

Gerald Hughes - Nature-loving older brother of the poet laureate who wrote a poignant memoir of their idyllic childhood and Ted's troubled later years

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As a small child Ted Hughes pleaded with his older brother, Gerald, to let him join his expeditions around the countryside surrounding their home in West Yorkshire. The teenage Gerald, nine years older than the man who would become one of Britain's greatest poets, took the boy's hand and introduced him to a feral world.

The brothers roamed the moors, shot birds, rabbits, rats and wood pigeon, fished in the pike pond, made fires and camped. Ted retrieved the rabbits that Gerald shot and, as they methodically skinned their quarry for the family pot, the younger boy would ask "endless questions" - such as the names of trees, the habitats of owls and badgers and, among many others, how to distinguish each birdsong from the chorus in Redacre Wood - of the older brother whom he later admitted was like a god to him. It was here that Ted kept a tom-tom hidden in the undergrowth and the two boys would drum as a sort of benediction to the beauty around them.

"He would trot along with me, very nimble ... pretending to be a Red Indian hunter," recalled Gerald in his acclaimed memoir, *Ted and I*, which was published in 2012. Adulthood would put them on divergent paths. Ted Hughes would find fame, admiration, tragedy and a certain notoriety; Gerald would find a happy but unremarkable life in Australia, where he remained a vital emotional support to his younger brother.

Throughout the years, Gerald, a handsome man with the same high forehead as his brother, would politely respond to the many requests from biographers. Fielding questions about his brother's relationship with his wife, the poet Sylvia Plath, and his lover, Assia Wevill, both of whom committed suicide, tested even his good nature.

However, Frieda, the daughter of Hughes and Plath, suggested he write a memoir. Persuading him took six months. In his nineties, Gerald wrote his first and only book. He passed the manuscript to his niece who mentioned it to the publisher Jeremy Robson, a poet and an old friend of his brother. He pored over the manuscript and realised that "there was a great deal more to say".

Writers who had dwelt on Hughes's relationship with Plath, hinting at a certain callousness, had turned the Hughes family away from the world, but now they looked outward again. Frieda, with Ted's widow, Carol, and his sister, Olwyn (obituary, January 8, 2016), all engaged in the process of refining Gerald's faltering memory, filling gaps and giving permission for previously unseen letters and photographs to be used. Even the famously waspish Olwyn was satisfied with the result.

The charming and above all poignant book was well received in the literary world. Ted's recollections of fishing and hunting with his brother provided context for poems such as *Pike*.

Pike, three inches long perfect *Pike* in all parts, green tigering the gold. Killers from the egg: the malevolent aged grin.

They dance on the surface among the flies.

Gerald Hughes was born in Hebden Bridge in 1920 and brought up in the market town of Mytholmroyd. His father, Billy, was a carpenter, one of only 17 men in his regiment to return from the Dardanelles in the First World War. He liked to show the splayed tatters of his army pay book, which had saved him from a bullet. His mother, Edith (née Farrer), was a clothing machinist who was once voted the prettiest girl in the factory.

When his younger siblings, Olywn and Ted, were born, Gerald would accompany his mother as she wheeled them in a pram around the countryside. He said that Ted resembled Edith in temperament; he was "calm, selfless, marvellously even-tempered".

The brothers built model boats, aeroplanes and kites on a work table near the skylight. Their mother would confect stories and tell them over several evenings. One featured three mice - Olywyna, Edwyna and Geraldine.

With the onset of the Depression, and short of work, Billy Hughes moved the family to the coalmining town of Mexborough. They opened a newsagent. Ted prospered at the grammar school and won a scholarship to Cambridge.

Edith, who loved Wordsworth, lavished her academically bright younger children with encouragement. Gerald had left school at 14 to work in his uncle's clothing factory where his daily tasks included cleaning 200 windows. He felt no jealousy or resentment.

In any case, war intervened. Gerald, who had trained as a fitter, joined the RAF; he was stationed in north Africa where he was detailed to

a Halifax bomber squadron. Returning at the end of the war, the door was opened by a 15-year-old Ted who "just stared, with tears streaming down his face, and in a strong voice said, 'Mam, it's him, it's him!'" Gerald trained as a policeman in Nottingham. One "dreary, rainy early morning" on patrol, an inspector said to him: "Cheer up Hughes, the first ten years are the worst."

A few days later he saw a sign in a travel agent saying: "Come to the sun: migrate to Australia." Within ten minutes he had signed up. He left Britain in 1948.

His brother was bound for Pembroke College, Cambridge, and Gerald's parting gifts included a green fishing rod. Ted spoke of following his brother to Australia after his degree to teach, but then he met Plath.

Gerald settled in Melbourne and found work as an aircraft mechanic with Australian National Airway. Later he became a sales manager in an engineering company. He lodged with the Whelan family, whose daughter Joan Gerald married in 1950. They had two sons: Ashley, who worked in PR, and Brendon, who works as a carer in a hospital. Ted sent Gerald children's stories, urging him to read them to the boys so that they would develop their vocabulary. Gerald's sons survive him. His wife died in 2013.

As he rose in the literary firmament, Ted Hughes sent affectionate letters. All seemed well as he wrote: "Marriage is my medium. You have no idea what a happy life Sylvia and I lead."

Sylvia Plath also wrote to Gerald, commenting: "If he has any faults, they are not shutting the ice box and knotting his clothes in unknottable balls." The memoir includes a letter from Edith Hughes to Gerald describing Plath as "strong willed but I think left alone they are very happy together". Edith added: "They are not as lively and cheery as you and Joan. You always seem to have sunshine around you. Sylvia and Ted seem more sober. Of course, her father was German you know."

Of the split, Gerald wrote: "Sylvia insisted that Ted move out and he complied." Ted hoped they could get back together as a family." Ted later wrote to his brother: "All this business has been terrible - especially for Sylvia - but it was inevitable", adding of his sense of "relief".

Gerald wrote: "From Ted ... I heard that Sylvia had become more and more worried, even paranoid after her work, particularly her forthcoming and deeply personal book, *The Bell Jar* - how it would be received and whether it would sell ... again and again Ted tried to reassure her, but her anxieties grew, and the emotional tensions between them ... the situation was inflamed by Sylvia's awareness that Ted had become infatuated with another woman, Assia Wevill."

Plath committed suicide in 1963.

A year later Gerald visited his brother in Devon. "Such discussion of personal affairs did not come easily to him. Her death and the circumstances surrounding it continued to haunt him, and I found him in a poor state, mentally and physically." Ted started making "a number of such strange demands ... we complied as best we could. I posted Ted a very large python skin to add to his exotic collection."

He later wrote of how Ted's wife, Carol, brought "calm and order to his life, his chaotic schedules and emotionally taxing work".

Some years later, when the brothers were reunited in Australia, Gerald saw at first hand how his brother's reputation had been tarnished. Ted was heckled by a group of women holding placards about Plath's death. "It always upset and angered me that such a gentle and caring man should have that kind of welcome from people who could have had little knowledge of the real and complex circumstances behind Sylvia's tragic demise."

Ted yearned for his brother to move back to Britain and even bought a farm that they could run together. However, Gerald could not leave the outback that he had grown to love. He was a talented landscape watercolourist of the vast Australian landscape suffused with "strange prehistoric-looking vegetation". He would send Ted some of his canvases. Ted never quite gave up hope that Gerald would join him. In the poem *Brother Pear Tree*, he wrote: I send you fewer letters - fewer and thinner Year by year. Can I really be thinking It's just not worth it anymore? What was it I once hoped for? Last year, the author and film-maker David Cohen made a documentary about Gerald Hughes and recalled a "lucid, warm and engaging raconteur who was sharp as a button". He told Cohen about his immense pride in his brother's achievements. Gerald last saw his Ted in 1991 when they fished together on the Queen Mother's estate in Scotland.

Shortly before he died in 1998, Ted rang his older brother for the last time to tell him that he had cancer. Recalling the conversation, Gerald said it was just as if they were boys again - gambolling in the moors.

Gerald Hughes, engineer and painter, was born on September 7, 1920. He died on August 6, 2016, aged 95 He wrote the book as he was fed up of being asked about his brother

• Caption: THE TED HUGHES ESTATE Gerald Hughes, right, pictured with his brother at London Zoo in 1970. They exchanged many affectionate letters

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