

[The Write Place At the Write Time](#)

[Home](#)

[About Us](#)

[Announcements](#)

[First Annual Contest](#)

[Interviews](#)

[Fiction](#)

[Poetry](#)

["Our Stories" non-fiction](#)

[Writers' Craft Box](#)

[Writers' Challenge!](#)

[Submission Guidelines](#)

[Indie Bookstores](#)

[Artists' Gallery](#)

[Feedback & Questions](#)

[Scrapbook of Four Years](#)

[Archives](#)

[Inscribing Industry Blog](#)

Come in...and be captivated...

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Joanne Harris; photo by Kyte photography (<http://www.kytephotography.co.uk/>)

You are invited...

In the tradition of the elite, exclusive 17th century Parisian literary salons, imagine that you have been asked to attend a gathering defined by the quality of honnêteté at the Hôtel de Rambouillet near the Palais du Louvre. Soft blue velvet cushioned chairs, designed to match the hue of the Chinese porcelain, surround a cream-colored marble fireplace. You will be in the fine intellectual company of 17th century writers and aristocrats including Madame d'Aulnoy, Madame de Sévigné, Madame de La Fayette,

Mademoiselle de Scudéry and Charles Perrault. Take notice of the gilded plaster molding, large mirrors, Baroque chandeliers and candelabrum with botanical motifs. The topic of discussion will be the work of contemporary New York Times best-selling author, Joanne Harris as we delve into archetypes, destiny, symbolism, societal modes of thinking and the role of storytelling over the centuries. As Harris' work is known to often contain delicious sensory prose, we will have to be served a treat that was popular in the 17th century to make our experience complete-blanc manger, an almond milk custard. Now we're ready to get talking!

With numerous internationally bestselling novels, including Chocolat (made into an Oscar-nominated film starring Juliette Binoche and Johnny Depp), Blackberry Wine, Five Quarters of the Orange, The Girl with No Shadow and Coastliners, Joanne Harris weaves her storytelling magic time and again with intoxicating sensory detail, intricately orchestrated perspectives from multiple viewpoints and first-person 'narrative structures' that have distinct, undeniable voices to speak to the themes of the ages. Her most recent novel, the riveting Peaches for Father Francis, features many of the beloved characters from Chocolat. She has served as one of the judges for the Whitbread prize and the Orange prize. Harris' books are now published in over 50 countries and have won a number of British and international awards.

Interview of Joanne Harris by Nicole M. Bouchard

1) Storytellers, folklore and fairy tales- past, present and future

Your literary approach to incorporating folklore, fairy tale archetypes and imagery as well as an earthy, everyday kind of magic that manifests itself through stories, food and perceptions of others, allows for a deep understanding of humanity to pass between characters, between reader and writer. Novels such as *Holy Fools*, *Blackberry Wine*, *Chocolat*, *The Girl with No Shadow* and *Peaches for Father Francis* illuminate contemporary and age-old perceptions, cultural concerns, regional/religious boundaries, societal issues and inherited generational behaviors through the utilization of this approach. The *Runemarks* fantasy series is steeped in myth, bringing new life to ancient figures of legend, drawing parallels between humans and immortals through their motivations.

Award-winning author and editor Terri Windling observed in a 2010 interview that, "Stories not only reflect the way we see the world, they also

help to shape the way we see the world – which was something understood by older societies in which the storyteller's role was a magical and sacred one. In such societies, the line between “fact” and “fiction” was less rigidly defined than it is today, and less relevant to the point of telling stories. Joseph Campbell once wrote that we no longer know how to hear a myth or folk tale properly; we no longer understand these stories as our ancestors did -- for we've all but lost the knack for understanding the metaphoric language of myth. In modern culture, our thinking tends toward the reductive and literal, not the metaphoric and poetic."

In an article entitled "Les Contes des Fées: The Literary Fairy Tales of France" (<http://www.endicott-studio.com/rdrm/forconte.html>), Windling speaks of the evolution of France's literary relationship to fairy tales and the 17th century movements largely driven by "a group of nonconformist (and somewhat scandalous) upper-class women." She explains that the long-held bias toward male authors until recent years was "a reversal from the oral storytelling tradition, historically dominated by women. Indeed, Straparola, Basile, Perrault, and even the Brothers Grimm made no secret of the fact that their source material came largely or entirely from women storytellers. Yet we are left with the impression that women dropped out of the history of fairy tales once they became a literary form..."

What do you think the future holds not only for storytelling in general (will we return to an open-minded understanding of the figurative vs. the literal?) but more specifically, what role do you feel women writers will or could play in shaping that understanding?

Traditionally, the role of fairy stories has been to articulate concepts too emotionally difficult or socially subversive to be treated in a more explicit way. Originally part of a matriarchal oral tradition, they became legitimized as a more patriarchal literary convention – much in the same way that traditional magic (feminine) was later absorbed by the (primarily male) science of alchemy before shedding its magical elements altogether and becoming the science of chemistry.

Elemental fears, subconscious desires, sexual taboos are all at the heart of the fairytale; initially intended for an adult, rather than a juvenile audience, enabling folk with bleak and often unhappy lives to come to terms with their monsters, both literal and metaphorical, as well as offering them the hope that

sometimes those monsters could be overcome. Since then, much has been made of the deepening division between the literal and figurative view of fairytale (in the same way that the division between science and magic has now become definitive), but in my view, the basic need for these stories is as great as it ever was.

Like our concept of the divine, which has expanded over 2000 years to fit an expanding world picture, our acceptance of the supernatural has changed – at least, to a point – although I would argue that even three hundred years ago, fairy tales were not intended to be taken entirely literally. Every age has its monsters, be they werewolves, vampires, terrorists, AIDS, crazed gunmen or pedophiles, and every age needs to believe in the ability of human beings to defeat monsters, change their lives and ultimately be saved by love.

I would argue, furthermore, that every age has its magic, too – although our concept of magic has adapted to fit a more rational world. We now have a need to rationalize our need to believe in magic, as our world picture and our understanding of possibility continues to expand. But as the science-pendulum begins to swing back – with particle physics seemingly bringing us back ever closer to what once was called “magic”, I think that the literal-figurative debate will become increasingly less relevant, as will the division between “conventional literature” and the oral tradition. These stories speak to the irrational mind, and therein lies their power.

2) In *Peaches for Father Francis*, you showcase the ease with which the young children, Rosette and Maya, become friends without an awareness of the differences between the cultural borders of the French village of Lansquenet and the Muslim quarter of Les Marauds: “At five, making friends is easy. It begins with a shy kind of circling like two curious little animals. Language is no barrier; culture and colour, irrelevant. Rosette puts out a hand to touch the golden bangle around Maya’s wrist; Maya is equally fascinated by Rosette’s red, curly hair. Five minutes later, they are at ease; Rosette signing and chattering in her private language, Maya, who seems to understand, watching with her round, bright eyes.”

Although we're supposed to gain knowledge and wisdom as we age, sometimes it seems as though, through experience or others' influence, we are simply unlearning the wisdom we are inherently imbued with at birth. As there are schools of thought that teach that the concepts of fear and intolerance are instinctive, there is a question of nature vs. nurture. Do you feel that if these concepts were not learned, that they wouldn't arise, or do you feel that they would naturally evolve regardless, due to external circumstances, interpretations of experiences and the miscommunications, misunderstandings that occur in a more complex adult world?

I think that fear (natural) is instinctive, but a phobia (irrational) has to be acquired, either by personal experience or through the anxiety or teaching of a parent-figure. We acquire prejudices as we grow, as we acquire the wherewithal to judge (or misjudge). Small children, as a rule, haven't yet learned to do either.

3) Andre Dubus II once said of short fiction, "I love short stories because I believe they are the way we live. They are what our friends tell us, in their pain and joy, their passion and rage, their yearning and their cry against injustice." In the beginning of *Jigs and Reels*, your first collection of short stories, you write, "A good short story---and there are some very good short stories out there---can stay with you for much longer than a novel. It can startle, ignite, illuminate and move in a way that the longer format cannot. It is often troubling, often frightening or subversive. It provokes questions, whereas most novels merely try to answer them." You've spoken of your process in terms of writing novels and mentioned that you tend to write short fiction in winter.

Tell us of the other differences in approach and process that you utilize for tapping into your short fiction (beyond timing and genre) from the time you sit down to your laptop to the time you finish. Many writers have very specific rituals, even superstitions such as the position in which they place the furniture around them and viewpoints on how to access the 'muse', which can range from a spiritual 'letting go of self' process to envisioning the audience for whom they write (a lover, a friend, a crowd or a solitary stranger in need of a story). Share with us your views, habits, rituals and superstitions, if any, in relation to your short fiction process.

I don't have any habits, rituals or (as far as I know) any muse. I can write a short story over the course of a morning, or over six

weeks, or even over six months, depending on the story. I often write short stories when I'm travelling, as a lot of them are born directly from experiences and encounters I've had on my travels around the world. I always know from the very start whether an idea is suitable for a short story, or whether it belongs in a novel; my short stories are often single episodes, thumbnail portraits, snapshots out of time, rather than ideas in need of complex elaboration. I think of them as postcards from other worlds, whereas novels are maps designed to lead the reader towards multiple destinations.

4) You've said that you begin your novels with characters and that you "... try to understand all the characters I write; even when they are difficult, harsh people, it should be possible to identify why they behave as they do, and to feel some sympathy for their position." One of the most powerful qualities of your novels is the way that you constantly shake up readers' perceptions of characters. Just as we get used to loving to hate a character, they go and exhibit some subtle but touching behavior or trait that involuntarily elicits an emotional response from us as though they'd craftily nestled their way into our hearts against our every inclination to resist them doing so. In a similar fashion, heroines and heroes are beautiful in those minor aspects of themselves that exhibit frailty or flaw.

Whether showing the vulnerability of a 'villain' or the Achilles heel of a protagonist, belying strength with a stutter (Paul from *Five Quarters of the Orange* and Luc from *Chocolat*) or enhancing virtue by deformity (Inès Bencharki in *Peaches for Father Francis* or 'Flipper' from the short "The Little Mermaid"), the masks of the characters fall away to shift perception and even go so far as to change archetypes.

As archetypes (those of folklore, Tarot and storytelling) are featured prominently in many of your works, we wanted to ask the unusual question here of what archetype you yourself would identify with at this time in your life (it can be one in existence or one of your creation) and which traits of yours go outside this chosen archetype?

I don't think we choose our archetype; rather, we exhibit different archetypal aspects of ourselves in our dealings with others. However, if I were to choose the one archetype that fits my personality best, it would be that of Cancer, the crab: reputedly home-loving, fond of the sea, prone to self-

concealment; tender inside, prickly outside, industrious, imaginative and with a tendency to hold a grudge. Interestingly, changed by the Romans from the Egyptian scarab; symbol of transformation and earthly embodiment of the sun as it rolls across the sky.

5) In novels such as *Coastliners*, *Five Quarters of the Orange*, *Chocolat*, *Peaches for Father Francis* and *Blackberry Wine*, there is either a return to or a call to small village life. It would seem that in these settings there is an inescapable reflection on the self and the inner life. In *Peaches for Father Francis* and *Coastliners*, the phrase “everything returns” appears. In contrast, mentions of cosmopolitan cities like Paris, as in *The Girl with No Shadow*, imply a certain anonymity or escape from associations with the past. In your January 2009 article for *The Independent* entitled “Life in the Middle of Nowhere”, you write of your life living in a country village. The distinctive charm of such locations needs no explanation, yet from a literary standpoint, what is your perspective on the population and geography of a more intimate setting that allows for personal revelations, reconciliations, closure, discovery, healing and new beginnings? What is your perspective on the upsides and downsides of the anonymity found in city life?

As someone who is primarily interested in people and their interactions, I prefer to write about the volatility of the small community rather than the alienation of city life. It's easier to become disconnected from other people when living in a city environment, which is why we try to re-create our own small communities wherever we go, be it at the office, with our friends or with our immediate neighbors. However, in a city environment, it's easier to go unseen, unnoticed; easier to ignore the lives and needs of others. It's often quite a dehumanizing environment, promoting a kind of self-absorption and dislocation from others, whereas in smaller communities, a different social dynamic (and, I think, a more natural one) prevails.

6) In your works, as noted in the dissertation, *THE REPRESSED AND EMPOWERED OTHER: THE ROLE OF RELIGION AND THE OCCULT IN JOANNE HARRIS'S FICTION* by Sara Marshall-Ball, you use “the opposing themes of religion and the occult to express literary and sociological concerns.” You highlight the extremes of both yet refrain from advocating either. If anything, you show in your novels how both can be

limiting in their use of fear to restrict, exclude, contain or encourage devotion/adherence solely to their particular customs/rules, yet also how both can have their merits in exhibiting a higher faith and consideration for the welfare of others in pursuit of the common good.

You wrote in *Peaches for Father Francis* of how people can be easily slotted into tribes (religious, political, lifestyle-oriented) - "...each tribe with its multitude of smaller and smaller sub-categories, because, in the end, doesn't everyone really want to belong somewhere, to find their perfect space in the world?" and go on to discuss how Vianne, being different and not quite belonging to a particular tribe, has a different perspective that allows her to find it "...easier to cross the narrow boundaries between one tribe and the next. To belong so often means to exclude; to think in terms of us and them – two little words that, juxtaposed, so often lead to conflict."

Though there are many positive instances where there's nothing wrong with having 'tribes' and being associated with them, for the 'so often' negative instances where it entails exclusion and judgment, from the schoolyard to opposing nations, why, in your personal opinion, do you think it's so important to some individuals to fit a narrow definition, find a small space to fit in, even at the cost of others' happiness and perhaps theirs as well? Is there a large metaphoric price tag on acceptance even in the modern age?

I think that to a certain extent, tribal thinking is an inevitable part of the human psyche. It creates bonds, shapes society, enforces laws. However, it also creates a situation whereby being "one of us" is the primary means of recognition and acceptance, with "not one of us" being an excuse for dehumanizing others, sometimes in the most barbaric ways.

Historically, "not one of us" has been the main excuse for slavery, genocide, social and political repression and abuse; a means of stepping away from the wrong that we do to others and of reassuring ourselves in times of doubt that we are still the Good Guys. Without the illusion of tribal thinking, we would have to face up to the unsettling truth that we are essentially all the same, all of us with the potential for both good and evil and every other thing in between. Nazis love their children, too; the teenage shooter feeds his dog before going out to kill school children; the terrorist who blows up the Tube

station was once a newborn baby. Tribal thinking is often a way of avoiding these disquieting truths and of fooling ourselves that we have no wider responsibility than to ourselves and to our own little circle of family, friends and acquaintances.

7) There is a passage in *Chocolat* where Vianne questions of the time spent with her mother, "...was this what she fled? Not her own death, but the thousands of tiny intersections of her life with others, the broken connections, the links in spite of themselves, the responsibilities? Did we spend all those years running from ourselves, our friendships, the casual words uttered in passing that can alter the course of a lifetime?" Knowing the ripple effect of human relationships and interactions to change lives, one has to wonder, regardless of belief-system, whether we really do control our own destiny.

What is your philosophy in terms of things that are meant to happen (writers are known to encounter a great deal of synchronicity), those that we choose and those that are simply the result of the people who touch our lives? What were some of the most meaningful interactions that led you to where you are in your writing life?

I like to believe that we have a say in our personal destiny - not necessarily an ultimate say, but that at least we have the power to shape our lives to a certain degree. I'm still not sure how possible (or even how desirable) it is to identify those formative moments in a career. But I think that, like many writers, I have drawn inspiration from an incredible variety of experiences, including bad decisions, mistakes; painful experiences that at first glance we may think best forgotten. The writer's job is to spin the straw of this experience into gold – however rotten the straw may seem. Luck – like fate – comes in many guises. The trick is to use it as best we can.

8) Both in the spirit of imagination and the tradition of Parisian literary salons, if you could arrange to meet any author (of any time period, place...) to sit with them over tea and discuss writing, their work, your work and consult on upcoming projects (whatever discussion you'd most desire to have), who would it be and why?

Victor Hugo; a wonderful storyteller; a humanitarian; a father; a poet; a grandfather; a deeply thoughtful and compassionate man who put all of his life into his work. My grandfather read his work to me aloud when I was still a child, and I've loved his books ever since. Sadly, my grandfather died before I could show him my first published book – but whenever I read Victor Hugo, I can almost still hear his voice.



Robin Lloyd-Jones

On a serene moonlit trip through silvery gray waters by sea kayak, we go forth into the untamed and explore the majesty of the west coast of Scotland with award-winning author Robin Lloyd-Jones. It is here, knowing of the dolphins swimming beneath us, thinking of the white shell sands on shore, that we are able to connect to something higher than ourselves and remember the power of nature to give us an entirely different perspective on life. No one could make for a more fascinating companion on this particular journey than Lloyd-Jones, who shares his wisdom and experiences with the down-to-earth ease of an old friend. We study the evolution of the Scottish literary landscape, examine elements of Victorian literature, define social anthropology from Cambridge to India, talk about the hardships on the streets of South America, discuss method and the role of the wilderness.

Lloyd-Jones served as the president of the Scottish Association of Writers and of Scottish PEN. His novel Lord of the Dance won the BBC Bookshelf First Novel Award and his radio drama, Ice in Wonderland won the BBC award for Best New Radio Script. His novel Fallen Angels led to an Honorary Fellowship from the Institute of Latin American Studies at Glasgow University. He graduated from Cambridge University with a Masters Degree in Social Anthropology. He is a writer of novels, short stories, non-fiction and radio drama. His works include Red Fox Running, The Dreamhouse, Lord of the Dance, Fallen Angels, and Fallen Pieces of the Moon.

Interview of Robin Lloyd-Jones by Nicole M. Bouchard

1) The Scottish literary landscape

You've formerly served as the president of the Scottish Association of Writers and of Scottish PEN. Concerning your fiction work, you've spoken of a preference toward historical subject matter and of certain themes that recur unintentionally. "Over sixty years later, looking at my fiction as a whole, it seems that, without intending it, three themes keep recurring: (i) the wisdom of having doubts and that the dangerous people in this world are those who are certain they are right; (ii) the relationship between illusion and reality; (iii) trickster figures who like upsetting established authority, although good often emerges from the chaos they create."

Looking at history, the trickster figure, perception as a matter of illusion vs. reality and the extremes of personalities that have a strong fixation on

"being right" or their version of morality without doubt, calls to mind some trappings of the Victorian era of literature that involved characters such as Dorian Grey, Edward Hyde and Dr. Henry Jekyll. Robert Louis Stevenson wrote in a letter from 1886 that he "...had the old Scotch Presbyterian preoccupation with these [moral] problems...The Scotch side came out plain in Dr. Jekyll." How has the Scottish literary landscape changed and how have some of its traditions remained the same over time?

Like most literary landscapes, the Scottish one has always reflected the big issues of the time, the social problems of that period, the uses and abuses of power and the changes taking place. Our modern issues and problems, of course, are different from those of previous eras. Literature, everywhere, I think, seeks to interpret the world, and human behaviour in particular, to its readers, and generally follows Alexander Pope's dictum that 'the proper study of Mankind is Man.'

We should remember that Scottish literature is tri-lingual – Gaelic, Scots and English and that each has its own traditions. That said, I see a strong tradition of writing about place in Scottish fiction, with both rural and urban settings vividly described and very much part of the texture of the story. You mention Dr. Jekyll and I see this dark side continuing in the 'Tartan Noir' crime novels of writers like Ian Rankin and Louise Welsh; and I see the elements of fantasy and myth found in writers like Sir Walter Scott and J.M. Barrie continuing in J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter books. Compared to thirty or forty years ago, the number of people in Scotland who are writing creatively has increased hugely. Writers' circles and clubs, creative writing courses and poetry evenings in pubs proliferate in every town and city. I would say that creative writing in Scotland is thriving as never before and that, for a country with a population of just over five million, we are 'punching above our weight.'

What, in your personal opinion, are some timeless aspects of Victorian era literature?

Story-telling is timeless and the Victorian novelists did this very well. They established the novel as the main literary

medium – strongly plotted, crowded with colourful characters, novels that were not afraid to tackle the big issues. Thanks to a rise in the literacy rate of Britain’s population, it was the first time that literature started reaching out to the masses. Down the ages books have helped open our eyes to all sorts of wrongs and there was a reforming aspect to much of Victorian literature, particularly Dickens.

Do you feel that there are certain classic authors that have influenced you as a writer?

The book which has most influenced my style is the King James Version of the Bible. Throughout my schooldays I heard passages read from it twice a day and three times on Sundays, so that I absorbed the flow and rhythms of its prose. At my rather macho boys only school we did not study female writers, but when I finally discovered Jane Austin I was bowled over and saw many new paths to follow with my own work. There is an element of the exotic and the fantastical in some of my writing. I am not sure whether the South American Magical Realists influenced me, or whether I simply recognised in them things that were already there inside me, but I am certainly a great admirer of Gabriel Garcia Marquez.

Recently, I was discussing with a group of writers what their major sources of material were. All of them said that they drew upon their childhood, when the world was fresh, colours brighter and impressions at their strongest. Included in this were the books they read as children. For me, a childhood book which made a lasting impression was Rudyard Kipling’s The Jungle Book – read in India, where I spent six years of my childhood, and with the real jungle starting at the bottom of the garden. It showed a human being as part of nature and not separate from it, and that stayed with me.

As writers often speak to the age they live in, regardless of whether they choose to write about history or present day, what do you think are some of the prevalent influencing factors for writers in the modern UK?

Like I said earlier, I think writers try to interpret their fellow humans and the society in which they live. What we write about

is influenced by modern trends and problems, by things such as one-parent families, feminism, the whole gay scene coming out of the closet, alcoholism and drug addiction, homelessness, environmental problems, unemployment and, of course, the usual seven deadly sins. I think we live in a more liberal and open society than we did, so that subjects which were 'off limits' such as incest, child abuse, cancer, religion and the Established Church have now become subjects for fiction and drama. Also, writing used to be mainly an occupation for the white middle classes. Now we have writers coming from all levels of society, racial origin and cultural background and, therefore, a much greater variety of values and viewpoints reaching the printed page.

Historical topics still exert a strong pull, particularly the two World Wars. What used to be marginal genre, like crime, horror, fantasy and cartoon novels are now becoming more centre-stage, being reviewed seriously and winning awards, with the result that more writers are going down these paths. A strong influence on many writers in the UK is the availability of funding, either through government funded arts organisations or charitable foundations. This has helped new writers to emerge and has encouraged more experimental writing. More and more young writers are also coming out of the three-year Degree courses in creative writing which many universities have set up. It is now possible, as part of obtaining a university degree, to write a novel and present it as your thesis.

2) Having been a tutor in Creative Writing at Glasgow University, what principles did you stress most to your students about the craft and their approach to it? What did you discover in terms of the common strengths and difficulties?

I used to start by saying that I couldn't teach them to write well, only how not to write badly, and that writing well had to come from within themselves. Each one of us is unique and if they wanted to be original they had only to be truly themselves – but this is not easy. Real honesty about oneself and one's feelings has to be worked at. I also stressed that they should not put labels on themselves too soon and that without trying all forms of writing they might never discover where their strengths

really lay. The third point I stressed was that writers are people who write and put words on the page, not just talk about it or attend courses.

I'd say it was a common strength amongst my students that they were willing to try new things and to expose their work to the criticism of the whole group, which is not an easy thing to do. As to common difficulties: it's the age old problem of knowing the difference between telling and showing; and also learning the hard lesson that prose in fiction should be like glass – the reader does not notice it, seeing only the story. Often, the descriptive passages on which the students had spent the most time and care - the bits that cried out to be noticed - were the ones that needed to be edited out.

3) In both your fiction and non-fiction, there is often a backdrop of the natural world to the examination of the humanity of man through primitive, isolated or rustic settings. Do you feel that human nature most accurately reveals itself amongst the indifference of nature and the trials of the wilderness?

No, I think any situation involving conflict and challenge, which asks questions of our true values, our determination and the depth of our desire to achieve whatever it is, will reveal these things. I use wilderness and rural settings because I know them well and I enjoy being in those kind of places and, for me, they are much more than a backdrop. My novel, The Dreamhouse, was set in the snowy wastes of Alaska, beyond communication with the rest of the world and beyond the law. This was deliberately done to create a near fantasy world where normal rules did not apply.

Of the locations in your novels and non-fiction, which did you find lent the most profound inspiration, guiding pen easily to paper?

There is something timeless about rural India, so that when I wrote Lord of the Dance, set in 16th century India, I felt confident that the rural scenes I had witnessed as a child would not have changed much. These were the scenes in which I felt I had bridged the time gap most successfully, was there in person, truly experiencing what my characters were

experiencing. Of my non-fiction writing, I would say it was an article I wrote about a moonlight ascent of a Scottish mountain, Ben Ime, in winter. The beauty and wonder of that experience flowed onto the page in a way that does not normally happen for me.

Conversely, in *Fallen Angels*, the novel which subsequently led to an Honorary Fellowship from the Institute of Latin American Studies at Glasgow University, where you write of the plight of children on the streets of South America, how did the more urban setting affect the writing process/characters?

The characters in these stories were very much based on the real children with whom I spent time. Most had run away from their homes in the shanty towns where violence, neglect and sexual abuse were the norm. Grim as it was, life on the streets was better than what they had left behind. The horror and tragedy of their lives was such that it was more than two years before I could properly internalise and process what I had witnessed and then recreate it as fiction. Earlier attempts did not work because I was too outraged, too inclined to lecture my readers on the injustice of it and too ready to pile on the horror, not having learned that, sometimes, less is more, that understated, well-aimed irony hits the target more effectively than wild, uncontrolled rage.

In short, it was not the urban setting itself which affected my writing, but the urban poverty which led to these children being on the streets and the indifference of urban society to their plight.

4) Your novel *Lord of the Dance* won the BBC Bookshelf First Novel Award and was nominated for the Booker Prize. Your radio drama, *Ice in Wonderland* won the BBC award for Best New Radio Script. Your 2007 novel, *Red Fox Running* was nominated for the Manchester Children's Book Award. Of writing fiction for adults, writing fiction for children and writing a script for the radio, which do you prefer the most and how do they differ in terms of your writing method?

My books and radio dramas are rather like my children – I love them all equally, but in different ways and for different

reasons. I like having this variety of media and find that alternating between them helps keep my writing fresh. I enjoy the subtlety, complexity and depth that is possible when writing for adults; and I also enjoy being able to have a good strong storyline when writing for children. In literary circles this is rather sneered at these days in adult novels, being considered unsophisticated and old-fashioned. As regards method: when writing for children, I might simplify the sentence structure and vocabulary a little - but not too much, because I think children like finding new and interesting words. I make the logical steps in a sequence of thought a bit shorter. For example, if a thought needs to go from A to F, in an adult novel I might go A- D- F and let the readers work out for themselves the steps in-between; but in a children's novel I would put all the steps in.

Drama is a different kind of animal from fiction. You are a member of a team. You don't have control of the script in the same way as when writing a novel. The producer, stage manager and the actors all have an input to the final version, and there is the budget to consider. Scenes can be cut because they cost too much. In this respect, radio drama allows a lot more freedom than other types of drama (no costumes or stage scenery to worry about, no transport to exotic locations). In writing drama you need to appreciate how much an actor can bring to what you are trying to say. The right tone of voice in one simple line can be worth a whole page of writing in a novel.

5) In your own words, how did your degree in Social Anthropology from Cambridge University, prepare you for your work as a writer?

Many of my attitudes were shaped by my childhood in India. Real poverty was all around me and I witnessed the worst famine in India of the 20th century. During the six years I lived there I came to realise that my own culture, religion and way of life was not the only one. This is probably why I chose to study Social Anthropology, which continued the process of opening up my mind to the fact that different societies have different solutions to the same human problems and needs. It has helped me see my own society and its values more objectively.

Earlier in this interview you suggested that the Victorian writers might have influenced me. I think the themes you mention are more an outcome of my studies in anthropology. They showed me that words like 'right' and 'wrong' often only have meaning in their cultural and social context. I was influenced by my tutor who, as part of his field research, had served an apprenticeship as a 'witch doctor' or sorcerer in New Guinea. This led to my life-long interest in shamanism and to the whole matter of the relationship between illusion and reality. Many of the societies I studied were much closer to nature than we are and this has always been an important thing in my own life and in my writing.

*Here we would like to thank featured past and present authors for permitting us to interview them. It was an honor to be able to discuss the craft of writing with them.

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