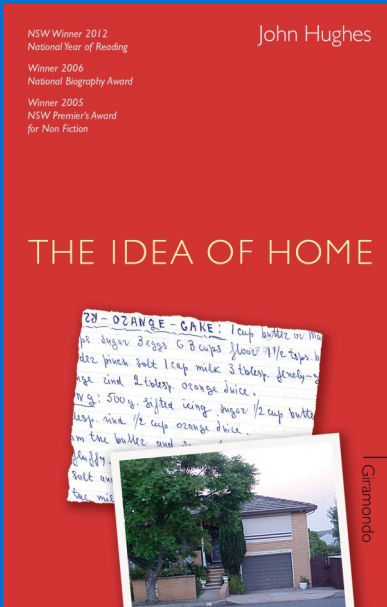
John Hughes, 2004

Giramondo Publishing Company

207 pp.

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Book Groups @ Blue Mountains Library



In *The Idea of Home*, John Hughes writes about growing up in a Hunter Valley coal-mining town in a household dominated by memories of the Ukraine, which his mother and grandparents were forced to flee during the Second World War. Hughes charts the effect their stories and routines had on him as a child, the way they shaped his imagination, and determined his idea of himself: as a child, a student in Newcastle, and later as the holder of a prestigious scholarship at Cambridge University.

Yet this inheritance almost undoes him, for in Cambridge what he encounters is not the romantic idea of Europe he had imagined, but a provincialism more pronounced than that he had left behind in Australia.

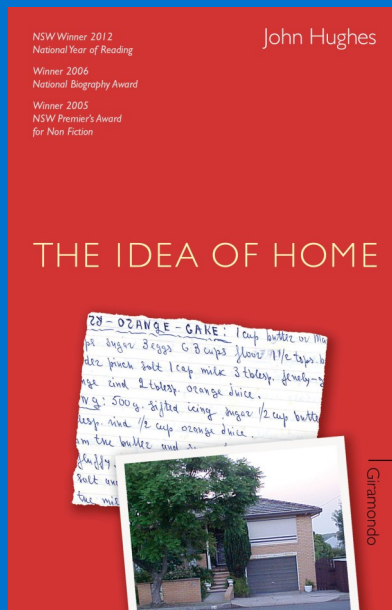
Winner of 2006 National Biography Award.

(from abc.net.au)

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Reviews



I know John Hughes. Or rather the boy-near-man he was when he entered the University of Newcastle in the late 1970s and an academic clamour grew around him. A lithe, slightly bitter-tongued idealist with dark Ukrainian looks and ascetic taste, he slotted in perfectly with the cold waves of post-punk music breaking over us, English bands such as the Fall and Joy Division, whose bleakly romantic influence would refract through local groups such as Pel Mel, Swami Binton and an entire scene of work-shirted students.

In *The Idea of Home*, Hughes writes that in his own imagination, "I was a character Tolstoy or Dostoevsky had created, I lived in their novels as their characters lived in me." Despite his black, burning energy, it always seemed there was something lighter, kinder and more open about him: the Cessnock country boy in love with art, music and literature; the individual who didn't fit the scene.

Through this book I meet him again and the missing pieces of an old puzzle are put before me. Hughes won the University Medal and a Shell Scholarship to Cambridge, but it all went awry. Hughes writes of finding his life in Cambridge fraudulent, of how he turned down the opportunity to complete a PhD on Coleridge and "the life in letters".

Once feted as the young genius about town, Hughes became a self-proclaimed failure and proud of it. He washed up in Newcastle, a disenchanted tutor who knew he'd let the home side down. Eventually, even that insult to his promise lost its negative glow and Hughes left for Sydney. There he spent a few years obsessed with writing a novel about a serial killer who murders only academics: a faintly comical obsession, as Hughes well knows, though he never says so. It's also a sign of how intense Hughes can be. A whole unpublished novel born of spite and anger!

What do we make of failure in our lives? How much of it is a choice? What do these choices say about us as human beings, about our existential metabolism, the forces of family, history, place and culture that have shaped us? What do we remember? What do we forget?

Hughes dives deep into himself for genuine answers. And, as this book's title suggests, he mulls over the cliché "home is where the heart is" to look at his migrant family background, his childhood in the mining community of Cessnock and the rise and fall of his academic star at Newcastle and Cambridge. What emerges, strangely, is a love story, perhaps best summed up by an epigraph from the poet Carlos Drummond De Andrade that Hughes uses: "The strange idea of family travelling through the flesh".

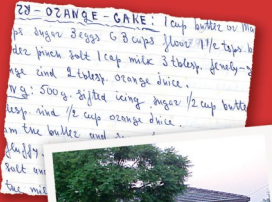
He has a way of conjuring moments with a vivid intensity, then brilliantly reflecting on them, like a guitar player teasing out themes around a single chord. Hughes is beautifully clear and logical, yet there are moments when the rationality feels unconvincing, as if his analysis (causing me to re-read some passages two or three times) smudges his great writing. This schematic tension probably goes back to Hughes's conflicted identity: writer versus academic, romantic versus essayist.

An excerpt on what he inherited from his father shows how remarkable Hughes can be: "While my father talks I say nothing. The beer has made us close and I remember a school night in Maitland, or perhaps in Singleton, watching his greyhounds race and eating a pie and shaking vinegar on my chips. The dogs sleek and steaming in their wire muzzles, the mechanical rabbit they never caught. I remember the cold and the rings around the floodlights and the men shouting the dogs' names. I remember being carried into the house, the warmth of my father's body, his sports coat itchy against my face. Why do such things stay? ... The things I learned from him you couldn't get from talking (how do you teach openness, responsibility, curiosity, loyalty, respect, integrity, attachment, temper?). They were inherited bodily, transferred like rubbings: his mannerisms, gestures, actions, values. The things I do whose origins I cannot see. That I have

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Reviews (continued)

to clean my shoes, for example, whenever I return home from a trip, while my father cannot leave the house without doing the same."

In passages like these, Hughes suddenly shakes your heart as well as your head and sends you back into your own family past, or perhaps towards it. This is a great book, part of a peculiarly modern genre that mixes memoir, essay and poetic style into something fresh, contradicting the academic heritage of detachment, while profoundly deepening the shallow waters of the modern-day confessional. You won't really know yourself without reading it.

Mark Mordue is the author of *Dastgah: Diary of a Headtrip*.

Sydney Morning Herald

Author John Hughes, an English teacher born in Cessnock, said he had no intention of writing a book. THE non-fiction work of Cessnock-born author **John Hughes** has received a Premier's Literary Award. Hughes received the \$20,000 Douglas Stewart Prize for The Idea of Home at Parliament House in Sydney last night.

The work is a series of five autobiographical essays on three generations of his family.

It outlines how the migrant experiences of his Ukrainian grandfather, who lived through World War II and moved to Cessnock, affected the lives of Hughes's parents and himself.

Hughes said his project began when he wrote a poor review of the Helen Demidenko novel *The Hand that Signed the Paper*.

That author, real name Helen Darville, became embroiled in controversy over inventing a Ukrainian background.

Hughes was approached by a publisher who said "Put your money where your mouth is and write the piece you said she [Darville] didn't do".

"I think he planted a seed and I started to think more and more about my grandfather's experiences and what he had told me," Hughes said. "I had no intention of writing a book.

"I thought each piece was discrete and would be the last piece I would write."

The judges described Hughes's work as "a stunning debut" that is "beautifully crafted".

They said he resisted "the nostalgia that sometimes characterises account of migrant experience" by exploring "the inextricable link between memory and forgetting, how rituals can transmit past habits into present experience, the exigencies of failure, the rich complexities of the migrant's relationship to home".

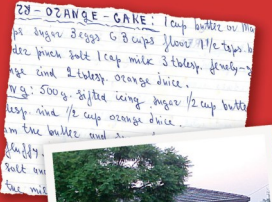
Hughes, an English teacher at Sydney Grammar School, is working on a series of essays about authors, composers and painters.

Newcastle Herald

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Discussion Questions

1. What does the title have to do with the book?

As Mark Mordue suggested, in the Sydney Morning Herald article, Hughes is reflecting on the cliché “home is where the heart is” to look at his life and the various communities in which he has lived.

Please discuss.

2. The idea of home, as a concept, is an enduring theme in post-war Australian history and indeed 'home sweet home' is an ideal taken up time and again in film, music and story. The question of what constitutes a home is a central idea in this book. What issues or ideas does the author explore? Are they personal, sociological, global, economical or spiritual?

3. What observations are made in the book about Australian Culture? Are they positive or negative? What aspects does he criticize or admire?

4. What observations does Hughes make about the forces of family, history, place and how they shape us as human beings? How did the effects of war and his Ukrainian heritage shape him? How did this 'shaping' inform his academic life and then his experience of the culture he found in England (and Cambridge University) at the time?

5. How did you find Hughes' approach - his writing style? It has been suggested by some reviewers that he uses two kinds of storytelling. Do you see a conflict between the way Hughes writes about memories and the more analytical aspects of the book? What do you think about this possible "schematic tension" between the more reflective and more analytical writing?

6. Did you engage with the book immediately, or did it take you a while to get into it? How did it make you feel: sad, happy, bored...? Is there a specific passage that you found memorable, and how so – was it profound, beautiful, disturbing, illuminating...?

7. Has this book broadened your perspective in some way? About people or society? Has it exposed you to different ideas or parts of the world?