



WRITERS IN CONVERSATION



In Conversation with Catherine Cole

Jaydeep Sarangi

Catherine Cole is currently Professor of Creative Writing in the Faculty of Law, Humanities and the Arts, University of Wollongong, NSW, Australia. In March 2017, she will take up the position of Professor in Creative Writing at Liverpool John Moores University in Liverpool, UK. Catherine has published three novels, Dry Dock (1999) and Skin Deep (2002) and The Grave at Thu Le (2006), two non-fiction books, Private Dicks and Feisty Chicks: An Interrogation of Crime Fiction (1996) and The Poet Who Forgot (2008). She is the editor of the anthology, The Perfume River: Writing from Vietnam (2010) and co-editor with McNeil and Karaminas of Fashion in Fiction: Text and Clothing in Literature, Film and Television (2009). Her poetry, short stories, essays and reviews have been published in Australia and internationally and broadcast produced by BBC Radio 4. In 2017 Catherine's short story collection, Sea Birds Crying in the Harbour Dark, will be published by UWA Press.

This interview was done through e mail.

J.S.: Would you please tell us about your early childhood days and parentage?

C.C.: My parents are British migrants and they and my older brother and sister, travelled to Australia after the Second World War. I was the first child born in Sydney. I had a very happy childhood. I had many cousins and we were always making up very imaginative games. We were ruffians and our parents left us alone all day to climb trees, make cubby houses and generally get into mischief. I loved to read and devoured books, which my little sister and I often acted out. I also started writing my own stories very young – my father helped this along when he gave me an old typewriter. My parents always gave us books as gifts and had brought lots of books from the UK so our house was a reader's paradise and the local library was very good too.

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I remain of the view that reading shaped my life and my future passion for being a writer. To paraphrase from George R.R. Martin's *A Dance with Dragons*, we all live a thousand lives through the books we read and people who don't read live only one.

Nothing charges the imagination more actively than a good book, with great characters and story line. I am grateful for my early introduction into the world of books and especially the young adult fiction by Australian writers like Ivan Southall, Nan Chauncy, and Ethel Turner who showed me how exciting my own country was.

J.S.: You are multi-faceted. An academic, a prominent critic, reviewer, biographer, editor, fictionist, novelist and poet. How do you manage so many genres and streams?

C.C.: I like to write in all forms because a single approach never seems to serve my ideas. A poem is often the most appropriate form of expression for an idea whereas a long novel offers a more meandering and reflective opportunity. I feel I move well through these different approaches, including my academic essays. Publishers don't always like it though – it's an expectation these days that you fit a single angle. I resist that. Writing is its own director as far as I'm concerned and I like to let the idea take shape in whichever form suits it best.

To date I have written lots of poetry, crime fiction (*Dry Dock*, *Skin Deep*), memoir (*The Poet Who Forgot*), literary fiction (*The Grave at Thu Le*) and academic writing (*Private Dicks and Feisty Chicks*). I have edited a couple of books (*The Perfume River: Writing from Vietnam* and *Fashion in Fiction*). My next book is a short story collection, *Sea Birds Crying in the Harbour Dark*, which will be published by UWA Press in 2017.

J.S.: How did you see the French colonialism in Vietnam in *The Grave at Thu Le*?

C.C.: I was fascinated by French colonialism when I first visited Vietnam in 1994 at the prompting of a journalist friend. She knew I was a Francophile and thought I would find Hanoi's 'Frenchness' fascinating. I thought Hanoi was assertively Vietnamese but I also liked the French architecture and other colonial legacies, though not the repressive rule that ended in 1954. Slowly I began to write prose poems about it and then the novel, *The Grave at Thu Le*, took shape. I researched it in Hanoi and also in Paris and Aix en Provence where the French colonial archives are kept. I have been back to Hanoi many times. I love the country and its people and as someone who protested against the Vietnam War in my youth, I am pleased that the Vietnamese people have achieved independence, peace and prosperity.

J.S.: *The Perfume River— Writing from Vietnam* (2010) is again about Vietnam. What makes you so fascinated with Vietnam?

C.C.: The Vietnam War shaped my youth and adolescence and seared the country into my consciousness. The war also seemed to be one Australia wished to forget and the soldiers who fought there experienced a great deal of distress about this. So that combination of war protest,

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conscription, fleeing refugees, remembering and forgetting led to a potent and fascinating mix. The French had been through something similar after their defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954.

I was pleased to visit Hanoi in 1994 and have been to the country many times since, including for Asialink writers' residencies. Vietnam seems to me to be a country which demonstrates how a hard won independence also offers a range of literary and cultural responses, hence the anthology of writing about Vietnam. I should also add that one of my favourite novels in BaoNinh's *The Sorrow of War* – a remarkable book about war and its impact. I consider it one of the greatest anti war novels of the twentieth century.

J.S.: *Private Dicks and Feisty Chicks* explores the lure of crime fiction. How did you get interested in crime fiction?

C.C.: I had never been a big fan of crime fiction other than some holiday reading of Agatha Christie or Ngaio Marsh, so when a friend left some boxes of feminist crime fiction for me to mind while she travelled overseas I got very interested. This was largely because the writers and their main characters were women. They offered a whole new take on the genre and my interest – and writing about crime – sprang from that.

My research explores the ways in which crime attracts us, from the strong plot and narrative structure, the crime's ethical conundrums, the morality or ethics of crime writing, the pull of fear or of reading to scare ourselves, crime as adult fairytales. I am particularly interested in why women remain the largest number of readers of crime fiction, often of stories that are quite misogynistic. I suspect it's because they act as a form of training on how to react if confronted by a dangerous situation, much as fairytales taught children to beware of strangers.

J.S.: *The Poet Who Forgot* is a memoir about your long standing friendship with A.D. Hope. How is he different from other Australian poets?

C.C.: A.D. Hope was a classicist, a man who believed in form and style, weighty or classical topics and formal poetic approaches. These approaches at a time of experimentation and free verse stood him apart from other, more modernist poets, and he was often dismissed as old-world because of it. He also was hugely interesting in the ways in which he captured so much in his verse – humour, sadness, beauty, lewdness. He was generous too with up-and-coming younger poets whom he mentored and supported. He certainly added a great deal to Australia's poetic culture. Despite his traditional approaches he influenced generations of Australian poets and his influence is still felt today.

J.S.: Could you please tell us about your first meeting with A.D. Hope?

C.C.: I had written to A.D. Hope when I finished my university studies to thank him for his poems which I'd studied in Australian literary studies. He invited me to dinner with him and his wife, Penelope, if ever I was in Canberra. I went to dinner one night and other guests included the Australian writer and academic, David Brooks, various historians and civil servants, as well as Alec

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and Penelope. I was smitten with the Canberra literary scene after that! Alec also took it on himself to read my poetry and he offered suggestions about it. He was a very good teacher and mentor and was very helpful in his support. Other Australian poets such as David Brooks and Kevin Hart experienced this too, a kind of generosity that went beyond editing our poems but also asserted our rights to call ourselves poets.

J.S.: How did you see him as a poet?

C.C.: Some of his poems I like very much, others less so. I loved to talk about his poetry with him and he often explained the inspiration for his work. He also read all my work and offered suggestions – always kindly. I think sharing your ideas and inspiration is a wonderful thing – poetry feels full of possibility – and companionship - when you approach it like that. It was always interesting to read his work chronologically and in the context of his influences. This was a great lesson in how poets develop. His subject matter was also diverse and incorporated classical and well as Australian themes. This opened possibility to the ways in which a poet can write.

Other than that I saw him as a man who strove for perfection and who wrote what he wanted, not influenced by the modes of the day. He often referred to himself as a 'lazy' man though I saw no laziness in his commitment to his work.

J.S.: What are important thoughts in his poetry?

C.C.: Beauty, love, sexuality, humour, satire, patience, kindness, loss of hope and belief in hope. All the great themes which trouble and inspire humanity. He always seemed to be searching for new ways in which to express ideas, through classical approaches and also new ones. He often talked about his inspiration and how a view of a bird, for example, breaking away from group could become the beautifully paced 'Death of the Bird'.

J.S.: Who are the poets influenced Alec?

C.C.: He was a sponge who soaked up poetry and knew vast amounts about it. So Pope, Byron, Shelley, Keats, Yeats. He also knew the world's poets, Donne, Marvel, Lorca, Akhmatova, Neruda. There was very little about poetry he didn't know. He was the most open of poets in that he read and engaged even if he didn't like something. He rejected with knowledge and after an astute reflection. He loved to chat too about the lives of poets. He saw many of them as being a bit silly and self-destructive, this from a man who lived a quietly suburban life in Canberra, but, as you see from his poetry, he lived widely and richly in his verse.

J.S.: He was referred to in an Australian newspaper as 'the 20th century's greatest 18th-century poet'.¹ Do you subscribe to the same view?

¹ Gia Metherell, Obituary: 'Poet, teacher and fearless civiliser'. *The Canberra Times*, 14 July 2000, 13.

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C.C.: Yes, in form, style and subject matter. He was particularly good at satire and bawdy, sexualized humour. But also some of his 'plainer, simpler' more modernist poems like 'The Death of the Bird' offer something more modern than that. So I see him as a poet who could pop up in any century since the metaphysical poets of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries – always having something new to say and also deferring to the great traditions of each epoch.

J.S.: Did Alec possess three pillars in a writer, storyteller, teacher, enchanter?

C.C.: Yes, in his poetry certainly but also in his love of life. When I met him he was already old but he feasted on life. He was a great storyteller. He loved company, gossip, food and whisky. He was interested in all things and this was very fascinating for a younger generation of poets who learned from him but never felt other than an equal, such was his capacity for making a fledgling poet feel they had something to offer. That was his great skill and charm – to assist and inspire and not to patronise. He had a tough side too – in the past some of his critical reviews of poets had been very unkind. He always said he regretted those and was sorry for any hurt he caused.

J.S.: How did he influence you to write poetry?

C.C.: I had already been writing poetry for a while but he encouraged and supported and suggested publishers. He didn't suggest ideas for the poems but often referred me to poets he thought would interest me and that too was a gentle way to say, 'before you write any more, read and learn'. I still feel his influence when I write poetry, especially the need to write, reflect, set aside, read, edit, set aside. It's a very important influence and one which I share with students who rush at poetry as though it's just something you dash off.

J.S.: Who are the poets you read now?

C.C.: I read widely still, backwards and forwards in time. Reading Lorca at the moment. Always dipping into Eliot. I enjoy the work of Australia's Michelle Cahill and also Adam Aitkin. If I happen on a poet I don't know well I do a search and learn more about them and read their work. I go back time and time again to favourites – Sylvia Plath, HD, Keats, Browning, Whitman. I also enjoy meeting poets like Alice Pung and Priya Chabria.

J.S.: What are your enduring themes; issues and concerns that pre-occupy you constantly?

C.C.: Always – home and the need for refuge, memory and loss, the role the older and wiser play with shaping youthful imaginations. I suspect these ideas come from being the child of migrants who were often homesick. I write about imagined places where someone is an outsider ... the outsider theme infuses my work.

J.S.: As already informed you during my stay at Wollongong, NSW, Australia, there is a tremendous interest among Indian scholars to work on contemporary Australian authors. But

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books and journals published in Australia (though AustLit has a rich online bibliography) are very difficult to get. What is your suggestion for teachers and scholars like us?

C.C.: Write to the publisher or author direct and ask for a copy. Also, are you aware of any Indian publishers who would print Australian writers? Some of the works are available online, or through university research pages. If a book is out of print in Australia I'm sure many writers would be happy to discuss how it might be disseminated in India – I know I would.

J.S.: Are you familiar with Indian authors?

C.C.: I know Priya Chabria. I also have read Aravind Adiga, Arundhati Roy, Salman Rushdie, Manu Joseph, Rohinton Mistry, Anita Nair, Amit Chaudhuri, ... others too. I suspect my knowledge is the tip of an iceberg!

J.S.: A different question: how will you conceptualise Aboriginal, Maori and Dalit writings these days?

C.C.: That is far too big a question for me to answer, I'm afraid. I will just say that Indigenous writing is strong, assertive and necessary and that in Australia Aboriginal writers are reshaping our sense of place and self. It's exciting and timely. We have some remarkable writers including Melissa Lucachenko, Kim Scott, Tony Birch, Alexis Wright, Tara June Winch, Samuel Wagan Watson to name just a few.

J.S.: What can the function of literature be said to be? Is literature a by-product of literary movements these days?

C.C.: For me literature has always been a portal into another place – that quote I mentioned earlier – that a reader lives a thousand lives. It offers knowledge, shared experiences and new ones, characters, places, ethical conundrums, historical reflection. I also think those moments are very special when the words open to you like a mystery, so you read them out loud and ponder their beauty and complexity and you marvel and how the writer managed to construct them so perfectly, side by side. I think writers love to share ideas, with themselves, with others, in a kind of collegial space. There is nothing more wonderful than the anticipation of a good book, especially the comfort of it at the end of the day.

It seems books are even more important than ever now. The world seems to be going crazy so a book can reach out and pull as away from the edge. That to me is a wonderful social function. Ideas are important in shaping how we articulate these anxieties and books are full of them, perhaps that's why they're the first things bad people want to destroy.

J.S.: 'Poetry makes nothing happen', W.H. Auden once said famously. How do you read this axiom?

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C.C.: Well, for me poetry is something into which you fall. Like looking into a lotus. You can do all kinds of things with it, and nothing at all. Read it on the page or out loud, by yourself with others. It's much kinder and more understanding than a bomb or a gun. Nothing and everything happens in poetry. A.D. Hope said, poetry justifies our existence.

J.S.: Could you mention a few poems that represent you as a poet?

C.C.: I'm not sure that they represent me – not even my own poems do that – but I love these ones and I'm happy to read them over and over again. This is from T.S. Eliot's play *The Family Reunion* but it always attracts me as it says so much about memory.

In an old house there is always listening, and more is heard than spoken.
And what is spoken remains in the room, waiting for the future to hear it.
And whatever happens began in the past, and presses hard on the future.
The agony in the curtained bedroom, whether of birth or dying,
Gathers it to itself all the voices of the past, and projects them into the future.
The treble voices on the lawn
The mowing of hay in summer
The dogs and the old pony
...

I also have loved Edna St Vincent Millay's 'Prayer to Persephone' since I was a child:

Be to her, Persephone,
All the things I might not be;
Take her head upon your knee.
She that was so proud and wild,
Flippant, arrogant and free,
She that had no need of me,
Is a little lonely child
Lost in Hell, – Persephone,
Take her head upon your knee;
Say to her, 'My dear, my dear
It is not so dreadful here.'

I love all Cavafy's poems, I could go on and on, and I especially love hearing poets reading their own work and for that I like trawling through YouTube and just settling back to listen.

Kenneth Slessor's poem 'Five Bells' haunts me every time I cross Sydney Harbour on a ferry.

J.S.: Why do you write poems, a threatened literary species these days?

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C.C.: A poem is often the best form in which to write. No other reason really. I like the word play, rhythms and metre. I don't think poetry is threatened – people will always write it.

J.S.: Please will you share with me one of your recent poems?

C.C.: This is a short poem about embracing life and art.

LEDA

Faced with a simple truth:

You either lurch into the sea, naked as any plucked and pimpled swan

or else you stand and cringe uncouth,

maintain that sad position on the shore;

I leapt and found the water strangely warm

soft as the feathers of some youthful bird

and joy enough to float.

J.S.: Thank you, Cathy! It was all learning for me! You inspire writers for generations.



Jaydeep Sarangi is a bilingual writer, editor, interviewer, translator, author of a number of publications on postcolonial issues, Indian Writing in English, Australian Literature, marginal literatures and creative writing in reputed journals and magazines. He is a senior faculty member of the English Department, Jogesh Chandra Chaudhuri College (CU), Kolkata. He is in the editorial board of several refereed journals in different continents. Widely anthologised and reviewed as a poet and a critic of Australian Literature, he has authored five poetry collections in English and one in Bengali. With Rob Harle (from Nimbin ,NSW), he has authored four anthologies of poems from India and Australia. Recently, with Angana Dutta, he has transliterated and edited *Surviving in My World: Growing up Dalit in Bengal* (2015) which has been reviewed widely in different shores. Another pioneering anthology (with Usha Kishore), *Home Thoughts: Poems of the British Indian Diaspora*, is due in February 2017. He may be reached at: jaydeepsarangi@gmail.com

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