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Abstract

I never quite know how to begin with that question. I had a few false starts when I was at school. I wrote a short story and sent it to the Australian Women's Weekly, and when I was at university I wrote a novel and a few short stories which I didn't finish. But then I got going seriously when I went to England in 1976. I'd always had a yearning to see if I could write or not so I thought I'd take six months off and live on my savings in a garret in Paris. I thought if I was going to do the cliché I might as well go the whole hog! So I wrote two novels in the space of nine months which are both absolutely appalling. They're the ones you write to get a certain amount of junk out of your system before you can start really writing. The urge to write came out of the fact that I couldn't find anything to read that seemed to be about the kind of life that I lived, the kind of problems that I was dealing with. There was a lot of that rather uplifting feminist writing, like Erica Jong and Lisa Alther, and they made me feel discouraged because they were so cheery. In spite of their anguish and self doubts they had some kind of control over their lives. And they had gusto and they weren't afraid. I was terribly timid. And then at the other extreme there were those British women: Angela Carter, Emma Tennant, Micheline Wandor, the Women's Press sort of books. And they seemed to me like another extreme. They were writing a kind of highly analytical feminist fiction, and I wasn't one of those either. And I felt as a reader I was caught between two stools, and when I began to write I realized that I was still falling between two stools. I sent some of the early stories to the Women's Press and they were rejected, with a note saying they weren't feminist enough. I sent the same stories to conventional outlets too, and the men there also rejected them, saying they were too radically feminist and angry. So I started writing out of that sort of frustration of there being no reflection anywhere of the reality that I seemed to be dealing with.

The Story-teller's Revenge: Kate Grenville Interviewed by Gerry Turcotte

Could we start this interview generally, perhaps with your background as a writer. How you started and why.

I never quite know how to begin with that question. I had a few false starts when I was at school. I wrote a short story and sent it to the *Australian Women's Weekly*, and when I was at university I wrote a novel and a few short stories which I didn't finish. But then I got going seriously when I went to England in 1976. I'd always had a yearning to see if I could write or not so I thought I'd take six months off and live on my savings in a garret in Paris. I thought if I was going to do the cliché I might as well go the whole hog! So I wrote two novels in the space of nine months which are both absolutely appalling. They're the ones you write to get a certain amount of junk out of your system before you can start really writing. The urge to write came out of the fact that I couldn't find anything to read that seemed to be about the kind of life that I lived, the kind of problems that I was dealing with. There was a lot of that rather uplifting feminist writing, like Erica Jong and Lisa Alther, and they made me feel discouraged because they were so cheery. In spite of their anguish and self doubts they had some kind of control over their lives. And they had gusto and they weren't afraid. I was terribly timid. And then at the other extreme there were those British women: Angela Carter, Emma Tennant, Micheline Wandor, the *Women's Press* sort of books. And they seemed to me like another extreme. They were writing a kind of highly analytical feminist fiction, and I wasn't one of those either. And I felt as a reader I was caught between two stools, and when I began to write I realized that I was still falling between two stools. I sent some of the early stories to the *Women's Press* and they were rejected, with a note saying they weren't feminist enough. I sent the same stories to conventional outlets too, and the men there also rejected them, saying they were too radically feminist and angry. So I started writing out of that sort of frustration of there being no reflection anywhere of the reality that I seemed to be dealing with.

You're a favourite as a Creative Writing teacher. How much of the techniques you use are the result of your studies in the USA?

Almost all of them. What I learned there was to free up. I had a teacher there who said, 'Look, they're quite good Kate but they're full of closure.' Well, that really seared me to the heart. What he meant by closure was what I thought a well-made story looked like. All the threads tied up. The gun on page one fired by the end of the story. I thought that was what good writing looked like.

What I learned studying with those American writers was that good writing could look like many different things. And open-ended, exploratory ways of writing can be more exciting, more risky too, than safe, traditional, highly controlled forms. As a writer I learned to trust instinct, and not to feel I had to know everything about the story before I started it. The notion of writing as discovery, rather than as just tale-telling, was revolutionary for me. The British-inspired literary education I'd had was very prim and straight-laced – the worst thing you could be was out of control. What I learned in the U.S. was that if you're never out of control, you never break out into discovery.

Can you say a bit about the differences between the North American approach to Creative Writing and the Australian approach?

There is no belief in Creative Writing here. Even the term is sneered at. Creative Writing is considered the kind of thing that you do at WEA¹ along with macramé and pottery. The image is of little old ladies writing about their lives. In this country when you're a Writer-in-Residence you still have to go through that dispiriting argument about whether you can teach writing. As part of our British baggage we have taken on board the Muse theory of writing, the theory that writers are an elect group, an elite touched by the finger of Art. Academics like to keep the study of literature firmly in the realm of the theoretical: the idea that you can learn things from Shakespeare as a writer that you can never learn as a critic, has not made much headway. And our British heritage also gives us a distrust of experimentation and innovation. We would rather go on perpetuating old forms of excellence than discover new ones.

*You have said elsewhere that you get very bored with anything which isn't structurally challenging.² More than this, that you felt inhibited by 'form' and felt you had to fracture it in order to speak as a woman. How did this surface in your earliest work, *Bearded Ladies*?*

Those stories...some of them are attempting to be traditional well-made stories, but some of them under the influence of Americans I met in Paris, are kind of pale imitations of John Hawkes, John Burroughs.

All men?

Yes, the mainstream, even in innovative writing, is still male. Who are some women? Oh, Kathy Acker, of course. So a story like 'Making Tracks', began as a traditional well-made story. Eventually I realized that what I really wanted to write about was a kind of nightmare state of mind. And I knew that that mood was going to be trivialized in any conventional way of telling that story. It would be reduced to either/or: either it's a dream or it's reality. What I had to do was to find a form in which what happens to that woman was simultaneously fantasy and reality. The woman does go back, and she doesn't go back. The power of her imagining the return makes it real. Something doesn't actually have to have happened in real life to be real. So I wanted to get in these simultaneous impossibilities. Or a story like 'Blast Off': what I wanted there was to find a model for pure rage. I had no model for a story as angry as I wanted that one to be. So it came out in those chipped little fragments of pure black hatred.

In your mind, is the ending of Dreamhouse sufficiently open to be successful according to what you outlined earlier in your comments on closure? It's really ending in a beginning, but is that sufficiently open?

No. I tried to do a bit of closure with that. I was still learning to let go of the safety-line of closure at the time, because I wrote that book during the two years I spent in America. The fact that Rennie has to have some kind of cathartic scene with the hat – which never seemed to me an adequate kind of object on which to hang that catharsis – the fact that he has to have a catharsis before she can leave, I think it is a bit too neat. Life isn't really like that and I don't think fiction has to be either. However it's very much better than an earlier version of the book in which I had a whole section, fifty pages, showing Louise and Viola living happily ever after. That was real closure, closing up and nailing it down and tying it up.

I wonder if you could discuss the rather fascinating structural peculiarity of Lilian's Story. Its original form was quite different, and then you re-shuffle the chapters. Why was that necessary?

It was the first book I wrote after I'd done the two years in America and I thought, 'All right, learn your lessons, just write whatever comes to you each day. Write where the energy is instead of following where the plot is.' In fact I never knew what the plot was going to be right up until I had almost finished the book. I didn't quite know what was going to happen in the end. And I thought, write a lot of fragments then rearrange them in neat chronological order in chapters, so I did that. I wrote about a hundred pages of fragments and then typed them all up and put them together in a very neat orderly way. I found to my surprise that they dovetailed beautifully. But when I strung them all together some

indefinable thing happened to the structure. It just became flaccid and dull. It lost some tension. So I went back to the fragments: the fragment-instinct seemed to have been right. And the structural shape that suggested itself then was to gather them into big loose bags: a girl, a young lady and a woman. Those seemed to be convenient bags in which to put fragments of various kinds. I'm still traditional enough to think that you have to have some kind of thread of action – it doesn't have to be plot – but there does have to be some kind of growth, a sense of organic growth. So there's an overall steady shape, chronological structure, but within that, a very loose assemblage of scenes.

What about the lack of quotation marks?

I'd always been unhappy with the way quotation marks set off dialogue. It insulated it from the rest of the narrative. And for various reasons I thought that this was very false because in life it doesn't happen like that, dialogue is usually part of action, it's very seldom that someone sits down and gives a speech. So I wanted to convey that kind of simultaneity instead of cutting it off in time. I also wanted to convey the fact that things between quotation marks have no different status than things not in quotation marks. In other words, it's all made up by the writer. There's that illusion with quotation marks that you're quoting something that happened out there in the real world. And particularly in *Lilian's Story*, where it is a first person account by somebody who might in fact not be a very reliable narrator, I wanted to clue the reader in that the dialogue is also going through the filter of this woman's consciousness. That mightn't be what the people said at all, it's what she *heard* them say. Italics seemed to work because I didn't want much dialogue. It's not a technique that would have worked if I'd had a lot of dialogue. And it wouldn't have worked with realistic dialogue. Italics help to make the dialogue stylized and slightly unreal.

Both your earlier novels have been published outside Australia. I know in Lilian's Story your New York editor asked you to add in a chapter, but that had more to do with character development than with explaining Australia and its language.³ But there must be a lot of work to do in order to translate the Australian lexicon for a world market. How have goannas and damper fared overseas? And do you care?

Well they haven't gone down very well. My American editor for *Joan* gave me a whole list of things that needed translating like damper, goanna, short back and sides and choko and all *kinds* of things that you take for granted. And I'm in a quandary here. I don't want the book to be so foreign that it's inaccessible. I *want* it to be accessible. But I also don't want to reduce its Australianness. So somehow I have to try and approach

each of those problems and write around it so that it's self-explanatory, so that I could keep the word but elucidate the meaning. But for some things it was just impossible. I mean a goanna. Without making the prose ridiculous it's really hard to describe. 'A large lizard, which we call a goanna, rumbled across the stage.'

Footnotes?

Yes, footnotes would do it.

A glossary?

A glossary. Well, they thought of a glossary for *Lilian* but they decided they didn't need it. In the end I wrote back to the editor and said, 'Look! I've done what I can but you have to remember that we learned what coyotes were by reading cowboys and Indians comics, and American readers are probably smart enough to work out, in context, what a goanna is.' And if they read enough of Australian writing they soon will because the same words will keep popping up. But it's one of the not-so-subtle pressures on Australian writers to become much less Australian, to become transpacific and transatlantic writers. It's a terribly distorting thing which I suppose any small culture has to deal with; to what extent you're willing to distort what you have to say, to make it international. Which means of course that you tend to fall back on those universals, you know, like human psychology and human relationships. Unfortunately I'm now less interested in those things and more interested in things that have to do with the history of a particular place and the politics of a particular place. And the more I get interested in that the sharper the problem is becoming, because you have to sell your books overseas to make any money.

You begin, Joan Makes History, with an obvious allusion to biblical history: 'In the beginning was the word.' But, of course, since Joan is a re-vision of history, particularly masculine history, you change the quote. 'In the beginning was nothing much.' How conscious were you of somehow rewriting patriarchal history; of wanting to substitute feminine history for it, even at this level?

I began the book as a very conscious exercise in a feminist rewriting of Australian history. But as I got involved in the book I got interested in other aspects of the problem. The current dilemma for women is the age-old dilemma of how you combine the desire to have a family – the domestic dimension – with being out in the world, being an achiever. And simply rewriting the past in a new shape didn't seem adequate to confronting that problem. I came to see that it's not just a matter of rewriting history, it's a matter of rethinking our whole role.

Much of what you offer for 'inclusion' into history is the rather large, though unacknowledged, contribution of women which has little place in the masculine spectrum: motherhood, companionship, and so forth. More than this, you focus on what Don Anderson has called 'the importance of the minutiae of everyday life in the writing of history.'⁴ Can you comment on this?

When I began *Joan* what I was going to do was pretend that a woman was actually there at the great achievements of Australian history: that a woman was really the one to discover Australia, that a woman was really the first one to step ashore. In other words, I had women simply stepping into the shoes of men, dressing up in drag if you like. It was a kind of drag version of history. And that's how the book begins. The first couple of scenes are like that with women playing out the male role.

But later on, the contemporary Joan actually does do this, doesn't she? She actually does become a man.

Yes. But she rejects this, just as I rejected it, as I was writing it. I realized that it was no solution to say, 'Look, women were there and they were making history in the male way.' That still goes along with the assumption that the only history worth talking about is the kind where someone discovers something, or leads an army, or rules a country. As I went along further with the book I realized that what I wanted to say was, those things matter, but what also matters are the humble things, and the people who do them. The person who 'just' brings up the kids and washes the socks is as necessary to the whole picture as the kings and explorers. She, or he, is also making history in the sense that they are creating the climate in which humanity lives. Beside, if no-one got the dinners there wouldn't be much exploring or ruling. That's why Joan turns her back on the great achievements and becomes a washerwoman and a mother. It's why, in the specific scene in which she becomes a man, and literally dresses in drag, she realizes that the achievement of being a man is a hollow one. There are more satisfying things to do than just ape men.

One of the particularly interesting, and also confusing, occurrences in one of those 'drag' scenes is that as soon as Joan becomes a man she begins to use all the same pressure tactics against women that men do. Why is that?

I've always enjoyed that feeling of what a lovely revenge it would be on the system.

Except that it's a revenge on women.

Yes. It's part of the patriarchal oppression of women that women are the real warders of other women. It's always been the case because women

have internalized it all so thoroughly. You know, certain slaves have been given favoured treatment so that they can be placed above the other slaves.

A type of The Handmaid's Tale.

Yes! You can talk from a woman's point of view about what it's like to be pressured by men, and it sounds as if you're just whingeing about trivial things, or that you're just being paranoid. You know, men are not *really* whistling at you on the street, they're just passing the time of day. But to reverse the whole thing so that it's a woman acting the part of the oppressor – that makes it more convincing as the bullying it really is.

You've said that initially, your short stories were rejected by feminist journals for not being radical enough, and by male journals for being too radical. Notwithstanding the response of the feminist journals, your first collection of stories was extremely well received by the women's community at large. Since then you've been under increasing fire for, as some might put it, not remaining faithful to a radical degree of feminist thought. This criticism has been particularly bad in terms of Joan. What do you see has changed in your writing, if anything, to cause such a feeling? Is it that your investigations, those levels you're playing with now, are just too subtle?

I hope not. Because I think they're the level that most women are trying to come to terms with. I think that thoughtful feminists understand *Joan*. Dale Spender, for example, saw exactly what I was trying to do in *Joan*. But feminism can harden in the arteries like any other vigorous set of ideas. It begins, or began for me anyway, as a blinding flash – you grow up in patriarchy and you accept the patriarchy. Then you do some reading and some thinking and you have this epiphany and you see that it's all wrong. Then you rethink everything. And having rethought everything to a certain point it takes another leap, another epiphany, to think still further, to adapt to new streams or ideas or desires. Many feminists like myself are trying, somehow, to incorporate the fact that many of us want to lead this difficult life of motherhood and being a member of a family. Somehow our feminism has to change shape to absorb that fact. Feminism for me has always been about broadening options – it's been a response to the gap between the real and the ideal and trying to bridge that gap. It's not dogma. Now the choices that Joan makes might appear to be reinforcing that terrible old idea of 'A woman's place is in the home'. But what I'm trying to say is that if a woman chooses that her place *is* in the home, then she should be given full honour for that. That should be *her* choice. What the book is about is giving glory to occupations type-cast as inglorious – women's occupations. Judy Chicago's 'Dinner Party' is an

obvious analogy – glorifying female skills – glorifying tapestry rather than demanding bronze statues.

There were also women enacting what masculine historians would consider 'larger' or more 'heroic' gestures. Caroline Chisholm for instance.

And Daisy Bates.

I can understand that you wouldn't have wanted to represent exclusively this type of achievement, but were you tempted to tell these stories at all?

Yes. And in my first plan of the book that's what it was all going to be. Women of achievement. But I got interested in the other idea: to talk about the utterly ordinary women, not the remarkable ones. The reality for most women was that they have been wives and mothers...enormous numbers of women are still choosing that as their life. So you have to tackle those women, if you're going to say something useful to women today. You have to say, okay, our history was about being drudges and wives and mothers, a slave race, and *that was glorious, that was history!* We have been magnificent! Rather than to say, the only women worth remembering are Caroline Chisholm and Daisy Bates because they did those masculine things, were individual achievers.

When we spoke earlier about Joan Makes History you said, 'I felt very strongly writing this history that I wanted to put in at least some of the groups that had been left out – mainly the women, but also the Aborigines.'⁵ You also suggested that you felt 'uneasy' about doing this. Was writing the Aboriginal passages made all the more difficult knowing the book would be associated with the Bicentennial?

Absolutely. At the time that I wrote them it was still a long time before the Bicentennial and the full horror of the way it left out those people wasn't apparent. I probably should have guessed, but I didn't then, how insulting the Bicentennial would be to the Aboriginal people. But as the day got closer, as the book was finished, it became obvious that the Bicentennial was going to be an exercise in dismissing whole areas of human experience.

Did that cause re-writes?

No, but I was in a bit of a dilemma. I didn't want to leave the Aborigines out of the book because one of the things I was doing was putting back into a history book some of the groups left out of other history books – among them women and the Aboriginal people. But I also didn't want to tell their story for them, or do any of that patronizing White-novelist-telling-the-story-of-the-Blacks thing. So I was in a bit of a dilemma, and

the only way that I could see out of it was to write a totally subjective account that was shamelessly myself imaginatively projecting. The other thing that I wanted strongly to do was to say, Aborigines, the women too, were not the passive creatures that we've always learned about in our history books. So I've made both the Aboriginal women fairly active, especially the second one. Of course, they weren't just decorative plaster statues standing around the landscape. They were actually – as we know now – fighting a fierce guerilla war. I wanted to make the gesture, and leave it at that – not go too far on someone else's territory.

In Joan you set up very clearly a dichotomy between the 'Brits' on one side, and the non-Anglo-Celtic, the marginal and the female, on the other. This continues your investigation of themes of imperialism and colonization doesn't it?

Yes. Again when I first conceived the book it was as a reaction to Ann Summer's *Damned Whores and God's Police*, where she draws a parallel between the colonizing of a country and the colonizing of women as a class. I thought, wouldn't it be interesting to write a story that was a parallel of exactly those two events, the literal colonizing of a country, namely Australia, and the metaphorical colonizing of a woman, Joan, to show those two stories and to intercut them side by side. And that thread, as often happens in a book, the thread that begins it, becomes buried after a while in the elaboration, in the other things you get interested in. And also simply in the human momentum of the human beings and the stories that you put into action. That parallel is very clear in the first couple of sections. I've got the conception of a nation – they're sitting on the Endeavour, saying 'What will this Great South Land be like?' – and the images I use are of a pregnant swelling womb the country swelling in its unknown home over the sea somewhere. And in a parallel chapter the foetus is swelling within the womb, and it's another great unknown being speculated over. I set the parallel up mechanistically and what happened was that I realized that such a mechanical schema was too rigid for the book that I wanted to write. I wanted to have much more elbow room than that, and I kind of faded that parallel away. I hoped that enough of it would echo at different points of the book, that the parallel would still be there. Federation is the point where it parallels again very obviously with the coming-of-age of a nation and the coming-of-age of a daughter. It was an important organizing structure for my first ideas about the book.

There's an interesting parallel too between Lilian's Story and Joan. Joan begins with the discovery of Australia by Whites, and Lilian's Story with the consolidation of that discovery, Federation.

I wanted them to dovetail. I was even going to put a date on Madge leaving home which happened to be my particular birthday. But I thought that would be too subtle. A bit of an in-joke.

We spoke elsewhere about your propensity for the Gothic, at least in Dreamhouse and Lilian's Story. Is the Gothic voice something you're moving away from? Certainly Joan doesn't have that type of darkness.

No it doesn't. You mean the darkness of sinister images? When I began to have all those thoughts about what I regard as the new wave of feminism, where you combine feminism with the old values that we have from our mothers – when I began to think about that it was a terribly freeing thing. For years it had really blocked me up in a quandary, how to combine being a mother, where you're totally the slave of another human being, with being completely your own person. So when I began to see in *Joan*, as in my own life, that it was in fact possible to find a way out of that quandary, it was like a huge opening of delight. It was a really positive thing. There didn't seem much impulse toward the darkness of the earlier books.

You've described the Gothic as a playful convention.

It's playful in the sense of being exaggerated and not like real life, so you can slip under people's guards. I suppose that now I think that there are other ways of slipping under people's guards; other interesting things to do. And I suppose the Gothic suits tearing down, it suits the destruction of the old icons, but perhaps it doesn't so much suit the exploration of new positive directions. So I hope *Joan* is playful as well, but with other conventions.

As a final question, now that you've covered the history of the universe, what will you turn to for subject matter? What's in need of revision?

It's a real problem. I thought of writing a utopian novel, rather than revising what's already been, to invent completely. But I actually prefer to deal with what there is rather than make something up. In the book I'm writing now I'm burrowing downwards, I'm writing Lilian's father's book.⁶ And I'm burrowing downwards into that idea of patriarchal oppression from the man's point of view. But I'm getting in a way slightly less interested in that aspect and more interested in a notion that patriarchy is bound up with a kind of ruthless law-of-the-jungle set of political or philosophical beliefs: the thought-system that says the strongest deserves to win. Which is a very topical thing to be thinking about. At this place and moment in history, it's quite hard not to think about it at the moment.

Although Darwin helped that idea along.

Yes, he gave justification, the ultimate scientific justification. And the animal analogy is one which we still have to come to terms with when we transfer it to human things. So Father, as well as being an oppressive patriarchal figure, is representative of those beliefs: the market place as jungle, the weak must go under, the trickle down effect, there is no equality in nature so why should there be in the affairs of men. He represents that whole way of thinking about human affairs. What I'm trying to do is to show how wrong he is, that human affairs are more complicated than that, and that we have to acknowledge that there are, for want of a better word, *moral* imperatives as well as power imperatives. So I'm trying to explore patriarchy's deepest beliefs. As well as have a lot of fun at the expense of this particular man.

I guess this also gets you back to Malthus.

Yes, the *Doctrine of Necessary Catastrophe*.⁷ Well, I'm fascinated by that. I deeply envy people who hold those beliefs, because for them it is so simple, their position is so logical you cannot attack it logically. There's nothing you can do with it except appeal to these terrible woolly half-baked notions of goodness and compassion and looking after the weak. All you can do is appeal to this mumbo-jumbo, so that the challenge is to find a kind of alternative logic with which to battle it. So it's always interested me. Like most people I've been exposed to a lot of that conservative philosophy and never been able to argue against it really effectively.

Except to become a story-teller.

Yes. It's such a good revenge. I mean, apart from people like you challenging me, I can say what I like. And get away with it. No reader is going to leap up off the page and say this is all wrong, this is nonsense. So yes, it's a great revenge for those of us who believe in the woolly values.

Well that seems to be a good place to end. We have, after all, recorded this in the Woolley Building at the University of Sydney.

Notes

1. An organization providing adult education courses. The acronym stands for Workers' Educational Association.
2. Gerry Turcotte, 'Telling those Untold Stories: An Interview with Kate Grenville', *Southerly*, No. 3 (1987), pp. 284-99.
3. Kate Grenville, 'A Time of Hard', *Scripta*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (1987), pp. 51-59. According to Grenville, this chapter was added to the American edition of *Lilian's Story* because her 'editor in New York suggested that Lil got too old and too mad too suddenly ... that a transition was missing'. *Southerly*, p 290.
4. Don Anderson, 'You've met Joan - Our Everywoman', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 April 1988, p. 70.
5. *Southerly*, p. 297.
6. *Albion's Story* is to be published in Australia and the UK by Macmillan in 1994 and by Harcourt Brace in the US, under the title *Albion's Story*.
7. Rennie, in *Dreamhouse*, is writing his doctoral dissertation on Malthus' infamous *Doctrine*.