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2010

Talking Heads

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Publication Details

Peter, T., Woolfe, S., Graham, G. & Suiter, W.. Talking Heads. Audio-visual recordingWeb. ABC1: Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2010.

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TALKING HEADS with Peter Thompson

ABC1 Monday 6:30pm

Transcripts

Sue Woolfe

Screened: 05/07/2010

Award-winning author Sue Woolfe *"We can all learn to be creative"*.

<**PETER THOMPSON:** Welcome to Talking Heads. It's good to have your company. This week's guest promises some dangerous thinking and trance-like states. 'The creative mind and how it works fascinates Sue Woolfe. She's looked to neuroscience, great authors at work and her own creative processes in crafting her very different books. Sue Woolfe, welcome to Talking Heads.

SUE WOOLFE: Thank you.

PETER THOMPSON: You're a self-declared dangerous writer. You don't seem that dangerous to me. Should I be afraid?

SUE WOOLFE: Only when I write and I'm probably only dangerous to myself. I write not knowing what I'm doing, where I'm going. I write in a state that's rather like a dream state so that anything can come out and I deliberately organise myself and my life and my writing so that that happens and in that way, it's dangerous. You blurt.

PETER THOMPSON: In other words, you're surprised by what you write.

SUE WOOLFE: Oh, astonished. Quite often it doesn't feel like it's me. You could easily talk me into saying that there was some power coming down, but I don't really think that's that. I think it's that there are many parts of us that we don't explore.

PETER THOMPSON: Your book Leaning Towards Infinity puts you on the map. You won the Premier's Prize in New South Wales, other awards, you'd been noticed. How much easier is it when a writer is on the map?

SUE WOOLFE: It's more difficult.

PETER THOMPSON: (LAUGHS)

SUE WOOLFE: You don't think that, but when you start off, when I wrote my first novel - and it never seemed to be like that. It was just scribbling and I was on a mountainside in Greece where I'd gone, cos I didn't want to have anyone ask me what I was doing and I didn't know what I was doing. That was part of the problem. But you're so innocent. Later, you've got to put yourself in a position where you do believe that you're not going to show it to anyone.

PETER THOMPSON: One of the areas of interest you've written about is neuroscience. What does that tell us about creativity?

SUE WOOLFE: Ah, that's fascinating. I wanted to see if neuroscience had figured out what goes on in our imaginations when we create. What neuroscience does show is that creative people, yes, you can mimic what creative people do and it seems like creative people do go into a particular space - a sort of capsule, I teach.

PETER THOMPSON: There's hope for all of us.

SUE WOOLFE: There's hope for all of us. I think anybody can learn to go into that love.

PETER THOMPSON: Your own life story, particularly your childhood, would have given many writers enough material to deal with for their whole lives.

SUE WOOLFE: Mmm. Yes. It's given me plenty to deal with.

SUE WOOLFE VOICEOVER: It's an immensely rich place, the imagination, immensely rich. You forget where you are, who you are, you forget time, you lose self-consciousness. It's an extraordinary state. I'm not the first storyteller in my family. One of my family stories was of my great-great-grandmother, who came from a wealthy military family, a Spanish family, and she was very beautiful and she eloped with the drummer boy of the English Army. I adored my mother, partly because she was so beautiful. She had blue-black hair and olive skin and melting eyes. She was enchanting when she was well. My father, all he wanted to do was be a painter, an artist. He was totally untrained, but he worked meticulously, carefully, obsessively.' One day, I remember coming home from school and seeing him paint this painting and I said, "Who is that man in the cart and where are they going?" It looked a little bit like the Blue Mountains in the distance. My first memory is of the Blue Mountains. Out the back gate, there was the bush all around us and it was my company. I was very shy and introverted. I don't know that I learnt about the world very much through my parents. Books parented me. I read six or eight novels a week. I was totally a reader. Originally, I had four brothers and two died in childhood. Those deaths shattered my parents all their lives. Mum, she got more and more erratic and violent and unpredictable and eventually, my father took my brothers away. And he had that older generation view that girls know intuitively how to look after their mothers and I felt very much that responsibility that I had to do this well. I was 14 at the time.

PETER THOMPSON: That was a very young age to be left with a mentally unstable mother.

SUE WOOLFE: Hmm.

PETER THOMPSON: Did you know what was wrong with her?

SUE WOOLFE: No, it was a very florid mental illness. Eventually, uh, I, I managed a trick where I got her to a psychiatrist, but she only went twice and he diagnosed her as paranoid schizophrenic. I hadn't, at that stage, known there was a possibility that she was mad. I thought she was bad.

PETER THOMPSON: All of this is understandable when you think of how sick with grief she must have been, and your father, about the loss of your brothers.

SUE WOOLFE: Yes. When my second brother died, it was in the days when he was considered a mental defective. And as I look back, I realise that he'd become autistic, which happens exactly the same age, the same symptoms, everything and my mother was blamed for that. He was put in a home, we were never allowed to see him and he died two years later.

PETER THOMPSON: What sort of impact did all of this have on you?

SUE WOOLFE: I grew up on a psychiatrist's couch. I was terribly lucky to have been born at that moment when that was possible. It isn't possible now.

PETER THOMPSON: Did you ultimately reach peace with yourself about these things?

SUE WOOLFE: Absolutely. That's why I'm talking to you now.

PETER THOMPSON: In amongst this difficulty, this sea of troubles, did you find some happiness?

SUE WOOLFE: I found happiness, in an extraordinary way, in beauty. I think my father had attuned me to beauty very early on. We'd go for a walk and he'd say, "Now, look at that rose against the evening sky. Forget everything you're thinking about, all your childish things and concentrate on the colour and shape of those petals." And I found I could do that very readily all by myself without his prompting and it always gave me an enormous relief. It was like going into a trance like you do when you're writing.

PETER THOMPSON: How old were you when you decided you wanted to be a writer?

SUE WOOLFE: When I learnt to read.

PETER THOMPSON: When you learnt to read?

SUE WOOLFE: Yes, yes, yes. I was so dyslexic. I remember being kept in at school with a teacher who wrote, "On, no, no, on," all the way down the blackboard and she'd crack the blackboard with a cane and say, "What's this word?" and I wouldn't have a clue whether it was "on" or "no," you know? Eventually, I wasn't a child who talked about my problems, but eventually, I went to my dad and I said, "I can't read." He drew an apple and he said, "That's ah." And the he drew a banana and said, "That's buh," and by the time he got to carrot, I got the idea, but I had somehow missed the essential point that the shapes actually signified sound.

PETER THOMPSON: And that opened the world of reading to you.

SUE WOOLFE: Yes, and then I wanted to be one of the people who made those marks.

SUE WOOLFE VOICEOVER: It was the most extraordinary change I think I'll have in my lifetime to go to university. It opened up the world that I longed to belong to and this world loved words, it loved thoughts, examined things. Here in this lecture hall in this building, I felt an amazing freedom. I felt like I could, at last, be myself. After university, I trained as a teacher and I went out to schools and I was an appalling teacher because I couldn't keep discipline. I was very ill-suited to it. And I remember, one day, all the girls had to look good for something or other and I had to go around and inspect their ankles and I thought, "This is not me." When I left teaching, I dabbled in various things. I'd always wanted to be a writer, ever since I'd learned to read. I was too frightened to write what I thought of as "real" books, "real" stories, "real" novels. When I met Gordon, I began to get the courage to start my real writing life.

GORDON GRAHAM IN KITCHEN: King prawns or tiger prawns when they're big.

SUE WOOLFE IN KITCHEN: Where do you think they come from?

GORDON GRAHAM IN KITCHEN: The fish shop, as far as I know.

SUE WOOLFE IN KITCHEN: (LAUGHS)

SUE WOOLFE VOICEOVER: It was very important to me that Gordon was a writer. He writes very violent, gritty, funny comedies. I felt that with him, I was really going to be able to develop my deepest wish to be a writer.

PETER THOMPSON: Now, your transition to becoming a teacher, it obviously didn't work quite as you expected.

SUE WOOLFE: No, I had the wrong sort of temperament and I would walk in a door and no-one would notice that I'd entered. Eventually, an older teacher showed me how to walk in a door with an entrance, fling her fox fur head over her shoulder and command the room.

PETER THOMPSON: If only you had a fox fur.

SUE WOOLFE: If only I had many things, including a fox fur.

PETER THOMPSON: Well, strange to say, this actually facilitated your path to becoming a writer because you started to write a textbook.

SUE WOOLFE: Yes, yes. It's much easier teaching through a textbook than teaching in person, of course.

PETER THOMPSON: One of your key books is about mathematics, or that is one of the themes. And at a young age, you married a mathematical genius, Michael Woolfe, which is where Woolfe came from in your name. Through your relationship with Michael, did you become fascinated by mathematics?

SUE WOOLFE: Oh, yes. In our courtship, we talked about mathematics all the time and, in fact...

PETER THOMPSON: You weren't mathematically oriented at all.

SUE WOOLFE: No, no. No, I couldn't do maths. I couldn't add up. But when I was doing Leaning Towards Infinity, I would ring him and say, "How many ways could you arrange 50 umbrellas?," say and he'd say, "Are you thinking of storing them on top of each other or beside?" and I'd say, "Oh, anything." And he'd just do the sum in his head.

PETER THOMPSON: What fascinated you about that?

SUE WOOLFE: It was a different way to think. And I have talked to mathematicians later and they have corroborated that it's a different way of thinking. They almost know those answers intuitively.

PETER THOMPSON: Now, your later partner, Gordon Graham, he also was a helpful pathway for your writing.

SUE WOOLFE: Yes. I think I still had that notion that a writer has to know what they're saying, has to have something to say, has to have a plot. And I found that he would, rather like my father did with his painting, he just started off and did masses and masses of writing with all little squiggles, squibbles and squiggles and everything and he just wrote and wrote and wrote and wrote and eventually this play emerged. And I thought, "I'd like to try that."

SUE WOOLFE VOICEOVER: Gordon and I went as far as we could go, across the world, to Greece and we found a mountainside with a grassy knoll with white goats jumping, which was just my daydream of Greece. I wanted to lose my self-consciousness entirely. I didn't want to feel that it mattered if I failed and so in Greece, I started the novel that at last became Painted Woman. I used, for the first edition, on the cover, one of my favourite paintings from my dad. I felt, in a way, that I had channelled some of his understanding of art and I wanted to acknowledge that. I was two-thirds through writing the novel when Kitty was born and having a baby was wonderful, because it made me take my creative life seriously. Something happens to the soul when you have a child. It deepens somehow. My next book is set partly in the 1960s, when women's appearance seemed to be a defining thing and especially the shape of their breasts. Leaning Towards Infinity begins - I think it all began because of the shape of my mother's breasts. In one chapter, the mother buys a bra. "My mother, shopping later in her lacey bra and a silky blue pullover, was awesome. Outside the pub, men's eyes watered with longing as they held their amber beers." I felt, at the end of writing Leaning Towards Infinity, utterly drained. It's like a love affair that takes everything out of you.'

PETER THOMPSON: Leaning Towards Infinity has that wonderful cover, which - and there's no doubt that covers sell books.

SUE WOOLFE: Hmm. I'm going to sound like the most selfish person you've ever talked to. It was right for me because it looked weirdly like my mother.

PETER THOMPSON: Well, I thought that immediately once I realised... that your mother had Spanish blood.

SUE WOOLFE: Yes. And my publicist showed me a couple and I said, "Gotta have that. That's my mum." And what was really weird about it was that Leaning Towards Infinity started out, I'd planned to do a biography of my mother. And I got out a photograph of her, one of those funny old photographs where the photographers touch up the cheeks and the lips with pink although it's sepia. I got that out and I started describing her face and suddenly she was a mathematician and I was gone.

PETER THOMPSON: What's been the most important writing to you?

SUE WOOLFE: Maybe the last book I did about creativity called The Mystery Of The Cleaning Lady, because then I sort of came out of the closet and talked about this strange way of thinking and that was very liberating for me, to talk about how an artist or a writer thinks and, particularly, it's interesting for me because I teach at Sydney University and I teach postgraduates, who've been trained to be excellent at logical, reasoned thinking - thinking where you know what you're talking about, more or less.

PETER THOMPSON: (LAUGHS)

SUE WOOLFE: You know, one of the fascinating experiments, which was done a long while ago in the late '70s by someone called Colin Martindale and - but it was also a time when people thought that creative minds were buzzing with ideas and...so he tested professional creative people against people who - it sounds like an insult now, but it wasn't then - "noncreatives," as he called them. And with the IQ tests, they both had the same amount of cortical activity. But when they had a creative test, the noncreatives had very high cortical activity, but the creative people, it's extraordinary, the buzziness of their minds went below the level of the measuring instruments. And only after a while did they come up and become creative and the it seemed like more nodes of the brain were actually stimulated.

PETER THOMPSON: Is there that "Eureka!" moment for people where they've been blocked, blocked, blocked and then suddenly the flood waters are released?

SUE WOOLFE: Oh, yes. Absolutely. I've watched that. It's wonderful when you take a class and several hours into that class, you feel the air change. This sounds weird. You feel the air go electric. You can feel people have gone somewhere...amazing in their minds.

PETER THOMPSON: Should they share it?

SUE WOOLFE: No. It's disappointing, isn't it? Because with that comes a longing to share. You have this enormous sense of oneness with the world, but sharing it is very dangerous, because I think the problem is even if you raised your eyebrow when I read a sentence, I would think, "Oh."

PETER THOMPSON: Yes. "My audience is disappointed."

SUE WOOLFE: Or pleased, even. Even admiration or a compliment can stymie creativity. It's such a - it has to be done in utter loneliness, I think.

SUE WOOLFE VOICEOVER: We have a house up a creek off a river. It's a hideaway house. It's not glamorous, but to me, it's utterly beautiful. All sorts of creeks to explore and little bays to look at and lots of daydreams. You don't just write when you're sitting in front of a computer or with a notebook. You're writing all the time. It's part of the way you see the world. All these thousands of little sensations and sense impressions that you have, that's all part of a story and it seems to me that when you get them down, the story builds itself. One of my current projects is working on an opera with a composer, Wendy Suiter. She approached me after she'd read Secret Cure.

SUE WOOLFE: I didn't realise, in my writing, that I was listening so much.

WENDY SUITER: But that's the whole point about your novel is about exactly how aural it is, how everything comes with sound built into it, which makes it...perfect.

SUE WOOLFE VOICEOVER: The Secret Cure is set in a science lab and Wendy and I have been discovering sounds that she might be able to use in the composition.

SUE WOOLFE: So you could develop that sound into an aria.

WENDY SUITER: I'm thinking of it as a primeval swamp at the moment that the arias and the rest of the music actually develops out of.

SUE WOOLFE VOICEOVER: Writing is such a messy, messy, chaotic process, but I find it fascinating. I don't know where it's leading, but I had a dream of the shape of the story of the opera and I feel it just might work.

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