

An interview with Margo Lanagan
24 June 2008

Pradeep Trikha

**Copyright © Pradeep Trikha and Margo Lanagan 2011.
This text may be archived and redistributed both in
electronic form and in hard copy, provided that the author
and journal are properly cited and no fee is charged**

Keywords: Australian Literature, Short Stories, Women's Writing

Australian short-story anthologies appear in good number. Do you think most of them do justice to the writings of young authors? To what extent are recent anthologies able to sustain or revitalize the interest of the reading public in the short story?

I can't really give an opinion on this, not being a habitual enough reader of Australian short-story anthologies to be able to judge. All I can say is that short stories are a wonderful way for young writers to start out, because they allow them to practise the ends of stories, as well as the beginnings and middles. They're also a wonderful way for young or reluctant readers to start out, simply because they require such a small investment of time in return for the gratification they offer. They're also the perfect form of reading for time-poor twenty-first century people; you can read a complete short story in the course of a single commute, and you don't have to keep track of plot twists or multiple characters. I can't understand why people don't read them more; any publisher will tell you that a novel is a much more marketable commodity than a short story.

I keep going back to writing short stories because they're the perfect way to conduct small explorations of single ideas; a novel tends to grow and multiply and develop interconnections of ideas within itself, whereas a short story tightens a single knot of thought until it bursts under the strain, then leaves the reader in the aftermath, buzzing with surprise or questions, or any number of reactions.

I don't have any fears that the short story will disappear altogether. I don't know if we'll ever make it as popular as the novel, but I don't see why it shouldn't be.

You have written for many years. How important a part of your life is writing in this form (i.e. short story) novel? Would you differentiate between the two creative processes, i.e. creative writing and critical writings?

I've never done critical writing, but I do technical writing in my day job, and there's a strong contrast between the short stories and novels I write and the extremely unambiguous, logically-progressing, instructional material I write for work. The latter is a very good method for building up steam for the former; after a day writing procedures, a lot of gorgeous imagery and verbiage is backed up in my imagination!

With novel writing, I really have to take slabs of time off from the day job, because I need to be able to hold the whole story and its multiple possible meanings and themes steady in my head. A short story can be written in a couple of sessions, a few days apart, or months apart, if necessary, but if I try to write a novel in that piecemeal way, I find that it gets fragmented; I have to spend so much time re-uploading its intricacies that if I take too many breaks the process becomes tedious and the story quickly becomes stale.

Most of the women writers of the 1930s were concerned with social welfare; to what extent has it changed?

I can't say that I see women writers of the 2000s being limited to any one field or topic. War, hard science fiction, political commentary, history, metaphysics; we're in there with boots on. Literature is one field where the glass ceiling is a lot thinner than in other places such as the business world. I can't speak for all women writers, any more than I can speak for writers as a group, but I don't feel I have to confine myself in my writing to matters that have been traditionally thought of as 'women's business', such as the domestic sphere, the caring professions, emotional realities instead of action-packed plots, delicacy and subtlety of language rather than more powerful and hard-hitting styles of writing.

Should the works of women writers be considered by critics in relation only to one another, because it can give an insight to aesthetics from a woman writer's point of view? Does this in any way help in understanding the core from the margins?

Oh, not *only*! Critics should consider it much more often than they do in relation to men's writing—it's still the case that women's writing can be treated as a separate category to men's, and often an inferior one. But I'm not interested in women's writing being compared to men's in order for the critic to voice some generalization about how one is characteristically different from the other; I want criticism that deals with the specifics of both kinds on an equal footing, without any kind of stereotyping agenda going on in the background.

Also, I don't think there's necessarily an issue about 'understanding the core from the margins', if we're talking about male and female realities. There's an assumption in your question, I think, that men's point of view is the core, and women's marginal—and in terms of the power balance in patriarchal societies, I dare say this seems true. From the centres of power, that is. I am anything but marginal in my own life and environment! But it's usually abundantly clear to marginalized people how the marginalisers work; the issue is usually in getting the holders of power to see, acknowledge and appreciate the benefits of

understanding the marginalized point of view. If you continue to always review women's writing in some separate place—in separate journals from men's writing, or within the same journal in separate reviews—you make it all the more ignorable by men. A certain amount of forcible pushing of it into men's visual field, I think, is necessary!

There is a wide gap in the representation of colonized women of Asian and Aboriginal origin in Australia.

Sorry, Pradeep—I'm not qualified to comment on this one.

How do you like India as a country? Has it in any way affected your writing?

I hardly know India as a country, having only spent two weeks there, at the beginning of last year. However, it's a fascinating place and I would love to spend more time there. There is so much overlapping history there; here in Australia the main historical movement has been the overtaking of the very longstanding Aboriginal civilisations by the British, but in India you have aeons of different civilizations sweeping across the country, forcing adjustment and overlaying another set of beliefs and social customs on the previous one. The resulting density of language, of culture and of religious belief is spectacular.

Any kind of travel is good for the writing, in that it wakes you up, it forces you out of your daily rituals and comfort, it makes you recognize that your way of living and looking at the world is only one of many ways to operate. India was wonderful in the degree to which it showed me that some of the more fantastical things I imagine are not as extreme as I thought; I suppose, that what I call 'fantasy' is closer to the real world than it sometimes seems here in Sydney. I think every Western writer should go to India and be blessed by an elephant, see goats sacrificed and families sleeping on the streets, learn to eat with their hands and grapple with the meanings behind the shrines and temples; it is the perfect antidote to smugness and insularity.

Would you like to say something about the recent Australian creative writers that have moved you?

The Australian authors who've inspired me in the last year have all been writers for young adults. Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief*, which has had huge success here and overseas, impressed me with its depth of feeling—I really felt he was laying his innermost self out for us to see, which is a brave and dangerous and wonderful thing to do. Ursula Dubosarsky's *The Red Shoe* managed to infuse an episode in Australian history with real life and character—her characters are always very appealing to me, fully rounded and thoughtful people. And James Roy's *Town*, which is a collection of short stories from different teenage points of view, made me want to go back and write another naturalistic YA novel, the voices were so vivid and varied.

By contrast, the three adult novels I've read most recently by Australian authors have more

than disappointed me. All three authors (no, I'm not naming names) seemed very self-conscious, and worse, didn't seem to have much of a story to tell besides, 'Look how worthy my moral stance is!' or 'Look how beautifully I can turn a phrase!'

To what extent is your writing autobiographical in nature?

My writing is autobiographical to the same degree that the flowers and vegetables grown from compost are compost themselves. I tend not to use many real events or people to base fictional plots or characters on, but of course, the best stories come from deep within a person, and that person is the sum total of all their life's experience, laid down in the memory cells and mulled over and read and conversed around. A story that flowers from that basis is its own species, with its own characteristics, but it wouldn't be a flower without the nourishment from all the laid-down, mixed and merged material.

Are you interested in myths?

I'm interested in myth-making, on top of the myths themselves. I'm fascinated by the stories different cultures make up to explain the world, whether they describe the formation of the landscape or the operation of fate or luck and the degree to which humans can bargain with, or influence, natural and supernatural powers. The impulse to make sense of life through stories is a wonderful thing; the stories themselves, with their unending variety, yet their very similar core needs, are a constant revelation.

Do you agree that the manifestation of 'self' in creative writing at times becomes a metaphor for national identity?

I think this is only so if you're writing with questions of national identity in mind. When I'm writing, I'm not writing from a sense of being Australian, necessarily—although the novel I'm just beginning to explore is quite an Australian-centred story. I think Australian fiction sometimes suffers from being too self-consciously Australian and *trying* to say things about the nation instead of broadening the story to have universal significance.

Is there any book/collection of yours that you dislike?

No, there's no published work that I really find embarrassing in retrospect. The teenage romances I did my apprenticeship on, learning how to fill 100 pages with story, are extremely light reading, and my first couple of novels (*WildGame* and *The Tankermen*) now seem very wordy, but 'dislike' is too strong a term. Nothing is ever wasted, for a writer, and those books had their reasons for being the way they are. Some of the manuscripts of books that were never finished are painful to look at, simply because they represent so much hopeful work that never quite came to fruition, but again, I don't *dislike* them; I only feel again the distress at their not arriving where I hoped they would.

Is equitable cultural exchange possible through literature between two nations, and if not, why not?

Literature is one of the means of cultural exchange, certainly; I would think that the essential nature of the relationship between the nations exchanging would come into the dialogue at some point, or at least should be acknowledged within it. I think it's perfectly possible for nations to use discussion of literature to avoid coming to the point and uttering awkward truths, to use books as neutral ground on which to maintain an illusion of goodwill or to enforce *inequitable* power relations. As with all types of dialogue, it depends on what desires the participants bring to the forum. I don't think literature is neutral ground, and if people are truly engaging with books, discussion of those books should give rise to as much passion and bitter fighting as do discussions of politics and religion.

Have your writing methods changed over the years?

The main change has been the degree to which I've taught myself to relax with the process, instead of trying to control and direct it all the time. I used to be very focused on producing for a market, but I found that once I stopped thinking of audience and recognition and started letting whatever needed to be said say itself, my stories had much more resonance and coherence.

Apart from that my writing methods remain much the same as twenty years ago, when I first started trying to be professional about writing prose. I write long-hand (some would say that that's not very professional!), and when I'm having a good spell I write about 10 A4 pages in a day. I don't write every day, because that tends to make my writing stale after a while, but when I'm at work on the first draft of a project I try to write regularly—if the day job allows, I'll write every week-day and take weekends off, for example.

In the last year or so I've joined a writing workshop that meets every month or so, just so that I'm in regular contact with other people who are trying to do the same sort of thing I am; I found that the solitude of writing was becoming a burden that I couldn't carry on my own any more. I've found the workshop to be immensely helpful and motivating - finally, I managed to complete a novel after nearly a decade of trying and failing!

What inspires you the most when you come to writing?

As well as the workshop, which gives me company on the journey, almost every book I read inspires me to write, whether it's fiction, history, poetry, a book about art or archaeology or plants or deep-sea fish. Every time I open a newspaper some story (usually the smaller, stranger ones, rather than the big movements of war, money or politics) begs to be written about. My problem is never getting ideas, it's deciding which to work on next.

What are the major influences on your works?

It's quite hard to say, from the inside; it's probably clearer to other people who can look at my fiction more objectively. People say my writing is very much like Angela Carter's, or at least in the tradition of hers—this is something I'll have to investigate, as I've only read a tiny amount of Carter, a long time ago. I'm also compared to George Saunders and Kelly Link, both of whose work I read and admire. There are a couple of British writers, Alan Garner and William Mayne, whose books I've always loved, and Ursula Le Guin's wisdom and humanity are a great inspiration. The classic fantasies (Tolkien, Lewis, *Watership Down*) and more recent series (Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*, Paul Park's *A Princess of Roumania*) combine with the darker traditional fairy and folktales to set the mood for the stories I write.

You have often made experiments in your creative writings, as in your short stories. Any comments?

I don't know that my stories are particularly experimental. I might leave quite a lot of work to the reader, but I don't know that that counts as experimental—I write the kinds of stories that I like to read, and there are plenty of examples of stories that I like to read, by other people, so I can't be breaking too much new ground. What seems to surprise people is the stories' darkness and emotional intensity, and their oddness. They sit equally well in the young adult, the mainstream and the genre literatures of science fiction, fantasy and horror. But this isn't the result of conscious experiment so much as of years of fumbling around in the dark trying to find material that will allow me to say what seems to need to be said.

Do you ever consciously restrain yourself in writing about sexual relationships and things like that?

In my novel, *Tender Morsels*, there is quite a lot of sex, both pleasant and unpleasant. Because I knew that the book was likely to be sold as a young adult novel, but also because some of the bad sex was *very* bad, and I didn't want the horror of it to dominate the story, I tended to write about it obliquely, rather than give every gruesome detail. I guess as a general rule I don't see sexual relationships as any more taboo a subject than...well, any other type of relationship. And books are a much more discreet and thoughtful place to examine these things than are many other media. I think, particularly for young people, a book that will speak to them truthfully about taboo matters can be a great help as they try to understand how the world works.

What are the chief characteristics of a successful novel or a short story?

Well, there are all kinds of successful, aren't there? What I like—and there are plenty of stories that are successful that I don't like, being a very cranky, particular reader!—are characters who appear to have a life beyond this story; prose that does strong, interesting,

possibly beautiful things without drawing attention to itself; dialogue that sounds like people speaking, not lecturing or pronouncing profoundly on the world; and a purposeful feeling to the plot, so that I sense the author is on as much of a journey of discovery in the writing as I am in the reading.

Between when you started writing and the present the literary scene in Australia has drastically changed. Do you think writers, in order to cater to the taste of their reading public, should keep shifting their own stances?

I think a writer should be writing the stories she has to write, and not looking too closely at the literary scene, or the taste and opinions of her readers. I think that as long as she's being true to her deepest self in her writing, her work will reflect her ongoing exploration of the world, and will shift of its own accord without her conscious interference.

Your collection of stories *Black Juice* is a serious comment on the ambiguities and uncertainties of post modernism. Where do we go from here?

No, I'd say post-modernism was one of the farthest things from my mind when I was writing *Black Juice*—I wrote it mainly as an escape from a tedious working life. I think it and the other collections (*White Time* and *Red Spikes*) deal more with the ambiguities and uncertainties of human existence—and not necessarily modern or post-modern existence.

Do you think your books would make good films?

My stories would make excellent films! Having watched those movies in my head repeatedly, I can attest to their striking imagery, engaging characters and strong atmospheres! I'd certainly pay to go and see them.

Pradeep Trikha is a Senior Faculty at the Department of English & Centre for Indo-Australian Studies. Dayanand College, Ajmer (India). He is a co-editor of *Lemuria: A journal for Indo-Australian Studies* and *Prosopisia-A journal for Creative Writing*. His recent publications are *Multiple Celebrations In the Plays of Girish Karnad* and *Literature, Nation and Revolution: Celebrating 150th year of 1857*.

pradeeptrikha@rediffmail.com