

The Country of Unspoken Feeling: An Interview with Jean Kent

CHRISTOPHER LEE

Affiliation



The Australian poet Jean Kent was born at Chinchilla in rural Queensland on 30 August 1951 and educated at the Glennie Memorial School in Toowoomba in the mid to late sixties. Her youth was spent in and around the Darling Downs, before she took a degree in psychology from the University of Queensland and moved further afield. Kent likes to use domestic metaphors to suggest the paradoxes and significance of ordinary human life, and she can be compared with a fellow Toowoomban, David Rowbotham, for her tendency to explore the familial relationships of her youth within the significant spaces of vernacular architecture and local geography. Her books include *Verandahs* (1990), *Practising Breathing* (1991), and *The Satin Bowerbird* (1998). She has won many awards including the Josephine Ulrick National Poetry Prize, the Somerset Poetry Prize, the National Library Poetry Prize, the FAW Anne Elder Poetry Award, the ASAL Mary Gilmore Poetry Prize, and the FAW John Shaw Neilson Poetry Award. In 1994, she spent time as a resident at the Nancy Keesing Studio in Paris.

Jean recently returned to her hometown of Toowoomba to take part in a special set of readings as part of the City's centennial celebrations. Christopher Lee took the opportunity to speak with her about her career as a poet and the importance of place and family in her writing.

This is the country
where feelings stay unspoken.
In the home paddock of the head,
harvesting is private. Between the ripening
thoughts and the reality of speech,
there is always this silence
this space between warzones
bordering us as the verandah
boards the deep space
between the heart of the house
and the world.

from Jean Kent, "Verandah Poems: Under a Roof of
Rippled Tin," *Verandahs*, Sydney: Hale & Ironmonger,
1990, p.15.

CL: Jean, tell me about the creative process. How does Jean Kent go about writing poetry? Do you have deliberate self-conscious subjects, themes, and styles, or is it more serendipitous?

JK: I generally tend to respond more to things that are happening around me, and the poems begin as just phrases or some kind of rhythm that comes into my head. Possibly some memory or strong emotion has been triggered . . . Initially the poems are like an organic event and I don't know what is going to happen. I . . . just start off with a few words and let them develop into something. As I grow older, though, I find that I get one poem from that process and then I often feel that there could be more. I am starting to stand back and reflect on the initial content, then wonder about extending it into a linked sequence . . . That then becomes much closer to the kind of working where you can sit down at 9 o'clock in the morning, pick out a poem from yesterday (or last year!), play around with it a bit, follow various tangents, and hope to be haunted by it. Eventually I might have 3 poems . . . and I start to see then where it is all going. Obviously, at some stage structuring becomes important—a continuing image or metaphor to tie it all up, or some thought or emotion circling back to the beginning, for example. It's become a funny kind of mixture of being very fluid and unpredictable and also quite disciplined. I think that probably the stint in Paris helped me to learn that, because I amassed so much material that I did

not complete at the time. So now I have all these notebooks full of images and observations—just fragments often, but I tried to get down critical cues to help me remember—I mean concrete details as well as my emotional state— so they do sometimes have the heart of the poem there already. I can just sit down with those and meditate on them for a day or a week, or however long it takes . . .

CL: *Are you conscious of the writing process as the product of a career, or is it a much less self-conscious process of thinking through something?*

JK: Umm. I don't know. I don't think it's either really. I think it's just about being alive and being in tune with what's going on around me, what's happened to me already and what kind of little reverberations are happening between situations. It's kind of like an identity-less state . . . It's certainly not about being a poet because I never ever expected to be one.

CL: *When you apply for a writer's residency in Paris you have to assemble a body of work that entitles you to that level of funding support. There are clearly expectations that then go with that. Does that expectation to produce prompt the need to develop the writing discipline that now complements the fluid and unpredictable creative process?*

JK: I think so, yes. As soon as you get your first grant that happens. For me, anyway, there was this realization that— Oh I have to live up to this now! I have to justify the fact that they have paid me this money . . . whereas before that I was squeezing writing around working . . . as a psychologist or counselor, mainly. So the poetry was very much about whatever came into my head on my day off or something that happened at work or things that I had already started years ago that I would go back to . . . Once I had the grant and I had 5 days a week where I could focus on writing, I really did feel obligated to do something every day . . . There was a pressure to produce something even if it was just going back through old drafts and making them polished and publishable . . . certainly with the Paris residency there was this huge sense of obligation that was hanging over me.

CL: *When students bring their poetry to me and they say that they want to be a poet, I normally advise them to send their work to the small magazines. If they can place 20–30 poems with good magazines then they can write to a publisher and suggest a book. Then there is the hope that one book will lead to more. It's a view of poetry as a set of career steps, which is consistent with the discipline you have described that goes along with grant recognition. Is this sense of poetry as a career at odds with the idea that the poet's motivation comes from a less- if not disinterested pursuit of curiosity?*

JK: Yes. It's something about contemporary poetry that I'm very ambivalent and quite anxious about actually. It is becoming a career and I feel I have to watch myself, too, so that I'm not just producing poems that are just *competent*— perfectly publishable but that really don't go anywhere terribly exciting. Perhaps when I was younger that wouldn't

have mattered so much, but now I get really anxious and I don't publish a lot. It's a difficult question. If a poet publishes 5 books in 10 years and only a handful of the poems are memorable, should we be disappointed? Well, personally, I would be. Although sometimes I think poetry *should* have that freedom—to be well made but not electrifying. Even just to be light and entertaining. We don't put such a high expectation on fiction writers, after all . . . Perhaps because poetry is so rarely read and because it is written under such tight pressures I really want it to be something more, something that I feel really glad to have spent the time reading. Then I will read it again, and again, and again.

CL: *One way to see contemporary poetry is as a career shaped by certain literary, educational, and government institutions and mapped out by grants, publications, and awards. But I have also thought that in some sense contemporary Australian poetry operates as a form of guild in which poets write and read and review each other according to their own set of rules and interests. Even when you look at academic attention to Australian poetry, there are not a lot of critics who aren't also poets themselves. This makes for a very different situation to that which exists in relation to fiction. Do you work with a sense that you are part of a particular tradition or connected with a particular group or school of poets, and if so how do you understand those relationships?*

JK: Not really. I don't feel connected and I've probably gone out of my way not to. Perhaps it's to do with where I live in Lake Macquarie, near Newcastle; so, I'm just far enough away from Sydney to be able to go down for readings and the things I want to, and to keep in touch with a small group of poets there, but not to be constantly in that cultural scene. I'd probably do that anyway even if I lived in Sydney, but it works very well living where I do. It allows a degree of disconnection so that I can read and admire other poets, but I don't necessarily know a lot about them as people.

CL: *Lake Macquarie may be a little out of the way but there is a very active and interesting poetry scene in Newcastle and the Hunter Valley.*

JK: Yes there is a very lively, very energetic, and very talented group there. Judy Johnson, Rob Riel, David Kirkby . . . of course, Paul Kavanaugh has been there for years and set up the creative writing course at the university and started the Mattara/Newcastle Poetry Prize, along with Christopher Pollnitz, and Lucy Dougan who used to run the Writers' Centre. There are a lot of terrific people there, and we do keep in contact with each other but not excessively. It's interesting. I think we appreciate the fact that we are all there and that we are not too peculiar—in a region better known for industry and football. But we don't go to one another's places often or take our poems to read to one another or anything like that. We tend to meet up through organizing competitions for new poets and putting out local anthologies. And that's something that's been really enriching for me because it has given me the contact with these people in a different context. I've found that by looking at other

people's work—judging the competitions, selecting poems for publishing, talking through our selection process—I've found that I've learnt a huge amount.

CL: *So who do you write for?*

JK: Probably for myself. Until a poem is finished I don't really have anybody in mind. It's just that there's something there intriguing me and I want to get it out and then I want to make it into a well formed, well crafted piece of writing. And then I do what you were talking about before. I think what magazine could it go in, where does it fit, where do I send it? And I send it out into the world. I don't really think about who is going to read it, other than hoping that it will be published somewhere.

CL: *Do you have any models?*

JK: Ummmmmm!

CL: . . . *or heroes?*

JK: I have a shadow group of poets that I live with and that are almost as important to me as real people. They go back to Gerard Manley Hopkins and Dylan Thomas and those sorts of people I read at school . . . and more recent discoveries such as Les Murray, Seamus Heaney, Mary Oliver, Charles Wright. And as for Australians, well it's difficult to start talking about those people because they are alive and in contact and I worry that I'm going to forget someone. But people like Judith Beveridge and Anthony Lawrence I think are fabulous. They have been emerging at a similar time to me. They are developing alongside me, and it's nice to see what these kindred poets are doing.

CL: *When did you decide that poetry was important and that it was something that you were going to work at?*

JK: Probably when I was sixteen and in the 2nd last year of school. And it was probably that adolescent desire for self-expression added to being drunk on Dylan Thomas! I had been writing a lot before that, though. I started writing stories from as soon as I could pick up a pen and scribble on the walls in symbols—even before I had words. My mother was telling people last night that I used to walk around the yard telling stories out loud.

CL: *That's the way they teach children now. They call it magic writing and they encourage the children not to let the fact that they can't write a word stop them from imagining their story. When they reach a word they can't spell they just put down squiggles.*

JK: I probably started that way with poetry, too, initially. Because I just thought that poets were such strange, mythical people; so, I was only doing it for my own pleasure. I'd never seen a real poet until I reached university . . . In primary school we read Wordsworth and Henry Kendall, who were quite amazing in their own way—I did love the sounds of their poems, and, of course, we learnt them by heart and did "recitations"—but it wasn't until those last couple of years at secondary school that I discovered poets I could really connect

with. I loved that idea of using language for its own sake, in a way that is different from fiction writing. But I thought that *real* poetry was on another plane. It was not something that I could do. So I just wrote it for myself. And I just went wild with the language! When I went to university it was in the back of my head that I would write. But I thought I would write fiction, novels, short stories, and that's what I was mainly doing. I spent most of my time going through Women's College Library and borrowing books, sitting in my room reading. I discovered the Penguin Modern European Poets, with people like Miroslav Holub and Zbigniew Herbert, both of whom I loved—and another amazing Penguin series of modern poets including Ferlinghetti, Ginsberg, William Carlos Williams . . . I would sit in my room and do my own thing, never imagining that I would actually do much with my poems. But I had a friend who was also writing, and she told me about little magazines and said "send some away." And so I did, and that was how the idea developed. The first things that I sent away were accepted and naively I thought, OK, I can do this! But it took ten years of sending things out before I wrote much that was worthwhile. After the first acceptances there were lots of rejections. I just thought, oh well, that's poetry. I'm not really very good at it; after all, poets are pretty exotic creatures . . . and I don't come from that kind of background. I was still writing fiction, I'd written a couple of novels (not publishable, of course) and taken one of them through several drafts. So that seemed to be a better direction to persist with. But then I had to work, and I didn't have a lot of time for writing long fiction or for the concentrated overall reviewing you need to do to make a novel work. I got more poems written; more poems published; and after a while I realized that I had more than enough poems for a book. So I started submitting a manuscript. It sort of crept up on me.

CL: *So for the first book you merely collected your published poems and that was that?*

JK: Well it took ten years for that to happen, from when there were enough poems for a book to when one was actually published. There were a lot of letters along the way saying that we think you'll get a book out some time but it is a very competitive business and you're not really what we are looking for at the moment.

CL: *Verandahs won the Association for the Study of Australian Literature's Mary Gilmore Award and the Anne Elder Award, and it was short listed for the NSW Premier's Award. When those honors came along it must have changed your sense of yourself, certainly your sense of yourself as a poet.*

JK: [laughs] Yeah, I resigned from my job. It was pretty silly really. It was good as it turned out, but it was very risky. On the strength of the manuscript of *Verandahs*, I got a decent sized grant and then I got another grant the next year. I was counseling in NSW TAFE colleges, and I got into the habit where I'd get a grant and I'd take leave—until I used up all the leave without pay that they were prepared to give me. I was trying to persuade them to come to a job sharing arrangement

with another person so I could work halftime. I did that for the last year. But then the “Verandahs” sequence won the National Library prize, which gave me \$3500—that was quite a substantial amount at the time for a poem, so I decided I had to get serious about this and I resigned.

CL: *I want to go back to when you were at University. You were reading widely and studying psychology. Why? What part of your brain was saying “Jean Kent, Psychologist”?*

JK: I was thinking about that last night in relation to what you were saying about growing up in regional places and the way we end up writing afterwards. And I actually think that that has an awful lot to do with it. Having been in all those little towns and then coming to Toowoomba, I think I was really steeped in the oddness of people. You had to be tolerant—and I don’t think I was particularly tolerant then—but I think I was given exposure to people living in a lot of different circumstances. So I became very interested in people and very curious about them.

When I went to university I was going to do languages—I enrolled in French, Japanese, and English. Well, I went along to the English lectures and I was horrified. So . . . after about 4 weeks of English . . . I changed my enrollment. I went to my English tutor and I said, I think if I do this course I’m never going to read a book again in my life. . . . This was the University of Queensland in 1969 . . . We had progressive assessment each week and were churning through books very fast, plus we were doing Dylan Thomas, who was my hero, and we had to analyze one of his poems in what I thought was a very clinical way—and I thought no, I don’t want to do this.

CL: *Was it a new critical reading . . .*

JK: Yes, it was starting to be. I just followed my instincts. I already knew I wanted to write, but I couldn’t say that. I changed my enrollment to psychology and then sat in on all the English lectures. I did that for about a year and, because all my friends were studying English, I would meet up with them to talk to them about all of the books. Because I read all the books, I had all the books, I’d bought all the books! And I got a much better deal, I think, because I read them and I thoroughly enjoyed them while my friends sweated about the assignments and worried about what does this mean and what is T. S. Eliot alluding to here . . . So, I kept doing the writing and reading, but psychology was giving me a different view of people, a different background knowledge. And it gave me a job. I don’t know whether I expected that or not, but it was the way that it developed. It turned out to be the best job that I could have done because as a counselor I had people coming in to my office, sitting down, and saying, “well this is my life.” It was just like being presented with a living novel. And I would go away and I just can’t help myself, I have to write things down.

CL: *Was writing it down a form of therapy for you?*

JK: No, I don’t think it was therapy. It was almost like acknowledging a debt to the person. That these people had opened themselves up and what they said was so extraordinary and so moving and it obviously connected with something in me. I would start off with their story but probably I ended up writing about myself more than anything. It was a kind of wonder at the world I wanted to write down. What they said, and how they had lived, triggered the poems.

CL: *In your verse there is an exquisite sensitivity to language and a clear interest in emotion, interpersonal relations, pain. It is clear that that comes out of a deep thinking and a professional understanding . . . How does somebody who is practicing the arts of the poet, where sensitivity is so vital, deal with the day-to-day rigors of being a counselor where sensitivity lays you bare to the personal damage around you?*

JK: I think I survived it because I had the writing and I kept taking time off. Before I burnt out I would say I want to take leave without pay now. Then I would go away and replenish myself.

CL: *When I left school I worked in a hospital for over a decade. I was just a kid really when I started. In that time I witnessed a great deal of suffering. There came a time when I realized that the people working longer term in that environment were very hardened. I guess it’s a survival strategy?*

JK: Yes . . . it’s very chilling to watch. . . . I wasn’t going to let that happen to me . . . As soon as I felt that was happening I would opt out and I did other things . . . like gardening . . . getting back to really concrete natural things.

CL: *You can see that in the poems. They express a joy in nature or rehearse small practices of self, which engage with natural rhythms, cycles, colors, tastes, and textures. The poetry represents sensual experience as a process of the self. This gives the verse subjective depth. I want to talk a little about the cycle of home and away, which underlies some of the poetry. Amongst the early poems there are those about being a schoolgirl stifled in a provincial city and longing for an escape. Then later the poems in Verandahs bring you back to the grandparents’ home and the ambivalent security of the verandah. In between there seems to be a loss of innocence. People seem subject to damage in the world, and life is construed as a process of dealing with disappointment and recovering from damage. This seems to prompt a reconsideration of your own roots and the need to revisit the complex relationships associated with them. In the world of Hollywood there would be some grand crisis at the root of all this, but there doesn’t seem to be anything like that?*

JK: I don’t think there was . . . obviously when my father was put in hospital with TB; when I was six, that must have been very influential, but I think that my brothers and I were very well protected from that in lots of ways. We were taken back to my grandparents’ place because of it, and so we ended up in that very extraordinary family environment.

CL: Tell me about their background?

JK: My grandfather Campbell, who owned the property near Jimbour I wrote about in the “Verandahs” poems, was a grazier. That was my mother’s home; she grew up there. They had sheep at the time I lived there, then wheat and then later they moved into cattle. They’ve been there since after the First World War. It was a soldier’s settlement block. My grandfather was in the Fifth Light Horse and was at Gallipoli. My grandmother married him a month before he went off to the war, and when he didn’t come back promptly she said, “well, I’m coming over there to see you.” She was an extraordinarily independent woman. She hopped on a boat and took herself off to Egypt and stayed there a while. Then she traveled. Took herself off to Paris in 1916 and then Scotland, England and met his relatives. And she wrote letters to him all the time.

CL: Does the family have those letters?

JK: Yes. They were all kept, and I have copies of several.

CL: Have you thought of writing about those letters?

JK: Yes it’s one of my projects at the moment. But it’s very difficult because she was such a good writer and she has such a strong voice. I haven’t worked out yet how to do it.

CL: That’s interesting. I found that reading the poetry while researching regional writing framed it in particular ways. Once it became interested in the stresses found in relationships, there was a tendency to misrecognise characters as repressed and narrow according to the familiar stereotypes of provincialism. Your grandparents don’t sound like those kinds of people?

JK: No, not at all. And I think that my grandmother might be the key there. She died in 1927, when my mother was six. So I never met her. My grandfather married again—he had four small daughters at the time of his death—and my mother’s stepmother brought them all up, and so I knew her as my grandmother. But my *real* grandmother was from Sydney. She was from the Gowings retail family and she left all that to marry this man from the country, left Sydney and came to live in a fairly basic house on the Darling Downs. Now I’d love to know what she really thought about that. How she *really* felt about it. Because in all the letters from Paris, and England and so on, she is so sophisticated and cultured. And she never let anybody in the family see her complain, as far as I can see, but she must have had this extraordinary tension. I grew up with a sense of that tension in my mother and my aunts. They had this idea that there is another place . . . a place of culture. So everybody learnt the piano or did painting, and read books; they are all great readers. But they mostly ended up in the country, on properties or in small towns, though my mother and her older sister both married bank managers; so, they at least moved around. I do get a sense of a tension between their country backgrounds and the other kinds of possibilities that they might have liked to pursue in their lives. Three of my aunts are amateur artists, and they are really good. If they had had the chance they could have been anything . . .

CL: A common convention for representing rural and regional cultures is to place them in the past. The anthropologist Johannes Fabian calls it the “denial of coevalness” and uses it to explain the way in which indigenous cultures could be displaced by being relocated in time. A similar situation happens in this country in relation to the coast. There is the sense that as you move west from the coast that you are moving back in time. This is quite a theme in the writing of the Darling Downs. David Rowbotham captures it beautifully when he talks about “standstill days.” In his early work it is explored quite positively in terms of a people spiritually in tune with the natural rhythms of the land. Les Murray, of course, is the most powerful contemporary exponent of this tradition, and at times he sets it quite antagonistically against this “metropolitan century.” Bruce Dawe, always a Melbournian at heart, is much less kind about the standstill days on the Darling Downs. At the root of representations of provincialism there is often this sense that somehow regional people are missing out on the dynamic modern moment. I wonder how those soldier settlers felt about it though. Some of the literature suggests that they were happy to leave the modern world of European warfare and lose themselves back at home in a very different form of life. How did your grandfather feel about it?

JK: I really don’t know. My grandfather was a very taciturn man. I probably spoke about twenty words to him. He was a wonderful man, a very gentle man. He was the ideal person from my childhood because he was always there. He wasn’t the kind of man who would talk about his feelings or what he thought much. In fact, not many people in my family did. So I was almost fighting against that when I started writing these things down and expressing the thoughts that were considered not to be expressible. Was he happy to retreat back to country life? I suspect so—but I don’t know. It is the kind of thing that I ponder about now, especially having lived in Paris and having felt that tension there, too. I loved the place; I thought it was like heaven walking out the door each day. But my *body* did not like it. And I realized I couldn’t live with that. Am I really made for a “standstill” place? I do have to have that strong connection with space. Because although I’ve spent most of my adult life on the other side of the mountain near the coast, my early childhood was on the flat plains to the west, in that bigger area with big skies overhead, and that’s where I feel relaxed and comfortable. I think that that was maybe my grandfather’s place as well. So there is a real tension in all this for me. I think that it has been in my family for quite some time.

CHRISTOPHER LEE is the Director of the Public Memory Research Centre at the University of Southern Queensland. He is currently working with Robert Dixon on an illustrated edition of Frank Hurley’s diaries, which will be published by Melbourne UP in 2009.