

Farewell, Clive James, a giant who long outsmarted Death

By **TRENT DALTON**, THE WEEKEND AUSTRALIAN MAGAZINE

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It was tempting to think Clive James had outsmarted even Death. He lived so long and so publicly past his diagnosed departure date that you could almost believe he had bamboozled that moody spectre with his wit.

Of course James could charm a cloaked boatman with his lip. The grim one surely skulked along his cobblestoned Cambridge street, tapped three times on his door with a sharpened scythe.

“Clive James?” answered the elusive Kogarah Kid, his body riddled with the terminal leukaemia with which he was diagnosed in 2010.

“Sorry ol’ boy, you just missed him, he’s on a plane bound for Sydney. But please give his regards to Dante!”

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We had almost a decade to prepare for the truth but it still came as a surprise. And may our heavy hearts be lasting proof that James was mortal after all.

Australia’s sharpest wit died at 80 on Sunday in his Cambridge home, leaving behind an unrivalled literary legacy of poetry, prose, criticism and groundbreaking laugh-till-your-ribs-ache television entertainment.

His family and closest friends farewelled him at a low-key private funeral in the chapel at - Pembroke College, Cambridge, on Wednesday. A statement from his agent said he had long endured leukaemia, kidney failure and lung disease “with patience and good humour, knowing

until the last moment that he had experienced more than his fair share of this 'great, good world' ”.

Clive James made this place great. Clive James made this place good. He showed us how to laugh at ourselves and he showed us how to love ourselves. Adore ourselves. Our suburbs. Our rocks. Our rivers. Our stars and our starlets and that secret twinkle that exists in the corner of every Australian eye.

He told us how Arnold Schwarzenegger resembled a brown condom filled with walnuts and how Mozart was born in Sydney and by that he meant magic was first born in Oz.

He made us think, he made us feel and he made every last one of us — hopeless dreamer suburban boys and girls of the Australian 1980s — pick up our chewed Bic ballpoint pens and try to write, write, write a single sentence that might pulse with a Clive James kind of electricity.

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Maybe that's how he kept Death from his door for so long. The power of his writing. Maybe he fixed Death a cup of tea on his Cambridge porch and he read his poem, Japanese Maple, out loud in full English sunshine before the very walled front garden tree that inspired his last truly great work of poetry.

Your death, near now, is of an easy sort.

So slow a fading out brings no real pain.

Breath growing short

Is just uncomfortable. You feel the drain

Of energy, but thought and sight remain:

Enhanced, in fact. When did you ever see

So much sweet beauty as when fine rain falls

On that small tree

And saturates your brick back garden walls,

So many Amber Rooms and mirror halls?

Maybe Death was so struck by that 2014 poem — that perfect ode to dying — that special dispensation was made to accommodate the late burst of genius and inspiration that came as a strange and dark benefit of his long departure. He got five more years and did not waste a day.

He wrote eight books after his diagnosis, including his epic and renowned translation of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Until mid-2017, he penned a weekly column for *The Guardian* called *Reports of My Death*, his deadpan take on his premature plans to part ways with his beloved Earth.

His final years were a perfect representation of his character: a 50-50 split between serious self-analysis and laugh-out-loud self-deprecation. His 1979 classic, *Unreliable Memoirs*, was a light read by a blatant comic genius — the suburban fence-hopping, troublemaking adventures of his self-dubbed superhero avatar “the Flash of Lighting” — that at once illuminated and masked the fragile psychology of a fearful boy whose father survived a World War II prisoner of war camp only to die inside the crashed plane he was flying home to Sydney and his six-year-old son.

“There you are,” James said in an exhaustive five-hour interview with *The Australian* in 2015.

“That’s the first hint of a great truth that I’m still dealing with. The book itself is happy because it’s about Australia, but it’s a book written by a quite seriously troubled person.

“Your expectations of life are usually expectations of immortality. But if you’ve seen very early in your life, someone close to you quite arbitrarily wiped out, that alters the expectation. What was security becomes insecurity.

“It’s really what happened. You could go on and on just writing about that or you could realise that it set up a polarity in which you’re obliged to compensate for this feeling of insecurity, by actually getting something done, leading the life that your loved one might have led.

“My father, I think, would have really been something, but I’m only guessing. What I did with my work was to make up for the life that he and my mother didn’t have.”

That five-hour interview was the gig of this wide-eyed writer's life, conducted largely in the literary giant's living room by the sliding glass doors that led out to his front garden with the Japanese maple.

"I've been technically dead now for several years," he said. "This is all extra time now. I'm not scared of not knowing anymore. I'm living far, far beyond my luck."

I brought him a gift of sorts. Something I hoped might appeal to his macabre side. It was his own obituary, typed 20 years ago and long-filed in the newspaper archives on a slow news day by a - forward-thinking journalist who thought the Kogarah Kid's fast-living days were numbered long ago. "Oh, this kills me," he howled, reading his own obit. "Oh, I'm gonna die! Well, it is useful to know where your story is going to end."

In the end, he ended that story in his own words. He rightly decided his obituary wasn't safe in anyone's hands but his own. This, he said, would "serve as a cheaper obituary than anything most newspapers are likely to have in the freezer".

That extra time — the injury time — meant he had time to make things right. He could close off gaps that had grown between friends and beloved family members who had long felt the gravitational pressure of swirling inside his orbit.

If he had one great wish by the end, it was to see his beloved Sydney again. His body never would have lasted the journey. He wanted to come home but he needed to be close to the life--sustaining support of Cambridge's Addenbrooke's Hospital, whose wondrous doctors he placed in the realms of the greats such as Shakespeare and Virgil and Kylie Minogue.

He told in the 2015 interview of his plans to come home regardless. A beautiful and simple wish. Scatter my ashes in Sydney Harbour.

"If you walk along Circular Quay past the overseas terminal and go up around the bend, under the bridge, from the wall there, I think, is the best spot," he said. "It's from where the old ferry used to leave to go across to Blues Point. That'd be the spot."

He smiled when he said that, a twinkle in the corner of his eye. "And then I'll be home," he said.

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