



# WRITERS IN CONVERSATION

## A Kind of Craziess: Susanna Moore on Women, Writing, Sex and Feminism

Maya Linden

*The closing scene of Susanna Moore's 1995 novel, In The Cut, remains one of the most shocking and powerfully written episodes of sexual violence by a contemporary female author. Narrator, Frannie Avery, watches as her breasts are sliced from her body: 'the nipple resting on the edge of the blade, the razor cutting smoothly, easily, through the taut cloth, through the skin, the delicate blue skein of netted veins in flood, the dark blood running like the dark river, the Indian river, the sycamore, my body so vivid.'<sup>1</sup> This violent description later shifts to a disengaged poetic consciousness in which Frannie's narration dissolves into quotation: 'My skirt was heavy with blood, pooled between my thighs ... it tickled when it dripped onto my skin, into my pubic hair, over the labia ... I am bleeding. I am bleeding to death ... Give me my Scallop shell of quiet.'<sup>2</sup> Moore's juxtaposition of meditative description with an account of dismemberment renders the scene so beautiful, that it is potentially hugely troubling. As one critic's response reflects, how can a presumed feminist justify producing an 'erotic story involving the matter-of-fact mutilation of women'?'<sup>3</sup>*

*It was Moore's responses to queries such as these, as well as my own ambivalent attraction to her narratives, as a woman, a writer, and a feminist, that I wanted to gain a greater understanding of by interviewing the author. As a reader of Moore's fiction, I am fascinated, as many women would be, by the representations of femininity in her novels. From The Whiteness of Bones to Sleeping Beauties, In the Cut, One Last Look and The Big Girls, it seems that the women in her novels seem to encounter certain hardships and dangers, simply because they are women.*

*Perhaps more disturbing than Moore's unapologetic depiction of sexualised attacks on the female body was my discovery, during research prior to the interview, that In the Cut is listed on Playboy's 'Top 25 "sexiest" novels of all time.' Moore acknowledges that 'it is important for a writer to understand and anticipate the response of their readers,' and that often the topics of her novels have been chosen to elicit a particular response, to change the way her writing and her identity as an author has been perceived – but is it always a desirable response? And are authors ever free of moral responsibility?*

*Moore's decision to return to the theme of women's experience so often is, according to the author, made "very consciously, very deliberately." It is, she says, a part of her own continuing exploration of femininity:*

---

1 Susanna Moore, *In the Cut* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995) 261.

2 Moore 262-7.

3 Graham Fuller and Lizzie Francke, 'Sex and Self-Danger', *Sight and Sound* 13.11 (November 2003): 16.

*I am perplexed, mystified and fascinated by what it is to be a woman. A woman in different times, different places, different circumstances. The Big Girls, for instance, is about a woman who kills her children, but it is also about the obsession with fame that causes people to identify with public figures, and a delusion of intimacy that almost always results in such trouble for people. In the same way, I wanted to show in In The Cut the subtle and constant violence that is displayed everywhere in our culture – in language; in attitudes, of course; in popular films and music. After I'd written the first draft, I inserted, wherever I could, words about death and killing – a character says, 'I laughed so hard I almost died', or 'You'll die when you hear this story'. In the Cut in particular was a reflection of my wish to show what it was to be a woman in late-twentieth-century New York; a woman alone in a dangerous city ... I very consciously tried to make it a sexy book. And, of course, if the book is about a woman exercising her power, trying to figure out who she is and refusing to be afraid, sex would be one of the things she thinks about.*

Q. Was the decision to write about sexual violence and murder in later novels an attempt to move away from stereotypes that had been established by the Hawaiian trilogy (comprising *I Myself Have Seen It*, *The Whiteness of Bones* and *Sleeping Beauties*)?

A. I was considered to be a 'women's writer', which meant that I wrote poignantly about children and flowers and mothers. And that irritated me. As a description of my work, it was circumscribing. It kept me from being categorised with the 'big boys'. I remember very consciously thinking, 'Oh really? You think that's all I can do? You think that's all that interests me, all I can write about?' It led me to want to write about sex. Women don't customarily write about sex, and few people write about sex very well. Speaking of the 'big boys', John Updike and Phillip Roth and Martin Amis, among others, write about sex in a way that I find excruciating. Before writing *In the Cut* I spent two years reading all of the erotica and pornography that I could find, in an attempt to understand what worked and didn't work. I discovered, oddly enough, that the more impersonal the prose, the more erotic the description [because] it allows the reader to impose his or her fantasies onto the text. In conventional descriptions of sex, there is a lot of simile – the emotions are described, and what things smelled and felt and tasted like – and the writing is generally awful. I decided to write about sex in the simplest way. Not describing feelings and thoughts, but the act itself in a straightforward, unembellished way.

Q. Much of your writing is quite detached and literal, but there are other times when your narrators distinctly switch to a more poetic stream-of-consciousness style. What do you reach for in juxtaposing two very different writing styles?

A. Well, there is thinking – and then there is *thinking*. There is the conscious thought, 'Did I pick up the laundry', and there is the less fully conscious thought, 'Was the delivery boy in the laundry flirting with me, and should I be worried if he carries home my dry cleaning?' There is something in writing that I call the 'hanging bridge'. And the 'hanging bridge' can be made out of all sorts of material – wicker, vines, steel struts. It is used by the writer to

connect peaks and span valleys. There are plot points or main events that need to be connected, usually by letting the reader know what the character and you, the writer, *think* about things that have happened or are going to happen.

Q. What is it that causes you to write?

A. I used to think that it was growing up in Hawaii and then I realised that it couldn't possibly be, because if that were the case there would be more Hawaiian writers. Reading, too, seemed to me for a while to be connected to my writing – but then again there are lots of people who read who don't become writers – although I know that everything I have learned about writing comes from reading. I only went to school until I was seventeen – a wonderful school in Honolulu – so my education has come almost entirely from reading, and reading was at first a refuge from my childhood.

Freud has written a little about writers and, in the end, he conceded that in trying to understand the artistic impulse, he was not successful – he lay down his arms in defeat. Freud also likened writing to daydreaming – but writing is a mysterious thing to me. I don't believe it can be taught. It's easier in some ways to discuss writing in relation to music. There are great technicians who never quite – in performance, or in concert, or in composition – make the leap to that 'thing' that would make them great musicians. So it's very tricky, and I certainly don't want to romanticise it. I don't think that writing has to do with inspiration; I don't think it has to do with suffering; I don't think it even has to do with temperament. So – what is that 'thing' that makes me a writer? I don't know. I think sometimes it's a kind of craziness.

Q. Critics, particularly feminist literary critics, have been troubled by the seemingly masochistic behaviour of your female characters (such as *In the Cut's* Frannie, who has been interpreted as a woman who seeks her own death.) What is your response to them?

A. There is a misperception about Frannie – and if readers don't see her clearly, it is my fault. Her behaviour is less motivated by masochism than by her refusal to be afraid. I grew up very conscious of my own fear. As I get older, I am impeded by things such as my strength – how fast I can run, or how fast I can think – but my behaviour, certainly as a younger woman, was often determined by my refusal to be intimidated or afraid. And of course, what is so bleak about *In the Cut* is that even when a woman makes that determination, they'll still get you. 'They' being the patriarchy, the establishment, those who hold power. So a woman might as well be brave. Not everyone agrees with that, of course – it is an idea that is understandably disturbing. It is meant to be. When *In the Cut* was published, I knew that there would be questions. I had the statistics of brutality toward women on hand. The statistics are shocking. Most women who are killed, are killed by men they know and love. Well, perhaps not love.

Q. Did you feel any apprehension about the way your readers might react?

A. Yes, of course, I thought about it. It was disappointing that people were appalled, or even worse, delighted – that horrified me – that Frannie, in their view, sought her own death ... I

do not think that Frannie is a woman who seeks her own death, although I came to see that her death was inevitable, given her refusal to compromise. Feminists, some of them friends of mine, said, 'Don't be ridiculous, you're not going to put on a see-through dress and stiletto heels and walk home at 2 o'clock in the morning – why would Frannie?' I used to argue that violence is the man's problem, not my problem, that I should be able to wear what I want and do whatever I choose. Of course you should be able to do what you want, but that is not a practical view. To refuse to accommodate the strictures of society, whether or not you approve of them or accept them, and to ignore what reality requires of you, what *statistics* require of you, is irresponsible.

Q. What level of responsibility do we have to women and to feminism in our writing and understanding of femininity in fiction? Are masochistic female characters detrimental to the achievements of feminism?

A. Feminine masochism is not a condition that is much admitted anymore. It's not just that it's unfashionable, but that it's unacceptable. I wish there were more written about it – masochism is a very interesting and important aspect of being female. Recently I was teaching a class at Princeton, in which a young woman wrote a piece about anal intercourse. I was surprised that everyone in the class, both boys and girls, read it as a story about rape, except for the writer and me. I asked them why they saw it as rape, and they said it was because the boy persisted, despite the fact that the girl at first resisted. I asked them if they did not think it was perhaps part of the dance that can occur between a man and a woman – genuine on the part of the woman because she may be shy or afraid or uncertain, but also because the woman's resistance is erotic – it gives her power. They just looked at me. They had no understanding of the concept that masochism in sex can be a kind of play-acting, a replication of the relationship between men and women that is going on every second of the day.

---

*Moore's characters, like her critics, often seem ambivalent, and divided, double voiced, double discoursed – aware, as they are, of the sometimes problematic intersection of fictional identities and social reality. In the Cut's Frannie is aware, she anticipates, and speaks back: 'I know that. The difference between male and female perversion. The action of the man is directed toward a symbol, not himself. The woman acts against herself,' she states, as if replying directly to Freud's writings on Femininity, but 'I am not a masochist. I know this.'*<sup>4</sup>

*In The Feminine Sublime: Gender and Excess in Women's Fiction, Barbara Freeman proposes that many misreadings of novels, such as Moore's, have occurred because critics view what might be considered masochistic female protagonists 'as either exclusively passive, as society's victim, or as an accomplice of the economy that excludes her,' without considering the ways in which these characters might in fact shift and expand our understanding of the nature*

---

<sup>4</sup> Moore 188.

*of literary agency, through their very confrontation with the limits of the representable.<sup>5</sup> After speaking with Moore, I began to consider that, perhaps, as readers and critics we need to become more expansive in our analysis of literature, in order to understand characters such as these in the way that Freeman describes, as 'subjects who exert will, even at the cost of self-destruction, and thus not merely as victims who are acted upon.'<sup>6</sup> Potentially disturbing representations of femininity are not 'dangerous' as such or a purported threat to the achievements of feminism, precisely because of their literary nature. They are instead contributions to an essential element of the pleasure of writing and reading – the part that can confront us with otherness, confound our view of the world, and educate our emotions. They are opportunities to explore and inhabit fleetingly, alternative subjectivities, those that differ from our own. As Moore concluded: 'I don't think that books should be polemical. The role of the writer is to render the world, not alter it.'*

---

**Maya Linden** has been published in many local and international journals including Women's Studies, Griffith Review, Hecate, Meanjin, Westerly, Life Writing and Australian Book Review as well as multiple anthologies and she has been the recipient of several prizes including a Josephine Ulrick Literature Award in 2011. She completed a PhD in creative writing at the University of Adelaide in 2011 and is co-editor of *Just Between Us: Australian Writers Tell the Truth About Female Friendship* (Pan Macmillan, 2013). [www.mayalinden.com](http://www.mayalinden.com)

---

<sup>5</sup> Barbara Claire Freeman, *The Feminine Sublime: Gender and Excess in Women's Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995) 6.

<sup>6</sup> Freeman 6.