

Walking on Graves: An Interview with Amy T. Matthews¹
Gillian Dooley

Amy T. Matthews won the 2010 Adelaide Festival Award for Best Unpublished Manuscript for *End of the Night Girl* (Wakefield Press, 2011), a novel about an Adelaide waitress haunted by the Holocaust. *TNL* editor Gillian Dooley spoke to her about the challenges of writing on this immense, vexed subject.

GD ‘There is no equivalence’ – *End of the Night Girl* seems to invite criticism for its use of the Holocaust, while at the same time providing a response, or series of responses, to that kind of criticism. How do you negotiate that tension?

ATM When I started this project I felt like I was walking on people’s graves. I felt a great sense of anxiety about whether I had any right to fictionalise the Holocaust. Every time I sat down I had a little voice in my head criticising every word I wrote, accusing me of voyeurism, appropriation, historical inaccuracy, moral vacuity. So I put the anxiety into the book. For me, it was the only ethical choice. In essence *End of the Night Girl* is a novel about the ethics of fictionalising the Holocaust.

GD Your novel also raises questions about the nature of fiction – how the creative process works, all the ethical issues about ‘stealing stories from dead people’ and playing god, but I was particularly struck by the fact that you didn’t feel you had to provide answers to those questions. Was it difficult to maintain that moral ambiguity?

ATM It wasn’t difficult because I’m not sure there are answers to any of those questions. The book engages with some enormous moral and philosophical questions and for years I wrestled with them and, as a result, wrestled with writing the book. I felt free when Nick Jose said to me: ‘You only have to raise the questions; you don’t have to answer them.’ The act of questioning is enormously important. We’re fixated on answers and quick information these days, but unanswerable questions are useful too; we need them to open up territory we’re not always comfortable entering.

And in the case of moral questions there’s not always one clear answer. Different people have different ways of understanding and coming to peace with this idea of ‘stealing stories from dead people’ and I was always fascinated by how other writers approached the material. Some, like Jonathan Safran Foer with *Everything is Illuminated*, were inspirational but there were others that outraged me, where I felt the author had crossed the line and appropriated mass suffering for cheap narrative purposes. I found Inga Clendinnen’s *Reading the Holocaust* was a touchstone during the writing of *End of the Night Girl*; she explores the moral questions of appropriation in a way that made sense of the anxiety I was feeling about my own work.

GD The Holocaust narrative is at a remove from you – it’s actually Molly’s story. Is there a difference, writing metafictionally like that? Was it different writing about Gienia and writing about Molly?

¹ A shorter version of this interview was published in the *Adelaide Review* September 2011.

ATM All of Gienia's story was written first; I think there were two or three scenes written late in the process, but for the most part her story was finished before Molly's was even started. Molly was much harder to find than Gienia. I started her story dozens of times without success. No matter what I did I couldn't find her voice. And then one day, out of the blue, she just showed up. It was absolute subconscious writing. She arrived on the page, psychologically fully-formed, and the words just poured out of me. Her story ended up being written in a matter of weeks. She just took charge.

Once I had the two stories, the hard work started. The next drafts were about how the stories would be contrasted and it was a bit like doing a jigsaw puzzle. I knew as I was writing that the two stories would be juxtaposed but it took me four or five drafts of the novel before I realised that Molly was writing Gienia's story. Which changed everything. Being able to play with meta-fictional and self-reflexive techniques meant I could open up all of those ethical questions which had been plaguing me.

GD Molly isn't a proud author. At one stage she describes her story as a tumour – the writing almost seems like a sickness. Is that just a fictional construct? What does writing mean to you?

ATM That's a complete fictional construct. The image of her writing as cancerous was so I could draw out the idea of the material affecting her, and of the act of writing in her case as being an act of transgression. Writing is a joy for me. Not always, sometimes you're so stymied you want to throw the computer at the wall, but for the most part I do it because I enjoy it. There's no greater feeling on earth than when I'm in flow and a story is working. This is not to say it's not hard work, because it is, novels eat up years of your life. But you couldn't sacrifice the time and the energy, squeezing it around paid work and family commitments, if there wasn't the pay off. And for me the pay off is joy.

GD It's not just a Holocaust novel, of course, it's an Adelaide novel, and the workplace – the restaurant – is sharply observed, clearly something you know about from personal experience?

ATM I spent most of my twenties working in hospitality. My family has owned Jolley's Boathouse since I was eleven, so I spent a lot of my life there. Like a lot of people, I funded my studenthood by waiting tables. On many levels it was a great experience: it conquered my shyness, taught me about food and wine, and introduced me to some fascinating people. But I have to admit that after a while I hated it with a passion. You learn a lot about human nature when you're a waiter and a lot of it is depressing. People – both customers and workmates – can be awful to you over the most trivial things. I quit waiting forever one day when a man yelled at me about a side-salad. He was red-faced and furious and out to humiliate me because of a *salad*. I remember thinking 'life's too short for this' and I quit and never went back to waiting tables – that was almost ten years ago. That kind of behaviour in some ways made sense of the Holocaust for me. Because how many times have you heard someone ask in bewilderment 'How could they *do* something like that?' and yet I'd go to work and be cursed at and humiliated over a bowl of lettuce leaves. There is no equivalence, but those moments always struck me like a warning. Some people revel in having power over other people; or they're liable to forget that

you're a human being at all.

One of the best quotes I ever read was from Dave Barry: 'If your date is nice to you and rude to the waiter, then they're not a nice person.'

GD I think one thing that impressed me most about the novel was its restraint. OK, there are some unpleasant characters, Chef's a bit of a bastard, but he's not unlikeable. No-one's there just to make a point.

ATM No, he has his own motivations for what he does and Molly doesn't quite have access to them. He's clearly having marital problems and chefs are under enormous pressure in terms of work hours and performance. Particularly in high end restaurants where the food they produce is essentially art.

I was always fascinated by the fact that a chef could bully you during your shift (to the point I've had things thrown at me) and then sit down for a knock off drink and chat to you like you were the best of friends. Which sometimes you are. I think there's a tenderness to Molly and Chef's relationship which is quite touching, even though he can be abusive at other times. People are complex and I don't believe in good and evil, even in the face of the Holocaust. I think we're all capable of both kinds of acts and the danger is in making anyone 'other'.

GD You teach creative writing at Adelaide University? What can be taught in creative writing courses, and what can't?

ATM Last year at Writers' Week Irvine Welsh said the most brilliant thing I'd ever heard: 'Writing isn't teachable, but it is learnable.' That sums up my feelings about teaching Creative Writing. All art processes are individual and in the end as a writer you're alone with your computer (or your pen and paper). Only you can write your work. But I do believe in learning, in surrounding yourself with other writers, going to seminars and festivals, reading constantly, and having discussions about craft and process. I think attending the university is a way of 'hot-housing' your process because of the rich exchange of information and the fact that you're taken seriously as a writer (by yourself as well as others). Talent is never something which can be taught, but craft can. Just like the other creative arts – Music, Dance, Drama, Visual Arts – we can spend time thinking about the tools we use; in our case these are tools such as point of view, characterisation, setting, dialogue etc. But what university courses do also, particularly at post-graduate level, is introduce writers to theory: narrative theory, theories of representation, theories of language and meaning, political theory, genre theory. Hemingway said that we're working in an art form where everyone is an apprentice and no one is a master; the learning is continual and university courses are just another avenue of learning.

GD Who have you learnt from, as a writer?

ATM I have always been a voracious reader and I think first and foremost that's where you learn as a writer. All good writers are readers. But on a personal level I've been fortunate enough to have met many brilliant writers at the University of Adelaide and through the South Australian Romance Authors. The talent in Adelaide beggars belief. But the three key people I have to thank, who mentored me early on and still inspire me, were my mentors at the

university: Nick Jose, Eva Hornung and Tom Shapcott. They're all extremely talented writers but they've also always been generous with their knowledge, and they're still supportive today.

GD This is your first published novel, but are there others?

ATM It took a long time for *End of the Night Girl* to get published, which was to its benefit, as it needed the time to season and I kept tweaking it over the years. But during the time I was tweaking I also wrote four more books. I write literary fiction under my own name and historical romance under a pseudonym. I'm hopeful those books will find a home soon too. I'm always writing something. I just finished my latest book in July, and launched immediately into researching the next one while that one sits for a while, waiting to be re-worked.

GD How important was it to you to win the Festival award in 2010? Are these competitions helpful to authors, and to literary culture?

ATM I can't stress how important awards like the Festival award are, and hats off to Arts SA and Wakefield Press for that award, which has launched many great local authors. It's hard to get published if your work is even slightly outside of the box. I had many agents and editors really like the book but they didn't think they could market it because it's not an easy one to categorise. An editor once said to me, a little despairingly, 'why don't you write a nice simple book next time and send that to me?' But I don't write simple books; I'm not interested in writing simple books. If it weren't for this award, I think I'd still be struggling to get published.

I'm really passionate about writing about Adelaide; we're under-represented in literature. Why don't we mythologise and fictionalise our own landscape? Undergraduate students are always telling me that they don't read books set in Australia because they're boring, and I think that's so sad. We need more good books set in an Australian (and South Australian) context because these are the spaces where we explore the issues important to us. How can we work through our anxieties, problems, and examine our own culture, without local art?