The Mob of Women

Kate Grenville and Don Anderson interview author Finola Moorhead about her new novel.

Finola Moorhead wrote her latest novel, Remember the Tarantella, after a challenge from Christina Stead to write a book without male characters. In the event, the novel, structured around the musical forms and those of co-ordinate geometry, has twenty-six characters, each represented by a letter of the alphabet — and all women. It has variously been described as a feminist masterwork, and unreadable. Here Finola talks to Kate Grenville and Don Anderson.

Kate: What intrigued me reading the book was the way you started off in theory and then moved into the material. You say you began with a collection called Quilt is a little section which is untitled. You're talking about monologue, and you have this to say:

It is interesting that many women wish to write, perform and film monologues. Duna Barnes' Nightwood takes off into an amazing monologue; Stevie Smith; others; the stream of consciousness has monologue rhythms. It is not that women wish to tell each other anything — they don't claim to give intelligence — when the aesthetic drive is in gear the women wish to appreciate, handle with delicacy perhaps, a point, an observation, an insight which, if given second place to the relentless progress of the plot, would be rendered banal, mundane, unimportant. The shimmering jewels of appreciation of what is there would be lost in the flapping veils of what is invented.

Could I ask you, in a long and complex book, what happens to the monologue as a form apparently chosen by women?

Finola: It relies heavily on monologue in the five vowel characters’ cases. But then I was observing that women are interested in the monologue form ... like Gill Leahy's film Life Without Steve, for instance. I like monologue: I find it easy; and I threw that onto the central vowel characters who are all presented in deliberately set classic monologues — diaries and letters and so on.

I'm formally using that, but underneath what I'm saying is also that the structure of fiction for women does not necessarily rely on not knowing what's coming next, whereas a lot of traditional fiction, written by men and women, relies very heavily on the fact that you've got to continue reading in order to find out what happens next. You can equally appreciate the next sentence if you know what's coming; in fact, the ancient Greeks must have done that all the time. They all knew the whole plots of their plays but by heart. That's fine writing: it's like music.

So, in Tarantella, I'm actually not saying anything new to those people out of whose world the book comes. In fact, I hope I'm not because my gratification would be in their saying "yeah, that's right", rather than discovering something. That's the only way they're going to be given a place in the fiction world, rather than in the real world, because they're in the real world but they're not very often in the fiction world.

Don: Can I ask whether you have an audience in mind?

Finola: Paul, my publisher, called it my "constituency".

Don: Could you describe your constituency?

Finola: Well, it's just the mob, the mob of women. But it jumps around in your mind. Sometimes when I was writing that book I maybe thought, what would my mother think, but she died halfway through. And then I said, what does my sister, who is a nun, think? And you have to keep on doing it or really think through that, using the fiction mind to become a fictional reader, like my Ursula in the book. I was writing it as
much to Ursula in away. I don't know if she exists, such a woman, but somebody described her as a really good reader. That's the person I was writing for.

Kate: I think that aspect of trying to subvert the patriarchal is also just trying to subvert the old, it's just also trying to subvert the stale, the dead ...

Finola: It's also cutting off your nose to spite your face — in terms of success. Women's writing has a fair bit of a tradition already. It always has, ever since the penny dreadfuls, Jane Austen and so on. Ever since the novel, the women have been around.

And so it's a book as much about my generation of women as anything. It might even be as much about the 'sixties as anything else. 1968 — what happened to that revolution? It's not around now. They say there was a baby boom, and there was a whole bunch of university-education women who weren't going to be like their mothers. So they turned to other women. A lot of them, in the book and in the middle 'seventies, were lesbians for a day, or for a year. It was a self-recognition at the time, and it was as much related to Australian post-war history as anything else, in that sense of being the first one educated in the family. And I don't know whether it's going to happen again. So the book's as much of an historical document as anything literary in that sense. I'm just saying this bunch of people existed.

Kate: Yes, I think one of the reviews of the book mentioned that a useful introduction would have been a history of the recent women's movement, rather than a history of the tarantella. And I think that's right, because that historical thing, perhaps that's partly the sense of being excluded that I also felt, and that brings me back to what I mentioned before about trying to pick up threads of real history that you recognise from your own general knowledge. That historical thing, which I think is one of the most interesting things about it — it's a document in a sense much more than a novel — is one of its sources of strength, I think, and also for me frustrating because I wanted more.

Finola: Well, that negatively proves the point about women's history generally. You've both got kids, but kids now don't know that history. They're still studying Tess of the D'Urbervilles, aren't they? I can't write that sort of stuff. But that history is in behind the experience of these women in the book, at least ten to twenty of whom inform each character in the book. They know it. And it continues, that secret, or erased, history of women.

Christina Stead didn't like feminists ...

Don: She said it so often, one tends to wonder ...

Finola: ... so I was very surprised that she took me out to lunch after my first novel. And then she said, it's very difficult to write a book with no men in it at all. And now I'm finding that, yes, it is difficult to write a novel with no men in it at all — that men like. When she was writing she probably had mostly male editors and things like that — but now the publishing scene's gone all female.

Kate: I was very interested — in your blurb it says rather tantalisingly "Christina Stead once challenged Finola Moorhead by saying that it is very difficult to make an interesting novel with no men in it at all"; which sounds as if she flung down the gauntlet. Was it like that?

Finola: I took it like that. She was responding to Lots of Potential, which has a man in it. It's not real good — it's my first novel. But I was a bit blown out that she wrote to me. And I was a bit blown out that she took me out to lunch and talked maths with me. And the challenge was worthwhile. That was when she was writer in residence at Monash; and then I was writer in residence at Monash, and she was still alive. And I wrote to her and I said, "I can't believe this, but I'm sitting in the same place as you—. And she wrote back — that was not with that challenge, but she said, oh, forget that first novel, write something else.

So I drew the diagram and started writing. The first two weeks I was at Monash I wrote that autobiographical "I" stuff, and nearly threw myself out of this seventh storey window, except you can't open them. That type of writing really bored me.

I think reading's become a hobby anyway. No longer do you have to read a damn thing. You don't even have to read the news. You don't have to read any novels. The public has gone down to the aficionados.

Don: Reading's also become institutionalised — that's the famous remark of Joyce again about Ulysses: "I've put enough puzzles in there to keep the professors busy for a hundred years, and that's the only way to ensure your immortality". That's one of the things that has happened to reading. A shrinking reading public ...

Finola: But those who do never stop reading. It's a real hobby. You have to make time for it. You have to have a place for it. I think we've got a few old-fashioned ideas about fiction. Narrative fiction is better told on the screen now — because it's done faster, it's done much more subtly ... And you've got your Mills and Boon culture. There's a romance publishing industry that'll go on forever. Those people will still read it, probably because film's too expensive to put it out that way.

Kate: And it's a very intimate experience, I think, reading about his ironbark hair and his piercing blue eyes and you want to be by yourself, curled up in a corner somewhere, I suspect.

Finola: But for the real novel, the reading public has to be hobby readers, readers who spend money like fishermen do on bait, and read ...

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