

I n - D e p t h

easy time because I had a story in the Fiddlehead, and one had come out in the States, in Hudson Review, and a few other stories started coming out in Canada, just in little magazines and a man in Ottawa who's a publisher read them and phoned me and said, I would like to do a book, do you want to do a book. I mean this sort of thing doesn't happen any more. Mind you, I got very little for it and he was a difficult guy, but it was easy.

[*Our Lady of All the Distances*] originally came out with a cover by Alex Colville, and it was kind of in its own little way a best seller, certainly among writers. It was reprinted and reprinted and reprinted, and then Harper Collins bought the rights to it. I changed the title from *Women and Children*.

And then [*If Only We Could Drive Like This Forever*] contains most of the stories that I worked on in the late seventies and early eighties, and eventually it became my MA thesis at Concordia. There was an editor then at Penguin who really liked my work and he had been asking me to send a book so I sent it to him, and that's how that one came out.

This one [*Fortress of Chairs*] came out because I had won a poetry prize, and I was asked to read it at the League of Canadian Poets Annual Convention. A publisher of poetry was there and heard me read it, and phoned me about a week later and said, "do you have a book, send me everything you have and I'll let you know within a week." And he let me know within a week. So I went with him, so that was all easy.

But I think the situation has changed a great deal.

I was under the impression that poetry wasn't really marketable.

It has its own little market. I was told that there were 700 poetry buyers in Canada and if we could sell 700 copies of this book, this would be, in poetry terms, a best seller.

What warnings or directives would you give to beginning writers?

Trust the imaginary reader of your work, and above all trust yourself as a writer. Value your own life. Don't be stodgy or literary or formal. Begin by telling your story simply, but with irony and force, the way you'd tell it to a friend in whose company you feel at ease. Or begin with a moment that feels incidental, tossed off, but also has some speculation or mystery at the heart of it. Don't be a boy scout, and don't be a social worker, either. Don't pose a moral problem for a character and then try to "solve" it. Imagery and energy are both very important, at least they are for me when I'm writing.

And don't use euphemisms for "said". These replacements for "said" tend to make the reader much too aware of the writer sitting down at a desk and painstakingly writing, and besides, if a lot of characters are running around inside a story grunting and growling and snapping and hissing and barking, you don't only become

too aware of the writer writing, you also begin to feel that the characters are foolishly over-emphatic. And what you end up with is a zoo, not a story.

Great, now I can make a smooth transition from zoos to feminism. What's your personal definition of feminism?

I do think of myself as a feminist, and I would not ever want to be one of those women who says, "I'm not a feminist, but...", as if there's some awful shame attached to having feminist beliefs. I've lived the life of a feminist. But I resist the "ist." I resist being identified as a feminist writer because any word with "ist" at the end limits you. Idealist, minimalist, nihilist, feminist ... but one of the disservices that women reviewers do to women writers is that they refer to the material women are writing as "familiar domestic territory," which makes me see red. Because it's only familiar if it isn't well done.

I'd like to talk a bit about your political views, and thoughts on censorship.

I know some writers are very politically conscious and very politically active, and have very strong feelings about censorship, for instance. And I must say that I'm very against censorship, but when feminist principles come up against certain things like *American Psycho*, I become extremely uncomfortable, and extremely confused actually, about what you should allow and what you shouldn't allow. On the other hand I think that it's very damaging to be very controlling about what people write and there are so many, you know, wonderful books, like Nabokov's *Lolita*, for instance, which you know if some people had had their own way would not be around any more. The plates would have been destroyed, all the books would have been burned. You know, real works of art are so incredibly misunderstood if they involve things like sexuality of certain kinds. I suppose the difference between someone like Brett Easton Ellis and *American Psycho* and somebody like Vladimir Nabokov and *Lolita* is that one was such an amazing artist and the other is not, you know. I think somebody at the trial concerning *Lolita* said there are no, sort of right books and wrong books, there are only good books and bad books, and this is a good book.

But do you censor the bad books?

Well, I don't know. No, I think you probably don't. You'd like to think that the general buying public would punish the bad book-writers so that they didn't survive, but in fact they do very well, don't they? I mean sometimes when you're sitting on a bus or a subway and you see all these people reading Judith Krantz you think, what's so great about democracy anyway?

What makes you want to write?

Well, I think in my case it's probably a compulsion. Once I began writing I couldn't stop. You get deeper and deeper into it, and it becomes more something you must do. I can't imagine not writing. It's just natural to me to

always be working on something. It seems more real than real life. Maybe that's a sad comment, I don't know.

What have you hoped to achieve so far in your own work?

I always hope to evoke the alive and actual world, and to chronicle, one way or another, tenderness, betrayal, doubt, the weather, how the light looks, how we forgive or don't forgive ourselves as we blunder onwards. What do we fear, what do we hope for, how can we deal with the hand fate has dealt us...

So it was a matter of conscious choice to focus on relationships?

No, not a matter of conscious choice. It was just something I did naturally.

What would you like to do as a writer that you haven't done yet?

I guess I would always want to go deeper into feelings. What interests me at the moment, is to evoke very powerful feelings from childhood. Up to a point, that's easy to do, but there's a point beyond that where it's hard to imagine yourself in another

person's life, whether it's yourself as a child or someone else who's another, of a totally different background, or another gender. I've tended to use very close third person narrations, I've tended to stay much more deeply with one character who is much more like myself than not like myself.

What I'd really love to do now if I had the time and the energy and the money to really take some time, is to write one of those panoramic Victorian novels where you're inside everybody's head, and you can be all these different people. I think for me that would be a real change, and would be quite liberating, in a funny kind of way, and in another way rather constricting, because I don't think you could achieve the kind of complexity that some of my stories have because I don't think you could stay that long with one person. But I think it would be fun. And I'd like to do it.

What are you doing now?

I'm working on a number of things. I've got two books of short stories almost finished and I'm revising a novella, and then I have a novel that is sort of sitting on the back burner that is almost finished.

What about fame? Do you think most writers want it?

Probably. Or I think they think they want it. But what they probably really want is passionate acknowledgement. I know that that's what I want. Readers who'll talk to me in a precise and enthralled way about my own work.

Which makes me sound like an egomaniac. Which I am. But I hope it's a useful egomania — one that leads to giving something back to the world.

Down There

By Elisabeth Harvor

The water in the hot water tank had to be saved for the dishes, washing floors, and so on fall and winter mornings and on spring mornings, too—the peeping lilac bobbing at the cramped bathroom window—my mother and sister and I would take turns squatting in the hollow tub to pour a tin jug of warm water over ourselves down there. Rural hygiene! Only in July and August would we be free of the jug with a quick dip from the dock. Some hot and windy mornings we were even too sleep-stunned to swim and would only stand,

up to our throats in the water, our fists on our puckered, elasticized hips, our legs in the military At Ease position, a sexual way for a young girl to stand in a river, feeling the water offering its play of thrilled, rippled coldness.

Years later,

I was taught, in the purposeful, deadly bright light of a hospital morning, the sleight-of-hand of lifting drugged hips onto warm bedpans, the clinical magic of pouring a tin pitcher of warm water—this time marked with the formal braille of measurement—over post-operative women patients down there, the trick being to trick the body into thinking it was already doing what it must do.

I did not recall then, as I recall now, those girlhood ablutions.

You need time for that, that kind of linkage, memory begetting memory as water beget water.

But oh, those hospital questions! So like the question a child might ask of God or a parent:

Can you make wind?
Can you make water?

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