15 *To Begin to Know*

Resolving Ethical Tensions in David Leser's Patriographical Work

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Introduction: Vampires and Thieves

Our lives are relational. This proximity to the other means, as Eakin argues, 'our privacies are largely shared, making it hard to demarcate the boundary between where one life leaves off and another begins' (Eakin 2004, p. 8). How to treat and respond to this perceived indivisibility, as we well know, often vexes those who write memoir, particularly stories relating to parents. Most notably, in the Australian context, there is Richard Freadman's excellent framing of the issues constellating around whether he should (or could) write about his deceased father (Freadman 2004). And of course, Nancy K. Miller's work charting the dilemmas and responsibilities associated with potential acts of 'betrayal,' writing about parents continues to be both instrumental and informative (Miller 2000, 2004).

Resolving the binary oppositions of loyalty/betrayal and privacy/shared ownership frequently problematizes the practice of those writers producing patriographical/matriographical texts. In an article for *The Guardian* Charlotte Higgins identifies one of the chief criticisms when drawing on the lives of others to author stories, arguing that writers can reduce their subjects, narration often serving as an act of diminishment rather than expansion. Then comes this pejorative charge: 'Memoirists are vampires and thieves, you might say: vampires and thieves with shards of ice in their hearts' (Higgins 2010). Central to this judgment is the notion that writers not only prey on their subjects – and echoing Malcolm's (1995) burglary metaphor – they also heartlessly steal part of what is essential to the core of another person as part of their intrinsic creative process.

While Higgins' 'thieving' imagery is a heightened claim, nonetheless it graphically highlights the charge writers often seek to ameliorate when moving familial work from the private to the public sphere. In Freadman's reckoning when publishing a book about his father, part of this ethical resolution lies with the establishment of 'trust parameters' (Freadman 2004, p. 133). Freadman clearly identifies one of the chief concerns curtailing early attempts to write an account of his father's life: '... writing the book would hurt, and I shied away from that' (2004, p. 121).

The initial shying away from textually representing a father is not unique to Richard Freadman. Similarly, in his own work Australian author and journalist David Leser experienced both the desire to tell and an initial inability to publically disclose his father's life story. While Freadman finally produces a book about his deceased father, Leser has to work through the inherent tensions of writing about someone who is still alive. Although each of these separate familial scenarios produce particular challenges around making private knowledge public, Freadman is ultimately able to resolve his hesitancy:

> This book about my father and myself is in part a narrative of exploration, an attempt to give the fullest – and the most morally consequential – answer to the question who am I? My father would certainly have understood and endorsed such a search.
>
> (Freadman 2004, pp. 143–4)

Likewise, Leser's ongoing questions about selfhood finally propel the completion of his book. As Miller argues '... memoirs are documents about building an identity – how we come to be who we are as individuals – and a crucial piece of that development takes place in the family' (Miller 2000, p. xi). This is difficult territory for, as Mansfield writes, the writer-son is required to travel in two different directions simultaneously when attempting to write about his father:

> At one end of the first spectrum stands the towering presence of the father, the 'fully realised' biographical subject of the text through whom the autobiographical self of the son is formed. The identity of the author is created out of his depiction of the father, even when it is drawn against or in opposition to the father. In such cases, the father is the enduring presence of the narrative and a reader may favour him over the son, regardless of the author's intentions. At the other end of that spectrum one encounters the dominant presence of the author-son, the more realised subject of the narrative through whom the author attempts to construct an image of the father. In many cases, even when the portrait is a sympathetic one, the device of foregrounding the autobiographical self seems to be adopted reluctantly, as perhaps the only way to give birth or shape to the reticent figure of the father.
>
> (Mansfield 2013, p. 8)

What is most interesting are the questions and concerns that affected Leser's decision making and writing processes during the construction of his memoir, and we offer this paper as an exploration and exemplar of the practice of a contemporary author who seeks to both protect and reveal the lived experience with a parent.

David Leser: A Professional Context

David Leser is an award-winning journalist, one of Australia's most prolific profile and feature writers. He has worked as a Middle East and Washington DC correspondent, and as feature writer for the Murdoch, Packer and Fairfax organizations. He has written six books, and is editor of a seventh,[1] as well as his work for the *Daily Telegraph, The Australian, Australian Women's Weekly, HQ* magazine, *The Bulletin, The Sydney Morning Herald* and *Good Weekend*, Asia-Pacific writer for Italian and German *Vanity Fair*, and the *Daily Beast* website in America. He is also executive producer of the award-winning documentary on the life and musical career of Paul Kelly. But importantly, David Leser is the son of the late Bernard Leser,[2] the founder of *Australian Vogue*,[3] the former managing director of British Condé Nast, and former president of Condé Nast International.

David Leser's professional writing career spans decades so he is familiar with the forms and audiences shaping and driving the publication industry. He has a keen understanding of Ben Yagoda's observation that: 'Memoir has become the central form of the culture, not only the way stories are told but the way arguments are put forth, products and properties marketed, ideas floated, acts justified, reputations constructed or salvaged' (Yagoda 2009, p. 7). Given the prevalence and current appetite for memoir, it is unsurprising that David Leser ultimately writes one. However, what is interesting about Leser's engagement with this form is his self-reflexivity astutely summed up in Diane Dempsey's book review entitled 'David Leser finds himself in his father':

> [David Leser] is fascinating on journalism. He cultivated profile writing that is illuminating, but can often be excruciating for the subject. But Leser is alive to the contradictions and anomalies inherent in the biographer's art. Acknowledging the skill of documentary maker Errol Morris, he says the best way to find the truth about your subject is not to shame them but to humanise them.
>
> (Dempsey 2014)

The reviewer cogently articulates Leser's overriding impulse to narrate truthfully without shaming; that is, to humanize and truthfully represent to the best of his ability, in an attempt to preclude accusations of theft. As Mansfield writes:

> How does one decide what an ethical representation of the father is? What are some of the ethical complexities that must be negotiated when representing the reticent-laconic father in auto/biography? How does the desire to judge or not to judge the father, to condemn or to celebrate, complicate the act of representation? If the father is

> deceased ... how do notions of regret or debt affect the task at hand? How does the father's death impact upon a reader's judgement of whether an author's representation is ethical?
>
> (Mansfield 2013, pp. 10–11)

In reality, Leser's father was still very much alive, if nearing the end of his life. Leser was in a race to finish his text while his father was still alive, not just so his father could read and give him his blessing, but so they could dialogue about it. He succeeded in this venture, publishing several months only before his father passed away.

Desert Places

David Leser entitles the preface to his text *To Begin to Know: Walking in the Shadows of My Father* 'The Desert Places,' appropriating from the poet Robert Frost[4] as he ruminates on his own inner turmoil and fear: '...I have it in me so much nearer home; To scare myself with my own desert places' (Frost 1936). It is an apt selection, as Leser explains the thesis behind his text in three stages: his father writing it; Leser writing his father's story; and finally, writing his own story, with the story of his father told within. All the while shaping the process is Couser's notion that 'Memoirs are, undeniably, artful' (Couser 2012, p. 168), which is to acknowledge '... memoirs are just "texts". They're never the whole truth, never truth-*ful*. They're errant, fallible, fictive human constructions...' (Couser 2012, p. 168). David Leser has his own framing of what memoir is, and what function it can perform:

> ... the role of memoir is to ... serve as a way of remembering, serve as a way of setting down a record. Not exact, because it's memoir, but a record of an experience or a moment or an episode in one's life. It's to give voice to a kind of – to the enormity of the human experience, in all its guises. Whether it's the Irish memoir that looks at the poverty and the oppression of the Irish at the hands of the English, or whether it's the Jewish memoir which is to record the Holocaust; celebrity memoir, to survey the arc of a kind of glitzy career. It's a record of people's experiences ... I think the unconscious thing from the writer is to give shape and meaning to their experiences.
>
> (Author interview 2016)

Building on the motivation for writing a memoir, he writes in the opening pages of his text: 'I began this book out of love and disappointment for my father' (Leser 2014, p. ix). His disappointment was watching his

father as he grew older, and he could 'see his purpose faltering' (p. x). And he tells Richard Fidler in an interview on *ABC* radio,

> ...I thought that once he'd stepped down from the position of president of Condé Nast based in New York his purpose faltered and the view didn't look as good or as clear as it had from the mountain top, and I felt him sliding a little bit into melancholy if not depression, and I thought as the act of writing often helps you become clearer about things. When you have to write things down as opposed to just say them it sharpens your thinking....and it brings clarity and perspective to your life, and I thought that that would be a wonderful exercise for him. To just sit with himself and the arc of an extraordinary life well lived.
>
> (*Conversations* 2014)

But his father did not want to write his story. Leser believes he did not want to do it himself: '...because he's not a writer, and because he is that social animal and to write, you really have to spend inordinate hours on your own' (*Conversations* 2014). So Leser offered to write it for him, telling Fidler he thinks his father was at first 'very chuffed' that he had offered to write it. Then: 'I think he was proud. I mean it was obviously an act of great fealty. A son saying I'll write about your life' (ibid). But that strategy did not work either. The prospect of writing bringing many of the issues that Eakin describes: 'Moral issues... The moral consequences of the act of writing itself. What is right and fair for me to write about someone else?...' (Eakin 1999, p. 160). As Leser explains:

> ...it proved impossible. I mean I started it and then I thought, well how does a son do this? How does a journalist write about his father when as a journalist you're always wedded to the truth whatever the truth might be?...Was I going to go off, wade off, go off into the distance and actually ask all the people that populated his life about him? Tell me about my dad, and what were they going to say and what was their motivation going to be for telling what they told me? Knowing they're talking to his son, and so there were all sorts of problems with that, and then what about the things that I was critical of and how did I write about that. How did I put down on the page the fault lines that run through any father son or mother daughter relationship?
>
> (*Conversations* 2014)

What Leser articulates here are the very real writerly pressures and consequences Ellis and Bochner describe which can result from autobiographical narration: '...honest autoethnographic exploration generates

a lot of fears and doubts – and emotional pain' (Ellis & Bochner 2000, p. 738). They further describe the loss of control that can attend the process of generating texts for public consumption: 'Just when you can't stand the pain anymore, well that's when the real work has only begun. Then there's the vulnerability of revealing yourself, not being able to take back what you have written or having any control over how readers interpret it' (Ellis & Bochner 2000, p. 738). And in relation to the production of autoethnographic work (life writing) Freeman makes this observation: 'The temptation to imbue events with our own ethical perspective can be overpowering' (Freeman 2015, p. 6). From Leser's ethical perspective, it was important for him to consider the vulnerability and pain that might also result for his subject (his father), and it is important to cite his deliberation here at length:

> When I started writing the book, I realized maybe three or four chapters in that I actually didn't want to write a biography. I didn't want to spend all this time observing my father's life. That's one thing, because as I say in the memoir, as a child you spend forever trying to look up to or live down your parents' expectations in life, and so I actually was sort of standing alone in the clearing. I realized that the act of putting myself back in the thrall of my father's life was a kind of retrograde step for me.
>
> Because the second point is that I didn't feel I could write about him without writing about myself. I mean, that's axiomatic, really, because if you're writing nonfiction, just like quantum physics shows us that the person who's doing the experiment actually influences the outcome to the experiment, there's no such thing as objectivity. Equally, a nonfiction writer observing events is filtering it through his or her own personal experience. It filters the things that they've seen or haven't seen, people they've spoken to or haven't spoken to, so it's a subjective enterprise. So I decided that I would conflate the two and I would try and write something that was both biography and memoir... the hardest person to write about is the person most close to you. Did not take a while for my ethical lights to be switched on with this project because how on Earth was I going to write without fear or favor about my own father? Impossible. Unless you don't care...a lot of children are scathing about their parents, but I had no wish to be like that because I had a very – with all its complexities – a very beautiful relationship, so why would I cause him injury?
>
> (Author interview 2016)

Relating to his own practice, it is clear that Leser closely identifies with Couser's ethical concerns when writing about another person, particularly a vulnerable one: 'Deliberation on the ethics of life writing entails weighing competing values: the desire to tell one's story and the need to

protect others, the obligation to tell truth and the obligations of trust' (Couser 2004, p. 198). And, the day after his interview with Richard Fidler where he airs such considerations, Leser tells Michael Cathcart on *ABC Books and Arts*:

> The book is called *To begin to know* for various reasons. The act of writing is the act of thinking better and understanding better. I think it's easy to say things. It's easy to verbalize things, but when you actually have to commit them to the page it sharpens your thinking. It gives you some kind of clarity and some space, and I think I began to realize that in my early years as a feature writer and profile writer, first of all there was a desire to prove myself as not just the son of Bernie Leser but as a writer in my own right, but also I was a child of the '60, '70s' generation. Gough Whitlam was one of my heroes and I was appalled by the war in Vietnam and I wore my hair long and I was part of that sort of hippy generation and that was the antithesis of *Vogue*, and so I think every healthy child has a healthy dose of rebellion in him or her and that was mine. I rebelled against the value system of *Vogue*. *Vogue* was all about etiquette and style and good manners.
>
> (*ABC Books and Arts* 2014)

Cathcart then poses this complexity:

> One of the motives you questioned ... or one of the skills you questioned is this way in which a successful journalist is able to win the trust and confidence of someone and then goes away and writes an article which also dumps on that person.

To which Leser replies:

> Yes, that's the Janet Malcolm *Journalist and the Murderer*[5] idea. That you know every journalist in a way is a trickster. Is a confidence man or woman preying on the vanity or the self-delusion or the gullibility of their subject, and they're like burglars. They rifle through the drawers and they see what's in there and then they steal away in the night and then they air it for everybody to see. There is a part of that in the implicit contract. You want the story. You want the pearls and those nuggets of truth that go to the person's psyche. You want all those things that speak to the human condition and that's both the dark and the light. So to get that it's not dissembling. It's part psychoanalyst. You know, you're playing therapist and you're appealing to the vanity. I mean why would someone agree to be profiled? I've always asked myself that... subjects, I think, they fall for this sense of I'll trade you pound for pound, flesh for flesh. You tell me about your life, I'll tell you about my life too. Well it's a totally unequal thing. I mean, they're

> talking to two or three million people. You're just talking to them. So I think that people who agree to being profiled have a healthy ego or they have something to say. They have a message and that's a good reason to agree to a profile because there's a larger story about what you want to convey, and I think they're the best profiles. Is that you use the person or you employ the subject as a device for exploring larger themes around the human condition.
>
> (*ABC Books and Arts* 2014)

While Leser is acutely aware of a potential powerful differential between writers and their subjects, he places ethical considerations at the center of his practice. The application of Freadman's statement/question 'Writers have a right to write. But how far into the privacy of others does that right extend?' (Freadman 2004, p. 123) is answered by Leser:

> ...it would be true to say that amongst the most frightening words in the English language, for any family member, are 'I'm thinking of writing a memoir'. Because no one signs up to that. You don't give birth to that, you don't marry that, you don't – that's just something that doesn't enter your head; that years and years of parenting are suddenly going to change into some kind of narrative for public consumption. So it's a crippling thing.
>
> If you care about ethics, which I do, and I suppose if I was to track my journalism from pretty early on, I would say there's always been a kind of moral component to my stories. I'm looking for the moral moment, the tone, you know, who acts well, who doesn't act well, the human paradox, how do we make a good life, what's worth doing; all those kinds of Socratic questions. I'm also informed by Buddhism in my latter years, which is do no harm.
>
> So if you love someone – and even if you don't, you still have a duty of care – but if you love someone, you have a huge duty of care not to hurt them as best as possible, and that is in absolute tension. That stands in absolute tension to the prerogatives of the writer; to write as you see fit, to call it as you see it. There is that inner moral compass and that's what guided me – there was no way in the world this book was ever going to be published without my parents, my brother and sister, and my former wife, having sign-offs. Not having sign-off; reading it and feeding back their comments.
>
> (Author interview 2016)

Importantly though, Leser qualifies the difference between a sign-off and feedback, observing:

> Feedback. I never promised to change anything, but I did promise to take very, very seriously any concerns they had. For example, my father asked me a number of times – he kept coming back to this point

> in my memoir of me writing about him being sick in the morning. 'What happens in a man's bathroom should stay in a man's bathroom,' he said...
>
> (Author interview 2016)

Leser remembers as a small boy, hearing the sounds of his father vomiting each morning into the toilet bowl. It was the stress of his job and deep anxiety his high profile role produced. Leser recounts this episode in his memoir, and it is the only private revelation Bernard Leser asks him to remove. Leser says he listened to his father but felt strongly this particular component of the book was integral. It is an example of the relational complexity of story-telling where this particular component is integral to Leser's story, but not in his father's view. And this is the textual moment where arguably the story becomes largely Leser's, and not his father's. Providing an insight into the proximity and demarcation of shared ownership of past events, and what influences his choice of material as a writer, Leser describes a conversation with his father:

> I would argue with him that this was one of the most crucial hinge points in the book. But when he put on his armor and he would zip up his Armani suit and he'd step out into the world, that's what he presented to the world. But as this little boy, I could hear something else. I could see something else, and that for me was I think when I first unconsciously, as I write, began to equate success with stress. You couldn't have one without the other.
>
> He rang me a couple of times, and each time I would say, 'Dad, please, don't make me take this out ... This is my story and you've got to understand this is a little boy's moment. This is a little boy reacting to his father not being well, or thinking his father's not well, and actually, Dad, it's the only point in this book where you're vulnerable. I'm vulnerable all through this book and you're invulnerable for all this book except here. It actually makes the reader like you more. It makes the reader identify with you more. So I want to appeal to the publisher in you.
>
> 'You've always championed free speech. You've always wanted to see journalists call it like they see it. This is how I see it. Can you live with it?'
>
> 'Okay.'
>
> That's what he said.
>
> 'Okay.'
>
> ...then I think he said: 'Look, I'm not happy about it but it's yours – it's your book. It's your story.'
>
> (Author interview 2016)

When confronting the politics of ownership and perspective associated with this notion of *your* story and the right of the writer to tell it, Leser

also confronts the critical question of whether his memoir is ultimately authorized or unauthorized theft? He proffers:

> Look, there's no doubt... it would be disingenuous to say – for any memoir writer – to say that there's complete endorsement for everything you write. By its nature, writing is theft. Paul Kelly is a songwriter. He begs and borrows and steals from other songwriters for his lyrics. He makes no bones about that. He conceals the theft in – as a kind of – as a fictional story, but embedded in that are tricks and moments and lines and melodies that belong to some of his heroes. So theft is always taking place.
>
> Are we authorized to steal? There's some kind of licence as an artist – as a writer, I think, but I wouldn't want to give it complete carte blanche. I think I went through all the necessary ethical steps to ensure that people didn't get hurt, and therefore I was authorized as much as one could be, and therefore this book has that stamped authority on it as a result.
>
> Look, the fear was that probably of all the people that were most at risk in this book – well, my father, obviously, and also my former wife, the mother of my children. So it was less important to me to be right in my recollections of everything than to have her say okay, so most of those nine pages of notes I agree with.
>
> I think I had a fairly strong, independent voice as a writer up to that point [of writing the memoir], but that's just – there's much more – it's much more my own voice now because it was the first time I have ever written so personally. So all the experience that I had writing about others and writing it from others' spirited positions and my own individual slant on the world, writing something like this is actually – it's a kind of stepping out.
>
> (Author interview 2016)

Reflecting on the therapeutic nature of writing memoir, Leser decides in the end that the reading of books/the act of reading books can be just as therapeutic. He argues:

> Memoir definitely has a therapeutic role. Both can have – it can have for the writer and the reader. I mean look at whether revenge is therapy; betrayal is therapy. There are many memoir writers who have waded into print as a way of getting back at someone. Whether that's therapy for them, who could say? There are many memoir writers who betrayed confidences and have engaged in theft, authorized theft because maybe memoir writing is all slightly theft of some sort.
>
> But I think at its best, isn't reading – aren't books therapy anyway? I mean, isn't the act of reading an act of therapy for the reader? It's a

> consolation. It's a source of solace. It's nourishment. It enlarges your horizons, takes you into a private universe. That's for the reader. For the writer, I think there's something about putting things down and trying to make sense of your own life ... It gives a shape and a form to what can otherwise be just random and myriad experiences.
>
> (Author interview 2016)

Conclusion

There are few moments where a memoirist can escape the interconnectivity between their own story and the story of another – the assertion of their own voice while simultaneously considering the possible violation of someone else's privacy. And of course, an ethical memoirist gives due consideration to harm minimization. Novelist Charlotte Wood describes both fiction and nonfiction when she writes:

> We writers are the only people who may be able to pinpoint the exact delineations between life and fiction in our work, and to describe the transformative processes involved, yet we rarely discuss the ethics of this in public. Perhaps this is because we all know that, no matter how much we deny it, or try to minimise the damage we cause, theft from the lives of others (and the potential to cause pain as a result) is ... a deeply uncomfortable, complex moral problem that has always been with us, and will never disappear.
>
> (Wood 2009, pp. 82–3)

Wood's idea of 'theft from the lives of others' may have an even more restrictive moral claim on writers such as David Leser, as Couser explains: 'Memoirists ... have much less freedom in the creation of their characters than novelists. More to the point they have a responsibility toward their characters that is more than aesthetic' (Couser 2012, p. 171). While Leser wrestles with the aesthetics and conventions of narrative practice, his duty of care to his father is never far from his consciousness when publishing the finished manuscript.

To Begin to Know: Walking in the Shadows of My Father was launched in 2014 at the Icebergs in Sydney. The late Bernard Leser attended, as did all of Leser's family and many of his friends. In testifying to both a writerly and fatherly endorsement of the memoir – and the comfortable convergence of lineage and legacy – David Leser concludes:

> The book launch was basically his last public appearance. His last public outing, if you like. He spoke and he was very proud, and – I can only give you the flavor of it [what his father said at the launch], which was one of great pride and then he – and I think that he was always looking – he sung me into life, in a way. He sung my praises

> and he passed me the mantle, and I don't see a lot of men doing that to their sons. So this book, the fact that he could read it before he died, was a great gift. A blessing, actually, because I would've always wondered. I wanted it to be published before he went, because I didn't want to live with the wondering of how he might've reacted.
>
> It sits very comfortably. I think it's a good book. I think it's as good a piece of writing as I could do at the time, and very, very difficult ethical issues that were hovering from the get-go. But yes, when I look through that book, I'm proud of it.
>
> (Author interview 2016)

David Leser attempted to write his father's biography and failed, specifically because of the familial ethical tensions which arose. As Mansfield writes:

> ... author-sons will continue to create monuments and tributes to, mount searches and performances for, elucidate defences and denouncements of, and seek dialogue and resolution with their patrimonial inheritances through the act of writing autobiographically.
>
> (Mansfield 2013, p. 199)

Leser knew his father's story was an important one to tell because of Bernard Leser's renowned public profile. He discovered the only way to write this narrative was by enmeshing it with his own story – bridging the tacit gap between father and son, and producing a hybrid generational text, nuanced by differing perspectives.

He masterfully navigates proprietorial entitlement – more simply, whose story is it? – forensically negotiating the spaces and intersections between himself and his father, and other family members, in *To Begin to Know*. His struggle to write authentically – focusing on raw honesty, yet concurrently constrained by an overarching harm-minimization ethos, privileging familial allegiances – uplifts this text as an exemplar in its field.

Note on Methodology

Ethical approval for this research was granted by the University of Technology Sydney's Human Research Ethics Committee.[6] We interviewed Dr. David Leser via Skype, as a semi-structured narrative discussion. There were 11 main questions ranging from his views on what memoir is and what it performs within a literary culture, to the ethics of writing about other people, particularly his father Bernie Leser, and other members of his family. The interview was recorded, including Dr. Leser giving his informed consent and conducted in accordance with the Australian Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance Code of

Ethics.[7] We then melded his responses with other interviews he has taken part in as well as paratextual materials, for example, reviews about his memoir.

Acknowledgement

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Notes

1 *To Begin to Know: walking in the shadows of my father* (2014 Allen & Unwin); *A View from the Lake* (2014 Random House); *Dames & Divas* (2006 Media 21 Publishing); *Somebody Save Me* (2002 Allen & Unwin); *The Whites of Their Eyes* (1999 Allen & Unwin); *Bronwyn Bishop* (1994 Text Publishing); and editor of *Paul Kelly: the Essays* (2013 Shark Island).
2 Bernard Leser, 1925–2015.
3 First published in 1959.
4 1874–1963; Desert places in a further range (Holt, 1936; Cape, 1937); the 1937 Pulitzer Prize Winner in Poetry.
5 Published by Alfred A. Knopf/Random House, 1990.
6 UTS HREC: ETH16-0428.
7 see www.meaa.org/meaa-media/code-of-ethics/.

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Interview

David Leser interview May 6, 2016, Sydney (Skype).