



WRITERS IN CONVERSATION



Photo: Tobias Andreasson

Interviewing the Interviewer: A Conversation with Charlotte Wood

Gillian Dooley

*Charlotte Wood is an Australian writer and editor, the author of four novels, most recently *Animal People*, which won the People's Choice medal in the 2013 NSW Premier's Literary Awards, with a fifth, *The Natural Way of Things*, about to appear later this year. She has edited a book of essays, *Brothers and Sisters* (2009) and written a memoir on food and cooking, *Love and Hunger* (2012).*

*I have long been a fan of Charlotte's work, and was delighted when I learned in 2013 that she was beginning a new online subscription magazine, *The Writer's Room*, which would contain interviews with her fellow writers. This was particularly exciting since it was at this time we were exploring the establishment of what would become *Writers in Conversation*. I subscribed immediately and have found the *Writer's Room* interviews unfailingly illuminating – essential reading for creative writers and anyone seriously interested in the craft of writing.*

*Details of Charlotte's publications are at <http://www.charlottewood.com.au/> and *The Writer's Room* subscription page is*

http://www.charlottewood.com.au/store/p27/2015_Subscription_The_Writer%27s_Room_Interviews.html

*When *Writers in Conversation* was established, Charlotte kindly agreed to join the Advisory Board. It seemed clear that we shared a commitment to the long-form literary interview, so earlier this year I decided to ask Charlotte if she would agree to an interview for *WIC*.*

*We spoke on the phone in May 2015. I began by quoting a passage from Charlotte's *Writer's Room* Interview with Sue Smith: 'I love these interviews I do with writers, you know, because just about*

everyone I interview talks about failure. And you never hear it elsewhere, really,¹ and asking Charlotte to comment on what she had said.

CW: It's interesting to me that when I've done these interviews with writers, that are lengthy and about a body of work and often quite a long career, reasonably quickly the writers themselves bring up the topic of failure, and not just commercial failure or critical failure, but the sense of struggling against the failure of their own work of art all the time. I don't know if they raise it because they're in conversation with another writer who knows how it feels, but I do think that the experience of writing literary work is the experience of pushing all the time against failure. At the same time, whenever you do a mainstream press interview you are kind of in sales mode, and you don't really want to be talking about failure when you talk about your new book, which is really what most interviews are about. Even at writers' festivals and whatever, underlying most interviews about literary creativity is the uneasy sense that you're trying to sell books. I think the interviews that I've done somehow release writers from that feeling. Also, though I haven't always been successful, I've tried to get writers in between books as much as possible. Lately, for various logistical and timing reasons, I've interviewed a few writers with a new book about to come out or one just released, but on the whole, when I've spoken to writers they're not in promotion mode. I think it's quite a relief for them to be talking about their work in that sort of phase, because it's a much calmer sort of time and they don't feel the obligation to publishers and whoever else to try and promote their work. And we're talking about the process of writing, we're not talking about the outcome, the actual content of the book, or not so much.

In her interview Sue Smith was quite adamant, and I agree with her, that there needs to be among creative people a much more open discussion about the presence of failure and the necessity and the inevitability of failure in a long career. She particularly drew attention to some of the really quite vicious commentary about David Williamson's plays. I think part of that is the cultural need that we seem to have to tear down someone who has been very successful. When something isn't successful there's a kind of glee in pointing and laughing and triumphantly drawing attention to a failure rather than expecting that in 30 or 40 or 50 years of producing art you're not always going to have a major success. A really intelligent audience will be interested in failures rather than embarrassed or horrified or disgusted by them. And if you want artists to risk trying new things, we have to embrace failure as, if not an inevitability, then a possibility of any real adventure in the creative process.

GD: In wonder how the book reviewer fits into this? From a reviewer's point of view, you don't want to pull your punches and be kind if you don't think a work has succeeded, but how do we make especially new authors, but I suppose all authors, realise that a bad review is not an indictment?

CW: To me it's all in the tone of the review. It's not the criticism that's the problem for most writers, I don't think, it's the tone that is often quite sneery and derisive. When that kind of

¹ Sue Smith, *The Writer's Room Interviews* 13, February 2015, 7.

tone is employed in the hands of a critic who actually isn't very confident it can be their fairly transparent attempt to bolster their own sense of authority. But a really confident reviewer has a much more solid sense of enquiry and approaches the book that they're reviewing with a fundamental respect for the endeavour of creating fiction, or non-fiction. They start from a baseline of respect and then ask, 'So, what's gone wrong here, in this case?'

GD: How do you prepare for your interviews? Do you formulate questions in advance?

CW: The first thing I do is read as much as I can of the writer's work, and I then do as much research as I can, looking at interviews they've done before and articles and profiles about their work. I make a long, long list of questions which I never get through. The questions are both about the process of their work, and the content of their work to a lesser degree, and I also have broader questions about the creative process and their opinions of various things. For instance, I might ask them their opinions about what the relationship is between ego and creativity, or I might ask them about ambition and failure.

GD: There are not standard questions that you always ask everyone?

CW: No, not that I always do, but I do have a sort of bank of general questions that I will consult to see if I think some of them might work. But one of the important things that I try to do is to let the writer really lead me in the conversation. If I ask a question and they don't seem particularly interested in it but they start going off on a tangent I'll go with them down that path, because obviously they have something they want to say about it, and that way you find really interesting things that you haven't heard about before. For example, in the last interview I did, with James Bradley, there was a really fascinating thread of talking about how you create narrative tension without using plot. I'd never read anyone talking about that and we had a really interesting discussion about how you can use the structure of a book to maintain momentum and so on. If I'd just stuck to my list of questions I wouldn't have got that material, so it's a matter of listening more than speaking myself. One of the discussions he and I ended up having was about the speed our books are read at. A writer will make a statement about something, and instead of just saying, 'Yes that's interesting' and then moving on to another question, we tend quite often to get into a longer discussion about *why* they think that. One of the things James said was that he really likes it when people say they read his books in one sitting – he doesn't want his books to be slow, and I said I felt the same way, but *why* did both of us feel that way? So it's often an investigation of things both the writers in the conversation are thinking, on a subject that we haven't actually thought about before. It's quite an interesting excavation process.

GD: And the way you choose your interviewees – they're writers who you either know or you've read and you find interesting?

CW: Some of them are writers that I've known and loved and just been dying for the opportunity to talk to, people like Joan London. Other times they're people who I haven't really known but I might have seen them speak or heard them interviewed and thought

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they've got really interesting things to say. I hadn't read much of Wayne McCauley's work, for example, but I saw him speak a couple of times at writers' festivals and I thought he was a very thoughtful guy, with some very provocative things to say. So then I went off and read his work and asked if I could interview him. So often it's not so much about what they're writing as how they can speak about writing and how they articulate discussions about writing that is the salient point.

GD: And your subscribers – who do you believe your subscribers are?

CW: I think in the main they are practising writers in one form or another, so they might be published writers, or they might be student writers, or beginner writers. I think there are quite a lot of those, who, like me, use the magazine as a sort of inspirational or instructional exercise. Then I think there are probably a few subscribers who are just readers, who are interested in the creative process. But the feedback that I tend to get is from writers themselves, often about a particular interview, saying that they felt very relieved or consoled or somehow inspired by the person who I'd just interviewed and that they had given them some sort of solace or given them a new idea of how to approach their work. I'm not sure how many general readers are really that interested in the nitty-gritty of the creative process, unless they're interested in a particular writer. I had a person the other day who just wanted the Joan London interview, and I told her they're not separately available, you need to buy the year's subscription. She was quite happy to do that. And though it was really because she wanted to read the one with Joan that she took the whole thing, she later said, 'Actually it's all quite interesting.'

GD: Yes, I must admit I haven't read many of the works of the people who you've interviewed, but when I read the interviews there's always so much in them and I usually think, if only I had the time I'd go and read all their books.

CW: One of the things I really wanted to do was to give some conversational airtime to writers who we don't hear from very often. Some of them are newish writers, like Pam Newton, who wrote two excellent crime novels, but a lot of them are much more widely published but not that widely known. Joan London has just published her third novel but she's written two short story collections, and Amanda Lohrey has published a lot of books but attention to her work felt to me to have waned at the time we spoke. It has picked up again since with the publication of her new novel.

GD: They're not the big 'stars', necessarily, although you've got Kim Scott ...

CW: And Lloyd Jones. Kim Scott and Lloyd Jones might be well known for a time, but people forget about them again. People have sometimes asked me, 'Could you interview Helen Garner or David Malouf?' These are people who would give brilliant wonderful interviews, but who I feel have already been interviewed and in great detail, and I think I would rather this magazine had a few more surprising names, names people haven't even necessarily

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heard of, but who might now find a couple of new readers because of my interviews with them.

GD: It was the Pam Newton interview that made me think, I've got to talk to you. That was the one – though I'd never heard of her, but I just loved it so much.

CW: She's so articulate and intelligent, especially doing really interesting things in the crime genre.

GD: And interrogating the genre she's writing in. So that brings me to the question of where you got the germ of the idea to do this.

CW: I've always loved the *Paris Review* interviews, which have been going for decades – there are interviews with Hemingway and Faulkner and people like that, so a very long time. And I've always liked the fact that those interviews are done in a collaborative way, so that although they read as a conversation, just a question and answer, it's quite explicit in the introductions, and certainly in the collections, the books, that the interviews are very highly edited. Although they read as a verbatim report, they're very much curated and edited and shaped.

I think this approach is really interesting, because in journalism the general rule of thumb is that you would never show an interviewee the draft of your story or interview, because the assumption is that they would want to take out anything that would reveal them, or something – I don't really understand it. So that's the approach that I take with these interviews. I do the interview, I edit down the transcript which is usually about 15,000 to 18,000 words, down to about 8,000 words, then I send it back to the writer, and they have the option of ignoring it or fiddling with it as much as they like. I have never had anyone retract something they've said. I've often had people refine what they've said. I know when I do an interview myself, often when you see it in print you think, I might have said that but it's not really what I think – I didn't articulate properly. Whereas this way they have a chance to really say exactly what they mean. I think the fact that they know they're going to have that chance later makes them very relaxed. Every now and then they'll say, I don't know whether I want to get into this, and I say, you can cut it out later if you want to. Then they don't tend to cut it out. So that's the kind of *Paris Review* model.

But there was also an interview I read some time ago in an excellent visual arts magazine called *Artist Profile*, and that was an interview between two painters. It was the painter Steve Lopes interviewing the painter Euan MacLeod about his process, and I was so moved by that interview. It was very insightful about the process of painting in a way that I hadn't read in normal journalism, which tends to focus on the outcome rather than the process, and because the interviewer was also a painter he had questions about the process that were completely different from the kind of questions a journalist or a non-painter would have asked. When I read that I thought, I wish there was something like that for Australian writers, and then I realised that I was actually in quite a good position to create something. I

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have a background as a journalist so I know how to interview people, and yet because I'm a fiction writer, I also hopefully would ask questions that a journalist might not.

GD: There's also the academic interview, where typically a PhD student will approach a writer and often they're even more at cross purposes than journalists, because they're very much focused on outcomes and imagery and content.

CW: Also they might be pursuing a line of enquiry with their own thesis, so they think, say, 'Charlotte Wood's work is all about alienation in Australia' or something. I might not think that, but in that sort of interview they really need you to support their proposition – not that I've had that experience, but I can see how that might come about.

GD: I understand you're studying as well – tell me about your PhD.

CW: I'm doing a PhD in Creative Writing at the University of New South Wales and the creative component of that is my new novel, *The Natural Way of Things*, which is coming out in October. The critical component is actually a study of cognitive processes of creativity and I have done a series of recordings of conversations among a group of writers that I know. We have these conversations anyway about our work – we meet every month or so and talk about our work in progress, and have been doing that for about 20 years. I've recorded some of those conversations over the period of one year, and then analysed the transcripts to try and identify what are some of the cognitive processes involved and the techniques they use but that they don't know they use. I've come up with nine different processes, and now I'm creating a model of creativity based on them to see how their books actually get written. I'm comparing my model with existing models of creativity, a lot of which are cyclical, but mine is not. I'm probably going to be trying to refute the idea that creativity is necessarily cyclical, because I think it's much more random than that.

GD: So does *The Writer's Room* feed into your studies?

CW: It probably will in terms of providing a component of my literature review, rather than using those interviews as actual source material. My study is a participant observation study, so I'll be looking at *The Writer's Room* interviews, along with things like the *Paris Review* interviews and all kinds of other interviews with artists of various kinds, for material that would support my thesis and especially that support the idea of a concept called 'problem-finding' that a researcher called Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi came up with in 1976 in a study of visual artists. I'm looking at that concept as the basis of my research.

GD: What makes an interview exceptional? You've talked about things going places you don't expect. Are there any responses which have just floored you, or really surprised you?

CW: That's a really good question. Sometimes it's hard to know until you get the transcript. Sometimes I've been in the interview as we speak and have thought, 'God this is amazing, I could just literally print the transcript of this and it'd be brilliant.' Then you actually look at it

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and you think, 'Oh no, this isn't as good as I thought, actually there's really not that much there.' But then through the process of refining and refining I come back to a position of real enthusiasm.

GD: It sounds like most writing projects to me!

CW: I think if there's anything that I am quite good at it's having a radar for people who are going to be generous in their conversation and honest about their processes, and I'm always incredibly struck by how generous they are. They're incredibly open about talking about something that's usually deeply, deeply personal and deeply private. For example, I thought Sue Smith was really quite transcendently generous. I think what works best is if they are surprised by the question and they have to think really hard about it as they are formulating their answers. I think a lot of them quite enjoy that process. It's more like having a real conversation rather than thinking, 'Oh yeah, I've answered this before', and just going into your normal rote answer which you tend to do after a while, because if you're answering honestly there really is only one answer. I suppose if I can come up with questions that make them think, 'I don't know what the answer is, but let's talk it out,' then you can find you get to really interesting places.

GD: And then that might cut both ways, you might both get something out of it?

CW: Oh very much so! Every interview I've done has certainly given me very rich and concrete writing advice, which is really why I'm doing it. It is a real masterclass for me every time.

GD: It's interesting how much is transferable between writers, because obviously what works for one person's not going to work for someone else, but ...

CW: That's right, but it's also amazing how many times you think, 'Oh, I can try that.' Sue Smith said the most beautiful thing. I asked, when you get marooned and you're really stuck, what do you do? She said something like, 'Well, usually it's about not knowing my character enough and so sometimes I just take them to bed with me and just go to sleep with them.' I thought that was the most touching and lovely image. She said, 'I just think, here they are, they're lying next to me and I'll just go to sleep with them,' and there's something there about actively encouraging her subconscious sleeping mind to engage with this imaginary person. And I thought, 'Ooh I'm going to try that one day.'

Actually there have been a few people talking about sleep and the role of sleep in the creative process, which is really interesting.

GD: And the interviewees themselves, what do they get out of it, do you think? Do you get feedback from them?

CW: I've had some feedback. Some of them I think have felt a bit confronted by it. I know one in particular was quite horrified by the repetitions in their speech that I found perfectly

normal, and I actually cut some of them out, because when you shape it you don't put in every 'um' and 'ah' and 'yeah' and 'you know'. But that person seemed to think that I'd somehow invented them. But I've also had people say that they felt really quite moved afterwards, that it made them feel actually quite proud of their body of work and they hadn't really thought about how much they'd done until I asked them carefully about it. I've had one writer revive a book that he'd let go, that he'd forgotten about until I asked him whether he had ever thrown a book away. That was Malcolm Knox, and after the interview apparently he thought, I must have another look at that – and now it's his new book. He acknowledged me in the back of the book as one of the people who helped the book without knowing they were helping it. I think some people are really proud to be asked to take part in it, and feel they are engaging in a project that is part of a record of a period in Australian literature. I'm sure others see it as just another run-of-the-mill interruption to their work, but several of the writers have kept in touch – they really want the magazine to be a success and are often asking me how am I going to sustain it. A lot of people have said that they're really disappointed that it's coming to an end.

GD: I suppose I would say, yes, in a way I'm disappointed but in another way I totally understand.

CW: I think it's important to quit while the going's good. It's very, very time consuming and it's quite a demanding workload, and in terms of making a living as a writer it's probably the least effective thing I could be doing. By the end of this year it'll be three years. I actually nearly finished it last year, but some writing friends of mine got together in a funny sort of little delegation and said please do one more year, and I thought, yes, that's good, three years is a nice healthy sort of time ...

GD: It's a good sample, isn't it? You've got 18 people. That's a pretty good sample of Australian creative practice at this moment.

CW: I think it is. It's partly a profile of a generation of writers. They're not all my era of writers, but quite a lot of them are, and I think we've had a lot of coverage of writers like Helen Garner, David Malouf, Kate Grenville, Tim Winton and their generation, and absolutely rightly so. I feel that the people I've interviewed in the main are the generation of writers that follows.

GD: Even if they're not actually younger, they're not so far advanced in their careers.

CW: Amanda Lohrey would be more of their generation than mine, but not given nearly enough publicity and exposure for the work that she's done, which is really outstanding. And her enquiry continues in a really active way. She was the first interview I did, and she's been incredibly supportive of the whole enterprise. But I guess for the most part they have been people in their 40s and 50s. My sort of rule was that they had to have at least two books. And most of them have had many more than that. Pam Newton, for example, had two books, and I was waiting for her to finish the second one because I really wanted to talk to her. And

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interestingly I think that turned out to be a good rule because with more than two books you have much deeper experiences of different kinds within a single writing life, whereas if you've written one or even two books, your experience tends to be more singular, I suppose. But I have been interested in how writers have changed over the period of a long career, and how they haven't changed – what are the things that endure and what are the things that fall away.

GD: The gender balance has been very equal so far.

CW: I have been very assiduous in being absolutely equal, and I think that is about to tip in favour of female writers for the last three or four issues, partly because, to be frank, some of the male writers that I'd be interested in have had a lot of coverage. I want to hear from people who we don't know so much about, and a lot of those people tend to be female writers, and I figure that it's my magazine, so I can do what I like. If there's an imbalance in favour of women writers, that's quite unusual. I don't mind an imbalance in that direction.

GD: And as you say, you have the freedom to do that, it's your project, and you haven't had funders telling you what to do.

CW: No. Initially I decided I wasn't going to apply for any funding because I wanted to be completely free to run it how I felt and to be sort of capricious about it, so I felt that I could just stop if I wanted to, and then I did get to a point when I thought I really need some financial support for it, and I applied for some to the Copyright Agency and didn't get it and went back to thinking, 'Well, that's all right, I've got the freedom to do what I want.' It would be a bad thing if I got funding to do it for three more years and lost heart for the project, and yet had to keep doing it because I'd agreed to. I think that would be bad for everybody concerned. So it's been nice, actually, to feel so free about it.

GD: And it's nice also that it's your project so that you can call an end to it without a whole lot of other people's work being affected.

CW: Yes, I'm not causing any hassles to anyone but myself - and not even to myself.

Gillian Dooley is the founding co-editor of Writers in Conversation and the author and editor of several books, including From a Tiny Corner in the House of Fiction: Interviews with Iris Murdoch (2003).