

**Bee Rowlatt and May Witwit. *Talking about Jane Austen in Baghdad* (Penguin, 2010)**

Ten years ago, in a review essay on V.S. Naipaul's *Letters Between a Father and Son*, I wrote:

These letters are priceless, invaluable. In fifty years from now, will we be able to live through the early years of struggle of a future great artist in this way? Will there be a record like this for inquisitive readers to devour? Present-day forms of communication are more evanescent. Perhaps there will be collections of email messages, or downloaded chat sessions, but it is hard to imagine that they will have the charm of a correspondence such as this.<sup>1</sup>

My anxieties are partly answered by this book. Bee Rowlatt and May Witwit carried on an email correspondence for four years, from 2005 to 2008, and it is reproduced here in full, just as immediate and probably more detailed and quotidian than most correspondence sent by the post. A separate question might be whether people are being as careful to preserve their email messages as their forebears were to keep letters: both media are easily lost, but digital preservation is something not yet to the forefront of most people's minds.

Rowlatt is an English journalist, who contacted Witwit, an Iraqi academic, in 2005 seeking an interview in the lead-up to the Iraqi elections. Rowlatt became intrigued about how an educated, liberated woman like Witwit was faring in Baghdad, the correspondence continued and the two become close friends via email.

The title, *Talking about Jane Austen in Baghdad*, is quite misleading. It's hard not to suspect that it is a mere marketing ploy to cash in on the popularity of Austen and Azar Nafisi's best-selling *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. Jane Austen is mentioned a few times in passing – Witwit is a lecturer at Baghdad's College of Education for Women – but her pedagogical activities are a minor part of her story. Early on, she tells Rowlatt:

As for college, I am teaching first-year students the subjects of human rights(!) and democracy (!!!). Not topics to which they relate naturally, as you may imagine. It is hard to know how best to teach them. I also teach third-year students the novels *The Scarlet Letter*, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Hard Times*.  
(15)

Rowlatt responds by asking about these students: 'don't they find it hard to relate to literature when their lives are a daily struggle? How can you teach Jane Austen in Baghdad? How can they make sense of it?' (16-7). Witwit doesn't respond to these questions, though later she says that her students are reading *Hard Times*: 'Oh, they so love these things! Most of them are deprived of real experiences because of the strict Arab traditions, so they just dream away in their classes' (128). *The Scarlet Letter*

<sup>1</sup> Gillian Dooley, 'Those Difficult Years,' *CRNLE Journal* (2000), 153.

Book reviews: *Talking about Jane Austen in Baghdad* by Bee Rowlatt and May Witwit. Gillian Dooley.

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causes some problems of cultural translation: the students can't understand why Hester Prynne's husband has to be so indirect in his revenge.

Iraqi-born Witwit is very 'western' and modern in her outlook, having been brought up in the United Kingdom and returning to Baghdad with her family at the age of 16. She doesn't wear the veil – until the fundamentalist militias make it life-threatening to be seen in public without it. She is not exactly pro-Saddam, but the American invasion has destroyed a country that was functioning in its way and unleashed chaos. She even discovers that her name is on a hitlist, just because she is a university teacher:

Why did the bloody Americans invade us? Dictatorship with security and safety is much better for civilians than the blood-thirsty democracy they have brought us. Five awful years with no sign of improvement. It is just making us lose all interest in life. There are many times when I've felt that the right way to end all this is by taking my own life, instead of waiting for someone else to take it when I am not prepared. (178)

Rowlatt responds with horrified sympathy, and tries to cheer Witwit up by diverting her with the cheerful trivia of her family life in London, with three small girls and a busy and often absent husband. But she's of a practical turn of mind and begins to hatch a plan to help Witwit and her husband Ali get out of Iraq. She discovers an organisation called the Council for Assisting Refugee Academics (CARA), established in 1933 to help academics under fascist regimes, and this is the beginning of a tortuous but eventually successful process of bringing her friends to Britain.

So, despite the literary references they share – to Hemingway, Chaucer, Gerald Manley Hopkins and very occasionally Jane Austen – the driving force of the narrative contained in this email exchange is the compelling and almost heroic story of their combined efforts to navigate the brutality and, almost more confounding, the bureaucracy of Iraq and Jordan. Witwit's views on corruption are slightly unexpected. In Amman, she finds that the visa people are 'not corrupt, but lazy – which is worse, because with corruption you can pay for things to be done, but there is no cure for laziness' (317-8). So many tiny factors are crucial: a spelling mistake in Ali's Jordanian visa threatens to ruin everything, and only Witwit's bravery and persistence manages to win through.

The genesis of this book becomes part of the story as well. In November 2007 Rowlatt writes to Witwit with the idea of publishing the emails and using the publisher's advance to fund their living expenses in the UK while Witwit does her Ph.D. This means that more than half the book is written with the expectation of publication, as they go through the process of negotiating with the publisher. However, this occurs very much in the background – it becomes a given very soon – and any difficulties they encountered in that department are not dealt with at all. Although the amount required for Witwit and her husband to live in the UK for three years is quoted at £30,000, and the publisher's advance is not quite enough, we never find out exactly what the publisher's advance is, for instance. One suspects there might have been some tactful editing or self-censorship involved here.

The real-life epistolary narrative has a power and suspense of its own:

although Rowlatt does tell Witwit that the book would only be published after their safe arrival in England so we assume as we read that all will end in success, there are many setbacks along the way, every one of which could have been fatal (sometimes literally) to their efforts. And despite the chick-lit oriented triviality of the blurb ('Would you brave gun-toting militias for a cut and blow dry?') both these women are revealed as intelligent, determined individuals. Witwit in particular is always conscious that her escape will be partly a matter of luck and that there are many people who are unable to escape. As for what happens when her Ph.D. is finished and her student visa expires in late 2011, that is something they hardly allow themselves to contemplate. *Talking about Jane Austen in Baghdad* is a deeply involving and revealing book, full of surprising insights into the myriad and unanticipated ways, small and large, international politics affects lives. Collateral damage, indeed!

**Gillian Dooley**