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| **The comic philosopher**

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| Australian poet Chris Wallace-Crabbe believes that a writer should be a social critic. *Picture: Neil Newitt**April 24, 2004* |

**It has taken Chris Wallace-Crabbe 13 years to write his latest epic, a task he says is "the climax of my Middle Period". Jane Sullivan reports.**'Do you really hate Melbourne?" schoolchildren ask him. It seems an odd question. He was born in the city, has lived here - on and off - for nearly 70 years, and has long been at the heart of its cultural life.But then Chris Wallace-Crabbe was pretty rude about the place in Melbourne, his most anthologised poem: "... Highway by highway, the remorseless cars/ Strangle the city, put it out of pain,/ Its limbs still kicking feebly on the hills./ Nobody cares. The artists sail at dawn/ For brisker ports, or rot in public bars./ Though much has died there, little has been born."Melbourne was written 40-odd years ago but he's still at it. "We believe in slightly more than sweet f.a." he wrote about Australians in his 1999 poem *The Minimal Republic*.That's the satirical Wallace-Crabbe, doing what one British reviewer called "brilliant, no-nonsense commentary on the great Australian sell-out". Our well-known apathy is both our sin and our strength, he says. "I thought it was the job of a writer to be a social critic and some of that has lingered in my writing." But "I'd rather live in Melbourne than anywhere else. And I've found it a good place to come back to."There is another Wallace-Crabbe in his poetry: a man chasing after experience just out of reach of language, with all the exuberance of Steve Irwin chasing a crocodile. High culture rubs shoulders with blokey Australian idiom, "crumbs", "cripes", and "boop a doop". As his brother Robin says, he's quite capable of getting Ron Barassi and Piero della Francesca into three lines.In his poem *The Thing Itself*, he talks about inventing a wonderful new sentence: "That would be a sentence to really show the buggers." And now he has a poem to really show the buggers: his longest yet, a "short epic" that has taken him 13 years to write. With splendid optimism, he calls it "the climax of my Middle Period".We are talking in the Chris Wallace-Crabbe Library at the Australian Centre in Carlton. Dominating the room is a huge portrait of Wallace-Crabbe with his head in the clouds, painted by his partner, Kristin Headlam. Clouds are one of his obsessions; others are sculpture, painting (he has a painter's visual sense, say artist friends), team sports, ancient history, flowers and the leaves of trees.Wallace-Crabbe is like Hollywood's idea of the scholar-poet. Tweedy, with a big brainy head, but also tanned and fit from exercise and weekly tennis - "we play with teeth-gritting competitiveness". Always ready with a smile and a quip and a deep, thrilling voice that every poet should possess. It comes almost as a shock to realise he will be 70 on May 6. "It does pull you up with a start," he says. "In the teeth of this I feel some injunction to proclaim vivacity."As always, he is busy. As chair of this year's Commonwealth Writers' Prize, he will be welcoming visiting literati, headed by the Nobel prizewinner V.S. Naipaul, to Melbourne next month, for the final, and deliberating with his fellow judges on the winning books. And his English publishers, Carcanet, are considering his biggest project so far, the 1700-line *The Universe Looks Down*."It's a small epic - I can't think of another name to give it," he says. "A bunch of very different characters are engaged in a quest to find the meaning of things. But because it's written in the modern democratic age, they are all going to find different meanings."Sources include the Holy Grail legends, the Renaissance epic poem *Orlando Furioso* and C.S. Lewis's *Narnia* books. The characters range from an Aboriginal wise man to a toxicologist, with a female narrator who can see everything coming but cannot prevent disasters. The poem took him so long to write because he could not envisage the ending. When he finished, a friend jokingly said to him: "Now for the major work."The critical consensus is that Wallace-Crabbe has been doing major work for half a century. "Along with Peter Porter and Les Murray, he's the Australian poet with the most significant international reputation," says David McCooey, senior lecturer in literary studies at Deakin University. If anything, his reputation has increased over the past 20 years: "Chris is a kind of comic philosopher, he mixes the day-to-day with the metaphysical ... He's often moving and amusing in the same poem."One of the reasons he writes poetry, Wallace-Crabbe says, is that he doesn't have much "prose stamina". He did write one novel that won a runner-up prize in a literary competition, but says he couldn't write one again unless he changes his habits.He laments the decline in poetry reading. "Ironically, huge numbers of kids want to do poetry-writing courses ... Most of them are interested in writing the stuff but are not interested in reading it, much less buying books of it. And it's a fantasy that you can write poetry without reading it."His own generation of poets grew up reading and recommending the latest Auden or Judith Wright or Elizabeth Bishop to each other. But Wallace-Crabbe's influences go much further back. He has returned frequently to his childhood in 1930s and '40s Melbourne in his poems and essays.His father, Kenneth, a journalist, comes across as a compulsive creator, inventor and doer. Chris's younger brother Robin (another multi-talented creator, a painter and novelist) describes a typical home scene: "Kenneth making a crossbow which would fire through the door of a car. Two small boys running around. Phyllis playing Chopin on the piano. At the same time Kenneth would be doing a lino cut, or a small etching, or casting tin soldiers into plaster moulds, heating lead on gas rings on the stove." Kenneth also wrote racy adventure stories: Robin remembers one where the hero was going down the Yangtze in a boat with a beautiful Chinese dame.Chris says his father encouraged the boys to be jacks of all trades. Robin says Kenneth never read highbrow literature, but he encouraged his sons to read. He passed on this curiously worded advice: "Your friends will betray you in the end, but a book will never desert you." The boys' mother, Phyllis, an excellent pianist, was a quieter but very strong influence, particularly when Kenneth was overseas for five years during World War II. Robin remembers a portrait of her on the wall of their Toorak flat with three arrow holes in it: for years, the brothers argued about who had shot the arrows.Her patient efforts got Chris reading very young, so by the time he was at school he had to be tied to the chair to stop him wandering around while other children were learning to read. Childhood reading included *Just William* and *Biggles*, Twain and Conan Doyle, Stevenson and Kipling. Later he discovered Keats and Browning at school, and when he was 16, a Bloomsbury-leaning librarian introduced him to Eliot, Forster, Gide and his great hero, Auden. He wrote his first poems a year later.One thing his family taught him was to notice everything. He is still astounded when his students don't know one species of tree or bird from another.Wallace-Crabbe is a curious combination of the public and the private. On the one hand he's famously gregarious, can engage with everyone, loves gossip and good talk. Just walk from the Australian Centre to Lygon Street and see how many people Chris knows, says McCooey, "and he remembers all their names!" He loves Melbourne and its cultural institutions - university life, going to art exhibition openings and book launches - and he also loves the blokey culture of cricket and football.But then there's the quiet, dreamy side. "I've always thought he conducts his life somewhere between poetry and reality," says his brother Robin. "He's extremely charming, but he's much more internalised than he appears. A lot of his life is lived inside himself in a rather protected little shell. Sometimes when you're talking to him his eyes are drifting everywhere and you can see his mind going off."But that doesn't mean he shuts himself away. "He's hugely aware on a lot of fronts, you have this sense he's listening to the world," says his friend, artist John Wolseley. "He regards poetry as something you share. Suddenly a little poem will arrive for me out of the blue in the post."He loves to compete, says his friend Jim Morgan. He has a formidable memory and every time they argue over a supposed fact and then look it up, it's nearly always Wallace-Crabbe who is right. He knows literature through and through: he has read some books 20 times (his most important advice to students is "Read it again"). At the same time, he's not particularly interested in winning and is gracious in defeat.Wallace-Crabbe's energetic and varied academic career began when he went into teaching to support his young family. McCooey says he was one of the first Australian scholars to teach creative writing at university level and to seriously engage with Australian literature. He also became an internationally recognised scholar with an enormous knowledge of English and American literature.A highlight for him was his three years at Yale on a Harkness creative artist fellowship, where he was free to be a poet without any need to do scholarly work. "It was the most wonderful boost to my confidence and my range of response to other writers."When he founded the Australian Centre at the University of Melbourne with the late Dinny O'Hearn in 1989, he became a cultural ambassador for his city and his country, interpreting our way of life to students from America and Asia. What he stresses is the question of displacement: what it's like to grow up with two worlds superimposed on each other, "that doubleness, and what literature can do with it".Look in different poems and essays and you will find different explanations for why he writes. They are always something to do with capturing the elusive: he keeps a journal of his dreams. "Our writings dramatise the life which is constantly slipping away from us," he writes.One life that slipped away from him was that of his eldest son. He wrote about the young man's death in the 1980s and McCooey says this dark, elegiac side brought out some of his best work. "I couldn't write about it for a long time," Wallace-Crabbe says. "Then a girl who used to be a close friend rang me and said she'd been to see his grave. And then the word erstwhile caught me. I thought, he's my erstwhile son, and a poem built itself around that. I didn't know when I began it what the last lines would be, the poem found them for me." They were, he adds quietly, a knife in the guts.But the Wallace-Crabbe exuberance is soon back. He quotes Auden's line "Bless what there is for being" and adds: "Part of my philosophy is we should, as far as we can, rejoice in the world. I don't think it's going to get better afterwards."He shows no signs of slowing down. He starts every day early, finishes late, and divides his time into short blocks. "I do something for an hour. Every Monday morning I come in with six or eight things in my head I've got to knock over." It's the same with his reading: five or six books on the go (it used to be up to 16), usually biography or history, switching from one to another for the flavour of the moment.Future projects include a book of autobiographical essays and another long poem focused on questions of belief, ethics and society. "I have no idea how it will be written. But I hope to do it in two years." Long may his Middle Period continue. |