

The Truth of Australian Crime Fiction: Gabrielle Lord in conversation

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Gabrielle Lord has published nine novels, all currently in print: *Fortress* (1980), *Tooth and Claw* (1983), *Jumbo* (1986), *Salt* (1990), *Whipping Boy* (1992), *Bones* (1995), *Grace of Angels* (1996), *The Sharp End* (1998) and *Feeding the Demons* (1999). Lord's most recent work *Death Delights* will be published in 2001. *Fortress* has been made into a successful film starring Rachel Ward, and *Whipping Boy* has been adapted for television drama by Peter Yeldham in 1996; Lord is currently adapting *Bones* for the screen.

Donna Lee Brien: speaking to members of the audience before this session, I know there are many of us who are curious about how you find your ideas and the creative process you employ in order to develop these ideas into a novel.

Gabrielle Lord: firstly, I don't see my writing as a creative process, it is work. Secondly, I do always start off with an idea. In *Feeding the Demons* (my most recent book) I began with a crime scene photograph. This shows two effigies made of clothing, of a man and a woman, laid out on a floor. There is a simulated penis of about eighteen inches long made out of a belt emerging from the fly of the 'male's' jeans onto a wet patch where a man had masturbated onto the 'female's' nightie. Underneath the nightie was underwear with talcum powder all around the crutch. This was really very spooky, and what makes it even creepier was that it had been done in the lounge-room of a little unit in beach-side Sydney. The woman who owned the clothes was sleeping in the bedroom, and the intruder was never caught. That really seized my imagination. Oh my god, I thought, fancy waking up that morning and finding *that* on your floor.

That was the genesis of *Feeding the Demons*. Somewhere out of that one image I had to make 130,000 words. So, I started thinking about a woman who wakes up to find these effigies on her floor. The character of Gemma started to emerge as a young PI, an ex-cop who has recently been sacked. I almost always use ex-cops in my books –

very rarely writing about serving policeman (as I did in *The Sharp End*) – simply because it frees me to vary from police procedures in the text. I asked myself a series of questions about Gemma. Who are you? What do you do? I don't sit and write these down, instead I think about them when I'm in the shower or walking or cooking. And out of this I start building up her character. I gave Gemma a sister, Kit, so then she starts to materialise as well.

The next thing is to consider is what sort of family they are from. Before this, I had attended a Victims of Homicide meeting. A woman announced that the man who killed her daughter was to be released from prison in the next few months. She asked what she was to do because the man was her son-in-law. She was the grandmother of his two children, but the kids were forbidden to speak that man's name in her house. I wondered about such lost children. Their mother murdered by their father and them forbidden to mention his name. That touched me, their terrible suffering, and I also understood the suffering of the grandmother. The situation was awful for everybody, and out of that came the back-story for the two sisters in my story: two sisters whose mother was murdered by their father. Their father is in gaol, but is about to be released after serving a long sentence. Gemma, who was five when he was arrested, thinks he was innocent, while Kit believes he is guilty as she was twelve and can remember her parents' terrible arguments. This immediately puts my sisters into conflict, the first big conflict they have ever had. Writers need conflict – if everyone is happy there is no story.

The emotional line is always my main interest, rather than the crime. In this book I had two threads: the story of the effigy-maker who escalates to murder, and how he is connected to Gemma; and Kit, who as a psychotherapist deals with some very dangerous clients. As the novel proceeds the two threads have to be developed, then they touch and merge. This is the mark of a successful story to me, when you get the various strands coming together in the final 'blow up'.

DLB: you've just mentioned your interest in human emotions, and I agree that your books are as much about people and relationships as crimes or investigatory procedures.

GL: I write about families. I am interested in the way, historically, children have been totally unsupported by their families, by their parents. Human emotions create suffering and, as a society, we are beginning to understand the connection between brutalised children and serious violence in later life. Do you remember the movie *The Bad Seed*?¹ Her mother had been in gaol, therefore the child is a psychopath. Now we are starting to see that if we brutalise a child, society is going to pay the price later on. In *Whipping Boy* paedophilia and child abuse forms the under-story, but the main relationship is between a son and his mother, a lawyer who is investigating corruption in Sydney.

DLB: *Jumbo* is all about children. The drama unfolds around a child who writes increasingly distressed letters to a teacher using an alias/nickname. The plot is a race against time, with the writer begging, 'Stop me before I do this terrible thing'. Did your experience as a teacher give you your insight into, and interest in, children?

GL: I was a teacher for a brief time, in the bush, and I really did gain insight into what a close band the kids of a small country school could be. The little kids and big kids mixed in together. I do feel that my work is very much about children, because to me the child is where the aliveness is. So many of us, as we grow up, stop that spontaneity and that joyfulness. I have a two-and-a-half year old grand-daughter and she is a whirling dervish of energy. I know, though, that at school she is going to be told to sit up straight and be still.

It surprises me that so few people write about children. It is almost as if many writers don't even regard children as human. Apart from Helen Garner and a few others (and perhaps an increasing number of writers now), there was a period when you could have picked up any number of novels and there wouldn't have been a child in any of them. Or if there were children, they were merely obstacles in the way of the important relationships between the adults. But, the truth of being a human is all there in a child. The same passions that are activated in children are in adults too, except we pretend otherwise.

DLB: it seems to me that the children in your work provide a necessary foil to the adults because these kids have an innocence that is imperilled by adult society. These children are often placed in situations of jeopardy, precisely because of their innate goodness.

GL: I never would have thought of it in that way, but yes, perhaps because children say things as they are, before they are taught what we call good manners, which is basically how to be dishonest. We are all taught, for instance, not to make personal remarks. Kids do, but then learn instead to pretend and dissemble.

DLB: perhaps the children provide a lightness in your work that is, I find, quite dark overall. Even though there is always a (satisfying) resolution, your endings can be quite tough. People suffer the consequences of their actions. These are just endings, although they are not happy.

GL: that depends on how you look at it. The consequences of Karma are usually unavoidable but I am actually a boundless optimist. Others have voiced the opposite view, that my books have a radiance, so I think it depends on what the reader brings to the work. There are fifty-four theatres of war in the world at the moment, so the world is a very dark place. We have just got a very good dress circle seat. The best subjects are also deeply neurotic people with a lot of conflict in their lives. If I wrote about well-balanced people of maturity and wisdom, nothing would happen. Everyone would discuss everything, give each other space, would not try and control one another or manipulate or lie or cheat. In a sense, the nature of my writing creates the need to have that dark world.

DLB: the dark situations that you write about are, also, very real and, as you have mentioned, sometimes based on actual events. I am very interested in the connection between your work and your research.

GL: in *Feeding the Demons* Gemma manages a security business which specialises in following men for women who want to be sure they are not getting involved with someone nasty. I based this on a real business. In *The Sharp End* Harry goes to the Vietnam War as a dog handler. I found out that the army uses black Labradors

whereas the police generally use German Shepherds. Now, if I hadn't known that I would have had German Shepherds in Vietnam which would have been wrong. I only got that information by spending a day with the army dogs.

DLB: such material makes the text so much richer because even if, as a reader, I might not have noticed that the German Shepherds were wrong, learning the fact about the Labradors adds another level of interest to the text.

GL: do you want to know why they use black Labradors? The black Labrador is a silent dog, a hunting dog, trained to point, quietly, not to frighten the game. They do bark, but only on command. You do not want a dog barking in a war zone. Whereas, for a German Shepherd, barking is its alert call.

When I am researching I get more and more material, and even though I might use very little of it, I feel that behind what I write is a sort of pressure of knowledge that people can pick up and feel satisfied by. I do get a lot of story by researching, things I never would have thought of. Once when I was talking about police dogs, one of the dog squad told me that their dogs live at home, like family pets. I thought they would live in pens at the police station, and it struck me that the dog squadman's house is a twenty-four hour operational police base. I asked him how his wife felt about that. He said, 'Well, I've told her that if she doesn't like it, one of the bitches can go, and she knows which one that will be.' That was perfect for me because I wanted a marriage in disarray, and he had just given me one on a plate. The idea, I mean; I didn't use his dialogue.

I also feel it is essential that readers have a strong sense of *where* they are. It might only take one or two sentences, but I always try to ground my scenes very firmly to a real place. It makes the whole thing more convincing. I always use real places I know very well, and that I like or dislike or have some connection with.

DLB: all your settings, from the inner city to the suburbs and the bush, are immediately recognisable, but they are never clichéd. Perhaps it is the vivid details like the sad little squashed possum that resonate because they come from this personal observation.

GL: I do use detail, but I have banned descriptive writing, preferring my story to come out of the action. I get the character up and doing, living through the story and revealing his or her character and their defects or strengths in the process. Then I can mention a character's long hair flying in the wind or how she was aware of the scent of eucalypt.

Once, in Ocean Street Woollahra, I noticed a poor ringtail possum that had got run over. Sydney had been very dry, and after a couple of months he was absolutely paper thin, so thin he was almost an appliqué. I could just make out his beautiful tail curled around like a treble clef and that was just about all, apart from a smear. Then, we had a day of really heavy rain and he reconstituted in a most hideous way – awful soapy, adipose tissue. So there he was, all plump with his little pink ears and his little pink paws again. I wanted to put him in a book, this particularly Australian tragedy.

DLB: you often seem to describe your writing in visual terms or liken it to a film.

GL: absolutely. I see the people. I think I am a very visual person, this is my strength, and that is why I won't wear glasses and do lots of eye exercises. One of the

things that I have noticed about writers and detectives is that, in a way, we both do the same job. A good detective doesn't miss anything, neither should a good writer. *Feeding the Demons* is a book about making connections, about noticing things.

DLB: each of your novels is a separate (and complete) story, yet many have characters like Cass Meredith, Harry and Gemma, for instance, who could easily be the protagonist of a series. Do you have any desire or temptation to develop those characters further?

GL: I suppose I don't do that because I am no longer interested in them once the book is finished. I have written that book, it is over.

Audience: have you ever written historical fiction?

GL: no, I am very much a creature of the twentieth-century, the twenty-first now. I write about where I am now.

Audience: how do you feel about writing so often about women at risk? Do you believe women are in danger in society?

GL: I think you will find that much crime fiction written by men will have a very pro-active protagonist. He is armed and looking for trouble. There is going to be a showdown, a shoot-out, and he is going to win. Whereas we are lighter in build, less, much less, strong, so we are simply, by virtue of our biology, a more vulnerable species. We are more at risk, and I think female writers know what it feels like to walk down a dark street at night. Most men don't know that. I hear footsteps behind me, and I am immediately on the alert. This is not paranoia, just commonsense. And if I hear a change in the step speed, I am immediately even more alert. I also think there is a way in which women know they are not in control of their lives that men often don't understand until they are nearly dead. If you have had a baby bursting out of you, you know you are not running the show! Many men never lose control until the dying process.

Audience: I am interested in your writing of rape. What state of mind are you in when you write such material?

GL: it is not quite a state of tranquillity, but when I am writing about really difficult material, I am very detached because that is when I really need to be in control. As a younger writer, I would become so involved that I would become highly emotional. That is fine for journaling and for a particular style of writing, but I have got to stay back a little from such material. It is like putting manure out on your garden, you have got to let it cool down before it can start feeding the vegetables.

Audience: what are you working on now?

GL: I have just finished a new book, *Death Delights*. It was like a difficult child, didn't leave home when it should have. My editor liked it, but I was sick of it. About two-thirds of the way through I had a problem with the plotting which was so difficult that I actually abandoned the book. Because I spent so much time with Cassie, my grandchild, I didn't have the focus I had with the other books, and my natural enthusiasm ran out. Thus the final third took probably twice as long as the rest to write, which was too long.

Initially, I always fall in love with the idea and I get very excited and enthusiastic. I race around and do the research, but then, after a while, I get bored. At that stage

any new idea sounds ten times more entrancing than what I am actually working on and that is what happened with *Death Delights*. When I am really stuck, I do try to remember that with every book there comes the descent into hell at about three quarters of the way through where I think I have outsmarted myself, and I will never be able to finish. Then I remember that I got to this stage once or twice or eight times before.

Audience: do you get much help or feedback from your editors?

GL: I wish! There was actually an inconsistency in *The Sharp End* which we didn't find until the book almost went to print. The bad guy does something in the first chapter and then hops in his rusty ute. Then in chapter 2, Harry is alerted by the sound of this ute changing gear as he is training his dog, but I had forgotten that the baddie was a pilot who had flown to Sydney and so couldn't have had his car. Only about the ninth reader noticed that. There are only two or three references throughout the whole book to this utility, but the editors have to go through and hold everything in their minds. I am obviously much more interested in the structuring and the story and the action. Actually, *Jumbo* starts in a way (and no one has ever picked this up) that actually couldn't have happened.

Audience: have any projects beaten you?

GL: the only project that I have ever abandoned was a funny thing that came to me in a dream years ago about a vestal virgin. She is being walled up for being unfaithful and as the mason is putting the last of the brickwork in, somebody throws something into her, some little thing from her mother. 'Lady from your mother', the mason says and then puts the last brick in. I wrote about thirty thousand words on that idea, but it was so different from anything I have ever written, and I still haven't decided what was thrown in. I did a lot of work to try and find out what it was in my dream and it seemed to be trefoil-shaped. This might be a matter for psychoanalysis rather than fiction.

Audience: you could have a character who dreams about it.

GL: I could, because there is a feeling when you have done the work that you want to do *something* with it. You have written it and it doesn't go anywhere but I keep thinking, one day I will be able to use it. I keep thinking it will come to me.

This conversation took place on Thursday 6 July, 2000; transcription by Kirsten Dundliff, edited by Donna Lee Brien.

Note

¹ *The Bad Seed* (1956) dir. and prod. Mervyn LeRoy, distrib. Warner Brothers. Christine Penmark (Nancy Kelly) seems to have a perfect life: a lovely home, a loving husband (Henry Jones) and an angelic daughter (Patricia McCormack). Since childhood, however, Christine has suffered from a recurring nightmare, and her daughter lies, steals and commits much worse crimes. Only Christine knows the truth about her daughter and only Christine's father knows the truth about her nightmare. Writing credits: Maxwell Anderson's Broadway play was adapted by John Lee Mahin, and remade for TV in 1985 (*Internet Movie Database* <<http://www.imdb.com/>>).