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Abstract

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How do you deal with the influence of the European heritage, both on your life and on your work – in contrast to the Australian experience?

I suppose everything has an influence on you when you are writing. I don't think I'm trying to come to terms with either of the backgrounds. I didn't find it terribly hard to move from Britain to Australia. I came with an absolutely empty mind. As I grow older, I think more and more of my childhood experiences come to the fore – they become more vivid. Also, of course, when you move from one country to another, the country you've just left becomes more vivid; so that all that experience to do with travel is useful for the writer. But I don't see myself as trying to manage either place; I'm just using it for the craft. I'm not distressed by it – I'm not trying to overcome it, as far as I know.

*What is the significance of having a European connection in the novels set in Australia, such as *The Well*?*

You need to be going to the wheat country to get the feeling that I tried to capture in *The Well*; and even in *The Well* Hester sings Schubert lieder, songs she learned from her governess, who was from Europe. At the beginning I wasn't going to have any of Hester's background in the novel; I wanted just to have a flat, mystery sort of story without any complications; and I found that I couldn't write the book until I had explored Hester's childhood. And so the complications come in because of your own handling of the craft, in a way; I needed to do my research into the character.

Is the cultural experience of people living in these two worlds more important than the actual countries?

I haven't any novel completely set in Europe. In *Peabody* [*Miss Peabody's Inheritance*] they go on their trip, and in *Milk and Honey* there is reference to the way in which they lived and the fact that the characters are still trying to preserve a closely knit way of living that they knew before they came to a strange country. That interests me very much – the way in which people might try and continue their way of living.



Elizabeth Jolley. Photo: William Yang.

When you come to Australia you really have to take on a new way, simply because of the climate when you're here in summer. It took me a little while to develop a way of living different from my previous way.

With these differences in mind, what does living in Australia mean to you?

It is a voluntary exile, in a way, though I didn't feel exiled. But recently I heard a wonderful phrase from a Jewish writer, in a Melbourne newspaper, who said we are all exiles from childhood. As I am in my seventieth year and as I've been approaching older age, my childhood, from which I am exiled, is creeping up more and more; and, as I said: coming to the new country, I did think back.

The first story I wrote here was 'A Hedge of Rosemary', in which I try and link – I didn't know I was trying to link – the two countries; but in fact I am, because there is the old man walking down this Oriental type of road – what seems Oriental to him – remembering his time as a boy in the Midlands in England, and all the factories and the joy of seeing some geese on the village green when he goes out in the country as a child. I didn't realize I was trying to bridge this gap of movement from one place to the other, but obviously you do things without knowing what you're doing.

Do the Midlands mean 'home' to you, and how does your parents' home fit in with this notion?

Well, if your parents are in exile, too – my mother being Viennese and living in the industrial Midlands of England, for the whole of her life being homesick and refusing to go back to Vienna after the War.... My father, of course, was in his own country, but he was an exile in a way, because his father had been the son of a farmer; there were, I think, a number of brothers and they all had farms, and my father's father, who had a hernia all his life, refused to have it operated on, so he had to leave the farm. People have to leave for various reasons – their background...; and then some of that comes out in the child, as in the case of my father.

As a child we identify through our parents and our emotional bonds with them. Did you have a strong tie to your mother?

In my own case, I could never do anything that was right for my mother, and it took me years to realize that; I suppose she minded awfully how we both (I have a sister) turned out. She had the ability to make you see all the faults in the person you were with.

Out of jealousy?

I don't know if it would be jealousy or envy, or whether she had a way of seeing things about people. One of the things she said about my own husband was that he would turn me out into the streets – which he didn't, and he never would have. Whether or not she was afraid he might – that could undermine you when you're very young.

All these little things are very useful for writing, and one of the ways of overcoming them is to create fiction from them. If anybody had said that to me some years ago, I would have been really enraged – that I was getting over something by creating a fiction. But then I read this marvellous quotation by Flaubert, that fiction was a result of a deep and hidden wound. When I think of all the different writers – think of Patrick White, for example (I'm not putting myself on the same level as Patrick White) – when I read his biography I thought how true this thing of Flaubert is, because he was such a sick man and had such quarrels with lifelong friends and never spoke to them again. I haven't done anything like that; I'm not dramatic.

Your mother-figures in the novels appear very dominant, whereas the father-figures are quite emotional, even though they cannot express their feelings properly ...

... Or else the daughter doesn't take it quite properly. And, of course, in the case of the mother – in the case of *Cabin Fever* – there is more homage to the mother. *My Father's Moon* has more homage towards the father. Well, in the third book – if I'm allowed to have it

Does that mean that you are working on a sequel to My Father's Moon and Cabin Fever?

I am working on *something*. I'm not sure if it will be a success or a dreadful failure. I tried not to write this book – this is the third book, after *My Father's Moon* and *Cabin Fever*; it's the third volume, and it might be that it isn't the right thing to write. When I was in Melbourne, three people, including the publisher himself, spoke to me and said they thought that I should try and write a third book to go with those two. Of course, I really wanted to write it, but I felt I shouldn't, because I have the idea that you shouldn't try and create a fiction until the end is past. The first two books are largely autobiographical in background; so in the third book I'm not looking back except, in the way of writing, one does look back all the time. But at the same time it is covering things that are not complete. And that might be mistaken.

Do you think of yourself as a female or a feminist writer?

I just think of myself as a writer. I don't really draw the line so clearly between woman and man writer, and certainly the feminists in Australia have been a bit put out by me because I have said in public more than once that I couldn't get on with my writing till I knew what I was going to cook for the family dinner in the evening. That has annoyed people very much.

Nonetheless, most of your protagonists are women ...

Yes, but I've also got some very important men in the novels. Mr Bird is very, very important in *The Well*. The dramatic moment in *The Well* for me is when Hester looks at Mr Bird's accounts and then is forced to look at herself. And Mr Bird's advice to Hester, which must be the hardest advice to give to a woman: that some man might come and want her, but not really want *her* – want her land. Which is a terribly painful thing, and Mr Bird manages to do that.

And then I've got Mr Frome, in *Miss Peabody*, who is also a powerful man. He doesn't come in a great deal, but his mere existence as Debbie Frome's father, and also someone to whom Miss Thorne actually feels – not humbled by, exactly – but she meets more than her match in Mr Frome, and she isn't used to meeting her match, she's used to being higher than everybody, and she almost imagines that Mr Frome may be a bit fond of her at one point. So he somehow has – to use a cliché – got under Miss Thorne's skin without any intention on his part, simply by being what he is.

I find Mr. Bird and Mr. Frome very powerful people. I may have kept them under surveillance a little bit, but I feel they are very powerful men.

Edwin Page in The Sugar Mother appears to be the 'female' partner in his relationship with his wife. Is she the dominating person?

Yes, she is in a way, because it's a role reversal. Because until recently it was a man who went on study leave, and not a wife. That is one of the things I wanted to bring in – the reversal that has happened. But what happens in the novel is that this completely uneducated woman and her daughter take Edwin for a glorious ride, but they also give him a nice time while his wife is away. And he hasn't got to tell his wife about it – she's not going to give him a chance to tell, because she always talks so much. And also he has taken a look at his own life and the way in which the shipboard friendships have crafted his life. So he's never really had a chance to stray out of that – but in fact he does, while he's got Leila and her mother and this baby coming, and so on. It would be interesting, really, to know what would happen to Edwin later on.

The other two male characters you talked about, Mr Birch and Mr Frome, represent the traditional role of men in society; they know their position in life, in society.

I think that's very important. And then they work from that. Hester up to that point has known where she stands in society, but the minute she lets that go, she goes right over. She does take that look at herself. I think all is not lost for Hester. At the end, when she's about to tell the Boarden children this story that no-one's going to believe, she's getting rid of that, and she'll have to live without Kathy and she will manage, because Kathy's going off on that religious trip. So there's a fairly optimistic ending for Hester.

What does the relationship between the two women mean for Hester?

What she gets from Kathy is the reliving of a teenage that she never really had. And, at the same time, Kathy will have acquired some background that she hasn't had before. So they've both gained from their relationship.

Would you say that Hester represents the virgin mother?

She represents a virgin. The mere fact that she has the well sealed up by Mr. Boarden's men makes it clear that she has pushed everything out of sight, out of mind, repressed everything sexual. She can't stand the thought of Kathy being taken by some uneducated, uncultured oaf as a husband. For her it is too late to be anything other than a virgin, as she's already in her sixties, I think.

Is it possible to apply the same image to another character?

You get the same idea of the Virgin with Child with Leila and the baby – but, of course, Leila is not immaculate, she's far from it; she must have been pregnant when they got there. But again, you can have two different kinds of virgin mothers. You can have the one who is immaculate and you can have the other kind. When you do obstetrics in the war, all the young mothers with their babies are like Virgin Marys, they all have the same positioning and the same devotion and the same tenderness that you attribute to the Virgin Mary with Child. So it doesn't really matter if they are immaculate or not.

Some of the younger female characters seem to be fairly inarticulate.

Yes. Leila hardly speaks really in the novel; I think I did that on purpose. Debbie Frome speaks quite a lot, and so does Gwenda. Gwenda refuses, for example, to leave the party in Vienna. She is very much acted upon –

she's initiated by Miss Thorne. But she also expresses herself physically by having her period all over the place, which is a good reminder for Miss Thorne that Gwenda has another purpose in life. So the characters do express themselves as much as is necessary for what the particular novel is.

What about the stronger characters?

With people who are more powerful, like Hester and Miss Thorne, it is as though they're infallible in one way, like the gods, but they're fallible as well. In a sense, my powerful characters are fallible; they've got a skin that can be got under.

On the other hand, they are often quite lonely. Do you think that loneliness is a prominent experience in people's lives?

Do you mean the life-lie? I think that most human beings, essentially, are alone, and if you spend some time nursing, you will discover that people are entirely alone in their illness, however many visitors come. I think in ordinary life most people do experience either a sense of being outcast or alone or inferior or something not as they would like to be. Fortunately, those people do have a sort of a life-lie or something that keeps them going. Or they have somebody that they can really love – and this is more important, really, than being loved *by* someone. Because you could be loved by someone and not really care much about the person who is loving.

I find that, as I get older, the idea that the human individual wants to be liked rather than loved is easier to take – and also having people that you really like and can trust, without being head-over-heels in love with them. And in a person's life there are only a limited number of people that rank as this. And the novelist or short-story writer has to come to that realization; because you don't know it when you are young.