



WRITERS IN CONVERSATION

An Interview with Marion Halligan

Robyn Greaves

*Australian author Marion Halligan began publishing fiction later in life. She has won numerous awards for her writing, including the Age Book of the Year for Lovers' Knots in 1992. More recently her work has appeared in The Best Australian Stories 2012 and 2013 and the latest edition of the Griffith Review. Halligan has largely flown under the radar of literary critics, however, perhaps partly because her work is set in the suburbs and the domestic realm. For Halligan, suburbia is a rich source of material: it is 'where life happens, where people live and love one another and raise their children, where there is grief and recrimination and murder and pain, it is where the human comedy unfolds.'*¹

*The following interview was conducted at Marion Halligan's Canberra home in 2011. It is an informal discussion around her work, in particular three of her novels which feature an artist protagonist who is struggling to come to terms with the experience of loss, grief and bereavement. These novels, Lovers' Knots (1992), The Golden Dress (1998) and The Fog Garden (2001) are rich explorations of the role of art in the lives of the main characters and in our lives in general. According to Halligan, 'the world is a cruel and dark and difficult place and it is words that light the small candle flames that keep the dark at bay.'*² *Words and writing are essential to her life. In an essay titled 'Why I Write', she says: 'I write in order to put the world into words. I've always done that in my head. I can't perceive anything without trying to find words for it.'*³ *Halligan's writing is an evocative exploration of the human condition and the ways we cope in the face of events common to all of us during our lives.*

RG: Over the course of your career, you've written quite a bit about the processes of writing and how you go about writing yourself. For instance, in 'Love, Actually', you talk about the role of the imagination: 'When people ask me how I write a novel I always mention the imagination. I have to make it up, I say, and at the beginning I am never sure how to do this. But you have to give the imagination something to work with, and you have to train it to recognise what it can use, to be alert for those concrete details, those *things*, which will create the intimate moment that is the reason for writing and reading the book ... The whole business of fiction is to capture the abstract in the concrete. The abstract is emotions: love, fear, doubt, suspicion; goodness, wickedness; sensations, ideas, anything that belongs in the mind or the heart. The concrete is things.'⁴

¹ Marion Halligan, *The Taste Of Memory*. (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2004) 166.

² Marion Halligan, 'Memoir: Small Candle Flames,' *Griffith Review* 10 (Summer 2005-2006) 160.

³ Marion Halligan, 'Why I write,' *Kunapipi* 16.1 (1994) 58-9.

⁴ Marion Halligan, 'Love, Actually,' *Meanjin* 66.1 (2007) 213-14.

Do you find that you always think like a writer now, and do you feel that this comes naturally to you after so many years of writing?

MH: I think I probably do. I have developed the habit of seeing the world in terms of writing about it. I know that when the kids were small and I had a part-time job, and I'd be driving them to music lessons and things like that, I became trained or trained myself, to see the world in short stories; it just sort of turned itself into short stories all the time. I'd sit for an hour waiting for somebody to have a music lesson and jot things down. It was a fragmented time, but quite useful for that sort of thing. So I think I am probably pretty much trained now.

RG: Is this how you found time to write when the children were young?

MH: When the kids were young it was easier to get thinking time than writing time. The short story actually needs more time spent thinking than writing, whereas the novel you have to inhabit; you have to sit inside it and plot it and spin it, and it's very much a full time job writing the novel. Short stories, on the other hand, have to be written in your head more than on the page. They need a good bit of writing on the page, too, but you have to think about them a lot.

RG: In *The Taste of Memory* you talk about looking at things in a fresh way:

I think ... it is a perception of something that is always there, and if we come to such experiences freshly it is what they will offer us, a whole range of sensuous responses that have always been available but we haven't paid attention to. Food is sight and smell and so are flowers, but pay attention and they are sound as well.⁵

Your writing has often been described as 'sensuous and seductive', and I certainly find it to be so. The scenery or settings or objects in your fiction are so beautifully described that I find them very easy to picture in my mind. Is this something you consciously strive to achieve in your writing?

MH: This is something I've been thinking about a lot. I think that some writers strive after metaphors; they strive after clever ways of saying things without really thinking, 'Is this illuminating what I'm saying?' They just want this kind of jazzy, gaudy metaphor, and they're going to put that down and when you really think about it, it's not working very well at all.

I do quite strongly believe that there's a whole lot of stuff available and we don't pay attention to it. When I'm sitting down writing something I'm thinking about it, and if you get a really good way of describing something in terms of something else, you find it leads you into a better understanding of what you're talking about. So if you get a really good metaphor or a really good comparison it kind of leads you into saying more clearly what you want to say. I can give an example of that, if you like [MH gets a copy of *The Hanged Man in the Garden*].

⁵ Halligan, *Taste* 235.

This is a story I wrote quite a long time ago when the kids were small. I was interested in writing a story about happiness and it didn't work. I found that you can't write a story about happiness. My son, James, had been reading a book about tarot cards and he was talking about the hanged man in the garden, which was where the title came from: 'She would like to have had a gibbet in the garden; to hang from it by one foot with a halo round her head, and see the world from a different angle. All new.'⁶ James explained to me that the hanged man was not hanging by the neck he was hanging by his foot and he was seeing things from upside down and it was a different angle. That intrigued me, and I realised when I went upstairs and looked down at the garden you could see things from a different angle, and that kind of carried me on through some things. 'For the Hanged Man dangles gallantly by one foot and turning upside down observes the world. Its powers cannot harm him, he sees it clearly and afresh, all new. He is an individual. And he has a halo round his head.'⁷ The idea of the hanged man dangling by the ankle and seeing things this way was very interesting. I liked that idea and also there was the particular rhythm of the sounds. I had to fiddle with the ending of this because having it just happy didn't work. I had this image that perhaps it became all smashed up, a dreadful wind blows through a left-open door, perhaps it's real or perhaps it's an idea, and destroys the good and happy life.

RG: Did you have any formal learning in how to write? The way people learn in a creative writing degree, for example?

MH: No, what I did was an English Honours course, which started off in second year, with a lot of distinction courses building up to the honours. We started off with Beowulf; we did Middle English, we did Chaucer and we did Sixteenth Century and Shakespeare, and the Seventeenth Century, the Eighteenth Century, the Nineteenth Century. We did poetry, drama; we did Irish literature, we did American literature; we did absolutely everything except Australian literature. And that was a huge training ground, really. In fact if I were teaching people creative writing, I'd say just read and read and read. It worries me that a lot of people who are interested in writing themselves don't want to read. I always think, now if you were a teenager who wanted to be a rock musician you wouldn't say, 'Oh no I don't listen to any rock music; I just play it.' That's just a bad idea. Would-be rock musicians listen to rock music all the time, as loudly as they can have it. I know; I've lived with one.

It's very good practice to read as much as you can. I've just read an Allan Hollinghurst novel. He won the Booker Prize a few years ago. He's a gay writer (though that term irritates him, he doesn't like the pigeon-holing effect of it). He writes about gay men a lot and he gives you a lot of detail. Terrifically explicit gay sex. I think he's a fabulous writer, and although I'm not mostly madly into terribly explicit sex, it's a sign of what a good writer I think he is that I love reading him despite this. The book I was reading, *A Stranger's Child* – is more implicitly than overtly gay. He doesn't go into the detail so much.

⁶ Marion Halligan, 'The Hanged Man in the Garden', *Collected Stories* (Queensland: UQP, 1997) 256.

⁷ Halligan, 'Hanged Man' 256

As I was reading this novel I was thinking about (I was reviewing it, of course) but even so I was thinking about what he was doing and how I could learn from that. I noticed how his language was mostly not full of a lot of similes and metaphors but more ways of trying to say exactly how things were. He had a lot of people in English gardens at the end of the day with descriptions of the way the light was. I've noticed it myself quite often; the way the light goes quite strange at the end of the day and the colours change. I suppose I was sympathetic to it because I'm quite interested in doing that myself.

I think that is the way to learn how to do things: to read other people and think, 'How does he do this? What is he doing?' Not that you copy them; you're not going to sound like them. People say to me, do you read other people when you're writing? Well yes, I do, all the time. I think that if you read widely enough you don't fall into other writers' ways and find yourself copying what they're doing.

I think that there's a lot of small detail in people's lives, and if you can make your readers see that and kind of feel it, perhaps; really kind of *know* that it's there, then they have a sense of the texture of people's lives. It's very tangible; it's something that the reader understands and can picture and relate to. If you've got those material things, you know like Ada in her toque looking like Queen Mary (in *Lovers' Knots*), then when you do the emotional things, the abstract things, the things that are much less concrete, because you've made people believe in the concrete things they'll believe in the more abstract things like emotions and feelings and so on and so forth and so they accept that. I think that a lot of the art of the novel is making this concrete structure that people believe in so that they'll believe in the non-concrete things.

RG: You were once a member of what was known as the Seven Writer's Group. Do you think a group like that is important for a writer to bounce ideas off or to workshop their writing? Did you find it helpful?

MH: That's quite interesting; I found it hugely helpful but not so much in the way that you say. Other people, I think, liked that aspect of it. I liked the sense of having colleagues, and the way it kept you writing. We had meetings on Sunday mornings and then we started having lunches on Sundays. We'd go till about the middle of the afternoon and then you'd come home and you'd be really fired up. You'd think, they're all working; I've got to keep going. I think one of the real problems a writer has is procrastination, putting the writing off, which I was very good at. I was forty-seven years old when I published my first book, so I'd clearly been mucking around for a long time. I'd always intended to do it one day and I suddenly thought you can't just keep thinking you'll do this one day – you'd better make one day happen – so for me it was that sense of colleagues, I suppose, of competition to a certain extent, but more being inspired to keep working. Writing is quite hard, and it's very long term. You think of writing a story and you write it and you fiddle about with it and it might take quite a long time before you're happy with it. Then you send it off and it might take six months to be sent back to you, and then it's a rejection – but of course if you've got enough material and you keep sending it out then there's usually something happening.

RG: I found the theme of desire came through very strongly in your fiction. Would you agree that is an interest of yours?

MH: Yes, and there's a bit about that in *Wishbone*. The quote about desire in *Wishbone* was one that I was happy with: that art makes us desire things and doesn't quite fulfil the desire it creates. Desire that is never quite fulfilled but sufficiently to keep us coming back, so that we keep doing it.

(Quote: 'a lot of art make(s) us long for something [it does] not quite give us. The pain of desire is not quite assuaged by the pleasure of possession and so we must keep coming back to it in the hope of satisfaction, this time.'⁸)

RG: I found the ending of *Lovers' Knots* wonderful, as you end with the beginning of Dane and Eva's relationship and discuss the nature of stories and beginnings. There are images throughout the novel of life being like a tapestry; of webs and threads; knitting and photographs; stories that continue on; some satisfied, some left unfinished.

MH: That has the same ending, really, as my last novel, *Valley of Grace*, which had that same notion that this is a beginning and that's what matters, and who knows about endings? And somebody remarked to me (and I hadn't thought of it), that it was quite a daring thing to do in that book because suddenly there was my authorial voice saying that, which hadn't really been there before, and I thought, that's true it hadn't. I suddenly popped in and said those things.

The ending to *Lovers' Knots* is interesting because I was in New Zealand at the time I thought of it. I spent a month as a visiting exchange writer and stayed at a funny motel in Dunedin called The Safari. It was an old wooden nineteenth-century building, probably a grand house originally. It was a little wooden mansion painted yellow and orange, which for Dunedin was so gaudy because otherwise it has a lot of stone buildings. I was walking along the road – I was writing this novel but I wasn't anywhere near the end – and I suddenly thought, 'this is how it ends', with that life isn't a tapestry bit and I remember rushing in and writing it down in a notebook I had; the bit about life not being a tapestry unless it's the wrong side we're looking at, all the knotty bits.

I suppose as I get older and there are certain things that pass and won't happen again – you know, one of the things you face up to is that you'll never have a baby again (well, you can have a granddaughter, that's very nice; that's excellent!) – but there are certain things you've done and they pass and that's quite melancholy because they won't come again. I think that all of us as we get older – I mean you're not at this stage yet because you're still opening out into things – but then we realise that the more choices you make the more things I think sort of straiten in, narrow in, and you know you won't do these other things now: I'm never going to go skiing, for instance, I'm never going to ride a motor bike, I'm never going to do this, I'm never going to do that. If you really got thinking in too much detail about that kind of thing you could get yourself into quite a melancholy state.

⁸ Marion Halligan, *Wishbone* (Port Melbourne: Minerva, 1996) 31.

RG: Yes, you speak about choices in *Out of the Picture* where you say, 'I believe that our lives have the potential for a great many stories, which, as we are obliged to make choices, there is less and less possibility of our inhabiting. But the stories are still there, and even though most of us will forever live on the edge of them there is nothing to prevent us stepping in our imaginations inside these alternative narratives and trying them out, for a while'.⁹

Then in *The Taste of Memory* you say, 'I think a lot of life is much more accidental than we give it credit for being. Small choices, let alone large ones like the person you marry, can set things going in different directions.'¹⁰

MH: I do feel that quite strongly and there's a chapter in *Lovers' Knots* about that called 'Gingerbread men'.

The child says 'was daddy your first boyfriend...did you ever think of getting married to anybody else?' The mother remembers all the people she might possibly have married. A lot of these were people I'd known; I mean, they were never thinking of marrying me particularly, but you know when you're young and you meet chaps and you think, 'Oh I wonder what would have been if I'd married this person?' I said to my husband, if I'd married an engineer and we'd gone to Saudi Arabia how different my life would have been from marrying him - who was a French scholar and we went to France. And he was quite disturbed by this because he hated to think that he'd kind of dragged me around, I suppose. These days if I was saying that kind of thing I'd say it in terms of both partners to a marriage, that they tend to take people here or there; that who you marry *does* influence what you do. I mean, if you marry somebody who hates cooking and hates eating and hates drinking wine, it's probable that you're not going to *do* many of those things. Marry somebody who loves swimming and you could end up spending a lot of time in the water. These are everyday examples, but the same applies on all sorts of levels.

RG: Yes, my first husband hated reading, so I don't think I read a book in the ten years of our marriage. I really missed that because I love reading. Who you're partnered with does have a certain influence on what you do or don't do.

MH: Especially if you feel that the person you've married perhaps wasn't the best person to have married or you should have married somebody else, or whatever, then you are perhaps more likely to think of those alternative scenarios: if I'd married this person and done this or done that, or if I hadn't married but stuck to my idea of having a career, and done whatever, whatever. I'm a fairly optimistic person so I don't tend to look back and regret things, I tend to think, oh well, that was that, you know, I did it and that was it.

RG: Yes, that's one of the things I tell my children when things don't go quite as they think they should, not to dwell on it, but move forward. Working in palliative care has given me a completely different perspective on life.

⁹ Marion Halligan, *Out of the Picture*. (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 1996) viii.

¹⁰ Halligan, *Taste* 7.

MH: I certainly was very conscious of that sort of thing when my husband died; small things, material things weren't terribly important any more, for example, dropping a plate, so what.

RG: How did *Lovers' Knots* evolve? You said it was a novel about desire, and that it also started as a kind of family history. When you started writing it, did you have an intention and if you did, did it change?

MH: It began with 'The Tin Mission', which was originally a novella, or rather, a long short story. That was my parent's courtship as I knew it. It's not a memoir; I couldn't say that was their life. The salient facts – that my father proposed to my mother and she refused him, and then he went away and married somebody else who died, and then he came back – are true. She must have been 32 years old when she got married which in those days was pretty old. She was 35 when I was born which was very ancient; in fact my sister was born when she was 42 and she hated going to things at school because she said felt like the grandma and of course she was probably as old as plenty of children's grandmas. So those things were all true, but by the time I was writing it both my parents were dead and anybody who knew anything much about it was dead; so anything that I hadn't already found out I couldn't find out and I wasn't particularly interested in doing so. So for instance, when I have George helping stir the Christmas cake, I don't know about that. I do know that my grandfather bought rabbits from the Chinese gardeners over the road, so that was something that happened, and he did borrow a donkey and go on picnics. There were certain significant things that I knew happened but I just kind of invented around them, and I think that's what everybody does when they write novels; nobody invents it from nothing, it's got to have some bits to peg it on.

So *Lovers' Knots* started off as that long short story and I suddenly thought that it could just keep going on and be a novel. I'd written a short story about Mikelis, when he was up the pole photographing the building of the new Parliament House and found that to be very interesting, and I thought there was a lot more to say about him, and so it kind of developed into a novel from there. When I was writing it, every time I typed up a chapter (because I wrote it by hand), I'd have to give it a title. I couldn't give it a number because I didn't know what order it was going to be in. I had this big piece of cardboard on a table and I had the names of the chapters on little bits of card, and I'd rearrange them every now and then and I'd think, 'now what about this order?' and then I'd look up the manuscript and see where that bit finished, and quite often there'd be a sort of serendipitous connection because I wanted that image of the box of snapshots that just spreads out. We can understand people's lives from that; you know, you see them as a baby; you see them getting married and you know they grew up and got married and that sort of thing. I actually like that way of writing novels and I called that a one-hundred-year saga because it does take one-hundred years; but I didn't want it to be kind of trundling along, there's so much mechanics you've got to get in if you do the whole one-hundred years in detail.

RG: Another book I'm looking at for my thesis is *The Golden Dress*. I wondered about Ray in the end and felt it was a little ambiguous as to whether or not he really wanted to be rescued?

MH: Yes, it is a bit ambiguous, isn't it? It was certainly a choice he made at that time; that novel came out of my stay in the Literature Board's Paris studio; the empowerment that he's got as a painter is the writer's empowerment.

When you looked out the window there was this *clochard* figure. There was a parking station and I think he slept in that, and it was quite warm and fuggy somehow in there. But you'd see him and he'd just sort of slope around. He was a fascinating person. A friend of mine is a poet from Newcastle, Jean Kent. She had the studio a bit after me and she wrote a whole lot of poems about this person. When you looked out your window there he was, quite often. He'd be leaning against the wall or he'd wander around, or wander down to the water and back again, and he was just there; and he was clearly a narrative that you didn't know.

Ray looks at the *clochard* and then he does those drawings that become more and more obsessively detailed. He does get lost – but there's a kind of attractiveness in being lost; it's the total dipping out. You looked at this man, he had no responsibilities; every time you saw him he had the same clothes on and he clearly didn't ever take them off really except (we were there for six months) after we'd been there for about two months, he had a complete change of outfit. Obviously some charity people had taken his old clothes away and given him a new set. There was a way in which this was a totally sort of contented existence without desire; you see the *clochard* is the person without desire. He smoked, and I don't know what he lived on. There was a church around the corner, I think, that had a quite big charitable arm to it which probably fed him at times or whatever. I didn't ever see anybody giving him anything.

In a way I suppose if you're a very busy person and a very ambitious person and a person who strives a lot, there's a lot of charm in not desiring anything; being totally, almost 'vegetably' content.

RG: Similar to the character in *The Point*, Clovis?

MH: Yes, he too, opted out; although he kind of got chucked out because he'd behaved badly.

RG: But then he chose to stay.

MH: Then he chose to stay. The interesting thing about him, of course, is that I did get him from a Paris *clochard* because they sleep on the hot air vents outside buildings. You walk around the streets of Paris at certain times and you'll see people with maybe a sleeping bag or maybe cardboard on these hot air vents which are very warm. I was walking past the National Library and it was exactly the same thing but I don't think anybody does it; I've never seen anybody there.

I suppose I do think that it was necessary for Ray to be brought back; I don't think he really did want to in the beginning. He is a very melancholy person, and I think he's a very damaged person

RG: He seemed a bit disconnected to me, from his own life; a bit lost.

MH: Martine does rescue him and ground him. I suppose I do think that's quite a good thing, really. It's probably better than being a bit 'vegetably'.

RG: I tried to imagine how Ray lived, what his life was like as a clochard. You don't really know how he lives.

MH: Just as I didn't ever work out how the *clochard* lived. He obviously did; he was thin but he was not undernourished and he didn't ever seem to be sick. In fact, Jean sent me an email recently from the apartment that she's in and that I was living in (and that I based the one in the novel on). There used to be a building looking across an open piece of ground, and there was an underground carpark. Anyhow, the main building was parallel to the Seine and had a kind of veranda or cloister along the front, and Jean said that it's absolutely thick with clochards sleeping, now. They come late at night, and there they are next morning, and there's a kind of acceptance of that.

When my husband was first in Paris, (he went to Cambridge as a student and then he went to Paris with some friends) they befriended a *clochard* and decided that they would spend the night like him. They took him out for a meal in an all night cafe and then, my husband said, 'I think he went home to bed while we slept on the pavement'. It's kind of one of those fascinating things that you don't understand and you don't know about. I think it is more an opting out; it can be an alternative that people sort of choose. I suspect that the *clochard* who was my source, was probably sort of mentally ill in some way, I think he probably had no social skills, he was probably intellectually disabled in some way or another.

Last time I was in Paris on the other side of the river, there was a woman *clochard* who slept in a corner of the street. It was warmish weather; she wore very tight-fitting, good-looking jeans and a denim jacket. She had high-heeled wooden platform sandals. Her toenails were painted; her feet were filthy but her toe-nails were painted. She had an airport trolley with a whole lot of stuff in it. She collected the things that people would put out on the streets. She had a lot of books. She had a huge amount of stuff in bags and so on. The street sweeper would avoid her, I think she drank a lot, and she'd mutter and talk and curse and carry on. I wouldn't go very near her, she was a bit scary.

It's a kind of phenomenon that interests me because it's an outcast person, and are you a holy outcast person or are you an unholy outcast person?

RG: And who determines which you are ...

MH: the idea of the holy idiot is quite an interesting one and I do think the *clochard* that this was based on was the kind of person that people looked out for, the church people looked out for, and made sure he was all right, that he had cigarettes and probably soup; I mean you'd see him eating a bread roll, a piece of baguette, sometimes. He did seem to get looked after by people. Kind of interesting. And the question of 'are you laying up treasure in heaven' by doing this?

(Looking at RG's copy of *The Golden Dress*.)

The golden dress on the cover of that book is not the right dress as described in the book. That book got translated into Chinese and the golden dress has turned into a strapless

dress like a ball gown on the steps of the Sydney Opera House; none of which is anywhere near that book. The golden dress in the book is made from a tiny little remnant of material bought very cheaply which of course is the sort of thing we were always doing when I was young, and it's a hugely ambitious dress because it's a gorgeous dress but it comes out of these absolutely exiguous circumstances and I think that's very poignant. It's meant to be straight, the sort of sheath dress that people wore in the fifties rather than that shoestring straps thing; but you can't do much with what publishers want to put on their covers. It was contemporary with the book probably is the thing and they quite like doing that

RG: This is a nice cover. I like this one (*The Taste Of Memory*).

MH: I like that one. Some people don't they say that they hate children with dirty faces.

RG: It fits with the title. My son always used to have food on his face. I told him it showed that he'd enjoyed his food.

My book group read *The Golden Dress* and were interested in the scene where Martine finds Ray and they end up slipping in the dog shit in a very graphic, almost comic scene. I spoke to Dorothy¹¹ about it and she likened it to Yeats' poem, 'The Circus Animals' Desertion', and that line 'in the foul rag and bone shop of the heart'.

MH: I wanted it to be a sort of cathartic thing. People go on about the streets of Paris being filthy and in fact they do get dirty, but everyday little green vans or big green vans or men with brooms come along and clean it all up; so that although you've got to watch where you put your feet it's not too bad because it's constantly cleaned. But this was a particular area, a sort of little 'place' somehow or other that had a kind of gutter or little curb around it and the cleaning machines didn't ever get in. People took dogs for walks and so it was absolutely filthy, and I used to walk around and look at this and I thought, yeah now if he's there ... I don't know, I just sort of thought of doing it. I think that's a good idea of Dorothy's, I think it is a cathartic thing; they get into the dog shit and have to get out of it. She's got her beautiful overcoat that she just takes off and leaves behind because she can't bear to think of it and it's almost as though they go into this deep horrible thing together and then come out of it.

(Marion finds the piece in the novel): I'm just trying to remember how I made it start, of course he steps on the turd ... It'd make a good scene in a movie.

RG: Yes, it's very visual.

MH: Mmmm, yes. She's very smart, Dorothy.

RG: It's where we all end up at the base level of life.

¹¹ Dr Dorothy Jones, one of the few academics to critically analyse Halligan's work.

MH: Yes, they're kind of rattling in the filth and they have to get up and out of it and they get back to that life together and the apartment where the muslin curtains blow in the wind and so on.

I suppose they're both a bit damaged but I think Ray is never going to *not* be damaged. And there's Step's death and that of course is a part of Newcastle life. I lived about two hundred metres from the beach where that young man was taken by the shark and I remember it happening and then later looking it up and reading about it. I remembered the event at the time but I did get the details of it from some contemporary newspapers. It was very damaging, I think.

RG: I grew up near the ocean as well.

MH: Oh, whereabouts did you grow up?

RG: I grew up in Kiama, and that's another thing I could relate to in your writing. I think if you grow up near the ocean you have that affinity with it and you describe it so well; as well as your descriptions of Canberra, the light, your garden. And now I'm sitting here looking at the oak trees that I've read about ...

MH: Yes, well, I'm always surprised that I don't live by the sea. I always thought I'd end up back there and after Graham died I thought of going back but I realised that all the people I know are here.

RG: Yes, your life changes.

MH: Yes, your life does change.

RG: I went to school in Kiama and most of my friends moved away, a couple are still there, and I live a bit south of it now, but it's still home to me and I have that sense of place, that's where I came from.

MH: I think they're quite alike, Newcastle and that part of the south coast; they're both places that have had bad press; people think they're dirty cities. I did a thing at the Wollongong Library, 'Friends of the Wollongong Library'. I talked at a luncheon with an amazing view up and down the coast, and they put us up at the motel that overlooks the golf course and it was lovely; we stayed an extra night we had such a good time.

RG: In *The Fog Garden* it seemed to me you were writing about the processes of writing. I wondered whether you were doing that to encourage people to think about those processes or to think about writing themselves?

MH: I do like to encourage people to think about writing but I don't know that I was trying to encourage them necessarily to do it. I think that people should think about it. I am fascinated that people want to write considering it's a hard way to prosperity.

I'm going to Melbourne next week to do this thing at the Wheeler Centre about Ruth Park; they're doing a celebration of dead writers. She was interesting because she got married in about 1943 and she and her husband determined to live as freelance writers and it nearly killed them, it was such hard work and they did so much. They did an enormous amount of stuff of which only a small proportion was published. They worked out their percentages; they had to do this much in order to have anything happen because so much of it would be rejected. They did radio plays and stage plays and children's books and essays and journalism.

RG: In *The Fog Garden* I felt as though I was drawn into the life of the writer; I felt my pace of life slow. It made me think of the time needed to write: time to reflect, to notice things, such as the raindrops running down the window pane, as Clare does in *The Fog Garden*.

MH: That was a funny time because when somebody dies there is a lot of time, somehow. Especially when the person's been quite ill and you've been looking after them and suddenly you don't have to do that anymore.

The interesting thing about *The Fog Garden* is that it is an examination of how you go about writing something because I did really think for quite a long time that I was just writing it down and that I never would publish it and that I was sort of making up these stories as something I needed to do and then after a bit I realised that yes of course I was going to publish it.

Although I'd done this (points to *The Golden Dress*) with Penguin, and then I did *The Fog Garden*, and the editor of Penguin had a fit; she couldn't cope with that at all, she didn't like it. 'No Marion, I don't think that booksellers would want to stock this book, it's too terrible'. I thought, 'what are you talking about?' I've never known a book too terrible for a book seller to stock. She felt it was too sexy, too much about sex.

RG: I thought it was a really touching exploration of grieving and how you find yourself again when your life has changed like that.

MH: I was very interested in how it's structured, too, because I realised that the stories (which are separate stories, which is how a lot of my books do get written) circle around a kind of central black hole, this black hole of the husband's death and the stories sort of circle around it.

RG: And then there'll be a brief sentence or two that brings you back to the fact of Graham's death, for example when you write, 'Today is four weeks. The longest time in thirty-five years in which I have not spoken to you'.¹² This has the effect of bringing the reader right back to that central fact and then the tone changes again as you go on to something else; then a sentence or paragraph abruptly brings you back again somewhere else.

¹² Marion Halligan, *The Fog Garden* (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2002) 5.

MH: It was as though the whole world conspired to offer me these images of sex and death like the Eva Peron segment that I came home and watched on the television – and I thought ‘what’s all this telling me?’

RG: I remember when I divorced it was like everyone I saw was coupled up and I was the only person in the world on my own, I mean that was nothing compared to this ...

MH: Well, it’s pretty drastic isn’t it, I mean you’re grieving.

RG: Yes, it’s a big change. It’s a different type of grieving you’re grieving for your marriage and all the hopes you had for it.

MH: I was very conscious when I was doing *The Fog Garden* that I was inventing whenever I wanted to; I was *using* the facts and inventing around them. A lot of people say, ‘Oh Marion, it’s not a novel’. But it’s *not* a memoir. Because when I was writing the memoir, *The Taste of Memory*, where I was sticking to the facts, if I didn’t know the facts I didn’t put them in; or I said well I don’t know this but perhaps it was that and so on. Memoir is a very different thing from having certain stories that you’re embroidering for the sake of your own fictions and I think people should be aware of that. I’m not a person who believes in fictional memoir, I think that’s a novel, for goodness sake.

RG: Yes, you are very specific in the title of the book, *The Fog Garden A Novel*.

MH: One of the judges for the Miles Franklin said one of the other judges wouldn’t let them consider *The Fog Garden* because she said we all know it’s not a novel. Which I thought was terribly unfair. I claim it’s a novel and I claim that I have fictionalised; that’s why I have this character called Clare because I would never have been able to write the way I wanted to write if I’d been doing it in the first person, I would have to have done it quite differently.

RG: You said in an article titled, ‘Where Truth Lies’, ‘I find it curious that we as a society are so hung up on authenticity. It’s what we truly value ... It is a pity that good writing is not more valued in this country ... Just as paintings can get closer to the truth, or truths, than photographs do, so do novels compared with writings of fact’.¹³

And in *The Taste of Memory* you write (in regard to *The Fog Garden*); ‘This is a novel, it owes a lot to the events of my life but it is still a work of fiction. I needed fiction to be frank in a way I could never have been in a memoir.’¹⁴

MH: You can shape things in fiction, you can make them happen in certain ways that you can’t if you’re sticking to the facts and if the facts don’t do that, then you can’t do it.

RG: You speak about good writing in an essay, ‘From Barthes to Barmecide: The Tasting of Words’, as that ‘to which attention has been paid, in which a writer has thought what she

¹³ Marion Halligan, ‘Where Truth Lies,’ *Meanjin* 64.1-2 (2005) 99-100.

¹⁴ Halligan, *Taste* 10.

wants to say. You may end up with a pellucid simplicity. Or one of the most cunning results, apparent transparency.¹⁵

To me this captures what you do in your writing, for example in the short story, 'Blue Fornications': Martha goes and has this surreal experience with a strange man over dinner then drives home:

She drove past rows of houses that repeated one another into boredom, and each was somebody's own place, dwelling and castle and shelter from fear. A safe house. She looked at the gardens and in one a woman smelling roses as she picked them, and at the hills taken for granted at the ends of streets. And the whole suburban plan suddenly seemed marvellous and fruitful and very moving.¹⁶

In a short couple of lines there is a powerful impact. I was expecting her to maybe want to change her life or something but she comes back and thinks she's happy there in her existence as it was.

MH: She's been in that strange kind of shut away space with the funny light in it which is like an international hotel without any kind of individuality and she's happy to come back to her space.

RG: You do that so well; you convey 'big' things in a really concise but powerful way.

MH: I'm a great fan of suburbia and I think I say that in *The Taste Of Memory*. There's that lovely David Malouf quote which I think I put in *The Taste Of Memory*, too. I'm actually a great believer in the fruitful life of suburbia.

(Quote: 'Years ago I read a remark by David Malouf, it was in the book of articles and extracts edited by Frank Moorhouse called *Days of Wine and Rage*. Malouf said that "the real achievement" of Australian writers "might be in pioneering the experience of suburban man".¹⁷)

There's an interesting thing that's been happening in the Australian world of literature. There are some women who are trying to get together a prize in Australia for women writers like the Orange Prize, which is of course fraught with controversy as people think why do women need a prize and so on which I'd have thought once but I'm beginning to see it differently, especially now the Miles Franklin seems to be totally ignoring women writers. Why I'm saying this is that the sort of writing that I do, if done by men is highly valued. If you think of somebody like Jonathon Franzen and *The Corrections*, or if you think of William Trevor or John Banville, they write that kind of thing and it's where literature's at, this basic birth, life, death, what we all go through thing, but if women do it it's domestic, it's trivial, it's frivolous. I'm not sure how much people are noticing what women are doing now ...

¹⁵ Marion Halligan, 'From Barthes to Barmecide: The Tasting of Words,' *Australian Cultural History: Food, Diet, Pleasure* (Geelong: Deakin University, 1996) 27.

¹⁶ Marion Halligan, 'Blue Fornications', *Collected Stories* (Queensland: UQP, 1997) 255.

¹⁷ Halligan, *Taste* 165.

RG: Do you think your books appeal more to a female audience? What sort of reaction have you had?

MH: Yes, that's an interesting question. I know some men who've read them and who really get them but I do think sometimes male reviewers just sort of ignore them because they think disparagingly, 'oh, women's books'. I think if people are being ignorant they can do that. I don't think of myself as a woman's writer. I think I'm writing about people for people and I don't know whether setting up a prize for women only is the way to deal with that.

There's been this fuss recently that somebody pointed out: the review pages of books in this country and in America and in England are heavily weighted to male books and reviews by male reviewers and that kind of thing. Whether just having the conversations will make people change their minds, I don't know. Somebody suggested that now men are retiring earlier, taking packages and so on, they're more likely to take to reading and they'll go to book groups and they'll go to literary festivals and that then they'll be more attuned to things that are being written.

RG: Yes, that's interesting. Where I live in Berry there's a male book group and a female book group and a friend of mine whose husband retired and who previously wasn't a great reader, has joined the book group and is now reading voraciously.

MH: I think there's always been a tendency for men to think that if you read a book the 'serious' books are non-fiction books of history or about battles or about science or something; whereas I think women have always thought that novels would tell them how the world works. Especially women who were perhaps a bit isolated having to stay home with children; reading books told them what was going on in the world, and it was fiction that they wanted to read because that's what told them about relationships and how families work and all that kind of thing.

RG: Yes, all the things you write about: relationships and choices we make and you talk about fiction illuminating our lives and nourishing us along with food and art and all those things add to our lives.

MH: I think women have known that for a long time and men are perhaps just beginning to find that out.

RG: May I ask you about your latest book, *Shooting the Fox*, which has just been published? Is it a collection of short stories?

MH: Yes, it's purely short stories and I was thinking about what you said about discontinuous narrative because *Valley of Grace* is really a set of short stories but they're totally linked. I actually love that way of writing a novel because I think that's what life's like. I mean you've got six stories and pretty well all the same people are in it and it does have a kind of linear progression but basically these stories sort of loop around and so on and then you get into the next one and that all loops around and it seems to me that's much more realistic. We're

all sort of the heroes of our own stories but we're bit players in other people's stories and I quite like that.

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