

# Interview with Albertan novelist

## Caterina Edwards

someplace like Edmonton, I started thinking about what a city was and what it should be. How much does beauty or ugliness affect the people that live surrounded by those elements? I think basically that Edmonton has not been built with an eye to beauty or with an eye to any artistic plan. I mean Paris was all laid out, right?

So I started to think about organization of space and how it affects people. For a long time theorists tended to attack cities and say that cities cause crime and violence. You crowded people in together and all these horrible things happen. But I think they're changing their minds now. It seems obvious to me that you have to have a certain density of population in order to have a certain level of civilization, that developments in culture occur in cities. And on some level there has to be conscious decisions made in the organization of a city that I don't think has happened here.

**Q:** Well, maybe to move onto a different topic. You're teaching here at the U of A, you're also married with two children, and at the same time you have a writing career. How do you set your priorities when you

have a conflict between your family life, your academic life, and your writing?

**Ms. Edwards:** I don't think I consciously set my priorities. I think it's always a question of trying to find the right balance. I think what happens all the time is that writing is pushed aside. Obviously a responsibility to a child is so immediate. You know that when they're sick or crying that you have to go to them. That, as it should, takes precedence. The way I see it, they're young for such a short time that you should give them as much as you can.

And the same thing is the teaching. I feel that it is my job and I owe my students a certain level of performance. So writing of course, it's easier to put it off. [laughter] But then it's a problem because when I think about what is central to what I am, of course the writing becomes very important. So perhaps my priorities inside and my priorities as far as activities go are reversed.

**Q:** There is a tradition in Western art, and I think it is very much a masculine tradition, of the artist as an anti-social being, that in order to create, has to cut himself off from family and ordinary work. Do you think your

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approach to writing reflects a more feminine attitude or are gender roles not relevant to the issue?

**Ms. Edwards:** I don't know if it divides along masculine, feminine. I mean someone like Rilke refused to see his daughter because it was going to upset his writing schedule and then there is someone like Thomas Mann who saw himself basically as a family man. That split has gone all the way through art. I really think artists should see themselves as members of society and accept their responsibilities.

Obviously you do give up something. You give up time. You think that perhaps if I had that time I could produce much more and better, but that's too simplistic. For example, I think that becoming a mother improved my work. It gave me a better vision of what I felt life was. But it also taught me how to organize myself better; how to cut out inessentials.

I'd like to say something else about that though. I think being a mother has fed my writing: I really do feel it has improved what I've done. On the other hand, I think being a writer and a teacher makes me a better mother. And it's not just in the sense that I have an outlet for that other part of me so I'm not stuck home with the kids all the time. It's more important than that.

I guess it's because I have girls and I do think that for girls a mother is also a role model. I hope what I'm doing will suggest to them is that they can grow up and do whatever they want. They can have it all, like men have, and have a family and work out in society too.

**Q:** You've taught creative writing here at the U of A and at Grant MacEwan. Do you think writing actually is something that can be taught?

**Ms. Edwards:** I don't think you can give a person talent. It's like someone who wants to be a musician; the great talent is something you're probably born with. But obviously you can teach technique. You can encourage what you see as good directions or warn people against others.

I think a creative writing class can save the young writer a lot of time, a lot of trial and error writing, and it can direct him or her in a very positive way. I think it's good to run on the seminar approach where the emphasis is on writing. Obviously the biggest thing about learning how to write is practising it and then having some audience that says, "This works," or "This doesn't work."

**Q:** I was reading recently that nearly all of young upcoming writers have gone through some sort of university course. Do you think this is changing our approach to fiction?

**Ms. Edwards:** It could be detrimental. That is, it could encourage perhaps a certain cleverness. But I don't think it does. Looking at a lot of the younger writers, serious writers,

that are published I'm surprised with just the basic polish and skill that seems to be there. And that is achieved quicker through creative writing classes.

Reading first novels from the 1920's and 30's, now, you can see that there is a real difference in the quality of the beginning writer. That doesn't mean the young writer today has anything more to say, perhaps even less [laughter]. It's just that the polish is there now.

**Q:** Do you think that teaching writing has affected your writing?

**Ms. Edwards:** In different ways, yes. I guess teaching at university people who are very serious about becoming writers, I became aware of what role the writer plays in society. What does it mean to be a writer? What are the responsibilities? Through watching my students I saw they obviously had very strong ideas about what the role of the writer was, yet not thought out, not crystallized. It made me conscious of my own ideas and made me work them out. It's something I'm starting to deal with a lot in my writing which I haven't dealt with before.

I do think that teachers of creative writing have a lot of power. You do get certain trends. Maybe this is negative, I don't know. Certain kinds of writing are encouraged or not encouraged. So you do hear of certain schools and the types of writers that come out doing a certain style because that's the kind of writing they've been told is the 'way.'

**Q:** You touched on something there that we could talk on about for hours but I was hoping you might discuss briefly. Just what do you think is the author's responsibility to society?

**Ms. Edwards:** I guess I really object to the concept of the artist as, even though I deal with the person outside of society, as someone who is any better than the normal person. I support what Flannery O'Connor said when she was asked why she wrote. She said, "I write because I'm good at it." If you're good at carpentry, you do carpentry. It doesn't mean that you're under a particular star or that you are any superior to anyone else. It's very complicated. I guess I believe more humility is needed, not arrogance.

And I decided that because you are a member of society, your role is to comment on your society, to even be a critic of what you see going on around you. But definitely not to use your craft for self-glorification.

The question is difficult to answer completely because I approach it through my writing. If I had a simple statement I could write it down and not bother with stories.

**Q:** Well, I'd like to thank you for giving us this interview and I am looking forward to seeing your new collection when it comes out.

**Ms. Edwards:** You're welcome.

