INDICE

AN INTERVIEW WITH HILARY MANTEL*

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Hilary Mantel was born in Derbyshire in 1952. She studied at the London School of Economics and Sheffield University. Apart from her career as a fiction writer, Hilary Mantel worked as a film critic for four years, and is currently working as a reviewer in literary journals like *The London Review of Books* and *The New York Review of Books*, among others. That she likes trying new forms is clear from the fact that she is at present preparing radio serializations of her books.

Hilary Mantel has written eight novels (*The Giant O'Brien* has just been published at the time of writing this introduction). Her first two novels, *Every Day is Mother's Day* (1985) and *Vacant Possession* (1986), are powerful works which combine suburban everyday life with horror. Both novels portray fearsome creatures which are meant to «make you laugh, and make you shiver at the same time», in Mantel's words. In *Every Day is Mother's Day* Evelyn Axon and Muriel, her daughter, have such a strained relationship that Muriel has not been able to gain a sense of self, which will eventually lead to her mental deterioration, and to murder and horror in the Axon household. In Mantel's second novel, as Muriel takes revenge on her mother's death, she plays havoc with the Sydney family, also involved in Mantel's first novel. What these two novels seem to underline is one of Mantel's main concerns: the theme of transformation, which is especially relevant in *Fludd* (1989). In dealing with an alchemist, this novel shows the qualitative change brought by a supposed curate to the fictitious village of Fetherhoughton. *Fludd* can be also understood as Mantel's first attempt of talking about the creative process consciously.

She has lived abroad for ten years, in Africa and the Middle East, and her experiences of having lived and worked there are reflected in two novels, *Eight Months on Ghazzah Street* (1988) and *A Change of Climate* (1994). The former takes place in the Middle East, in Saudi Arabia, and the theme of transformation is also present here, although slightly veiled. The writer herself has pointed to the eighteenth-century atmosphere that pervades the whole novel, which contributes to consider *Eight Months on Ghazzah Street* as a Gothic novel. Furthermore, she tackles here the theme of power, both sexual and political. Her novels are never cut off from the outside world; they are well embedded in their socio-political context. Moreover, Mantel takes pains to show how preoccupied she is with politics, power, transformation, evolution and revolution. *A Place of Greater Safety* (1992), her novel about the French Revolution, concentrates on the lives of three revolutionaries, Robespierre, Danton and Desmoulins, producing a historical novel which, unlike others which also deal with the French Revolution, brings to light what happened to these people when they moved from the private to the public sphere. Consequently, the women who stood behind the men of the French Revolution play a very important role in a novel which captures the excitement of the Revolution through the three most important protagonists'

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lives, writings and families. Mantel won the 1992 *Sunday Express* Book of the Year Award with *A Place of Greater Safety*. However, this is not the only prize she has won: *An Experiment in Love* (1995), a novel about love, sex, money and power set in the Britain of the 1960s and 70s, was awarded the 1995 Hawthornden Prize, which, since its inception in 1919, has only twice before been bestowed upon a woman. In 1987 she was awarded the Shiva Naipaul Memorial Prize for travel writing, and *Fludd* was awarded the Winifred Hotby Prize, the Cheltenham Festival Prize and the Southern Arts Literature Award.

In Britain Hilary Mantel is usually connected with Muriel Spark, but she claims that she read Spark in her mid-twenties, and that their approach to writing fiction and to life differs considerably. In this sense, Mantel would rather link her work with that of Doris Lessing, or Margaret Atwood, especially, with whom she has a «fellow feeling». However, Mantel is unique in the depiction of her characters, subtle perceptiveness, sharp wit, as well as her tendency towards gloom, and her dealing with profound questions about the human being and about life. In Spain we have been fortunate enough to have had Hilary Mantel as a plenary lecturer in the XX AEDEAN Conference held at Barcelona in December, 1996 and last year in a Summer Course, titled «Tiempo de Mujeres», where she gave a lecture, read a long passage from her latest novel, *The Giant O'Brien*, as well as participating in a roundtable.

This previously unpublished conversation is a transcription of the original recording, revised by Ms. Mantel. The interviewer has respected the author's wishes of wanting the interview, as she herself put it, «to sound like the spoken word».

INTERVIEWER: Your first novel *Every Day is Mother's Day* was published in 1985, but when did you start writing?

MANTEL: I started writing in 1974, because the first novel I published was not the first novel I wrote. The first novel I wrote was *A Place of Greater Safety*, my novel about the French Revolution. Now, between 1974 and the end of 1979 I wrote two drafts of that novel, and I then thought it was finished, it was only later I realized it wasn't, and then in 1980 I had quite a serious illness, which put a split down in the middle of my life and made me decide to put that project aside and start something fresh. There was a feeling that it was time to fresh beginnings, and I recovered through my illness, began to write another book, which was *Every Day is Mother's Day*. So this is now just about 1980. We then moved from Botswana to Saudi Arabia in 1982, and in 1982 I picked up again with *Every Day is Mother's Day* and finished it off. I think it was actually submitted for publication towards the end of 1983, and it was accepted pretty quickly, but because of the way the publishing year is ranged with the spring of autumn seasons, it was just coming at the wrong time of the year for the publishers, so it was a long time before it was actually published; it was almost eighteen months in the cycle, just because our autumn publications schedule is very busy and they tend to try to protect first novels from autumn publications because there is so little review space, and it was thought at that time anyway that spring was a better time for first novels, so I would say it was finished in 1983 and published in 1985.

INTERVIEWER: Apart from your fiction, you review other writers' novels in *The London Review of Books* and *The New York Review of Books*. Are you a severe critic of your own work? Does your critical activity help you see your own novels differently?

MANTEL: Well, I call what I do literary journalism rather than criticism, because I have no training in English Studies at university level, let alone in critical theory, because I studied Law and my whole life went away from that part of literature, so I have no expertise in critical theory, and the kind of reviewing I do is very much designed to be read

by the *laïkos* rather than by the scholar. I am a severe critic of my own work in that I'm very much a perfectionist and I'm sure the two activities play off one against the other. Sometimes you may be reviewing someone's book and you see something doesn't quite work; sometimes because of your own experience you can put your finger on why that is, and that must, I think, feed back into your own work, this matter of the technical shaping of a book, the craftmanship of it. Having said that, I don't write by a very conscious process, so it tends to be when the book is finished that I see how it's done and what it's about. I wouldn't do reviewing if I didn't think it was helpful to me to look at the structure of other people's work, but it's helpful in a secondary kind of way, up there in the head, whereas, I think, writing first of all comes from down here in the gut. It's very interesting, though, as a reviewer who is also a novelist, when you see someone walking into a cul-de-sac in their text, somewhere their narrative is heading off, and though they won't be able to turn around and you feel for them, because you know from experience that there are some mistakes in the writing of a book that you just have to make; when you are in the process, it feels the honest thing to do. And sometimes to make a book that is technically perfect seems dishonest, and I always feel for those writers, who are trying to reveal a bit more truth to their reader, but perhaps by doing that they are going outside the framework they've created for themselves or they put a new strand into the book that then snaps. All this, you see, when you look at other people's texts and you think yes, I made that mistake and I know why I did, what you hope is that it makes you a more sympathetic and perceptive reviewer now that you write fiction yourself. On the other hand, I think that if you write yourself you tend to come down hard as a reviewer against what you might see as taking short cuts, as dishonesty, because to me to keep good faith with the reader is the most important thing.

INTERVIEWER: Is there some kind of shape, structure, that comes to you when you're starting to work on a novel?

MANTEL: The first thing that comes is the tone. Yes, it's like hearing the music of it, and once I have got the tone it doesn't matter how many years I then set it aside, I'm not going to forget it. So, when I came to write my book *Fludd*, which is my fourth novel, I sketched it out in the course of a train journey, that was two or three quarter hours, and I wrote the first paragraph and I wrote the last paragraph, and they contain the tone. And what came in between I had a very hazy idea of, but I threw some ideas down on the paper, and it was, I suppose, two and a half or three years before I came back to it, but though no one could see the join, I think, between that first paragraph and what followed out of the book, and the last paragraph, and I'm lucky in that respect, the structure to me then begins to set in place. But I really perceive a book as something organic, so I think the author is a plant growing rather than making a building, so what I think is a plant just doesn't grow randomly or out of place, it grows according to the laws of its nature. So, if you begin that, you won't turn into some other kind, it will just obey the laws of its own structure or form, so I try not to think of it too hard, I know that there is a principle of order inside me, I know the book isn't employing itself, I know that's only a metaphor; I know that really it is me who is pulling, pushing the process along, but I believe that there is this inner process of ordering which storytellers naturally do, and so you don't have to worry about what comes next; when you get there, you'll know it, I have faith in that.

INTERVIEWER: Isn't it then difficult to stop the plant from growing?

MANTEL: To that extent maybe we have to say the plant is a metaphor, and as I say, is not a terribly good one, perhaps, but there is a kind of interchange between the growing the plant does according to the laws of its nature and the gardener, that's my conscious mind coming along to say: this shape, that is the correct shape for you, tree, or that is the

correct shape for this hedge or that plant. I think I always have in mind some vision of what the finished shape would be, so that I never feel any danger of going on beyond the end, or, I'm not very musical so I tend to be wary of musical metaphors, but there's never any chance of the symphony going on beyond its end because it has its natural shape, and then you know when you reach the coda. It is this curious interchange, I think, between what is conscious and what is unconscious, as I say, what is intellectual and what comes from very deep psychic sources. I would be the last person to pretend that I always know why I'm tackling certain subject matters. The book I finished last week I got the idea eight years ago, and I did a couple of days of research to see if the idea would stand up, and I decided it did, so I then put it aside. And that it was a good thing to do, because all I knew was what story I was to tell, I didn't know what theme I was tackling. It's one thing to know your subject, it's another thing to know your theme. And one may come to you in a flash, and the other need to develop over a decade.

INTERVIEWER: One thing that interests me particularly about your novels is the presence of tragic events, horror, and madness lurking in the protagonists' everyday life. But then these long-buried tragedies erupt, so that the protagonists have to confront crises in their lives and society. I'm thinking of *Every Day is Mother's Day*, *Vacant Possession*, *A Change of Climate*, for example. Does this reflect any specific concern of yours? Would you please comment on it?

MANTEL: Yes, sure. I think the reason I tackle these themes is that I'm an ambitionist novelist. I'm not the sort of person who is going to give you a slender a hundred-and-twenty-page novel about a bitter-sweet love affair. I respect the people who do it, but it's not for me. I'm interested in power, and sex, and money, and those are all novels are about, for me, and each of those things trail in its way high comedy, and high tragedy, and sometimes farce, when the two clash. The reason I think that the tragedy tends to erupt so suddenly is because I am preoccupied with the theme of transformation. This runs through all my books, and in *Fludd* I make it very specific because I'm actually writing about an alchemist, and comparing, if you like, the creative process to the process of alchemy. In that book it is most overt, but it is buried in every book, I think. I'm occupied with the point of change where there's a qualitative change, and this is why I choose to write about revolution, the moment I do it nothing will be the same, either in individual lives or in the light of political life. I think that is the reason for the suddenness, of course I also write about evolution, so it's interesting the recent scientific speculations about how evolution occurs, and, you know, I'm very interesting in this respect. Also of course I'm interested in the moment when society is changed, I'm interested in the moment where, I mean, on a more human level where an individual undergoes crises, when, as if were, the contents of the psyche pour into conciousness, and people act irrationally under the pressure of event. If you look at, for instance, *A Change of Climate*, there are various things going on there. Ralph's love affair which almost splits his family apart; it's almost operating everything that has been suppressed in this man. But the real change in his life is the opening of the door to the people who are going to steal his child. Now you could argue that the opening of the door is something about what he's prepared for all his life. He couldn't bear to leave those people outside in the storm, and this is where being good has got him. On a symbolic level, the opening of the door is the release of irrationality, so it operates on several levels.

INTERVIEWER: The socio-political context is very much present in *A Change of Climate*, as well as in most of your novels: How relevant is it to your work?

MANTEL: Vital, absolutely vital. This is why, as I say, I would never be a proponent of a bitter-sweet love story which takes place some time, some place, and you don't know where. I can only envisage things embedded in a society, and I'm not a novelist with a po-

litical agenda in the sense of I am pushing the politics of the Left or the Right, but I always think let us look for the politics of the situation because, as I say, one of my main concerns is power. So when I write about a household, I'm not simply writing about someone's domestic set-up, I'm writing about them as a reflection of politics in the wider world. I think this is probably most overt in *A Place of Greater Safety*, my novel about the French Revolution, where the power politics and the sexual politics are so directly connected, and the domestic, and the wider context of politics, a culture. I couldn't write novels except well embedded, I think, in this context, although strangely enough, one of my favourite novelists, she rather falls into obscurity, I don't know if you have heard of her, she is a novelist called Ivy Compton-Burnett, who was born in the very end of the last century. She didn't begin writing seriously until she was in her forties, and then produced a series of novels going on right through into the sixties, and all these novels are curiously alike. They are set in a large house in the English countryside, and the time is somewhere before the First World War. In this house, under this roof, you usually have three generations of one family, and maybe uncles, and cousins and their relationships, are all very mixed up. These are novels about power and money, and she inkly pins her eye absolutely steady and never distracting her reader by going outside these confines. She manages to portray a whole world of power politics, and to write about oppression, and cruelty, and hierarchy in a way that reminds one of a Greek tragedy. Now I envy that business of keeping the camera absolutely steady. I think the reason I haven't ever tried to do that myself is that I am too distracted and pulled up by too many concerns. As I say, I didn't start out to be a writer, really, I started out to write one novel, that novel is the novel about the French Revolution, where obviously social and political themes are uppermost. I think it's just because I started in that way, I'm never likely to abandon it. But my latest novel, *The Giant O'Brian*, is political in a much more metaphorical sense. It is actually the fiction of working out of a political metaphor, but I don't want to distract you in that until you are ready to hear it. But I think, as I say, I brought a lot of other preoccupations, besides the literary ones, to my work, and somebody said to me the other week, one never forgets you are a lawyer. I don't know what they are commenting on, but I think that's possibly true.

INTERVIEWER: You have written on Margaret Atwood. Do you see any link between her work and your own work? Do you feel kinship with other writers, other novelists?

MANTEL: Well, that's an interesting question. If people ask me about the question of influences, I'm always very perplexed. I know lots of people knew early in life that they were going to be writers, and it was interesting to hear Marita [*Marita Golden was also invited to give a lecture at the Summer Course and to participate in a roundtable*] say today how, when she was going through college, she had Alice Walker as a role model. Well, I was going through law schools, so it didn't seem very relevant. When I did begin to write, the people who hung in my background are not people I wish to imitate, but the great stars for me in English literature were Charlotte Brontë, and Robert Louis Stevenson. I read a great deal of Russian literature in my teens, I don't know whether...they may have influenced my mind's setting, probably turning me towards gloom, you know. In modern times my two great heroes were Evelyn Waugh and Ivy Compton-Burnett, and, you see, by the time I was writing I was very quickly abroad. I went to Botswana in 1977, a lot of my writing was done there, I was completely cut off from what was happening in English and American fiction. So I did begin to read Doris Lessing while I was there, because I was always fascinated by her subject matter, which talks about the then Rhodesia and Martha Quest novels. I didn't come across Margaret Atwood, I hardly came across anybody, and when I came to England in 1982, I was very much, I think, formed as a writer then, but in a way rather innocent of influences. When I went back and read Margaret Atwood, I saw

that, yes, we certainly do have some common preoccupations. And I would say that now of our very contemporary writers, she is certainly the one I most revere. I think that her last book, *Alias Grace*, was a work of a genius, and I would give a great deal to have written that book and I think I never will write anything like that. So it's not really so much a question of influences as does one find a fellow feeling, and with Margaret Atwood I do. In Britain people often say that I'm influenced by Muriel Spark. In fact I didn't read Muriel Spark again until I was in my mid-twenties, and I think I knot to her, I can recognize a certain animancy there, but the thing is though I'm fairly preoccupied with religious questions, I don't have myself any personal faith, whereas Muriel Spark is a Catholic convert, and this influences entirely the way she views the world. I begin to wonder, though, and especially with my last book, like Marita, I would say to anyone anywhere I'm a feminist, but it's very difficult to see what my last book in particular has to do with female experience or how a feminist put on it, and I'm sure someone would do it, but it really doesn't seem to relate in any way to preoccupations that my female colleagues are writing about. A. S. Byatt has pointed out in an essay that there's recently been a preoccupation with Darwinism among English writers, and certainly that's touched me in *A Change of Climate* and slightly in this new book. Other than that, I don't really find it similar to anything anyone else is doing, that maybe because I'm too close to it, having only finished it two days ago. I'm wondering already when it's reviewed, what will they say this is like, which is always good for the game of the author, you know, because sometimes people detect you being influenced by the work of someone you never read and of course this is great fun, which isn't to say it isn't true because the spirit of someone's work gets into the air. The people who started to write about Darwinism, we weren't all talking to each other, we just did it. I find it, I feel that now I reach the point with this, which is my eighth novel, when very much write writing for myself. Now that could be the first sign of madness, or I don't know. But I have a feeling of not really worrying about what everybody else is doing, but quite this is what I'm doing. I think I have got probably a new confidence in my writing since, probably for the last nine months. That's partly to do with shifting forms and I've been writing radio serializations on my books, I've written a screen play, and as a journalist I tend to do it, time permits, almost anything anyone asks me, so radio this year, for instance, I was writing before any previous comments, which a lot of people think it isn't very dignified, isn't very literary, but I just believe in trying to handle things because it all feeds to making you a better writer, and I think radio serialization, for example, it makes you very quick on your feet as a storyteller, so does writing a script-play in a different way. So I think, even if these things never come to anything, it's like going to the gym, it pays off rights with your life, and it gives you a lot more confidence when you come back to writing novels, I think. You just got more technique sat in your fingertips.

INTERVIEWER. And then you like applying new things to your writing.

MANTEL: Yes, that's right. I do regard myself primarily as a novelist, but over the last year I really have found out that apart from everything else, it's just fun. I'm about to start a play, maybe it'll never be produced but I want to see if I can do it. I've started out very ambitiously with two characters, only, and then see where it goes. I've started a new novel already, so it's a time when I feel, after years of stagnation things are moving again.

INTERVIEWER: One critic, Millicent Bell, uses the term 'black comedy' in her review of your latest novel *An Experiment in Love* in *Partisan Review*. Would you consider your first two novels, *Every Day is Mother's Day* and *Vacant Possession*, as such?

MANTEL: Yes, I would, amongst other things. Although I would say that there is a difference in tone between those two books, and I would say that *Vacant Possession* is a much theatre book, and I would call it more of like farce, than a black comedy.

INTERVIEWER: In most of your novels you dwell on personal relationships. But it seems to me that in *Every Day is Mother's Day* and in *Vacant Possession*, there is a special emphasis on the difficulties parents find in establishing communication with their children, as well as on the mother-daughter relationship. Do you see something in the way mothers and daughters get on together as somehow maintaining some particularly painful bond? How important is the mother-daughter relationship in your own work? Could you also talk about Carmel and her relationship with her mother in *An Experiment in Love*?

MANTEL: In this matter I have rather worked from the metaphorical to the actual, because you probably have picked up that *An Experiment in Love* is to some extent autobiographical. Now my mother doesn't have the appearance of Carmel's mother, and I'm not Carmel. But the depiction of the mother-daughter relationship is very close to a portrait of my relationship with my own mother. When I go back to *Every Day is Mother's Day* I think what I did was right the metaphor for that relationship, at a time when I was very much more scared of these issues than I am now. I...it's a strange thing to say, considering that Muriel is a mentally deceptive murderess, but I really think Muriel is me in that relationship, who can only cope by closing her eyes, closing her ears, and I think that maybe...you can't get away from autobiography here, or rather what is not autobiography, what is one's life, and I think that if I go back to my childhood, probably the relationship between myself and my mother was negotiated very badly. I love her dearly, and we can manage always to retain the relationship, and people now think that we are a very close mother and daughter because you know close bonds can be very destructive ones. If you tie two people together, they can really claw at each other's eyes. When I was a teenager, my mother used to say a very strange thing to me; she would get me this message on the one hand I was to work to a very, very hard school, and I was to go to university, and I was to be a credit to her, and I was to fulfil all her ambitions that she hadn't been able to achieve. But then she would say: Well, if you got married while you are up at university, and you had a baby, I'd look after it, you know. At the time I used to think this is a very strange thing to be saying. That's what I thought consciously, and I think that at some deeper level I completely panicked about it, and thought if I had a baby, my mother would take it away. And now looking back I think that's what *Every Day is Mother's Day* was about. When I wrote it it was a horror story, and a ghost story, and it was meant to make you laugh, and make you shiver at the same time. I have a real tendency towards the macabre, if I'd been a genre writer, certainly I ought to have been a horror fiction writer. But it was a very long and painful process for me to see what that book was about. And once I got to the end of *Every Day is Mother's Day*, Muriel had in effect murdered a child to stop it being taken by her mother. She had murdered her mother, and everything began to run under its own insane logic, whereby in *Vacant Possession* events get completely out of hand, and there is mass destruction brought in the Sidney family, so then goes beyond the mother-daughter bond, although the fact that Evelyn is dead doesn't stop her being a very powerful presence, and there is almost to suggest you, I think, in the book that she is waiting there to destroy her daughter, whether psychically or, as in some horror films, in a physical way, the end is open.

INTERVIEWER: That's true. When in *Vacant Possession* Muriel goes back to her lodgings, she physically feels the presence of her mother, always associated with dampness, and in their former house decay and dampness were everywhere.

MANTEL: And you see, Muriel has never gained a sense of her own personality, she has no self, because her mother has not allowed her to have a self. If you remember at the beginning of *Every Day is Mother's Day* Muriel believes her mother can read her thoughts so she has no autonomy, consequently she has no conscience, either, because she never

performs that part of life's work, she doesn't have to take her parent into herself, her parent is already there, seen through her eyes, if you like. Muriel's only answer to that is to reify herself she becomes a thing, she thinks herself as a wall, I believe at one point. And then in *Vacant Possession* she survives by changing into other personalities, rather like an author, you might say.

INTERVIEWER: But in *Every Day is Mother's Day* we can foresee what will happen in *Vacant Possession* because although Muriel hates Evelyn, she becomes her mother at night.

MANTEL: That's quite true, yes. And it is, I think, quite a lot of women fear; they are, that is to say, in silence and darkness and out of view, they are becoming their mothers. My nephews sometimes say to me: «having you is just like having grandma around», and I hear it, I can see her expressions on my face, I can hear her speaking through my voice, I find it almost alarming, even now when as I'm free of the fear of being utterly destroyed by it, but I find that it is a consecution in terms of my life because it means that to an extent I probably just can't bother to make myself in certain areas, and I certainly never have made myself as a mother because I have no children. As I say, I think, these extremely powerful scenes that came from way inside myself would be iterative in these books. I don't have much of an impulse to the confessional, and I think this is why I chose certainly to wrap it in all those macabre layers, but it does nevertheless express a certain truth about my life, and probably about the lives of a lot of other women. I think I have perhaps rather taken it to extremes. I found in the end, I told you, I had a serious illness, after that I couldn't have children, and I realized that probably I could never have had children. Certainly not after being about the age of twenty, I find this, if I care to look at it on a metaphorical level, I might say that the panic went so deep that if I had a baby, my mother would take it away, that I did better than Muriel, I didn't wait until born to murder it, I made sure it'll never be born at all. With all this going around and analysis of one's life, you wonder my themes are macabre, and my outlooks sometimes bleak. On the other hand, I think it would be unbearable if I didn't have a vein of comedy running through all my books, really. It's not very much there in *A Change of Climate*, but it is there. It's a sort of a comedy. The new one is my most deep and macabre book, and I don't know if it is the funniest, but I think it is.

INTERVIEWER: Isabel says in *Every Day is Mother's Day*: «Some of the mothers don't seem to make relationships with the children. They don't treat them as people, just as objects...the constant frustration of one's efforts to adapt the world, and the resignation of the attempt» (106). Could you comment on this?

MANTEL: Yes. What Isabel is expounding there is the theory that held sway at the time about the causes of autism in children. It was a theory that produced a great deal of guilt amongst mothers because it was said that it was their coldness that was responsible for their children not making a relationship with them. Isabel is expounding the thinking of our time. I think we now know better, we now know that there are some biological factors involved, there are some genetic factors involved, and that a lot of mothers were unfairly blamed for what was no human being's fault, but I still think, you see, that although in another sense we now believe that is not the cause of autism, I still think that what was written in those years about relationships between mothers and children still have some value, it was misapplied, but it's still interesting...*Every Day is Mother's Day* is set in 1974, and at that time there were certain theories about autism which were fashionable, very much based on, again, blaming the mother, the mother's neglect, the mother's response to the child, and this was productive of a great deal of guilt amongst mothers. There was a theory that it was middle-class mothers who had autistic children, in fact it was

the middle-class mothers who are having their children diagnosed autistic, working-class children were just being diagnosed as stupid. Now, this theory about the bonding with the mother fell out of favour, and I think it is now pretty widely accepted that there is a neurological component and a genetic component to autism. However, I think that those theories still have something interesting to offer, and when I was writing *Every Day is Mothers's Day*, I was writing about a character as damaged as Muriel Axon. I was very much under the influence of Bruno Bettelheim, who was an Austrian psychologist, who survived the concentration camps, and went on to found in Chicago an institute for the treatment of autistic, psychotic, severely damaged children, which was taking children no one else could cope with, children whose behaviour was so deranged as to appear subhuman….high staff ratio, number of staff per children, he recruited very dedicated staff. At the time he was credited with very good results. Recently murmurs have been heard against him, that he was a dictatorial person, that he didn't always treat his staff very well, and that the progress his children made was exaggerated, and above all, that his theories were ill-founded. But then, again, I think one has to look at how Bettelheim evolved these theories, and not throw away what is valuable. He compared these damaged children to people he had encountered in the camp, he had a theory that in the camps the only way to survive was not to draw attention to yourself. Some inmates became so cut off from the world, it was as if they had sealed their senses, and the other inmates called them 'musslemen', which is a corruption of muslim because it was said that they were indiferent to their fate, they were totally fatalistic. Others adopted the conscious pose of never attracting attention to themselves, by rigidity of posture, by never meeting anyone's eye. Bettelheim remembered these people from the camps, he looked at the children, and he thought what they had in common was fear, what they had in common was the fear of arbitrary power. In the camps, there was no justice, there was no law, there was simply arbitrary decisions about life and death, which couldn't be understood on a rational basis. Now his feeling was as damaged children, but with no idea of the laws of cause and effect. So, they were, in fact, as it seemed to them, in a totally arbitrary world where violence and distress were random; and I think that that was a very powerful insight because I think it is not only children who are recognized as severely damaged who have problems with this kind of fear, we all go through a stage in life where we do not understand the adult world, we do not understand how decisions are arrived at, and we cannot predict what can come next, what may come next, and this can be productive of a great deal of fear in even a normal child, so I don't think that we should just throw away the whole of that analysis on the basis of later knowledge having superseded it.

INTERVIEWER: What about the tale of terror you wrote about the fear of not recognizing one's children?

MANTEL: Yes. In the last couple of years I've been a bit in a moral panic about babies being swopped in hospitals, mothers going home with the wrong babies, and this was making a lot of headlines suddenly, and I began to think how deep this terror went within us. We think that one of the constants of human nature is that children would recognize their parents, and parents would recognize their children; animals do usually after all, and we tend to think of it as a natural attribute that we assume is written into us, but we know from stories of these hospital mix-ups that have happened over the years that these things do occur, and they are often not found out after years and years later, and we have to ask whether there are cases when they are never found out at all. To capture the mode of this moral panic, I wrote a short story called «Little Kid», which is about a mother and daughter who look very unlike. The mother is called Anna, she is tall, slim, dark; her little girl, Polly, is five years old, but looks even younger, she is, whatever she is, blonde, rosy-che-

eked British infants with burbly curls, burbly long curls, when Anna goes to pick her up at the school gates, people think Anna is her nanny. Polly is a rather precocious and manipulative child, and a terrible moment of truth comes when Polly steals some sweets from the supermarket, and her mother only discovers this when they are half a mile along the street, and Anna is flustered, she is late, she shouts at the child, and Polly retaliates by screaming at her: «You are not my mother». And immediately a crowd forms, and people begin to abuse Anna, and a woman snatches at Polly, and then fights break out among the crowd. This is my illustration of the kind of moral panic that was going on a couple of years ago during one long hot London summer. Really the story is an exploration of whether or not we can trust to the rectitude of Mrs Thatcher's remark, that there is no such thing as society.

INTERVIEWER: I find it fascinating the way the physical decline of the house on 2 Buckingham Avenue and the deterioration of the Sidney family run parallel to each other in *Vacant Possession*, where Poe's «The Fall of the House of Usher» is actually mentioned. Would you say that there are Gothic elements in both your first two novels?

MANTEL: Well, I think the macabre and Gothic elements were certainly implanted by me quite deliberately in those first two novels, which are only really a shade of being horror novels, and certainly, I think I might have said elsewhere, if I was a genre writer, I almost certainly would be producing horror stories. What is interesting, however, is that in *Eight Months on Ghazzah Street* I produced a Gothic novel unconsciously because I thought that what I had written was a true accurate account of my own experience, given that it was novelised, but I thought it had the texture of lived experience. What I found fascinating is faced with being powerless as a woman in Saudi Arabia, and faced with a return to the control that eighteenth-century women had to put up with, the lack of status, the lack of control of their own lives, put back into this powerless situation, I had automatically reached for the form that many eighteenth-century women novelists used, so it's a form of recovered memory, I think, and I had done that quite unconsciously, and it was many months later that I could analyse the novel, strip its gothic elements out. I could only see it as the true record when I wrote it, I was not conscious of trying for any particular literary form.

INTERVIEWER: In what ways did Africa and the Middle East influence you as a writer, and as a person?

MANTEL: Well, I think that going to Africa, which I did when I was twenty-four years old was probably not very influential for me as a writer because I took with me the book that I was beginning to write; it had nothing to do with Africa, and I didn't want to write any other books, I had no intention of a full-time career in fiction writing, so I wasn't viewing Africa through the conscious eyes of a writer, I was not keeping journals, that would help me to write about Africa later. I suppose during those years I was turning into a writer, so that by the end of my five years I was registering things possibly in a different way. What I did do was changing quite a lot as a person, changed the way I thought about things, and therefore I suppose by an indirect route it made me into a different kind of a writer from the one I would have been. The way it changed me as a person really was that it made me less accepting of received opinion; it made me realize that the world was a much more complex place than it looked from Britain; it undermined certain sentimental attitudes and liberal certainties that I had taken with me; it made me see that lies and distortions can be written into the liberal position just as much as any other political position, and I suppose it made me more questioning and more radical, that is not to say a radical of the Left or the Right, but more concerned to get down to the basis of experience, and I suppose it impressed upon me the necessity of making your own observations before ven-

turing an opinion (...) I have a dread of spoonfeeding my reader because I hate books where the writer is always telling you things as if they don't give credit to your intelligence or intuition of your own. I think it's something that just comes with experience, how to present your information, or where to leave the gaps. In that way I don't regard *Eight Months on Ghazzah Street* as a very successful piece of storytelling, although there are in other respects in which I still like the book a lot. I do remember this business of waiting for the story to take shape, and the moment it did when I went up to the roof of our block of flats, and saw an empty packing grate, and I thought 'you could get a man in that', and that was where the story started to form. That is the plot, you know, but I think probably I did a lot of growing up in Africa. I was only 24 when I arrived there, and obviously they are important years in any woman's life, and it's difficult to put up with specific changes. I think it changed me less as a woman than as a person, if that makes sense because it made me very much more suspicious of received information, for instance, I have been all my life reader of certain British newspapers with a liberal slant, books which gave a great deal of South African coverage, and I thought I knew what these issues were about. When I went to that part of the world, I realized that they were far far more complicated, that anyone had ever cared to explain to me, so from that day I began to distrust the official channels, I began to see that in certain circumstance liberalism can pertain to its own corruption and be a great vehicle for simplification, which it is to say for lies. That doesn't mean in any way that I became more right-winged, I just became more questioning; I became more radical, and I began to trust my own judgements a little more, and the judgements of other people a little less, and instead of trusting to received wisdom, I began to try to gather information, and process it into such wisdom as I personally could manage, so when I went to the Middle East, I took with me, I did a great deal of reading before I went, to give me basis for seeing and I tried to suspend my judgement, and I tried to stand back from the conventional judgements of the ex-patriates, but, having said that, I don't believe that when you travel, you leave your judgement at home, and I do believe that you have a right to comment on a society, and you have a right to say 'very well, it's your country, it's your culture, you are my hosts, but I find this loathsome', and I don't think anyone can take away your right comment. So I think these are the changes brought about me as a person by the time I went to Saudi Arabia, as a woman there, you are very much split off. Someone says to Frances at the beginning 'you are not a person any more, you are a woman now', and my own husband's experience of that culture became completely remote from mine, and you can feel then, if you like, is an aid to the imagination because then you can imagine what it's like to be black in South Africa, when you see sexual apartheid in force; you can imagine what it's like to be in a situation of powerlessness within any society because you are a powerless woman there, and there are so many layers on you: you've got to get your husband's permission to go on a journey, but even your husband, he has to get permission from someone else. You can't leave the country because you don't have your passport. It seems that everything is confiscated from you. So in a sense you try to gain your identity as a woman; what I found shocking with many of our women, with the advantage of the education, among the English women, the American women, the upper-European women were perfectly content. They thought 'the Silk Market are good, we've got a swimming-pool, you know, what more is there to life?' This, a political stance, taking politics in a wider sense, makes me despair, not only of women but of the human race. They were unbothered by what was all around them. What saved my sanity was that, I am rather good at sitting in a room and being quiet, I'm quite a solitary person, and I can tolerate a lot of loneliness, and of course I was writing a book. I think if I hadn't expected to get something out of it, I don't think I could have stood beyond a year because it is so depersonalizing to deprive you of your identity at the most basic level.

And then when you come back to England, we used to come back every year on leave, I found it very hard to function, I expected my husband to do things for me. By the end of our leave, I would have learned, and then when I go back to Saudi Arabia, I had to go through this fortnight of adjustment, whereby you didn't just speak to people, they just asked for what you wanted, it was your husband they asked because they wouldn't deal with you anyway.

INTERVIEWER: As happens when Frances goes to the chemist's to get aspirins, they don't even look at her.

MANTEL: Yes, that's right. I'm going to deal with that story tomorrow [*Hilary Mantel's lecture took place on August 26 and was mainly concerned with* Eight Months on Ghazzah Street *as a Gothic novel*] because it was something that really happened. But you have to be very quick to do the changeover. There were some women who couldn't stand it at all, and they started to spend most of the time in England, I remember then that they were apart from their husbands most of the year. You see, if like me you have done a lot of reading, you have no doubt about the nature of this society you are going into, what you can't predict is the effect it will have on you as an individual, because I do think I understood the extent of my perceivity on the one hand, of my rage on the other hand. Between those two, you know, you live a very choppy life.

INTERVIEWER: One last question, do you have any of your novels that is a favourite, that you feel a lot of affection for?

MANTEL: Well, I feel differently towards them all. *A Change of Climate* is my least favourite. It was very hard for me to write, I didn't get on with the very traditional form of it, so I had to wrestle it onto the page. *Fludd* and *An Experiment in Love* have been the easiest to write, both in their various ways give me some delight. However, I regard *A Place of Greater Safety* as my best achievement, if you like, it may not, it can't be by its nature the most perfect novel, but it is so ambitious, it took me so many years. There is a sense in which, and quite properly, nobody but me will ever know what effort went into that novel because I worked very hard to knock the appearance of effort out of it. So to slide information to the reader in a way...OK, sometimes you have to be upfront, you have to say to your reader 'I'm telling you this, there is no sweet way, I'm just going to tell you, I'm going to give you some statistics'. But other times you slide knowledge past them, and sometimes when, if I look at it now, I think wow! if you knew how many books I read to get that one line, you know. So in a sense, just I suppose 'cause of the effort that went into it, it's my favourite, also it contains the story of my life, you know, all my life has been bound up with it, since I started doing reading when I was twenty-two, and in truth I was bound up with it before that because I've been fascinated with the Revolution since I was fourteen. And I know that now it's a book that is emphatically, we were saying at lunchtime actually when you finish a book it's not finished, it goes on and on having lives. It was published in England, it was published in the United States, next year it will be republished in the United States. It unabled me to open a correspondance with historians, and it is not over in the sense that I've written or I'll write two little bookends to it, one is the novel I've just finished, *The Giant O'Brian*, which is nothing to do with France at all, but I think it's to do with the question of what it is to be human, which I think it's the defining question of revolutions. What it is to be human, what rights does that give, what responsibilites does it compel, and who decides; and then years down the line I want to write the other bookend, which will be *Jean Paul Mare*, which I see it as a very little book like the one I've just finished. So the issue is that the book isn't really close to me because there were many years when it was just a dusty manuscript on my shelves, and then I took it down, I wrote a certain draft during 1991 at an enormous speed, and I

changed 15% or 20% of it from my old 1979 draft. I suppose it's very much the book I'-ve never stopped being engaged with because I tried to keep up the scholarship; I'm not terribly concerned with theory, but I'm an accumulator of more and more facts because I feel I've cut my own path as a novelist through them without a historian telling me this is the line you take. So I'm not any more clever about the critical theory of history than I am when it comes to literature, but I suppose I've split into two really, there's the person who writes the other novels, and then there's the person who works on the Revolution, and in many ways I regret not having been a historian. My editor said to me recently, 'well I think you ought to face it Hilary, doing the Revolution is your vocation', and I think that's possibly quite true, and she said, you know when you are working on the Revolution you are happy, when you are not working on it, you are to some degree unhappy, so why keep protesting? I think I just have to recognize this is not something I never will leave behind.

INTERVIEWER: Thank you very much, it has been a real pleasure to talk to you.

MANTEL: You are very welcome.