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Rebuilding Lifeworlds: Marylynn Scott Interviews Beverley Farmer

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Abstract
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You have written a substantial amount since the publication of Alone in 1980, including A Body of Water, a work which figures as a watershed in your oeuvre. In the opening pages, you refer to the book as 'my new departure.' In what way was it a departure for you?

At the time I wrote that, I didn’t have any more than a sense of it being a departure. I had a vague hope of it, if anything. I started touching base with everything that matters to me emotionally and intellectually, including the past because you don’t just wipe it out; you have to find what its place should be in a new life. The book was a way of establishing the foundations for the future. Looking back now, I can see that without having written it I couldn’t have written my novel, The Seal Woman.

A Body of Water reads like a taking-stock of things both personally and in terms of the creative process. Was writing it a means of consolidating different parts of yourself?

I think so. I’d come to a new home, this house, and that was an important step. I’d started writing it in my first summer in this house after coming here in the spring of 1986. I began it in late summer on my birthday. I’d lived in Lorne before that for thirteen years where my marriage had been. My husband (who became my ex-husband) and I ran a restaurant there. My mother had bought a house down there to be near us which I took over when she died. I was living more or less in the wreckage of a marriage, and my reason for living in Lorne no longer applied. It was an important step for me to come and have a new house and a new life somewhere else.

You imply in A Body of Water that you had reached a block in your writing.

I hadn’t written anything for a long time. Worse than that, I’d written 15,000 words of something which had then died. It had just turned brittle and dead on me. I could see when I reread it that it was worthless. I had worked for months on it without seeing that, which is a very unnerving
experience, not so much because it shouldn’t disintegrate, but because I
didn’t know for all that time that it wasn’t any good.

What brought you to that point?

I wasn’t working close enough to the bone; I was being too careful not to
expose my secret life. All that could have been a psychological
explanations.

In A Body of Water, you foreground your practice of shaping stories out of
fragments of the everyday by recording experiences in the journal as you were
living them. Were you actually trying to capture the transformation of life into
art?

I was while editing it, but not while I was writing it. There weren’t a lot
of revisions in the journal. It was meant to be a writing journal, so there
were things cut out which didn’t have anything to do with writing. I’m
not so meticulous and systematic at keeping notebooks that only diary
material goes into the diary. It’s not like The Golden Notebook where
everything is separate and different. I didn’t write anything for the diary,
so there are things that were momentous in my personal life which didn’t
come into any of the stories or poems and, therefore, they were cut out.
It was long enough already with things that did have a bearing, so I cut
out the materials that just obscured the process. I think it was Elizabeth
Bowen who said, ‘If something doesn’t contribute to it, then it takes away
from it.’

What do you mean in A Body of Water when you refer to ‘beginning my new
phase of writing’?

I didn’t want to write that book in the old way, with the old sort of clarity
and meticulousness that Blanche D’Alpuget, among others, has said
characterizes my earlier work. I felt that no longer corresponded to how
my impressions of life and of other people were coming to me. I realized
that while you can deal with human experience like that, there are other
ways of getting closer to it, and fiction is uniquely privileged to do this.
I had been neglecting those ways, writing things that were like plays or
film in being external, and I wanted to write something more internalized.

Does this development carry over from A Body of Water to your new novel?

Yes, The Seal Woman springs directly from it, although it’s fictional. I’m not
in it. How it springs out of A Body of Water is hard to say without
recapitulating the book, but it has much greater looseness and freedom
than I’ve ever been able to allow myself before, not with regard to style
or structure, but rather to the development of character. I can allow a character to materialize in the reader’s mind without feeling I have to direct it like a puppet from here to there, as if it were a film I was directing and the character was only real when on the screen. Now I’ve got an idea of how to have characters live on when they’re out of sight, so there’s more depth to them than there was. They’re not all surface, as I think of my past work as being.

*Does this mean, for instance, that the creation of Shirley in *Alone* differs from that of Dagmar in *The Seal Woman*?*

I think of *Alone* as a dramatic monologue in that it is written largely in the present tense, and, as a reader, you’re only presented with what you’re told; you’re not given the liberty to weave the character of Shirley. She’s presented like a character on a stage, whereas I didn’t do that with Dagmar, who, like Shirley, also narrates the story. Dagmar takes a lot more for granted from the reader than Shirley does in matters having to do with beliefs and experiences in common, as well as with things she can just touch on knowing that the reader knows what isn’t being said. I couldn’t do that with Shirley because I didn’t know enough about readers’ responses. I don’t know that it’s a matter of technique so much as letting go, as not being so uptight about making sure I get across what I want to. I’m freer now; if something doesn’t reach everyone, I don’t worry so much anymore.

*You have said that Shirley is a character based largely on yourself. Can you talk about the autobiographical underpinnings of *Alone*? Would you call it a lesbian novel?*

*Alone* is very much a contemplative novel, if it is a novel. It was meant to be a projection of adolescence. When I was that age, I didn’t want to live anymore. I *did* want to kill myself because I thought there was nothing to live for. I started writing the story in 1969, ten years after the experience, but it was still very clear to me how it had been because, when you want to die, it really does concentrate you.

The lesbian experience on which *Alone* is based happened in College, that is in residence, while I was at the University of Melbourne, not in that boarding house where the story is set, although I did live there later when I was twenty. Shirley is eighteen in the story, but I was twenty. It was the cheapest place in Melbourne; I think it was two pounds a week. I did live on bread and milk and go to the market and get fish that were being thrown out; there was a pile of shit by the gully trap. All those physical details were true except for the chooks; they came from somewhere else. There wasn’t a henhouse, but everything else was there. The boarding house has been tarted up now, but a whole lot of ‘derros’ still live there.
As you will have guessed, May O'Toole is meant to be a sort of mother substitute because Shirley's own mother and father have failed her. She sees May as a possible mother and the funny old bloke, the one who lends the bike, as a sort of father figure. She's conscious of their parental care for her in their rough and ready way, but that's all she can bear too. She can't let them closer than that, but that's what she needs from them.

*How much did you change your own lifeworld in writing the story?*

There were things I transposed and heightened. I began it as a love affair between a man and a woman because what sort of love affair it involved seemed unimportant at the time. The story is about a suicide, so the focus was on the failure of the relationship and the young woman's wish to kill herself. I thought it would be a lot easier for people to accept the story if the love affair were with a man. My parents were still living and they didn't know about my relationship. As it happened, I didn't publish it until after they died.

The story that *Alone* grew out of was published earlier, in 1968, and, in that story, it was a man who dumped her. I could carry something like that off in a short story, but, in fact, I felt it was inauthentic. I had not experienced first love as love with a man and I couldn't fake it to that degree. I hadn't even seen the male genitalia at that point. I wasn't interested in writing the story if I had to fake it that much; I lost any interest in doing it at all.

*Is Dagmar a version of yourself as well?*

No, she grew out of my imagining what a Danish woman, whom I met 25 years ago while she was visiting Australia, might be like now. It never occurred to me then that she might ever have a novel centred around her, although I was interested in her experience. Various sets of circumstances make me want to centre something on a fictional character based on her. Because it is so difficult to write as a Dane when I'm not and I don't know any Danes, I tried to make her Australian to save myself a lot of trouble and anxiety, but it didn't work. For some reason or other, this woman insisted on being a Dane, and there was no way around it.

Sometimes authors who haven't been important to you for a long time suddenly resurrect in a new light because of some problem you're tackling. That's what happened here. I went back to Karen Blixen because of a Dane being the voice in this novel. The particular cast of Dagmar's voice, which is a very definite voice different from my own, has something of Karen Blixen in it.

*Do you get tired of readers confusing you with your narrators?*
That's an interesting question. It's not something I get tired of, but sometimes it can be irritating. For example, the assumption that Shirley is me in *Alone* can be very irritating.

I'm not surprised by people making this connection, but I feel invaded by it. On the other hand, it's a risk any writer takes because the illusion you're trying to create is that this is a real woman speaking to you from her real self. When some people read, they need to feel that they're being addressed by a sort of puppet with a real writer behind it; that's just the way they read.

*This connection must be easy to make when a writer's life experiences parallel the ones described in the art.*

Well, I think most writers' lives do parallel their art. It's just that we know less about some writers' lives than others. But the more biographies I read – and biography is one of my favourite genres – the more the lives seem close-knitted with everything they've written.

You've said before that you think the writer should move back into the shadows so that the work can stand alone.

Yes, sometimes I think that, but when I read *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, I'm very conscious of James Joyce. I read every page of Richard Ellmann's biography of Joyce (and there are so many pages) with fascination and I think that most of the interest in Joyce is from knowing that this is a real man telling you what he knows about life, both about other people and about himself.

*It follows that a reader of your work might be interested in you as a person as well.*

Maybe, but it's all very well to feel like this about someone else and not about yourself!

*Are you conscious of an ideal reader when you write?*

I'm not conscious of a personality. I'm conscious of an eye, like a camera eye. I'm in a double role when I'm writing. I'm creating something for a reader, but I'm also reading. When I add something to a piece, I try to see it from the double perspective of what it gives the reader to add to what she already has. It's almost instinctive; at a certain point, I realize I haven't given enough information that something is missing. It's the reader part of me, not the writer, that tells me this, so I have to go back and supply that missing clue.
The piece is only written so that a reader can go through it from beginning to end and resurrect in her mind at least an approximation of what I had in mine when I wrote it. The closer those correspond the better; the more skilful the writing has been.

**How would you characterize your ideal reader?**

That would be someone exactly like me probably because I’m my own first reader looking over my shoulder. I more or less assume that people are going to see things in the same way as I do! But jokes aside, an ideal reader would be someone who is intuitive and perceptive.

**Do writers have a ‘third eye’ that sets them apart from the rest of us?**

I think good readers have the same eye as writers. The difference with writers is that they actually sit down and get it done. There are millions of potential writers walking around out there who don’t write, but they could if they sat down and put in the hours every day. It’s important for readers to feel an affinity with a writerly mind, which they certainly do if they’re ideal readers.

When you appropriate material alien to your own experience, as is the case with Dagmar or with your male narrators, do you seek what is other in order to distance yourself from the narrative?

It starts that way, but, as Flaubert said, the more you write about someone, the more you make them like yourself. So Madame Bovary started off being utterly different from Flaubert, but in the end they were one and the same: ‘Madame Bovary, c’est moi!’ Peter, the narrator in ‘Fire and Flood,’ for example, is very like me in some respects; the psychological paralysis and sterility that I mention at the beginning of *A Body of Water* is the state of mind Peter is in too, although he’s catatonic as well. If I hadn’t felt at least part of what he is feeling, I wouldn’t have been able to put the words in his mouth.

**How do you connect with a narrator like the rapist in ‘A Woman with Black Hair’?**

That’s a projection, of course. He’s an extreme version of men I’ve known, a variation on the type whose attitude towards women is a combination of the romantic with the bitter and sadistic, and who boasts about his sexual conquests. The story grew out of an experience I had in the house where the story is set: I awoke and imagined there was a man sitting in a chair in the room. I stared in terror at the chair for at least an hour before it became light enough for me to realize that it was empty.
Have you been accused of appropriating the territory of male writers?

No, actually my fascination with rape has been the one thing that has attracted most comment. For example, in a competition that was anonymous, somebody mentioned that I’d submitted an entry. ‘Oh,’ said one of the judges, ‘that’s funny, I don’t remember a story about rape,’ as if to say that if I had written a story it had to be about rape.

How do feminist readers react to your work?

I’ve been accused of writing from a pre- or post-feminist perspective or from a reactionary perspective because my women are victims. However, my men are victims too, at times, and in a story like ‘Maria’s Girl,’ the man and the woman are fully victims, if victim is relevant at all to a situation like that. In a story like ‘Milk,’ you have to ignore... Wait! I don’t even know why I’m answering this accusation. It seems to me to pick on a side issue to talk about victims in my work.

By writing about feminist concerns such as rape, gender and relationships (whether heterosexual, lesbian or even incestuous anti-relationships) as well as from a male perspective at times, you invite, if unintentionally, the appraisal of feminists.

Ideally, people would read those stories without knowing who had written them. It seem, a pity that one’s idea of the writer contaminates the content of the story when it isn’t meant to. There are some stories when it is meant to as with ‘Black Genoa’ in A Body of Water, but that’s not always the case. If something has been written as if it were a film script, for example, where the writer’s character or personality isn’t part of the content, to introduce it skews the balance of the story.

Have you been attacked by feminist critics in Australia?

Yes, I have been attacked by critics saying that my women aren’t strong, that they’re not role models. I reply by saying that they were never intended to be.

Your male characters often express frustration and become aggressive and violent. They’re isolated in their relationships with others and from the world around them. These are characteristics one might associate with an essentialist view of male behaviour. Is this your view?

I don’t have a fixed view of what’s male or female. I don’t know that anyone is fixed; people fluctuate throughout their lives and vary from one to another. Those adjectives and characteristics apply equally to a lot of
my female characters too, so you could say the same about them. For example, there’s the woman figure living in a Greek culture who feels that she’s inadequate compared to some of the women around her and unable to live up to what’s expected of her. She falls short all the time because she feels she’s either not in tune, not as good a wife or a mother, or not as beautiful as others. That’s Barbara’s experience in ‘White Friday’ and ‘Our Lady of the Beehives’ or Bell’s in ‘Place of Birth.’ Bell is only really reconciled with her mother-in-law when they meet again after the divorce. When she goes back to the village in ‘Pomegranates,’ she is accepted on her own terms by her mother-in-law rather than as a daughter-in-law. She can see clearly everything she found repellant about the Greek culture as well as everything she found magical and still loves about it.

Why don’t you acknowledge in your characterizations that there are differences between men and women resulting from their gender conditioning?

I think it’s because I’m only really conscious of the men at the moment when they’re in conflict with the women in their lives. In a sense, the men are almost dummies.

Do you mean that they serve as foils for the women?

I mean they might seem to the reader to be dummies. It’s not my intention to depict them that way, but, instead of getting the male character’s thoughts, his internal monologue, what you usually get are the woman’s thoughts about him. Occasionally I’ve tried to redress this by using a male narrator, but in the stories where there’s conflict between men and women, I’ve always taken the woman’s point of view as far as I can recall. Because the man’s perspective remains external whereas the woman’s thoughts are revealed, she is privileged in those scenes. But I don’t deliberately tell you what the woman is thinking, while withholding the man’s thoughts, in order to create a particular perspective. It’s not as conscious as that.

Your characters often find themselves in conflict with the culturally conditioned codes of behaviour associated with gender, say, or romantic love. Peter in ‘Fire and Flood’ admits that ‘At the best of times I was – am – far from being a man of action.’ The story turns on his not living up to others’ expectations of him as a male. After watching the movie Casablanca, the women in ‘Home Time’ compare the inadequacies in their relationships with what they’ve just seen on the screen. Do you reject codes such as the one connected with romantic love?

I don’t reject romance with a capital ‘R’ or with a small ‘r,’ but the stuff Mills & Boon publishes is corrupt romance, and, of course, I reject that. It’s corrupt and commercial, venal and disgusting: it’s a lie. But romance
doesn’t have to be a degraded version. There are other types as well, such as true romance. I don’t mean the *Casablanca* sort of romance. ‘Home Time’ is more about the non-meeting of minds and the impossibility of communication that mirrored the true event in my life which it was based upon. It’s not necessarily meant to be about all human relationships; it’s just showing the pattern as it applied to those particular lives.

**But what we see here seems to be true of the relationships that many of your other characters experience. Is it not possible to extrapolate some general truths regarding relationships from these particular lives?**

There is a large element of cruelty in those relationships. Even though the young man cries along with his girlfriend while watching *Casablanca*, later he quite brutally accuses her of scavenging her story materials and forbids her to ever write about him: ‘Perhaps if you wore a badge, a brand on your forehead that meant: Beware of the scavenger? Then people would know they were fair game.’ But the man, for example, in ‘Vase with Red Fishes’ from *A Body of Water* is not cruel. He preserves his singularity; he doesn’t respond to his girlfriend, but he doesn’t hurt her either and he retreats gracefully. She’s not surprised by the outcome of the relationship. He hasn’t tried to destroy her as some of the other men have tried to destroy their women.

**Do you distinguish between male and female modes of discourse?**

I’m sure there are differences between these modes of discourse, but I haven’t had time to pursue them very fully. The threshold is a very female way of writing, which is what fascinates me about Peter Handke. In fact, all the writers who interest me most have a very strong element of the androgyne about them. They are writers who embrace the whole of humanity, the two halves, such as Handke, Virginia Woolf and D. H. Lawrence. It’s there as luminality in A. S. Byatt’s *Possession*. I thought maybe she had made it up and was satirizing the Romantic movement, but it seems that there is such a field. It is the study of thresholds and the mystical interfaces, the fluidity of borders, between two worlds or modes of existence. That struck me with tremendous force because *A Body of Water* is all about the writer being a thresholdologist, that is ‘a seeker after thresholds,’ as Andreas Loser says in *Across*. That’s what fascinates me most at the moment.

In ‘Vase with Red Fishes, the woman who’s arguing with the man about *Narcissus* says, ‘I think it’s an illusion...that human beings can transcend gender.’ Can you comment on this statement from your own perspective?
I've never thought about it from my perspective. That seemed to me something she would say to get some response from him, and, in his case, to keep her at arm's length. It's part of the struggle that these two people are engaged in, which is a sexual battle as well; there's no meeting in their sexual intercourse. It wasn't something coming from deep within myself necessarily, but, even though there are no absolute truths, I'm certain there's a lot of truth in it. I was brought up – or rather I brought myself up – on *The Second Sex* and how one becomes a woman by being made a woman; the same goes for men too, of course. I suppose my characters, both male and female, tend to come up against a situation which is a stone wall for them and they know it. It isn't gender, but something else in their own characters, in their lack of particular strengths, or in their circumstances. It happens to all of them; they reach their limitation or something that they can't transcend. The realization of this, the moment of truth, is the crux of the story. I think that is the basic situation for a lot of those stories.

*Do the characters experience moments of epiphany then?*

I think of epiphany as something optimistic and joyful: in that respect, not necessarily so.

*Think of epiphany in the Joycean sense of it being an awakening, a realization.*

Yes, I suppose it's an illumination, in the sense that they see more clearly.

*You've said that you don't try to achieve psychological realism in your male characters.*

Nor in the female characters. That isn't really the point of what I'm trying to do so much as to create impressions of a situation as it takes place. I emphasize certain things and not others; for example, a painter of portraits might leave out a subject's nose without the viewer noticing because enough other details are included in the picture to achieve the desired impression.

*Which things do you emphasize?*

It varies. Sometimes, for instance, I actually do a bit of drawing just as a memory aid and as a way of concentrating my attention on something that I want to describe, such as a jelly fish. I sketch its shape, and the features that I pick out first to sketch are the ones I emphasize when I write about it; that helps me to decide how to describe it.

*Do you imagine the reader filling in the noses, filling in the missing details?*
Yes, or at least subliminally knowing where the nose should go. I think my men and women are recognizable people one might meet.

Yes, certainly, they are which suggests that the artist, painter or writer, must master the details before she can confidently omit some of them. Are you interested in psychology even though you don’t foreground it in your writing?

Yes, I am and I am defensive about it as well. The science of psychology, including psychoanalysis and all the other different schools of thought attached to it, seems enormously dogmatic to me. The human psyche is much less definable than many theorists believe. So I’m wary and suspicious of psychology, but very interested in it nonetheless.

Its influence on literature hasn’t always been a good one. If you look back before psychology became such a dominant force, at the nineteenth-century novel, for instance, you find that the characters were as vivid and intense then, if not more so, than they are now. What did Chaucer know about ‘psychology,’ but the precision of his psychology in a work like ‘Troilus and Criseyde’ is just wonderful. Psychology needs to be kept at arm’s length by an artist, otherwise it can take over and wreck something very easily. You can analyze something to death or explain characters away instead of letting them just exist there on the page or having them tell you what they are thinking or feeling. There are quicker, sharper, more economical ways of revealing character such as through body language. The more economical the means, the better the art; it all comes down to an economy of means.

Even though you talk about being distanced from the experiences you write about, we keep coming back to the close connection between life and art.

Oh, I think A Body of Water is all about the way they interrelate. Quite obviously, there is nothing that can feed art except life and other reading, so the work fruits out of these. It helps me not to be too conscious of the process or aspects of it, such as why I choose this rather than that, but many characters and events are rooted in experience.

Even with a story like ‘Snake,’ where it’s hard not to think of D. H. Lawrence’s poem being in the background, a personal experience underlies it. The genesis of that story was a real snake in Greece which I had tried to kill, then repented of trying to kill and let escape as Manya does. Manya, herself, is a snake too in the sense that pride is her downfall and she’s too proud even to recognize or to care that this is the case.

Jimmy/Dimitri, the narrator in ‘A Girl on the Sand,’ is based partly on my husband and partly on a couple of other Greeks whom we knew in the group we moved around with when we lived in the Greek ghetto in Melbourne. There, again, these parts were fused with myself in some respects. My husband told me about the incident of the girl in the sand.
There was a girl discovered like that on the beach at Kennett River while we had our restaurant there. So the raw materials were there, but separate from each other; in fact, the connection was not made by him, but by me in the story. Dimitri’s emotional dominance by his mother is something I’ve noticed a lot in Greek sons, and I think there’s something quite feminine about him.

‘Fire and Flood’ was actually set in the flat that I lived in at that time — those trees, all that was there. The fire on Ash Wednesday in 1983 burnt Lorne and destroyed over 300 houses at Aireys Inlet at Anglesea. It was terrifying in Aireys because no direct access to the beach, so people were fleeing along the road through the tea-trees to get to the lighthouse, to the one the locals call ‘The White Queen,’ and to the water before they were taken over by the fire. There were a lot of cases like Peter, who’s suffering almost paralytic neurosis. People came up to me after reading the story and said, ‘You’re one of the few who seem to realize how long the effects of Ash Wednesday have lasted.’

Kate Grenville talks about there being two levels of place: the one you inhabit physically and the one you can inhabit imaginatively. Do you move back and forth between these two senses of place or are you more concerned with the place that you’re settled in and how you can translate that into a reflection of your own preoccupations?

Being concerned with the place I am living in is fairly recent in my case. *Alone* was set in Melbourne and written in Greece, so the high colour and overwhelming nostalgia of place in that story came from my not being in the spot, but from the radiance of memory. *Milk* was largely about Greece written in Australia after my divorce, after the Greek experience was closed off in time and place and quite remote for me. *Home Time* was partly Greek and partly American, with episodes that again were closed off to me. *A Body of Water* was really the first book in which I was open to the place I was writing in and writing from that place and about it at the same time as I was living in it. It was more or less an experiment in being present in the here and now and letting the writing come out of that.

Before *A Body of Water*, I relied heavily on photographs and on images that I remembered, whereas all the rest of the experience was washed away. Only the vivid memories and moments came through, so I was writing short stories based around those moments. When I was writing *The Seal Woman*, which is set here in Australia, I wanted to avoid photographs and depend instead on emotion and fleeting impression. I didn’t want things to be cut and dried up, either by memory or by a camera or by any device like that, but to be more or less straight from life onto the page, as in what D. H. Lawrence called ‘the living plasm.’
Can you compare your use of place in the novel with that in your writer’s notebook?

I used the landscape near my home at Point Lonsdale as a setting for *The Seal Woman*, although I gave myself the liberty to change a few things. I used it in a quite different way than in *A Body of Water* because Dagmar is a visitor, a transient, not planting herself by definition. Her sensations are fleeting; her experiences are a sort of time out of time for her, not part of her real life, whatever that is. She has been here before, so there’s that double image or blur, the mirror image in which the past is juxtaposed with the present. Tension exists between who she was then and who she is going to be. This is her hiatus between that old life, which is closed off to her now by her husband’s death, and the new life.

*Dagmar is reminiscent of many of your characters in having reached a hiatus in her life. Is The Seal Woman a continuation of what is one of your major preoccupations as a writer?*

Yes, as I said, what I’m most interested in are transitional moments or moments of crisis in somebody’s life, changing points or revelations. I don’t know that a subject interests me unless it has an element of that in it. Dagmar is making the journey to the land of the dead because she has just been widowed. She has come south to Queenscliffe, in fact, although it’s called Swanhaven. She spent her honeymoon there because her husband, who was a seaman, went to Antartica. Now that he’s dead, she has gone back to where they were first together.

Her experiences take place in a sort of underworld because Australia is the underworld in that sense, a return to the past, a way of purging herself of all unfinished business because he has died as a middle-aged man in an accident at sea. The story is set in 1988 when the *Nella Dan* crashed onto rocks at McQuarrie Island and was scuttled and burnt.

She knows all the tales of visits to the land of the dead such as the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice and the story of the Eskimo shaman and his voyage under the ice to speak to the Goddess of the sea beasts; and about Norse mythology as well as about the Bog people in Denmark whose bodies were supposedly resurrected from the bogs looking as if they died yesterday, although they were 2000 years old. I make her conscious of all this without weaving it in too closely or making it too obvious, I hope. She deals with her bereavement basically through these tales, although there are people she meets there, a woman, a man. She relives the past in her memory and creates a new life in Swanhaven for the time she is there until she overcomes the grieving process.

*Often your characters write poems or stories within the story in which they appear, beginning with Alone and extending through to A Body of Water,*
where you reveal the day-to-day ideas and influences that nourish your creativity. How does this metafictional feature, this foregrounding of the writing process, figure in The Seal Woman?

Dagmar isn’t a writer in this story. Hang-on, she’s a writer in the sense that she might be a writer of children’s stories. She grew up on Hans Christian Anderson. She isn’t writing her own story yet. Maybe she will, but not as a writer, as a diarist, if anything. At this stage, anyway, she’s not conscious of any wish to be a writer, but she’s making notes on books she reads. What you’re given now are just seeds of what might possibly turn into material for a writer.

Did your use of narrative techniques change at all in The Seal Woman?

Conversations are more important in this book than they have been before. The characters more or less created themselves through their conversations. At one point, for example, I discovered that Tess, a woman who had been in the book for several weeks, is partly Greek, that her father is Greek. She lives in Swanhaven in the story and she wasn’t going to be partly Greek, but then there developed a logical necessity that she should be, and I’m glad of that.

If your characters are conversing more, does it mean that they are becoming better able to communicate with each other?

I think so. Cruelty, as I said, is a large element in many of the relationships between my male and female characters in the earlier works. In this book, there is at last a real warmth, a feeling of security and mutual generosity, between a man and a woman where there hasn’t been before.

Was this made possible by A Body of Water and the experiences underlying it?

Yes, and it is also a matter of age and experience as well. As May O’Toole says in Alone ‘What wouldun I give ter be eighteen all over again! The best a life all still ter come. But knowun what I know now.’