Maestro
Peter Goldsworthy

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About the author

Peter Goldsworthy was born in Minlaton South Australia in 1951. His parents were both teachers and moved regularly to new schools and new towns. In an interview with Clare Forster at HarperCollins, Goldsworthy recalls how ‘my parents put on Gilbert and Sullivan operas in every country town in Australia as far as I can tell.’ While *Maestro* is not autobiographical it would seem that there is a great many of his experiences used as a basis for the story. Goldsworthy, like Paul, finished his secondary school in Darwin. The opening of the novel recounts his own impressions of arriving in Darwin as an adolescent. Goldsworthy loved the freedom that Darwin offered after life in the south. After completing school, Goldsworthy attended the University of Adelaide where he studied medicine. He has practiced medicine, but like Paul’s father he found that he was not deeply committed. ‘I’m a doctor who prefers to write books.’ Goldsworthy is married with three children.

He has written a number of collections of poetry; a collection of short stories, *The List of All Answers; Honk if You Are Jesus; Wish; Keep It Simple Stupid; Jesus Wants Me for a Sunbeam* and *Maestro* which was his first published novel. He wrote *Maestro* quickly while in Brisbane, where the tropical conditions triggered his memories of Darwin. ‘I came to write *Maestro* and it happened very quickly and I loved that. It wrote itself, this character took it over. And so when I came to read it again, when it was published – I loved it. And that doesn’t happen with me, with things I write, very often. So I decided then and there I was never going to read it again because I wanted to love it forever.

*Add your own notes below*
About the book

Music is central to this novel. Characters are defined by their musical preferences and characters are driven to extraordinary lengths by their love of music. It would be worth listening to some of the classical music mentioned in the novel. Explore why Paul was insulted to play the ‘Children’s Bach’ and why Mozart was so important to Keller. Consider Liszt and see if you, like Paul, appreciate the ‘noise and speed and blurred hands and lyrical flashiness.’ Keller’s wife was a Wagner specialist, a composer much admired by the Nazis. What in Wagner’s music might have appealed to the Nazis? It would also be worth watching a Gilbert and Sullivan operetta. The Pirates of Penzance is easily available on DVD. Why might Paul’s parents have been so devoted to it? Listen to the music that Paul describes as ‘music to shit by.’ Was he right to despise it in comparison to the ‘classics’ or was he too suspicious of anything that came to him without a struggle.

The novel is divided into a number of movements in the way that music sometimes is. Each movement has its own particular focus and while it can stand alone together the movements great the whole piece. The centrality of music to life is shown in the very structure of the novel.

The novel works as a series of contrasts. The style of life in the northern city of Darwin is contrasted to life in the southern capital of Adelaide. Life in Australia is contrasted to life in Europe. Characters too are set up in contrast with one another. Keller’s role as mentor to Paul is contrasted with Whitely’s role as mentor with ‘Rough Stuff.’ Paul’s mother and father are set up as contrasts to one another. Rosie is contrasted with Megan. Keller’s pursuit of music at the expense of his family is set in contrast to Paul’s experience of family life. And yet these contrasts are rarely simple nor do they present ‘easy’ lessons for the reader. Rather the complexity of human experience is demonstrated through them.

The novel also presents a mystery to the reader. Do you accept that Keller is who he claims to be? If he is, his is a remarkable story of survival. All his friends in Europe accept his death. Abandoned on a forced march, it seems amazing that he would have survived and how if he were penniless and friendless would he have aquired the old music transcipts he gives away with studied carelessness. What is the source of his money? If he is not who he claims to be why would he have adopted that persona? Why would he have personalised the guilt of Keller so deeply? Why in either case would he have settled in Darwin?
The novel, paradoxically, is not about music. It is about life. The lessons that Keller has taught successfully are the lessons of life. As a music teacher he recognised Paul’s limitations and while he tried to tell him of his mediocrity his care and concern of the young man were interpreted as signs that he saw great musical talent there. As a teacher of music Keller failed; as a mentor for life he succeeded.

Add your own notes below 📝
Some central ideas

Love

Love in all its forms is central to *Maestro*. Romantic love is shown between Keller and his wife. We learn that Keller married late in life and that he adored his wife. However, that love did not outweigh his musical ambitions. Despite being asked to leave and being warned to leave Vienna Keller stayed. He felt that his reputation ensured his safety. That he either had to be ‘invisible’ or so ‘highly visible’ that no one would harm his family. He trusted to the fact that he ‘knew’ these people (the Nazis) that he had ‘signed their programs.’ Keller ignored politics and political considerations. He was arrogant enough to think that he was above them. The deportation of his Jewish wife and son and their ultimate murder changed that feeling. The Keller that we see in Darwin still loves the ‘younger woman’ in the ‘shell framed’ photograph and still grieves for her. His passion and grief is accessible only via music – the very music that seduced Keller into ignoring his wife and son’s plight. And so Keller cannot help but love and cannot help but hate music.

Paul’s parents are also tied by love. ‘Their differences are inexhaustible,’ ‘they speak different languages’ but they were tied together by the ‘sticky glue of sex.’ Their connection seems genuine and they have shared interests and passions. Even though their interest in music is different Paul’s father is attracted to the mathematical neatness of music and Paul’s mother more to the liberating freedom that can be achieved by loosing the measured control. They share each others feelings, beliefs, interests and sense of humour. ‘They laugh together’ perhaps the ‘best defense.’

After one passionless bout of sex with Megan, Paul discovers lust and love with Rosie. The tension mounts as Paul discovers sex in the unlikely location of the library and peering between dislodged library books learns the sights and sounds of lust. Later he learns the ‘agony of touchings and pleasures.’ When Keller tries to unburden himself about his betrayal of his wife, he in turn is betrayed by Paul who insensitively walks away to another sensual experience and turns his back on duty. For Paul, Rosie ‘always seemed able to tell me exactly what I wanted to hear.’ She is an uncritical and adoring audience for the supercilious little boy who takes such a long time to grow up. Romantic love is shown in all its glory and with all its weaknesses in this text.

Keller protects himself from grief in part by cataloguing the stupidity and weakness of the world. ‘A bleak human landscape somewhere between
tragedy and dumb stupidity.’ His scrap books recount that it is not just in the
1930s in Vienna that evil flourished. The Crabbes decide that the scrap books
are inappropriate reading material for their son, not because any one story is
so very bad, but because the collection suggests a very cynical perspective
on life. The ‘bereaved parents’ who ‘lash out’ that compensation cannot ‘bring
back their son’ and then make clear that they are using this sentimental ploy
to extract more money.

Keller is not the only one to collect stories of the bizarre and cynical.
Paul’s father brings home stories of the ‘lover who died on top of her’ and the
girlfriend whose only concern was that wanted to move his car moved before
her husband returned; the gangrenous penis of the man who tried for a
permanent erection and the man who borrowed his girlfriend’s car to kill
himself. The extraordinary events in the lives of ordinary people and the
sadness of the world is juxtaposed with the frailties that we see in Paul and in
Keller. They are both arrogant and at times willfully blind. They both enjoy
feeling superior to others and are terribly sensitive to those around them.
They are both extremely judgemental and callous towards other ‘lesser’
beings. They both crave admiration from people they purport to despise. They
both exhibit, and are hurt by, the frailties, human weaknesses and stupidity of
those around them.

Add your own notes below ✎
Teaching and learning

Much of the novel is set in a classroom; the room with two pianos where Keller attempts to teach Paul to be great. It becomes clear that he knows early on that Paul is not capable of achieving greatness, but perhaps because Paul reminds Keller of his son, he persists. It is a strange series of lessons because Keller has learned to be suspicious of the very thing he loves. The music of the Romantics that were his passion has become to Keller’s mind the music that Hollywood stars kiss to. As dismissive, in its way, as Paul’s comment that rock music is ‘Music to shit to.’ And yet Keller is not really free of his love for this type of music. It haunts him. He removed his own finger as part of his promise to himself to reject certain pieces of music and then he learns to play as well without it.

Keller is teaching very complex lessons about music. And Paul is ultimately unable to learn them. He cannot understand that he needs to interpret music and give the composer credit for what he has created. For the young Paul music is a show designed to give the artist accolades. It is where the audience gives him appreciation, not where he gives the audience the gift of the music. He learns to be a good ‘forgery.’ He picks up the rhetoric and learns to be ‘technically perfect.’ He blusters for some years convinced of his own greatness and squanders his parents’ money on a fruitless tour of Europe and exploits Rosie’s love by demanding her support for his self indulgent dreams. But he knows what real music is, and he cannot even convince himself that he truly has the gift. His finest performance, a performance filled with passion to convince Henisch that Keller lives too fails. By failing to demonstrate the sure hand of his teacher, he finally has to face the truth about his musical talent. And yet much of what Keller taught the young Paul is with him and the resignation in the older Paul to accept a life that he finds unfulfilling and that his passion for music has betrayed him, is Keller’s legacy. In the end Paul recognises the ‘maestro’ that Keller was.

Add your own notes below 📝
Suffering

In the hot house of Darwin we see many instances of suffering. We see the outcasts Keller, Paul and Benny. We see people who have run as far as they can with nowhere else to go. Whitely is pathetic as he tries to recapture a sense of his own identity with a fourth-rate rock band. We see Benny determined to suffer rather than give into bullies. And we see the exquisite torture of Keller. We have to wonder how all of these people arrived in Darwin and what it was about its isolation and insulation that attracted them. The boozey, red faces of the inhabitants are caught effectively by Goldsworthy. He shows us people, who have no where left to escape, to finding their own ways to survive and make sense of their lives in a lush tropical climate that in the wet season that could drive you mad.

We hear little about the atrocities suffered by Keller but the tattoo, the self-hatred and the permanent cynicism and isolation are made clear. ‘Nothing’ could make this lonely man ‘homesick.’ ‘If you want people to believe your lies, set them to music’, he says at one stage, showing the love hate relationship that he has with the heart of his own existence. We learn how he was left for dead and we imagine how he survived. Goldsworthy uses the power of the reader’s imagination often as in imagining the beating Bennie gets after Paul’s careless betrayal. All the sad stories that Dr Crabbe bring home speak too of people who are marginalised and stripped of human contact. Paul too, at the end of the novel, is haunted by his insensitivity as a youth to those around him he judges himself harshly and harbours no illusions about the person he was and has become.

However, out of that suffering we do see the capacity for people to reach each other and make meaningful relationships. Again and again we see the sacrifices that people are prepared to make for those who they love and we see that lessons are learned and that consequences are faced with dignity and resolution. We come to admire both Keller and Paul and see that it’s true ‘only people who are capable of great ugliness are capable of great beauty.’

The quest of an ideal, for perfection, is worth a great deal of suffering.

Add your own notes below
The main characters

Keller

Keller presents as a mystery on a number of levels. First there is the confusion about his identity; then there is the story of his escape and his unexplained presence in Darwin, and finally there is the source of his income. Paul is apparently his only student and yet he seems to support himself in his Darwin hotel. Keller also holds the mystery of music. He knows the secrets of the masters. This is partly because of his teacher and the unbroken line of great pianists who have passed on knowledge, partly because of his own great talent and partly because of his great passion and grief which power his playing. He becomes, in his own way, genuinely fond of Paul.

While he certainly tries to tell Paul the truth about his piano playing talent his behavior undermines his advice. He tolerates Paul at his most insensitive and arrogant and at no point willingly abandons the struggle to make Paul a real pianist instead of just technically faultless. His fondness for the young Paul, perhaps because he reminds the aging Keller of the son who he lost, is a mixed blessing for the young man. Keller’s persistence suggests that he sees the chance for Paul to be great. He certainly is a great teacher for Paul, but no teacher could make Paul into a great pianist, and a less lonely man might have admitted that and spared Paul years of yearning and suffering.

Keller is bitter towards the world. He protects himself against the world by collecting stories of human weakness and stupidity. In Keller’s case, it was a mixture of innocence and arrogance that was his weakness. He felt that his talent would protect his family and he was willfully blind to the political situation in Austria. He loves and hates the music that clouded his vision at that time. He has removed his own finger, but he cannot leave music alone. It is his way to express his grief and feelings. He can no longer love the Romantics, but neither can he abandon them. His suffering is permanent and the image of him dying surrounded by muzak is poignant and moving and fitting. Keller, despite his outburst, retains his dignity to the end. He is surrounded by people he despises, and of all the people he despises himself the most.

Add your own notes below 👇
Paul
Paul as an older man is scathing about his younger self, It is a redemptive loathing because the reader has already judged Paul harshly. He was an unattractive youth; arrogant, smug and supercilious. Tapping his pencil to draw attention to his slower class mates that he has finished a test they are struggling over, he is insufferable. Almost we can forgive the school thugs for their behavior. His callous betrayal of Bennie and equally callous interrogation of Keller revolt the reader.

While the extenuating circumstances are apparent his isolation, physical, intellectual and artistic are all reasons that might drive him to adopt such a smug attitude. Perhaps he was so innocent that he was unable to escape Megan’s attentions, but when he rushes straight to Rosie, we see his self-indulgence. Rosie is an extremely uncritical audience. Talented and clever herself, she seems to have a blind spot where Paul is concerned and is happy to play groupie to Paul for years. It is this kind of uncritical attention that Paul longs for. His parents’ friends’ accolades, Rosie’s devotion and his musical superiority to ‘Rough Stuff’ is what he yearns for endlessly.

Despite this, we see that Paul is suspicious of things that come easily. His work for Keller is extraordinary. He is able to discipline himself to dedicate himself to music. For Paul, the dawning realisation that he can only be a second-rate musician – which does not come until adulthood – is crippling. It forces him to reassess himself and his life to that point. It is at this stage of the novel that Paul becomes so critical of himself – more critical even than his reader. He fails as a musician, and part of his grief in failing is his dawning realisation that the unbroken line of talented performers and teachers has broken with him – Keller failed his own son and failed to find the student to carry on the tradition. He is aware that his failure has become Keller’s and that Keller cared for him, despite his lack of talent and that he betrayed that love. The disillusioned and unhappy man at the end of the novel seems to accept that he has a penance to pay, in much the same way that Keller did – a long payment for the sins of his youth. Both Paul and Keller pay a price for their love of music and the way that music blinded them at the same time as it illuminated their lives.

Add your own notes below ✎
Significant quotes

'I loved the town of booze and blow at first sight. And above all its smell: those hot, steamy perfumes that wrapped about me as we stepped off the plane, in the darkness, in the smallest hours of a January night.'

'The arsehole of the earth.'

'Fortunately – unlike you – she understands that she doesn't understand.'

'Apart from the piano they had little in common.'

'Music was another glue.'

'Skinny, unathletic, irredeemably smug, my pen slamming loudly onto my desk at the end of each maths problem to let the plodders know I'd finished…'

'He had been born to suffer: a favorite victim of school bullies, certainly, but also of all known natural laws and forces.'

'The boy is too given to self-satisfaction.'

'So many ponderous orchestras and so much ponderous music. I miss nothing.'

'There was passion in the voice, yes, but under intense pressure: a passion that was given hints, then snatched away, given again, and disallowed again.'

'My own plan was simpler. I wanted only to bury Papas to the neck in the tidal flats, kick him very hard in the head a few times – nothing extreme, just breaking his nose and front teeth – then leave him to the incoming tide.'

'I knew you'd tell him,' he said, 'you're that sort of person.'

'I loathe all newspapers,' Keller assured her. 'The goiter of the world … but we must study the goiter carefully … like pathologists.'

'Every fish has its depth.'

'And thus, while I listened, the future became the present unchallenged: and all too soon the regretted past.'

'I also wanted you to stay, but for me, not for you.'

'It is difficult to see evil in your own home.'

'He told me that if he ever felt the desire to play again he would hack off his fingers, one by one.'

'Can I know that mine was a foolish world, a world of delusion and feeling and ridiculous dreams – a world of music and still love it? Endlessly, effortlessly.'

Add your own notes below ☝️
Workbook Questions

1 How does the adult Paul view his adolescent self? Find evidence to support your response.

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2 In what ways does Keller teach Paul as much about himself as about music?

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3 Listen to some of the ‘Romantic’ music that Keller came to despise. What, in the music, seduced him?

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4 Do you see Rosie as the feminine nurturing counterpoint to Paul’s rigid, arrogant masculinity, or is her attraction and dedication to Paul inexplicable?

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5 How is the structure of the novel important to the development of the story?

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6 Does Paul, with his interest in technical perfection, come to see music as something separate from life’s passions?

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7 Was Keller a good teacher?

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8 Was Henisch right that Keller could not have been Paul’s teacher? ‘Only those capable of ugliness can be beautiful,’ a phrase I had failed to understand, and thought nonsensical at the time.’ What did Keller mean? Was Paul capable of understanding?

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9 Collect all the quotes about Darwin together. Is the ‘Darwin experience’ important to Paul’s development?

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10 What are the rites of passage for Paul?

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11 Was Keller a good teacher for Paul?

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12 How do the events that happened in Germany during the 1930s and 40s impact on Paul’s life?

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13 Use a search engine to find at least two reviews of *Maestro*. Which review is closest to your reading of the novel? Remember to justify your response.

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Practice topics

Oral exploration of the text
1 Play your class a piece of music central to the text. Read the relevant section of the text to the class and play them the music. How does knowing and understanding the music enhance your understanding of that section of the novel?
2 Collect images of the events, places and people referred to in Keller’s past. How does understanding what these are and what they represent enhance your reading of the text?

Essay questions

Ideas, characters and themes
1 *Maestro* is a story of betrayal and cowardice. Is this how you see the novel?

Structures to construct meaning
1 Goldsworthy’s use of music conveys ideas about character that are critical to understanding the novel’s focus. Discuss.
2 Goldsworthy has used the retrospective first person narrative to enhance our understanding of Paul’s character. Discuss.

Implied/expressed points of view
1 Does Goldsworthy suggest that it is immaturity that prevents us from seeing true value?
2 In *Maestro*, Goldsworthy shows us that the appellation is meaningless. Discuss.

The ways readers’ interpretations differ
1 The reader, in the end, sees Paul and Keller both as egotists and equally unattractive characters. Discuss.
2 In what ways do the locations – Darwin and Adelaide, for example – help the reader understand the characters who inhabit Goldsworthy’s novel?

Creative responses
1 ‘Rough Stuff’ head east to ‘greatness.’ Outline their journey.
2 What obituary do you believe Paul should have written for Keller?