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Talking about Women, History, and Writing with Michèle Roberts

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Michèle Roberts is an Anglo-French feminist writer who was born in Hertfordshire, on May 20, 1949. She is the daughter of an English Protestant father and a French Catholic mother. She was brought up to be bilingual and educated at a religious school. She also lived in a convent for a long time, and these facts have influenced her works. Through writing and through the revision of stories Roberts has fought against the doctrines defended by the Catholic Church, although she recognises that this religious culture has given her both stories and a particular language. In the same way, it is relevant to mention the figure of her grandmother in her literary production, as Roberts has also thought of her as an inspiration, since she was the woman who told her stories that made her imagine, dream and invent. In relation to her family, Roberts has also disclosed how her battle with her mother—that figure of authority who wants to control her daughter and makes her behave according to the principles imposed by society—has been developed in her works of fiction. On the other hand, not only the relationship between mother and daughter, but also the union between father and daughter, and her wish to be accepted by the male body, are reflected in her novels.

This writer has shown herself to be against the values defended by Catholicism, and throughout her work she writes about women who are freed from the prison that the Church has shaped for them, especially where aspects connected with the body and sex are concerned. For Roberts, the feminine character rescues and expresses herself verbally and sexually, thus achieving an attitude of triumph in the face of the Catholic clergy. For that reason, as she has mentioned on different occasions, Roberts portrays a variety of women, putting an end to the cliché of the good and the bad woman with novels like *The Wild Girl*, in which there is a celebration of being a woman and the sexual union with a man.

Roberts attended Oxford University where she gained a degree in English. It was during these years at university that Michèle Roberts became a member of the "Women's Liberation Movement," which she has always supported by writing articles in magazines like *Spare Rib* and *City Limits*. Apart from being a writer, Michèle Roberts has worked in different professions throughout her life; she has been a librarian in Bangkok for the British Council, a cook, and a teacher, currently holding a post as a professor of creative writing at the University of East Anglia, in Norwich, England, where she teaches a postgraduate course. Although she lives in the two countries of her childhood, England and France, she has also lived in other places like Italy and Thailand.

In this conversation, Michèle Roberts described how her last work—*Reader, I Married Him* which was published in January 2005—takes place in Italy and how we get to know the story through the voice of a fifty-year-old woman. This conversation took place in her apartment in London as part of my research for my doctoral thesis.

I would like to start the conversation talking about "writing" and its beginning in your career.

Um. Well, I think I was like all other children in English primary schools. You were encouraged to write little stories, poems, etc. I also kept a diary. I began keeping a diary when I was about ten. I lived in a family where people read a lot. My parents both read, so we had a lot of books at home. My English grandmother, who lived with us, was a great storyteller. So, she, I think, gave me a sense of the magic of storytelling. My father had written stories about the war, the Second World War, but had never managed to get them published, but I knew he was an unfulfilled writer. So, there was that background. Then, I think probably the fact that I grew up with two languages made me interested in language because I grew up bilingual in English and French. And I think as a child born in two cultures, this is obviously with hindsight, I needed to work out what culture I belonged in. And when you write, I think, you can invent a culture. And, I think, a second major reason for becoming a writer was the misogyny of the culture I grew up in, particularly the Catholic culture. It made me want to fight back and talk about women and become a woman, in a way, in a fantasy, because real women, according to the Church and the culture, were these terrible beings. I hated them and I didn't want to be one. I didn't want to be a woman. So, again, I had to invent something that was bearable. And I think that did help me to become a writer.

And this figure of the grandmother that you just mentioned appears a lot in your novels, all the time. You can find her in The Book of Mrs. Noah, The Visitation *and your current experience is very relevant in the books, isn't it?*

Yes, I think the figure of my grandmother was ... she is like the figure in Alice Miller, that psychoanalyst who writes about childhood. If you have been witnessed, in some way, by one loving person, then you're going to be OK. And because I had a difficult relationship with my own mother when I was young, my grandmother was somebody who I knew loved me, unconditionally. That was incredibly helpful. And she was very, very honest. And that made me trust her very much. She spoke the truth, always, even if it was very unpleasant. It didn't matter, it was the truth. She was very loving. She loved me. So, that's a wonderful combination for a child, I think. So she is a kind of muse. She really is. Yes.

All the main topics developed by feminism also take place in your novels, but you express them in connection with writing all the time. So the protagonists in the novel usually develop, in an active way, the writing technique. Then how important is writing for these characters who show feelings of sisterhood, envy, etc. in your novels, dualities ... ?

Well, obviously, they wouldn't have to be writers. And I don't ... I think I started to be interested in characters in folklore and religion, actually. And they were my saints, if you like. And that probably got to its apotheosis with Josephine and all the saints in *Impossible Saints*. And now, I think, I am writing more explicitly about writers because they are my new saints. But again, of course, very imperfect, flawed saints. But I suppose the point about being interested in characters who are writers is that, there is that quality of invention, that writing could stand as a metaphor for people who try to invent themselves and invent their lives, and invent a world they want to live in, which I think is probably quite fundamental to human beings. But many people would just do it in fantasy or in dream. Or they would do it through watching movies or playing games on the internet, or you know, whatever. Because my interest is in language, I think, I choose to show people doing it through writing. It's not so much that I think writing has an elevated or elitist place. For me it's quite a practical down-to-earth thing. But it's also a way of playing, yes. So if you are writing about someone writing, you are showing that even as a grown-up person, they can play, rearrange the world. And I think that's fun.

Yes that's fun, good. Would you say that your writing style is part of postmodernism and poststructuralism in the sense that you use intertextuality, and I would say, the pastiche technique where you take parts of different stories and you mix them together and create like a work?

Well, I think I began as a modernist. I think my first novel certainly was modernist in that its experimenting form was to follow the zigzag and the spiral of memory. And to attack a traditional, well it tried to attack a traditional form of storytelling which had, I think, entrapped and bruised women. So, it tried to do something very, very different. And I think I became aware of living in a postmodernist age, as I got older. And decided yes, this is a useful way of looking at how to write, how to read. Yes, I'll let myself experiment with this. I don't know what I am now because I'm probably still postmodernist in that collage goes on interesting me, pastiche goes on interesting me. I hope that it's more than just something decorative. I think pastiche for me is very, potentially subversive. When I wrote what I call my homage to romantic novels, *Fair Exchange*, I very deliberately was using a kind of romance form but very deliberately writing about eighteenth century revolutionary feminists, so wanting to subvert form again, not just imitate it. I think subversion for me is an important tenet of personal movement. I don't like the acquiescent nature of personal living, the way that everything is equal to everything else. Nothing has any real meaning. That isn't a side of postmodernism I enjoy. I am an old Lefty, I'm a feminist. I can't think like that but I'll use postmodernism for my own end. But I think that's how a writer operates. You may be possessed by the unconscious and possessed by language, but you're not just a conduit for things to flow through. I mean you try to interact with history, you try to interact with form, so you interact with postmodernism.

You've also mentioned before that some of these protagonists in your novels use the unconscious world all the time. And some of your novels start with a death or darkness straight away. Is this unconscious a kind of free state for them to start writing and being themselves?

Yes, I think so. That's a very nice way of putting it. I noticed in mid-career that I nearly always began with a death which I hadn't realised I did. Although *The Visitation*, interestingly opens with a birth but it's then immediately a death, of course. The moment they are born, they are done for. So, yes, I write about the unconscious as a place and I also think I write about the unconscious as a kind of energy and a kind of language formation. It's a kind of poetic language. And it is a free space, particularly for these women because

I think women have been so repressed into the unconscious of the culture if you like, that (a) it's where we've belonged but (b) it's where we can begin to invent ourselves. And I think there I have been encouraged by those French philosophers like Kristeva and Cixous and Irigaray who I think suggested to me in the seventies and early eighties that because so many meanings of woman were repressed, it was very liberating for a writer to dive down, and see what she can find, and bring it back up to the surface. And I go on feeling very inspired by the unconscious. And it's not quite death as a place of liberation, but perhaps death signifies the unconscious, or what's underneath. But I think there is another sense in which the reason I've always started with a dead body is that, it's about anger, perhaps. It's about a maternal body that's dead or absent or lost, and, perhaps, a child fantasising she's killed her mother through being very angry with her. And then the process of making the novel is a process of resurrection. And life happens at the end. The novels nearly always end like real life, about finding words. They nearly always end on an image of finding language. So the dead body in the beginning sits up and can speak at the end. So that's like a Freudian version, I suppose, or a Kleinian version of what I'm doing. And I would like to stress that this just happened. It wasn't that I read the theory, and thought oh, yes, I must do that. It's that I was very interested to find that the theory described what I was doing. I mean, it probably made me feel very supportive actually.

Religion, and especially Catholicism, is another very relevant topic in your novels and it has been part of your upbringing and education. I can see a positive message through your work in relation to women. You criticize historical religion, but at the same time, there is a message of freedom, change and liberation especially in the way characters like Mary Magdalene in The Wild Girl *or Mrs. Noah in* The Book of Mrs. Noah *express themselves. Do you intend to show in your novels how religion has conditioned the division between men and women? I mean, history has been very relevant in our position as women, but religion has been like the main institution, shall we say. Then again through your novels, I would say that you try to make these women, as you said before, not eternal but alive through the words.*

Yes, you see I think the Church has been an institution of great oppression to women. Of course, to men too. I really don't think the Church gave much to women at all. But since we have had the Church for centuries and the history of being a human being, of woman in this case, was connected to the history of the Church, that's what we have to battle. So, I think my attitude is that I'm telling stories about women who fight back, who might be crushed by the Church in some ways, but might find ways, even through the Church, to fight back. But it's not that the Church liberates women. The Church, I think, is misogynistic and oppressive and terrible. The Catholic Church is a force of dreadfulness in history, but women are very clever. They fight back. They become heretics. They involve themselves in alternative religions. They become poets. There is a long tradition of mystical writing by women: poetry and prose which resists the Church and proposes alternatives. Fantastic and powerful stuff. You know, Teresa of Ávila was questioned by the Inquisition because she was a Jewish mystic operating within the Church. It's a very exciting story. So, I think one of the things women say as mystics and heretics and rebels and saints is that the division between men and women is false, in the interest of institutions, and of course one of the divisions between men that most hurts more women is that we are given the body and men are given the spirit, the intellect, and therefore, the power of authority. And that's a very damaging split between men and women. And I think what interests me about the real historical writings of women that you can see through the centuries, who are often nuns because that's how you got an education, is that there is an attempt, I think, to challenge the split, to explore the conflict it brings up for us as women and to propose alternative ways of being. Now, this was often, of course, couched in mystical terms, in terms of union with Christ as the beloved. So, it's not as though it's an explicitly feminist message. It couldn't be. But it does interest me that there's a reclaiming of the body as good, so that union with God can be felt and expressed in bodily terms. There is a reclaiming of Jesus as a mother, and he has breasts and feeds us or he has a belly in which we hide because he is pregnant with us. So, I'm enchanted by the way that rebellion against the Church can be expressed through religious terminology. And of course, the Church then comes and stamps a foot and says you must not do this, it's wrong. It's out of order. I think some male mystics did it too but they reclaimed the body in their mystical writing. They didn't just talk about being souls and being intimate. They acknowledged the power of divine love as a bodily force. So it's as though mystical language and poetry offered a level on which to explore a possibility of reconciling body and soul of both sexes, which makes it very subversive and very critical, I think.

What is the relationship between the protagonists in your novels and men. Do you develop the concept that Jung defended between the "animus" and the "anima"?

Well, I did at one point, I think. When I was writing in the early eighties, I think I was very interested in that. I think my book of Mary Magdalene *The Wild Girl* shows that. It's saturated with Jungian thought. And I don't know that I'd write it in the same way now. I think also *The Visitation*, which is the one before, is pretty Jungian. And I think Mrs. Noah in some respect is. I still think, although it is just perhaps I wouldn't use Jungian terms, perhaps that means I've simply incorporated them into my language. I think we share a DNA. So we've got to be all somehow the same in some deep, deep sense. If we can fall in love with each other as heterosexuals, we must have a way of knowing and understanding the other. So again, there's something shared. On the other hand, I do believe that I began to think, as I've got older I suppose, that for a woman the fact of becoming pregnant and giving birth is a profound experience because men simply don't share it, although technology is catching up very quickly, so we'll see in the next fifty years, won't we? So that difference, it seems to me, could affect you in how you feel and think about what it means to be a woman. Now many women have very different views on that, and that's what interests me. We're not all going to be the same about it. But given that it's a biological difference, women can think about it and men can. This is all very cautious, because as you get older you get wilder, but you get more cautious. And I still think that history and culture affect us around gender. But I don't think I'd go so far as the queer theory people who would say that even gender is not enough just to have a playfulness about gender. We are going to have a right, right away, because of the possibilities offered by technology and, you know, by our bodies. But also, I think, by things like the Internet. We can simply be whatever we want, whenever we want, all the time. I don't think I've gone that far, because I think for most women in the world, at the moment, you know, the nurturing of children is pretty important, and the giving of food, the finding of food. So it seems to me it's quite a luxury for people with access to higher technology to have extremes of queer theory. And I am more interested in the kind of daily message of what it is to be a woman. Although I know for your generation, people don't think about it as much as my generation. Which is wonderful. All the students that I teach, the young women think, you know, I can be whatever I want, I can write whatever I want. This is fabulous. I think it's a wonderful freedom, I salute it. I don't think you have to go around thinking about I am a woman all the time. You do whatever you want [*laughing*].

In relation to The Book of Mrs. Noah*, considering Mrs. Noah a silenced historical character, do you intend to rewrite a history or a "herstory," putting words into writing from the character's points of view. Do you think it's possible to relate historical events with fiction considering that in both cases the subjective point of view of the narrator is inevitable?*

Well, I think, I don't say "herstory" because for me the linguistics is history and I think all of us, actually as writers can become interested in history, men as much as women. So women's history is what I might say—or men's history—you know, working class history. I think the new history, which is now being written, makes us see that we can find the voices, for example, of working class people, of black people. If we look hard enough, there is more there than we thought, as I found with the voices of women in ancient archives. So, the new history is much more democratic, it's much richer, it's much wider, because it's drawing on a much bigger section of the population. And I think it's made us see that historical records are, to some extent, subjective. I want to believe that objective truth can be sought. But I think that at the same time, in a contradictory way, I know that it's always inflected by subjectivity, because it will reveal the interests of a particular class. So, for example, Church history will reveal the interest of priests and popes. And probably, the history written by abbesses will be subjective in another way. It's not just that male dominated history is bad and the other one is good.

This is such an enormous and complex question because I still believe, I think, in truth and lies, and yet I know that we find it very hard to tell the truth because we are subjects and we are conditioned by the unconscious, by our own past, by our fantasies, by our dreams, and by our desires. So in a sense, I think, I see the novelist as a sort of historian and as a sort of biographer, and that we have a lot in common. We're all writing narratives and I think what the form has in common, if you like, is history as a narrative, a novel as a narrative, a biography as a narrative, a saint's life as a narrative. The point about a narrative is it's after the event. A story is something you compose after the event and that's what interests me as a writer. It's the shape, it's about a shape, to put a shape on things. It's a very long-winded answer [*laughing*].

In relation to Gaffer, I'm going to compare Gaffer with Adam in The Mistressclass *because I could see that in both stories you've got writers, and it seems that Gaffer and Adam are just blocked. They're not able to write. But however, both Vinny and Catherine in* The Mistressclass*, or the sibyls and Mrs. Noah, can write without stopping. Do you try again to use parody and just reverse the history of writing?*

Yes, a bit, but I thought the sibyls all started off with writers' block. I thought that's why they came on the ark, they have all got writers' block. So it isn't just that they can write without stopping and the men can't. I don't think I'm doing that. It isn't a simple reversal.

I was interested in the sources of writers' block, whether it's gendered in any way. And I think for women writers, it can be. But there's a joke about God, yes, having written one bestseller, what do you do next? I just felt, yes, he could do with a bit of a reversal, like turning upside down. You see in *The Mistressclass*, I think I'm trying to say something about good writing and bad writing. And for me, Catherine is a bad writer. She is somebody who's sold her soul. She's writing what I consider a series of lies or bad fantasies because I don't go along with the postmodern idea that any old erotica is wonderful. For me, Catherine is writing, she is writing about women wanting to be heard and wanting to be punished as a sort of pay-off, having some power in the world. So, I was amazed when all the reviewers said "Oh yes, she's writing erotica." I deliberately said she's writing sadomasochism. And it's not that I don't want to explore that or I don't think it's interesting, but she is writing about it in a kind of cheap, exploitative way. Whereas Vinny, I think, is a purer writer because she is willing to be poor in order to pursue her vision. Adam is simply blocked for very personal reasons; he hasn't dealt with his feelings about his father. And I suppose that something I feel about a lot of men is that masculinity has become a subject for them. If they face it, they would write very interesting things. But if they block it off, maybe they would get stuck. So I was seeing it with Adam in quite a personal and subjective way. It's just he's had a really rough time with this very difficult father. I don't think I was being kind of political about male writers in this respect. And, of course, the problem with poor old Charlotte Brontë, the ghost of Charlotte Brontë, is that she's writing away for dear life, but she's burning her letters. So, it's a kind of terrible writing, really. That's masochistic, I think. She's writing for somebody else, not really for herself. And then she's giving it away and she's burning it. And of course, she doesn't exist anyway because she's dead and it's a ghost talking. So, I think I'm more ambivalent, actually, about the women writers than you are admitting [*both laughing*].

I'll just add something else. I was very tender in my mind towards Adam because it's the first time that I've written at length from inside a male character. And I got very fond of him. And that was a nice discovery. I mean, OK, he's having problems, he looks weak. But I was very intrigued by him. I enjoyed creating a man. So that was a nice breakthrough for me.

I'm just going to go now to The Mistressclass. *I've just got a couple of questions in relation to that. And I have read, in relation to* The Mistressclass, *because you're using Charlotte Brontë, that you are more identified with writers from the nineteenth century like, Charlotte Brontë, than contemporary writers like Angela Carter or Fay Weldon, for example. How much of this influence appears in* The Mistressclass *or in the whole of your novels?*

Well, first of all, there is a difference between saying "I like writing about writers of the nineteenth century," simply because they are a hundred and fifty years ago and there's a certain licence in freedom. That doesn't mean I'm not inspired by some twentieth century writers. I really am. You know, Toni Morrisson has been a major influence on me. Angela Carter has been an influence, but I think more in her fairy stories, *The Bloody Chamber*, than her novels. Fay Weldon is not an inspiration, that's quite true. But it's not that I'm not interested in contemporary writers. I read them, voraciously, all the time. So, whoever said that was wrong. Sorry, tell me the second bit of the question?

I was asking you how much of this influence of the nineteenth century writers appears in your novels?

Well, you see, what happens is that you fall in love and you don't consciously choose who to fall in love with. But when you fall in love in real life, the person gets kind of lit up and they sort of shine golden, and of course it's because you're projecting to them. You know, it's your own light that projects, but you don't realise it, you think there's that amazing person. So I'd had an experience with falling in love that got me interested through a very circular route with George Sand, actually. But I didn't quite feel that I could write about her directly, partly because, I think, she wrote so much about herself that she's very known. Somehow my beam of light switched aside to Charlotte Brontë when I fell in love with her. I've always been in love with Charlotte Brontë, actually, ever since I was about ten. But I suddenly felt I can write about her now. But I think it's because she was hopelessly in love with the teacher. And again, it's this writing thing about what does it mean to have a mentor who is a man, a mentor who is a teacher, a mentor who tells you that you write in overelaborate and baroque ways. A mentor who is married. It brings up all kinds of very interesting issues. Perhaps particularly because in Britain, there's been a real issue in universities about sexual harassment. What does it mean to be a young woman student with a charismatic male teacher? Do you feel free and liberated? Or do you feel that there is too much sex coming from them? I mean, these are all very important questions, I think, for young women students and of course, they also fall in love with their teachers. We all know this. So, I wanted to write about that as a subject. But I think, if you write about something like that very directly, it can come across like journalism. And I hate that kind of novel where it's like a journalist in disguise, I hate it. What I learnt from Charlotte Brontë is, as a writer, you can use metaphor, and she learnt that from Shakespeare. So you can structure your novel like a Shakespearean play with a subtext of metaphor. You can also actually put Charlotte Brontë in it, which is what I wanted to do. Obviously, I couldn't yet write a novel about Angela Carter. She is too recently dead. She's too alive for me in that sense. But I was very inspired by her and by Calvino and, you know, by all the writers of my generation, Casanses, A. S. Byatt was doing it, I was doing it, retelling old stories with that personal link on. And of course, Carter does it really beautifully in *The Bloody Chamber*. I mean, her language is very rich and very voluptuous. Marina Warner also. So, I think I've been getting permission from all those writers to write in a voluptuous and imagistic way. And that was very helpful for me as a writer. And one day, maybe, I'll write more about George Sand because she continues to fascinate me. As indeed when I fell in love with Flaubert and Mallarmé, I put them into *The Looking Glass*. I made a composite male writer out of them because I had fallen in love with them. They had lit up and begun to glow.

Is Doris Lessing another writer that you admire?

Yes and no. I admired her enormously in the seventies, but then I became irritated by her omniscient narrators. They seem to me too lofty and potentially scornful of ordinary humanity. So, I don't really admire her any more as a writer. I feel bad saying that because you know, she is a great writer. But I had to have a big fight with her. She is like a mother figure woman, so I had to have a big fight with her to break loose and write differently. I don't believe in omniscient narrators. If I put them in, it's for a very, very difficult reason.

Yes, usually you use the first person narrator all the time.

Or I use the third person, you know, that Flaubertian thing, just looking over the shoulder. That kind of omniscient one, I'm going to fight it because it's God the father, for me. It's an authority figure.

Would you say that Vinny in The Mistressclass *and Charlotte Brontë have some kind of similarity as the two of them can be writers who are in love with a married person and are, in a way, independent. Will you agree with this?*

Yes, I think what I was doing was to some extent taking the Charlotte Brontë story and saying "what if" it happened again in the present. So Vinny does in a sense represent Charlotte, but she also has bits of Emily, I think so. But the fact that I've got two pairs of sisters. Yes, it's a replay.

And madness is again another topic that appears in the novel if we consider Madame Heger's madness as it becomes visible in Jane Eyre*'s character. The same happens again in* The Mistressclass *because at some point, I saw Adam mad at the end of the novel. Again you're just swapping, according to my point of view, the roles. It's Adam the one that becomes mad because he cannot really see.*

That's very interesting. I didn't see that. What I thought was, really I was exploring in Charlotte's letters, in her impossible letters what it is to be mad when madness means possession, obsession, stalking, mad love, mad desire. If there are no boundaries, that's probably a kind of madness. But of course, Charlotte contains it because she contains it through literary form in letters. So it's actually quite safe. I think for Adam, it wasn't that I was reversing. But I was saying something about a man that can be extremely vulnerable and can lose touch with something called reality. So in that jumping off the bridge, falling off, it is a plunging to the waters of the unconscious. But it's more, you could also see it as a plunging to the unconscious which is a good thing. You could see it as a rite of passage. You could see it as a baptism, a journey of discovery, because madness, of course can be all those things. So it's not a simple opposition of madness and sanity. I've always been interested in madness because I think it's not clear-cut. I know it's easy to romanticize it. People who are mad can suffer enormously. I know that. But I think that if you're helped to understand what is going on, then madness can be a bridge into a better, richer life. I think that's true, because it's usually about the unconscious coming up. Then if you are helped to cope with it, then you get somewhere better. And I think for Adam that is what I thought happened. So madness is a shorthand, isn't it? And he's more interesting than Catherine. Catherine is totally depressed. She's half dead. She's an awful person. I really didn't like her.

Just to conclude, would you say that your novels make a revision and a rewriting of the metanarratives that we have—history and religion—that have controlled our thoughts, our behaviour and our conditions. And are you trying to contribute to make those voices from the past be heard and expressed with freedom in your novels? Are you at the same time joining all times and all women in your fiction throughout the short stories?

Gosh! That's three cosmic questions in one [*laughing*]. I think I am trying to challenge the metanarratives. Yes, and I do that through working with form as well as content, so that the kinds of narratives or stories I'm making simply are part of the critique, which is expressing the content. And I know that sounds very pompous.

That's your other question about joining all women across history because I do actually, as a Marxist, you know, I was trained. I went to university and did a lovely literature degree on Medieval Language and Literature and I had a fantastic time. I got out of university and began to educate myself as a thinker, which I hadn't been before. And I joined the Marxist study group and I became a Lefty and I read Freud. So I have a concept of history, but it's quite a Marxist one. History really matters. On the other hand, as a woman with an imagination, who is a writer, you kind of fly through history. And, you know that definition that it's like I've got my knees apart with bits of skirt, so they're separate, but you can just do that and they meet. And that's what you are doing as a novelist very often. It's different ways of thinking. And the unconscious. You know, I dream at night and I'm talking to dead people, I talk to my grandmother. You know, what is going on? So, the two things co-exist. On the one hand, recognising the specificity of history. On the other hand, cherishing what the imagination can do. But I don't believe in, a historical, "all women are together everywhere for ever more." Because actually that's almost like an imperialism, actually, as a way of thinking. And I think as a Lefty, I'm more and more aware of that, but as a white woman, I can speak for my experience and my imagination. But I cannot speak for anyone in the world in a simple way. That would be to colonize it. On the other hand, if I wanted to write about black women in Africa, I could have a go, but I would have to go and do a lot of research. I can't just rely on imagination. So, it's incredibly complicated and I've given you a very simplistic reply. I'm struggling with that a lot at the moment, partly because of teaching and talking to the young people in my classes. We talk a lot about this issue because we have a very multicultural group of students. We disagree, we all disagree about how free are we as writers to write about whatever we want. And we all say that we are. And yet we can have quarrels when it comes to how we do it. Is it accurate? Is it authentic? What do those words mean? It's very interesting, actually. For example, I mean, there is a story that I rather like in *Flesh and Blood* which was inspired by seventeenth century Italian culture. I did a lot of research for that story, I wanted to get the details right, so that then, my imagination can take off and I suppose that's how I see it, that history really matters. You look at an authentic church record written by a real scribe in the seventeenth century. The real handwriting, the real document, the events, so far as we know real, copied, written down, his version, his glosses, his mistakes. All of that is a reality. But then, as a writer I'll fly off. And I feel able to do that. I feel licenced, which is perhaps a very bourgeois notion of writerly freedom, I'm sure it is. But I think I'm more and more sort of coming to terms with that, thinking, OK, I'm confined by my history, my feminism is a white woman's history. I'm from a middle class family. My father was working class, didn't have any education, got me an education. I became middle class. My mother's family is middle class. I'm white. I can try and criticise myself, I can try and understand my formation, I can try and change, I can try and struggle with myself, but I also cherish what made me. I cherish even the old bloody Catholic Church. Because it gave me language, it gave me stories, it gave me folklore. So it's a mixture of self-criticism, self-knowledge. And a kind of jumping up with the imagination.

Thank you very much for your conversation.

Thank you for your good questions, and for making me think [*both laughing*].

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