



# WRITERS IN CONVERSATION

## Winged Words: An Interview with Claire Corbett

David Golding

*When We Have Wings by Claire Corbett is an interesting and unusual novel from an Australian writer. Interesting because it is so beautifully written and thoughtful. Unusual because it is set in a future where climate change and genetic engineering have brought great changes – and some people have been given the ability to fly. The reality of what it would mean to fly is powerfully explored through the stories of Zeke, a private detective, and Peri, the flier he has been sent to find. She has run away, taking with her the child that she used to mind for a rich couple – the job that made it possible for this country girl to be given wings. Published by Allen & Unwin in July 2011, When We Have Wings has since been published in the Netherlands, Portugal, Russia, and Spain. It is Claire's first novel.*

*Claire has had stories, essays, and journalism broadcast on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's Radio National and published in Picador New Writing, Rolling Stone, and the Sydney Morning Herald, among others. She was born in Canada and moved to Australia at the age of nine. Claire studied film and writing at the University of Technology, Sydney, and crewed on films before becoming a policy advisor to the Premier in the NSW Cabinet Office. She worked on water and genetically modified organisms for the Environment Protection Authority and child and family health for NSW Health. She now teaches Popular Fiction at UTS, is a doctoral candidate at the University of Western Sydney, and lives with her husband and children in the Blue Mountains.*

*Though two years have passed since I read When We Have Wings, it continues to hold my interest. Its great sensitivity to language makes it one of my favourite recent novels. I interviewed Claire via email to discover more about how she created this lively work.*

**Golding:** I like that you have gone some way with your publisher to confound quick judgements of your book, so that it can be taken on its own terms. I'd describe the cover as 'genre ambiguous', you have an endorsement from a respected independent filmmaker, and the blurb emphasises the oneiric response a reader can expect. And this approach seems to be working: you were shortlisted for the Barbara Jefferis Prize; shortlisted for a Ned Kelly Award; and you got an excellent review in our national broadsheet, the Australian, which didn't mention genre at all, though it made a comparison with Margaret Atwood's dystopian fiction. So you're receiving attention from many camps. Reading the book, I thought it could also be of interest to someone who wants to read a political thriller, domestic drama, or bildungsroman. Given all this, I was wondering if and how you thought genre has informed your writing? Were there any lines or parts you wrote that you saw as particularly taking part in any traditions of literary, speculative, and crime writing?

**Corbett:** I love the phrase ‘genre ambiguous’ and may have to steal it. I’m definitely genre ambiguous and tend to love other writers who are also; who aren’t too easily pigeon-holed. I always saw myself as a literary writer to begin with because they tended to be the writers I admired, the ones whose sentences stuck in my mind for their beauty, so that’s what I aimed for. Then I realised that I had to tell a gripping story as well. I taught myself how to do that. I know many writers think the ability to write a page-turning story is a talent you either have or not, like writing jokes. That isn’t true. You can learn how to do it. The great Japanese film director Ozu said that plot disrespects character and I know what he means by that; this is why many literary writers find it hard to write a good story because they also believe this. There is a sweet spot however, where you never sacrifice character plausibility and motivation to drive story. It isn’t easy but it can be done. The art form that is hitting that sweet spot the most these days is probably television in its current golden age.

When I think of literary writers who inspire me though, they are mostly writers who bring an imaginative quality to their work, from George Orwell to Margaret Atwood, from A.S. Byatt to Italo Calvino and Angela Carter and Tove Jansson. So I began writing *When We Have Wings* as a literary novel but with obvious speculative elements. I know my speculative fiction in some depth so felt comfortable working within that. Besides, I don’t see speculative fiction in terms of restrictive conventions – it doesn’t demand a romance or a mystery or a happy ending. The freedom of it is what I love.

Now the crime/thriller aspect, that’s the one where I thought, this is hard and I need to study it and learn how to do it. I respected the conventions of that genre and wanted that aspect of it to be satisfying. So you can imagine how gratified I was to be shortlisted for the Ned Kelly Award. That’s an award I have great respect for because it seems to privilege the literary as well as the genre.

In terms of lines being informed by different literary traditions, some of Zeke’s dialogue, especially with his police mate Henryk, became much tougher, more hard-boiled, if you like, as I realised that police often give each other a pretty hard time. It’s not a workplace in which to show weakness. So my literary process for writing Zeke was to make him far less ‘literary’ in how he expressed himself. Which, paradoxically, is a more literary thing to do, to write truly in the voice of the character rather than show off as the author. I can think of specific lines I had to change that were too flowery or poetic to be Zeke.

**Golding:** I’m interested in your process for writing certain kinds of sentence. As a reader of, among other things, science fiction – a term which both denotes and obscures a wide range of subject matters and approaches, of course – I was particularly struck by an early sentence of yours: ‘The others [other reasons I’d been hired] had to do with the fact that Peter Chesshyre was a whole different species of client, literally, to any I’d had before’ ( 14). Now this interests me because it is easy to skip over, to read as being a type of hard-boiled prose common to detectives like your Zeke Fowler. Yet SF readers learn to pay attention to such sentences because in SF stories these often turn out to be literal, as is the case here, rather than figurative. Combined with the previous chapter, this sentence read literally can tell a reader a lot about the setting and plot of the novel. Some SF readers would find the appositive adverb unnecessary, over-egging the pudding; I admit that I did at first, until I realised that Zeke’s use

of 'literally' tells us about his – and thus the common person's – expectations of this future setting. I wonder if this sentence was something that came easily to you, or was it something you wrestled with? Were you writing for yourself here, or were you conscious of readers with different reading backgrounds?

**Corbett:** This sentence came easily but I did think about the word 'literally'. Put it in, then took it out, like Eeyore with his rag of balloon and his honeypot. I thought about what it added and decided it was for Zeke's character. It emphasises his sense of humour and also the sense that he's an outsider entering a new world. That word signals the growing class divide, that non-fliers are becoming outsiders in their own society. I take your point though that it's a signal to readers from different reading backgrounds. I like your point that SF readers learn to pay attention to such sentences; perhaps the thriller and SF genres aren't so different in that readers expect to have to construct what is going on. I think many readers find SF hard work which is probably why it's so much more popular as a film genre, where the effort of visualisation is done for you. I've noticed that SF readers tend to be intelligent. They get bored easily.

**Golding:** More broadly, I wonder how some sections of your novel have been received. I found one of the most thrilling passages to be the expository dialogue between Zeke and the flier specialist Dr Ruokonen (155–71). Exposition is a valid rhetorical mode, and like any other form of writing it can be done well or not, yet critics give exposition a hard time, thanks to that glib injunction, 'show don't tell'. And fantastic writing is far more likely to be attacked for the use of exposition as realist writing has retreated from the objective in the last century. So I give you bonus points for even attempting this scene. And full points for carrying it off with aplomb. I haven't enjoyed such writing so much since I read *Dune* by Frank Herbert. In both books, there is so much more going on than the direct transmission of information, yet I also celebrate the direct transmission of information. It isn't a 'dumping' of research, as some would have it; instead I read it as an attempt to engage the reader in an interesting topic, an invitation to the joy of science. How has this section been received? Have you been surprised by the response?

**Corbett:** I'm glad you enjoyed this scene. It was a joy to write. I had to do a lot of research and then thoroughly absorb it, make it 'mine' so that I could work with it. The 'show don't tell' injunction is a real bugbear of mine; it's such lazy criticism. 'Glib' is the right epithet. Entire genres, such as comedy, depend absolutely on telling rather than showing; it's all about the authorial voice in that case. This may be of use for a very beginning writer but it's one of those rules definitely made to be broken. Also, it's often deployed wrongly. People do have conversations, they do talk, you know! This is a particular problem in the Australian literary scene where there's a kind of sub-Raymond Carveresque cliché that people never talk, that it's always all subtext and conversations are never about anything. Now, I am all about the subtext; there has to be a great deal of subtext in a novel for it to be worth re-reading. But characters can say what's on their minds sometimes.

Once I read an author opining that dialogue was never to be used to convey information. Oh dear. I know exactly the kind of bad writing this author was warning against.

**But if you really know your characters you can do this without it being bad dialogue because every line is also revealing character. I agree it's not an 'infodump' either; I worked very hard to avoid any hint of that in the book. The reaction to that scene has surprised me because it hasn't, as far as I know, come in for any criticism. I was braced for that and was surprised when my editor didn't cut any of it. I think the scene ended up with such a smooth pleasurable flow to it and that, I presume, was why I wasn't asked to cut it.**

**There is a part of the book which has received this kind of criticism though, which is in some of the flying sections with Audax. I've had a fair bit of criticism in reviews that there's just too much flying there, too much detail about clouds and so on. My editor did suggest cutting those sections more than I did. Thank goodness I did take almost all of her advice. But some of the parts I didn't cut as hard as some think I should have went to the heart of why I wrote the book in the first place, so I felt justified in leaving them in. They gave so much joy and wonder to me, for example the part where Finch and Peri find their 'cloud street' or where Jay teaches them 'pigeon tactics' to escape attack from the Wild. Some readers just want to get on with the plot. I don't write for them; I don't see the point of speeding through novels like junk food and praising them for being 'a quick read'. I do think that readers deserve a good story but I want more than that, as a reader and as a writer. I have also had praise for that detail too though, so it's one of those things. You have to risk going too far if you're interested in creating art.**

**Golding:** I was also very impressed by your use of the telling detail to construct the absent paradigm – that is, to imply a history and context for your story. The existence of Taj is the most overt detail; others pass by in a single sentence or even a few words. When reading of a fictive setting, I like to ask questions about it that are prompted by questions I have for the world today. For your novel, some of the questions I asked were: What has happened to AIDS? And the environment? What is Australia's geopolitical and cultural position? I'm fascinated by the way I can get (possible) answers to these questions when they aren't specifically addressed. I'm also fascinated by the way that I can imagine the story of the fliers to be embedded in quite a different context, yet you chose this one. When creating the texture that makes the answering of my questions possible, were you searching primarily for an aesthetic effect, or did you seek to comment on the present? Did you see this background information as being as important to your story as the fliers?

**Corbett:** Great question. As you may have suspected, I wrote a lot of background detail that ended up being cut. I think many imaginative/speculative fiction writers do this; many probably look at cutting at least 50-60,000 words from their earlier drafts and if they don't, they probably should. You need to write those words to create the world for yourself, so that you as the writer know it intimately. Then you know what you can cut so that you intrigue, rather than fatigue, the reader. Also, the reader can tell that you've done all that work, that you know your world inside out and can probably answer most questions about it, a bit like an actor writing a biography of their character. Art is an iceberg; most of the work is under the surface. This background information is almost as important as the fliers because it grounds them; you wouldn't believe in them otherwise.

It's great the book prompted these questions for you. Someone commented to me that they loved my book partly for its originality as a kind of 'pre-apocalypse'. Clearly the environment is in trouble, climate change is happening, there are genetically modified superweeds, the Australian continent has dried out even more, but the complete crash hasn't happened yet. Those factors were important to me as a comment on the present day but also as my view that these trends seem likely to continue. So I was aiming for believability in the world I was creating and the sense it wasn't too far in the future. I also liked the aesthetics: the strong contrasts between glittering city/rural decay, rich and poor, the power of our technology and the havoc it wreaks. The image of the dead hydroelectric dam in the middle of nowhere was important to me; when I was a senior bureaucrat I worked in water policy and I thought a lot about rising salt.

In terms of questions like AIDS, I felt strongly that more dangerous diseases would surface as we degraded our environment and I allude to this with PapaZie's daughter's mosquito-borne illness as well as Ray's TB. Many of our old scourges such as TB aren't going away; they're evolving into more dangerous illnesses. Solving the AIDS crisis didn't strike me as all that important (though of course it is to individuals) because new diseases would spring up in its place. And with our recurring bird flu panics I'd say that is happening and that we have much, much worse to fear in looming global pandemics than AIDS. The real danger is something we're barely aware of which is crop diseases. We grow cereal crops with a terrifying lack of genetic diversity. The current honeybee crisis and worldwide Colony Collapse Disorder is a good example of this kind of problem which we don't seem to be taking seriously.

**Golding:** 'We have done with Flight as a symbol!' says one character (424), and indeed you convincingly render the reality of fliers, going well beyond the cinematic aspect of such beings. You let us know what it feels like: you give us their smells, body language, habits, and pathologies. And you remind us that no space is ever empty: air is a fluid, and the sky is a place. You fulfil the promise of the blurb: 'Flight – you'll dream about it.' I have often read of angelic figures in science fiction, yet these are usually the product of virtual realities or 'sufficiently advanced technology'; I couldn't find any other book that has done the hard work of realising winged humans. What was your original inspiration to make this move away from the symbolic? Obviously a lot of thought and research went into this project; what kept you going?

**Corbett:** My original inspiration to move away from the symbolic was twofold: firstly, precisely because we have so much art depicting winged humans and other winged creatures which of course *is* symbolic, and secondly, the reality of flight as we experience it in our dreams. I was so intrigued that we all believe we know what it feels like to fly, though actually we don't. I detest the whole new-age angel thing; it does not interest me. I knew that what was original about my idea was its reality; the challenge was to make the reader believe. I haven't read anything about angels or winged humans that felt real. I wanted you as the reader to *feel* it or what was the point of writing it at all? To do that required massive amounts of research: bird evolution, the experiences and jargon of the paragliding community, clouds and weather, the physics of fluids, etc.

**What kept me going was that I knew it was a good idea. I knew it was original and must not be wasted. I had to do it justice.**

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