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## An Interview with Eve Makis

Petra Tournay-Theodotou (Nicosia, Cyprus)

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Eve Makis was born in Nottingham to Greek-Cypriot parents, who emigrated to England in the 1960s. Makis studied Combined Arts, majoring in Psychology, at Leicester University and then went on to take a professional journalism course. After working as a reporter for Middlesex County Press, in 1994 Makis left London for Cyprus, where she worked as a freelance writer, radio presenter and stringer for the London Evening Standard. Since her return to England in 2001, she has been living in Nottingham with her Cypriot husband and two children.

While in Cyprus, Makis researched the island's history and traditions, including the country's colonial war and the events that led to the Turkish invasion in 1974. This knowledge found its way in particular into Makis's first two novels, in which she not only explores the Anglo-Cypriot diaspora experience but also recuperates Cyprus's troubled colonial history and postcolonial condition (for a British readership). To date Eve Makis has published three novels *Eat, Drink and Be Married* (2004), *The Mother-in-Law* (2006) and *Land of the Golden Apple* (2008), all published by Black Swan.

In the face of the lively literary production by members of other immigrant communities in Britain, Cypriot voices have so far been few and far between and it is thanks to Eve Makis that Cyprus and its specific diasporic narrative is finally firmly placed on the literary map. As the first full-length novel describing the Cypriot diaspora experience in Britain, *Eat Drink and Be Married* (voted the Young Booksellers International Book of the Year 2005), traces the lives and mores of an Anglo-Cypriot family in Nottingham at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In many respects this is a typical coming of age novel told from the perspective of a young Greek Anglo-Cypriot woman caught in between two cultures, and can thus be read alongside first novels such as *Lara* by Bernardine Evaristo, *Anita and Me* by Meera Syal or *Every Light in the House Burning* by Andrea Levy.



Eve Makis

*The Mother-in-Law* is a polyphonic novel that centres around the story of a young Greek-Cypriot woman happily married to an Englishman. Their relationship almost shipwrecks through the disastrous interference of the English mother-in-law. While addressing fundamental differences between cultures and generations, both novels end on a note of hope for successful intercultural relationships and a more conciliatory future – in Cyprus as well as in the UK.

*Land of the Golden Apple* is set exclusively in contemporary Cyprus and explores a young boy's gradual development from child to young adult, providing insight into various of the island's maladies such as anachronistic

gender relations, promiscuity, gambling, organized crime, the effect of tourism and child abuse. This bleak outlook on life on a beautiful Mediterranean island is counterbalanced by hopeful aspects such as a growing cultural diversity, gender equality and the promises these changes hold.

The present interview took place in Nicosia, Cyprus in July 2009 while Eve was over for a family visit and carrying out research for her next novel.

**Petra Tournay-Theodotou:** *How would you define yourself as a writer?*

**Eve Makis:** I am a writer of contemporary fiction, largely inspired by my ethnicity.

**PTT:** *Are you very conscious of being an Anglo-Cypriot writer or for that matter, an Anglo Greek-Cypriot writer?*

**EM:** I consider myself an Anglo-Cypriot writer. I was born and raised in England but draw on Cyprus and my cultural heritage as a source of creative inspiration.

**PTT:** *Given that you are the first to address the experience of Greek-Cypriots in England in mainstream literature do you feel the “burden of representation”, the expectation that you are speaking for the entire Greek-Cypriot community?*

**EM:** No, I don't feel the “burden of representation” nor do I claim to be speaking for the community as a whole. My work represents my experience of being Cypriot and growing up in a very traditional household. However, I have had plenty of feedback from Cypriot men and women who can relate to *Eat, Drink and Be Married* on a very personal level and see it as a representation of their experience.

**PTT:** *Your novels and your background invite comparison with second-generation British immigrant writers like Bernardine Evaristo, Andrea Levy and Meera Syal who find themselves in an in-between situation, feeling – as Caryl Phillips said in an interview – “both of and not of this place”. How would you position yourself?*

**EM:** At this point in my life I would consider myself a contented outsider in both of the countries I lay claim to, ie England and Cyprus. I find being an outsider is advantageous in terms of writing. It allows me to view situations and people from a distance and write with greater clarity. It also frees me from the burden of representation. Feeling “both of and not of this place” is a feeling that many English Cypriots have. As I say in the book, when in Cyprus we complain about the heat and the dust and when in England we hanker after sunshine and blue skies.

**PTT:** *Does this result in any kind of tension, possibly creative tension?*

**EM:** Yes. I think being raised as an outsider certainly created tension in my life, which has been channeled into my work. *Eat, Drink and Be Married* explores some of the tension I felt when I was growing up. I think I have managed to turn a negative into a positive.

**PTT:** *Do you feel very strongly about being a female writer or even a feminist writer? Do you think that women writers have a distinct voice?*

**EM:** I have never consciously considered myself a feminist writer but I certainly believe in female equality. I grew up feeling quite indignant about the unequal way sons and daughters of my generation were raised and this was certainly a spur to writing my first book. When I was growing up girls were expected to get married and have children and leaving home to study was actively discouraged, if not prevented. Like Anna, the protagonist in my first book, I battled with my parents for the right to go to university, a right that for most of my English peers was a given. *Eat, Drink and Be Married* is written from the perspective of an oppressed Cypriot female who struggles against the stranglehold of tradition and parental expectations.

**PTT:** *To my knowledge Eat, Drink and Be Married was the first full-length novel describing the Cypriot diaspora experience in Britain. In light of the prolific literary production by members of other immigrant communities why do you think that there hasn't been a livelier contribution from the Cypriot diaspora community in the UK?*

**EM:** I don't really know. Communities with a more prolific output tend to be larger and with more pressing social issues to contend with. We are a very small community and, outside London, relatively invisible. I suspect many books about the Cypriot community have been turned down by publishers because our culture is not considered particularly marketable. I feel very lucky to have broken through against the odds, in my own small way.

**PTT:** *What prompted you to make the transition from journalist to fiction writer? Was there any particular event or experience that triggered this change? Can you also tell*

*me about your first experiences with writing?*

**EM:** I always enjoyed creative writing at school and when I was young I also kept a diary, charting my teenage frustrations. Later, at university I regularly wrote letters to a close friend recording the minutiae of my student life. I did a professional journalism course when I finished my degree with the vague notion that I wanted to write. However, I soon discovered that newspaper journalism, didn't satisfy my creative bent and consequently I was never very good at it. I used to spend my lunch breaks penning stories (all with a Cypriot theme) as a form of escape and release. Eventually, I decided to quit my job and go to Cyprus for six months, for a change of scene. On the island I started working as a freelance journalist and radio presenter, enjoying both of these roles and my professional freedom. I researched Cypriot history, traditions and culture, interviewed a diverse range of people and immersed myself in the culture. I met my husband and six months on the island turned into four years. I was working as a freelance journalist (and writing creatively) when I became pregnant with my daughter and that's when I decided to give up work and write my book. I spent all my free time writing, and *Eat, Drink and Be Married* evolved over a period of about four years. The time I spent living and working in Cyprus provided me with plenty of material for my books.

**PTT:** *Could you speak about the genesis of your novels? How autobiographical are your novels?*

**EM:** The first book began life in a very disjointed way on scraps of paper. I wrote for pleasure and as a means of escape, jotting down thoughts and family stories. It took several years for the story of Anna to take shape. It is very autobiographical, Anna's life and struggles mirroring my own as a teenager. The main characters in the book were also modeled on close family members. The irrepressible Tina is based on my own mother and the soothsaying Yiayia is a celebration of my grandmother Despina, who read fortunes and practiced kitchen table magic.

**PTT:** *What about the other two novels?*

**EM:** In my second novel I wanted to explore dysfunctional family ties, focusing on the mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship. The relationship in this book is compounded by the fact that the daughter-in-law, Electra, is Greek Cypriot and her overpowering character offends the sensibilities of her very English mother-in-law. I based my characters loosely on people I knew and on experiences I had heard about, and drew inspiration from my own marriage to a native Greek Cypriot. The book continues the history of Cyprus from where I concluded it in the first book, told through Electra's family stories. Electra is a refugee and the book includes a return to the home she lost following the Turkish invasion in 1974. I wrote this chapter after I made a similar journey to see my husband's family home in the occupied region.

**PTT:** *Whereas in your first two novels you explore the Anglo-Cypriot diaspora experience, your third novel Land of the Golden Apple is set exclusively in Cyprus. What prompted you to make this move back to your "homeland"?*

**EM:** I never considered the book a return to the homeland but more a return to a lost childhood. My protagonist, Socrates, is modeled on my husband, who grew up in the village of Trikomo and lost his home at the age of eleven. He has very vivid memories of a very adventurous and magical early childhood and his stories captured my imagination. I wanted to write about children who were free to roam, to climb trees and to satisfy their natural curiosity. I wanted to explore the village idyll and at the same time explode the myths that surround it. I also drew inspiration from my father's stories about village life in the 1940s and 1950s, a life he so often eulogizes, in spite of its difficulties.

**PTT:** *Could you briefly comment on the choice of titles of your novels?*

**EM:** The first novel started life as *Saint, Serpents and Green Eyed Monsters* (i.e., the symbols that the grandmother saw in the coffee cup) but my editor turned it down saying it sounded like a book about the occult. So, I came up with the more lighthearted title of *Eat, Drink and Be Married*, which I thought said something about the focus of my culture. The

title of book number two is straightforward and self-explanatory and has more to do with marketing than imagination. The title of my third book is a reference to the golden apple tree that grew in Aphrodite's garden in Paphos. In ancient times Cyprus was known as "land of the golden apple" and this description seemed a fitting title. Also a golden apple is central to the plot.

**PTT:** *How do you see the role of history in your novels? For example, in Eat, Drink and Be Married you speak unequivocally to a British readership when you resurrect the memory of curfews and killings during the liberation struggle or the lack of British protection as a guarantor power during the Turkish military intervention in 1974, which eventually led to the island's partition.*

**EM:** The role of history, especially in *Eat, Drink and Be Married*, is absolutely vital. I don't think you can understand the characters fully without knowing their history. I grew up listening to my father's stories about curfews imposed by the British and about how and why he got involved in the 1950's liberation struggle. Later, in 1974, when the island was invaded, our home in England became a refuge for relatives fleeing the war. The political situation in Cyprus was a hot topic in our home for many years. I am married to a refugee and my father's brother went missing during the war in 1974 so as a family, we were directly affected by the troubles on the island, as were most Cypriot families. No doubt, all of these experiences have had an overt and subliminal influence on my writing. I never consciously set out to make a comment about British involvement on the island: I just tried to tell the story of Cyprus through the eyes of an ordinary Cypriot family.

**PTT:** *Given the political situation in Cyprus and the division between the two ethnic communities, it is surprising that in Eat, Drink and Be Married you completely exclude the Turkish Cypriots from the narrative. By giving the protagonist of The Mother-in-Law a Turkish Cypriot childhood friend with whom she reunites after the permeability of the green line in 2003, you*

*seem to make amends for the earlier omission. Could you speak a bit about that?*

**EM:** The second book was written at a time when the borders were opening up and refugees were streaming back to their homes. There were many stories in the Cypriot papers about old Greek and Turkish childhood friends being reunited and these captured my imagination and seemed relevant to the book. Before the war the two ethnic groups lived side by side and the friendship between Electra and Oya symbolizes my hope that this might happen again one day.

**PTT:** *In your first two novels the protagonists are young Greek-Cypriot women and their stories could be regarded as corresponding to the coming-of-age novel or novel of transformation, with Elektra embodying a grown-up Anna. Do you see them as connected in some way?*

**EM:** No, because they are such different characters. Anna is an English Cypriot and Electra is a native Cypriot. Anna's home is England. Electra's home is Cyprus. They have had very different growing up experiences. Anna has been raised under lock and key while Electra has had complete freedom. They are opposites and not a continuation of one another. Perhaps, in a small way, these two women are a reflection of myself and my husband.

**PTT:** *When I read your first novel Eat, Drink and Be Married I was shocked by the high frequency of descriptions of violence, which on the other hand are counter-balanced by a lot of humorous scenes. Would you like to comment on this observation?*

**EM:** All the violent episodes described in the book were experienced by my own family. Anybody who works in the take-away business will be familiar with some form of over-the-counter abuse, be it physical or verbal/racial. My parents kept a baseball bat behind the counter to protect themselves from the drunks that rolled in at closing time full of "beer and bravado" as I say in the book. There was also a lot of laughter in the shop, reflected in the comic scenes described in the book. Cypriots have a very unique, slap-stick, irreverent sense of humour and I wanted to put this across.

**PTT:** *Your novels have been translated into several languages, including German, Spanish and Greek. How is your work received in other countries, particularly in Cyprus?*

**EM:** *Eat, Drink and Be Married* has been reprinted in Dutch so sales are going well there. I have had a very good response to the book in Cyprus both from expatriates and repatriated Cypriots who can relate to the characters on a personal level. I have to say that the book wasn't written with a Cypriot audience in mind. I wanted to expose Cyprus and its history to a wider, mainstream audience.

**PTT:** *How has the reception been in Britain, both in public and in academic circles?*

**EM:** The response to my first book was very positive, with a number of reviews in national newspapers and magazines. Thankfully, the reviewers recognized that *Eat, Drink and Be Married* wasn't simply a book about teenage angst but covered new ground, shedding light on a community hitherto unexplored in mainstream literature. As far as I am aware this is my first inclusion in an academic journal.

**PTT:** *Could you name any writers that have influenced or books that have inspired you, that in a way "made" you as a writer?*

**EM:** The book I keep on my desk, hoping its magic will rub off on me, is *Middlesex* by Jeffrey Eugenides. It has all the ingredients I like in a book. A historical backdrop and a great story, wonderfully written. It is the book I wish I had written. I tend to read books about other cultures and constantly find plot lines, turns of phrase etc that inspire me and spur me on and make me want to become a better writer.

**PTT:** *Are you currently working on a new novel? Would you like to share some details about that?*

**EM:** I am writing a book about a family of Armenians who live in Cyprus and their troubled past. The story is set in many different locations including Cyprus, Eastern Turkey, Lebanon and America. I have gone back to the spirit of the first book in terms of exploring a culture and its mores. This book is tough going as I am writing about a culture that is not my own and one I knew very little about before I started writing. The Armenians have a fascinating history and their story is definitely one that deserves telling.

The Editorial Board of *Anglistica*, A.I.O.N., *An Interdisciplinary Journal* is glad to announce that *Anglistica* has become an open-access on-line journal.

*Anglistica* is a bi-annual peer-reviewed journal of international interdisciplinary studies. It explores the politics and poetics of intercultural communication and representation in the complex 'glocal' formations of the contemporary world. Providing a space for intellectual dialogue within and beyond the field of English studies, literatures and linguistics, it engages with postcolonial, North American, cultural and gender studies, as well as issues of race, migrancy and diaspora. The journal welcomes work on new voices, practices, forms of creativity and performance, but also revisitings of the past.

Its Editorial Board, which is composed of members of three different Departments of the University of Naples "L'Orientale", can now rely on the help of a large and authoritative International Advisory Board.

Those interested in viewing it may click on the following link: [www.anglistica.unior.it](http://www.anglistica.unior.it).



**JOHN STOTESBURY:** *At the start of June 2009, the mass media headlined the news that English was about to get its millionth word, trotting out the familiar arguments about the “success” of English. You yourself were interviewed on TV by Jeremy Paxman (see YouTube), and your response implied that the news report was somewhat spurious, since English, past and present, has probably accumulated at least a million and a half lexical items. Central, of course, to the news report was the notion of the “success of English”. Can, in fact, this popular notion be linked to any extent at all to lexical or other English linguistic factors, or is it rather a matter of historical accident – and hence a cultural myth?*

**DAVID CRYSTAL:** “Implied it was somewhat spurious”? That’s a somewhat genteel paraphrase! I actually said it was the biggest load of chicken-droppings I’d encountered in years. I wanted to say “bollocks”, but the BBC wouldn’t let me. I’m amazed that the claim attracted so much attention in the media. I suppose it shows the general ignorance of people about language. If someone had claimed that the six billionth child was going to arrive in the world on June 11th 1999, the stupidity of the remark would have been noted straight away. But people swallow whole the most extraordinary claims about language. Which, I guess, is why we need linguists and language periodicals: to put the record straight and to develop a climate of informed opinion.

I won’t repeat my arguments here – they can be found on my blog (<<http://david-crystal.blogspot.com/2009/04/on-biggest-load-of-rubbish.html>>) – but I think it’s worth recording that the proponent of the million-word claim has publicly acknowledged, both in that TV programme, and also in a comment to the blog, that there *are* more than a million words in English, so the ridiculousness of the whole exercise is evident. But you’re right. Underlying all such claims, whether true or false, is some vague notion of “celebrating” English. Now, I don’t have any problem with the notion of celebrating a language, as long as it’s seen within a frame of reference which recognizes all

languages as equally worthy of celebration. There is no place for triumphalism, whether it’s on behalf of a world language or a minority language, in a mindset which derives from linguistics.

There’s nothing special about a million words. Any language which belongs to a scientifically literate community will have over a million at its disposal, simply because it is in the domains of science and technology that lexical growth is most apparent. Numbers become irrelevant after a while, when we start thinking of how many biological species there are in the world which have been given scientific names. English probably does have a larger vocabulary than any other language, but this is a consequence of its having been the dominant language of science for so long. It’s also a consequence of its global spread. Once English came to be adopted by countries as an additional language, it began to adapt, to meet the communicative needs of the people, and huge amounts of local vocabulary were added to the lexicon. Regional dictionary projects (such as of South African or Caribbean English) testify to the tens of thousands of words which English has acquired over the decades. Languages which lack an international reach, or which try to protect themselves from other-language “interference”, believing in some imagined notion of purity, reduce these sources of lexical enrichment.

Your question also refers to the other great myth – or rather, set of myths – about English, that there’s something in its structure which has made it such a successful international language. Over the years I’ve heard many variations on this theme. English has a simple morphology, therefore it has become a global language. English grammar does not reflect social classes (in the way some oriental languages do), therefore it appeals to people with a democratic bent and therefore has become a global language. English has borrowed words from many other languages, and therefore learners will find a familiar point of contact in it, and therefore it has become a global language. While there are grains of truth in all these statements, opposite arguments also obtain. English has a complex syntax, therefore

it should not have become a global language. English has a really awkward spelling system, so it should not have become a global language. And so on. Structural arguments always cut both ways.

They are in any case beside the point. As I've argued at length in such books as *English as a Global Language*, a language becomes an international or global language for one reason only – the power of the people who speak it. Power, of course, means different things at different times. In the case of English, a combination of political/military, scientific/technological, economic, and cultural power has led to English achieving its present position. Equally, because languages are dependent on power relations for their standing, it would only take a shift in world politics or economics or religion for other languages to come centre stage. Whether that is likely to happen is for wiser minds to explore.

**JS:** *Closely connected with the previous question, is there any glimmer of truth in the old saw that learning English (as L2 – or, indeed, as L22) is “intrinsically easier” than learning some other languages?*

**DC:** No truth at all. The best evidence, to my mind, comes from child language acquisition. Although only a small proportion of the world's languages have been studied from a developmental psycholinguistic point of view, the evidence is clear that children pass through broadly similar stages of language acquisition at more or less the same ages. Observe five-year-old children talking in England, China, Brazil, or wherever, and you find comparable competencies. If adult learners are unable to replicate this commensurability of learning, that must be due to other factors, many of which have of course now been given sophisticated appreciation in the second language learning literature.

You ask for a “glimmer”? Well, I am impressed with the way English has become the language of choice for most international popular vocal music. Note the way people sing in English in such competitions as the Eurovision Song Contest. I've sometimes had the opportunity to ask singers why they use English. The

answer is partly functional – because English is the “cool” language, associated with the Beatles, the Stones, and so on. But it's also partly structural: composers often say that the predominantly monosyllabic character of the common words in English makes it an easier medium to work with, for heavy beat music, than languages where word morphology gets in the way. Rapsters also make this point.

**JS:** *Although, in a very real sense, you left behind the formal constraints of institutionalized linguistics a quarter of a century ago, you very obviously have remained at the forefront of linguistic investigation, especially in relation to English. Are there areas in the present-day institutional practice that you wish that you had been able to share in more directly? Are there areas of present-day linguistic practice that you consider un(der)-productive? Where may the research emphases be in the immediate future?*

**DC:** The value of an institution is that it fosters collaboration in ways that are not easily available to individuals working as independents. When I left Reading in 1984, at a time when I was heavily involved in clinical linguistics, I was immediately cut off from my primary source of research data – the interactions with patients who routinely passed through the linguistics department's speech therapy clinic. Fortunately, I had amassed a huge amount of data already, thanks largely to an MRC project, so in a sense leaving the clinic behind was a benefit: it gave me time to write everything up! But once that was done, I realized that it wasn't going to be possible to retain an ongoing dynamic role in relation to clinical linguistic research.

I have indeed missed the stimulation provided by collaborative research situations – working with doctoral students, in particular. But don't forget that, though I ceased to be a full-time academic in 1984, I didn't cut my ties with academia. I began an honorary professorial relationship with Bangor, and for several years taught a couple of courses there. I've done a fair bit of external examining, especially at doctoral level. Editing journals and book series also fosters an intimate contact with other academic linguists, as do fairly frequent visits

as a visiting lecturer to universities and involvement in the British Academy. So I do feel “in touch”.

I find your last two questions very difficult, because there are so many areas. I never cease to be amazed how neglected some language topics are. I’m not interested in rediscovering wheels, and every time a publisher (for example) asks me to write something, the first thing I do is check that the topic isn’t already covered. Repeatedly I find that it isn’t. I wouldn’t have written *Language Death* if a general account had been available at the time (there are several such accounts out there now), and the same applies to *Language and the Internet*, *Language Play*, *Txtng*, *Pronouncing Shakespeare*, and a number of others.

I’d like to have done some “hands on” work in relation to endangered languages. Apart from in the case of Welsh, my experience of endangered languages has come from reading the work of others. Today, there are some excellent accounts of the reasons why we should all be deeply concerned with language preservation, notably Nicholas Evans’ moving and masterly *Dying Words: Endangered Languages and What They Have To Tell Us* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010). I would like to have been able to write a book like that. As it transpired, the closest I could get was to edit it.

But if I had to opt for one area, as an indication of future trends, I would go for electronically mediated communication (EMC). The internet is now the largest corpus of language data ever compiled, and it is offering an extraordinary array of research opportunities in such areas as graphology, lexicology and stylistics, as well as applied areas such as automatic translation and searchlinguistics. And “we ain’t seen nothin’ yet”, given that voice-over-internet is going to be a huge growth area in the next few years. There are major opportunities for research in speech-to-text (eg a system that turns voicemail into text message), text-to-speech (eg a system which turns texts into voicemail), automatic speech recognition (eg in answerphones, washing machines, and hands-free carphones, where – despite huge advances in the past few years – regional accents and rapid speech still

pose problems), and speech interaction via such systems as Skype and iChat (where the technology introduces interesting – but little studied – communicative constraints, such as the effects of message arrival lag or limited video view). What happens to language when technological constraints are placed on the interaction – as illustrated by turn-taking in chatrooms and instant messaging, or character restrictions in texting and twittering?

One thing that particularly interests me is the way the whole notion of what counts as a text is undergoing a revolution, as dynamic processing evolves. How are we to define the boundaries of a text which is ongoing? People can now routinely add to a text posted online, either short-term (as in the immediate response to a news story), or medium- or long-term, as in comments posted to a wiki, blog, bulletin board, or other forum. Ferdinand de Saussure’s classical distinction between synchronic and diachronic does not adapt well to EMC, where everything is diachronic, time-stampable to a micro-level. Texts are classically treated as synchronic entities, by which we mean we disregard the changes that were made during the process of composition and treat the finished product as if time did not exist. But with many EMC texts there is no finished product. I can today post a message to a forum discussion on page X from 2004. From a linguistic point of view, we cannot say that we now have a new synchronic iteration of X, because the language has changed in the interim. I might comment that the discussion reads like something “out of Facebook” – which is a comment that could be made only after 2005, when that network began. I don’t know how to handle this.

The problem exists even when the person introducing the various changes is the same. The author of the original text may change it – altering a Web page, or revising a blog posting. How are we to view the relationship between the various versions? The question is particularly relevant now that print-on-demand (POD) texts are becoming common. It is possible for me to publish a book very quickly and cheaply, printing only a handful of copies. Having produced my first print-run, I then decide to print another, but

make a few changes to the file before I send it to the POD company. In theory (and probably increasingly common in practice), I can print just one copy, make some changes, then print another copy, make some more changes, and so on. The situation is beginning to resemble medieval scribal practice, where no two manuscripts were identical, or the typesetting variations between copies of Shakespeare's First Folio. The traditional terminology of "first edition", "second edition", "first edition with corrections", ISBN numbering, and so on, seems totally inadequate to account for the variability we now encounter. But I don't know what to put in its place. The same problem is also present in archiving. The British Library, for example, has recently launched its Web Archiving Consortium. My website is included. But how do we define the relationship between the various time-stamped iterations of this site, as they accumulate in the archive? I don't know how to handle this, either.

**JS:** *Is there still some dispute over the "scientific" status of linguistics? Has the "science" of linguistics gained a share of public as well as institutional acceptance to the same extent as other sciences that can be followed by the "layman", such as astronomy, genetics, etc?*

**DC:** I don't think linguistics is viewed as a science by the general public, or – more important – by those who form the opinion of the general public. I'm thinking of people like the buyers from bookstore chains. Large bookstores usually have a section called "popular science". Did you ever see a linguistics book there? (I can speak only from an English language perspective. I don't know what happens in bookstores in Germany, France, etc.) In my experience, books on language tend to turn up in sections as varied as general reference and travel, but rarely in anything that might be called scientific. So it seems as if much of the linguistics PR over the past forty years, which has emphasised the message that linguistics is "the science of language", hasn't had the impact on popular consciousness that we hoped it would.

But that's no reason to stop trying to get the message across. The importance of studying

language objectively, systematically, empirically (and so on) needs to be emphasized as much today as ever before. The need is perhaps not so urgent in the UK, where several of the tenets of linguistics have been adopted in the English language parts of the National Curriculum. But there are still many countries where people foster misleading or harmful views about language. And the UK is certainly not immune. Here's an example from the pages of *Quest*, the journal of the Queen's English Society (Winter 2007): "The vast variety of earthly languages is indeed an almost unmitigated curse. The fewer languages the better, and the world will be a far better place when everyone speaks the same language – or perhaps I had better be frank and say when everyone speaks English (and it will come). I think Crystal once said languages are dying at the rate of one a fortnight. If so, that's the best news I've heard in a long time, and long may it continue!"

This is the first time, as far as I know, that a member of the QES has come out so publicly in an attack on linguistic diversity. I have often heard its members put down regional English dialects, but never before all other languages. The periodical's back cover maintains that the views expressed in its pages are not necessarily those of the editor or of the Society – but in this case, we can delete "not necessarily", as in the previous issue of *Quest* the editor himself had expressed the same opinions in a book review (which is what motivated the letter-writer). Talking about the views I represent on linguistic diversity, he asks "do we really need it [diversity]?" and answers his own question with "quite the contrary", and he goes on to say: "when a language dies, what really is lost? Surely something is in fact gained if the speaker decides to drop, say, Karas and adopts English instead?" The ignorance of the expressive richness of other languages is truly breathtaking, but it is only to be expected from someone who affirms "the superior quality of the content of the English language". And no letter expressing the opposite viewpoint has since appeared in its pages.

I'm quite sure we could find similar views being expressed in France (about French) or Spain (about Spanish) – or indeed in many

countries. In one of my wildest dreams, I enjoy the prospect of locking a member of the Queen's English Society and a member of the French Académie in the same room to debate the language superiority question. But the example illustrates the fact that purism, prescriptivism, and other naive views about language are still present in society, notwithstanding the efforts of linguists to eliminate them. Accordingly, there will always be a place for the corrective that a scientific account of language provides.

**JS:** *How do you react to the concept of ELF? Do you consider that it has both pros and cons? Is there any possibility of ELF eventually being codified as a variety – or, perhaps more conceivably, varieties – of English to be learned by certain learners?*

**DC:** As a designation of a research field, I think it's timely and fruitful. At the same time, it has attracted a lot of theoretical speculation which, in the absence of empirical research, has resulted in some pretty silly claims being made about its linguistic character. This is why the Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English (VOICE) project of Barbara Seidlhofer and her colleagues is so important (see the website at <[https://www.univie.ac.at/voice/page/corpus\\_availability](https://www.univie.ac.at/voice/page/corpus_availability)>). For the first time we have a serious corpus of data illustrating what people actually do when they use English as a lingua franca. Having dipped into this a little, I can't see any basis (yet) for suggesting that it is a single variety, though some statistical trends may emerge in due course. Apart from anything else, the contexts of use in the corpus are very diverse. But certainly, some of the usages that have been proposed as characteristic of ELF aren't supported by the data. Are uncountable nouns being replaced by countable? Here are the VOICE stats for a few such words:

informations	7	information	400
researches	5	research	234
advices	3	advice	30
furnitures	0	furniture	5
evidences	0	evidence	26
staffs	0	staff	87

I'll take that as a No, then. Any attempt at codification right now would be hugely premature.

A single variety? It's possible that ELF has some common-core features, but a much more likely outcome is that it will evolve into an indefinite number of varieties reflecting the speech situations in which it is used – situations which are defined by the linguistic backgrounds of the participants, the cultural influences of their communities, and so on. I'd also expect to observe a great deal of code-mixing. This is what we have seen in sociolinguistic and stylistic studies hitherto, and I don't see why ELF should be any different.

**JS:** *Do you speak Klingon? Might an "artificial" English (or some other variant of another world language) eventually form some kind of a lingua franca?*

**DC:** HIjol. (i.e. Beam me aboard.) I have the reference materials to hand, of course, pending the day I need to learn it. I take Marc Okrand's advice (in *The Klingon Dictionary*) very seriously. Explaining that *H* is the "ch" sound in *loch* or *Bach*, he apologises for the phonetic approximation, and wisely observes: "The best way to learn to pronounce Klingon with no trace of a Terran or other accent is to become friends with a group of Klingons and spend a great deal of time socializing with them."

It's never sensible to predict the long-term future, when it comes to languages. After all, who would have thought, a thousand years ago, that Latin would one day no longer be a dominant force in world linguistic affairs? But I don't see any sign at present of any of the artificial languages which have been devised over the past century or so achieving sufficient reach, because they lack the power base which is prerequisite for international appeal (as I mentioned earlier). It is, of course, precisely that power base which a Klingon Empire would provide.

**JS:** *Your contributions over the years have been in many varied sub-disciplines of linguistics. To what extent do you believe that the numerous strands of your work cohere, and, if you believe that they do, what is it that holds them together?*

**DC:** I think I see three motivations which provide a certain coherence. The first is a fascination with descriptive detail, deriving, I suppose, from my time on Quirk's Survey of English Usage. That's what unites all my early work in linguistics in intonation, prosody, syntax, and lexicology. The second is a concern for linguistics to be useful – an applied motivation – and there seems to be no end to the fields where it proves possible to apply one's linguistic knowledge to help solve language-related problems. This is certainly what drove my work in religious language, stylistics, clinical linguistics, educational linguistics, Shakespearean studies, indexing, and the various internet explorations.

The most rewarding times for me have been those when the two motivations coincide – where it is only through the descriptive detail that the problems get solved. This is what working with language-disordered children, with an acting company on Elizabethan pronunciation, and with online advertising companies have in common. The solutions are not possible without a meticulous, time-consuming, and informed attention to detail.

And the third uniting factor? Exposition, in the broadest sense, to include popularization. This is what brings together a third strand of writing, from *What is Linguistics?* to the Cambridge *Language* and *English Language* encyclopedias, and including the more focused expositions such as *Language Death* and *Language and the Internet*, as well as the lexicographical and indexing projects, such as the *Dictionary of Linguistics* and the journal *Linguistics Abstracts*.

But not everything coheres. A man must live. And especially since 1984, when I became an "independent scholar", I have had to balance work in linguistics with general editorial work which helped, as it were, to pay the mortgage. The editing of the Cambridge and Penguin families of general encyclopedias illustrate that balance in action. For some time there was no particular relationship between the two worlds. But in due course a strong and fruitful link emerged. The classification system which I devised to find and group entries in the

encyclopedia database evolved into a taxonomy which has since formed an important element of what I would now call "applied internet linguistics".

The problems of internet search and navigation are well known, and linguistics has a role in helping to solve them. In online advertising, for example, irrelevant or inappropriate ads are found on many pages. A Web page about bridge construction is accompanied by ads about card games. A CNN report about a street stabbing in Chicago is accompanied by ads which say "Buy your knives here". It's obvious that the keyword algorithm being used is linguistically naive, ignoring issues of ambiguity and context. A more sophisticated semantic analysis of page content avoids such problems.

And underneath all of this, there is I suppose a further factor, more to do with personality than anything else. I saw a travel book in a catalogue once: its title was *Because I Haven't Been There Before*. I feel like that with language too. As soon as I encounter a field I haven't had the opportunity to explore, I want to go there. Conversely, I am reluctant to go back over a field I have already visited. I hate having to do second editions!

**JS:** *Finally, I've always been impressed by your enormous productivity in terms of publications, and your recent memoir, Just a Phrase I'm Going Through (2009), underlines the success (there is surely no better term!) that your research and writing have enjoyed and continue to enjoy. Can you suggest, especially to young, aspiring academics in the broad field of English Studies, ways in which they might even to a modest extent emulate your example?*

**DC:** Well, as one of the stories in *Just a Phrase* explains, I had to give up full-time academia in order to write. So I'm under no illusion about the difficulty facing young academics today, whose administrative load is probably greater than mine was in the 1980s. But, if the time can be found to research and write, there is certainly no shortage of subject-matter. The beauty, as well as the frustration, about working with language is that, always,

“tomorrow is a new day”. Whatever the results of one’s research on language today, one is always aware of the steady, ongoing process of language change, which makes tomorrow a new linguistic world. Indeed, in some domains of language use, the likelihood of tomorrow being linguistically novel is very real.

Take internet linguistics. In 2001, impressed by the way a new world of language use seemed to be emerging, I published *Language and the Internet*. This had chapters dealing with what I thought were the main domains of internet activity: emails, chatrooms, virtual worlds, and the World Wide Web. There was no mention of blogging or instant messaging because, although those domains existed (the term *blog* arrived as early as 1997) they had achieved no public presence in 2000, when I was writing my book. A new edition was needed, and that duly appeared in 2006. This contained a new chapter on the missing domains. But it made no mention of the social networking sites, such as Facebook or YouTube, for these had hardly been born in 2005. Four years on, and there seems to be no end to the new technologies. If I had put out a third edition in 2007 it would have been out-of-date by now because it would not have mentioned Twitter. And when we consider all the domains as yet unborn, especially those which will use voice-over-internet protocols, it’s easy to see that there is enormous potential for research, both in the pure and the applied domains.

Two forces pull linguists in different directions: the desire to know a lot about a little; and the desire to know a little about a lot. The ideal is to

keep a balance. All linguists need a domain which they feel they “own”, in the sense that they know as much about it as anyone else in the world, and in some respects know that little bit more. In my case, once upon a time, that domain was English intonation; later, it was clinical linguistics; today it is internet linguistics. But everyone needs to be willing and able to react to new linguistic questions and situations as they arise, and that is very much how I’ve ended up writing so much. Most of my books have been written in response to a single question, sometimes overheard, sometimes addressed directly to me. While having lunch in the British Council canteen in London, a remark heard from the next table – that “English has become a world language because it is more logical than other languages” – led to my deciding to issue *English as a Global Language* as a general text (it had previously had only a private circulation). A view expressed by someone at a conference lunch, that “text-messaging is harming children’s language”, led to *Txtng: the Gr8 Db8*. And the most recent example: *Just a Phrase* was written as a response to some of the commonest questions I get asked during language “days” for schools. “Why did you become a linguist?” “How do you become a linguist?” “What’s it like being a linguist?”

People are hugely interested in language, and hold strong opinions about it, so linguists are always in demand to help debunk myths and to explore questions of genuine popular interest. The millionth-word question illustrates that. Which is where we came in.

#### **NOTE**

My thanks to Lachlan Mackenzie (Lisbon) for his assistance in the formulation of some of the questions. Thanks are also due to Routledge for permission to reproduce the book cover image. JAS

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## From Crime to Kids: An Interview with Christopher Russell

John A Stotesbury (Joensuu, Finland)

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*“I suppose I always had a desire to write – from the age of five....”*

In recent times, Puffin Books, UK, has published four novels for young readers written by Christopher Russell: *Brind and the Dogs of War* (2005; in the USA as *Dogboy*), *Plague Sorcerer* (2006; in the USA as *Hunted*), *Smugglers* (2007), and *Scarper Jack and the Bloodstained Room* (2008). Christopher, however, has spent the major part of his working life as a professional writer, starting with radio plays, moving into schools’ television with work on a series named *Look and Read*, and then in the mid-1980s finding his long-term niche in scriptwriting for television crime series, including *Crown Court*, *Bergerac*, *The Bill* (a total of fifty episodes), *A Touch of Frost*, *Cadfael*, and *Midsomer Murders*.

The present interview, conducted at his home at Ventnor, Isle of Wight, on 9 April 2009, concentrates on Christopher’s recent fiction-writing, but an interesting article by Paddie Collyer, based on an interview recorded with him in 2008 and focusing on his career in scriptwriting, can be found at <http://www.eupjournals.com/doi/pdfplus/10.3366/E1743452108000411?cookieSet=1>.



**JOHN STOTESBURY:** *About five years ago, you changed direction.*

**CHRISTOPHER RUSSELL:** Yes, I’d done television for twenty-five years, and so we [his wife and text editor, Christine] decamped from London, and came to live on the Isle of Wight. I’d had an idea for a children’s novel for a long time and so, in 2003, I wrote it on spec, sent it to our agent, who found a publisher, Puffin, and that’s how my new career started!

**JS:** *That was with Brind and the Dogs of War, wasn’t it? What was the inspiration for that kind of story, set in the 14<sup>th</sup> century? It’s realist, it’s historical, and it’s not fantasy.*

**CR:** Given the prevailing climate in children’s literature, I didn’t want to write a fantasy, and I’d always wanted to write a historical novel. As a child

I was very fond of the novels of Rosemary Sutcliffe. And I was also intrigued by the phrase “dogs of war,” and so when I discovered that dogs were actually used by the Romans and in medieval times as weapons, that gave me a starting-point. So I thought, let’s have a boy who looks after the dogs, a simple-minded boy who loves dogs, and who is thrust into a war.

**JS:** *You’ve used an adjective that I wouldn’t have expected: simple-minded – because, to me as a reader, Brind is a somewhat mystical character – he’s a bit like the Simon of Lord of the Flies; he’s not very articulate, except in dog-language.*

**CR:** He’s not meant to be “mystical” as such, although he is in tune with dogs, and he has grown up as more dog than boy. He feels empathy with dogs. But his function is also to point out the

paradoxes, and indeed the realities, of war – without being pompous about it, he enables the child reader to look at war through the eyes of somebody who has no idea what war is, and who thinks instinctively, like a dog. It provides an opportunity to say things and look at things in a slightly different way.

**JS:** *The war that you portray is between the English and the French, the Hundred Years War.*

**CR:** Yes, a war that was fought at a time when, at one level, there was no real difference between the English and the French, since the English aristocracy were basically French. And they conducted their wars in an almost absurd, Monty Pythonesque way. You did your best to kill someone, but if you failed to kill them, you took them home with you, wine and dined them, and kept them in luxury until you received ransom money and could send them back home – and then the cycle would start again. It was a very elaborate game. They prided themselves on their courage – quite rightly – and also on their physical prowess in a game played by rules that are strange to us: kill and be killed, but beyond that you were friends.

**JS:** *At the centre of the story is the dog, but also the boy, Brind, who is, in a sense, playing a very familiar fictional role: as an orphan child.*

**CR:** Orphans are quite useful in stories because they're untrammelled by parents and other family considerations.

**JS:** *But Brind also suffers from inarticulacy, although he forms a relationship that becomes very important for him, with a little French girl, Aurelie, who has been captured.*

**CR:** She's intended to be a complete antithesis to Brind – very fierce. A dramatic contrast.

**JS:** *I imagine that the modern child could identify with that.*

**CR:** Yes, but in modern literature the ground rules have obviously changed from what they were even fifty years ago. Now it would be almost unthinkable to write an adventure story for children that didn't involve children growing up together.

**JS:** *So in a way Aurelie is a 21<sup>st</sup> century character as well as a 14<sup>th</sup> century character.*

**CR:** Yes, but I think you can take this too far. Once it becomes a matter of mere political correctness, it becomes false. I try to create "real" characters, but again, Aurelie being a girl in a man's world gives her much more dramatic grist to grind, because she's fighting against convention, and, like Brind, she's drawn into situations that she

wouldn't normally encounter.

**JS:** *You continued with the same set of characters in the second novel, Plague Sorcerer.*

**CR:** Yes. Puffin wanted a sequel, and, of course, *Plague Sorcerer* is about the plague in the same century. I didn't choose the title, and had a long argument over the word "sorcerer." I was determined that it wasn't going to be in any way a fantastical story, but the publishers had the final say on the title, even though the word "sorcerer" does not occur anywhere in the text.

**JS:** *Nor in the American edition, which appeared as Hunted.*

**CR:** No. The story is about the Black Death, and I wanted to write it simply because of the superstition and fear, and the devastation of a third of the English population.

**JS:** *I thought it was also a fascinating focus partly on the individual fears and partly on the social disorder, which is taken advantage of by some characters. Another interesting thing was the focus on Brother Rohan and church corruption. Putting that into a modern children's novel is rather unusual.*

**CR:** Well, one hopes that children who read the books will be taken back to a time and way of life that they will have no previous conception of – that will show them that this kind of behaviour was common. The medieval church was imperfect in many ways.

**JS:** *It's again very dramatic.*

**CR:** That's one of the nice things about historical novels: you can easily find very dramatic social and personal stories. Life was so different, and short.

**JS:** *So that was a series of two novels. Could you have imagined writing further sequels?*

**CR:** Yes, if Puffin had wanted more. The chemistry of the two characters works quite well, and the 14<sup>th</sup> century is a very fertile area.

**JS:** *You've been referring to an apparently significant factor: the publishers have said that you should either continue or discontinue that type of writing, character, story.*

**CR:** We live in difficult times for publishers, despite the phenomenal success of the Harry Potter books. You could argue that their overwhelming predominance has skewed the market. It's quite hard to sell a one-off story for this age group because publishers are nervous about sales and so they want what they know, but they want it to be "different." They want the best of both worlds. They often want a series that will build up reputation, popularity, and

so on. Both of my Brind novels did well in America, whereas *Brind* did quite well in England but *Plague Sorcerer* didn't. So it was quite understandable that they didn't want to continue that series. But another thing I had always wanted to write was a novel about the coast, and *Smugglers* was an adventure story set on – well, it is set on the Isle of Wight, although officially it isn't!

**JS:** *It's the kind of mythology that we grew up with, isn't it!*

**CR:** Yes, but in *Smugglers* I tried to recreate life as it was, not to romanticise smuggling or piracy, but to describe what it must have been like – it's important especially in a children's novel to try to explain or describe succinctly the life of a 10 or 12 year-old child in different periods of history.

**JS:** *In Smugglers you again have two central characters, Reuben, the local boy, from the coast, and the Londoner, Pin. Why that choice?*

**CR:** It's again a case of putting a character like Pin in a strange milieu, because he can then show the audience's first perception: they are thrust into a world they know nothing about. It requires the audience to evaluate the situation through the eyes of a fictional character.

**JS:** *So Reuben, the local boy, is shown involved in the values of his family and community, and the Londoner comes with his very different background, as a kind of sounding board.*

**CR:** Yes, it's always useful to have two contrasting characters.

**JS:** *This novel has a 19<sup>th</sup> century setting.*

**CR:** It's set in 1821.

**JS:** *At a point when there was a shift towards more regularised national policing. And you're also looking at an imagined local community that's anarchistic.*

**CR:** What I wanted to explore was the morality of survival, particularly on the coast, and people's attitudes to the sea. There certainly was, until quite recently, a deep respect for the sea, almost a religious attitude. So if the sea decided it was your turn to drown, then you drowned! Most fishermen in the 19<sup>th</sup> century couldn't swim because they thought it was wrong to learn how to. The sea provided you with a living, and when the sea changed its mind and it was your turn to go, then you went! There was the same attitude to shipwreck – I think the whole idea of wrecking, where locals deliberately lured ships onto the rocks in order to profit from the wreck, is vastly overstated. There isn't very much proof of it. But if a ship was wrecked, you made the

best of it. All that lore of the sea is fascinating!

**JS:** *And in the course of this story, it's the law of the land that's displacing the lore of the sea.*

**CR:** Yes.

**JS:** *And then in 2008 you published a very different story with a later 19<sup>th</sup> century setting, Scarper Jack and the Bloodstained Room.*

**CR:** Set in 1856. The Victorian period I find fascinating because it's an era when change accelerated as a result of the industrial revolution, the coming of the railways – technology in its broadest sense. This was a period in England, particularly in London, of extremes – of poverty and wealth – both created by the upheavals in society. It was also a time when forensic science was coming into existence, fingerprinting, for example.

**JS:** *This time you created a triangle of central characters acting as amateur detectives.*

**CR:** Yes. The amateur child detective is nothing new, but it was worth revisiting, and it does give a dynamic to relationships, and also the chance to use three characters' skills.

**JS:** *So you created the working-class boy and the "posh" boy, as the cover blurb puts it, and the sewer-rat of a girl! There's also a nice contrast between the chimney-sweep boy, unafraid of heights, and the girl, unafraid of depths: lots of metaphorical possibilities.*

**CR:** Yes, and also very different attitudes to life and survival.

**JS:** *And the middle-class boy is able to operate on a horizontal level with credibility. What happens next?*

**CR:** Well, *Scarper Jack*, strangely, has now been sold to Heinemann Educational, and it's being used in schools. They've done a print-run of several thousand, along with worksheets, study documents and CD-ROMs, as a package that goes to schools for the 11-13 age group. So it's used as a resource for History, English, and so on.

**JS:** *Is the use of imaginative, creative texts for such purposes a new phenomenon?*

**CR:** Apparently, Heinemann have been doing this for a long time, as an encouragement to children to read books as fiction but also with further spin-off opportunities. It gives teachers a year's basis for their teaching in a number of subjects.

**JS:** *A holistic approach, in other words?*

**CR:** Yes. And for us, it has also meant going almost full circle. A book can be used in so many ways!

## A Life in Books: An Interview with Susan Johnson

Carmen Espinola Rosillo (Granada, Spain)

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Susan Johnson<sup>1</sup> is an Australian novelist based in London whose fiction blends the universal and the personal with considerable skill. Her writings explore the gap between our imagined worlds and the real world, with a focus on the relations between men and women, and the challenges faced by women and artists. Johnson has published several novels with a backdrop of contemporary politics and crucial events which have shaped the character of Australia as a nation. Her latest novel, *Life in Seven Mistakes*, has attracted international attention as was the case with her previous novel, *The Broken Book*<sup>2</sup>.

Johnson is one of Australia's most active writers and has had a good reception among critics and scholars. She has published seven novels: *Messages from Chaos* (1987), *Flying Lessons* (1990), *A Big Life* (1993), *Women Love Sex* (1996), *Hungry Ghosts* (1996), *The Broken Book* (2004), and *Life in Seven Mistakes* (2008); and a memoir, *A Better Woman* (1999), which is a brilliant example of what women face today when they decide to integrate mothering as part of their lives. Among her novels, the most distinguished work is her recent novel *Life in Seven Mistakes*, which was published by Random House as a Heinemann imprint in August 2008. Twenty years have passed since she was granted \$8,000 by the Literature Board of the Australia Council to write her first novel, *Message from Chaos*. Two decades later Johnson brings the issue concerning the generation of baby boomers back. This time the heroine of her novel is not Anna Lawrence but Elizabeth Burton, who is in a state of bewilderment. Burton, a successful Australian ceramist, will have to deal with the problems that arise between her family when they gather together for Christmas and also to celebrate her parents' 50th wedding anniversary. *Life in Seven Mistakes* depicts the Burtons' private life where aged parents Bob and Nancy manage to have such emotional power over their middle-aged children, especially over Elizabeth, who has not been a role model for her parents' generation, which is captured from the beginning of the novel when Elizabeth feels ashamed of herself, because to her parents her work is a triviality and the fact she has travelled to Queensland means nothing to them. This emotional power over their children will be felt by them throughout the novel, feeling themselves victims of emotional blackmail. This feeling is going to paralyse Elizabeth, leaving her immersed in a feeling of confusion through out the novel, where "rage and frustration and pity, and a stubborn and inescapable love keeps her believing that if she could only break through to the truth of her father she might see him at last revealed in a cleansing and forgiving light" (58). It is a novel about love and hate, regret and [shamelessness](#) highly emotional, yet often comic. As O'Hearn (August 6, 1987) states, Johnson's fiction is "*witty, reflective and finely written*".

The interview that follows is the result of two meetings (Paris, November 2007; London, October 2008) and further contact through e-mails. I have concentrated principally on her reflections regarding her latest novel *Life in Seven Mistakes*.

**CARMEN ESPINOLA ROSILLO:** Reviewers have labelled *Life in Seven Mistakes*<sup>1</sup> as: "a black comedy about a dysfunctional Queensland family", "a window into ordinary suburban life", or "black family comedy." But it is important to tell the non-Australian readers that the roots of

your novel are the problems of baby boomers in Australia. What comes to your mind when you hear that word? Have baby boomers been a challenge for the previous generation?

**SUSAN JOHNSON:** Yes, the main character of Elizabeth is a baby-boomer, and by that I mean she is

a member of the great swollen generation of children born in the years immediately following the Second World War, those *soixante-huiters* who through their sheer numbers had an enormous social, political and economic effect on the world. I chose this character because one of the most cherished beliefs of baby-boomers is that they can 'have it all', that 'you're worth it' and that self-definition is everything. But here, in this novel, Elizabeth is confronted by a choice between duty and self. Duty hardly exists as a concept any more, and I wanted to illustrate what might happen when a baby-boomer comes face to face with it.

**CER:** *As you have just said, people who were born after the war thought they "could have it all", which I personally think is more a myth than a fact. But this idea of a writer struggling to combine the demands of creation with a child and a husband is a common theme in some of your novels (e.g., A Better Woman, The Broken Book and Life in Seven Mistakes). Can this be seen as a reflection of your own life?*

**SJ:** Most definitely, I read an article by the Irish writer and Booker Prize winner Anne Enright recently in which she said that she didn't understand writers who felt children were the enemies of promise, and she felt that the pram in the hall was a fine thing for a writer. Well, yes, I agree emotionally – having children is the ultimate way of engaging with the world in a very hands-on, visceral way, and it stretches you emotionally in very challenging ways (Fay Weldon says you can believe you are a nice person until you have children!). However, it is also exhausting, time-consuming, expensive and very, very hard.

I have discovered that, deep down, I believe in a very much unreconstructed, antediluvian way that a 'real' artist gives her life over to art, and doesn't compromise her art by having children! In some ways I do think that having children slowed me up, and profoundly compromised me for all times. And yet having children also engaged me with life on the deepest level, and who knows if my writing might be a more sterile, impoverished thing if I hadn't had them? I think all writers are quite good at giving reasons why they are as never as brilliant as they might have been, and perhaps the having/not having of children argument is simply another version of that!

I do know my life is enriched by my children, but I am not entirely sure my art is... It is very, very hard for me to combine writing with running a household, having children, and a marriage. Most of the world's greatest women writers did not have

children. This is not an accidental fact.

**CER:** *Using a quotation from Shakespeare's As You Like It as an epigram in your book hints that you share a vision of people as players using the world as their stage. From your point of view, does this imply justifying the entire host of irrational experiences people go through?*

**SJ:** What I meant by using that quote is that life is indeed an act in seven stages, from infant to old person, *sans* teeth, and all of it is largely played out in the most blind, irrational way. We live our lives in essence as one long mistake, because our lives are not known things but a stumble into the dark, and everything we do is in a sense a mistake, in the sense of the Oscar Wilde quote of 'experience being the name we give to our mistakes.' I believe, deeply, that human beings are more irrational than they are prepared to believe.

**CER:** *In your memoir A Better Woman you said that to be a writer means "to be a witness, in some way, to existence" Could it mean that your work is an attempt to create a new reality?*

**SJ:** Oh, of course! I think most writers find life hard in a way; hence they are driven to reshape the world. Many, many writers were strange children, isolated from other children through illness, personality, desires. I think to be a writer essentially means to be someone who is solitary by nature – even though there have been lots of partying writers, the Hemingway and the Capotes and the Dorothy Parkers etc., there is some essential loneliness, I think, in most writers. I certainly prefer the life inside a book to the outside world sometimes...

**CER:** *Writers often find it difficult to explain their works. Is this so in your own case?*

**SJ:** Yes, and I think this is frequently the case because any writer hopes to write the most complex, absorbing, world-within-a-world book, because we hope to get everything in, then it becomes impossible to summarise the universe of a book in a line. A book should be about many things, don't you think? To compress it to one thing trivialises a book in some way I think.

**CER:** *Although reading Life in Seven Mistakes is its own best possible explanation, we could touch upon the way it is organised. There are three main narrative voices in the novel; each in turn expresses their personal feelings, attitudes and reactions during a Christmas gathering. Did any voice prove more challenging than the others? Why?*

**SJ:** I suppose that Bob was the most difficult, being so very far removed from my own experience. But once I found a way inside him, if you like, once I

understood him to be a kind of Biblical father figure, or at least that was how he understood himself, as saviour, protector and head of his family, that I could do it. I came to love all these characters and saw that it is really true that once you understand the world from another person's experience. It is easier to forgive, and far, far harder to be absolute about anything. That is the great gift of fiction.

**CER:** *I am also curious about how you can achieve three such distinct voices (far from an easy task, but one accomplished convincingly) using simply what you call "an intimate voice", which people tend to confuse with autobiographical facts.*

**SJ:** Yes, see my other answers. I try very hard for this intimacy, and wish to present a voice as close to life as possible, which is why I will often use my own lived emotional truths in my fiction. I want to 'hear' someone's private, in-the-head voice, the voice in which they speak to themselves, and which the rest of the world cannot hear. I really believe in Edith Wharton's maxim that fiction must show us the 'back of the tapestry' – that the world sees the front of the tapestry but what the world of fiction shows us is the 'real' world within, the world unimpeded by social convention, good behaviour, public standing. That to me is often a truer world than the public world.

**CER:** *Using that "intimate voice", *Life in Seven Mistakes* superbly reflects a reality where, in some way, many readers can feel identified with some of your characters. Can I say that Susan Johnson has gone a step further in her writing as also in her marketing?*

**SJ:** Well, thank you! There have been different responses to *Life in Seven Mistakes* from some readers (my books have always elicited strong responses from readers – they either love them or can't stand them!) and this book is no different. Some readers prefer *The Broken Book* for being more 'original', but in many ways *Life in Seven Mistakes* is a more complex book because of its multiple voices. It was a more difficult book to write because of this and I would agree that it does take my writing a step further, in that it required a certain technical mastery that really stretched me. It

took a long time to get right.

As to the autobiographical content, yes, I have always elicited that interest because my work does grow from a lived emotional truth. In other words, I write out of my emotional life, and obviously some of what I write about comes from lived events. But, and this is a big but, if I simply wrote down what happened to me in my life, no-one would be interested. You have to turn feeling into story, life into drama, and experience into event.

**CER:** *You have often remarked how a novel's publication and literary festivals tend to go together. Obviously this needn't have been the reason but it certainly added something to your presence at the Melbourne Writer's Festival<sup>2</sup>. Can you describe what your experience was like?*

**SJ:** I always find the Writers' Festival rewarding because it connects writers with readers in a very intimate way. You can sometimes feel very shut off from readers – writing a book for two or three years, in a room, alone and meeting your readers is like a shot in the arm, a joyful thing that sends you scurrying back to your room, renewed. It is exhausting though, because I think temperamentally most writers are introverts, but it is good for introverts to pretend to be extroverts sometimes!

**CER:** *Finally, do you think that reaching number three on the new entries list of *The Bookseller* last August will affect your future writing?*

**SJ:** Well, I was conscious of the complaints of some readers over *The Broken Book* – e.g. the different time sequences, the chopping and changing from one scene in the main character's life to another, and also the relative lack of plot. So I wanted this to be a plot-driven book, and by page-turner I simply mean I wanted the reader to be in a fever to turn to the next page, to find out what happens next! As to my future work, I guess you will have to wait and see (but I am working on two things, a novel called *My Hundred Lovers* and an essay "On Beauty", part of the Melbourne University Press series Little Books on Big Themes published by Melbourne University Publishing<sup>3</sup>).

## NOTES

1. For more information about Susan Johnson, the Australian author, visit her webpage: <[www.abetterwoman.net](http://www.abetterwoman.net)>. She should not be confused with the American author of the same name.
2. Shortlisted for the 2005 Nita B Kibble Award; the Best Fiction Book section of the Queensland Premier's Literary Award; the Westfield/Waverley Library Literary Award, and the Australian Literary Society Gold Medal Award for an Outstanding Australian Literary Work
3. For reviews of her fiction, see <[www.middlemiss.org/weblog/archives/matilda/2009/02/combined\\_review\\_24.html](http://www.middlemiss.org/weblog/archives/matilda/2009/02/combined_review_24.html)>.

4. For more information see <[www.mwf.com.au](http://www.mwf.com.au)>.

5. See <[www.mup.com.au](http://www.mup.com.au)>.

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