



WRITERS IN CONVERSATION



Photo by Celia Dann

'They All Begin with an Idea': A Conversation with Andrea Goldsmith

Gillian Dooley

*Andrea Goldsmith has published seven novels, most recently *The Memory Trap* (2013) and *Reunion* (2009). I had not met her before I visited her home in an inner suburb of Melbourne to record this interview, but I had read her 2002 novel *The Prosperous Thief* with great admiration, and we had recently corresponded by email over our shared appreciation of Iris Murdoch. She had written a very kind review of my 2003 publication of interviews with Iris Murdoch, *From a Tiny Corner in the House of Fiction*, so it seemed fitting that I interview her for *Writers in Conversation*. I sent her some questions a few weeks before we met, and these provided a loose framework for our discussion.*

Goldsmith lives in the roomy modern town house she shared for many years with her late partner, the poet Dorothy Porter, who died five years ago, although she is clearly still very much a presence in Goldsmith's life. We sat in a comfortable room at the back of the house, looking out on a pleasant courtyard garden. Her dog Lotte, an affectionate, well-behaved poodle, shared the sofa during much of our conversation. Contented canine snufflings often appear on the recording, though I couldn't find a way to notate them in the transcript.

We recorded the interview and then kept talking about life, the universe and everything for more than an hour over tea and lemon tart. When it was time to go, Andrea offered to walk me to the railway station, and as we left, to our shared delight, it began to rain for the first time in many weeks. She lent me an umbrella, but preferred to walk in the rain. An enduring image from that day is the petite author skipping down the street, greeting her neighbours in unselfconscious ecstasy at the breaking of the drought.

AG: Let's talk about Iris.

GD: Yes, let's talk about Iris.

AG: Iris Murdoch, more than anyone else, taught me about the seductions of fiction. I came across her first at 14 or 15. I'd been reading since I was three, and reading grown-up books too, but her novels were novels of ideas and novels of characterisation which made her special. Her characters were so real to me, yet they were unlike anybody who lived in suburban Melbourne or travelled the 69 tram to school.¹ But I absolutely believed those people existed and I wanted to know them. And the only way I could know them was through Iris Murdoch's fiction. I was hungry for her books and when I got them I couldn't put them down. What was so wonderful was, at the time I discovered her, I was many books in arrears. So there'd always be an Iris Murdoch I hadn't read – a perfect present to myself after the exams at the end of each year. I'd already decided that I wanted to write novels, but it was Iris Murdoch who showed me what novels could do – their breadth and power – and the sort of novels I wanted to write. Her novels were concerned with characters and ideas. Sure, you could whiz through from the beginning to the end, but if you wanted to go deeper you could. I have a huge amount to be grateful to Iris for. Something you and I share.

GD: Her books have just got everything, because they've got the plot structure, the narrative dynamics, that make you want to know more, but then there's the substance as well, it's not just an Agatha Christie that just shoots you through to the end.

AG: Yes, you want to know what happens to these characters, *you want to know*. There are two books I read when I want to remind myself about obsession – great books. *Of Human Bondage* by Somerset Maugham, absolutely wonderful, where Philip is besotted over the useless Millicent, or whatever her name is,² and of course Iris Murdoch's *The Sea, the Sea*. Two fabulous books of blind, futile obsession, of people who should know better, but of course they *can't* know better. It's wonderful what fiction can teach you. For example, I'm reading a ton of Soviet Russian history at the moment in preparation for my new novel, but I'm also reading Russian fiction for the culture and texture of the times. I count myself really fortunate that my mother had some Iris Murdoch books on her bookcase and that's how I came across her. And Jane Austen too.

The thing with Austen, everyone talks about her novels as being novels of manners.

GD: Hmmm.

AG: You don't want to agree with that either?

GD: No.

AG: I think they're rich novels of characterisation.

¹ Andrea Goldsmith, 'Iris Murdoch', Blog Post, 2 September 2013, includes the text of an article written for the *Australian* in 2003. andrea.goldsmith.com.au.

² It is Mildred, not Millicent.

GD: Characterisation and ideas and morality – manners are just part of the setting, like the house they live in, the incidentals of their world.

AG: I agree. I studied JA at school. In my 20s I flew to America to see someone I thought I was madly in love with. It went very badly wrong and I found myself without a bean in Daly City just outside San Francisco – Daly City was the trigger for Pete Seeger’s ‘Little Boxes’. I couldn’t change my air ticket, I actually went to a pawn shop to pawn two rings I had, but they offered peanuts. What I did have was the complete works of Jane Austen. I’d gone out to Berkeley before the relationship went off the rails and bought – I’ve still got it – this huge book which was the complete works in one volume. Here I am, I have no money, I’m stuck in Daly City for one month, and I read all of Jane Austen’s novels and what a wonderful thing it was. And I have to say that in times of extremis since then, I’ve turned to Austen. It’s like falling into a familiar embrace, and you know you’re safe, you know that you’re going to be totally involved, enraptured. I turned to Jane Austen when Dorothy died, and in the years since her death, I’ve dipped into Jane Austen many times. I’ve put Jane Austen’s complete works on my iPad, because I travel with an iPad, and I’ll find myself picking up *Mansfield Park* or one of the other novels, and it’s like – not connecting with an old friend, it’s not that, it’s much more a sense of home and sanctuary but one in which your mind moves. I love her. I love Jane Austen.

GD: I couldn’t pick a favourite but I love *Mansfield Park*.

AG: It’s probably my favourite too. Another writer who I return to a lot and who has been a great influence is Patrick White. And I have no doubt about my favourite Patrick, it’s *Riders in the Chariot*. I recently gave a lecture on *Riders* at the Wheeler Centre – I said I’d only give a lecture on an Australian classic if I could do this particular novel. It’s a novel that I’ve read three or four times now, and I’ve read it differently every time.³

GD: That’s the other interesting thing, they change, they’re multifaceted, so that as you come into them at different times of your life you find more.

AG: It’s so amazing. Something hits you for the first time, and you think, why didn’t I see this on the three previous readings? And it’s because you didn’t need to, you needed to see other things.

GD: I recently reread my review of *The Prosperous Thief*. I loved the novel, but I said in my review, ‘the Lesbian idyll is overdone,’ and now I have no idea what I meant. Because it’s not: as soon as you set it up it disintegrates. I thought what on earth – where was my mind?

AG: It was where lots of minds were in 2002.

GD: Perhaps, but ...

³ The lecture can be viewed at <http://wheelercentre.com/videos/video/australian-literature-102-patrick-white-riders-in-the-chariot/>

AG: The comment was fine. Believe me, I've read far worse things than that.

GD: Of course. I loved it, and I hadn't kept up with your books, so that's what made me think, oh yes, I must read more now that I have an excuse.

I'm interested in the structure of your novels. Often novels with multiple points of view alternate chapters or short segments, but you sometimes provide long stretches, almost novella-length, developing one thread before starting or resuming another. Is there a reason for these differences in approach?

AG: I'm really interested that you bring up structure towards the beginning of our conversation. It's probably where I would have finished.

GD: I thought structure was something basic, or does it come later?

AG: Maybe the best way of answering that question is to talk about how my novels begin. They all begin with an idea, *all* of them. And it will be an idea that's been on my mind for quite some time. With *The Memory Trap*, while the theme of memory dominates the finished novel, it was the idea of genius, not memory, that I'd been toying with for quite some time: how much we're willing to excuse someone's bad behaviour for the exceptional gifts they give us. With *Reunion* it was the idea of friendship. Around the time I turned 50 I started thinking a lot more about enduring friendship. In particular, how we're far kinder and more liberal with our friends, as compared with our partners, in excusing their foibles and skirting around differences. That notion gave rise to *Reunion*.

When I finish a novel I read very haphazardly, very widely. Once I'm starting to formulate an idea the reading fines down. At that point I'm making lots and lots of notes and the characters start to emerge, characters and their narratives through which the ideas will be explored. That's the reason why my novels are books of characterisation. It happens that with pretty much all of my novels – certainly the last two – they've been ensemble novels: four or five characters of equal weight. One of the reasons why the narrative will stay with a particular character for a reasonable length of time is that when you shift point of view, it disrupts that deep immersion experience that makes reading so pleasurable. But there are also the demands of the novel: characters work towards the overall coherence of the novel, as well as propelling the narrative forward.

GD: I suspected that it was that kind of thing, because you can chop up the narrative and just have a few pages for each character, alternating between them, but that's a different reading experience.

AG: It is. I've always believed that the most powerful tool the fiction writer has is character point of view. In particular, that third person subjective – which I use a lot. It provides a much more powerful entrée into (1) a character (2) their world view and (3) it also works very well with a third person narrator to widen things out and move events on. If you're going to have a whole lot of characters it's because the novel needs them, so there's a reason to unzip the

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characters and see the world through their eyes. Of course this is very interesting for the writer, it also provides a deeper experience of the fictional world for the reader too.

GD: It's very interesting. A friend of mine is beginning to write and she's sending me her stuff to read and to critique – all I can say is what I think and what might work, and it made me think, what does make that third person free indirect discourse work, and you have to get the language right, you have to speak in the voice of the person, almost.

AG: You've got to see the world through their eyes. The eyes of your characters.

GD: You've got to be right in their world, so you wouldn't use a word they wouldn't use.

AG: No, you wouldn't do that, but it's more the *perspective* of each character. For example you have Nina in *The Memory Trap* seeing her brother-in-law Elliot sitting alone on the beach, seeing him for the very first time as a deeply demoralised, unhappy man. This is when our whole idea of Elliot changes. But if instead of Nina it was his wife Zoe who saw him up on the beach, she would think: Oh, there's Elliot, sitting all by himself, if only he'd find himself a hobby or a friend to help him through the day. It's point of view even more than the specific language that carries the meaning. And the reason that it's so powerful is that if readers observe Elliot up on the beach through Zoe's eyes, then they think, Oh, silly old Elliot. But when it's Nina and she perceives aspects of Elliot she hasn't seen before, we as readers also see qualities we've not seen before. From a narrative perspective it's a really rich approach, really powerful.

GD: Flashbacks are of course a common technique but you seem to have a way of advancing backwards through a story, situating a character and then going back and bringing them to that point. It creates an interesting, wave-like effect. How do you decide where a particular bit of someone's story belongs in the course of the narrative?

AG: Again, it's going to be the demands of a novel as a whole. Flashbacks: you rarely get them right on a first draft – sometimes you fall on your luck but mostly you don't. With me, after I have a full draft, a reasonable draft, I read it and I interrogate the manuscript. How did this character get the way they did? What does it mean that they would do something so odd? Where on earth did that come from? This sort of questioning might well lead to a flashback. Also flashbacks are often those spotlight scenes that will change the pace of a novel, they can rev things up quite a lot. But also they supply what we need to know at a particular time to further understanding of a character's actions and responses.

GD: And that has to be organic, doesn't it? In one of Iris Murdoch's novels, *The Green Knight*, you get to the end and find out that one of the girls is in love with not A but B, but we've been inside that girl's point of view and it feels like cheating that Murdoch hadn't told us.

AG: You're so right. Some years ago I read an Anita Shreve. I was absolutely grabbed by this novel. Then, at the end, something pivotal was revealed, something I could not have guessed.

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I went back through the novel and I looked for the signposting. The signposts were so feeble that someone with 2020 vision in good light would miss them. So you can't do your flashbacks like that. Again, let me use Elliot from *The Memory Trap*. He started off in my mind as really a nasty piece of work. He's brutal to his wife, Zoe, he's got a real whiplash tongue. I was happily writing him as a baddie, and then I got to a point when I thought – exactly as a reader would have thought – how did he get like this? I mean, if he'd been such a brute all along there's no way he could have had friends, had a job, had a wife.

GD: But also, well this may have been something you put in later, he's charming to everyone else.

AG: Not too much later, in fact as Nina notes early in the novel, the fact Elliot was so charming to everyone else actually made it worse for his wife. But just as the reader becomes immersed in a novel, as the writer I, too, am very much inside the work as I move through the early drafts. But once the novel is basically in place, then, believe me, I'm absolutely on the outside and I'm there with my magnifying glass and my embroidery kit – and the rubbish bin. In the early drafts when I'm writing new material it's a very organic process, and I find myself, as an immersed reader would be, asking questions about my characters, characters that of course owe their existence to me.

GD: Iris Murdoch once said she'd like to write 'a novel which was made up entirely of peripheral characters'.⁴ Sometimes I feel that you are aiming for something similar, in the way you share the point of view among many characters, including some minor ones. To what extent is your choice of multiple points of view an ethical rather than just a technical one?

AG: I don't really understand what you mean.

GD: I'm probably still recovering from my PhD – I shouldn't be, I wrote the Iris Murdoch chapter in 1995. But it's making sure that you're giving people equal weight, that you're doing justice to everyone.

AG: Oh, no, I'm not worried about that, oh, goodness, no! They work for me, but mostly they work for the novel. You take someone like Beth in *The Memory Trap*, she has a small role in the latter part of the novel, but it is absolutely pivotal. Did I feel that I needed to bring her in earlier, give her more words? Absolutely not, but nonetheless she's crucial. Confidentially, I don't quite believe Iris Murdoch when she says that.

GD: I don't either.

AG: Everything is in service to the overall coherence of the novel. I don't believe that novels are fair or politically correct and I don't think they ought to be. I've always believed that you can get away with a hell of a lot more in fiction than you ever can in non-fiction. I had a

⁴ W.K. Rose, 'Iris Murdoch, Informally', *From a Tiny Corner in the House of Fiction: Interviews with Iris Murdoch* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003) 22.

paedophile in *Reunion*, a *sympathetic* paedophile, and I got away with it. I couldn't have in non-fiction. The character, Stephen, struck readers as so sympathetic, I actually had to remind them that he was a man in his forties and Ava was in her teens when their relationship began. Readers would protest that they never thought of him as a paedophile. It was only when I suggested that if their 15-year-old daughter brought home a 42-year-old boyfriend they mightn't be particularly happy. That's what fiction can do – silence as well as challenge the most basic values and attitudes. I love that subversive but very powerful aspect of fiction.

GD: It's still not amoral though.

AG: Oh no, not at all. I think there's a moral flavour to all fiction. That doesn't mean you're on a mission or a soapbox, it's more that emotions reveal moral stances and so, too, the emotions of your characters. The fact is, though, if I have multiple points of view in a novel I can explore differing points of view on a particular issue, points of view that are certainly not the author's.

GD: One of those turning points in my critical career was when I came to my first academic conference – cultural studies, I was in the wrong place. About seven people in the audience. I was giving a paper on point of view in a Doris Lessing story. There was a very aggressive questioner afterwards who said, 'I'm very disturbed by your notion that fiction is about empathy rather than justice.'

AG: Oh for heaven's sake.

GD: I thought, right, good, you've just defined it for me. It *is* about empathy rather than justice.

AG: I certainly do think that writers of fiction who deny the moral currents that flow with fiction are fooling themselves. Or maybe they're just bad novelists.

GD: Your characters and even your narrators often express strong political opinions, especially about human rights issues such as asylum seekers. Do you think it's important to make it clear where you stand? Is writing for you at least partly a form of activism? Or is it totally in the realm of characterisation, e.g. Laura Lewin's indignation about refugees in *The Prosperous Thief*, which seems to be a factor in the break-up of her relationship?

AG: You've got four years to write a novel, so the sorts of ideas that you explore have got to be fairly complex otherwise you're going to be very bored. Starting with ideas in the first place limits the possibility of boredom, but they've got to be ideas that will really grab me and hold me for the duration. That means ideas I want to know a lot more about. Sometimes characters share my point of view on an issue, sometimes not. But whatever the point of view, the issue that's being exposed must be meshed with the character's life and worldview. It can't be polemical.

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A good example would be Helen, the molecular biologist in *Reunion*. I, the author, share with Helen the passion she has for her science. I love that passion. But Helen is involved in dual purpose research: one outcome will result in better health for third world people, the other will further bio-terrorism. The higher me, the moral me knows exactly what Helen should have done, the decisions she should have made. But that didn't gel with the character I'd written. Yes, Helen did suffer the conflict engendered by her work, but her passion for science won out in the end. And not just with her work. When her best friend, Ava, needs her scientific help, Helen's loyalty to her science causes her to be less than loyal to her life-long friend.

These are complex issues. And when it comes to an issue like refugees, you simply can't put it in a novel because you want to. It has to be able to justify its inclusion. If an issue is going to stand out like a banner along Swanston Street then it's got to go.

The art of the short story is knowing what to leave out, while the art of writing a novel is knowing how much you can put in and get away with. In early drafts you put in a hell of a lot that you can't get away with. Everything from a scene of several thousand words down to a brief observation made by one of the characters has to justify its inclusion in the final novel. I live in this world, of course I'm politically engaged. My new novel is going to be about exile. I'm going to write it without mentioning Tony Abbott – yes I am! So I've got to find a novelistic way of doing this.

GD: Henry Lewin in *The Prosperous Thief*, for example, is a likeable character, in a way.

AG: That's right, but he shouldn't be. Henry fought for the Nazis; at the end of the war he commits an immoral act that affords him a better future. Someone in a review described *The Prosperous Thief* as a moral thriller. And it is, though I hadn't thought of the novel like that. The thing is, I wanted Henry to be likeable, so I gave him the point of view in order for readers to understand who he was and why he acted as he did. Similarly, I wanted Stephen, the paedophile in *Reunion* to be a sympathetic character. And Elliot in *The Memory Trap*. Readers were wrenched as far as Elliot was concerned, they couldn't stand him to begin with and then found themselves changing their mind. Also in *The Memory Trap*, I didn't want everybody to be hostile to Ramsey, the very unlikeable genius pianist. So when he gets himself into a mess and can't play any more, I give him the point of view. We see how bad he's feeling, the poor man is quite lost, and this opens up the possibility of feeling sorry for him.

GD: Surely he's autistic, but the word is never used. Why not?

AG: Because Ramsay isn't as far as I'm concerned. This has been quite an interesting discussion point. Many readers have described Ramsay as being on the autism spectrum. But from the novelist's point of view if I'd written that renowned pianist Ramsey Blake was autistic (or on the far end of the Asperger's scale), then I've pathologised him, put him in a readily recognisable box. We all know about autism and Asperger's these days. Readers would immediately think they know everything about him, that he's one of those idiot savants: in front of a piano he's a genius, everywhere else he's disabled. Characterisation

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would begin and end there. But to me he is so much more interesting and complex. The fact is that at the piano Ramsey Blake demonstrates a full range of emotions – not what you'd expect of someone on the autism spectrum. As well, Ramsay knows exactly what he needs to get on in life, and when he slips up it's because one of the pieces he's put in place has faulted or gone astray – like when his minder dies. He needs a bit of help, but he fixes it in the end.

Let me tell you how I see Ramsey. Since the age of two he has spent most of his spare time sitting on a stool in front of a keyboard. Of course he's not going to have the same range of social skills that the rest of us have, we, who might well have spent some time at a piano, but have had many other experiences as well. So I think he reflects where he has actually come from. And even though his parents made sure he did play with other children, the fact remains that most of his childhood was spent at the piano. I think *The Memory Trap* is wanting to say something about the range of normal: that it's much much broader than a lot of experts would have these days. We're all too quick to categorise somebody as ADD or autistic or Asperger's. I don't think it was such a bad thing in the olden days when I grew up that we had shy kids and we had naughty kids and that's what they were. And we had dumb kids too (oh dear, that's so politically incorrect).

GD: The more interesting thing, really in *The Memory Trap*, is Zoe – her obsession with Ramsey. Of course there's no logical reason for it.

AG: Of course there's no rational reason for any obsession. Zoe's obsession with Ramsay points to a lack in herself. All obsessions do. I've long been interested in obsession and it seems to have entered many of my novels. Mark Rubbo of Readings observed that there's really only one love scene in the novel and it occurs when Zoe and Ramsay (they're in their twenties at the time) play 'their Beethoven' in New York – Beethoven's 4th cello sonata in C. They are so absolutely connected as they play together. I've read this scene aloud at gigs and people feel that erotic tie between Ramsay and Zoe. Throughout her childhood, Zoe played music with Ramsay. That was her primary connection with him. That it's coloured her feelings towards him, concentrated them into blind obsession, doesn't surprise me. In fact, all obsessions blind you, they're very blinkered. I believe most people have the capacity for prolonged obsession. And while you can come out of it at the other end and think, oh what a fool I was. How could I have not seen it? But the fact is you couldn't have seen it. That's the nature of obsession. I've sometimes wondered if obsessions are easier to come by for people who have deep passions.

GD: And passion is a much debased word.

AG: Let me tell you something funny about passions. I'm a seriously unathletic person, always have been. I've never broken or sprained anything because I've never done sport, but I do enjoy watching the Winter Olympics on in Sochi at the moment. I have such a good time sitting on my couch with my knitting watching those superhuman feats. I also like the fact that it's so cold there when it's stinking hot here. But it also means I've been watching commercial television. I've seen oodles of ads in which everybody is passionate about McDonalds, about insurance, about cars, about TV shows, about Subway sandwiches, they're

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passionate about so many things that do not deserve a second thought – much less real passion.

GD: You've only written one novel about the Holocaust. Is it something you needed to do? Nell's argument in *The Prosperous Thief* about loosening the Jewish monopoly on the Holocaust is an interesting one. Do you think a time will come when it will be excusable for non-Jews to write novels and make films about the Holocaust without that sense of trespass?

AG: I'm a funny sort of Jew for an Australian. I'm fifth generation Australian through three of my grandparents, and the fourth came via the Russian Pale of Settlement, Germany, Palestine and on to Australia, arriving in 1901. Because we were part of the Anglo-Jewish community here in Australia I actually didn't meet kids who were children of Holocaust survivors until I got to university. And then I sure did. I always struggled with my Jewish identity here in Australia. I went to a Methodist School for 13 years. They were very welcoming, but still I did struggle. I think one of the reasons I struggled was that most people in the Australia of that time associated Jewishness with Europe and the Holocaust. I was the wrong sort of Jew. So in my early twenties I started reading about the Holocaust, and of course I could talk to the families of the friends I met at university. I continued to read and talk through the years.

As to when I wrote about it, on reflection, I think it had something to do with Dorothy. Dot was a quarter Jewish, but hers was a very important quarter. My 100% Jewishness meant a lot to her. We'd been together for 10 years when *The Prosperous Thief* was published. By this time I was entirely at home in my own Jewishness and therefore able to take it into the public domain.

One of the reasons I wrote *The Prosperous Thief* is that there has been a burgeoning Holocaust industry – it seems to grow larger with each decade – and I wanted to understand better this long reach of the Holocaust. The other thing that was happening, and which interested me greatly, was that there were repercussions occurring in the second generation. The first generation may not have initially questioned their parents who had gone through these shocking horrors but the second generation were forcing them to. I know about adult children of survivors, people in their forties and fifties with children of their own who have dragged their parents back to Auschwitz. The parents were doing it for their children and grandchildren; if left to themselves they would not have made this journey. So there were many issues that drew me to the topic, and it just seemed the right time to visit this fraught territory. More fundamentally though, I was wanting to explore the extent to which people can behave badly, even brutally, when they believe they've a right to do so. (I should add that an exploration of this idea runs through all my books. How can people behave as they do? How can they justify the indefensible?)

I've no plans to return to the Holocaust in my own work. But I feel that the Holocaust is an occurrence so defiantly incomprehensible that we need to try every possible means of understanding it. And that can come from Jews or Germans or anybody. I discussed this in an essay I wrote soon after finishing *The Prosperous Thief*. In that essay I mention an art exhibition that showed in New York called 'Mirroring Evil'. Here were displayed images of the

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Holocaust created by contemporary artists, some Jewish some not. The exhibition shocked people, many wanted it closed down. But others were saying no, this art is making us think about the Holocaust in a new way. I was among the latter group.⁵

GD: Your characters always have such interesting and enviable occupations – like the four friends in *Reunion* – a bestselling novelist, a ground-breaking scientist, an Islamic Studies specialist and a philosopher. And in *The Memory Trap* Nina's job as a memorial consultant is integral to the fabric of the novel – the themes of memory and memorialisation – as well as providing the plot device to bring her back to Australia. How soon do their occupations present themselves? Are they among the first things you know about your characters?

AG: I love this question. The occupations are extremely important, not only do they flesh out the characters, they're also part of the fictional fabric, they have to serve the novel as a whole. Until I've settled on the occupations I'm a little hamstrung. And I have to be interested in the occupations – if I'm not interested, my readers aren't going to be interested either.

Often the occupations will come in the oddest way, this certainly happened with *The Memory Trap*. As I mentioned before, I'd long wanted to write a novel exploring the nature of genius, so the character of Ramsey Blake came very quickly. He was always going to be a pianist. I play the piano, I know something about the piano, it was relatively easy. I needed to listen to a lot of piano music – it was a real trial – and all the concerts I attended during the writing of *The Memory Trap* were tax-deductible. A nice bonus.

But the main idea explored through *The Memory Trap*, is the nature of memory and how memory is far more in service to the present than the past events it is seeking to preserve. We act as if memory is obdurate, fixed, but it's not. As the novel progressed it explored memory both at the national level and at the personal level. I didn't intend this. In fact, it was not until I had a well-developed draft and sat back and read it that I suddenly realised: this novel, it's about memory.

I write fiction, I don't write autobiography. My characters are made up, the situations in which they find themselves are made up, I like making things up. But there's one aspect of my novels that's autobiographical: the ideas that are explored. The ideas themselves are ideas that interest me. I started writing *The Memory Trap* a few months after my partner of many years died. And while I'd long been interested in monuments, I started looking at them differently. Like many people who have lost a beloved, I found myself making monuments at home and in my life generally.

One day I went to see an art exhibition by the wonderful artist Kathy Temin. The main piece was an extraordinary installation of numerous white trees made out of fake fur and stuffing. Some were one metre high, others stretched to four metres; some were cylindrical, others were conical, others still were made of plump white cushions stacked one on top of the other. I wandered through this forest, the sound was all very muted, and for reasons that

⁵ Andrea Goldsmith, 'Homer and the Holocaust', *Australian Book Review* November 2002, 31-7. In this essay, Goldsmith discusses the representations of the Holocaust in the context of depictions of horror and brutality from ancient Greece to twenty-first century New York.

I couldn't explain it was as if I were back at Auschwitz-Birkenau. I had no idea why this was. But I've learned not to question these odd experiences, I just went along with it.

That evening at home I read the catalogue. The installation was called 'My Monument White Forest'. And it had sprung from Kathy Temin's visits through the death camps of Central and Eastern Europe. These were white fake fur trees. What was going on here? That's when I started to question what makes a monument work. A short time later I decided to make my character Nina Jameson an international consultant on memorial projects. Not surprisingly people have asked me whether there is such a profession. I have no idea, but there ought to be. There are conflicting interests and all sorts of political and social agendas when a monument is being planned and built. I think a Nina Jameson would be essential.

GD: If we could turn now to your fourth novel, *Under the Knife*. The premise of it is a biographer and her subject. That novel wouldn't exist without that idea of a biographer.

AG: Actually it was the idea of fiction rather than biography, the *power* of fiction that propelled the writing of that novel. It was basically, where does truth lie? I wanted to muddy the divisions between biography and fiction. Peter Ackroyd, the biographer and novelist, was out here at a Melbourne Festival about 15 years ago. There was a question from the audience relating his fiction and his biography. He replied: I save my truths for fiction, the rest I can put in the biographies. The person who asked the question was insulted. She felt he'd treated her inquiry very trivially. But the novelists in the audience knew exactly what he was talking about. You can get away with murder in fiction and that was an idea I wanted to explore in *Under the Knife*.

GD: Yes, it's fascinating, because you can just see that Alexander Otto doesn't really know what Edwina knows. Edwina, who is both Alexander's biographer as well as the writer of a fictional account of his life.

AG: It was so interesting to me that Edwina, ostensibly writing fiction not the biography – readers might want to disagree – chanced on the truth about Alexander Otto. Of course it's also fairly playful because the author Andrea Goldsmith makes an appearance towards the end of the novel. I laughed all the way through writing those last few pages. And unlike my usual work where I work and rework and rework so that it sounds as though it's just fallen out of me fully formed, those final pages of *Under the Knife* did fall out of me fully formed. There was a reviewer who clearly did not like the book who said in her review that it was very obvious that Andrea Goldsmith had had a recent relationship breakup and hadn't left enough time between the breakup and the writing of the novel. At this stage I'd been with Dot for several years – no relationship break up for a long time. What had happened was that this reviewer had fallen headlong into the trap I was exploring in the novel. Reviews can have me reaching for a razor blade, but this one was so stupid I ended up laughing.

GD: That might lead to the question about Coetzee. I found your reference in *The Memory Trap* to Coetzee's *Summertime* intriguing – Nina realising that Ramsay reminds her of the main character in *Summertime*: 'the same confusion, the same muddied longing, the awkward hold

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on the normal movements of a life, that simultaneous presence and absence, Ramsay Blake reminds her of a character in a novel' (91). The pot calling the kettle black, one might say, since she is also a character in a novel. Is that a deliberate metafictional device?

AG: Yes, she *is* a character in a novel. But what I want with my fiction is that Nina, indeed all my characters, appear as if real.

GD: Yes, I was overthinking, but I think if I was a more innocent reader I would have just gone with that: really it was a very small thing. That sort of metafiction is great fun in *Under the Knife*, but if you do too much of it, it just gets so tiresome.

AG: Yes it does. I thought *Summertime* was wonderful. So it may have been a small indulgence of the writer to refer to it in a novel. But in my own defence, when the connection is made, it's written from Nina's point of view. It occurs to *her* – Nina – that Ramsey reminds her of the character in *Summertime*.

GD: He doesn't remind me of that character, but I can see, OK, this is the way Nina sees him.

AG: Through *Reunion* in particular but also through *The Memory Trap* – through all of the books – there are lots of literary references. With *Reunion* I actually made a list, there were so many. Some people are going to pick them up, others will pick up only a few.

GD: Some people will write PhDs on them.

AG: Ha ha. My characters tend to be literate. Books and plays and music are going to be part of their lives, sport is not going to be. In *Reunion* I made Helen's son sporty. But generally the sorts of ideas my books explore don't require the kicking of a football.

GD: Melbourne seems an essential part of the world of your novels, although of course action takes place in many other places. Would you ever set a novel somewhere completely different?

AG: I love Melbourne. I was born in Caulfield, a good Jewish area, and moved across the river when I grew up. And whilst I've lived away for long periods, and I travel as often as I can now, Melbourne has always been home. Melbourne is a very interior city – not a bad thing for a writer. When I met Dorothy, who came from Sydney, I made it very clear that I'd not move from Melbourne. So she did the moving.

I have people over for dinner, I cook. In Sydney, people tend to go out. I love the fact we have seasons here, and I like the fact that Melbourne is a Victorian bluestone city rather than Sydney's sunny sandstone. Having said that, when I first went to London as a twenty-one-year-old, I was immediately struck by the similarity to Melbourne. I've spent a lot of time there, and each time it feels very second-homeish. So London comes into the novels, but it's only particular areas of London – north London and Bloomsbury – the areas I know well. The other place where I've spent quite a lot of time is New York, the Upper West Side of Manhattan. That's where the New York section of *The Memory Trap* is set. It's always great fun and stimulating and enjoyable for a writer to take her characters into places she likes, it's

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a great pleasure to do that. But the place must be in service to the novel. I can't use New York and London and Melbourne in my novels just because I love these cities.

I like the idea of moving around, both in my life and my novels. In fact, in my new novel there's going to be a young woman who comes from Soviet Russia to Australia in 1986. She comes from St Petersburg, where I visited a couple of years ago. Now I'm writing about it I may just have to go back.

GD: Do you need to go back for the novel, or is it just that you want to go back?

AG: I'll see how it pans out. I need to know where my character comes from, what formed her. I doubt there'll be any scenes actually set in Leningrad, but I need to know what sensibility she's going to bring to Australian society. I'll probably manage it without going back. With *The Prosperous Thief* I wrote all the Berlin sections *before* I went to Berlin, I did it deliberately like that. I wanted the imagination to have free rein. I talked to people, I had the Berlin Olympics map of 1936, I read, and by the time I went to Berlin in 1999, I had a good solid first draft. It was the right way to proceed for that particular novel.

GD: Your endings are often left open - in *The Memory Trap* one couple makes up but we don't know about the other. And what on earth is going to happen at the end of *The Prosperous Thief*? How do you decide when a novel ends?

AG: A dear friend of mine, a scholarly writer, lives in London. We were talking about our mutual work just this morning and she told me something interesting about the actress Edith Evans. Evans was being questioned about how she managed the very long arias, in particular, the long monologues in Shaw's plays. She replied: I picture the end; I am pulled towards the end. My friend was relating this to her own work: she knows the ending of her current book and she is being pulled towards it. I wish that happened to me. I don't know my endings until I'm there. In fact with both *Reunion* and *The Memory Trap*, the novels went to my agent and on to the publisher without the real ending. There *was* an ending, but I knew (and I told my agent and publisher) the ending would change. The book is finished, it's absolutely finished, but I know the ending is not right. I need it to leave home first. And then a week or two later the *final* ending will come.

I do like to leave the endings open. I want there to be imaginative space for the reader.

At a recent gig on *The Memory Trap* there was a lively conversation about the ending. One person said absolutely categorically that Zoe and Elliot would stay together but he had real doubts about Nina and Daniel. And somebody else quickly protested: how on earth could you think that? she said. Zoe and Elliot? There's not a chance they'll stay together. And I just let them argue it. I loved it, I just loved it. That's what fiction can do. And the act of reading too – that fabulous, unequalled intimacy of a reader with the book. One person says, no, this is how the book's going to finish, another disagrees, and I'm sitting back thinking, they're arguing about fiction, about made-up people, but by golly they have a stake in what happens to these characters. I like that. And they seem to like it too. In *Modern Interiors*, I have Philippa Finemore in the end going back to her family at the expense of a newish lover. People have complained to me. Why couldn't she have left her family and gone off with that

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nice man? And I said because she was a sixty-something year-old woman who would always respond to the needs of her family first, even if it meant denying herself.

GD: I'm thinking of the ending of Iris Murdoch's *The Message to the Planet*, when Franca, the painter's wife, goes back to him, and you think, oh, why? Because she was who she was.

AG: That's exactly right. It's not what you wanted, but it's what needed to happen. And you often feel that about fictional characters. It's when you want to argue with the author that you realise that the author's done a bloody good job. That's what I think anyway.

GD: Because you learn something from that, it's not a simple thing, you can't just say, it's an abusive relationship, it should end, just get rid of him. That's not what life's like.

AG: No, it's not. I've never met the person who has not had a relationship that is in some way damaging, a relationship they stayed in far too long. We all have our human frailties and it's the frailties in humans that attract me as an author rather than the strengths. Now, afternoon tea?

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