

# WRITERS IN CONVERSATION



## 'Setting off Fireworks over a Mysterious City': An Interview with Kathleen Winter

James Bailey

Visitors to the online journal of Canadian author Kathleen Winter find themselves suspended indeterminately between reality and dreams. Winter's blog includes a 'Dream Journal,' recounting half-remembered visions of a careening aircraft teeming with cockroaches, a giant anaconda twisting around the neck of its nonchalant owner, and, in its most recent entry, 'Margaret Atwood tucking into a panini on Avenue Mont-Royal.'<sup>1</sup> Reality intrudes sharply elsewhere, however; one blogpost transcribes film footage of a speech made by the Attawapiskat First Nation chief, Theresa Spence, then twenty days into a hunger strike in support of the Idle No More indigenous rights movement.<sup>2</sup> An earlier entry, on the 2012 Quebec student protests, sits alongside a surrealistic image of a group of mechanics covered in falling cherry blossom petals: 'the petals blew in on the men and the men did not drive them away. The men had petals in their hair.'<sup>3</sup>

Reality and dreams cohere closer still in Winter's fiction. Her 2010 novel, *Annabel*, sets the experiences of an intersex character named Wayne against the harsh, rural landscape of Labrador, a remote part of Canada's eastern coast. In a place of rigidly-defined gender roles, where men are expected to hunt, fish and build, and women remain at home to raise children, Wayne - born in 1968 and rendered anatomically 'male' via surgery and hormone treatment - appears otherworldly, belonging nowhere. On reaching adolescence, the protagonist comes to identify with (and as) Annabel, the girl who lives 'inside Wayne', and who experiences Labrador and its inhabitants 'from her hiding place.'<sup>4</sup> Wayne's mother, grieving the daughter she feels she has lost, also communicates with Annabel, lending the novel an air of gothic solemnity - an impression of secret communion with the dead.

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1 Kathleen Winter, 'Dream Journal,' *Kathleen Winter - LiveJournal*. LiveJournal, 1 February 2013. Web. 8 October 2013 <http://kathleenwinter.livejournal.com/79585.html>.

2 Kathleen Winter, 'Full Text of Chief Theresa Spence's Historic Statement Day 20 of Her Fast,' *Kathleen Winter - LiveJournal*. LiveJournal, 1 January 2013. Web. 8 October 2013 <http://kathleenwinter.livejournal.com/78992.html>.

3 Kathleen Winter, 'Cherry Blossom at the Mechanics' Hole,' *Kathleen Winter - LiveJournal*. LiveJournal, 13 May 2012. Web. 8 October 2013 <http://kathleenwinter.livejournal.com/69820.html>.

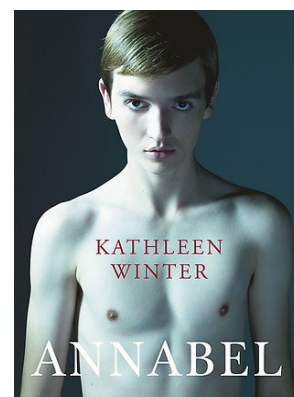
4 Kathleen Winter, *Annabel* (London: Vintage, 2011) 373.

*Shortlisted for the 2011 Orange Prize for Fiction and awarded the 2011 Thomas Head Raddall Award, Annabel was published to critical acclaim and later adapted as a radio play for BBC Radio 4. More recently, the novel has inspired further reinventions, providing the inspiration for a song by the British band Goldfrapp and an accompanying short film directed by the filmmaker Lisa Gunning. Goldfrapp's song, also named 'Annabel,' captures the sense of yearning and isolation that characterises Winter's novel, while the accompanying film gestures toward something more hopeful, its final frames shifting from monochrome to hazy, sun-dappled gold; reality and dreams cohering once again.*<sup>5</sup>

*Winter was born in Bill Quay in the north of England in 1960, but moved to Newfoundland in eastern Canada at the age of eight. Her novella, Where is Mario, was published in 1987, and two works of creative non-fiction entitled The Road Along the Shore and The Necklace of Occasional Dreams followed in 1991 and 1996. Her first collection of short stories, entitled boYs, was published in 2007 and awarded both the Metcalfe-Rooke and Winterset awards that year. In 2014, Winter will publish Boundless, a non-fiction account of her journey through the Northwest Passage, as well as a new collection of short stories entitled The Freedom in American Songs. Our interview was conducted via email correspondence throughout September and October 2013.*

JB: I'd like to begin by asking you about *Annabel*, which is probably the work for which you're best known. What gave you the idea to write a novel with an intersex protagonist? Did this also offer you the chance to explore broader ideas relating to gender, identity and society?

**KW: I was told a true story about an intersex person who had grown up confined to one gender and was blossoming into a combination of both, with a lot of difficulty and struggle. The person who told me the story called the child in question a 'true hermaphrodite' and I had not heard this term before as a condition existing outside story and myth. That term is not generally used any more for many good reasons, but at the time it was still used in some places and I knew that earlier it had been used commonly to describe a variety of ways a person can be on a spectrum within the gender binary. I started to experiment with a short story, which my editor did not want to include in the collection on which we were working together, but I was haunted enough by the story that I began to work on a longer piece, which became the novel. The story did, yes, give me space to explore questions of gender, identity and society, though my exploration was just a beginning – I think the novel really only begins to touch the profound nature of many of these questions.**



JB: In that respect, Wayne's indeterminate position at neither end of the rigid gender binary you established in the novel – where men are 'kings outside their houses', while women appear bathetically as 'queens of inner rooms ... and carpet cleaners' – seems to offer readers a point

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<sup>5</sup> Goldfrapp, 'Annabel,' *Tales of Us*, Mute, 2013. Music Video. Dir. Lisa Gunning.

of entry into the community you create.<sup>6</sup> I wondered whether you ever considered constructing the narrative from Wayne's perspective?

**KW: No, I never did. The thing is, I know more about the people and communities surrounding Wayne than I could possibly know about his inner life. Perhaps I could have tried, but I don't know if I really felt I had the authority. I was attuned, throughout the writing, to an idea that anything I wrote about being between genders would have to be personal knowledge, of which I do have some, but not enough to fully inhabit that character. To write from the point of view of one character is, for me, to inhabit that person. I try now to experiment with different ways of getting around this, but during the writing of *Annabel* I didn't feel ready.**

JB: I couldn't help but read *Annabel* as a kind of ghost story, from the remote, cold environment of Labrador, to the running themes of isolation and loss. Wayne's mother even seems to feel that she has murdered her daughter by raising her child as conventionally 'male'. In this sense, her secret nurturing of Annabel appears almost like a communion with the dead. Were you conscious of the gothic elements of the novel, or the sense of intertextuality with other genres?

**KW: I love this question because I have many unpublished stories and parts of novels that I'd consider gothic. My voice as a writer often tends that way, but editors and publishers tend to steer me away from it. In fact, the only publisher who ever went near any of my darker and more ghostly material was a UK magazine called *Black Static: Transmissions from Beyond*, which in 2008 published my story 'How Deep is His Loneliness'. I can't seem to get that story or any of my gothic work published in Canada. I never dreamed those elements had seeped into *Annabel* but now that you mention them I guess I have to admit they're in there. It's a happy admission, so thank you.**

JB: Why did you choose Labrador for the novel's setting? Is it a place you know well?

**KW: I lived in Newfoundland for many years, and Labrador is part of that province or region of Canada – I worked there in schools, giving writing workshops, and made friends there. I made a TV documentary about a young Innu woman songwriter who had a band and was a DJ in a tiny radio station, and in the course of making the documentary I spent time in the hunting tents of her Innu family who were hunting on the land. I know the land and the people and have friends there. It is a place with great magnetic power and a charged landscape. It has the kind of transformative energy I wanted present in the book.**

JB: The setting reminded me of something said at the end of your short story 'French Doors', about the character Larry: 'all the pursuits in which people involved themselves; all the things they wanted, and the beauty they wanted to attract to themselves. Here was beauty all around

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<sup>6</sup> Kathleen Winter, *Annabel*, 39.

Larry; in the stillness, in the simplicity here.<sup>7</sup> Were you concerned with creating a setting that sharpened our focus on characters and their actions?

**KW: More and more I regard place as part of the actual body or being of the humans and other living beings within it, less a setting. I think rivers and blood of land and human possess the same current. Air and mind are the same substance. For me, Labrador and the characters in the book were one and the same thing. I was also concerned with the supremacy of beauty and grandeur in the face of ugliness and pettiness, and Labrador has enough beauty and grandeur to conquer many fears and sadnesses.**

JB: Aside from the male gender it signifies, Wayne also seems such an unfairly dull name for a protagonist so unique. It puts me in mind of another character, Wayne Skaines, from your short story 'Incinerator Times' in *boYs*, who spends his time eating hot dogs and painting the kitchen cupboards.<sup>8</sup> Annabel, the name whispered to the protagonist by his mother and her friend Thomasina, seems almost otherworldly in comparison! Do you place much importance on the names you give to characters, and could you say more about what the names of characters in the novel might signify?

**KW: I was reluctant to give my character the name Wayne because, like you, I found it unfairly dull, even ugly. I kept meaning to change the name but never got around to it. In the end, its contrast with the exquisiteness of Annabel felt right, and I bit my lip and forced myself to leave it like that, though I wondered if it was too awful. But I think now that the awfulness matched that of the things the character had to endure and overcome. But it was hard for me to do that to him – to give him that name.**

JB: As well as having *Annabel* adapted for a radio play, it has now become the source of inspiration for a song of the same name. How did you feel on hearing Goldfrapp's song for the first time?

**KW: I was struck by how atmospheric the song is, a veil of pure emotion. I heard the song before I saw the video, so there were no specific scenes from the book, more a mood inspired by the characters and Labrador itself, a cold and beautiful and somewhat mysterious land. I found the song mysterious even though it had come from my own story. It made me realize there is still mystery in a thing even when we think we know it. I thought the song was beautiful.**

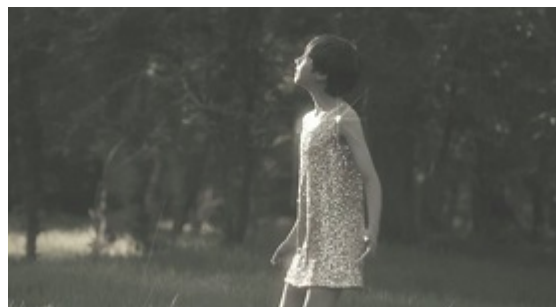
JB: And that song, in turn, inspired Lisa Gunning's short film, as you mention.

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7 Kathleen Winter, 'French Doors,' *boYs (Stories)* (Windsor, Ontario: Biblioasis, 2007), 55-62 (60).

8 Kathleen Winter, 'Incinerator Times,' *boYs (Stories)* (Windsor, Ontario: Biblioasis, 2007), 69-76.

**KW:** I'm amazed to see images come to life out of the world of my imagination – I loved the actor Lisa found to play Annabel – so perfect. Of course the film incorporates imagination and visions other than my own, but I felt the essence of it was true to the book, and those who've worked with me or are close to my novel agree. It's a really wonderful piece and I'm moved that Lisa Gunning was able to infuse it with a kind of golden loveliness while keeping the poignant longing and sadness intact. In the end, I wanted my novel to hold a feeling of promise, not defeat, and I think Lisa's film holds that promise and keeps it safe. This sense of promise has been really important for readers of *Annabel* who have written me letters, and I am glad it is present in the book and in the song and the film.



Still from 'Annabel' (Dir. Lisa Gunning, 2013)

**JB:** Having experienced these artists translating your work into other mediums, are you curious about turning the tables, and translating music or film into prose fiction?

**KW:** I once had a boyfriend who wrote radio plays and as they were being broadcast I used to paint watercolours, scenes from the soundscape. I never thought of turning music or film into prose, but in a way I did use music in the writing of *Annabel*. There were pieces of music I listened to over and over again while writing scenes. The blog piece I wrote mentions this, I think, and names some of the artists and their pieces.<sup>9</sup> I wrote a lot of scenes that never made it into the novel, but the act of listening and allowing the music to feed the writing – that is something I do. I find the thought of doing this in a more conscious way, with more focus or intent, an interesting idea. Maybe I'll try listening to something with the express intent of writing a story, and see what happens!

**JB:** *Annabel* was published in 2010. I'm curious to know what you've been working on since.

**KW:** I'm writing the second draft of a narrative nonfiction book about my voyage through what we call the Northwest Passage. The piece is about the power of the land, the animals and the ice and water in the north. It's about revelations that the land pressed on me, regarding the planet and what we need to be thinking about and doing instead of laying waste and desecrating everything. That book is called *Boundless: Mapping Geography and the Spirit in the Northwest Passage* and is to be published by House of Anansi in Canada, and by other publishers in Britain and Germany. I'm also working on a new book of short fiction called *The Freedom in American Songs* with editor John Metcalf at Biblioasis.

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<sup>9</sup> Kathleen Winter, 'The Golden Circle: A Reverie for Goldfrapp's *Annabel*,' *Kathleen Winter - LiveJournal*. LiveJournal, 3 July 2013. Web. 8 October 2013 <http://kathleenwinter.livejournal.com/83425.html>.

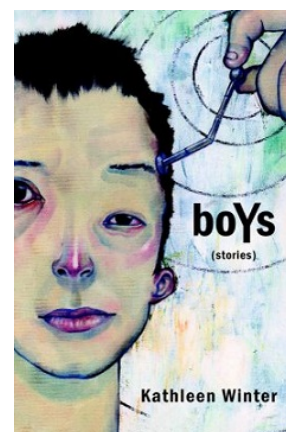


JB: Evocations of real spaces and places seem central to your fiction. Having chosen Labrador for the setting of *Annabel*, were you tempted to do the same with the Northwest Passage, fictionalising your experience rather than writing a memoir?

**KW: Yes. For a long time I thought it might be a novel. For a while I thought it might be a graphic novel, as I began to tell the story through creating a lot of drawings and paintings. There is always tension, for me, in calling a work fiction or nonfiction. A lot of nonfiction I try to read tends to fall into a sort of stultifying stiffness. It thinks it has to sound journalistic and punchy. It is afraid of mystery and ambiguity and reaches for maps, dates and statistics so as not to be considered suspect. Even so-called narrative or creative nonfiction does these things. It's as if people think truth is not allowed to have any life but must be slaughtered, pinned and stuffed before it can be properly documented. So yes, I was tempted to keep away from that mausoleum and write my journey as fiction. The problem was, there were important truths I didn't want anyone to think I'd made up. In the end, I feel I've been working on something that is alive as a novel can be alive. I hope so, anyway.**

JB: To return to your forthcoming short story collection, how did you arrive upon the title? And is there a theme that unites these stories?

**KW: 'The Freedom in American Songs' is the title of one of the stories. I chose it for the overall title because it is buoyant – the title has freedom and songs in it, as well as America: all things associated with buoyancy and perhaps – in an idealistic sense – some sort of happiness. But the title includes room for irony and gives notice that maybe someone is going to fall off the edge of happiness. Freedom is easily lost, or not what one thought it was, or exacts great cost. Songs can break your heart. And America ...**



JB: It could also be said that the short story possesses its own kind of freedom. Edgar Allan Poe famously argued that a shorter prose narrative, which can be read in a single sitting, is necessarily privileged with an 'immense force derivable from [its] totality'.<sup>10</sup> Poe would say that the short story is free to occupy the moment of reading and to affect readers in ways that longer narratives cannot. Do you happen to recognise this 'force derivable from totality' as something your own short fictions possess, as opposed to a novel like *Annabel*?

**KW: There is definitely a weight that a novel has to drag, which a short story doesn't. The novel requires interminable logic and an exercise of structure and false completeness. This might lead to 'totality' but rarely to 'immense force': very often readers get to the last fifty pages of a novel and find an unbearable weariness causes them to fling it aside and never finish it. The force is all in the heart and centre of the novel, and it's a rare novelist who can**

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<sup>10</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, 'Review of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*' (May 1842), *Essays and Reviews* ed. G. R. Thompson (New York: Library of America, 1984) 571.

keep it going and not let it dissipate before the end. A short story has the advantage of being able to open out into fabulous illogic and still work as a story. It can operate without the structural restraints of a novel. It can change its mind and get on a different train. It can play games or be deadly serious. It is easy for a reader to forgive a short story no matter how the story proceeds. When I'm writing a short story I feel excited, as if I'm setting off fireworks over a mysterious city. A short story is a one-night stand with no regrets.

JB: Thank you for agreeing to this interview. I'm curious as to whether you enjoy reflecting upon your work in this way.

**KW:** Often, when a writer makes something, s/he might not know many of its implications, just as we do not know all the implications of true things we see in the world. It is the writer's hope - mine, anyway - that the most direct or faithful rendering possible will reproduce or present what is seen to others, with many facets or qualities in place. Then the possibility exists that a reader, who may know more than the writer does about that story or situation, will 'see into' the written work in new ways that the writer has yet to learn. I love this. I love it when it happens, and it is one of the things that makes writing alive, for me - both other writers' work and - if things go well - my own, at times.

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*James Bailey is a PhD candidate at the University of Sheffield. His thesis examines the treatment of time and free will in the fiction of Muriel Spark and his research interests include narrative temporality, metafiction, queer theory, archive studies, and feminist criticism and theory. James co-runs the Postgraduate Contemporary Women's Writing Network (PG CWWN).*

*James's most recent article, 'Repetition, boredom despair': Muriel Spark and the Eichmann Trial' was published in both Holocaust Studies and an edited collection, Representing Perpetrators, in 2012. <http://sheffield.academia.edu/JamesBailey>*