

# An interview with Karen McLaughlin

By Carla EKY Lam  
Brunswickan Entertainment

From women we all come and to women we all return. From mother to mother - the earth consumes again.

She makes me miss my mother, and mom's not that far away. Comfortable. At home. Warm. Comforting. Soft Blue eyes. Discordance of words in harmony. All of these women are each other. Karen McLaughlin's first novel *Choral* stretches skin around the lives of 5 generations of women and girls.

Irony. Contradiction. Polarity. Separateness. Togetherness. Existence. Transcendence. Love. Clarity. *Choral* is all about the anomaly of family life. It tries to contain the lives of five generations of women; the pain, blood, and skin of our being - the touch of our lives on each other, the bewildering circumspection of all who come before.

Love, hate - the savage banality of our lives the sting of all perspectives. Not allowed to know just what we want, the fragmentation of singularity - we hear them all - all the voices of the women in these generations. The men are perpetually absent presences. The women are true, real and together in ways only outsiders could know. This is the cacophonous language of women's lives. Never fully understood. This is *Choral*. Holistic understanding; the primary love which succeeds all others and is so akin to hate. This is the travelling, transitional, transcending art that became *Choral* and moved on again. You see, *Choral* is the literary manifestation of an art display. The book, in turn, has gestated more visual art and so continues the cycle. McLaughlin is a visual-artist who just happens to be working this time with words.

## Catharsis?

Yeah, I've never been a journal writer... so I think it was, cathartic for the period of my life when I was writing in - more than for the story itself. It was at a time in my life when I was trying to figure out a lot of things. So that's where the catharsis came in, not because it was any horrible, personal tragedy, but so, in that way yeah, it was.

## Do you have a favourite medium?

I like to work in video, I like to write and you know, I really like working with thick, gopy, heavy oil pastels, and paper, and there are a lot of things that I really like to do. In my last semester at art school I started to do this little pieces of image-text work where I would take paper and sew on photographs, and I guess they were kinda like poems.

## Video work and the making of *Choral*

I would make some drawings on the paper, then I would sew a photograph into it and then I would scratch out some kind of little poem or narrative that I thought about while I was doing it. So I did a little book of all these separate pieces, cause really one didn't have anything to do with the other except how they were made. I made them into a little artists book, and a lot of people really liked them, and I thought well if I'm going to work with words I should learn a little bit about it because I hadn't even read a poem for twenty years. So I took my little book of visual poems and I applied to a third year poetry-writing, year long workshop at the University of Calgary.

And I got into the course, so all that year I worked with words, in poem form. Then in the spring, just after I had finished the class, I was approached by the curator of a gallery in Calgary to do some more video work and I really wanted the opportunity to show my work. But I didn't have the time and I didn't have the money to do video at that - video work's really really expensive. I asked him to give me 48 hours to come up with something else that I would do. So I decided that I would make him a video I had written a few lines of this story at the end of my poetry class and it was about the woman who gets her legs cut off, and I decided that I would make up this family and that I would write a story about them and then, that's exactly what I did. I sewed together about a hundred and fifty pieces into 64 feet long by 15 inches wide - and people actually read it in the gallery. I just thought people would just kind of look at it and say "Oh gee that's really neat" or "Gee that's an interesting idea" or you know, hopefully, people say good things but ... "What is this!" (laughter) People



Visual artist, Karen McLaughlin

actually read the story!

## Another Stage

So I decided then that I would apply to a fiction writing class. I took my video and applied to a fiction class. I was really scared and I got accepted. I was quite nervous because a lot of these people had been writing short stories for some time, and a lot of them had been in classes together. I did a few short stories and I actually even published the first short story I wrote for that class and I worked a little bit more on the *Choral* stories because I had people who said, you know I bet this would make a good book. I did a lot of those like triple text things but decided that nobody would read a book like that - you know, it would be too much.

Then I had to come up with another idea. I was reading Susan Swan's book "The Biggest Modern Woman of the World", about the Nova Scotia giantess ... Anna - what's-her-name? Anyway, there was a testimony in there from a neighbour, and I thought that's just exactly what I need in my book - I need to put in these sort of poem-like pieces, some straight prose. I wanted it to be straight-from-the-heart kind of prose, you know ... like speech, it was really important that it was like speech. So

that's how it got to be the book.

## Medium? Genre?

Do you know what I think - I'm a storyteller. I think that's what I am and that I find lots of different ways to tell a story depending how I think the story needs to be told. What I really, really want to do is make a film - a big film, like a two hour movie that people will come and watch. I'd like to do that some time too.

## Have you done that yet? Filmmaking

No, I have studied film structure, the narrative structure in film when I was doing the first couple of years of my BFA. I took quite a few film courses and at one point, I even thought of switching straight into film. But I didn't, we happened to move from the place we were living to another place and then I went to the Art school there but no. I would like to do that sometime but essentially I'm a storyteller and people say "You've been telling stories for years, and years and years anyway."

## The mystery of *Choral*

[I really got the feeling that the narrator, the voice was arbitrary-secondary. I understood that these women were each other]

Hallelujah! That's exactly it, these women were each other, and it didn't matter if you knew which one you were talking about or not. But one is narrating for those who can't speak for themselves that - that's it, so yeah I'm really glad you got it. Some people do and some people don't but most people after they sort of struggle through the first little bit, then they find that they can get into the rhythm of it and that it's okay.

I was into Postmodern theory at Art school - all kinds of Women's Studies stuff, lots of feminist reading. The reason why I used the name Cora comes from Julia Kristeva's work. The Cora that she was talking about, that's a very Maternal place, very vocal and it's before the "law of the Father". That's what this is all about. In fact, I even give her a nice little credit in my acknowledgements.

## Feminist strains

Yeah, and I didn't want to write a theoretical text but it is that, A lot of

that theory was really on the top of my mind the whole time I was writing this - it's just that people who don't know about it, then I don't talk to them about it cause it's just like another layer that they can't deal with it. But it is there.

## How & when did you come into your feminism

Actually, that's really, really easy. I would say before the spring of 1990 I was a person who was probably a little frightened of the word "feminism". I didn't understand it and, would have said that I wasn't that much interested.

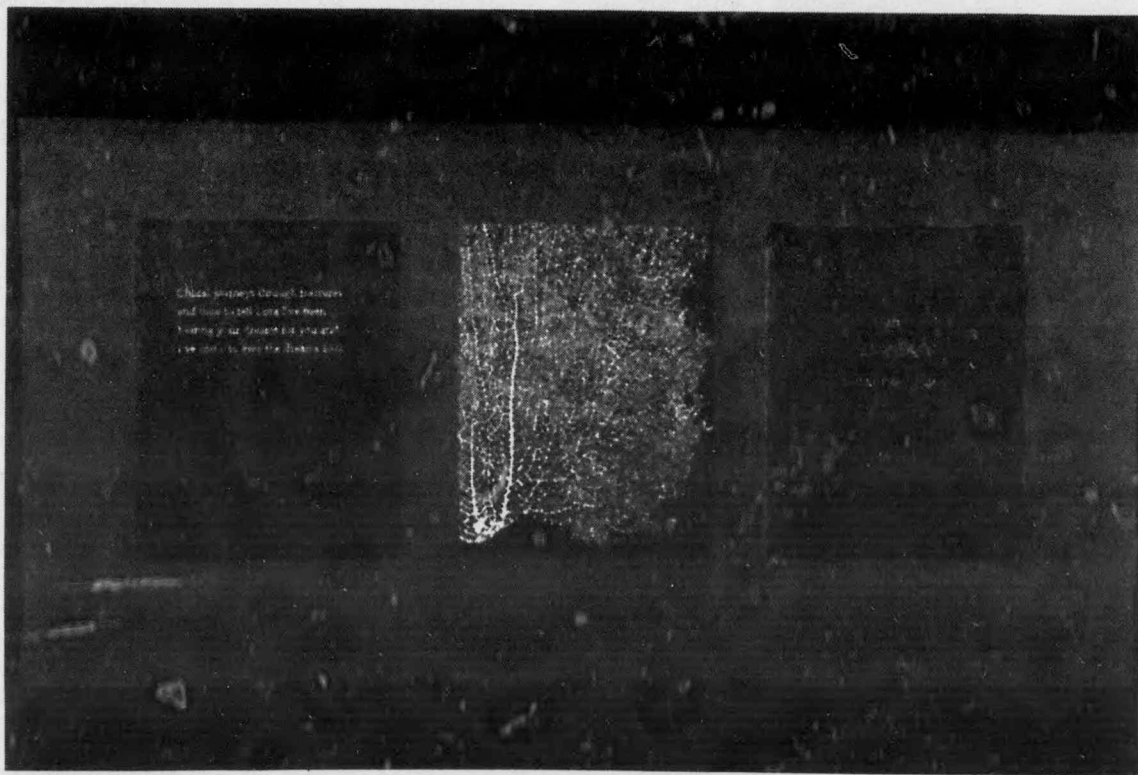
However, I had done a little bit of reading early in the winter of 1990. There were a lot of women my age, or older than me at the art college, and we heard about a literary conference that was going to be happening in Edmonton. We were in Calgary at the time. So five of us went together and this was a conference of ... people from all over the world so the level of theory and the level of language was supreme. But we spent three days, hardly understanding a word and we made a list of all the words that were used in Literary Theory and Women's Studies and all that kind of thing, but somehow - I think that I speak for the other women - is that we just came out the other end.

We knew, we just understood it, and it seemed like - it was like listening to something we knew in a different language but until we heard in a different language we didn't understand it. So it was an epiphany! (Laughter) Then I started to read some kind of writing that I'd never read before like Daphne Marlot's "Anna Historic" and that sort of thing, which became very, very influential in my own kind of approach to writing and I think in lots of ways, that for me it's good that I don't have a degree or a Master's degree in literature, or creative writing because I think about all kinds of other different structures of a way to write.

I do belong to a feminist reading group and we read novels and we try to find articles that somehow go with the writing to discuss some of these things so, I still carry on with it.

## Favourite excerpt

The little piece near the end called "Who will speak for my short life?" That's always been my favourite piece and I think it was the last piece that I wrote for the book.



*Choral* (detail)  
Oil pastel on paper (35" x 18")