

# WRITERS IN CONVERSATION



Writing southern spaces: or,  
Grappling with Patriarchy in  
Darkest Africa

Elleke Boehmer in  
conversation with  
Gillian Dooley and others

*Elleke Boehmer and Gillian Dooley,  
27 February 2019, Napier Building, Adelaide University*

*In early 2019, I was delighted to be invited to do a question and answer session with my friend and colleague Elleke Boehmer about her new book *The Shouting in the Dark and Other Southern Writing*, recently published by University of Western Australia Press. The conversation took place in the congenial common room in the Napier Building in the English Department at Adelaide University, South Australia. What follows is an edited transcript of the discussion, including the introduction by Dr Meg Samuelson of Adelaide University, and the audience questions towards the end. We would like to thank the questioners who we have identified for allowing us to publish their questions, and UWAP for allowing us reproduce passages from the text of *The Shouting in the Dark and Other Southern Writing*.*

**Meg Samuelson:** Thank you for joining us on this warm South Australian afternoon. I'd like to start by acknowledging that we meet today on Kurna land. We do so, of course, by virtue of a history of dispossession that, while not unique to the southern region with which are preoccupied in this seminar, might be said to define it. Negotiating the implications of this acknowledgement is – for many of us – the condition of dwelling in the south.

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It's my pleasure now to introduce Elleke Boehmer, who will read from and talk about her southern writing in dialogue with Gillian Dooley. Elleke Boehmer is professor of world literature at the University of Oxford. She is a major contributor to the field of postcolonial literary studies, in which her most recent publication is the 2018 monograph *Postcolonial Poetics*. In addition to her prodigious scholarly output, she is also the author of four novels and a collection of short fiction, and the hot-off-the-press collection *The Shouting in the Dark and Other Southern Writing*. Gillian Dooley is an honorary senior research fellow at Flinders University. She founded and for many years edited the journal *Transnational Literature* and is now the founding co-editor of *Writers in Conversation* – so she is an ideal conversationalist for this very transnational book.

**EB: I want to begin with warm thanks Meg Samuelson for chairing and facilitating this event. Thanks also to the Department of English and Creative writing for having me. Adelaide is home from home, as are this building and this department, so the opportunity to talk about this Australian edition of *The Shouting in the Dark* here is very special.**

I'd like to begin with a reading from the novel, and, as an opener to that, some scene-setting. *The Shouting in the Dark* is a father-daughter story, a family story, and a story of growing up, of political awakening. It is also importantly a story of southern inhabitation, of inhabiting the dispossessed lands of the southern hemisphere. As came to me in the process of writing, the shape of the story traces the arc of the Indian Ocean. That is, it touches down at certain key points on an arc that takes us from Durban through then Ceylon, Singapore, and the Indonesian Archipelago and then, not to give out too many spoilers, the story resolves itself after a fashion in the Timor Sea north of Darwin. That's probably enough by way of scene-setting.

Now I'm going to plunge us straight into two incidents, the first set at Victory Dam, in which Ella, one of the main characters, watches her father in cahoots with his new friend, Phineas the gardener:

On the way to the dam Phineas sits in the back seat of the car, in Ella's place. She's in the passenger seat. The whole way no one says a word but every minute of the journey she can sense him there behind her, his height blocking the light of the back window, his bony knees digging into the back of her seat. At the BP station they stop and collect an extra can of petrol. The petrol they bought last weekend sloshes untouched in the outboard tank. Again no one says a word. Again the sun beats down. When they get back into the car it's very warm. Ella thinks she can feel the heat spreading out from Phineas's body.

'That's just our garden help,' the father thumbs over his shoulder at the entrance gate to the dam. 'Come to help with a difficult engine.'

The uniformed black man at the boom throws a gloomy frown at Phineas, waves them through.

Phineas has probably never been to Victory Dam before, or any watersports resort for that matter, Ella guesses. However, he embraces the experience as if he's never done anything in his life other than launch small unseaworthy boats in dams. They park at the free area beside the marina, he spots their motorboat straightaway,

the small flat one. He points, looks at the father for confirmation, swings the outboard motor out of the boot.

'That's my boy.' The father emerges from the car at a ninety-degree angle, his fingers grasping his sides.

Phineas carries the boat into the water, his trousers rolled to the knee. He examines the steering stick, checks the starter mechanism. Ella stands at the water's edge shading her eyes, her bare toes in the mud. The snide thought comes from nowhere, taking her by surprise. How he manages it, she thinks, pretending he's in charge when he probably can't even swim.

She sees Phineas turn back to the shore, his hand resting on the motor. She waves, he doesn't. His eyes aren't looking for her. He finds the father standing on the jetty watching him, the water just wetting his shoes, the extra can of petrol in his hand. Phineas raises his arm, then leaves the boat bobbing by itself, strides through the water, bodily picks up the father, strides out again, plants him on the motorboat seat still holding the petrol can. There and back in an instant. Then, lightly, so lightly the boat hardly rocks, he vaults up, levers himself in behind him. He is sitting in the bottom of the boat, his head and shoulders just visible, the peaks of his knees.

To start the outboard motor, the ripcord must be pulled out to its fullest extent, again and again. The father could never have done it by himself. Phineas twists back, then leans far forwards like a rower, twice, three, four times. Finally, with a throaty cough, as if recovering itself, the boat shoots out across the dam, its comical round stern lifted out of the waves, pointed to the surrounding hills, the shirts of the two skippers billowing like spinnakers.

For an hour Ella watches the two of them, the father and Phineas, trace white circles on the glittery surface of Victory Dam, a few widening loops in one direction and then a figure of eight and a few loops in the other direction. Round and round they go as if it was the best lark in the world, as if there were two and not just one teenage boy in the boat acting silly. Once she sees them stop for Phineas to refill the outboard tank. The boat rocks crazily. The second time they stop it is dead close to the shore, the petrol's all used up.

She waits for the waves to push them far enough in, then wades out to drag them to the jetty. The father looks about as windswept and pleased with himself as Phineas. He's experiencing discomfort, she can tell, he's white about the eyes, but his lips aren't tightly pulled. As for Phineas, she glances at him only long enough to check that it's exactly as she thought—he has eyes only for her father. (pp. 196-197)

The second involves a younger Ella learning about the outside world, the world beyond her garden:

At home there are no opportunities to learn Zulu, only English from Dad. Because they are Dutch, that is, foreign and civilised, the mother and the father don't employ a black servant. Irene is fresh out of Holland, fresh off the boat, people say. She's all high colour, long arms, long gangly legs. In her few years in South Africa the foreign hasn't yet rubbed off her. She says she wants it to stay that way. Charley doesn't count as a servant, in her opinion, because he works outdoors.

The mother likes Charley. Some mornings she drinks her coffee with him out in the kitchen yard. Early on, she asked him questions about the ins and outs of gardening in this hot, sticky strip of coastal South Africa. Charley mostly advised her to avoid overwatering the flowers, especially down here within the rain-belt of the African shield. More recently, they've moved on to talking about his family, his hopes for the future. He often mentions his many aunts, his mother's sisters, how all of them are teachers. He confides that someday he aims to become a teacher like his aunts. As Charley and Mam talk, Ella hangs about behind the windy-drier listening, dangling her skipping rope.

One morning the father catches the mother in the act, the misjudgement, stupidity, trespass, he doesn't quite know how to put it – With Charley standing by, shuffling, still holding his coffee mug, the father spells out to the mother in Dutch, right here in the yard, that whites in Africa don't consort with natives, no, not even when they're good workers like Charley and aged just eighteen.

'In this country it isn't for blacks to aim high. That's the country's strength. It's for the white to aim high. Blacks can't aim high, they don't have the mental power. Charley is being plain *brutaal* drinking coffee with his Madam. Cheeky, Irene, *brutaal*, setting himself above his station. Don't encourage him.'

The mother puts her hands on her hips and puffs out her cheeks but makes no reply. Ella keeps out of sight behind the windy-drier.

At the end of the month, the father releases Charley from his employment. 'Self-respecting Europeans should avoid relying on black labour,' he says. (pp. 11-12)

**GD:** These two readings echo the father's ambivalence (or change of mind) about black servants – in the first, from later in the novel, the father is consorting happily with Phineas, while in the second, early in the novel, he reproves the mother for talking to Charlie. But of course in both cases the daughter's relationship with the black servants has to be within her, has to be unacknowledged. Charlie is the big brother she has always wanted, Phineas is the sort of love interest, but then she is rejected in favour of the father. There are so many tensions there.

**EB:** Yes, it was interesting to read those two passages in non-chronological order; it threw up some of those contrasts. Throughout, it was challenging and exciting to centre Ella in her body, certainly in the first scene that I read, in her body desiring Phineas in the context that she inhabited at the time.

**GD:** That scene at the dam is very confronting. That was, in a way, one of the most shocking scenes in the novel, for me. There's also the scene where Ella and Phineas confront each other in the little garden nook or shed, and he says stop liking me, this liking me is not good for me. But also we get the use of language. That slight distancing – that use of 'the' father and 'the' mother instead of her mother and her father. Which makes me think about the point of view of this book. Because it's basically focalised through Ella, the daughter, as she grows up, but every now and then it seems to step back and you even get 'the daughter' a couple of times.

**EB: The tough thing in a conversation like this is to talk about the language and the characterisation both from the inside and the outside of the work, speaking as both a writer and a critic. It's tough to speak as a critic of my own fiction, to take a position on the language and so on because some of that has inevitably come as part of the process of writing and hasn't been reflected on critically.**

For those who don't yet know the book – you're obviously all going to queue up at Dymocks after this, as it's now available in an Australian edition! – there's a triangular relation at the very heart of the novel between the protagonist Ella and her mother and her father. Setting it up as I did was an experiment, and I'm still not to this day convinced that it quite comes off, it's always the thing that people touch on, they talk about how it alienated or affronted them. However, I did take the conscious decision to distance the father and the mother, to as it were stretch that central triangular relationship as far as it would go by speaking of the father and the mother throughout using the definite article, 'the mother' and 'the father', so never 'Father' or 'Mother' and rarely 'her father' or 'her mother'. Taking away the 'her' and putting in 'the' meant that they were always in some way inhabiting generic roles rather than roles in relation to her. Sometimes it was really difficult to pull off, it really messed with the grammar of English, to do it. There's a construction in Dutch – the language that hovers just under the English in this novel – where you can do that more easily, especially if you're speaking somewhat snidely or sarcastically: 'O, de vader denkt of doet zo', but that doesn't really exist in the English novelistic vernacular.

**GD:** I did wonder about that. I wondered if there was an echo of the other language there.

**EB:** And that's not the only place where it happens. I wanted at certain points to create the sense in the reader that – and again it was a bit of a risk (I'm glad I did it but I'm not sure that it is one hundred percent successfully executed, but then what is?), I did want that sense of English as being in translation at certain points in this book, certainly in the opening scenes where Ella inhabits a kind of translated state, or is living in translation.

**GD:** And of course she writes her first poem and it insists on being in Dutch.

**EB:** Even though she wants to try to write it in English.

**GD:** Ella as a writer – Ella develops into a writer herself and she finds that writing is a way of stepping back out of this really rather horrible situation she's in with her parents: 'Writing, she notices, fuels her courage, dulls her sense of danger.' And 'Everything is at a distance but everything at the same time is under her control'. So the writing becomes a way of dealing with this situation which she's found herself in. And that made me think about the ways that children must cope in dysfunctional families. How do children who don't have that kind of release, how do they manage?

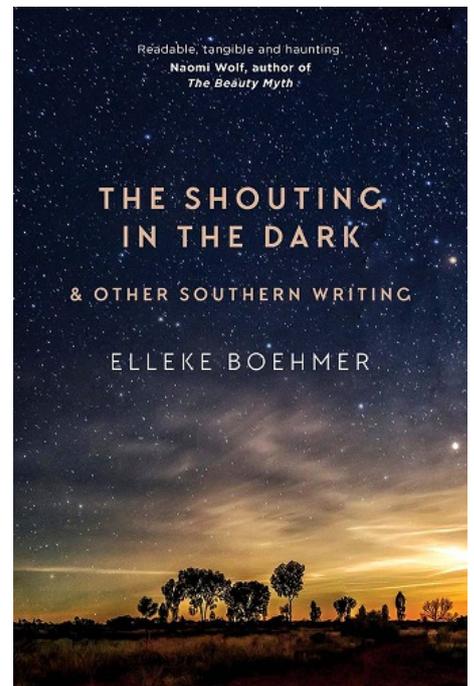
**EB:** The scene which you've just quoted is taken from a situation of extreme turbulence for Ella. It's not only that she is in a situation where she can't cope with her mother's hysteria, if I can put it that way as a shorthand; she is also in a situation where there is in fact an electrical storm going on and they are in fact airborne. So writing gives a measure of control. Of course

it's a complete illusion because if you're up in an aeroplane in the sky, there's no way that writing is going to save you from a fatal turbulence that might hit you – but, nonetheless, writing gives her an illusion of shaping something, it gives this stilling, centring sense to her that she can master at least this. It's a minimal sense of mastery and yet there's this sense within this space – I can manage.

And again it was interesting not only to write that, to reflect on writing while writing that, but then also, a few scenes later, to put Ella in a situation where she's writing for and on behalf of her father, in which he becomes a kind of writing mentor to her and instructs her to write in certain ways, even though she's always pulling against that; as it were trying to assert her province as against his. Self-reflexively – writers are inevitably self-reflexive, I guess – it was very interesting to write this, to take a line for a walk, or several lines for a walk, through the novel; to think about the writer in formation, the writer learning her craft. The writer learning her craft here not so much from reading, which is of course important – the reading experience always provides a very important tutorial for any writer – but also from the sheer act of writing, the graft of pushing the pen across the page, or indeed typing, as in that other scene that I just mentioned. That physical activity is itself a shaping of space; the space of the sentence to begin with.

**GD:** Do you want to talk about the title, *The Shouting in the Dark*? You can explain who's shouting – it's a fabulous image, but it kind of links to the fact that she always used to be the best reciter and she used to win all the Eisteddfods for reciting poetry and then someone else wins and she loses – she comes second – and on that night she goes and listens to her father doing his shouting in the dark and thinks, does he have word shapes in his head like she does when she chants poetry. So there's that fellow feeling at that moment – he's such a dark, difficult, intractable character but then she has these moments of communion or at least linking with him.

**EB:** OK, just on the title, *The Shouting in the Dark*. Again there's that definite article that I had to think about carefully. I did want it to be a particular shouting – that shouting in the dark. I'm not going to rationalise about it too much but there was a lot washing around for me about a Kurtz-like great mouth speaking, as in *Heart of Darkness*, a great masculine voice booming forth its truths or lies – that was there. And then there was also this aspect of performance. Again, this doesn't give too much away, but the Dutch title of this novel is *Op de veranda* or *On the Verandah*, and I think that's kind of spot on. The verandah is a stage, a performance space, a space for the father's performances, his shouting. So the father who suffers from what we now call post-traumatic stress disorder, when drunk he begins to sound off at invisible interlocutors, companions from the past, enemies, he begins to shout at these people from the verandah. So you see another image washing around was not only the great open mouth talking into the African darkness – this is a literal darkness because he does this



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at night – but it was also that idea of the verandah as a stage.

The verandah lifted from the earth, open to the outside, is so much a feature of the settler/colonial/southern home, as we all here know. That area of coolness, or rim around an interior space, that transition point between inside and outside and dark and light – it is also a proscenium. It's the space from which in the southern African context, on farms and so on, the servants would be paid, people would line up. So I was interested in working with that idea of the father performing – putting it in modern terms – performing his trauma to the darkness. So there was the voice, there was the open mouth, there was the night time, there was the starry sky of course, and then the stage of the verandah. The father there needs to feel that he's alone, or talking to friends from the old days when they drop by. Were he to be aware of his daughter listening in, as she does, it would be an inhibiting force for him. She is only able to tune into what he is saying by snooping, by eavesdropping, by being on the edge, as it were offstage but within the ambit of the voice.

As all of that will have suggested, returning to the title, it had to be *the* shouting – it was his particular shouting. I thought for a while about 'Shouting in the Dark'. In fact people who don't know the novel and simply mention the title in passing, do tend to drop the first 'the'. But I wanted a particular kind of announcing and denouncing suggested with 'The shouting in the dark'. I've already mentioned darkness and the heart of darkness and so on, but should perhaps also say that the dark bit is equally as important as the shouting bit. I owe the title itself, though, to my younger son who aged eleven came up with it. The elder son said that the novel might be entitled 'Grappling with Patriarchy in Darkest Africa'. I said no! That's not the title of a novel! Then the younger son said, then it might be *The Shouting in the Dark*.

**GD:** Well he did go to an ACLALS conference when he was four weeks old (as related in the essay 'The other side of the world and a piece of home', included in this book). The darkness, that's another interesting concept, because of course there's the light which is so important as well. That comes up in the peripheral essays, as much as anything, the southern light. The southern-ness and the particular light which we can see through those rather dirty windows. Which is of a different nature to the northern light. It's interesting to think of that as something that unites the southern hemisphere. I hadn't really thought of it before, but I was in Mauritius recently and I thought yes, this light is so different to other sorts of light, but it's recognisably a southern light. And then of course your trip to Rio, which is a delightful essay about your first trip – or is it Ella – no hang on, that's a non-fiction essay, right?

**EB:** Yes. Maybe it might be helpful to talk about as I see it the two axes in the novel. The one was very clear from the beginning as the axis around which the narrative turns and the other one became apparent by and bye. I've already referred to it as the arc of the Indian Ocean. The other one became apparent through the writing process and subsequently. The first axis is a north-south axis. Another way of talking about this book is to talk about it as a migrant story, because it's a story about white migrants and their southern hemispheric experiences. The mother in the novel keeps being pulled back to her European roots. There's that pull of family in the other country left behind, that all migrants feel, the pull of family deaths and disasters and having go home. That is a situation that works itself out in this novel too. So in the novel there's quite a bit of travelling up and down the lines of longitude, if you like,

connecting the European sub-continent with the southern African sub-continent. The mother and the daughter shuttle along this axis. There's the moment that always happens just as they're about to leave whichever place it is, whether Africa or Europe, when the atmospheric pressures start to change and there's a certain pull in the opposite direction yet also a pull back, the desire to stay wherever you are rather than to be shunted to the other place yet again; so there's that push-pull that kind of works itself out right the way through. North Atlantic-South Atlantic worlds play themselves out there, on this mother-daughter axis. But then there's this other axis, the father's axis that has a much more latitudinal dimension, bearing the shape of that Indian Ocean arc. This one required more research.

Touching on your interesting confusion between this person sitting here, Elleke, and Ella in the novel – unfortunately I wasn't privy in the same way Ella is to the father's background. She has access to that through the shouting in the dark on the verandah at night. So I had to do quite a lot of research on the activities of the father's British Eastern Fleet in the Indian Ocean after Singapore falls in 1942. The British Eastern Fleet gets cut off from the communications that link the British Navy in other parts of the world during the Second World War. Little known is the fact that Norwegian, Netherlands Dutch and Polish destroyers were part of the British Navy at large at that time. These are buried histories, they've not really been written up unless in dusty tomes tabulating the details of all the ships of the British Fleet. I looked at newspaper cuttings from Darwin papers during the war, from Geraldton newspapers, and that's how I dug out some of the history that plays itself out along the father's Indian Ocean axis in the novel. And that became another tension again of how we excavate what is invisible in the archive, how we give it voice, and then also how we plausibly discover it in a novel. As in a detective story, a big question was, how was Ella going to find that out? How was she going to dig up her father's secrets and work out the secrets of his past?

**GD:** Because there wouldn't have been the communication between them.

**EB:** There wasn't the communication, other than what she eavesdrops upon. So that was interesting to do. To some extent I had to resort to Dickensian coincidence and chance. And then, as you were mentioning the Rio bit – as I was doing my research and thinking about those different axes, it became clear to me that so much of my life had played out across those different both shorter and longer southern arcs. That's what I think about in those occasional pieces in the Australian edition, those 'southern writings' – four sketches, and a preface and an afterword – in which I map some of those further southern journeys. There's one in particular that you thought might be interesting for people to hear. It's a different voice than that in the novel. The sketch is called 'In Rio.' Yes, it's an autobiographical piece, about the only time I've been to South America to date, about this wonderful chance, this lucky experience where I found myself in Rio aged only just 17, with a couple of other students around my age:

Everywhere were sunbathers lying out on the sand and surfers trotting out into the waves winding their way among the bathers and skateboarders threading their own winding paths along the wavy paving and among the painted wooden kiosks selling

guarana in coconut-shell cups. Guarana gave a lovely lit-up feeling, like Coca-Cola, but tastier. I drank lots of it, and skimped on food.

Like puppies we lay side by side on the sand and the others flirted in an aimless way but I felt too distracted to participate. We skipped in the waves and swam a little and watched bathers wearing almost nothing but jewellery and trainers stretching and bending with the help of the exercise equipment set up right there on the beach. I say 'we', but the young Indian woman Sushila who was part of our group, also from Durban, did not wear a swimsuit and did not swim. She did though sit out with us on the sand and giggled helpfully when the boys made jokes. She was the only brown person among us and she did not expose her skin.

Later, when the sun began to set over the tall beach hotels behind us, the others drifted away to find food. I stayed on. I bought another coconut cup of guarana and watched the light softly dimming over the sea and the surfers paddling further out, in quest of bigger waves, and the volleyball players come out to play, once the sand underfoot had cooled.

I walked along the beach in my bikini feeling the warm air move over my shoulders and the icing-sugar sand crunching underfoot. I did not worry for a moment about showing too much skin or flesh because everyone else here was almost naked too, though not as pale. They were not as white. In fact, they were not white all.

In the course of that day, wandering about in my bikini on the beach in Rio, tingly with guarana, I had discovered my colour. The sunshine, the heat, the stimulating drink, the other bodies out there on the beach, across that day these things had worked together to expose my whiteness. Suddenly, looking down at my arms and my legs among people of all colours, all of them welcome on the beach, unlike at home, all smooching, joshing, playing, paddling together, unlike at home, I saw for the first time I was a colour, a strange, sun-blotched white colour, blinding white, almost as white as the sand. And I wished I could trade this colour for something else, a colour that blended.

**GD:** Thinking about North and South – I have to mention the polar bear – the northern creature in captivity.

**EB:** Tell them about the polar bear, Gillian.

**GD:** In the novel, there's a polar bear in the zoo in the Netherlands. In a very small cage. And every time her mother takes her to the zoo – Ella insists on being taken to the zoo every time she goes to the Netherlands, and crying because of this polar bear, but she must go back and visit every time. And there's something about this archetypal northern creature that seems to draw out all those sympathies in Ella, and I wonder if there's something about – the northern creature that is the father also confined – self-confined almost.

**EB:** It's interesting how certain things come to insist themselves upon your awareness as you're writing, and that was one of the things that pressed itself upon me, the polar bear. I was interested in playing with that image, the picture of the polar bear, a great big northern creature, an ice bear (in Dutch the word for polar bear is ijsbeer), under pressure from the

melting ice. I was thinking about all those connotations as I was writing. In fact the scene was far behind me in the actual chronology of writing the novel, when suddenly I realised that the polar bear was the dad. It loomed out of left field that the father was a great, caged northern creature.

**Dorothy Driver:** And was the little girl happy that he was in that cage?

**EB:** No, she was very very upset that the polar bear was in the cage.

**DD:** So there's no underlying pleasure? Can I just ask – when you were talking about your sons naming this book, and one son said 'grappling with patriarchy' – that's wonderful – and the other said 'the shouting in the dark', and earlier you were talking about the shouting as the father's, so I just wanted to be sure about it – so did your son mean that it was your shouting?

**EB:** No. The great mouth shouting is always the father's mouth.

**DD:** I'm just wondering if there's another shouting.

**EB:** No, there isn't. It's (as we used to say in the eighties) a monologic shouting – the father's shouting.

**DD:** It's odd to call a piece of writing by the shouting of another person rather than the ... well not odd, but interesting.

**EB:** We could say, it's the outing of the shouting.

**GD:** It's about his shouting, though. The shouting is the subject.

**EB:** It's about dealing with the shouting. As anyone knows who's grown up with a family member who is consumed by an un-slakable anger, that boiling bushfire force in a family, you have to take a position vis-a-vis their shouting ...

**DD:** I was wondering if there was a boiling anger in Ella as well.

**EB:** There is a boiling anger in Ella, there is. Her anger rises to meet his in the writing. Writing, I began to see how Ella gets the measure of herself in relation to her father, and, yes, through finding her father's voice in her. That was actually for me the most worrying part and I've not yet worked out quite how deep it goes, probably very deep – I mean the way in which she finds that despite all her efforts to place that voice at a distance, to see it as on a stage, to eavesdrop but always to describe a distance between herself and it, nonetheless that voice is, as Gillian was saying when she was referring to Ella not winning the recitation competition, related to hers. There are many such scenes in the novel.

**DD:** But that makes it really hard to be both the writer and critic.

**EB:** Yes, very hard.

**Rebekah Pooley:** I have a question about writing and languages. You were saying about trying to mirror Dutch. It's very interesting to me because I grew up in Indonesia and when I try to speak of my Indonesian experiences I sometimes have to use an Indonesian word because there isn't an equivalent in English. So I was interested in how you were trying to mirror the Dutch language but in English, and whether there were also other techniques you used to convey the sense of another language and therefore another worldview.

**EB:** I do various things, I have learned these things from other writers as well as doing a certain mirroring of my own, because I've never not been bilingual, except for probably when I was first learning language, when I was learning Dutch, the main language that I have other than English. The things I do include using words from that language mixed into the English, and sometimes including a translation or a kind of translation and sometimes not. Sentence structure was also a rich way of pointing to this other language, pretty much all the way through. The other thing to say is that Ella has synaesthesia about these different languages, different languages have different colours for her and different textures, and Dutch is spongy and beige and pale, and English is smooth and red and purple. That was interesting to do. But I know what you mean about not having that particular referent, that particular word for that particular thing from that particular world.

**RP:** Given that you were trying to create a Dutch flavour, why did you not write it in Dutch and then translate it, why English first?

**EB:** Because since about the age of 20 or so I've written everything I've written in English. It's the language I was educated in. Dutch is a language of the heart and English is the language of ... somewhere else. I worked very closely with the Dutch translator of *Op de veranda* that I mentioned earlier. It was a frustrating process for him just as much as for me because I kept wanting to intervene and 'do it better', and thank goodness I knew the language, because there were some things he just didn't know experientially. For example, he didn't know what it was to inhabit a hot climate, so there were some things he got completely wrong. He translated 'humid', as in 'humid Durban', as moist and cold.

**Jennifer Rutherford:** I'm really interested in the idea of English as red and purple – hot, passionate colours. Can you explain that a little bit more?

**EB:** I don't think that synaesthesia can be rationalised, especially in the sense that English in this novel is not a native tongue, but acquired. It's also in a dominant relationship as a language, so if we do want to reason about it we could think of red and purple as dominant colours, strong dominant colours, that might be going on. To be honest I've given Ella my own synaesthesia but I've made it stronger in her. It's hard to rationalise how it works. Cognitive scientists say that the sensory organs of smell and touch and the linguistic areas of the brain are very close together so that's why some people have strong synaesthesia. Similar things happen with music.

**Meg Samuelson:** I'd like to ask about southness. I'm interested in this question of what it means to dwell in the south, whether there is a southern aesthetic, what it means to write the

south. It really struck me that the two pieces you read from, that both were young characters – one is that girl that you partially overlap with and the other in your own voice – and that the fact of your dwelling in the south is coterminous with the time of youth. And I wonder how that inflects the vision? Whether it is a nostalgic one, whether there are things that you can see through that nostalgia that you can't see if you are in the south permanently, and whether that's been enabling or disabling for you?

**EB: Yes. I do worry about southern nostalgia a lot, even, I suppose, if I'm brutally honest, if it sustains me in the dark winter days of the northern hemisphere, sufferer from SAD syndrome as I am. At the same time I think that the question of southness, whether there's something that we can generalise across such vast spaces, as I try to do in the southern sketches included in the Australian edition, this question remains open. And if we do generalise in this way, what are leaving out of the picture, what are we over-homogenising? Speaking in my other role, as somebody concerned about marginality, I have grave worries about this, specifically about who gets excluded by this nostalgia. I don't want to go too far with my southern musings therefore, because of the danger of indulging in nostalgia, and because this kind of generalising has its coercive aspects. In fact I've been rediscovering in the last few weeks that there have other southern projects in the past decades that have fostered disturbing forms of settler solidarity, brotherhood, and male fellowship, such as you find with the sports in which the southern Anglo nations so succeed, like rugby for example. At the Perth Festival there was in this regard a brilliant Randolph Stow memorial lecture given by Andrew Lynch who reminded us all that we are here on these lands by virtue of the mass murder of many many millions. I think the kind of southern experience I would want to think about would have to be predicated on that, I would have to recognise that.**

**Nick Jose:** Can I just come at this conversation from a slightly different angle. I'm very interested in this too. The kiss in Rio goes right back to that beautiful phrase at the opening about the lip of the Indian Ocean, which is a very intimate and humanising conception of the Indian Ocean from that particular vantage point, and as you've just been in Perth where there's also the Indian Ocean, I can't think of any Australian conception of the Indian Ocean which is remotely like that. It's the furthest horizon, it's an edge, it's not human, and the only thing I could think of is Randolph Stow in *The Merry Go Round in the Sea* where the boy looks at the sea and thinks of the Japanese coming, it's just so different. So my question is, can you venture a difference between the Southern African southernness and the Australian southernness? It's even interesting that Andrew Lynch giving that lecture – maybe that's the Australian perspective on this, that it's not nostalgic, or it's not bodily even in the Rio way, but just a comparison if you can venture something.

**EB: I mean, I viscerally agree with – chime in with – everything you've said there, Nick. I only very recently visited Western Australia for the first time and saw the Indian Ocean from the vantage point of Australia. It was a very – not to overstate the matter nor to sentimentalise it – it was a very profound moment for me, a very particular moment, and I'm still processing it. It only happened in the last week and I'm still trying to work out what to do with it.**

**GD:** The photos are still on Facebook.

**EB:** And the ocean was exactly as blue as I remembered it – so there's a nostalgic bit – but it wasn't close by. Of course, that may just have to do with the point from which I saw the sea. It was Cottesloe Beach, which is quite small, and you have to drive there. It doesn't have the amplitude of some of the beaches I know well in Southern African or indeed Copacabana Beach for that matter, and so you don't need to walk or drive too far to immerse and be immersed. That's the thing that I think of here, though I'm still working it through. I'll try to fall back on a literary, textual reference. I think it's in Tim Winton's *Land's Edge* – these short pieces on his Western Australianness, even his Western Australian patriotism as I would call it, playing it safe. He has this image of the Indian Ocean, with which he has an intimate relationship of course, and he describes it as 'blue all the way to Africa'. It's something of a troubling image actually, that sense of a connection with a generalised, almost romanticised, Africa. This startled me when I first read it and again on re-reading it. Actually, from the point of view of Durban, the Indian Ocean does somehow come into the port, and not just Durban but that entire coast, it washes it. But these are first impressions. It was though wonderful to feel the Indian Ocean on my skin in Perth.

**Q:**<sup>1</sup> This is just a by-the-bye comment, but going back to the first reading about Phineas saying stop liking me, immediately in my mind I leapt to the play *Mies Julie*.

**EB:** The reworking of the Strindberg?

**Q:** *Mies Julie* the play. But I leapt immediately to that actual statement, and it made me shiver for a minute. But I thought, what does it mean? What is Phineas actually saying? And what could it be implying? Not from what you've been writing but what could it be implying in terms of other situations happening as we read about them in South Africa from all sorts of sources. It made me goosebump when you read it.

**GD:** It's quite resonant, isn't it? That this relationship which would be so natural for these two young people to have just can't happen.

**EB:** Not only can't it happen because of the law of the land, but it can't happen because she would be – she's making herself very open to him, but it can't happen from his point of view, too, because he has other things he wants to do.

**Q:** And how differently it is in *Mies Julie*.

**EB:** Thanks for that echo. I've seen that version and I remember the scene in which that is said.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> We have been unable to identify this questioner, but invite her to contact us if she would like to make herself known.

<sup>2</sup> *Mies Julie*, adapted from August Strindberg's *Miss Julie*. Written & directed by Yaël Farber.  
<http://www.yfarber.com/mies-julie>

**GD:** After the text and before the four essays there's a wonderful interview between these two ladies (EB and MS) and one of the things that Elleke says in the conversation with Meg is that 'it was extraordinarily difficult for me to write the father, very tough, though I began with resentment I ended up with a kind of grudging respect, even tenderness. It was a zigzag path.' But I mean that's fascinating, because the characterisation is really tough. The narrator doesn't give the father much, just a hint every now and then, and of course there's obviously a past that we can see only obscurely. The writing of that must have been really challenging.

**EB:** It was interesting. I did realise in the writing of it that the narrator of course has almost full control. So this very controlling character, i.e. the father, was in the control of the narrator, and I always knew as narrator that I was going to kill him. It gave me such pleasure, leading up to the moment. I spun it out, I even wrote some extra scenes which never got into the novel. Oh, it was great to do. Do some of you know *The Man who Loved Children*, the Christina Stead novel? The daughter is called Louie, the mother is Henrietta? Anyway, this is a spoiler and I must say sorry to Christina Stead, this is one of the greatest novels of the twentieth century. Anyway, in *The Man who Loved Children*, Louie plots to kill the father, and ends up making mistake and, well, killing the mother, poisoning the mother, instead. With Christina Stead in mind, I thought, OK, I'm going to get it right, on behalf of my character Ella and on behalf of Christina Stead and Louie, I'm going to get it right, I'm going to kill the father. And on the day that I wrote his death scene I was so upset, it all – there was no joy in it. I felt very very sad.

**GD:** Mmm. But 'never forget'.

**EB:** Yes indeed, 'never forget'. 'Never regret, never forget'. Gosh, that's a bit of a dampener. Shutting up the shouting in the dark.

**MS:** Please join me in thanking Elleke and Gillian ...