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Why I Write?

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Why I Write?

Abstract

Why do I write? This is like being asked why do I breathe, eat, sleep; and the short answer is because it is impossible to do otherwise. Even before the first geographical dislocation in my life (the 1000 mile move, at the age of 7, from Melbourne to Brisbane which are two different countries), I found it necessary to tell myself stories - and indeed to write them down in little notebooks - to explore the meaning of the bewildering contradictions I kept bumping into. From my first day at school, I felt like a space voyager, travelling daily between alien planets whose languages and customs were incomprehensible to each other. (This turned out to be good training for the rest of my life.)



Janette Turner Hospital was born in Melbourne in 1942, but moved to Brisbane at the age of 7. By education and emotional allegiance, she is a Queenslander, with a particular attachment to the tropical far north where she used to teach high school and where she returns every year.

She is a regular reviewer for the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Boston Globe*, and the *TLS*.

She has published five novels and two collections of short stories. Her first novel *The Ivory Swing*, 1982, won Canada's Seal Award. This was followed by *The Tiger in the Tiger Pit* (1983); *Borderline* (1985), runner up for the Adelaide Festival's Fiction Award; *Dislocations* (short stories; 1987; winner of Fellowship of Australian Writers' Fiction Award); *Charades* (1988), a finalist for both the Miles Franklin and the National Book Award in Australia, and also cited by the *New York Times* as one of the 'Most Notable Books of 1988'; *Isobars* (short stories; 1990), shortlisted for Canada's Trillium Award; *The Last Magician* (1992), was shortlisted for Australia's Miles Franklin Award and Canada's Trillium Award, was listed in the *New York Times*' 'Most Notable Books of 1992'.

JANETTE TURNER HOSPITAL

Why I Write?

Why do I write? This is like being asked why do I breathe, eat, sleep; and the short answer is because it is impossible to do otherwise. Even before the first geographical dislocation in my life (the 1000 mile move, at the age of 7, from Melbourne to Brisbane which are two different countries), I found it necessary to tell myself stories – and indeed to write them down in little notebooks – to explore the meaning of the bewildering contradictions I kept bumping into. From my first day at school, I felt like a space voyager, travelling daily between alien planets whose languages and customs were incomprehensible to each other. (This turned out to be good training for the rest of my life.)

I grew up in a micro-culture radically different from the macro-culture I encountered at school. My home life existed within that particular pocket of lower working class culture which, instead of finding meaning in pub, racetrack, violence, and sport (the usual Australian sources of working-class cohesion), found consolation and validation for a marginalized existence in fundamentalist evangelical religious fervour. My home life was severely circumscribed (quaintly and richly, it seems to me now). I was, for example, 20 years old before I had seen a movie, watched television, been to a doctor, or tasted alcohol. But also – and this was what people on the other planet I visited could never comprehend – family life was warm, rollicking, rich in love and hilarity. Indeed, my first experience of intolerance and the terrible cruelties which attend it came not from fundamentalists (the designated 'bigots'), but from school: and not only from bullying kids both fearful and scornful of difference, but from teachers, those symbols of liberal enlightenment. This has given me a lifelong fascination with the prejudices and incipient fascisms of the 'radical' and the 'enlightened'.

Though I've put a great deal of distance (in all senses) between me and my fundamentalist background, I am nevertheless constantly amazed by the unwarranted, unearned, and deeply uninformed glibness and bigotry of intellectuals toward non-intellectual sub-cultures (or, more accurately: toward non-standard-intellectual sub-cultures, for the appropriating and privileging of one small facet of the intelligence by western academics and 'rationalists' is in itself an act of aggressive intolerance.) The demonizing of the Other goes both ways; it is by no means the exclusive preserve of

the intellectually primitive; and the etiology of this phenomenon is part of my subject matter.

In my writing, I often prod at the ironies, discrepancies, contradictions, and hypocrisies that arise from the clash of belief systems. I harbour, I confess, a deep-seated cynicism about the blustering prophets of polemic, and also about the quiet well-bred tyranny of academic specialists. I observe such foci of authority very closely indeed, particularly when they are not hiding behind the masks of lectern or text. I am extremely interested, for example, in how they speak to taxi drivers and waitresses. 'Marginal' comments and events have always grabbed me. I listen hardest to what people don't say.

My urgent childhood need to decode a bewildering sign system in order to make sense of and to function at school has made me an instinctive semiotician. Dislocation (of belief systems, of geography, of culture, of trauma) and the ways in which characters mediate for themselves massive disruptions in their lives are my constant subject matter, but in exploring these issues, my attention is always focused at the edge of the stage, in the margins, on the 'bit players' and the 'extras'. I prefer to listen to the people no one listens to.

Silences and absences haunt me. I am absorbed by the ways in which silence, for the radically marginalized and disempowered, can be a form of protection, dignity, and survival.

My writing, I suppose, is a kind of map making (always provisional) of the potent unseen and unheard.