

## **WRITERS SPEAK**



## PELICANS AND PERSIAN CARPETS

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I'm planning to talk to you today about being a novelist, that is, a person who finds and invents stories and offers them to the society she lives in. Why? you might ask. For what purpose? And I might reply, for your delight. Or perhaps, for your illumination. For modesty can hardly be a quality of novelists. And so I might say I'm offering you a mirror, to look at yourself in, sometimes perhaps a magic variety that shows you the past with the intention of making sense of the present. Possibly a crooked one, whose images may shock. But not one I hope that might shatter into dangerous fragments which will lodge in people's eyes and distort everything they see. Or I might say I'm trying out narratives to see if they fit, and giving you a chance to do the same.

You in turn might accuse me of being a cannibal, feasting on the flesh of others, having no care for it as sacred. Or a vulture making a meal of dead flesh. Or a pelican tearing her own breast with her beak so her young can feed on her blood. You'll certainly have noticed that I tend to think in metaphors. I'm going to allow myself to get slightly sidetracked for a while, which is certainly the only way to write a novel, and point out that this sacrificial bleeding makes the pelican an emblem of Jesus Christ, who offers salvation through his own blood. St Jerome relates the story of a pelican thus restoring its young who'd been killed by serpents, and a medieval bestiary tells us that though pelicans are very fond of their offspring, when the birds grow they often rebel against the father bird, making him so angry that he kills them. After three days the mother returns to the nest, sits on the dead birds, and pours her blood over them; they come back to life and feed on it. Much the same did Jesus Christ.

Then sayd the Pellycane,  
When my byrdis be slayne  
With my bloude I them reuyue  
Scripture doth record  
The same dyd our Lord  
And rose from death to lyue  
(Skelton: Armoury of Birdis)

You won't be surprised when I tell you that the pelican feeding her brood on her blood is a fallacy. It's because the pelican parent transfers digested food

from the large bag under its bill to the mouths of its young. But will you agree with me when I say that I don't think this in any way harms the story? That we can still take pleasure in it, accept its emblematic truth, and possibly even be edified by it? Stories have their own power and beauty, and literal truth may have little to do with imaginative truth.

What readers often forget is that novelists write dramatically. In an autobiography the theory is that you are telling literal truth, though you'd have to be gullible to believe that this is always the case. But a writer of fiction can put all sorts of ideas into her characters' mouths and should not be held responsible for them. She should certainly not be quoted as believing any of them, though she very well might. Shakespeare's plays show in exaggerated form what can happen here, with people quoting him as saying this and that, when it's his characters that speak; a play like *King Lear* for instance has several sets of contradictory ideas about the influence of the stars and the role of the gods in people's lives, all powerfully expressed, but what counts is who says them: Edmund the villain, Kent the good man, Lear, Cordelia.

So, beware of the autobiographical fallacy when reading imaginative writing, is the first rule. Don't assume that being carried off by a handsome sheik to his tent in the desert is part of the writer's first-hand experience; that probably applies only to the Persian carpet hanging on the tent's canvas wall. On the other hand, have a good look at that carpet, because it's in the detail of the decoration that you'll find the novelist's preoccupations, and they will most likely come out of her autobiography. A novelist, whatever wonderful narratives she invents, has only her own story to make sense of them.

So I should start with a bit of mine. I grew up in Newcastle, NSW, a curious town, and one that I think I shall never finish writing about. Very Anglo in its makeup: few European migrants, not many Irish, so few Catholics, mainly north of England and Welsh chapel-going workers. There was a Baptist church in my suburb of Merewether holding services in Welsh as late as 1939. I started life Church of England, but thanks to circumstances, mainly a great aunt keen to fulfil my burning desire to go to Sunday school, grew up Methodist. This aunt, auntie Min, was supposed to come and take me, but failed to turn up. I don't know if we ever found out why, so I went on my own, with a note - I was five at the time. What a strange thing, looking back on it: going to Sunday School on your own with a note; it would have been in my father's flowery formal English, but all my idea. It

was the Sunday School anniversary, always held in September, when everybody got a book prize; they even found one for me. But there was a hierarchy: you got a better book if you went more often. I determined that next year I would get a better book.

I stayed a Methodist until I was at university. I was good at it, and it was good for me. For one thing, Methodists have an intimate knowledge of the Bible; all your life could be guided by reference to it. It was possible to have arguments like fencing matches: text, riposte, *touché*, hit, miss, with all the agility and fancy-footwork of a highly-contested game. *En garde!* they didn't say, but they waved Bibles held in a particular flat-handed grip. The best at it could add chapter and verse to their quotations. They might not have known Antonio's comment on Shylock, that the devil can cite scripture for his purpose, but they understood it in daily discourse. You had to know your Bible inside out to avoid being trapped by Satanic argument. This was the old Bible, the real Bible, the King James version; people who were not at all educated and couldn't put a grammatical sentence together to save their lives had no problem reading, understanding, quoting it. Its power lay in the mystery of its otherness, a mystery that was at the same time perfectly knowable.

The result was that it is natural for me to think in the words and images of the Bible, which is great good luck, since it was natural for all of Western culture until quite recently.

There was a kind of innocence in the whole edifice of the Methodist Church and its related activities - of Sunday school, bible class, fellowship, teas, socials, picnics, camps - that looking back on I find moving, as well as rich in contradictions. For instance, we were not allowed to dance, but we could play all sorts of kissing hugging touching games like Spin the Bottle, and Winks. The women weren't supposed to wear lipstick, though there was a certain amount of surreptitious applying then rubbing off so a faint stain of colour remained. Mouths were important, since we were always opening them in song.

Methodists of course are famous for their hymn singing, which they do fast enough; hardly anyone else does. We also sang choruses, short lively pieces, like Jesus Wants Me for a Sunbeam/ To Shine for Him Each Day, or Build on the Rock, the Rock that Ever Stands. But what we were mostly doing was singing love songs to Jesus. Looking back on them I am amazed to realise how simply erotic they were.

Jesus Jesus Jesus  
Sweetest name I know  
Fills my every longing  
Keeps me singing as I go

We sang them lustily and innocently, and it was probably a rather useful release for our adolescent sexuality, belting out sentences of passion and desire, at the tops of our voices, not only without guilt but with joy and worship and celebration. One of the great sorrows of my life is that I can't sing; I've got a tin ear, can't hold a tune to save myself (I sometimes wonder if my passion for words, the sound of them, their rhythm and music, is a compensation for the failure of my voice to lift itself in song), but the Methodists let me sing in choirs and small groups and never said a word about being flat.

I didn't manage their absence of judgment. Their generosity. I finally couldn't cope with the *ex tempore* prayers of lay preachers: long, rambling, incoherent, illogical, ungrammatical, unsyntactical, mixing metaphors and garbling sense, praising God and patronising Him, full of hubris. Salvation was their usual theme, and however humble and mean the sinner he still took up a great deal of everyone's time telling how he came to be saved. I stopped being a Methodist. I went overseas and spent a term going to Evensong in King's College Cambridge where the beauty of the words was second only to the beauty of the music, and people were rarely trusted to put their own together, not in public. I know that God is supposed to value the simple sincerity of the honest heart and not care about banality, but I preferred beautiful words. I see no reason for sermons to be original; why not use other people's good ones? I've had a go at writing a sermon; it's about willow trees.

I looked at Gothic cathedrals and Norman churches in England, went to France and fell in love with Romanesque chapels and churches; so plain, so simple, so pure, they touch your heart forever. Their small carvings, their capitals, their mighty tympanums, all this stone put together with love; once it has caught your imagination it never lets it go.

It was a desire for the Romanesque that made me want to go on the pilgrimage to Compostela, which is the idea of my book *Cockles of the Heart*. I ended up making not quite the pilgrimage intended, could not resist going back to various beloved places, a pilgrimage into my own past as well as through medieval Christianity, which is why I was happy to have the word heart in the title. I realised that I was travelling through Christendom, and

that it was my civilisation. I know Australia is supposed to look to Asia, that this is where we live, and we need to be part of it to survive, but my civilisation, my culture, is Christendom. The new Europe, that grew out of the Common Market, is largely a recreation of that entity, which in turn owed its being to medieval pilgrimages. It recognises that by having as its flag a circle of yellow stars on a blue field: the *campus stellae* or field of stars that gave Compostela its name.

I'm not sure that I can call myself a Christian these days, but I do know that the great works of Christianity are my spiritual home. I'm not simply talking about aesthetic pleasures, I'm talking about that passion of the heart and mind, the spirit and soul, all those ineffable parts that are in the body and of the body, yet beyond it, that are encompassed in it yet transcend it; the flowering of all of these in response to the great creations of human genius, under the eye of God.

We have wine, one of the great blessings of the human race, because monks made it, a little for the Mass, some for hospitality purposes, some for the health of their fellow religious. The motto of one of the great vineyards of Burgundy is, He who drinks good wine sees God.

Somebody who saw God or at least his mother was Bernadette, now a saint, then a sickly underfed undersized child, taking shelter in a cave in Lourdes. I went to Lourdes on my pilgrimage and hated it - a powerful reaction; I don't hate much. It was heart-wrenching. People without arms or legs, people decrepit with age, queuing up for miracles. When Bernadette began it all, by telling her tale of seeing the Virgin Mary, a small person no bigger than her stunted self, she reported that the lady asked her would she do her the favour of coming to the cave every day for a fortnight. *Voulez-vous me faire la grace de venir ici pendant quinze jours?* French has a singular form for you, as well as plural *vous*, the polite adult form, *tu* is familiar and intimate like the English 'thee' which was still alive in the Methodism of my youth but has hardly survived except historically. Most people know about French *vous* and *tu* but I'm explaining it because so much of this story hangs on it. Bernadette said, 'The Lady was the first person who ever said *vous* to me.' In other words the first person to speak politely to her.

There were miracles accompanying the Virgin's appearance - a rose-bush blooming in February, a withered hand unparalysed - but that detail, the *vous*, is where the power lies. It's the tiny fact that carries the whole weight of verisimilitude. It's the novelist's grain of truth, which can support

a whole edifice of story. It's the Persian carpet on the wall of the tent. It's the sort of thing a person doesn't invent. Does that mean I believe in the miracle of Lourdes? Well, I do find it difficult to ignore the conviction of that *vous*.

One of the things a novelist has to get right is the naming of characters. A book won't work until the characters have got the right names. Look at auntie Min, who didn't take me to Sunday school, how perfect her name is. For some of my Methodist years the minister was called Mr Pigeon, and his wife's name was Avis, but you could never put that in a novel, it would sound as though you were making it up, and not being serious. When I was thinking about writing *Wishbone* I considered naming my heroine Anabel. I wanted something pretty, unusual, with a number of syllables. Then one day I was having my hair cut and asked the name of the young woman doing it: Emmanuelle, she said. And I thought, that's it.

*Wishbone* is an interesting novel for me because I think some of its readers haven't always read it very carefully. Emmanuelle is beautiful, slender, rich, she seems to have everything, and this is the whole point, the book is about discontent, of people who seem to have everything still not being happy, and making wishes that come true in unexpected and mostly unpleasant ways. If she was short and fat and ugly and poor there would be nothing surprising or indeed interesting in her discontent. But some people seem to have read Emmanuelle, especially her wealth, with the eyes of needles and found her a camel they can't let pass.

Discovering the name Emmanuelle was important for me because of its meaning: God with us. It turned her into a certain kind of person. She knows this, it's mentioned quite early in the novel.

Once the minister put his hand on her neck and said Emmanuelle, eh? A most suitable name for a young Christian. He'd beamed at the class. Can anyone tell me why? No one? And what about you, Emmanuelle? You should, you know. Such an important name. It means, God with us. His hand curled round her neck like a fox fur with little pointed teeth. As he walked away she heard him say under his breath: A surprising name in a godless society. Of course she didn't know then that she'd been named after the pretty blonde girl in the novel who ends up in the sheik's harem after her party is raided by Bedouins, while they're travelling in a caravan through the desert, a situation fraught with danger for a virtuous young girl but she survives and the virtue too, her mother wouldn't have thought the name suitable without that.

Emmanuelle remembering the minister's hand on her neck thinks, perhaps this is something I have to do. Come to terms with being named God with us. However accidentally. (77)



I think that's quite funny, in a rather sharp way - and is there a Persian carpet hanging in the tent, we ask ourselves - but it's also essentially serious, and the theme of it occurs through the novel, with Emmanuelle always aware that her name is something that she'll have to come to terms with one day. Emmanuelle isn't me, evidently, nor is she a kind of anti-me, or alter-me, a wishful thought I would be if I could, nevertheless I can't help lending her ideas and feelings of mine. The idea of God lurks on a number of pages in this novel. Maybe one day He'll do more than that.

I mentioned that the Methodists had an anniversary every September, with extra days and nights of celebration: services and singing. I'd always have a new dress, made by my mother, which would be my best dress for the next year, but if it rained I'd have to wear my school shoes which were boys' shoes because they lasted longer. Quite fashionable in current terms but then a terrible disaster. Other people went by car so they could wear pretty shoes even in the rain. You see strictness hadn't abolished vanity. Anyway, we always learned some new songs to add to the usual hymns, and one year I remember an anthem which was very difficult, not simple and tuneful but swooping and erudite. Ambitious, I suppose you'd say. I wish I could sing it and show you, but you'll have to make do with the words.

A new commandment I give unto you  
Love one another as I have loved you  
By this shall all men know that I am God

I think you can see what I mean, even just saying it, about the difficulty of singing it. Nevertheless, it has stayed in my head for forty years and more. And it brings me to the point at which I think I'll stop. Not finish - these are not subjects for finishing - but stop. I'm a writer who loves her characters. I'm aware that however badly behaved, stupid, feckless, wicked they are they're human beings, they are as important to themselves as I am to myself. In another context I might have said they are immortal souls. I find it difficult to 'play God' with them - isn't that an interesting expression, in its implications of omnipotence without affection. The 'As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods, they kill us for their sport' equation. I think that my behaviour is the opposite; that my characters develop their own lives and that I have to respect that. It can make plotting difficult. One day one of them may find God, and that will be interesting. I'm looking forward to seeing what happens.