



# WRITERS IN CONVERSATION



## An Interview with Nike Sulway

Lisa Dowdall

Nike Sulway's latest book, *Rupetta* (2013), won the [James Tiptree, Jr Award](#) for a work of science fiction or fantasy that explores or expands our understanding of gender/sexuality. *Rupetta* begins four hundred years ago in rural France, where a young woman creates a part human, part mechanical woman, who she calls Rupetta. Bound to each of the women who wind her heart, the novel narrates the miracles and tragedies of Rupetta's existence. The novel is also told from the point of view of Henri, a history student who yearns for her own mechanical heart. But as Henri uncovers the history of the Salt Lane women – mothers and daughters whose lives were shaped by Rupetta's – she questions the very truth upon which she has always understood the world and her place in it.

Writing as N. A. Bourke, Nike's first novel, *The Bone Flute* (2001), was shortlisted for the Commonwealth Writers Awards and won the Queensland Premier's Literary Award for Best Emerging Queensland Author. Her other books, also written as N. A. Bourke, are *What the Sky Knows* (2005), a children's picture book illustrated by Stella Danalis, and the novel *The True Green of Hope* (2008).

Nike has a PhD in Creative Writing from Griffith University and lectures in Creative Writing at the University of Southern Queensland. She also blogs at [Perilous Adventures](#).

This interview was conducted by email in June 2015.

### On *Rupetta*

**Q:** Your writing is stunning; the poetics of *Rupetta* are simply sublime. How did *Rupetta*'s voice come to you?

**A:** Those first lines just came, as they so rarely do. The rest I had to work for. I'm really flattered by your question, actually, and flummoxed. When I was an undergraduate at university, I learned early on that I had a tendency to over-write, and ever since I've been

conscious of working hard to both honour my love of lyrical, poetic language, and temper it with a more ruthless editorial eye.

Rupetta's voice came, like Henri's, out of my sense of them as characters. I guess you can probably never avoid having your own voice in your work, but while I was working on this book, I was trying to find a way to give both of these very different characters a way of speaking and relating to their world that at least appeared to emerge out of their experiences of the world.

I wanted it to be the kind of book I love to read. A book about complex, ambiguous, monstrous and beautiful women. People who were real and lovely and cruel and strange. I wanted to give readers a story they could sink into.

I think the other part of it was that I was conscious, as the story evolved, of wanting to write in a way that honoured my love of the great speculative fiction writers I grew up adoring (Ursula K Le Guin, Angela Carter, for example), whose work for me was always informed by a serious but magical love of story, and a refusal to be unnecessarily simple or easy.

**Q:** You also write poetry. How do the fiction and poetry inform each other?

**A:** Poetry! I read poetry, voraciously, but I write it only like most amateurs. I love the compression of poetry. The way you can leave so much out. I love how sculptural it can be. How you can gesture towards things, and lay in a little blue here, a little scrap of copper there, and suggest a bird winging through a window.

I think good poetry – or at least the poetry I most enjoy – always maintains its secrets. It's the things that aren't said that matter the most. It's probably no surprise to hear that I'm rather fond of secrets and silences. Of the spaces between things. I love mysterious things. I love the darkness at the heart of the forest. The idea of it. And I do have this sense that it's OK to leave a great deal unsaid. It's OK to lead your reader towards the forest, to the edge, and let them enter it by themselves. I think that's what some of the best poetry does: provide a space you can enter. I'd like to write a book that had that sense of being something you can inhabit.

**Q:** Henri is fascinated by the Salt Lane women and determined to become an Obanite. To what extent does she reflect your own interest in history? How important was historical research to your imagination of the alternate history/present of *Rupetta*?

**A:** I'm deeply fascinated by historical research. I'm not a historian, myself, and perhaps Henri is partly the child I forced to live out my own unlive dreams. Poor Henri! But I do love research. I love reading and note-taking and writing papers and all the nerdy academic goodness. I was the second person in my family to go to university (after my younger sister), and it was like going to heaven. Perhaps that's why I'm still here! I love the whole romance of learning. And particularly learning about the past. It's like discovering another world, piece by piece.

**Henri does embody my own fascination with history, and particularly with the kind of social history that was unfashionable for a long time. The history of ordinary people. The history of ordinary objects and ordinary lives. Of gardening and relationships. Of love and loss. Oh, and, of course, the book is in itself a form of alternative history. It is about Rupetta and Henri, but it is also, I think, one answer to a question about what would have happened if queerness (or at least lesbianism) were normalised in Western-European culture. What if our gods and rulers had been queer for centuries?**

**Q:** Something that strikes me about *Rupetta* are the beautifully evoked yet drastically different landscapes and the places within those landscapes – the Oban college, the city of bridges, the dying house in Languedoc. Where does a sense of place begin for you? How do you imagine it and write it?

**A:** These are all real places! Seriously! No? I start with the real places. In fact, I have an annotated atlas of Rupetta's world. It's our world, with a few minor adjustments. I bought a cheap old Atlas from the op-shop and madly reworked it. Anyway, the off-shoot is that all the places in the book exist within landscapes I know. They shimmer just out of sight of the real world.

I think landscapes are really important parts of our writing. Each place has a history; is an embodiment of the history of the world you're writing about. And each place means something different to the people who live there. When I write about a particular place, I'm conscious that I'm writing about it from within a particular character's experience of it. That what Henri notices about Jenon's office, for example, is not what Jenon sees. And that the fjords of the great north, with monsters in their deeps, are a particular character's fjords. I don't think we can separate landscape from our experience of landscape. We are always in it, which is both inescapable and lovely. It's a bit like an expanded version of the way we are always inside our bodies, until we're not.

Simone Weil has this lovely piece in her writing about longing to see a landscape without herself in it; without anyone in it. She also writes about the unremitting beauty of the world, and that's a perspective I'm afraid I share, and which I think informs my writing about landscape. At one point she writes this beautiful sentence (her work is full of appallingly beautiful sentences): 'The sea is not less beautiful in our eyes because we know that sometimes ships are wrecked by it.' This is one of the sentences I read over and over while I was writing the opening scenes of the novel. I wanted to capture that very human thing of knowing the history of a landscape, or a person, knowing how dangerous and damaging it has been, and can be, and seeing the beauty in it anyway.

**Q:** *Rupetta* is played out across centuries, from 1619 to the present day. It's also told from multiple perspectives and the settings range from rural France to the imaginary city of Nepholi. How did you manage all these complex elements? Did you have this scope in mind when you began writing, or did it expand as you went?

**A:** *Rupetta* started out quite modestly. I wrote a terribly unsuccessful short story that was all set in one place (the rural Queensland town of Whitestone Shute), and was basically a kind of speculative fiction reimagining of Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale*. Then I wrote another, related story set in rural France.

At first, I thought it would be a book-length retelling/transformation of *Winter's Tale*. I was imagining something that was a little bit like Jeanette Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry*, and a little bit like Emma Donoghue's *Kissing the Witch*. But then, the story began to unravel, like Ariadne's thread, perhaps, and I had to find a way to map the labyrinth.

I developed a series of cards for the book. They're about the size of the palm-cards we used to use in high school debating. Each one has some image or quotation on it that means something to me, that evokes some aspect of what I'm trying to express in the work. For a long time this is my planning document. I lay them all out on the table and shuffle them around till things feel right.

I also keep a digital spreadsheet of any novel I'm working on that maps the whole thing. I use it partly for editing, and partly for planning, and partly for project management. It has columns showing places, objects, characters, tense, viewpoint, words, symbols. I use it to track analepsis and prolepsis, and to follow the various plotlines. It also shows boring things like word counts, and how many times a particular section has been edited, whether it's on death row (i.e.: maybe going to be cut). There's also a page I call the morgue, where dead scenes go.

I don't plan ahead a lot during the initial draft writing, however. I work a little like Elizabeth Bishop, in terms of structure. Robert Lowell wrote this poem for/about her,<sup>1</sup> which describes how she used to pin words to the noticeboard with gaps in between, and wait for the words to fill the gaps to arrive. When I work, I know where I'm starting from, and I know (in an emotional sense) where the story will 'land'. Then it's just a matter of setting sail.

**Q:** There are so many beautiful, nuanced characters in *Rupetta* – not only *Rupetta*, Henri and Miri, but also the Oban scholar Jenon, each of the Wynders, the Empress Kassia, Perdita, even the tiny bird Perihan. Each is beautifully realised. I felt I understood and could empathise with each character's motivations, even if they conflicted with *Rupetta*'s goals or caused harm. Do you have a process for developing a character? Do you find them through the process of writing? How do you inhabit their point-of-view and make decisions for them?

**A:** *Rupetta*, Perihan, Perdita and Henri arrived almost fully-formed, one at a time, and in that order. These four entities around whom the whole book revolves.

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1 Have you seen an inchworm crawl on a leaf,  
cling to the very end, revolve in air,  
feeling for something to reach to something? Do  
you still hang your words in air, ten years  
unfinished, glued to your notice board, with gaps  
or empties for the unimaginable phrase--  
unerring Muse who makes the casual perfect?  
'For Elizabeth Bishop' in Robert Lowell, *History* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1973) 198.

Are you a fan of Rilke? I really enjoy Rilke's poetry. And there's one poem of his that speaks, I think, to my particular way of thinking about character. He writes (this is in translation, of course):

Love consists in this,  
That two solitudes protect  
And touch and greet each other.<sup>2</sup>

For me, this speaks to the sense in which we are, as humans, and will always be both unknowable and unknowing. That is – we can never know the interiority of another, and our own interiority can never be known by another. Not completely. The eyes are not, as the cliché goes, the windows to the soul; we cannot see through the eyes of another to some essential essence of their physical, social or emotional selves. The same is true of the characters we write. Each one I'm in love with, or fascinated by, and I work hard to give the reader a sense of what it is about them that I find fascinating. I think it comes back to that idea about mystery. I don't believe you can completely evoke or reveal character. What you can offer the reader are mysteries. You can offer them something of what I experience as a writer: that feeling that's like falling in love with each character as you get to know them.

For me, the biggest mistake is to think you have to tell the reader everything there is to know about a character. For me, the appeal of a well-rounded character is that there are things you don't know about them. That they are so much like real people that you feel you will never know them completely. That they have secrets they are keeping from you.

**Q:** How did you come up with the idea of bonding Rupetta with her Wynders through a family inheritance? And through the very intimate act of wynding?

**A:** I have no idea! Do you ever have those things happen where you're writing, and you think it's going to go one way, and it goes another? I did have this idea that the role of the Wynder would be hereditary, and I'd written this strange little story about Perihan, actually, in which it was animated by love. I'd been reading Collodi's *Pinocchio* – I was reading anything I could lay my hands on about non-human people – and I was thinking about the way he becomes a real boy through love. Such a cliché! I knew I didn't want to have a story in which Rupetta became human, but I did know that she wasn't merely mechanical, or robotic. She's not (for me, anyway) merely technological. Her becoming conscious is an act of magic, and invention. And the transformations she undergoes during her lifetime occur on at least two levels: she changes externally, through technology, and she changes internally or emotionally in the same way we all do. Through experience. Through living in the world. Through love and loss.

**Q:** How does your fascination with monstrous things, monstrous women, relate to the characters' sexuality, as well as your point about imagining what the world would be like if we'd

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<sup>2</sup> The original German is "der Liebe, die darin besteht, daß zwei Einsamkeiten einander schützen, grenzen und grüßen" and is quoted in Rilke's Letter Seven to Franz Xaver Kappus, dated May 14, 1904, published in: Rainer Maria Rilke, *Briefe an einen jungen Dichter* (Frankfurt: Insel-Verlag, 1963). The translation is my own.

had queer rulers? It's such an interesting part of the book. Are you fascinated by women's relationships? Why? When these characters came to you, were their relationships already clear in your mind? Did you learn something from their mistakes, their trauma, their love?

**A: I'm such an old-fashioned girl, and so deeply entrenched, at the moment, in reading about sixteenth-century Europe, that the first thing that comes to mind when I think about the term 'monstrous' is she Scottish reformer John Knox's 'The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women' (published in 1558). He was writing a misogynistic tract against female sovereigns, particularly the queens of the time: Mary of Guise, Mary Queen of Scots, Mary I of England. It didn't help, of course, that they were each Catholic while he was Protestant.**

Anyway, when he uses the term 'monstrous' he uses it in the sense it was most commonly used at the time, to mean 'unnatural'. For Knox, women who rule (women with power) are unnatural, or monstrous, not just in his own eyes, but in the eyes of God/in terms of scripture.

Anyway, it's a fascinating document, and one that tracks the idea of women leaders/powerful women as monstrous backwards through a range of sources alongside his focus on the Bible, including Aristotle, St Augustine, Tertullian, St Jerome, and Chrysostom. It's written in beautifully archaic and strong and (to contemporary ears, I think) quite eccentric and powerful language. He writes, for example:

**To promote a woman to bear rule, superiority, dominion, or empire above any realm, nation, or city, is repugnant to nature; contumely to God, a thing most contrary to his revealed will and approved ordinance; and finally, it is the subversion of good order, of all equity and justice.<sup>3</sup>**

For a while, I had toyed with giving Rupetta a title borrowed from Knox. At one stage he has this little sub-heading that says (in updated English): 'The Empire of Women is Repugnant to Nature'. In one sense, perhaps it's possible to read Rupetta as one reply to Knox: a manifestation of some of his greatest fears, that an Empire of Women might be made manifest.

So, all of this is a long-winded answer to say that I think notions of monstrousness have a long, ambiguous and interesting link with femininity and particularly with the notion of an 'unnatural woman'. Women have often been called monstrous when we demonstrate that we have power, and are prepared to use it, usually as a way to discourage and damn us. But monsters are also incredibly powerful and mysterious. They often hold the power of life and death over others; they have magical powers, and belong more to the realm of gods than of men.

Rupetta, as a character, is (I think) monstrous in a number of ways. She's most definitely 'unnatural', in that she's not a purely organic creature. And inasmuch as she's a

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<sup>3</sup> John Knox, *The First Blast of the Trvmpet Against the Monstvovs Regiment of Women*, 1558.  
<http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/9660>

woman at all, she's also monstrous because she exercises power in a range of ways. Power that's historically associated with masculinity. And she's queer, and is at least partly responsible for creating a queer empire. At least triply monstrous, in Knox's terms. Contrary. Difficult. Complex. Unwilling to remain singular or still. Unwilling to be what others insist she is. For me, one of the most interesting things about the connections between femininity and monstrosity is that some images and language are about the refusal of the monstrous/feminine to be what others expect it to be. Or to remain one thing.

We are multiple and strange and powerful.

As to why I wrote about queerness and queer women, I guess the most obvious and simple answer is because I identify as queer, and I think there are far too few stories about queer women's experiences. I want to write the kind of books I long to read. Books in which women's passions for each other are deep, complex, multiple, strange, sad, and beautiful. Not clichés. Not flat tragedies. I want to be able to live in a world where (for a long, distended, imaginary moment) women are allowed to be everything they can be, and can love whoever they want to love. I want to be able to imagine what that might look like, in part, so that we can take that knowledge of what's possible into the real world, and work towards making a better future.

The character's relationships with each other, and particularly Henri and Miri's relationship, grew alongside the writing of the book. I knew they would meet and fall in love (I wrote the book in chronological order, even though I knew it would not end up that way), but I didn't know what shape their love would take. It surprised me in some ways, and broke my heart in others.

Every time we fall in love, every time we write about falling in love, we harbour some desire for it to be perfect. For us (and our characters) to be transformed into perfect creatures. But Henri and Miri are, like the rest of us, monstrous in their own ways. For me, their story was as much about learning to love the monster in themselves and each other as it was about anything else.

**Q:** How did you come up with the game of Oråki? What makes a good player? Who would you like to play against?

**A:** The game came very early on. I had a scene (that ended up being cut) in which Miri and Henri are playing a harmless version of the game, using it to flirt with each other, really, through the narrative-building aspect of the game. The game is based on a story in a little Chinese fairy tales book I had as a child. It had two stories in it that I really adored. One about the two lovers, the *zhinu* (织女) and the *niu lang* (牛郎), who are separated by the milky way/river, and can only come together once a year, over a bridge of birds. The other was about a boy who encounters two old gods playing a board game in the forest. *Go*, I think, or perhaps Chess. I don't have the book any more, sadly.

I'd also read in Masudi's *الجواهر ومعادن الذهب مروج* (*Meadows of Gold and Mines of Gems*) about the history of chess. He writes about how chess was invented during the reign of Balhit, and that Balhit preferred chess to backgammon because the winner was wise, and not a fool. Anyway, in this ancient version of the game every piece was consecrated to a different

An Interview with Nike Sulway. Lisa Dowdall.  
*Writers in Conversation* Vol. 2 no. 2, August 2015  
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star. My translation also says that Balhit ‘gave to the pieces the figures of men and animals, distinguishing them by certain degrees and ranks’. As you can see, I didn’t have much more work to do to create the Great Game.

A good player is a good storyteller, a ruthless tactician, is smiled on by luck, and experiences no pain when their fingers are severed!

Hmmm. Who would I like to play with? As long as we’re playing the non-blood sport version, I’d love to play with anyone who can spin a good story. I think Virginia Woolf would make a wonderful opponent. She has a tactician’s eye for imagery. But possibly I’d most like to play against Rupetta. She’d beat me, but it would be worth it.

## On writing

**Q:** Your work is often based around fairy tales, myths or fables. What is it about these stories that engage your imagination, and what can you achieve by reworking them? For example, you’ve called *Rupetta* a contemporary fairy tale. Why? You’ve also stated in other interviews that it makes you a little bit uncomfortable to be labelled a science fiction writer. Why is this? What do you think it is about the fantastic or the impossible that helps you tell your stories?

**A:** Have I? How ungracious of me! I think my discomfort is about not feeling sure that this particular book would meet the expectations of most dedicated science fiction readers.

Some responses I’ve had to the book from readers who’ve come to it expecting science fiction have confirmed my discomfort. They’re the readers who are upset that I don’t explain how *Rupetta* works. Or go into more medical-scientific detail about the manufacturing and/or functioning of the Obanite’s mechanical hearts. For me, they’re missing the point. The story isn’t meant to be realistic. For them, the story isn’t offering what they expect from a work of science fiction. It isn’t concerned about the realism of the science, particularly the technological science that informs the story.

This is why, for me, the story is closer to a fairy tale, or a fable. The technology only looks like technology. It’s as technological as the little mermaid’s legs, or the six shirts the sister sews to transform her brothers from swans to men or, perhaps more similarly, the false nightingale that is given to the emperor in Andersen’s tale. It’s a narrative device, a symbol that gestures towards some other narrative truth.

I *adore* fairy tales. They’re flexible, erotic, strange, magical. They tell truths in odd forms. They offer us ourselves in a simpler and more direct form, sometimes, and in a more magical and other-worldly one at other times. I grew up with them, so I feel that partly the appeal is that they’re part of my inner world of symbols. I understand the allure and the threat of a red apple; the power of silence; the sting of nettles gathered from a grave. I think fairy tales allow us to speak about the larger truths of life without necessarily falling into cheap melodrama. I think the images they contain are often beautiful. They resonate, for me, in ways I can’t easily articulate. There’s something about a fossil-headed fish, or a girl whose red shoes won’t stop dancing, about a witch’s house with chicken feet, or a bear who loves you. They allow us to step sideways, into this other world that both is, and is not, our own.

**Q:** When reading your writing I often felt like I was watching a film or listening to music. Are there any particular filmmakers, musicians or artists who inspire your writing?

**A:** You are a shameless flatterer! Thank you. I have this horrible feeling that as soon as I name a few artists whose work I admire and send this off into the ether, I'll remember all the others I haven't named, that I also love.

I listen to classical music when I'm writing, and compose playlists that accompany each novel. I have a Rupetta playlist that's an embarrassingly uneducated mish-mash of music. Arvo Part, Elena Kats-Chernin, Philip Glass, Bach (oh, Bach!), Shostakovich, Elgar, Webern.

When I'm not writing, I gorge on particular artists. I'm still going through a strong Iron & Wine stage (I love the images and subsumed narratives. The lyrics are like poems), Beth Orton, Angus & Julia Stone, Jen Cloher, Gillian Welch. I adore the soundtrack to *Into the Wild*, and Sarah Blasko, and ...

Well, of course, I adore lots of fairy tale illustrators. John Bauer is one of my favourites. I also really love Gordon Laite's illustrations. He did the illustrations for the Golden Book *The Blue Book of Fairy Tales*, which I've always adored. His illustrations for *Six Swans* were completed in the 1960s, but only released by Little Golden Books last year. They're astonishingly wonderful. Full of beauty and monstrosity.

I know almost nothing about contemporary art, though there are artists whose works I adore. One that has stayed with me, and that I still dream about, was an installation by Céleste Boursier-Mougenot [From here to ear (v. 13)]. It was an enormous gallery room, filled with a series of octagonal structures made of maple and plywood, harpsichord strings, and piano pins. Hanging within each structure was a sculptural tangle of coat hangers, and nests, suspended bowls of seeds and water. And in this room were thousands of finches.

Finches!

In my dreams, the artwork is somehow tied up with another image I adore: a photograph of some of the finches Darwin collected, held in the Natural History Museum. There are 13 species, all sparrow-sized and brownish in colour. Each with long, narrow tags attached to their feet. The tags are white, or red. They're just unspeakably strange and beautiful and sad.

Oh! And another artist whose work I adore is Marina Abramovic. 'The Artist is Present' is astonishingly moving. And simple. It is serenely and simply itself, but I wonder what a literary version of such a work would be. Perhaps it would just be a reader who sits and waits, and reads whatever you offer them while you wait, in silence.

**Q:** What has winning the James Tiptree, Jr Award done for you and your career?

**A:** Gosh! Enormous things. For a start, one of the enormous privileges that came with winning the award was that I travelled to the United States to take part in [WisCon](#). I'm not much of a Con person: I'm too introverted to enjoy the general noise and hubbub, and though there are usually lots of people at those sorts of events whose work I admire, I rarely have the courage or energy to talk to them.

But WisCon was amazing. I was absolutely inspired by the breadth and depth of intelligent, thoughtful, diverse and stimulating conversations that I was privy to. I came away from the Con enormously humbled, and enormously grateful for being exposed to such a wide array of great minds. One of the key things, for me as a writer, was a real sense that it was OK to be interested in writing stories that engaged with questions of gender. Which sounds odd, I guess. Of course it's OK! I mean something more than that. I think that I was reconnected with how important those stories are, and how exciting being part of that community is, and how wildly diverse and strange and beautiful that world is. I came away inspired to write more radical, more difficult, more strange stories. I'm not sure if I've done that yet. We'll see.

Also, just saying, but I got to meet some of my heroes. Well, 'meet' may be a strong word. Sit in the same bar as? Hiromi Goto, Nora K Jemisin, Karen Joy Fowler, Aliette de Bodard, Eleanor Arnason ... I could go on. And on. But OMG! I was in a ballroom with Ellen Kushner. Ellen Kushner *sang* to me! Words cannot describe what that was like. How magical. How affirming. How much it inspired me to want to do and be more.

In practical terms, I think it's made my work visible to people who might otherwise never have found it. I'm really grateful for that, and for the connections it's helping me forge with other writers, publishers, editors and readers.

**Q:** You will be judging the James Tiptree, Jr. Award for 2015. What are you looking for in the nominees' work, aside from an exploration or expansion of gender/sexuality?

**A:** Awesomeness! You know that beautiful definition of poetry by Emily Dickinson that everyone quotes?

If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can warm me I know *that* is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know *that* is poetry. These are the only way I know it. Is there any other way?<sup>4</sup>

For me, what I'm hoping for is something akin to that. An experience, as a reader, of having the world and my relationship to it, my body and my relationship to *it*, turned inside out.

I think I'd be happy to read a work that merely 'explores' what we already know about gender and sexuality and sex, but I'd be totally thrilled by a text that really 'expanded' my/our thinking and knowledge about those things.

**Q:** Can you describe the [Exquisite Cadaver experiment](#) you recently participated in? Why did you decide to take part and what did you think of the story that emerged? Did the writers communicate at all outside of the story?

**A:** Exquisite Cadaver is a writing game invented by the surrealists. I was invited to 'play' an online version of it as part of *The Conversation's* attempts to foster discussions in and about

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<sup>4</sup> Letter 342A in *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1958)

creative writing/creative practice. I was invited by an editor at *The Conversation*, and had no idea who the other writers were. We had no contact with each other before or during the writing, only afterwards, as it was being published.

To be ruthlessly honest, I didn't enjoy it very much. I thought I would, which is why I agreed to do it. And I thought the idea of it was fascinating. I'm fond of literary games, and often use them in my teaching to encourage playfulness and collaboration in myself and my students. But when I received 'the story so far' my heart sank. It was a male character, a war theme, and a dead male body. Very serious and abstract and literary. I was in equal parts intimidated and unimpressed. I think the result was some of the worst writing I've published. At once timid and self-conscious. Trying to be a good girl and play along, when what I really wanted to do (but wouldn't give myself permission to do) was upturn the whole direction of the story. I do sound like a grumpy old feminist! I *am* a grumpy old feminist. But also not grumpy enough, sometimes.

I was both surprised and appalled when, in the ninth and tenth instalments, Camilla Nelson and Jane Messer broke with the spirit of the story. Camilla by breaking the frame with an 'it was all a writing assignment' reset, and Jane by writing a response that treated the whole thing as if it was an assignment submitted by 'Camilla'. I admired their chutzpah and wished I'd been so brave, but was also a little. That kind of 'trick' ending—a version of 'it was all a dream'—is the sort of cheap trick I think we should avoid in most writing contexts.

That said, I did and do think it was an interesting experiment. Albeit (I think) a failed one. I'd love to see a more truly collaborative work produced: one where the authors communicated with each other, agreed on a starting point, where the text was more of a negotiated thing. And perhaps one where the authors chose to work together – chose each other – and established a sense of themselves as a cohesive group working on a shared project.

**Q:** What are your writing goals and how have they changed over time?

**A:** I have two types of goals. Intrinsic and extrinsic ones. And they change all the time in some ways, and not at all in others.

The intrinsic goals are ones that I have control over, and are about writing as an art form. These shift over time, but at their heart they're always the same goal: write a good book. Write the best book I can write. Write something that moves someone. That offers solace and inspiration. Then there are the more concrete goals that are under my control: finish this book, write *x* short stories, send them out into the world and cross my fingers.

The extrinsic goals are ones I don't have control over. And they're generally more career or real world oriented. I really, really suck at these. While I'm writing, I get far too caught up in the internal goals of the work. I don't write in a vacuum, but I'm not a market-oriented writer. I'm not writing with one eye constantly on the prize. In fact, I think I've become more market-aware over time, but in a way therefore less governed by it. When I started out, I wanted to get a novel published. I thought everything after that would be cream. Of course, that's not how publishing works for most writers, most of the time. Now my extrinsic/external goals are just to find ways to sustain myself as a writer. To make

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*Writers in Conversation* Vol. 2 no. 2, August 2015  
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enough money to 'buy' enough time to write. And to keep publishing. Right now, one of my extrinsic goals is to see my next book get widely read, reviewed and appreciated.

For me, the key is to balance the goals I have control over with the ones I don't. Pinning all my dreams on the whims of publishers or literary judges is only going to lead to heartbreak, so I focus instead on what I can do to grow my writing tree. Finish the book. Make it the best book I can make it. Send it to the publishers or other readers I think will most appreciate it/might publish it.

## On teaching and research

**Q:** Aside from writing, you're also a researcher. What are your current research interests? How are they informed by your own writing, and how does your writing inform the research?

**A:** I've got a few little research projects burbling along at the moment. Or research interests, maybe? You'll probably be unsurprised to hear that questions of gender and sexuality, and the role of women in literary production, are all key interests of mine. I'm still obsessed with fairy tales, and science fiction.

I recently gave a paper, for example, on the relationship between transformation, silence and gender in the fairy tale *Six Swans*, which is Andersen's version of the ATU451 tale type. The paper included a discussion of one of my works-in-progress, which is a novel called (for now!) *Tern*.

I'm also working on a paper about the relationships between gender, death and artificial intelligence in popular culture, with a particular focus on the Alex Garland film *Ex Machina*, but reading that against Wittgenstein's Blue Book, and the Perrault tale *Le Barbe Bleue* (Bluebeard).

Oh! And I'm doing some work on alternative history representations of time/history, looking in particular at some of the works of Jeanette Winterson (*Sexing the Cherry*) and Sarah Waters.

It's hard to explain how all this relates to my writing without going into enormous and ridiculous detail, so I'll just try to give a sense of the relationships going on here.

I'm working on three novels at the moment, which is nutty, but there it is. One is the novel *Tern*, which borrows some of its narrative structure and key images from the ATU451 tale type. It's the story of a rural Australian woman whose sisters are all transformed into various animals or objects, after her father's farm is repossessed by the bank. It's easy to see the connection there, I think, to my interest in *Six Swans*.

I'm also writing an alternative history series of books about Henry VIII's three children: the orphan rulers of England (Edward, Mary and Elizabeth). The first book, which is the one I'm mostly focused on right now, is called *The Orphan King*; it's about Edward, of course, but is deeply connected to ideas about time and history, and is a sort of practical application of my ideas about the role of historical fiction: what it can do, and what it can't do.

So, in a sense, all of the research I'm doing at the moment is deeply personal. It's all connected to the reading, thinking and research I need to do to write the books. And the

writing of the books feeds back into that research all the time. The two are the same thing, in many ways, or at least two ends of the same animal: an *ourobouros*.

**Q:** What do you learn from your creative writing students?

**A:** This is a great question! I learn different things from each of my students, but often it's hard to put into words what those lessons are. I've learned that there are a thousand different ways to dream of being a writer, and each of them is as important and beautiful as the next. I've learned that no matter how many times you think you know how to write a story or craft a poem, there is always someone who will show you another way. I've learned that no matter how many times you've read a story, there's always someone who will show you it in a new light. I've learned that the dirtiest little secret about a writing workshop is that the most valuable thing you can offer your students is your direct and undivided attention. That there is terrible magic in having your story heard.

**Q:** Do you have a creative writing pedagogy? When writing is such an intimate thing, how do you deliver a creative writing course at a university? What is the function of a workshop, for example?

**A:** I do have a finely developed sense of what I aim to offer in my classrooms, and a lot of that has to do with the very simple and obvious things. In order to be a writer, you need to learn how to read in an attentive and productive way. You need to learn how to read the work of others, and how to read your own work. I believe that there is no one way to write, and no one style or genre of writing that is intrinsically 'better' than any other style or genre, and that therefore my role is to help my students discover what style or genre they most admire, and what they admire about it, and how they can become the kind of writers they admire.

At the same time, I believe absolutely in rigour. I think writing is hard work, and I think that's one of the key lessons I want to teach the aspiring writers I have the opportunity to work with. I believe in learning good grammar, and reading widely and deeply and with a pen in your hand. I believe in writing long drafts and then throwing them away and starting again, if you have to. I believe in rigorous but thoughtful feedback. And kindness. And mutual support.

For me, workshops are, at their best, a mutually supportive community in which everyone is assumed to have equal potential to succeed as a writer. One of the things I like to talk about early and often is that one writer's success does not come at the expense of another's. Not in the workshop, and not in the world of publishing. Or only very rarely and temporarily. So you don't have to try to 'win' in the workshop. In fact, I think, writing workshops work best when everyone's goal is to lift everyone up. To work towards everyone becoming the best writer they can be.

So the function of the workshop is, I think, to provide support and encouragement, but the kind of support that challenges you to constantly do better. To strive and learn and stretch yourself beyond what you thought you were capable of. To introduce you to new

ideas, new texts, new worlds of possibility. And to make you write things you never thought you could write.

## On other things

**Q:** In your James Tiptree, Jr Award [acceptance speech](#) you mentioned the story of Descartes' Doll. Do you believe it? What do you think happened to her?

**A:** I believe in fairies, and fairy tales, so of course I believe in Descartes' doll. I suspect she's at the bottom of the sea near Copenhagen, hopefully in an anoxic pocket of cold, preservative water. One day, perhaps, I'll get to dive down and rescue her. What stories she'll be able to tell!

**Q:** Can you discuss your current works-in-progress?

**A:** I've done a little of this above, almost incidentally! But here's a little rundown on the two books I haven't yet talked about!

*Dying In The First Person* is a contemporary realist book about twin brothers who invent a language in which to tell each other stories, and a culture out of which that language has emerged. The language belongs to a race of men who live on an archipelago. In this archipelago, each island can only support the weight of one man's heart, so each man lives alone on his island. When the brothers grow up, they drift apart. One lives in Europe and the other in rural Australia. One of the brothers still writes stories in this language, and the other translates them for publication. The story begins, however, when the writer drowns and a woman who may or may not have been his lover accompanies his body home to his family. This book is in the editing stages, and is scheduled to be published by Transit Lounge in 2016.

*The Book of Ruth* is a book about a father and daughter who come to Australia as post-war migrants in the 1940s. Ruth and her father settle down in a small town by a river. The story is about the lives they live – the connections they make with the people of that town – and the secrets they carry with them from the old world.

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