



# WRITERS IN CONVERSATION



## In Deep Waters with Kerryn Goldsworthy, Freelance Writer and Critic

Gillian Dooley

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*On a wintry night late in June 2016, Dr Kerryn Goldsworthy visited my home in the north-western suburbs of Adelaide, not far from her own house, to talk about book reviewing, literary academia, the public culture of writing in Australia, and the challenges of managing a career as a freelance writer and public intellectual. We talked for nearly two hours, laughed a lot, drank some wine and tea; and what follows is necessarily incomplete record of a lively, wide-ranging and sometimes indiscreet conversation which often headed off on unexpected tangents and had to be brought to heel.*

*Kerryn has been a freelance writer and critic based in Adelaide since 1998. She is a regular book reviewer for the Fairfax press, Australian Book Review (ABR), and the Sydney Review of Books. She was the editor of ABR from 1986 to 1987 and lectured in literature at the University of Melbourne from 1981 to 1997 following her doctoral studies at the University of Adelaide.*

*She is the author of three books: a short story collection, North of the Moonlight Sonata (McPhee Gribble 1989), Helen Garner (in the OUP Australian Authors series, OUP 1996), and Adelaide, in the UNSW Press series on Australian cities in which leading Australian authors write about their home city (NewSouth 2011). She has edited four anthologies of Australian short fiction and was a member of the editorial team that produced The Macquarie PEN Anthology of Australian Literature (Allen & Unwin, 2009).*

*In 2013, Kerryn won The Pascall Prize, the only Australia national prize for cultural criticism. She was the inaugural chair of the judges' panel for the Stella Prize (for books by Australian women) 2013-15, and has also been a judge for the Miles Franklin and the then Commonwealth Writers' Prize.*

*Kerryn conducted a popular blog titled 'Still Life with Cat' for several years. Her social media presence has now moved to Facebook, but the Blog still remains and is full of delights. I particularly recommend a post from September 2009, which sets out some ground rules for book reviewing.*

<http://stilllifewithcat.blogspot.com.au/2009/09/and-bad-bad-review.html>

*I started our conversation with what I felt was the most obvious subject for discussion, book reviewing.*

GD: I'm interested what we get ourselves into when we put ourselves into the position of being reviewers. I think sometimes the tone and voice is really hard to get in a review. Do you feel that you've 'settled'? In your blog you said one must try to appear like 'neither a wanker nor a dickhead', which is actually surprisingly hard sometimes, especially when you don't like the book.

**KG: I try not to – every now and then, maybe once or twice a year, I will think, this person deserves ... no, not the person, the book. Just because you can't let these books out into the world and let them get away with it. My favourite example is an obviously put-together piece of chicklit. It was very clear to me that the only reason that book got published was because the author was Kathy Reichs's daughter, which was being made much of in the media release. And it was just dreadful, the worst kind of twee, very American, irony-free, very sexist, incompetent writing. Name any box that you could tick why this book should not be published. So that's my example for not feeling particularly guilty about hauling off and being very sarcastic. But that's a qualitatively different thing from reviewing something like Geordie Williamson's *The Burning Library* in which my line was that what he's saying is not true. And that's different from saying 'this is a bad book.'**

So there's a whole range of positive possible negativity. A Canberra friend who used to review for the *Canberra Times* once told me about a stranger coming up to her in the street saying, 'You owe me \$32.95. I bought that book because you said it was good but it was rubbish.' And I think they've got a case. It's only a little case, but it's a case.

GD: But that's another thing. The readers of reviews don't always understand what a review is.

**KG: No, they don't. I'm not saying that they were right. But I'm saying that we have a responsibility.**

GD: I got this reaction to one of mine recently, through a friend, who sent my review to a friend and said, 'What do you think of this review? You told me you liked this book.' So this person sent back a critique of my review, which said things like, this reviewer is prejudiced, she is a snob, she hasn't read the book properly. And then: book reviewing is going the way of all journalism. Nobody is objective or well-informed any more. It was a 300-worder for *ABR*.

**KG: The only thing I could say about that is that I am acutely conscious, especially when I'm doing the short reviews for Fairfax, much more conscious than when I'm doing the longer reviews – though I've got one now when I need to think about this – of what genre we're in. You know, I'm not going to review something that's clearly meant to be a thriller as though it was a literary novel. Why would I do that? I can remember when we very first started teaching creative writing at Melbourne Uni, 1983 it was, the people who were against it, would say, 'Oh but how can you judge?' Are they better at the end of the year than they were at the beginning? You judge by what people are trying to do. If this person set out to write a well-crafted crime novel and failed, you say, OK, this didn't work. If it's Peter Temple, if you get *The Broken Shore*, as I did, which blew my head off, well you say this is rewriting the rules about genre divisions. I think an awful lot of reviewers have a tendency to just dismiss something, to call any sort of genre fiction trash and not judge it by its own rules. Try telling them that *Nineteen Eighty-four* and *Brave New World* are both speculative fiction and see what they say. How did we get here? These are deep waters, Watson!**

GD: It's just that they're our readers, and so often they don't understand the object that we're offering them.

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KG: Something I realised when I was about half-way through the second Harry Potter book – I'd never heard of J.K. Rowling or *Harry Potter* until the 11-year-old daughter of a friend of mine who was meeting for coffee every Saturday morning turned up with this book, and I said, what are you reading? And she showed me. And I said 'tell me about that', and she told me about it, and I thought, this sounds interesting, and her mother said, yes it's wonderful. So it was a kid. It was the audience that the book was written for. And then I started to read them, and I realised that she is one of the most superb writers, who puts in lots of little jokes for the grownups. So it's brilliant for children, for whom it was written, but the language, the wordplay, she's clearly fluent in at least three other languages apart from English, and everyone's name means something in Latin or Spanish or whatever, and those kind of people really, the writers who can write for a wide audience in whatever genre or form that you're in, but who can also speak to ... Someone like A.S. Byatt's very good at this. It's possible for someone who's never been in a goddamn English department to read *Possession* and enjoy it. But someone who has been in an English Department, as you know – especially a feminist who's been in an English department and knows something about the nineteenth century, can get a huge amount of enjoyment out of that book. But that doesn't mean that it's no good for people who didn't. They're my favourite writers, those people.

GD: How many reviews do you write a week?

KG: Only two. It used to be four, it's now two because Fairfax ran out of money, and rather than just sack two of their four regular short reviewers, they decided they would job-share between the people who write for the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the people who write for the *Age*. So I now write a fortnightly column of four short reviews. Actually the amount of paid reviewing work has fallen off quite badly. But up until very recently it would have been at least one more full-length review, and I've got one at the moment that I'm half-way through, for example – more often than not there's one that I'm working on that's a full-length review probably every other week. And some other work gig that isn't reviewing. So it'd be about five reviews a fortnight, one of which is a full-length review.

GD: So do you come to every review thinking, this is fine, I know exactly what to do? Do you ever think, 'What the hell am I going to write?'

KG: [laughter] Not any more. I remember having a little crisis. I reviewed *Elizabeth Costello*, it must have been, for *ABR*, and I remember having a little crisis about that. It wasn't so much what I was going to write as what am I going to write that the author wouldn't be disgusted by. And the thing to do there I thought was to back off and think about philosophy and abstractions. And as soon as I did that I was fine. I realised what was going on, I think it was the right thing to do. When I do think, oh my god what am I going to say about that, more often than not it's a good, difficult, hard book like *Elizabeth Costello* or, more recently Nir Baram's *Good People* – he was out for the Sydney Writers' Festival in May. A very angry Israeli novelist. Very good. This was translated from the Hebrew, and it was clearly very bloody difficult in the Hebrew, so it took me about five days to get through it because it was very dense, it demanded a great deal of historical knowledge and it was conceptually quite complex. And then I found out that I'd got it mixed up in the reviewing pile and I wasn't supposed to be reviewing it at all, and it had been sent to me by some publisher.

It was terribly painful reading, because it was set during World War Two. One of the characters is a German man working for the government and the other is a young Russian woman working for her own government, and in both cases the work that they're doing is morally repugnant -- horrible stuff -- and they've just drifted ... So many people got caught up in what they

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had to do in World War Two and ended up hopelessly morally compromised, and it was about that, basically. And it was dreadfully difficult to read, and when I sorted out with my editor that I wasn't supposed to be reviewing it at all, I realised that I had wasted – well, it wasn't really wasted because I read the book – five days. I was hugely relieved because I had no idea what I was going to say. I was completely out of my depth with something like that. Not so much out of my depth as lost. It was so alien to my own experience that I had no way in.

I've been doing this short reviewing gig for Fairfax since the beginning of 2007, that's nearly 10 years, and the number of books published every year, at least in English and translations as well, that are about, directly or indirectly, World War Two, does not diminish. I don't know if you've noticed that. It's like a bruise that's still coming out in the general consciousness. It's really quite remarkable. And then you have to really think about those books.

GD: Yes. The double-header I did for *ABR* last month was Baba Schwartz's autobiography and Marcel Weyland's.<sup>1</sup> Baba Schwartz is a genuine Holocaust survivor. Marcel Weyland escaped the Holocaust, by pure luck, or by good judgement actually, on his sister's part. So that family got out in time. So his memoir is not a Holocaust memoir at all. But I had to do these two side by side. I'm sure Peter Rose [Editor of *ABR*] was expecting that they are both Holocaust memoirs and I had to say, well, hers is and his isn't and I found it really quite difficult to navigate that.

I don't do anything like as much reviewing as you, not now, anyway, but whenever my reviews provoke reactions, I get, 'she's a snob'. That was certainly the reaction to a review of a Bryce Courtenay, where I thought I'll take a step back, I won't just say this is rubbish, I'll try and work out what it is about Bryce Courtenay that people love so much. But that sort of thing seems to annoy people.

**KG: This is one of the things that doing the Fairfax reviewing has taught me a lot about. I get a lot of – rather apologetically my editor sends me a fair amount of what I refer to in my heart of hearts as *Women's Weekly* fiction. But I've read enough of it now to know what's good WW fiction and what's bad WW fiction, and my general phrase is 'well-crafted commercial fiction'. Which is what it is, the good stuff anyway. So I know what you mean. It's my job to talk about those books, but there's a lot of them about. And they take their idea of being a writer very seriously, and they're all very earnest. And you say, well, this isn't working, or this beautifully put together, everyone will like reading this.**

GD: As for Bryce Courtenay, I just can't see the attraction.

**KG: I don't know what I'd do about Bryce Courtenay. I think I'd just say no.**

GD: I did, after that one. I think they sent them to me, because ... I don't know why, actually!

**KG: I don't say no very often. I wrote my first widely published review for the *Australian* in 1980, which is 36 years ago, and I've been around these traps ever since. I was in Melbourne in the thick of most of it for a long time, with all the literary stuff I've done, and I know all these people. I can't possibly not review their books. If I said no to every book by everyone I've actually met I'd never review anything. So when I do say no, it's often because I've got too much of a history with this person or I don't think this is a good idea or whatever.**

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<sup>1</sup>In *Australian Book Review* June-July 2016.

GD: That thing you said about World War Two, I was looking at something someone posted about the Prime Minister's Literary Prize and the interventions by the prime minister, and it seemed to me that all the books that were chosen – the overriding choices – were military history.

**KG: By different prime ministers.**

GD: That's right.

**KG: I'm probably swimming against the tide in my views about that. I'm a stickler for the rules. So when I see literary people saying that they should change the rules of the Miles Franklin Literary Award, for example, I think No, we're talking about the terms and conditions of Miles Franklin's Will. You're talking about overriding, literally, what a woman wanted. Get to your half-back flank and rest, as we say in my family. No. That was in her Will and that's how it's going to be. And I feel the same way about the PM's prize, and if you're a judge and you haven't bothered to read the rules, then you get to your half-back flank and rest again. I think that if it's in the rules that the PM is allowed to override, then what's the problem? You might think it's a bad rule, but it's not as if it's surreptitious intervention. So it's public money. It's still there in the rules. He's the Prime Minister. The prize has his name on it – or her name. I did not have a problem with any of that. You're right to say that it's really interesting that in both cases it was military history. But what person who wants to be Prime Minister isn't interested in nation-building? And because every PM but Gillard has been a man, they all think that nation-building is about war.**

GD: Well, there's a deeper problem there than just the prize.

**KG: Quite.**

GD: But prizes in general. Sometimes I think we'd be better off without them. What do you think?

**KG: I think that any writer who has ever won one would just laugh. As Helen Garner would say, here I permitted myself a coarse laugh. [laughter] Obviously I don't think that or I wouldn't have agreed to judge the Stella Prize.**

GD: Although if there weren't all those other prizes, would there be any point in starting up the Stella Prize? I mean, the Stella Prize is a kind of redress thing.

**KG: Yes it was. But where are you going with this?**

GD: I suppose what I'm saying is that – it's a stupid question, really – what if the world was flat? What if we didn't ever have prizes? Does introducing competition into the arts ...

**KG: I see what you mean. Well, it's a perennial problem, isn't it? There's 'competition in the arts' – boo. 'Money for writers' – hooray. I think the question is not, what if the world was flat. The question is what if artists were properly paid.**

GD: Why should you have to compete against all your peers?

**KG: But you don't have to compete if you don't want to. People's books need to be entered for prizes, and the writers and publishers have to agree to their being entered. And I have never heard of any writer saying no, don't put my book in for a prize. It may have happened, but I haven't heard of it.**

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GD: I think perhaps someone like Margaret Drabble might have made that stand.<sup>2</sup>

**KG: Oh yes, and somebody else too, I think it was Patrick White who said after he'd won his second or third Miles Franklin that he didn't want his novels entered for it any more, and I think his motives were altruistic rather than snarky, in an era when there still weren't that many Australian novels being published – nothing like the number there is now. I think that when you're talking about competition in the arts, the difference is whether or not people do what they do in order to compete. If people aren't making art primarily in order to compete, then I don't see a problem. I mean, the number of Australian novels I've read over the last 20 years where the writer has clearly thought, Oh I'd better chuck in an Australian reference so I'll be eligible for the Miles Franklin – it may not have been them, it could be their publishers, who will also benefit from that, or even their agents. You don't know. But sometimes it's like looking at a really bad piece of embroidery – who did this, the work experience kid? You can pick it. Anyone with any experience can pick it. So that's a bit sad.**

GD: In this very issue of *WIC* my co-editor who is an English academic – from England – has interviewed three women writers about the Orange Prize, and of course there are shades of opinion between the three of them about it and what it does to your career and so on.

We've talked a bit about freelancing. Would you make that choice again?

**KG: It sort of comes down to free will and determinism. What made it possible for me to leave the academy – to walk away from a tenured job, everybody thought I was insane; it was a double-barrelled thing. I decided that I wasn't going to fret any more about how I'd make a living. I was going to leave, that I was going to a) leave that university and b) come back to Adelaide. And that after that the chips could fall where they might, but the only way I was going to make a clean decision was to decide what the priorities were. And that was jettisoning any idea that I was going to let what I did for a living determine other conditions of my life. So because I was 44 and still young enough to do it, I did it. I got very lucky – I got some bits and pieces of casual teaching work at Flinders and Adelaide Universities straight away and I had various kinds of writing work as well. I thought, I've definitely made the right decision here. And a year later, my mother died quite suddenly at the age of 71, and I thought I've seriously made the right decision here, because I got to spend a year with my mum. So given what happened, no – and I have not, even for a single day, even when I was having a shocking crisis of confidence about money, which happened one winter, when of course you're paying huge amounts for heat, no way. I mean I look at the people who were my mates and my peers then, and they're full professors and they've got millions of dollars in superannuation and they travel a lot, and I roll my eyes, but that's all I do.**

GD: They've still got their worries. I was talking to a full professor today and she was ...

**KG: I know, it's horrible, I wouldn't be them for quids. I mean, that was one of the things I left. That was very high on the agenda of why I left. I just couldn't bear what I could see coming, and what was already here. And it's obviously getting worse all the time. But some people can deal with it. I have great admiration for them. But I'm not one of them. I can't.**

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<sup>2</sup> See Nick Turner's interview with Margaret Drabble in *Writers in Conversation* Vol. 1, no. 1, February 2014, p. 3. [http://dSPACE.flinders.edu.au/jspui/bitstream/2328/27260/1/Drabble\\_Turner.pdf](http://dSPACE.flinders.edu.au/jspui/bitstream/2328/27260/1/Drabble_Turner.pdf)

GD: I'm in a lucky position in a way because I can have a steady income with the library job and still do my research as I want to do it, without anyone telling me I must publish in certain journals. They just love it when I do publish in certain journals, which I do quite a lot. But I would not want to be an academic and I see everything that is corralling people into producing a certain kind of product ...

**KG: The idea that people should whip up research projects that would appeal to the ARC. That was already starting in the early 1990s.**

GD: All someone like me needs is time and access to a good library. And maybe the odd airfare.

**KG: I think that's what most people need. It's just that some people are better at playing the system than others. And fine, good on them, good luck to them.**

**One of the things that I adore about being a freelancer. It's so precarious. I had almost no income in May, and then in the first 10 days of June three times as much money came in as had come in for the whole of May. And you've got to hold your nerve in a situation like that, you have no choice. But you see, I grew up on a farm, which means that to me being a one-person small business was the norm. And having a wildly fluctuating income was the norm. That was what you did.**

GD: Well I'm the daughter of a public servant, so to me it's quite a scary thought!

**KG: 1998 was probably the happiest year of my life. The year after I left academe. Because I hadn't realised how much I hated being a creature of the institution until I wasn't one any more. I didn't have to read anything I didn't want to read. I didn't have to deal with the febrile hysteria of something like what happened in the Melbourne Uni English department when *The First Stone*<sup>3</sup> was published. The atmosphere was like something out of some hideous dystopia. It was awful. So that was driving me nuts. It wasn't that I wasn't prepared to get on with people whose work I didn't have a lot to do with. You know, I was prepared to cope with them. So it wasn't like it was personal.**

**Freelancing, yes. Every now and then you have a crisis in confidence, so you get in touch with a few people and see if they can offer you any work, but I very rarely pitch. One reason why I was burned out as an academic by the time I was 44 was that I was doing so many extramural hours practically the whole time I was there. People kept asking me to, and I was so flattered, and so pleased. And the work was really interesting. I'd love to do it, yes! And I'd find myself working 80, 90, 100 hours a week, thinking how did you get into this, and that went on for 15 years.**

GD: I know exactly what you mean.

**KG: It was fine, but no one can work those sort of hours and not pay for it in the end, no matter how thrilled and flattered you are that people want you to do stuff.**

GD: I think because I came to it rather later, I'm still finding myself thrilled and flattered, and find it very hard to say no. But the other thing is that I keep having ideas, so it's my own fault that I'm convening a conference for Austen's bicentenary next year, at Flinders.

**KG: Good. That'll be great. I'll come to that.**

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<sup>3</sup> *The First Stone* by Helen Garner is a non-fiction account of a sexual harassment case at Melbourne University in 1992.

GD: We might ask you to do something. [laughter]

**KG: I've done something for a Jane Austen conference before.**

GD: I know you did. I was there.

**KG: Were you? It was a lovely conference, at La Trobe!**

GD: I wanted to ask you about time management. Do you sacrifice longer projects to get the short-run stuff done? Do you have a long-term project on the go?

**KG: It depends what you mean by sacrifice. I've been thinking about this a great deal lately. The three actual books I've written have all been at someone else's behest, as have most of the four books I've edited. The first book that I published was a collection of short stories. I had a few – I had half a dozen – but Hilary McPhee said to me, look, it's time you put together a collection. I wrote that because when Hilary McPhee says to you, where's your collection of short stories? you just write a few more and hand them over.**

**And then there was the book on Helen Garner. Peter Rose, who was then the academic publisher at Oxford University Press Australia, said we're doing this series, will you do a book on Garner?**

**And then there was the Adelaide book, and that was Phillipa McGuinness from New South approaching me at Writers' Week. I'd never met Pip – glorious woman. And she said, will you do the Adelaide book, we need it in 11 months. And I said, I'm reading four novels a week! Oh well, she said, don't let that stop you. So I didn't. I only submitted the manuscript a month late, too.**

**I've just been thinking about this lately. The only long-term projects I've finished were done because I didn't want to disappoint somebody else. You know, I see all these young women, women in particular but blokes as well, on social media, who, let's face it, haven't got a lot of talent but they have limitless self-belief and they take themselves very very very seriously, and I could do with one-tenth of that, I really could, it would be great. I might write and finish something. So to say 'sacrifice' would be misleading. It's more a matter of using the other stuff as an excuse. Helen Garner said many many years ago, 'the writer is the person who does it'. I can do it, but I can only do it if someone else has asked me to.**

GD: Well that's an interesting challenge! (laughs) People often say to me, how do you get what you get done done, and I think about it, and I look back, and I think, I don't know!

**KG: I'm a hopeless time manager, and I'm a procrastinator, and I am someone who doesn't have a lot of physical energy. One of my sisters and one of my closest friends are manic in their energy levels, and I keep saying to them, you need to understand that some of us aren't like you, we're just not. Inertia is our thing, and so is entropy.**

GD: And as for getting up at 6 o'clock in the morning!

**KG: One of the most interesting co-judges on the Stella Prize during my three years as chair of the panel was Annabel Crabb. And she was talking about what it's like to be the mother of three small children and to maintain her working life at the same time, and she said – she's a very funny woman, what you see on TV is what you get, she's exactly like that in a room – she said, 'it's like what a French peasant says about a pig: You just use every single bit of the pig. That is my attitude to a day.' That's brilliant. If everybody lived like that think how much we'd get done.**

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GD: I guess I try to do that. But Facebook has made a difference because it's just so possible to get into that little Facebook world.

**KG: I just want to know what everyone's doing! Is the baby better? Which I think is the fiction writer's frame of mind, I really do think that. I really want to know if the baby's better, and I want to know whether it's still raining in Oxford and if they got to go for a walk, and I want to know how they really feel about Justin Trudeau. I want to know that stuff.**

GD: And do you want to know what they had for dinner?

**KG: Often. Usually. Because most of the people I know who post about what they had for dinner are foodies, so they had something really interesting. I know that's the classic thing most people say about Facebook, and I guess it depends on who your friends are, really. If it's somebody whose spectrum goes from 'here's my dinner' to 'this is what I think about the theorist I was reading on the plane', I'll read what they had for dinner, because the whole person is really interesting.**

GD: I love it, and it keeps me in touch with people – I mean, you wouldn't write emails to all these people.

**KG: There's no time! But when they're people you're always fond of, and suddenly you can check in on them immediately and quickly, of course you're going to do that.**

GD: And there are people I've met through Facebook, now, friends of friends.

**KG: For me that's just an extension of blogging. Before I ever joined Facebook, the number of people I had gone out of my way to meet, or who had gone out of their way to meet me, that I had 'met' through blogging, was well past double figures, before Facebook ever came over the horizon. It was the norm for me before Facebook that you would seek out people, or they would seek you out, if you enjoyed their persona online.**

GD: So you don't think of yourself as a particularly good time manager, then?

**KG: I'm rubbish. I'm a rubbish time manager, hopeless, the worst. But I can meet deadlines. Have you seen that diagram, with 'All the work while crying' in the last two hours? It's me. C'est moi.**

GD: And as a writer, do you find it hard to get started?

**KG: Oh, it depends entirely what it is. I'm trying to think of different examples? Do you mean to get started in the first instance, or to get started every morning?**

GD: Get started in the first instance – the blank page.

**KG: Oh no, no. In my interview with Charlotte Wood at Writers' Week, about *The Natural Way of Things*, she said something really interesting. She said she was writing it as a realist novel and she was really struggling, and then she worked out how to do it because she had become attuned to everything in the air – everything in the news – that seemed to be falling straight into her lap in terms of content. The football girl, the St Kilda schoolgirl, the David Jones woman, the woman on the cruise liner, and she said she just felt she was attuned to it and the minute she started thinking like this, in terms of this dystopia where all these different women would find themselves in the same place, she said it was everywhere she looked. So it's a bit like that – when I'm starting a**

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**project, everything seems to be relevant to what I'm doing. It's like that wonderful image in *Middlemarch* about the scratches on the mirror. Everything just seems to be relevant to what you're doing.**

GD: I often think – I know what I'm going to be writing about, but I need that way in, and sometimes I know, this is bleeding obvious, it's not necessarily going to be the way this article will end up starting, but it's my way to start writing.

**KG: Yep, yep, it's like clearing your throat. I read something Chekhov had said, write the piece and then remove the first paragraph and the last paragraph, and I found it very liberating. And the number of times I've done that. Maybe not both, but one or the other, usually the first paragraph. Because you want to find your way in and you're working your way through all the ideas, then you think nup, nup, nup, get rid of all that now. You set it up, and it's like taking the scaffolding away. So no, I don't – with a shorter piece, it is like finding a vein. I find when I don't feel the pressure of a deadline it's much easier to get into the zone and get started. But I'm good at meeting deadlines. There's a lovely moment in the best Dorothy L. Sayers novel, *Gaudy Night*, where Harriet is trying to write a letter to Lord Peter and she knows it's a delicate letter, and she's worried about it, and she's sitting in her room at Oxford and she thinks how am going to do this. She tears up about four starts, and she says, dammit, I'm a professional, why can't I write a simple piece of prose on a straightforward subject? And every now and then I say that to myself when it's the matter of a deadline, for god's sake pull yourself together, this is your job. If you can't do it then you shouldn't be doing it. And then I miraculously get started.**

GD: With social media, do you find it, apart from the social side of it, do you find a professional or an intellectual vein in it – I mean, there is, isn't there?

**KG: Oh always! I post an awful lot, as you probably know, and it's always, I like to think, either about an idea that's out in the world, or it's some human thing that if I was writing a novel would be in the novel. If I post about my dinner it's either, 'I made this!' or 'What do you think?' There's always some other thing going on.**

GD: I mean I love when you hit the vein of a group or a page where you really share interests – the Iris Murdoch Appreciation group is just wonderful.

**KG: Now she is someone who's passed me by, and I've spent my whole life thinking I should get into her.**

GD: Well I don't know if you should, because apparently if you start it's very difficult to stop!

**KG: It was Paul Salzman from whose lips I first heard the words 'Margaret Drabble': 'read *The Realms of Gold*'. It's a wonderful novel, it's still my favourite Margaret Drabble. She's not as intellectually high-powered as Murdoch but she doesn't want to be. Cath Kenneally did a brilliant interview with her at Writers' Week in 2014 about *The Pure Gold Baby* – there's that gold again. And it was wonderful. Because you could see that she had made choices about how much of an intellectual she was going to be as a novelist, and made a conscious decision that she wasn't going to be that much of an intellectual, she was going to be someone who was read. It was very interesting.**

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GD: I'm interested in Iris Murdoch – she was one of the three authors I wrote about in my PhD – but she doesn't seem to have been studied much in Australian universities, as a novelist as opposed to a philosopher.

**KG: Because Margaret Drabble and A.S. Byatt are my favourites of that gender and period and country, and because they are both so utterly formed by Cambridge, I've got this overwhelming sense that they're all like that and that's obviously not the case.**

GD: In the English departments of our youth and perhaps later, it was Australian writers, postcolonial writers, all the classics. Or the modernists. Not the contemporary British writers.

**KG: I didn't have those choices. I did Honours in 1976 when I was 23 at Adelaide Uni, and in my day the rule was that you couldn't just start a PhD from scratch. However, you could start an MA and if you were judged to be doing well enough by the end of that year, you could convert to a PhD and that's what happened with me. At the beginning of 1977 I said, OK, here's what I want to do. I want to do a PhD on Katherine Mansfield, Christina Stead, and Nadine Gordimer and Margaret Atwood. And they had no idea what I was talking about, because neither the word feminism nor the word postcolonial had yet arrived in the Adelaide University English Department. There was no framework for what I had instinctively arrived at what I wanted to do. So they said no, no, you can't do that, so I said, then Katherine Mansfield, and they said no, because a member of the department was working on Katherine Mansfield.**

GD: But why is that a reason not to?

**KG: I don't know.**

GD: That's crazy.

**KG: And they didn't have anyone to supervise a thesis on my original proposal.**

GD: That's the thing, of course. Someone's got to break the mould. If you can only supervise things you're expert in then nobody can do anything new. What did you do in the end?

**KG: It was about place and displacement in Australian fiction. And I am still writing about this to this very day, as a dear friend pointed out when I embarked on the Adelaide book: 'Oh my god you're still writing your PhD thesis!' It was probably the last pre-theory thesis in Australia. Because, thank god, I could write the way everybody was writing in the 1960s and 1970s.**

GD: I think I probably came after that and I was able to write a post-theory thesis. I kind of ticked the boxes – but I'm not a theorist. I don't want the theory to get between me and the book. I read theoretical papers where the writer isn't reading that book, they're reading the theorist and then the book's over there somewhere.

**KG: I got lucky with that because I got more or less dragooned into a feminist theory reading group, it was the year after I'd finished my PhD. In 1980, an academic friend cobbled together this little package of work for me at Deakin University, which was just enough for me to live on, and I met Sneja Gunew, who formed this feminist theory reading group. And so right from the beginning I had at least one framework of theory which I thought then as I think now was fine, because as far as I was concerned it was true. The other stuff was theory, but this was true. Every single insight I ever**

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**got from feminist theory I thought, yeah, it's true. So I didn't have any intellectual struggles with it because it was facts as far as I was concerned.**

GD: I was lucky, too, because when I was in Honours, Robert Phiddian was teaching a Literary Theory course, which I did dutifully, but I found it was really good because he wasn't an uncritical reader of theory. We looked at different theories and did exercises, so it was negotiating your way through theory, rather than, here is the theory.

**KG: I got lucky because we had an option in Honours in 1976 – I think it was actually called 20<sup>th</sup> century literary theory, and the David Lodge anthology was the text book, which had just come out, and again it was here's what people have said through the ages. It stopped short of feminism, of course, but it was 1976.**

GD: What do you think about copyright? Where should we go with copyright?

**KG: Look I don't know enough about the law. I have some thoughts about intellectual property. None of them are coherent. Scholarly attribution seems to me to be crucially important. The generations after us all have this sense of, well it's all out there anyway so what's the big deal? And that frightens me a bit, only because of what it will do to scholarship, really.**

If I have an idea, I don't care how many people use it. I think it's great if people are using my ideas, I love that. If they pretend it's their own and make money out of it, I get a bit irritated. And people claiming they invented something when I know perfectly well I invented it also irritates the bejesus out of me. But only in a transitory way. But copyright seems to me to be crucially important because, again, for the same reason prizes are important only even more so. It's a marketplace, and it worries me that a lot of people who haven't got a lot of talent whinge and moan about how little writers get paid. Maybe they don't get paid because their writing's not very good! But something like copyright, if your writing's good enough to get published and get out there, then you deserve to get paid.

And just in the last little while, in the last couple of months, I had this fabulous windfall from Copyright Agency Limited, just when the plumber and the dentist between them had cleaned me out completely. And it was completely unexpected – and it was for things that, yes, people had been using in schools and universities for years. So I guess, on the one hand you want people to be intellectually generous, and on the other hand, when it comes down to dishonesty, I think that's what really sticks with me. If people claim ideas as their own, if they plagiarise, that's firing squad material as far as I'm concerned.

GD: I don't pretend to be across the Productivity Commission report.

**KG: Oh, I don't understand – however, Delia Falconer, who is intellectually a very sophisticated woman, apparently spoke to the Productivity Commission about this, and was posting about it on Facebook, and she said that they just didn't understand, they didn't get it, they hadn't heard the arguments, and I was thinking about the implications of that. We are in this little bubble talking to each other on places like Facebook. The Productivity Commission haven't heard the arguments. No-one – when I say no one, I mean most people – haven't gone to them with the arguments. Not directly anyway. And Delia said they were quite open to the arguments she was making and said can you give us some examples? So – I think they just don't get it, it doesn't occur to them. One of my best mates keeps saying, oh well, books will be cheaper, and yes, they will, but do you want to read Australian books?**

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GD: As if books are like pounds of rubble or something – they're all equal.

**KG: I think there's a failure of empathy going on amongst people like us here. Because we can't imagine what it would be like not to have a vested interest in this business. For somebody like my friend, who's a very very clever woman, it's just a matter of how much she's got to fork out for books, and I can understand that. I get it. I mean, most Australians are let's face it still cultural cringers at heart. They take it for granted that the American books and the English books are better. I think that kind of vague notion that anything that's not Australian is better, is even now still at the heart of the argument about what's wrong with cheaper books?**

GD: I went to a fascinating conference last year that I didn't expect to get anything out of. It was called the Social Theory, Politics and the Arts conference. We'd done a research project, and I needed somewhere to present. So I took it to that. And unexpectedly it was fascinating, because it was talking about how we value the arts, and it was political scientists, it was economists, it was arts people – it was all sorts of people with an interest. And one of the papers talked about the reasons that the arts aren't given much monetary value: that people will do them – writers will write, singers will sing – whether you pay them or not, so why would you pay them? So, should you boycott all amateur activity? They're not easy questions.

**KG: No, they're not simple questions either.**

GD: Because to say, you shouldn't perform in public, or you shouldn't write for nothing – It's cutting someone off from a source of fulfilment, an outlet, a way of expressing themselves, or whatever. But then the people who are trying to make a living out of it, you're sort of competing with them.

**KG: I often feel, one of the reasons that my sources of income seem to be slowly drying up is that so many people – everybody in the world, it seems, now – wants to be a writer and they are willing to do it for nothing, so there's heaps of competition, and of course in this market-driven mindset people can go for the 'content', no matter how rubbish it is. I'm just grateful I'm 63 and able to make choices. It would be terrible if one were younger.**

GD: Yes. Well, can we think of a cheerful note to finish on, after that? (laughter)

**KG: The thing I always come back to in the end, and interestingly this has become even clearer to me than it was before, since it began to be clear that my Dad needed lots of care. To take a bit of the burden off my sister I said I will make and bring dinner for the family twice a week, and you go home, take your dinner with you, and I'll stay with him and put him to bed, basically. And that means cooking for the family twice a week. I've always loved cooking but I've never had to give it quite this much regular energy, consideration and time before. And it's come back to something I've always believed, which is that writing is basically about making something. That it's a very physical activity. It's taking words and arranging them into – again, Helen Garner, many years ago, quote, 'a sentence is a little machine that works.' It's really, clearly obvious to me whenever I write anything that I am making something and I am putting something together in a shape. So that's my bottom line about writing, you're making something. It's a craft: you can go on about art as much as you like but it's at least as much craft as it is art, and that's why I get so irritated with people who say, 'Oh, don't worry about grammar, that's just pedantic, you know what I meant.'**

GD: Or 'I can't be edited'. (laughter)

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**KG: Yeah, right. Don't get me started! Go home now! So yes, that's my bottom line about writing, that's what it always comes back to. It can come down to a million things. It can come down to whether this is the actual word you meant, or, what is the rhythm of this sentence, or would this have the effect you wanted if it were in say regular poetic metre, except that people wouldn't realise that because it's just a sentence? That kind of really micro stuff to me is the bottom line about writing.**

GD: And I'm sure a lot of people would admire your writing but not notice these details.

**KG: That's the ideal, that it's so transparent that it can't be seen. Again, the embroidery metaphor holds. You want them to see the right side, not the wrong side. There you go, there's a positive ending for you!**

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*Gillian Dooley is the co-editor of Writers in Conversation. She has been a regular reviewer in various Australian publications and forums for fifteen years, and has published extensively on literary subjects during that time.*

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