

Homegrown Talent: an interview



THE LION'S MOUTH Caterina Edwards

The Lion's Mouth
by Caterina Edwards
published by Newest Press

This first novel by Ms. Edwards takes as its theme the dilemma of the exile. Two parallel stories run through the work, constantly linking and relinking. The first thread deals with Marco, a successful architect who lives in Venice with his wife and child. His self doubts as to the nature of his life and his marriage are brought into sharp focus by a chance encounter with an old lover, Elena. Elena, a political activist, re-enters his life, bringing with her the moral dilemmas of political terrorism.

The second thread winds about the life of the narrator, a young girl in a Venetian family, growing up in Edmonton. As she tries to work through the problems of reconciling her family's heritage with the problems of becoming a Canadian, she draws on her memories of Venice and Marcos.

These elements are drawn out in a clear and elegant style and they build upon the long and rich traditions of Venice. The end effect is that of a clearly focused photograph that reveals a key and precise moment in the lives of the characters.

Caterina Edwards has lived in Edmonton for most of her life. She studied writing at the University of Alberta and has received her master's degree in English. She has published short stories in *Canadian Fiction Review* and other major periodicals, and has been included in three anthologies of short fiction. In 1982 she published her first novel, *The Lion's Mouth*, to critical acclaim. She teaches expository writing for the English department and has an ongoing commitment to writing and the writing community. She was kind enough to grant us this interview.

Q: Your first novel, *The Lion's Mouth*, was set in Venice. Why would an Albertan writer choose such a setting?

Ms. Edwards: Well, first of all, it worked out perfectly for the area I was interested in exploring. Growing up in Alberta, living in cities like Edmonton or Calgary, a place like Venice so obviously represents the opposite in cities; a place that is totally a man's creation, concerned with art and which carries so much history.

Now I happen to know Venice because my mother's from there. I never lived there but I do personally know it very well. But though it had those personal associations it was like it was ready made for what I was interested in working on.

Q: Have you lived in Alberta most of your life?

Ms. Edwards: Yes, since I was eight. I grew up in England. I lived there till I was eight and then I've lived here.

Q: Here in Edmonton?

Ms. Edwards: First in Calgary and then I came up to University in Edmonton and I've been here ever since.

Q: In the introduction of Timothy Findley's new book, *Dinner on the Amazon*, he discusses his personal obsessions in writing. I was wondering if you've seen in your work a similar set of obsessions? Are there any particular things you find yourself coming back to again and again?

Ms. Edwards: Well, I think my obsession are not quite as clear to me as Mr. Findley's are to him, probably because he's been writing much longer than I have. But I do find that, though I don't intend to (in fact I kind of work against it), I keep coming back over and over again to the person caught between two cultures. And I keep thinking, "Well, I'm finished with this subject." But then it seems to present itself to me in a different guise.

I'm working on a novella now which has a totally Canadian character with a Canadian family and mostly a Canadian background, but the moments of understanding or knowledge come to him when he's in Europe, when he's outside his normal environment and displaced. I guess the displaced person really interests me.

Q: Could you tell us more about this piece you are working on right now?

Ms. Edwards: Well, I'm about three-quarters of the way through doing a collection which will consist of a novella and a number of stories. I'm not sure just how many stories will be in this collection. I say I'm not sure because I keep thinking that I have the whole structure down; the number of stories, and the development, and the order of stories. And then I think of another terrific idea that I feel just has to be developed. [laughter] If I control myself I'll be done soon.

review and interview
by Geoff Jackson

photo by Bill St. John

"I keep coming back... to the person caught between two cultures."

"I guess the displaced person really interests me."

Q: Reading *The Lion's Mouth* made me think very much about the distinctions between the novel and the short story. What are some of the different demands between the short story and the novel?

Ms. Edwards: I am really drawn to the short story as a form. That's true. I do very much appreciate the tightness, the lack of any kind of digression, and the fact that every word has to really count. But I wonder if I am not drawn to that form because, for the material I have chosen to deal with, the short story is probably the most appropriate.

I guess I am thinking here of, say, Frank O'Connor in *The Lonely Voice*, where he talks about how there is a real distinction between the kind of material that is appropriate for a novel and the kind of material that is appropriate for short stories. And when you're spaking of short stories, what works best is perhaps the marginal character, the displaced person. In a novel you really need an analysis of a whole society, and preferably a structured society. It's not that I'm not interested in doing that, I just haven't spent as much time looking at that.

Q: There is a particularly Canadian thing about doing collections of short stories following very similar characters or themes. How does that tie in with what you were just saying?

Ms. Edwards: Well again, I would say, though O'Connor talks about it in *The Lonely Voice*, that certain countries produce certain kinds of forms depending on what kind of culture they have. I think that Canada, since it doesn't really have a very developed, stable society as say England does, lends itself when people are trying to analyse portions of Canada to the short story.

So that if you get a collection of stories with the same characters, you could say why not use the same material and streamline it into a novel? But if you look at what is going on, the material-being dealt with is still appropriate for the short story form. It is those moments of understanding, of those... You see what I mean?

Q: Epiphanies?

Ms. Edwards: Yes, the epiphanies. I mean you can have someone who doesn't feel integrated into his or her society having a series of different experiences and the stories do work together and there is a culmination. You see that a lot in Alice Munro's work. But the whole structure, the way a character moves and understands and progresses: the expression seems better in the short stories.

Q: In *The Lion's Mouth* both the cities of Edmonton and Venice became vital aspects of the story. From previous conversations with you I know you are very interested in the connection between the city and fiction.

Ms. Edwards: I guess growing up in Alberta,