Jean Bedford was born in Cambridge, England, in 1946 and came to Australia in 1947. She was brought up in Victoria and, after university, taught English as a second language, and worked as a journalist. She was literary editor of the National Times from 1980 until recently when she resigned to take up the Stanford Writing Fellowship. A collection of her short stories Country Girl Again was published in 1979 by Sisters. She lives with the writer Peter Corris and her three daughters in Coledale on the South Coast of New South Wales.

Mike Donaldson talks to her about her book Sister Kate, published recently by Penguin.

The day Sister Kate was launched, the National Times reported that it was already a best seller in Melbourne. Apart from the fact that it is an extremely well crafted book, is there any other reason why it's had such instant appeal?

I don't know; I'm really surprised. It must be that people are still fascinated by the Kelly myth even when it's presented from the woman's point of view. I would have thought that with 1981 being the centenary of Ned's hanging that people would have been sick of the Kelly stuff, but it is one of the strongest myths in white Australian history.

Ned Kelly and the gang have become archetypes of freedom and anti-authoritarianism, a symbol for people who feel victimised and want to do something about it. Otherwise, the cover, a reproduction of Constable Fitzpatrick and Kate Kelly by Nolan, is very pretty, and that might have sold a few.

You're off to take out a Stanford scholarship. What attracts you to the US?

Firstly, I'm attracted by the possibility of being paid to work at something I'd be working on anyway. Secondly, I'm keen to get a glimpse of American writers at work. The course I'll be attending will be full of young American writers, and one of the very few things I admire about the United States is its fiction writing. In terms of narrative fiction, the new American writers are probably the best in the world. However, I've always disliked America and all it stands for, but the opportunity to go and observe it first-hand is too good to be missed; it's probably time I gave some grounding to my anti-American prejudices.

While I'm over there, I'll be working on another novel called Grace, which will be based on the life of my mother, a woman who grew up in the slums of London and then settled in rural Australia. She provided me with the sort of themes I like — women being destroyed by their lives — and it will be an opportunity for me to work out my relationship with her which is something that I have not so far been able to do.
There is a great deal of Australian symbolism in *Kate*; in the first few pages we have gum trees, wombats and kookaburras. What would you reply if someone said to you that your book was "aggressively Australian"?

I'd be pleased. I think Australian writers should be aggressively Australian. It seems to me that we take our symbols and metaphors from what we see around us, and it's time Australian ones became part of the language, but not too obtrusively; not kangaroos, and koalas and wombats everywhere. When I became conscious of constructing specifically Australian symbols, I found it didn't work, and I cut it out as much as possible. But generally, it happens pretty naturally. I have grown up in the country here and I remember things like that, so my similes come pretty automatically, I think.

What about those who say that the "real" Australia isn't in the countryside anyway, and that since Australia is one of the most highly urbanised countries in the world and has been so for a long time, that rural allegory is really not meaningful for most Australians?

Rural Australia was pretty real in Kate Kelly's time, even though there were a lot of people in the cities then. What was happening in rural Australia was historically extremely significant, especially round the period of the Selection Acts and the consequent formation of an Australian poor peasantry. The selectors thought that they would have the opportunity to rise, to become more than self-sufficient, and possibly even reasonably affluent. But they never achieved that. The squatters hovered over them, waiting to take their land as soon as they could.

The Selection Acts were extremely rigid. If the smallholders couldn't clear a certain proportion of their land, then they stood to lose it. The licences had to be renewed every three years and, given that most of those who had taken up selections were poor families, it was very hard for them to get their land cleared and the crops sown, to buy the seed and to actually work the land. If they weren't successful then the land was resumed and the local squatters, the local ruling class landowners, took it over as part of their runs. There was a lot of provocation on the squatters' part. They used to deliberately run their cattle over the selectors' land and then accuse them of cattle duffing. They used to deliberately break down fences and then accuse them of not developing their land. In class terms, what happened in the countryside between 1850 and 1900 was really important for the rest of Australia. Pastoral capital and its accumulation and expansion was the name of the game then. I agree that there is this whole rural myth in Australia which isn't based on much reality, but I think that this period was one where what was happening rurally was really important for the rest of the country.

It is significant in that respect that you dedicated *Sister Kate* to the memory of Ian Turner, a steadfast defender in Australian historiography of the legend of the bush-bred, independent, rural egalitarian Australia. Clearly, Turner has been an influence on your work, but what of the women writers of the Australian left? Do you feel yourself to be part of the tradition of Cusack, Devanny and Pritchard? Do you think that there is a viable, living tradition there at all?
I think it’s a viable tradition, though I don’t have very much literary sympathy with those women writers of the 1920s and 1930s. I think the Communist party interference in their work affected it badly and I believe they would have written much better work if they had not been subject to party scrutiny and censorship. It’s very hard to make didactic fiction work, anyway, even without that. The message has to somehow come through the sub-text and is lost if the writer sets out to tell people. I can’t think of many writers who have made it work; there’s de Beauvoir, and perhaps Doris Lessing, but I can’t think of any Australians who have written didactic fiction and still produced good literature. I don’t think I had any of those left women writers in mind when I was working. I was more influenced by people like Jean Rhys who wrote about women’s lives in the 1920s and 1930s in England and France. She didn’t write from an overtly left or feminist or even blue-stocking perspective, but nonetheless, Rhys presents us with a penetrating portrayal of women’s lives and the nature of the oppression women suffered then. I don’t think I considered myself to be writing in any tradition really; I was just trying to write Kate and get it finished with. I was simply trying to do the best job I could.

What you suggested about Turner, though, is quite true. He was a terrific history teacher. He was very anti-great men and battles, and pro-social context and understanding what the working people of the country lived through and created. That was what history was all about for Turner, reclaiming the texture of the lives of the working class, insisting that it never be forgotten or lost. I was very heavily influenced by him. He introduced me to oral history and showed me the importance in historiography of retrieving ordinary people’s lives.

Would you describe Sister Kate as a feminist novel?

Well, I hope it is, for I consider myself a feminist. But I wasn’t trying to put forward feminist objectives in the book and, indeed, it would have been impossible to do this in a book like Kate which deals with 19th century working class women; injecting feminism would have been anachronistic. I suppose, though, that some of it is anachronistic in that I probably gave Kate Kelly more liberal views than she would have held, given her social milieu. But I hope it’s a feminist book in that it retrieves some of the women’s part in the powerful Kelly legend. I suppose that I meant it to be a moral tale, one with lessons that still apply. Women can be destroyed if they have to live through men. I think that’s still true.

At the moment there appears to be some debate among women cultural workers about the representation of women in their work. Some say that women cultural workers should concentrate on detailing and revealing the oppression of women, others say that what is needed is the production of strong, almost, perhaps, heroic characters so that women can see the potential that exists for them in taking control of their own work and activities. How does Sister Kate come to terms with this dilemma?

I’ve made a conscious choice not to go for the latter; I’m much more interested in demonstrating what’s still so terribly wrong with women’s roles in the world. Until you understand the problem totally, and the mechanics of the problem fully, you’re not going to be able to posit real models for change. I don’t know any women who are heroic and who have “escaped” in any sense. Doris Lessing has turned to science fiction and has created a fantasy world in which there are heroic women, and it seems to me that such heroism would always have to be set in the future. Even women like me who have come from the working class and are now located in the middle class, with the affluence, freedoms and choices that brings, and which are denied to working class women, still carry within us all the seeds of being trapped and oppressed. We’ve just turned it into other feelings of insecurity and unconfidence. If I was to write about women like me as role models, I’d have to be fairly dishonest which, as a writer, is something I’d really rather not
be. I’d have to pretend that all the terrible things which I still think are wrong for women like me, don’t exist. I couldn’t offer us as a role model, we’re not there yet. I’m not saying that other women couldn’t write books about heroic women and make them honest and true. But I’m not interested in that, and I don’t think I’m capable of doing it.

You have suggested that the relationship of left women writers and, in particular, communist women writers, to the Communist party was one which was bad for the women themselves. Do you think it’s at all possible that not only writers, but women cultural workers generally, would be able to work inside an organisation like the Communist Party, or are organisations like that inherently destructive?

I hope it is possible, but I think that as soon as you start to impose any sort of line on art (or thought) you’re in danger of producing rubbish. It seems to me that what the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) did to its writers and artists, and what the Chinese and Soviet authorities have done more recently, is completely anti-marxist for it destroys one part of the dialectic, and prevents the possibility of growth. For socialism or communism to grow, it has to be able to accommodate change, and art and literature particularly are direct avenues for expressing both the need and the possible directions for change. The imposition of a line, such as social realism, freezes this crucial process.

There are communist writers and artists in Australia who don’t feel constrained. The CPA doesn’t attempt to impose a line or censorship as it did when it was stalinist. It worries me a bit that feminism has aspects of that sort of ”correct line” approach. That is, there are some truths that women find out about themselves, or think they find out about themselves, that are no good because they don’t ”fit” with the current correct line, so they’re disapproved of, or peer pressure is brought to bear, to see that they’re not developed. It is extremely worrying when political movements attempt to curtail their members’ expression of their own reality. Does that make sense?

Yes, it certainly does. The problem for me arises when I think of industrial workers. There are times, I think, when we would have no hesitation in saying to an individual worker, or section of workers within a union or plant, or a union or industry group within the labor movement, that they must curtail their actions and refrain from exercising their options, in the interests of winning a more general victory, or attaining some more common good. You are suggesting that this is not the case with cultural workers, that they are somehow different.

I think we are different. I don’t know much about the visual arts but, apart from them, language is all we have to express everything. It is the medium through which workers discuss whether or not they should, or should not, subsume their individual goals to some common good. Language, and expression, must remain free.

I don’t know .... I detest rightwing writers; I’m not at all dispassionate in that sense. Serious artists are only trying to express the truth of what they see around them, and if you interfere with that expression then you’re suppressing the truth. An industrial worker who says that he genuinely doesn’t want to act in the politically correct manner, for whatever reason, should be able to do that too.

But I suppose I do think that cultural workers are different. The nature of our work is different.

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