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Jack Hodgins

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Abstract
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Jack Hodgins. Photograph by Lawrence McLagan.
Jack, I'd like to begin by asking you to tell a little about your Vancouver Island background.

I was born into a family of loggers and farmers in a tiny community - it wasn't even a town, just a sort of crossroads - of sixty-acre farms: people worked in the woods as loggers, but at home they had a couple of cows and a chicken-run and huge gardens. A person's father spent the days up in the mountains cutting down all the giant trees and then came home and spent the rest of the time clearing land for pasture. It was a community where hardly anybody went on to University and certainly few people read books. I went to a very small school, where I read the whole library, which was one shelf across the back of a classroom, quite quickly. So I did a lot of re-reading of books. I think that might be significant. The few books that I read I re-read many times.

What kind of books were they?

Everything - particularly aimed at young people, like the Hardy Boys - that kind of stuff. But also historical novels. Anything I could get my hands on. Probably little that was 'good' literature. I was in high school before I started reading people like Thornton Wilder and Ernest Hemingway. My mother was a reader and tended to get Book-of-the-Month-Club type of books, so I read a lot of those. I was given books for Christmas by relatives but, I sensed, with some disdain: 'He's not much good at things that matter, but at least he can read, so give him a book.'

What would have been the normal expectation for someone in your situation?

Books were something that people 'did' when they didn't have anything that needed doing. In other words, they were purely for recreation,
purely for filling in time. But in a community like that there was never a time when you shouldn't be doing something else. There were fences to be mended and cows to be milked and gardens to be weeded and firewood to be hauled: decent proper things that you should be doing with your time. So reading books was always stolen time for me, and it was a thing that was never considered appropriate behaviour - for a boy especially. Books were for old women. People actually said that. I was very careful for many years not to be caught too often with a book in my hand...

But I did have an inspiring English teacher in high school.

*It's an old story.*

This young fellow moved into the district. It was his first teaching job. He was right out of University. He was twenty-two, or something like that. He was a baseball player of some talent who therefore became known in the whole valley. He had apparently just broken off an engagement: so he was a plum catch for everybody's daughters and was invited everywhere. He happened to board in a house owned by some people my parents know. He had a way of teaching literature that was just magical. A wonderful teacher! But the fact that he was a male was already a completely foreign thing. For a male to be standing at the front of the room reading poetry and talking about Gray's 'Elegy in a Country Churchyard' as if it was a normal thing for people to do was quite astonishing. And then to overhear his landlady telling my mother that he sat up all the night *typing* because he wanted to be a writer, changed my whole life. This was the man who, when Hemingway won the Nobel prize, ordered six copies of *The Old Man and the Sea*, so that we could actually 'read' it. He read the whole thing to us. This was to a bunch of guys and girls who would never have been exposed to anything like that before at all... I never told him at the time how inspiring he was as a teacher. And I never told him I wanted to write. It took me fifteen years to write to that man and tell him how important he'd been.

Actually we had a kind of reunion years later. He was a guest speaker at a conference in Calgary. So was I. He stood up and told all these people from right across the country about his first teaching job - he described the school right to a tee, said how proud he was of me. We both got quite sentimental about it all... He's a real hero to me. He came in to our little isolated community from outside and showed me that something unthinkable was possible. Since then, I understand he's moved to Australia!
Your fiction does often have outsiders coming into the community and having a great effect, for better or worse.

Yes. It seems to be a natural pattern for me: to establish a set-up that looks pretty stable and then bring in an outsider. The latest novel does the same thing. The community is set and the people are happy and then this woman steps off the boat and all hell breaks loose. It is one way stories get started in my imagination.

The destabilising usually seems to be quite a positive process.

Oh yes. I think it can be. Maybe it comes out of the kind of experience I've just described: people came into that closed, small community where I felt... I don't know what the word is... I'm in the process of sorting it through. The next book I'm going to write is dealing with this. On the one hand, much of my writing seems to be celebrating the sense of community that you can have in a small place. On the other hand, I remember how painfully restrictive it was. This other side that I'm trying to capture is the way in which a community like that assigns roles to people, condemns people to roles which they find difficult to break out of. People are almost instantly described with maybe two adjectives. That describes their entire life, and people will tend to grow up and live them. My younger brother at the age of two was already 'the hellion' of the family. He still refers to himself as 'the black sheep'. (It is probably the only family in the world in which 'black sheep' is a compliment!) People were all labelled very quickly. That's the painful, horrifying side of this enviable sense of community. That's what I'm exploring now...

What was your journey out of that community?

I was quite young, actually, though it seemed to take forever. I was seventeen when I graduated from high school and went to Vancouver, to the University of British Columbia. I was very anxious to get out, although I was then homesick for most of the first year. It was a huge leap. I had only been off the island, maybe twice.

Was there any opposition?

Oh no. It was accepted as natural and right. Maybe this is where that role-assigning came to my rescue. It was always known, it seems to me in retrospect, that I would go off to University. It was always insisted within the family, for instance, that we could be anything we wanted
to be in this world except loggers. My mother said she was willing to spend her life worrying about her husband; she was not going to spend her life worrying about her children. People were killed all the time in the logging camp. My parents were always encouraging of my plans.

What was that life like that you missed out on?

It meant going off into the mountains every morning at something like four or five o’clock and working with trees that were giants. They were cutting down trees that were fifteen feet across the base and three to four hundred feet high, with pretty appalling safety standards in those days. My Dad had two brothers killed in the woods. This was fairly normal. He was wounded a couple of times. I remember as a child there was one time when he didn’t come home. If he was even five minutes late the tension level in the house was incredible. If he was a half hour late we were all packed into the car and headed out to company Headquarters where the officers worked to see what was wrong. When he did come home the next day, this particular time, his head was entirely wrapped in bandages, with just two eyes looking out. I thought he was a mummy. A limb had fallen and cut open his nose and cut off part of his ear. The fact that he was alive was something to celebrate. It was a very, very dangerous life. I wasn’t even tempted... I went to UBC and took teacher-training. The biggest scholarship in the district was earmarked for teacher-training. I thought, ‘Well, I have to be something, so I might as well be that.’ I had had more than one good teacher as a role model. I had a Math teacher I admired. The English teacher was very serious and very young and very eager, while the Math teacher was laid-back, joking, made everything very easy to learn. By the time I was through my five years of University I realised I wanted to be both of them in the class-room... I got my degree in secondary education and started teaching high-school English and Math.

All the time I was at University though, in my heart I knew that I would write a best-seller before I ever had to graduate and go into a class-room. I never really believed I’d have to go into a class-room. This was the time when a whole bunch of nineteen-year-old sensations hit the world as writers: Françoise Sagan, Marie-Claire Blais in Quebec... When I got to be twenty-two and I still hadn’t published a book I thought, ‘Oh God...’

Were you writing by that time?

I started writing when I started reading, I guess, when I was six. I wrote a novel when I was fourteen, in a scribbler with a pencil - set in
ancient Rome. It started out with the Emperor pacing up and down the hallways complaining because the Christians were making too much noise in the jails. It obviously came from watching movies. Those were the days of ‘Quo Vadis’ and ‘The Robe’. I was writing while I was in school; but I didn’t tell anybody. I was writing while I was at University. I took one course from Earle Birney. There was no Creative Writing Department, but Birney, who was a highly respected poet and successful novelist, was teaching in the English Department. I remember again it was one of those turning points in my life... A long, long skinny man with white floating hair... I’d read some of his work. I knew his reputation. I thought, ‘I’ve got to study with that guy.’ There were two writing courses. One was introductory - poetry, fiction and drama - and if you passed that you could go into a second year in fiction. I wanted to go straight into the second year, so I went to him and asked if I could get into the course. He said, ‘Well, show me some of your work.’ So I showed him two or three short stories and he took me into his course. And then gave me terrible marks for my first stories - it was a real shock to me. I thought, ‘I’ll show you!’ Gradually, I improved. By Christmas I was getting A’s... but it was sheer determination to show him that he hadn’t made a mistake in letting me into the advanced class.

Do you regard Birney as a mentor?

I think the important thing was that he took my work seriously... I’m very grateful to him. Years and years and years later The Resurrection of Joseph Bourne won the Governor-General’s Award, which was to be given in Vancouver that year. The Governor-General was to make the presentation as always, but Tito died in Yugoslavia and the Governor-General had to go to the funeral. They asked Earle Birney to give the Awards in his stead. I guess he must have been given the winning books to read on the plane from Toronto. He said he was half way across the country before he made the connection that I was a former student of his. It was quite thrilling for me to actually have this wonderful old man - I think he was eighty by then - give me the prize.

Then you went teaching...

I do not know how I did this. I married, moved to the Island, started a family, built a house, started a career teaching, taught night school in order to finish the rooms of the house - one room at a time - and wrote five novels in the first five years. I don’t know how I did it. These were all novels that I never published. Actually, I probably didn’t
do five that fast. But I did a lot of short stories, and eventually did five novels that were never published. But I was writing every spare moment when I wasn’t hammering nails. This is a very Vancouver Island thing to do, by the way. You grew up, you started yourself a family and you built yourself a house.

But you didn’t write yourself five novels.

Obviously I was proving that I was normal while privately doing this very perverse thing that was anything but normal. And I never told anybody outside of my immediate family - until I finally sold a story, at age twenty-nine.

To?

*Northwest Review* in Oregon. I sold stories to a number of American magazines, and even an Australian magazine, before any Canadian magazine would touch me.

Which was the Australian magazine?

Westerly.

So that was the beginning of your interest in Australia?

Yes. Bill New at the University of British Columbia was a good friend of mine. He and I went through teacher-training together, but he stayed on and got his Master’s degree and then went off and got his Doctorate in England. He read my work and gave me critiques. I guess I must have said, ‘Look - I’ve run out of places to send stories. Where do I send them?’ He said, ‘Who don’t you try Australia?’ He gave me the names of some Australian magazines - *Westerly* and *Meanjin*. *Westerly* sounded attractive because I identify with the West.

I guess I had twenty stories published before anyone was interested in a collection. In fact, when Macmillan (Canada) did show some interest in seeing my short stories I sent them twenty stories which had been published in magazines and they picked ten of them. Then, in the period that it took for this book to come out I was constantly writing new stories and adding them and withdrawing other stories. So by the time *Spit Delaney’s Island* came out, it was quite a different book than the one originally accepted.

*It had in fact become a book in which the stories were not utterly discrete.*
Oh yes. In fact both of the Spit Delaney stories were added after the book was accepted. I wrote one Spit Delaney story and sent it in and then six months later - it took a while for the book to come out - I felt ‘incomplete’ about Spit: something was still needed, and I sat down and wrote the other story. I kept the very first story that I had published in for sentimental reasons. I’m kind of glad because, even though I think it’s very derivative, it seems to appeal to other people. There is a guy right now making an animated cartoon of it, and there was a television adaptation of it, ‘Every Day of His Life’, and a stage adaptation will soon be produced.

The teaching seems to have left its mark in at least one way, Jack - that is, although you eventually gave it up to concentrate on writing, you’re teaching again now in the Creative Writing programme at the University of Victoria. Then there are the three books for schools, which have become text books. Do you think there is a connection between the writing and the teaching?

I suspect there is, though it is hard sometimes for me to see it. They seem like totally separate worlds; and yet I know that the teaching is good for me as a writer. Working with the students is good because it forces me to think about what I’m doing. I have to understand why I’m doing things in certain ways in order to help a student solve his or her problems in writing, not by giving them my solutions but by knowing the process I go through to get the solutions. Also I’ve seen students starting with a problem that I’ve had to help them solve and I’ll be able to see that remarkably often that’s exactly what I was looking for in something I’m working on. The other thing that is useful is that it forces me out of the house. My instinct would be to become something of a hermit. I find it very hard to face the public. I find it very hard to go into the classroom - after all these years. I’ve been teaching for twenty-nine years and I still find it difficult to walk into the classroom. If I didn’t have the job I would be in danger of becoming very anti-social and very private.

And yet, thinking of the life of a hermit, one imagines a certain fixity. There is so much travelling in your fiction - not just travelling for its own sake, rather as a virtue of some kind.

Yes - exploring the world. Travelling as the journey of a person’s life: it’s all very important to me. But much of it has been a great effort. I will always do these things because I know that I will be glad I’ve done them and it’s good for me and I need to do them; otherwise I will turn into a cobwebbed, dusty curmudgeon.
I have always thought that there is a creative tension in your writing between the idea of being in a place and the other idea of moving out from that place.

I'm not surprised. I'm not deliberately putting it there; but it exists in my life. It exists within me - that kind of tension out of my childhood, the desirability of a community but the negative things, the tensions between the good and the bad. I guess I feel ambivalent about almost everything. That can be quite good for a fiction writer. It saves me from ever becoming too dogmatic. The minute I start feeling I really know something for sure this time, I start to see the other side of it. It's great for fiction, but it's hell for 'real life'... In fact, one of the tensions in my life is that I always find it easier to be in someone else's shoes than in my own. I'm constantly identifying with other people and suffering on their behalf. So, that business of searching for a place, the travel through the world is very important to me: the exploring, the journey, the growing. To me, all travel is growth. But at the same time it's also a search for home. I think I've always been searching for a new version of the home I left behind when I was seventeen. I know I'll never find it and that it doesn't exist. When I go back to the original, it's great to visit my parents, and I love going back and exploring things, but I know I could never live there.

But you don't really live far from there, do you?

I'm four hours away. No - it's not far. It's still the same world. It's still the same island. But I'm living in a small city...

What was your sense of the City when you were a child in the Valley?

Oh, the City was a magic world where everybody was intelligent and everybody read books, and everybody had a tolerance for people who read books. They were another breed. There was something understood in that community that people who lived in the city were a cut above other people. You know, 'Some day if we have enough money we can move to town.' Town was seven miles away - just a little town - but that was a cut above: polite society in the Town. We were peasants. We lived in the bush. To go to the City was even a step beyond going to Town. It was entering the world of the educated. The wealthy, the cultured - and the magical. Of course, it was a distorted vision.

What about Toronto and the cities of the East?
Toronto was as far away as New York or Los Angeles or Tokyo in my imagination. It was the source of a lot of things that came into the home. It was the source of television. It was the source of a lot of books. It had that kind of magic. It was where you wanted your publisher to be if you ever had one. But it wasn’t a place I was tempted to move to.

In Vancouver you were not ever part of a literary circle or anything like that?

Interestingly enough, it was at a time when there was the growth of a very strong literary school in Vancouver - the Black Mountain school. I was in the same American literature class as George Bowering, for instance; but I was not part of the campus literary scene. I was a country kid who had come to the City to learn the skills that were going to get me my passport to that magical world where I would suddenly turn into William Faulkner.

Faulkner is an influence that you have had to resist, isn’t he?

Yes. I fell under the spell of his rhetoric very early. I probably had a distorted view of him. I fell in love with his language and with his region and with the people that he wrote about. I somehow felt that they had a lot in common with the people I had grown up with. For years I thought this was a figment of my imagination, that I wanted to see my own world in his. When I went to Mississippi about eight years ago - to Oxford - to his house, I was surprised at the number of things the place had in common with where I had grown up. It wasn’t just my imagination after all. There was a landscape that seemed very similar to the Comox Valley. I think maybe it was also that underlying melodrama within Faulkner that attracted me. It seemed to me that he was getting away with writing about pretty melodramatic stuff, but somehow making it sound as if it were much much more than mere melodrama. And I found myself trying to imitate his writing, writing novels that you’d swear were set in the South - you know, plantation houses sitting on the edge of a cliff on Vancouver Island. Terrible. Terrible. It was almost as though I wanted to take his skin and put it on. I liked everything about his public image. The gentleman farmer - I liked that image: the fellow who lived in a beautiful mansion and rode horses and didn’t do anything else but write books in his little office... I didn’t find out until reading a recent biography that he was going crazy trying to write enough to make enough money to keep sixteen adults alive, because they all depended upon him for their living - his mother, his brothers, his stepchildren...
How did you go about writing against Faulkner?

The first thing I did was to decide I couldn’t read him any more.

What stage of your writing career was this?

We’re talking about my late twenties, when I still hadn’t published anything but was writing all those novels and all those short stories. His was the standard of excellence and I wanted to write things to sit beside his novels. I somehow got it into my head that they had to be like his. But at some point I had to decide ‘No more Faulkner. I’ve got to find my own way of writing and my own world to write about.’ That’s when I started to learn to write. Late twenties - I hadn’t sold a story - and I decided this was it. ‘If I don’t sell a story by the time I’m thirty I’m not going to write again.’ So I got out every book I could find on writing from the library and I read them all and made notes about how to do things. After all this time - it was the first time I’d ever sat down and thought, ‘Maybe I can actually teach myself how to write.’ I re-read a number of short stories that I really admired and I took them all apart to see what made them work. I remember lying on my stomach on the living-room floor and starting to write a story, thinking ‘I’m going to put in everything I know how to do.’ And I sold the story. That was my first. It saved my life! And I decided that if I could do it once I could do it another time. To that point it had all been fantasy. I’d been thinking, ‘If I want it bad enough it will happen.’ I hadn’t had the humility to learn how to make it happen, tiny step by tiny step.

In finding your own way to write and your own world to write about, how conscious were you of the blend that you were throwing together of epic, allegory, parody, etc. - all of the things that work so well in your writing, but which traditionally of course were thought to be separate genres?

Much of this was a response to an impossibility. First I had to learn how to listen to the voices of my own world. ‘Those are the people whose stories I’m going to try and write. I’m going to have to accept the fact that I’ve been given Vancouver Island. I’ve not been given New York, or Los Angeles, or London, or Dublin.’ It took a while to realise I had been given a kind of goldmine. I’m glad now that I didn’t have James Joyce looking over one shoulder and W.B. Yeats looking over the other shoulder. I had nobody looking over my shoulder at all. I had no models in that landscape or with those people. I was writing about people I had never seen on the page myself, aside from in some nature books by Roderick Haig-Brown. I was writing dialogue that was not
like dialogue that I had read before, because people on Vancouver Island talk slightly different from people elsewhere. The short stories I was writing were pretty traditional in structure and approach, but in the back of my head was this big thing beginning to form that didn’t look like anything I’d ever seen before. There was no reason to believe that this would be something you could call a ‘novel’, or something that you could put between covers. I spent a lot of time trying to think of a way to fit this story into a traditional pattern. It didn’t work. And there came a time - I can remember making this decision - ‘I’ve written five safe, imitative novels that nobody wanted. What have I got to lose? I’m going to write this one the way I want to write it!’ I took a half year off teaching and every day went into a room and just sort of listened - and it came in rapid passionate bursts of energy that lasted for a certain length of time and then disappeared - and then a whole new kind of energy and a whole new way of looking at it came for a while and then disappeared. I came back, for instance, from a summer in Ireland - full of the rhythms of the Irish language, having found my stone circle and all the things, the deserted village and so on, that I had gone off to find for the story. I just sat down and I thought: ‘I’m going to tell a story about this weird guy that led all these Irishmen to Vancouver Island. Beyond that I don’t have any responsibility. Plot-wise I don’t have to make anything fit. I only have to sit down and explain how he got from there to here. Whatever happens, I’ll write.’ I sat down and just listened to it - and the first sentence came, and the second sentence, and the third sentence ... I wrote the entire Irish section of what was later to become *The Invention of the World* in three weeks. And it was three weeks in which, at the end of every day, I was just shaking. I’d come out of the room with sweat pouring down my face - in another world. It came to a point where it ended. I had written a mythic Irish ‘thing’ - I didn’t know what it was. I just knew I had it, that it was complete and I daren’t touch it.

*Did you research that Irish section of The Invention of the World?*

Yes I did. I looked for specific places. I knew I had this story that I wanted to tell. I thought, ‘Well, OK - it’s a weird story. So I’d better anchor it in real things: a real village that I’ve seen with my own eyes and have pictures of, a real stone circle that I’ve touched and walked through and just turned cold in the presence of. I could point it out on the map. I went to a lot of stone circles that were sort of touristy and spoiled for me because there were signs and trails... And I was in a little village. The tour book said there was a stone circle somewhere around this village, but everywhere I asked they said, ‘Oh no - not
around here.' I knew there was one. While I was talking to this old fellow who was telling me there was no such thing my eyes went up the side of the hill and I saw a standing stone at the top of the hill with the sun shining off it. I didn't say anything to him; but I thought, 'There's something up there.' I took the family back to the house - it was just about two miles away from the house we were renting - and I went back after supper just as the sun was going down into the Atlantic. I went up to the top of that hill - and there it was! There were three huge slabs of stone standing up facing the sinking sun and a stone circle around them - and nothing else except a bunch of cows standing looking at one. And a cold, cold wind. It was as if I had actually found the novel lying there on the ground. It was an incredible moment. I came down that mountain knowing I had a novel and I could write it.

But you already knew about the crazy prophet...

Yes - I knew the pattern. I knew I was going to write a novel about a failed Utopian colony - a novel set in a place on Vancouver Island where a group of people had come from somewhere and tried to set up this community, but the leader was corrupt and had turned people into his slaves. This was actually suggested by a real colony on Vancouver Island. According to local legend, Brother Twelve gathered wealthy people from all over the world and turned them into his slaves there. It was just one of many different examples of failed Utopian colonies on Vancouver Island. So I knew I had that sort of historical basis to work with. But I had to find my own things to use. I did a lot of reading on circles and squares, circles and tangents and all the meanings of Medieval alchemy. One thing led to another. I had this great elaborate thing on my hands. It came in packages. Something that made me think that I could risk it was reading a wonderful novel called Tay John - by Howard O'Hagan - a British Columbian novel - divided into three parts. In the first part he treated the main character as a mythical heroic figure, to whom you never got very close; in the second part you actually had an eye-witness account of what this guy had done; and in the third part you went right in close to him, so that he became more and more human as the novel went on. I thought I would use that pattern: the mythic part, the eye-witness part, and the inside part. And alternating with that I would tell the quite opposite story of somebody contemporary. I actually ended up with huge charts on the wall to show me how I was structuring this novel. But to get to your question finally: I didn't sit down and say, 'OK - the second part is going to be a mock myth and some of it will be allegory and the last part is
going to be mock epic.' It's just that when the time came that's what felt right. Certain works that I happened to be teaching at the time contributed to this. I was teaching a course in which every year I was re-acquainted with 'The Rape of the Lock', and had great fun with it. When I got to the last section of The Invention of the World it occurred to me that the only possible way to end this novel was with an ordinary wedding that gets way out of hand. It was a wonderful experience for a writer - just wind 'er up and let 'er rip! It's a youthful novel, I think, dependent upon its great energy - written, so to speak, with a chain saw.

I wondered in fact whether there was any consciousness of the politics of this. You are dealing with a dystopian fiction - not only in this novel, though perhaps particularly in it - a journey from the Old World to the New; but in the process of your writing from the Old World to the New you do invent something new.

I think that in a sense I was aware that that was what I was doing, but I wouldn't have been able to articulate it. All I had was the need to tell that story, the need to find a shape for that story, and a few novels that I'd read. Tay John was one, and Rudy Wiebe's The Blue Mountains of China (which looks like a book of stories but is really a novel), Ray Smith's Lord Nelson's Tavern and David Godfrey's The New Ancestors - all of which look nothing like anything that I'd been taught a novel was supposed to look like. Something in me said, 'If these guys can do this and call it a novel, then I can do it too.' What may be related to something we now see was happening all over the Commonwealth was at the time really a personal response to the fact that I had no literary predecessors on my own soil. I had to invent my own kind of novel to deal with a people and an island that had not been written about before in serious fiction. What we now see, I guess, is that people all over the Commonwealth have been responding to the fact that we were writing in a language that was invented for another place. We had to change it to suit our place. We took a long time to notice that it is also possible to change the structures.

It seems in a way appropriate that the writer you decided to write against is American - not an English writer, which is more likely to have been what an Australian writer would have written against.

That was the glamorous literature next door. English literature was presented to us as the real literature of the world and American literature was presented to us as the exciting literature of the world: on the one
hand, this is the tradition; but, on the other hand, this is what is really happening! I think that deep in the hearts of a lot of Canadians growing up then was a sense of 'If only I had been born on the other side of the border I would have had a completely different life.' You could have been Faulkner if you were in America; but, because you were not, you were doomed (you thought) to eternal invisibility - an invisible citizen of an inconsequential country. Of course, this feeling could coexist with an equally strong sense of excitement at being born in a country which was still trying to find what made it different or justified its existence...

**How did you come to the next novel - after The Invention of the World?**

*The Resurrection of Joseph Bourne* grew out of my driving into a little north-Island community that was in the habit of sliding down the mountainside every time they had too much rain. People would sometimes be hurt, but more often their houses were pushed off the foundations, their cars were buried, that kind of stuff. They'd get up the next morning and start putting everything back just the way it was. If anybody ever suggested that they move the town to another location they really resented it. Something about that place kind of triggered something in my head: what kind of people would live here? What does the place suggest anyway? I saw this as the precariousness of living on the west coast of the most westerly part of Canada, with nothing between there and Japan... All these people clinging to the edge of the earth, which then suggested metaphor: people clinging to earth, people clinging to material things.

*Again it was a very different exploration of the dynamic between place and community, wasn't it?*

Yes. It grew out of the questions, 'Why are these people living here? Where have they come from?' I did a bit of research, a bit of asking around. In fact, like most of the West Coast, those towns are made up of runaways, people who have left everything behind somewhere else; and here they are clinging to the edge of the world. So I just sort of gradually created a population of people looking for home.

**What about the idea of the New Man?**

This is well embedded in religious and literary symbolism: the idea of renewal. Again, it goes back to the same thing: somebody comes in from outside, shakes the earth underneath your feet and you've got to
find a way of standing upright again. So it is that transformation that I was interested in. Can a place, can a people, can a person survive that kind of shake-up? In a way, I’m asking myself that question all the time I’m writing that novel. But while I’m writing it, because I realise I’m dealing with some pretty serious stuff here,’ and the other part of me is saying, ‘Well, come on, don’t take yourself too seriously,’ I start playing around. And the next thing I know - well, they tell me I’m writing parody. ‘Hey, you’ve written a parody of an eighteenth-century novel!’ Or something like that. I guess, because I’m aware that I’m dealing with topics that are pretty serious and pretty important to me, that the more I can balance it with irony or satire or mockery the more palliative the piece will be. There is something in me that is constantly undercutting. If I ever catch myself taking myself too seriously, there’s a mocking voice there pulling me up.

Why always the false prophet? It is a recurring figure in your writing...

When I’m writing, I’m constantly asking, ‘What if this were true? or what if that were true? or have you ever thought of looking at it this way? or why do we automatically accept that way of looking at things? why isn’t there another way of looking at things?’ So that every false prophet implies a true prophet. By looking at false prophets maybe I’m looking for a true prophet. It’s like shining a light on something to see what’s behind it, to see if there is something true behind the lie: that is what I’m constantly chasing after.

After the two novels you decided to publish a second volume of stories, Barclay Family Theatre. Had you been writing these throughout the period in between the first and the second collection?

Yes. A number of them had actually been written at the time that Spit Delaney’s Island came out. Some of them were newer. When I was preparing them I saw that the old stories and new stories had some common elements, that I was dealing with a family, and that the family was very much like my own family. I was exploring some of my own roots here, to do with becoming a writer, to do with the arts in a place like Vancouver Island - essentially, I guess, the discovery that even in the so-called uncultured places people still have a way of making art forms. It may not be ballet but may be plays in the local woodshed. It came together gradually. I began to realise that I was exploring some of the adults of my childhood, those archetypal figures that don’t ever go away. You keep trying to write about them again and again and you never succeed.
Does this relate at all to the increased length of some of the stories in Barclay Family Theatre?

I discover the older I get the longer the stories get. I don’t know that I’ll ever be able to write another short story. I’m amazed that people can write short stories - because to get anything into a short story you have to decide that it is possible to say everything in twenty pages or less. I now find it almost impossible to say anything in five hundred pages or less. One thing leads to another. The world is far too complex and interconnected. I find it also very hard now to be interested in only one person in a story - that interest in one leads to an interest in another, and another and another. The short story for me is not appropriate for that sort of exploration.

Is this what lies behind the idea of discontinuous story structure - some kind of linking of stories within a larger structure? I know that you are a fan of Chaucer, too, where you have the sense of community as well as tales that are connected in some way.

It seems appropriate not only to my reading tastes but to the place. You know that with a population of a certain size living on an island that paths are going to cross. There would be something essentially dishonest about pretending otherwise. If I wrote six thousand short stories all set on Vancouver Island and the people never bumped into one another it would be telling a lie. It’s just an accurate reflection of real life: people find out they are related to one another when they are sixty years old. So they are going to wander in and out of each other’s stories - and they are starting to wander into the next thing I’m writing too. I think that will continue.

What was the genesis of The Honorary Patron?

That novel grew out of two sources. One was being invited to Vienna to a conference on Canadian Literature. It was my first trip to Continental Europe. While I was in Zurich, sitting in a roof-top cafe, I had a very strong image of an elderly distinguished gentleman sitting at a table. I imagined him sitting at the table by the balcony, looking down at the river quay and waiting agitatedly for somebody. I started to imagine who he was waiting for. I got a picture of a professorial Canadian waiting for some terrifying person out of the past to come and corner him there. I wrote a few pages of that and put it away. Then not long afterwards I was invited to be an artistic patron at the inaugural season of a theatre festival in the town where I had lived and
taught for eighteen years before moving to Victoria. I found myself on
the opening night sitting on the terrace on a hillside overlooking the
town, listening to interminable speeches as the clouds got darker and
darker and darker. Lord Somebody from England was there as the
'honorary patron', and the Mayor was making speeches, and all the
politicians were making speeches... I was sitting beside this Lord. He
had a speech four inches thick that he was going to read. All the time
everybody was looking at the sky, because obviously it was going to
rain. Just before we got to my speech the skies opened up. A real West
Coast downpour! Everybody got up and ran for the building. Suddenly
I realised that that man I 'saw' in the roof-top cafe in Zurich was the
professor who had been dragged home to be the Honorary Patron at
a theatre festival in the most unlikely place for a theatre festival in the
world. The guy has been away forty years. What is it like to be
dragged back by the lover of your youth to be a distinguished gentle-
man in your old age? The old guy had decided that his life was over;
but she had other plans for him. It is a love story of advanced age.

It begins, then, exactly as you imagined it: with this man waiting in the cafe
on the rooftop, and with the reader waiting for something to happen just as
you had to wait yourself for the character to develop and have something to do.
I wouldn't want to put a handle on how Jack Hodgins opens his novels; but
it strikes me that this is somehow a very different opening...

I'm not surprised to hear you say that. I often like to start novels right
in the middle of things. Somebody is already on the street and walking
when I come in. It may mean I've thrown away the first ten pages. It
usually means I've written the first page - or ten pages - a thousand
times until I've got my voice. With *The Resurrection of Joseph Bourne*, for
instance, I could not possibly write that novel until I had written the
first couple of pages over and over and over again until I had a
rhythm that just carried me along - and hopefully the reader as well.
But with this one I was dealing with a quieter, more patient novel. It
is asking the reader to trust me. It is a novel that doesn't rely on acro-
batics of any kind. I was trying to write in a style that was appropriate
to the place. He's from Zurich. He's a man who goes often to Vienna
to look at paintings. He's an art historian. It had to begin as a Euro-
pean novel. But of course as the novel progresses on Vancouver Island,
where theatre festivals become stock car races, the language has to be-
gin to break down, to change.

*Rhythmically, the opening reminds me a little of Death in Venice.*
Death in Venice was one of the inspirations. One of the things I wanted to do was take the Death in Venice pattern beyond death, if you wish. In other words, let the guy bottom out; but instead of having him die at the end, see if I can bring him back to life - or see if Elizabeth can bring him back to life. The old man, like Mann’s hero, becomes obsessed; and the obsession could finish him. But I had somebody standing in the wings. I had Elizabeth, who is not going to let that happen. Of course, because he is on Vancouver Island and not in Venice, it has to be a different kind of ending.

Did you go through the same process of re-writing the first ten pages of your new novel, Innocent Cities, over and over?

Yes - in fact, writing the first hundred pages - and throwing away a lot.

What is it that takes you from publishing a story in Westerly to the Australian hippies in the story, ‘The Plague Children’, to the Australia/Canada Literary Award, to the new novel being set, in part, in Ballarat?

Australia has always been an exotic place in my imagination. When I first moved to Victoria I signed up for evening classes in local history, taught by a brilliant historian-biographer. She was teaching us social history, telling us the stories of real people who had lived in the place. Every week I’d go home saying, ‘I’ve just heard a brilliant novel. I’ve just heard a brilliant TV series. Or I’ve just heard of a brilliant idea for a short story, or play or whatever.’ But there was one story that intrigued me so much that when the course was over I approached the teacher and said, ‘Are you going to do any more with that?’

And she said, ‘No. [Pause] I knew you were here for a reason, you sly soul. You want it, don’t you?’ [Laughter]

I said, ‘Yeah - I’ve got to write that story.’

She said, ‘Well, you can have it,’ and she even offered me some of her research.

It was the story of a family in Victoria that was exploded apart by the arrival of an outsider, a woman who came from Ballarat in Australia. In fact the story began growing in the historian’s mind, as well as in mine, when she found a letter in the archives from this woman back to her sister in Ballarat. And it went something like,

Dear Emma, Do you remember when you and I were walking along the path by Lake Wendouree and Old Leathercheeks came up to us and said, ‘Would one of you young ladies marry me?’ And you looked at me and said, ‘I’ll marry him if you’ll sleep with him.’ Well, dear Emma, I’d like to offer you something simi-
Jar. Dear John and I have a happy marriage except that he finds me spoiled, having had another marriage...

I can’t remember how she put it, but she wasn’t all that thrilled with sex herself. But if her sister would emigrate to Canada, then they could share the husband - and everybody would be happy.

Well, the sister was on the next boat to Canada...

*Is this for real?*

This is for real. I’m not telling you the novel; I’m telling you the real. So - where did this woman come from? Why are they here from Ballarat? Well, the story unfolds with a family that was in Victoria, owned a hotel - a very popular man and a very loving wife and a whole slew of adopted orphan children. They were just too good to be true - except the guy was always in court for punching people in the face, cheating on horse races and stuff like that. He was very popular. This woman stepped off the boat and, after looking the territory over, announced that this guy was her husband - and that she wanted him back! Then she proceeded to use every dirty trick in the book to get him back. And she did - destroyed the family, got her husband back, and the hotel. It turned out that he had married her when they were both young in Manchester. He actually was engaged to the oldest sister; but the night before he left for America he married the younger sister. For one night - and then took off. When he sent for her five years later - he sent five hundred bucks for her to come and join him - the older sister got the letter. She opened it. There was a picture. She tore it in little pieces, put it back in the envelope, kept the five hundred bucks and she mailed the envelope to the guy in San Francisco. He interpreted that as 'Get lost!' And he and the washerwoman from next door moved up to Victoria and lived happily ever after - till this gal, who had just been widowed in Ballarat, comes looking for him.

That was the basic structure I was working with. That’s all in the archives. It’s from family letters and from this historian in Victoria.

*Which archives?*

In Ballarat archives and in the Victoria B.C. archives. This woman had done a lot of that research. She told that little story I just told to you in just one chapter of a little book of local history, a book that tourists buy when they come to Victoria.

*What period are you dealing with?*
This was the 1880s - the height of the Victorian age. What had happened is that people moved from goldrush to goldrush. These people were born in the same town in England - Manchester. People rushed out to the goldrush in California. Then some of them rushed off to the goldrush in Ballarat. Then I think they split up: they rushed off to Western Australia or they rushed up to British Columbia. A lot of people ended up in Victoria who had all started out together. The British empire was like a big family. People were constantly crossing each other's paths.

I saw that story as irresistible. First, I didn't know who was the main character. All of those people were equally interesting. But I thought, 'The guy is the one who is the most passive, because these women fight over him. So he's not a good one for a main character, even though in the non-fiction version he is the main character. The wife is too put upon, too sympathetic. I didn't find her the right person. But the bad guy - the woman from Australia [Laughter] - was the one who interested me the most. She became a Shakespearean tragic figure. She got her husband back but things turned out quite differently than she'd planned - tragically, in fact. So I thought she would make the most interesting central character. Still, I invented a fictitious character as the central consciousness, a young widower who is courting the daughter of the family.

This of course led into a need for a lot of research... Coincidentally, at this time I won the Canada/Australia Literary Award. The Literature Board in Sydney wrote and said, 'When are you coming? What do you want to do? Who do you want to meet? Where do you want to go?' So I gave them my shopping list of places I wanted to go and writers I wanted to meet - and I also said, 'Probably nobody has asked this before, but I want to go to Ballarat.'

When I got to Ballarat people were ready for me, thanks to the Literature Board. A college instructor was kind of a host to me, and his wife. The librarian, Peter Mansfield, threw open the archives and made his staff available to me; and he also drove me around town, showed me what buildings would have been there, what the architecture was like. We even looked up the records. We couldn't find her, of course, because she was a woman. But we found her husband - the husband that died - and found out what street she lived on before she came to Canada. And I was also able to ask all different kinds of questions, like 'How high would that tree be then?' Or, 'What would that park have looked like then?' I brought up the local paper on the screen and read a lot of ads and things like that to see what was being said and done in Ballarat in those days. I made a lot of notes and I bought books of Ballarat history...
Ballarat must lead to a completely different kind of rhythm.

Yes. In fact, I wrote the Ballarat section first, as soon as I got home from Australia. Again it was like the Irish experience: ‘I better do this before I forget.’ And the first sentence that came to me set the tone for the whole novel. It began with the image of this woman every morning at dawn coming out on to the front verandah of her little miner’s cottage with her husband’s musket and blasting at the cockatoos in the upper branches of the bluegums across the street.

The novel is set mostly in Victoria, British Columbia, in the present of 1881 and 1882. But she brings us up to date on the Ballarat section; and the gentleman brings us up to date on the San Francisco section. What I’ve done is structure this novel architecturally. Victoria’s architecture is a constant series of false faces. If you take the false face off many buildings in Victoria, you find another false face; and if you take that one off, you find another false face. I got intrigued with the idea, ‘What is the real face?’ So my central consciousness, the young widower, is also a builder who is an expert in putting false faces over false faces. I structured the novel as a stripping away of false faces, because of course it is a story of deceit. Deception of every kind. We never know the real story. You peel off another layer and you find out all your perceptions were wrong. It was a tricky thing; but it was a great deal of fun.

Architecture figures significantly in some of your earlier fiction.

When I went to University I majored not just in English but in Math. I’ve always been fascinated with geometry and architecture. I seriously thought of becoming an architect when I was in high school. It was probably a good thing I didn’t because after I designed and built my one house I was completely satisfied. [Laughter] But architectural images are fascinating to me. And the architecture of Australia, Canada and San Francisco play a role in this novel.

Am I right in my sense that writing this novel has also led to an interest in Australian writing?

Oh yes! But I was reading Patrick White and Thomas Keneally back when Bill New was telling me those were the people to read. I didn’t make a big thing about their being Australian - they were very interesting, very exciting literary figures for me. But when I learned that I had won the Award and that I was coming here I started thinking, ‘Well, I want to meet Australian writers - how will I know who I want
to meet if I haven't read any?' So I read a lot, especially fiction, before coming. No - now I'm going to correct myself. Years before, when the Award first set up, I was on one of the original juries. So I got to read a bunch of Australian work then - just for one year - current poetry and drama and fiction. But it mainly came out of my preparing to come to Australia. I became fascinated by a lot of the fiction and excited about some writers. Of course, after I arrived in Australia I went to every book store in the country, I'm sure, and bought all kinds of Australian books and sent them home - had an orgy of reading afterwards... In fact, there was a period in which every Australian novel that came out in Canada the Ottawa Citizen would send to me to review.

The writing of Australia seems at first to be so different from anything done in Canada, and yet I've seen Australian writers trying to do some of the same things that I'm trying to do: take a language that was invented for another place, try and bend it to suit your place. Maybe this novel I've just written is actually an Australian novel!

It became, in fact, a novel about the colonisation of language. It begins with a ship breaking up in Juan de Fuca Strait and all the cargo smashed up, washing ashore, all these boards and barrel-staves washing up on the beach of Vancouver Island - and every one of them has a word stamped on it. There are English words and German words and Spanish words, Australian, well... words from all over the world, just washing in! There is an Indian character who goes along the beach picking them up and he uses them to plug the cracks in his house, to keep the wind from blowing through. He ends up, of course, living in a house of words - as do all of the men in the novel. The young builder builds his own tombstone. He's not dead; but he puts his own history on the tombstone. He keeps changing his mind; so he has to keep building a bigger and bigger tombstone. Eventually he ends up with a gigantic castle with words, false biographies all over it. Of course, the guy who owns the hotel is always in the bar telling stories as if he's having to keep the roof up over his head - until of course he is silenced. The walls cave in. The woman, this central character who everybody is watching in the town, she is gradually using her language to strangle. I didn't even understand it myself. I was writing the last page of the novel and I thought, 'I don't know what this is that is happening to me!' But when I was writing the last page I had the image of people doing certain things - I didn't know what it meant at all - but I knew when I had written the last sentence of the novel that it was the only possible ending! I went back and realised it was absolutely inevitable. A boat-load of words just had to end with... well, I'm not going to tell you how it ends.
It sounds very different from what you’ve done in the past.

I think it is.

And yet history has been important to you before this.

Oh yes. Maybe I’m taking history more seriously this time. No - historians won’t say that. [Laughter] I went to more trouble to be authentic this time. Let’s put it that way. I wanted to capture the flavour, because I realised that this story took some of its power from the fact that it happened in the Victorian age, in a city called Victoria, with people who come from the state of Victoria - and with visits from two of Queen Victoria’s children. There is even a figure in the novel, Mary One-Eye, who wears a little tiny crown on her head and a veil like Queen Victoria. She sleeps in the cemetery in a broken-down old hearse that she has rescued. Queen Victoria floats in and out of the novel all the time, in her local manifestation as Mary One-Eye. I don’t understand it totally - I don’t want to - I just know it all felt right: the peeling away of the layers, and ending up with silence.
Although Mrs Jordan could hardly confess this to Logan Sumner immediately, she had not forgotten that back home in Ballarat she had begun to fear that the pressures of widowhood were beginning to have an unfortunate effect upon her mind. Because her hatred of the cockatoos had grown so large that she sometimes had trouble breathing, she began to go out onto her narrow verandah at dawn when the great white birds had gathered in the upper branches of the blue gum across the street and, with her eyes closed, to discharge her husband’s ancient musket at the vacant sky. Though the blow to her shoulder continued to send her staggering back against the weatherboard every day, fewer and fewer of the ten, eighteen, thirty-nine birds exploded off their shivering branches to go screeching down the street and resume their squabbling in the sturdy old bloodwoods at a safer distance. Stepping inside to lean the firearm into the corner behind the door, she knew of course that she had changed nothing, that others would come, and others, or the same ones again, that there was no end to the great white hated parrots, or to their persistence - there was a whole continent of them out there prepared to hang their weight on the limbs of the blue gums and bloodwoods of Ripon Street in order to drive her mad. ‘Nobody should be expected to live in a world where birds are the size of pigs that laugh in your face.’

For some reason she never learned, neighbours did not complain about the widow’s new habit of catapulting them out of their dreams every morning with a blast from a flintlock musket that dated back to the Eureka Stockade. Perhaps this was out of respect for her husband, dead now for less than a year, who had not permitted the loss of an arm in the rebellion to prevent him from performing his job in the dry-goods shop, or from starting a family, or from expressing admirable sentiments amongst the crowd at the Loafers Tree on Saturday afternoons. Perhaps their silence was motivated by a self-protective caution
as well, a horror of the sort of unpleasantness which might be unleashed by mentioning something even mildly critical to a woman of Kate Jordan’s temperament.

Even more surprising was the fact that no delegation approached her on behalf of the town council, to discuss this violation of certain city statutes. No mayor, no councilmen, no councilmen’s wives. No irate-but-careful leading citizens. Not even a deputation from Christ Church Cathedral, which might have added gentle remonstrances concerning other matters - that she had not been seen in her pew since the funeral, for instance, or that she had not approached any of the ladies of the congregation for the sympathy and comfort they felt they deserved to be asked to give.

There was no immediate response from her sisters, either, who must surely have heard the gunshots in the family boarding house three blocks to the east. Susannah, the eldest of the McConnell sisters, seldom passed up an opportunity to speak plainly to the most spirited member of her family. But she had not been speaking to Kate at all since the day they’d quarrelled publicly during the preparations for Tom Jordan’s funeral, when Susannah had insisted that for a new widow who owned a cottage but had no money the only solution was to take in boarders as she and young Annie did, as Kate had done herself, along with them, before her marriage - and Kate had responded that she would rather throw herself and her children on the charity of the parish than make herself the servant of every demanding butcher and brick-works labourer who pounded on her door.

Annie still visited occasionally to take tea in Kate’s kitchen, but she did not make direct reference to the explosions which had become a regular introduction to her day. She spoke, rather, of local concerns given space in the Courier. ‘You remember that boy at the Theatre Royal who accidentally discharged a gun into his thumb while putting it away after a performance - he has developed lockjaw!’ She also repeated rumours which had travelled up the track with Cobb and Co. from Geelong: ‘A shooting at the Melbourne opera! A man shot both his wife and her lover. Some Frenchman sent here to help set up the Exhibition. And then he shot himself. He was the only one who died.’ And she reported on letters received from their brother in Canada. ‘He seems to be accumulating a fortune in his saloon, having no wife to spend his profits. He says he had to fight off two would-be thieves wielding revolvers.’ Cheerful, energetic Annie behaved as though she were not aware of any common element in the stories she related, almost as though the world had undergone no very significant change.

On the morning of Her Majesty’s sixty-first birthday, Kate went out onto the verandah as usual and, bracing herself against the post where
scarlet roses continued to climb and bloom without regard to season, pointed the musket at the sky, and closed her eyes. This time, when she’d recovered from the shock of being slammed against the wall, she saw that not a single cockatoo had left the branches of the blue gum across the street. As indifferent as the citizens of the town, they continued to screech and tear at the leaves as though she and her husband’s musket did not exist. Kate Jordan went back inside the house, slammed the door, and tossed the gun into the corner, where it slid down and lay along the skirting board. She strode through to the kitchen where she stopped and pressed her palms together beneath her chin for a moment of silence; she threw open a door to look in on her children, both undisturbed in their beds; she marched back to the front of the house and snatched up the musket from the floor and found the small half-filled carton of bullets in the corner cabinet. This time, when she steadied the barrel against the post of fragrant roses, she took careful aim at one particularly confident sulphur-crested male. Though the intended victim did not plummet when she pulled the trigger, a nearby cluster of leaves detached itself from the upper limbs and wheeled earthward from the tree. Uncertainty rippled amongst the great white tenants of the upper branches. A third shot tore off still more leaves and caused a general confusion of wings. One, two, three birds deserted the no-longer-to-be-trusted blue gum in favour of safer branches farther down the street, but did not give up their first choice without indignant protests. A fourth shot also failed to find a victim but a fifth succeeded finally in convincing the rest of the stubborn inhabitants to evacuate the tree. At the same time, cottage doors squeaked open, eyes appeared at windows, someone’s voice shouted something from down the street. But a sixth and seventh and eighth discharge was necessary - aimed at upper branches all over the neighbourhood, in random order - before Annie McConnell came into sight, running from the direction of the boarding house and crying ‘Katie! Katie! Katie!’ as if all this had somehow caught her by surprise.

‘You frighten me half to death!’ she cried, catching up her sister’s hand in her own. An earnest sombre look had tightened all the curves in her freckled face. Poor Annie - her immense tangle of red curls seemed never to cease moving about her head! She yanked on the great thick plait she’d brought round from the back, as though it were a rope for summoning aid from some invisible servant. How could you take her seriously? ‘If you’d come live with us, we’d keep you far too busy to care about silly birds.’

‘I hear Susannah’s voice in that.’

‘Susannah says that if you’re planning to become a bushranger with that gun, you should do your target practice up on Misery Mountain,
out of our hearing.’ Annie was not reluctant to laugh at their common cross, but sobered quickly. ‘It isn’t because of Susannah that I’ve come. I can’t bear it myself. If you refuse to put this house to good use, then sell it and help us as you did before, when we were sisters together in a new country. I don’t see that you have any choice.’

‘Dear Annie! If I truly thought I had no choice I would use that gun on myself, I would turn it against myself! Surely by now you must know I would rather starve, I would rather die, than start again with her. I would rather burn this cottage down around us. I would rather see us throw ourselves down a mineshaft.’

Laughing at her sister’s habitual tendency to see things in extremes, Annie knelt to comfort the little girl who had appeared in the doorway. Beside her, James began to whimper. Kate told him to hush, but this only sent the child sobbing to Annie, to throw his arms around her neck. Now Laura also began to cry. ‘Hush! Hush!’ - it was Annie who comforted them. Kate glared. Two sobbing enemies glared back, from the safety of Aunt Annie’s trustworthy embrace.

Kate leaned the musket against the wall. Choking back what might have become a sob, she grabbed up her parasol and went down the steps and out through the gate to the sunlit street. Then she opened the parasol and laid it across her shoulder and marched off in the direction of Sturt Street past the row of plain-faced little miners’ cottages with their rust-stained iron roofs, her eyes ahead, scarcely aware of her children’s voices calling her back, conscious only of the heavy silence that reigned at last, at least for the time being, in the branches of all the fragrant eucalypts of her neighbourhood.

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