

Helen Garner



able to provide us with mythological heroines; and (g) an exposition of the fullness of women's oppression."

Perhaps it is the reader, and not the writer, who makes a book a feminist book.

A Woman's Word

Do women, must women, can women, should women write differently from men? Not just what they write about, but how they use language? Can a reader judge a writer's gender from a tiny excerpt, or are clues to be found only in larger elements — structure, plot or not, characters or not, narrative or not, or what?

Gillian Beer, in an essay "Women Writing and Writing About Women", says: "Virginia Woolf does not tell about women's bodies but in *The Waves*, having driven out authoritarian narrative, she uses women's special experience of time as one of the two underlying orders of the book. The book accepts the common human condition of growth and ageing, while relying for its particular order on recurrence and cycle. The menstrual relationship to time is implicit in the tides, the recurring waves, the stilled episodes of reunion and dissolution."

Computer studies have been done which show that there are certain words used more frequently by female writers than by male. I do not know what these words are.

English novelist Sara Maitland writes: "We must demand and respond to more and better novels, but we cannot demand that any one novel be simultaneously: (a) satisfying to our sense of the complexity of our lives; (b) a paradigm of orthodox feminism; (c) an evangelical document to convert the unconverted; (d) the bearer of a whole new language and symbol structure and world model; (e) a good read — witty, inspiring, identifiable with; (f)

Last summer at Writers' Week in Adelaide, Maxine Hong Kingston mentioned in passing that she was trying to get beyond female first-person narrative (of the kind where the author and the "I" are very closely related, if not the same person), and that in retrospect she felt "selfish" for having written *The Woman Warrior* from this perspective.

I happen to think that this is one of the strengths of that book, and I took her use of the word "selfish" as ironic, but some of the women in the audience took it literally and grumbled among themselves, "Selfish? Where does that leave women's writing? Is she heading towards just 'the artist'?" "Limited" may be a better word than "selfish".

It's easier, at least in terms of craft, to write a first-person narrative, to "self-express", than to do the broader thing, to split your imagination and spread yourself and go in a dozen directions at once. Easier in terms of craft, but it's not necessarily emotionally easier, as many men writers might admit.

"Literature is a making, not an out-pouring. 'Self-expression' leads too quickly to self-indulgence; writing fiction is the verbal counterpart of self-control, self-determination." — US novelist Janet Burroway, in *The Writer on Her Work*.

There is such a thing as a distancing between teller and tale which, when the events served raw or medium rare would have been unbearable, enables the reader to bear, to understand, to contemplate without boredom or despair, and finally in some sense to master, as the writer has done, the matter in question.

In 1961 at Melbourne University, Professor A.D. Hope read to a first-year English class Tolstoy's description (in *Anna Karenina*) of Kitty's preparation for an evening which would decide the direction of her life.

How wonderful, said Hope, is Tolstoy's ability to understand and portray the working of the female mind.

I was nineteen and believed everything I was told. I now find this account of Kitty's attitude toward her own appearance a rather obvious, even superficial piece of observation. This does not mean I don't think Tolstoy is a wonderful artist.

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Three Chinese women were guests at the Women Writers' Week: two writers, one interpreter.

The interpreter, translating the brief life story of the older woman writer, Han Zi, said, "the feet of her grandmother and her mother were bounded. Very sma' size. Because of feudal ideas their feet were bounded."

A woman in the audience asked two questions of Han Zi, famous writer of children's books.

"Are there, in Chinese fairy tales, evil female archetypes — the wicked witch, the wicked stepmother? And is there clearly differentiated male and female behaviour, in fairy tales?"

The Chinese woman did not seem to understand these questions, or the concepts underlying them.

Perhaps there were not words in Chinese for the concepts. They murmured among themselves for a length of time disproportionate to the simplicity (it seemed to us) of the questions. Finally the interpreter spoke. "There are some stories which are about boys, and some stories about girls."

She looked about her helplessly, hands out, palms up. "Is this . . . ?"

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Novelist and biographer Barbara Jefferis, talking at the festival about biography: "Male biography is about historical achieve-

ment. Men tend to set up heroes and try to emulate them. You can tell this from the hilarious terms of reverence they have devised: 'Your Holiness', 'Your Serene Highness'.

"Ask a woman who her heroes are and she won't have any. Heroines? Certainly not Joan of Arc, Boadicea, the Virgin Mary. Women are less envious, thus less likely to want reflected glory from the subjects of their biographies."

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Conversation between two women writers at the festival:

A: "How do you write men characters?"

B: "I go right into the male part of myself and I start inventing. I never thought of that till this very minute. Does it sound like bullshit?"

A: "On the contrary. You've given me the green light. Thanks."

tain the good things about a family and minimise the bad things, the awful neurotic thing that happens in families. It certainly happened in mine.

"Honour" has a moral title and it's a moral story. It's about people trying to behave in ways that are open and generous. The two women are trying to learn to confront each other, and to confront the fact that one's the first wife and the other's the second wife; they're not going to let themselves get slotted into social roles that have been created for them. They're going to try and approach it in some more open way. I think you could say that was a moral story. And *The Children's Bach* is a moral story because the woman comes back — and by that I don't mean that all women should go back to marriage. I think a lot of people probably interpreted it that way, you know; they thought, here's Helen Garner recanting. Of course, I think it is possible for people to walk out of a marriage. There's a period of sadness and suffering and so forth, but some of the kids I know who are products of broken marriages are the most extraordinary children. They're children who've got resilience and knowledge and sense. People talk about kids of broken marriages being traumatised, but how many people are traumatised by marriages that *don't* break up?

Would you say you are very conscious of the female characters and the whole issue of feminism in your work?

Of course. Some people think my men characters are drips; they don't know how the women in the stories can be bothered with the men. But I think that's a function of the fact that the women are centre stage and the men are slightly to one side. It might also be because my work shows the flip side of what feminists have grumbled about for all those years, that women weren't very well observed, that male writers didn't know what they thought or how they felt. I always feel conscious of taking a risk when I say "This is what this man's thinking", because I don't know. But then I don't know what other women are thinking either! I'm only guessing. You can only guess and go by hints and try to listen carefully.

Showing the Flipside

Extract from Interview by Jennifer Ellison

Within the broader theme of domesticity which seems to inform all your work, there seem to be two recurring motifs: children and music. Are you conscious of these?

Children are terribly important. Gerard Windsor said in his review of *The Children's Bach* that the characters are judged by their attitudes towards children. This is true but I hadn't done it consciously. Children are wondrous; they strike me with awe. And they're so tough, and funny.

Music is always there too. I never thought about it, until *The Children's Bach* — it was just there, like air, as it is in everyone's life in the modern world.

In *The Children's Bach* the music works as some kind of moral or ordering principle. It's a cliché but nevertheless true that art tries to impose order on experience which is not orderly, on a universe full of terrifying and demoralising things. I've tried to make music do that job.

Are you then addressing explicitly "moral" issues in your writing?

Yes. I suppose so. Two things got me out of a big mess at a certain point in my life. One was feminism and the other one was the whole ethos of collective households. That's the sort of thing that people who don't live like that were attracted to in *Monkey Grip* — the fact that there were those open households where people actually cared about each other and tried to create some kind of alternative to a family, some social organisation that would con-

Are you particularly interested in finding out more about male characters? Would you like to write more about male characters?

Yes, yes, I would, and in fact am doing so now. I've always had a very difficult relationship with my father. I think a lot of amateur psychologists would have spotted this already in my work. My relationship with my father has been the chief drama in my life and still is. It's going to be a job for me to understand my relationship with my father. He rejected me for many years and I behaved in such a way that he could only reject me. It was a tremendous battle and it's only now, in my forties, that I'm starting to be able to see him as separate from me, and not this force of nature breathing down my neck and saying "No, no, no." The other thing that happens to women like me, who have had such a difficult relationship with their fathers, is that you tend to be attracted to men who aren't going to love you as much as you want them to; it's because you've got unfinished business with your father. You want to recreate that situation with other men. Why would someone like me fall in love with a junkie? Because he's the sort of person who's unable to express love and so I can continue this battle to get him to love me, which is what the whole thing is with my father. That might seem a rather crude analysis but I think it's true.

It's taken me a long time to understand this about the male characters in my work, how many of them are unable to love. People have said they're weak or they're boring, but that's not the point. The point about them is that they're incapable of love. That's why for me, this character of Dexter is such a huge advance: Dexter can love. He may be slightly clownish still and a lot of people have written to me and said "What a dill this Dexter is, I really couldn't stand him", but to me Dexter is a wonderful character. In terms of my personal emotional development separately from my work (if the two can be separated, which I doubt) that's a bit of an advance.

How did feminism directly influence your writing?

It directly influenced my writing in the sense that I felt that it was

all right for me to be writing in the first place. I still have trouble even now with the thought that I'm not as worthy as a man. I mean have to put on a bit of bravado sometimes to get past that. I mean as a writer. It's the kind of female cringe that we recognised in ourselves when feminism gave us a way of looking at ourselves usefully. An act of will isn't enough to break out of female conditioning. You can't just bounce on the sofa drawing attention to yourself, saying "Look at me! I'm terrific!" You have to believe it, quite quietly, right inside you. That's a lifelong process.

But the reception that *The Children's Bach* got certainly helped. After Don Anderson's review in the *National Times*, the first one that came out, I thought, Phew — nothing can touch me now.

The idea of feeling less worthy is a hard one to examine. It's hard to distinguish between some form of not wanting to be up oneself, and the objective nature of people's responses to you. Every time somebody in a magazine or a newspaper says "Australian writers, like . . ." and then gives a list of names, if I'm not on that list I feel mortified. And when I feel like this I stop and I think, now what's happening here? I think, is this just my screaming ego wanting to be among the top of the class, or am I really looking out to see if I'm being excluded from some sort of category because I'm a woman? If you really wanted to answer that question in a specific case you'd have to go and read everything that critic's ever written, and why bother?

Also, I think that even people who like my work, and who think it's good, are probably waiting for me to write about something else. They seem, almost in spite of themselves, still to think of it as small beer because it's about domesticity and what happens in kitchens and bedrooms. I used to think, why can't I have a war or a revolution or something? And then I'd think, but I don't know anything about those things, and I won't be able to write about them until I do, and I may not ever, and I can't go out and look for them. There's a lot of that in it, the feeling that women's concerns are small or less important or secondary in some way. I don't think that myself. I think they're very crucial. I love novels about families. I suppose everybody does. Look at *War and Peace* — that's about a family as well as being about war. When I was writing *The Children's Bach* I felt very strange

and anxious from time to time because the scope of it was so small and domestic. And one day I was walking home from my room where I'd been working, and I went past a print shop. In the window of the shop was a print of a Van Gogh painting, that famous one of the chair in his bedroom. I looked at it and I thought, this is a wonderful painting, a painting that fills you with hope and life. And I thought, what is it? It's a painting of the inside of his bedroom and there's not even a person in it!

Do you think generally women writers do need to fight for recognition in Australia in a way that men don't?

That's a hard question to answer. I don't have the chip on my shoulder that I would have once had about this sort of thing. And, besides, I haven't had to deal with men in the business because I've got women publishers.

Has that been important to you?

Oh God, it's been crucial. If I'd had to take *Monkey Grip* to a male publishing company, either it would have been thrown out immediately as being too emotional, et cetera, or I would have had to hack at it and change it in lots of ways. It may be that the structure of it wouldn't have been acceptable to male publishers. I'm not saying that this is definitely the case — it may not be true — but I think it probably is.

Hilary McPhee and Diana Gribble are wonderful to work with. They're the sort of people whose opinions I really care about. When they came to Paris and told me my second novel was shit I knew it was shit because I trusted their judgment. They're the sort of people I can take something to when it's only half done and say, "Am I on the right track here?" and they'll say yes or no; I trust them to that extent. I don't really trust anyone else to that extent. *Anyone*.

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