



# WRITERS IN CONVERSATION

## Christos Tsiolkas and the Ghosts of our Past

Heather Taylor Johnson

*With the arrival of his first novel in 1995, Loaded, Christos Tsiolkas became a voice for a new generation of Australians. The book's main character, Ari – later made into the flesh by actor Alex Dimitriades in the film adaptation Head On – represented a young, gay Greek Australian man, angered by classism and racism to the point of self-destruction, and confused with his place in the world that surrounds him. This character would be reborn in many other men in Tsiolkas' books, as would these themes become the crux of his work. His other novels include The Jesus Man (1999), Dead Europe (2005; winner of The Age Book of the Year), The Slap (2008; winner of the Commonwealth Writers' Prize, shortlisted for the Miles Franklin Award, longlisted for the Man Booker Prize and adapted into an award winning mini-series) and his latest book Barracuda (2013). He is a multi-talented writer with an autobiography and book of essays to add to his collection, as well as 'playwright' and 'screenwriter' to add to his list of titles. Often referred to by literary critics as our most controversial writer, Christos Tsiolkas lays bare what it means to be Australian, and in this interview I revisit what for me is his most controversial book, Dead Europe.*

**HTJ:** The characters in so many of your novels are racist. No one is safe: Jews, Muslims, Asians, Wogs – in fact 'wog' might be the most commonly used word in your repertoire, stressing an acceptance of derogatory titles and thus a regularisation of racist thought. Misogyny, too, is painfully prevalent. Is this a commentary on Australian society or on humanity?

**CT:** I am going to apologise for pretending I can speak outside of my sphere of knowledge and my experience as an Australian. I can't speak for the rest of the world. My belief is that racism is a global experience but I don't think that all racism is the same. The racism of colonial societies such as South Africa and Australia is very different to that of Europe, to that of the north Americas, and again different to the experience of it in Africa, in the Middle East, in the south Americas. And of course there are different histories and expression of it in Asia. More and more I am interested in separating racism from xenophobia, investigating notions of the stranger. Australia had no experience of the Atlantic slave trade so any analogies made between our historic and contemporary racism and that of the USA, for example, can only be simplistic and not very useful. So what is the fear of the stranger? Is it equivalent to racism or is it something else? I am not pretending any answers but it is a question that increasingly concerns me. Undoubtedly it arises from the disgust I feel at the treatment of the refugee

and asylum seeker. But again it is not simply an Australian question but one that is truly and terrifyingly global. *Dead Europe* was an attempt to express that disgust from a global perspective. *The Slap* was an attempt to write from a specifically local position, hoping that in exploring how we treat ourselves we might be able to understand why we treat the stranger so abominably.

So what is specific to Australia, in its racism, in its misogyny? I think parochialism is part of it, for all the talk of globalised media and communications the sense of isolation does count for something. Parochialism, that self-centeredness, it is a part of who we are. Our inability to confront the truth of settler Australia destroying Indigenous Australia is also at the heart of who we are. What does such a combination of violence and insularity mean for women in our society? A sense of fear around the communality of men? Again I have to apologise that I am answering a question with a question but I am uncertain about giving definitive statements, maybe it takes an outsider to understand ourselves better. But, yes, I think the fact of violence in our nation is something difficult and complex, something we have yet to find a way of understanding.

Two years ago I went to Port Arthur in Tasmania for the first time. And for the first time I understood viscerally the convict heritage of this country, understood the great violence that occurred at the very foundation of the new nation. As a child of the transformation that came to this country with the first wave of post-World War Two immigration I always felt a distance to that history. I am not so sure now, I believe it still permeates our culture, even for those of us who have no familial relationship to that convict past. It will be in a novel that I come to deal with that subject. Violence will inevitably be at the heart of it.

**HTJ:** In *Dead Europe* a refugee named Sula says, 'I have met very few Australians, Isaac, but I have always been struck by their innocence. They remind me of a character from Henry James, they have an innocence that the Americans have now lost'. I love that comparison and I mused over it for days after reading it. Your characters, however, are anything but innocent. They are full of anger; they question, accuse and carry an equal weight of self-entitlement and guilt. How do you react those words you've given Sula?

**CT:** *Dead Europe* was very much an exorcism of my romantic notions of 'Europe', the site of culture, civilisation as opposed to the 'barbarism' of Australia. What I came to understand travelling in Europe, from west to east, from north to south, is that it is a continent infected with a toxic clinging to class and status that literally suffocates me. I love Europe but after a while I feel I can't breathe in it. After writing *Dead Europe* I found myself returning to the US literature I loved as a youth, rediscovering McCullers, Mailer, Flannery O'Connor, Ellison, Roth, Updike, James Agee, the critics Pauline Kael and Greil Marcus. I reread Henry James and Mark Twain. I wanted to rediscover the urgency and excitement of a 'new world' literature, the literature of second and third generation Jewish immigrants, the tough writing of the Americans. It is such a strong desire of mine, that one day on this continent Australia we will create an English that is uniquely ours.

The words I gave Sula were spoken to me by an immigrant I met in Greece. I don't think we are 'innocent' though we may be naïve. I also don't think we will create the writing I am

**talking about until we defeat our insularity and parochialism but also our egoism as a nation. We are not generous. That is what Sula doesn't understand about Australia, that is where the irony in her wanting to migrate here lies. Until we learn how to be generous there will be no promise in us.**

**HTJ:** When you were interviewed on *Compass* you talked about your father's knack for storytelling and how he told you tales of vampires from the old village, which I imagine to be a catalyst for *Dead Europe*. You also allude to family curses in your novels. Where does folklore and cultural identity, or even folklore and spirituality, come together for you?

**CT:** Orthodoxy, I am a child of Orthodox Christians. In the western European intellectual and artistic tradition we are very *au fait* with Catholicism and Protestantism being significant markers of culture and identity, so much so that we can speak of 'Catholic' and 'Protestant' traits even in a postmodern secular world. And to some extent intellectual and artistic histories of Europe now must acknowledge the Jewish and Islamic currents and contributions to culture and identity. Orthodox Christianity, however, is less well mapped. Again, it is only recently, or at least since the writing of *Dead Europe*, that I have begun to think about my cultural debt to Orthodoxy, and so I don't want to pretend any great insights but I do think it is something that has shaped my imagination and my writing.

Partly as a result of the Cold War, whereby eastern Europe was separated from the west for close to a century, partly because of the inevitable primitivism of the Orthodox Christian faith, the Orthodox world seems closer to the peasant past than does Catholic, Jewish and Protestant Europe. (I should also make clear that I am not using the term 'primitivism' in a negative sense. I am a writer so I am attracted to the elements of 'paganism' and 'superstition' that are so much part of the Orthodox imagination). Growing up in Australia, a child of immigrant labourers, I used to define my heritage as 'working class' (always guiltily aware that my educational opportunities had made me *déclassé*, a reluctant member of the bourgeois class) but I now think my heritage is not 'working class' but 'peasant class'. In many ways that heritage is evident in much of the fatalism of my work and of my thinking. My notion of spirituality too is bound up in ritual and the body; attempting to ground faith in reason is not so important for me. It makes me both a reluctant atheist and a reluctant Christian, in that I understand the intellectual importance of rejecting God but I can't live it in my day-to-day life. But maybe I am less burdened by that than if I were a writer whose heritage was Catholic or Protestant. (Writers of a Jewish or Muslim European heritage have a different 'burden' or maybe it is better termed a 'birthright', one forged from their being outsiders within the West, an identity that because of history transcends theological or philosophical questions of faith).

This is all speculation and I do not in any way want to pretend any great insights. It is just that your question has led me think once more about cultural heritage and debt. I do owe a debt to Orthodox Christianity and a notion of being 'eastern' in Europe.

**HTJ:** You've given us a glimpse of some of your favourite American writers above. Are there more you can mention as being influential in your life?

**CT:** The debt I have to my influences seems enormous and I am wary of just creating a list for you. And I'm not sure if I can answer a question about influence without also referring to cinema, an art that is as important to me as literature. At fifteen I saw a double bill of Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* and *Cries and Whispers* and that evening transformed my life, I started dreaming beyond Hollywood, and beyond London and New York, from that night. But here goes when it comes to literature:

To Dostoevsky, the first writer I loved; to the mid-century North Americans, Carson McCullers, Agee, Philip Roth, John Updike, Norman Mailer, John Cheever and Pauline Kael for making me grasp that I could write (and also to those Jewish North Americans, Mailer and Roth again, to Mordechai Richler, to Budd Schulberg for writing from within an immigrant experience that spoke to me as an adolescent when most of Australian literature was silent); to Sasha Soldatow, Frank Moorhouse and Helen Garner for breaking that silence; to John Rechy, Pier Paolo Pasolini and Jean Genet for kicking me out of the fucking closet; to Stendhal and Kazantzakis for making writing heroic for me; to Céline and Brett Easton Ellis for making writing frightening; to Lowell and Yeats for making me fall in love with poetry and making me realise I am no poet; to Tanizaki and Endo for reminding me of beauty and for teaching me to look away from Europe; to George Orwell and Nietzsche and Marx (Karl and Groucho) and Hannah Arendt for my ethics.

**Will that do?**

**HTJ:** You've written novels, theatre scripts and screenplays, and you've co-authored in each of those genres, which offers us a communal sense of you as a writer. This versatility seems to suggest you've found your calling in writing. When did you know you wanted to be a writer? And if you couldn't write, what would you do?

**CT:** I always knew that I would write. I'm still working out if I can write well. If I wasn't a writer I would be a filmmaker or a painter, but probably shithouse at both. If I wasn't a writer I fear that my anger would have turned into bitterness. There are two things I don't want in my life, bitterness and resentment. Those emotions kill the soul.

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*Born and raised in the USA, Heather Taylor Johnson moved to Adelaide in 1999 to go to the University of Adelaide, where she got her PhD in Creative Writing. She is the author of three books of poems (Thirsting for Lemonade is her latest) and one novel (Pursuing Love and Death). She has been writing reviews of poetry, fiction and film for the last ten years and is Poetry Editor of Transnational Literature.*