

*Beverley Farmer*



This one's hair is long and she is richly fleshed, the colour of warm milk with honey. Her eyes are thick-lidded: I have never been sure what colour they are. (She is mostly reading when I can watch her.) They seem now pale, now dark, as if they changed like water. On fine mornings she lies and reads the paper on the cane sofa under her shaggy green grapevine. She is out a lot during the day. She and the children eat dinner by the kitchen fire — her glass of wine glitters and throws red reflections — and then watch television for an hour or two in the front room. After the children go up to bed, she sits on and reads until long past midnight, the lamplight shifting over her. Some evenings visitors come — couples, the children's father — but no one stays the night. And she has a dog: an aged blond Labrador, half-blind, that grins and dribbles when it hears me coming and nuzzles for the steak I bring. It has lolloped after me in and around the house, its tail sweeping and its nails clicking on the boards. It spends the night on the back veranda, snoring and farting in its sleep.

The little girls — I think the smaller is five or six, the other not more than two years older — have blond hair tied high in a sheaf, like pampas grass. (The father is also blond.)

Tonight, though the moon is nearly full, it is misted over. I may not even really need the black silk balaclava, stitched in red, that I bought for these visits, though I am wearing it anyway, since it has become part of the ritual. I am stripped to a slit black tracksuit — slit, because it had no fly — from which I unpicked all the labels. I have the knife safe in its sheath, and my regular tracksuit folded in my haversack ready for my morning jog when I leave the house.

Tonight when the clock chimed one she turned all the lights out. When it chimed two I came in, sat by the breathing fire, and waited. There is no hurry. I nibble one by one the small brown grapes I picked, throwing the skins and the wet pips into its flames of glass, making them hiss. Nothing moves in the house.

When the clock chimes three I creep into her room — one curtain is half-open, as it always has been — to stand watching the puddle of dimness that is her pillow; the dark hair over it.

I saw her once out in the sun untangling her wet hair with her fingers. It flowed over her face and over her naked shoulders like heavy dark water over sandstone. The grass around her was all

## A Woman with Black Hair

Her front door locks, but not her back door. Like the doors on many houses in her suburb, they are panelled and stained old pine ones, doors solid enough for a fortress: but the back one opens with a push straight into her wooden kitchen. Moonlight coats in icy shapes and shadows the floor and walls which I know to be golden pine, knotted and scuffed, having seen them in sunlight and cloudlight as often as I have needed to; having seen them lamplit too, cut into small gold pictures by the wooden frames of the window, thirty small panes, while I stood unseen on the back veranda. (The lampshades are lacy baskets and sway in draughts, rocking the room as if it were a ship's cabin and the light off waves at sunset or sunrise washed lacyly inside it. Trails like smoke wavering their shadows over the ceiling are not smoke, but cobwebs blowing loose.) These autumn nights she has a log fire burning, and another in her front room just beyond. With the lights all off, the embers shine like glass. They fill the house all night with a warm breath of fire.

An old clock over the kitchen fire chimes the hours. One. Two.

Off the passage from her front room is a wooden staircase. Her two small daughters sleep upstairs, soundly all night. Beyond the staircase a thick door is left half-open: this is her room. In its white walls the three thin windows are slits of green light by day, their curtains of red velvet drawn apart like lips. There is a fireplace, never used; hardly any furniture. A worn rug, one cane armchair, a desk with a lamp stooped over books and papers (children's essays and poems drawn over in coloured pencil, marked in red ink); old books on dark shelves; a bed with a puffed red quilt where she sleeps. Alone, her hair lying in black ripples on the pillow.

For me a woman has to have black hair.

shafts of green light, each leaf of clover held light. There were clambering bees.

There is a creek a couple of streets down the hill from here. I wish I could take her there. It reminds me of a creek I used to fish in when I was a boy. There were round speckled rocks swathed with green-yellow silky weed, like so many wet blond heads combed by the fingers of the water. (My hair was — is still — blond). I used to wish I could live a water life and leave my human one: I would live in the creek and be speckled, weedy-haired, never coming out except in rain. I lay on the bank in spools and flutters of water light. A maternal ant dragged a seed over my foot; a dragon-fly hung in the blurred air; a small dusty lizard propped, tilted its head to take me in, and hid in the grass under my shadow.

Over the weeks since I found this woman I have given her hints, clues, signs that she has been chosen. First I took her white nightgown — old ivory satin, not white, but paler than her skin — and pulled it on and lay in her bed one day. It smelled of hair and roses. I left it torn at the seams on the sofa under the grapevine that shades her back veranda. I suppose she found it that night and was puzzled, perhaps alarmed, but thought the dog had done it; anyone might think so. Another day I left an ivory rose, edged with red, in a bowl on her kitchen table. She picked it up, surprised, and put it in a glass of water. She accused her daughters of picking it, I could tell from where I was standing by the kitchen window (though of course what she was saying was inaudible), and they shook their heads. Their denials made her angry; the older girl burst into loud sobs. Another frilled rose was waiting on the pillow in the room with the three red-lipped windows. I wonder what she made of that. They looked as if they were crumpled up then dipped in blood.

I drop a hint now: I sit down in the cane armchair, which creaks, and utter a soft sigh. Her breathing stops. She is transfixed. When it starts again, it is almost as slow as it was when she was asleep, but deeper: in spite of her efforts, harsher. Her heart shudders. For long minutes I take care not to let my breathing overlap hers; I keep to her rhythm. She does not dare to stop breathing for a moment to listen, warning whoever is there, if

anyone is, that she is awake. And at last — the kitchen clock chimes four — she starts to fall asleep again, having made herself believe what she must believe. There is no one there, the noise was outside, it was a dream, she is only being silly.

I make the chair creak again.

She breathes sharply, softly now, and with a moan as if in her sleep — this is how she hopes to deceive whoever is there, because someone is, someone is — she turns slowly over to lie and face the chair. Her eyes are all shadow. Certainly she opens them now, staring until they water, those eyes the colours of water. But I am too deep in the dark for her to see me: too far from the grey glow at the only tall window with its curtains left apart.

This time it takes longer for her to convince herself that there is nothing here to be afraid of. I wait until I hear her breathing slow down. Then, as lightly as the drizzle that is just starting to hiss in the tree by her window, I let her hear me breathing faster.

"Who is it?" she whispers. They all whisper.

"Quiet." I kneel by her head with the grey knife out.

"Please."

"Quiet."

The clock chimes. We both jump like rabbits. One. Two. Three. Four. Five. I hold the knife to her throat and watch her eyes sink and her mouth gape open. Terror makes her face a skull. "Going to keep quiet?" I whisper, and she makes a clicking in her throat and nods a little, as much as she dares to move. "Yes or no?"

She clicks.

"It's sharp. Watch this." I slice off a lock of her black hair and stuff it in my pocket. "Well?"

Click.

"Well?"

"Yesss."

When I hold her head clear of the quilt by her hair and stroke the knife down the side of her throat, black drops swell along the line it makes, like buds on a twig.

"Good. We wouldn't want to wake the girls up, would we?" I say. I let that sink in, let her imagine those two little girls running in moonlit gowns to snap on the light in the doorway. Then I say

their names. That really makes her pulse thump in her throat. "They *won't* wake up, will they?"

"No," she whispers.

"Good."

I press my lips on hers. My mouth tastes of the grapes I ate by her still fire, both our mouths slither and taste of the brown sweet grapes. I keep my tight grip of my knife and her hair. She has to stay humble. I am still the master.

"I love you," I say. Her tongue touches mine. "I want you." Terror stiffens and swells in her at that. "Say it," I say.

"I — love you," she whispers. I wait. "I — want you."

Now there is not another minute to wait. I throw the quilt off and lift her nightgown. She moves her heavy thighs and the slit nest above them of curled black hair. There is a hot smell of roses and summer grasses. I lie on top of her. "Put it in," I say, and she slips me in as a child's mouth takes the nipple. "Move," I say. She makes a jerky thrust. "No, no. Make it nice." Her eyes twitch; panting, she rocks and sways under me.

I have to close her labouring mouth with my hand now; in case the knife at her throat slips, I put it by her head on the pillow (it's steel not cold, as hot as we are), and it makes a smear where the frilled rose was. Her nightgown tears over her breasts, black strands of her hair scrawl in red over the smooth mounds of them, warm wet breasts that I drink. Is this the nightgown? Yes. Yes. Then we are throbbing and convulsing and our blood beats like waves crashing on waves.

None of these women ever says to me, How is your little grub enjoying itself? Is it in yet? Are you sure? Can it feel anything? Oh, well, that's all right. Mind if I go back to sleep now? No, move, I say, and they move. Move nicely. Now keep still. And they do.

"Now keep still," I say, picking up the knife again. She lies rigid. The clatter of the first train tells me it is time. Day is breaking. Already the grey light in the window is too strong to be still moonlight and the dark tree has started to shrink, though not yet to be green and brown. "I have to go. I'll come again," I say as I get up. She nods. "You want me to. Don't you." She nods, her eyes on the hand with the knife.

I never will. I never do. Once is all I want. At night she will lie awake thinking I will come to her again. Just as she thinks I might cut her throat and not just slit the skin; and so I might. But their death is not part of the ritual. The knife is like a lion-tamer's whip: the threat is enough. Of course if the threat fails, I will have to kill her. She, for that matter, would turn the knife on me if she could. Chance would then make her a killer. Chance, which has made me the man I am, might yet make me a killer: I squat stroking the knife.

"Well, say it," I say.

"Yes."

"You won't call the police." She shakes her head. "Or will you? Of course you will." My smile cracks a glaze of blood and spittle around my mouth. In the grey mass on the pillow I watch her eyes roll, bloodshot, bruised, still colourless. "I want you to wait, though. I know: wait till the bird hits the window." A bird flies at her window every morning. I see her realise that I even know that; I see her thinking, Oh God, what doesn't he know? "That's if you love your little girls." Her eyes writhe. "You do, don't you. Anyone would." Girls with hair like pampas grass. "So you will wait, won't you." She nods. "Well?"

"Yes."

Her coils of dark hair are ropy with her sweat and her red slobber, and so is her torn gown, the torn ivory gown that I put on once, that she never even bothered to mend. A puddle of yellow haloes her on the sheet. She is nothing but a cringing sack of stained skin, this black-haired woman who for weeks has been an idol that I worshipped, my life's centre. The knowledge that I have got of her just sickens me now. Let them get a good look at what their mother really is — what women all are — today when they come running down to breakfast, her little girls in their sunlit gowns. "You slut," I say, and rip her rags off her. "You foul slut." Just having to gag her, turn her and tie her wrists behind her and then tie her ankles together makes me want toretch aloud. Having to touch her. But I stop myself. Turning her over to face the wall, I pull the quilt up over the nakedness and the stink of her. I wipe my face and hands, drop the knife and the balaclava into my haversack, and get dressed quickly.

The dark rooms smell of ash. Light glows in their panes, red glass in their fireplaces. The heavy door closes with a jolt. I break off a bunch of brown grapes with the gloss of the rain still on them. The dog snuffles. Blinking one eye, it bats its sleepy tail once or twice on the veranda.

I have made a study of how to lose myself in these hushed suburban mornings. (The drizzle stopped long ago. Now a loose mist is rising in tufts, and the rolled clouds are bright-rimmed). I am as much at home in her suburb as I am in her house, or in my own for that matter, though I will never go near the house or the suburb, or the woman, again. (I will find other women in other houses and suburbs when the time comes. Move, I will say, and they will move. Move nicely. They will. Keep still. Then they will keep still.) And when the sirens whoop out, as of course they will soon, I will be out of the way. I will wash myself clean.

I am a solitary jogger over yellow leaves on the echoing footpaths. No one sees me. I cram the grapes in my haversack for later.

I know that soon after sunrise every morning a small brown bird dashes itself like brown bunched grapes, like clodded earth, at the bare window of her room, the one with its red curtains agape. Again and again it launches itself from a twig that is still shaking when the bird has fallen into the long dry grass and is panting there unseen, gathering its strength for another dash. (The garden slopes away under her room: no one can stand and look in at her window.) It thuds in a brown flurry on to its own image shaken in the glass. It startled me, in the garden the first morning. I think of her half-waking, those other mornings, thinking, It's the bird, as the brown mass thudded and fell and fluttered up to clutch at the twig again: thinking, Only the bird, and turning over slowly into her safe sleep.

But she is awake this morning. She is awake thinking, Oh God, the bird, when will the bird? Twisting to free her hands and turn over: Please, the bird. Her shoulders and her breasts and throat are all ravelled with red lace. Her hair falling over them is like dark water.

## Letter to Judith Brett

Dear Judith Brett,

I need hardly say how interested I was to read Kerryn Goldsworthy's article, "Feminist Writings, Feminist Readings: Recent Australian Writing by Women", in *Meanjin* 4/1985. There were statements about my stories that I disagreed with, but every reader reads a different book, I thought, and why not. But a sentence summing them up jolted me out of such complacency: "Given their historical context, her stories in *Milk* (1983) and *Home Time* (1985), written and published out of and into a public awareness of feminist issues, values and strategies, can only be read as reactionary to it." *Can only be read* . . . What we are getting is not "a" feminist reading: this is the only possible reading of my stories?

Paranoia, I muttered, and read on. My stories are reactionary to it, it said, because these days feminism is "a visible ideological position against which to react". Oh. My stories have revealed no "ideologically sound heroines", no women who are "rescuers, supporters and survivors". Readers are "implicitly invited to identify and sympathise" with a writer's heroines, and if under examination they're found wanting . . . well, it goes without saying, that means they're reactionary.

What if I'm neutral, though? I pipe up. *Ideologically neutral*? My stories, I mean? No, it seems there is no middle ground: "ideological 'innocence' is no longer a possibility". And furthermore: ". . . it has become literally impossible for any writer, irrespective of his or her own ideological position, not to engage on one side or the other with the issues that it raises — short of avoiding altogether the representation in his or her writing of the social and sexual relations of men and women".

So from now on, writing (if it deals, as most fiction does, with

the relations of men and women) must take into account "the historical and sociological context of post-seventies feminism". Well now, feminism may be "a powerful political force", but it's not a dictatorship. Writers of fiction, in Australia at least, can still keep ideology — *any* ideology — at bay if it so happens that they see human experience in other terms. Fiction is at once more and less than history and sociology; its sources are beyond their reach. There are many ways of writing; and of reading.

Beverley Farmer  
Carlton, Victoria

## Literature Is What Is Taught

Extracts from Interview by Jennifer Ellison

*How did you come to get Alone published?*

When Sisters Publishing was set up (I think it was 1977), I read about it in a newspaper or magazine and naturally thought there were possibilities there and sent it off. Hilary McPhee read it and liked it but there was a whole board of directors who had to read it and like it, so there were some months of nail biting before it was accepted in 1980.

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*Was it important to you that Alone be published by a group like Sisters?*

I wanted it published. I didn't mind whether it was a feminist publisher or an ordinary publisher.

*Do you have any feminist sympathies or do you define yourself as a feminist?*

Oh sympathies, yes, but I'm not an activist. I'm in sympathy with equal rights and women's emancipation and all that, but the trouble is that women's liberation is such a flexible term. It means something different to everybody.

*What does it mean to you?*

I don't really want to give a definition of feminism but I expect people to consider women as equal to men and I'm astounded when they don't. But I'm not actually out there in the field battling against prejudice.

*How did living in Greece, which is obviously a very male-dominated society, influence your views on the role of women and your views on "feminism", for want of a better word?*

I was only twenty-one when I met Chris, my ex-husband. We'd been together for seven years by the time we went to Greece and we'd adapted to each other in Australia. He had accepted that women are freer over here than he was used to. It was only when we went to Greece that we found that the compromise we'd worked out in Australia wasn't going to work in Greece because of family pressures and the scorn of other men, who thought he was hen-pecked if I was allowed to get away with what I took for granted in Australia. It was a very difficult time for us. I thought I was letting him down if I behaved with the freedom that I took for granted. Not sexual freedom, I should point out. And of course it's a generational thing too. His parents' generation were very shocked that I wore trousers, for example, as this was regarded as a radical act, but his brothers and sisters accepted me without question. His sisters were both working. They had had a good education. Now of course, with the socialist government, women's liberation is taking giant steps.

*Do you still take an active interest in Greece?*

Oh yes, yes. I only lived there for three years but we'd been married four years before then and we only went out with other Greeks. I lived in a totally Greek environment except for school. I had that split between my teaching life and coming home to a Greek household, Greek parties, Greek friends, Greek weddings,

Greek books to read (even in Australia, in Melbourne); and then of course Greece itself, and then coming back here again into a Greek family. I suppose about twenty years of my life were spent in a Greek environment and I'm still loosely a part of the extended family because I'm still my son's mother. And I'm accepted. I went back there in 1983 after seven years away after the divorce, not knowing how I'd be received, but I was very lovingly received.

*What sort of difficulties did you have as an Australian operating in a Greek culture? Did it make you more conscious of your "Australianness", for example?*

Yes, in a way it did. I realised that I had a fierce patriotism that I'd never suspected before. I got bitterly homesick for tea-tree and things like that. I think one of the strongest impressions when I came back was walking on a beach and it smelled right for the first time in three years. But that is more subconscious, I think, and it's only in encounters with individual people or incidents that offend you that you realise you're up against a cultural barrier. But you don't see it like that; you see it as Vassily being difficult or Stavros being difficult. It isn't the Greek male against the Australian female but person-to-person problems, just as they are here. That's how it is in the stories too — the conflict is from one person to another, because I'm more interested in the interaction between particular people. The cultural is subtextual I think.

*So when did you start to write more short stories and get them published?*

I hadn't really thought of the short story again for a long time until 1979. I wrote one — "Gerontissa" — and sent it to *Tabloid Story*. Also I enrolled in a Creative Writing course at the Council for Adult Education. I did one of their short courses and I was interested enough to go on and do a semester at Prahran College of Advanced Education. We had to do short stories as

assignments and I began fanatically to read every short story I could get hold of. I really fell in love with the form just as I had with Australian poetry before.

The first strong influence on me of Australian literature as literature — prose, I mean — apart from Mary Grant Bruce and Ethel Turner and all that in childhood, was a Patrick White short story in *Meanjin*, a Greek one too. It made me realise what could be done in Australia, that there were no rules. Coming out of university, I thought that writing anything and sending it out to an editor was more or less like sitting for an exam. Seeing this sort of work made me realise that a writer has to impose himself more or less, just by sheer force. By an "inner force of conviction": I can't remember who said that, but it means that the writer who has the strength to impose her own view will be accepted — you don't write to please anyone; you just write what you have to.

There had been rules at university, categories and criteria, and this author was "in" and this author was "out", and I felt that I had allowed myself to be conned in a sense. I felt that university stifled any impulses to write. I felt we were being trained to be critics or lecturers, academics, and that this training was not only not going to help us write but possibly going to inhibit us and I ought to forget it and overcome it.

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*Your stories strike me as being particularly well crafted. Is it a fairly meticulous process you go through before you feel you have a finished work?*

Yes, it is. I do a lot of rewriting. At first I used to read each story on to tape to make sure that it sounded right, but I don't do that so often now. I think I can hear the inner voice without reading it aloud.

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*Have there been any significant influences on your writing so far — people? Other writers?*

Yes, but they come and go. It's a bit like people that you come close to and then you move away and then perhaps you come close again. It's the same with writers. Patrick White for a long time was immensely important to me because he was doing what nobody else had ever done in Australian writing. He was opening up new freedoms, I thought. Even if you didn't want to write like Patrick White, the fact that he had done this and been abused for it — "verbal sludge" and all that — and had gone on doing it, that's what was brave.

*What particularly are you referring to about Patrick White's work?*

I think it's imagery and the satire and the mixture of techniques and innovations in syntax, everything. It's a bit like abstract art, a bit like cubism. He was breaking up shapes, and he was abrupt and awkward and not smooth and not what you'd call a well-made writer at all. This was what was so wonderful about it. It was a bit like a Cézanne painting, doing the same thing with writing. And I've always felt, too, with my stories that I like the abruptness and the occasional awkwardness. I'm like that myself. I'm not smooth, I'm not easy. I'm impulsive, I'm jerky and awkward sometimes, and I feel it fits me that the stories are written in that way, that they're not smooth. On a rejection slip once the person said that my writing wasn't smooth and that it was awkward and jerky but the story gets told somehow.

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*Some of your stories are written in the male voice. Is that something you find difficult to do?*

No. I'm glad you asked that, because it isn't something that I feel



is a great hurdle to be overcome. In fact, I never thought twice about it. For example, in "Maria's Girl" I was thinking of telling the story from the point of view of the girl, and then of course I realised she knew too little, and the material of it just began to develop. It's a bit like Nadine Gordimer being tackled about how dare she write about black people. As she says, blacks and whites have lived side by side for so many generations that they know each other. It's like any two people who know each other, whether they're male or female, or of different generations. They do know and they empathise. It doesn't bother me if men write books from a female point of view or about women. Using a male voice doesn't frighten me in the least because, for one thing, I'm not necessarily aiming for psychological realism. It's not a naturalistic portrait, for example; it's a dramatic action in a sense.

*What part, then, does imagination play in your writing?*

Oh, it's hard to say. I think I'm almost deliberately not analytical about my writing. It's like the centipede wondering how it walks. I don't really want to analyse the process by which I get a story together. Carlos Fuentes said somewhere, "I am not interested in a slice of life, what I want is a slice of the imagination", and I like that. I love that. But I don't think, ah now I'm leaving naturalism and realism and entering the realms of the imagination. I don't think there's a dividing line.

*So you don't think it's important to mirror life accurately in your stories?*

I think it's almost more important not to mirror it accurately but to exaggerate just that little bit so that people are shocked into seeing something differently. Like in a painting; you make something slightly the wrong shape or the wrong aspect, like a Picasso profile, so that you jolt first yourself then other people into a different awareness by falsifying it. It's like metaphor: it has to be just that little bit wrong to make an impression. If it corresponded

perfectly, it would just run through your mind without any friction at all. On the other hand, you can get it wrong and then you strike a real false note and people think, oh no, and they stop and you lose their trust. That's where the craft comes in.

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*What about the narrator in Alone — that's you, isn't it?*

When I wrote *Alone* I felt I was revealing not myself but Shirley, who was a creation based very largely on me, but I changed a lot about that. And it helped me to change it. The mother was perhaps a bit like my mother but the father wasn't, and I haven't a sister, and I hadn't walked out of my matric exams (it was at university that the affair happened), and various other changes that I made helped to distance her from me. So that I could create her as a separate person. But what did bother me on publication was that everyone would assume that this was an effusion and that I was just spilling my guts out in the confessional. Worse, in public.

*But that wasn't enough to stop you wanting it published?*

No. I don't think the fear of how people might receive it ever stops you wanting something published. Because I knew it wasn't just a gush of confession. It was a rounded experience. It was one night in a lifetime — very much a ritualised night. She ritualised it herself, and she had it all planned and she acted it out. Part of being on the borderline of schizophrenia is that you feel you're acting a part all the time; living in mirrors.

*How important are reviews to you?*

To a career, of course, they're important; they make a big difference to your reputation, to your sales. And a good opinion

from people whose opinion I respect is wonderful of course. Getting letters from readers is good too. In any other sort of job you have people you can have a coffee break with. You work with other people all the time. But in writing there aren't many chances for contact over the work and it's good to get responses from people and know that they are reading you. You're not just a book in a shop that nobody takes off the shelf. As I said, you write for the reader. If there's no reader, there's no point in writing. In fact, I don't think a story exists until it's published. I feel it's an embryonic form, it's not born, until it's in print. So I'm very anxious between when a story is finished and when it's in print, and this can be for a year or more.

*Do you feel happy with your writing career so far?*

The path has been fairly smooth since *Alone* came out. This is a good time to be writing in Australia. If you have talent and you are prepared to work I think this is a good time. Australian writing is being supported by the Literature Board, by the publishers, by the readers. It's not the way it was twenty years ago.

*Do you have any thoughts on why that might be so?*

I suppose it's because of the devoted and dedicated work of a few editors, publishers, writers, behind the scenes. It didn't just happen by chance. But this isn't really my field, the growth of Australian literature over the last twenty years. I've just been an onlooker. I think I'm a beneficiary rather than a participant.

*That sounds so modest.*

I'm not modest. Not at all. I hate that word. Writers have immense egos, otherwise they could never keep going.

*Why do you think that you're a beneficiary then, rather than a participant?*

Well, I feel I've been looked after really, by publishers, by editors, I've been accepted. I've been given chances. I got a grant from the Literature Board. What have I done to deserve this? I haven't edited a magazine. I haven't worked for the development of Australian literature. I haven't been an academic pushing Australian literature in the universities, and that's very important — what is being taught, and taken seriously.

*Are they the sort of people who create a receptive climate for Australian literature?*

Yes. Roland Barthes said, "Literature is what is taught". He might have been being cynical but I think he was just being truthful. That's how it is. If it's not being taught the assumption is, it's not worth much. Australian literature wasn't taught, twenty years ago. "What Australian literature?" people said.

*What about the mechanics of writing: the editing, the redrafting, writing from different perspectives, have you virtually taught yourself all that?*

Chekhov taught me and Patrick White taught me. Anything wonderful that you have read is a lesson. There are whole passages, for example, in *A Fringe of Leaves* where I could feel myself going green, not with envy, but because the blood was draining out of me. The intensity of what he was doing was so wonderful.

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*Do you feel it's difficult being a female writer?*

This is the big question, isn't it? If I were a man, would you be sit-

ting here and asking, "Do you feel it's difficult being a male writer?"

*No, I probably wouldn't, because it seems to have always been expected that if men want to be writers, they can be writers.*

It has for centuries for women, too. I mean, Jane Austen, George Eliot, George Sand — oh, it goes a long way back, doesn't it, that women have been accepted as writers. It's almost like actors and actresses, that writers were emancipated long before the average woman was.

*Except that, of course, George Eliot wrote under a male name.*

And so did Henry Handel Richardson. If it was required of them, then, it certainly didn't stop them writing. Writing under a pseudonym might even have helped them to distance themselves from the material and the female role, to be the omniscient author. A pseudonym is a mask. There have been men who have used pen names too, like Stendhal. Perhaps not female pen names, though.

I think Dorothy Hewett was terrific on the subject of being "women writers" in Adelaide in 1980, when she gave a speech about how ambivalent she felt about this feminist ghetto that we risk walling ourselves up in, and all the defensiveness and hostility and self-justification that follows from that. You build the wall yourself, and you create your own prison. We shouldn't be doing that. The point of fiction is that it leaps over walls; it turns them into panes of glass.