



WRITERS IN CONVERSATION



An Interview with Zoë Fairbairns

Nick Turner

Zoe Fairbairns was born in England in 1948, and educated at the University of St. Andrews, Scotland, and the College of William and Mary, USA. She was the poetry editor for Spare Rib, and has worked as a freelance journalist and a creative writing tutor. She has also held appointments as Writer in Residence at Bromley Schools (1981-3 and 1985-9), Deakin University, Geelong, Australia (1983), Sunderland Polytechnic (1983-5) and Surrey County Council (1989). She lives in South London.

*Zoe Fairbairns has written within many forms. She is the author of eight novels: her debut *Live as Family* (1968) earned positive reviews; her later novels *Benefits* (1979) and *Stand We at Last* (1983) positioned themselves easily within contemporary concerns in women's writing and have thus been the focus of critical attention. *Benefits* was shortlisted for the Hawthornden Prize and the Philip K. Dick (USA) Prize. *Stand we at Last* and Fairbairns's other 1980s novels *Here Today* (1984) and *Closing* (1987) were also commercial successes, partly owing to their use of genre models. However Fairbairns's work has had less commercial success since the 1980s; *Other Names* was not reviewed by most major broadsheets, and now only *Benefits* and *Stand We at Last* remain in print.*

*Fairbairns is also a short story writer, and has contributed to *Tales I Tell my Mother* (1978), and *More Tales I Tell my Mother* (1986). Her most recent publication is the collection *How Do You Pronounce Nulliparous* (2004); she is the author of the forthcoming *How to Write Short Stories and Get them Published* (2011). In addition to her writing of novels and short stories, Fairbairns has written many political pieces, fiction reviews, and a radio play. Overall, Zoë Fairbairns's fiction, which is the focus of this interview, can be identified as feminist in its concerns, often using and subverting genre models, and accessible to a wide audience.*

Critical work on Fairbairns has mainly focussed on Benefits and Stand We at Last, reading her as a feminist writer, and investigating her uses of genre or form. Flora Alexander is representative of this, placing Fairbairns in a chapter with Pat Barker and Fay Weldon; similarly, Peter Fitting aligns her with Margaret Atwood and Ursula Le Guin. More useful work comes from Paulina Palmer, who sees the tower block in Benefits as a symbol of patriarchy that is 'recycled' for feminism (321), and in several articles on Stand We at Last. While Lyn Pykett and Beatriz Domínguez García (2001) praise the implicit feminism of the novel, Duncker takes Fairbairns to task, arguing that she 'reinforces convention in odd ways' (124), 'reproduces the sexual values of romantic fiction' (125) and omits any instance of lesbianism or female romantic friendship. In terms of criticism of form, Andrea Kinsky-Ehritt usefully highlights the 'border crossings' of realism and postmodernism within Stand We at Last, while Domínguez García (2005) links Fairbairns with Kate Atkinson in postmodern presentation of first-person female narration.

The above shows that there is little serious critical engagement with Fairbairns's work at the moment; this interview is an attempt to remedy that, and to explore themes which critics have not yet raised. We begin with an analysis of how the subject of women and work, and women and the economy, is presented in the author's fiction. We then move to discuss Fairbairns's style and language, and the means by which she researches her novels, proceeding to a discussion of class and realism in her fiction, and ending with questions about her use of the short story form. While it is vital to acknowledge Fairbairns's feminism, her technique and method as a writer must not be forgotten.

Q: I'm interested in the theme of women and work, and women in business, which often comes up in your fiction. There aren't many writers who do make it their subject, apart from those of the Barbara Taylor Bradford school. Could you tell me about your interest in this?

A: It is very important to me as a reader and writer. One of the things I like about Marina Lewycka's novel *Two Caravans* is that it is about people working, about their relationship to money. I get very frustrated in a story if it's not clear how people put the bread on the tables. It doesn't mean I need them all to be poor, or oppressed workers: I'm quite happy to read about rich people whose idea of work is to ring up their stockbroker. But I want to know how people survive.

Q: I can see that in your novels. In *Stand We at Last*, you clearly want the reader to imagine the exhaustingly hard work involved in running a pie shop in nineteenth-century London. *Here Today* is partly about the frustration and boredom of working life; in *Closing* we see people at work, people starting a business. It struck me particularly in *Other Names*. There is a real anxiety for Heather: what will her next job be?

A: All human beings have to do something to put food in their belly and a roof over their head. It is an essential and intrinsic part of the human condition; I can't write about somebody unless I can show how they relate to the world of money and food and work. It gives a sense of who they are.

Q: It's not a moral point then, implying that everyone ought to have an occupation?

A: It's not a case of 'ought to'. Everyone has an occupation, even if it's only signing on at the JobCentre, or, at the other end of the scale, being like the character in a Paul Torday novel who, when asked 'what do you do?', replies snootily, 'I don't *do* anything. I manage my affairs.'

Q: In *Other Names* Marjorie, the other central female character, doesn't work, does she?

A: Well – she keeps house.

Q: So yes, she works unpaid, in a sense ... she also has a job in a charity shop, which is of course unpaid work. I wonder if you could comment on your depiction of *this* type of work?

A: Because of her circumstances (her husband is in a well-paid job, and her parents provided their house), she doesn't need to enter the labour market to put bread on the table. But she is working, albeit unpaid. I'm not saying this is good or bad. I'm just giving that information about this character so that the reader can understand her better.

Q: So again there is no moral comment on the fact that she doesn't have paid work?

A: No.

Q: Was there a deliberate contrast intended between the two women, in that Heather's economic status is so unreliable, as opposed to the apparent security Marjorie has?

A: Yes. This is very much a novel of Thatcherite times. There is this great economic gap – but suddenly, as a result of her own choices, Marjorie is set to lose everything and taste the experience of being poor, which is the other side of an awful lot of wealth and investment. It can very easily collapse.

Q: Interesting: a great contrast, and a narrative device that unites both women in the end. Would you say you're making gendered points about work and economic survival, as well as general human ones, here and elsewhere in your work?

A: Yes, in that I was born in the late 1940s, and lived through a time when many people thought that married women did not have the right to go out to work. I was horrified that a lawmaker or a husband might stop me working, stop me from being financially independent. This is not as much of an issue now.

Q: In *Other Names*, did you want the reader to think: here is someone who has a function they are not paid for, in the case of Marjorie?

A: There's keeping house and keeping house. Doing it for one undemanding adult isn't the same as doing it for a family of children and a difficult partner. It's not a full time job, and she has money from other sources. In *Benefits*, however, raising young children is a full time job.

Q: Can suggest any other examples of where you have discussed work in your fiction?

A: In *Daddy's Girls*, Christine is aware that her father forbids her mother to go out to work. Christine is horrified to realise that a grown woman can be told what to do by a man – that being bossed about is not just a feature of childhood.

Q: So as well as being part of a narrative and development of character, it's a social history and feminist point.

A: I don't set out to make 'feminist points'. I write about the world as I see it, which is what all writers do.

Q: Moving on, could you tell me about your style as a writer, and what you attempt do with the language you use in your writing? What is behind it?

A: I like to listen to the way people talk, and to capture that in dialogue. I carry a notebook and write down things I hear. When I read, I like to read dialogue that convinces as something I could hear. I like Marina Lewycka's first two novels for this reason, and I aim to do the same thing myself.

Q: Would you say then that you're aiming for verisimilitude?

A: Yes – the everyday idiom and unconscious wit and poetry you sometimes hear in conversation.

Q: Could you give any examples of where you think you have achieved this in your work?

A: I think that's a judgement for others to make. But when I was researching *Closing* I went on sales training courses and made careful notes about the way people spoke, their idiom, their concepts. When I was researching *Here Today* I worked as a temp. I paid attention to how people spoke to me and how I spoke to them. Wherever possible, I try to get into the situation that the fictional character was getting into, and pay attention, and get it right. The single, well-observed detail can say so much more than pages of generalisation.

Q: At the start of Chapter Four in *Closing* Daphne Barclay, who is the epitome of the 1980s businesswoman, and is running the sales training courses, has some memorable language. 'I don't know what you talked about over dinner, but you should have been selling to each other'; 'From now on you're off duty only when you're asleep, and even then you should be dreaming of products and presentations.'; 'Don't be surprised if I do turn up in your dreams because I shall be there: checking up.' (22) Is this based on truth, on things you heard?

A: For any novel, if it's about a world that isn't my world, I have always wanted to go there, and make detailed notes on what's going on, and then extend them into what might go on. I went on sales training courses and women's career development courses. I don't remember anyone threatening to turn up in anyone else's dreams, but it was a long time ago! I might have made it up.

Q: I'm wondering about the line between accuracy and observation, and satire and caricature, here.

A: She's a fictional character. She's over the top, and there to embody certain characteristics, as well as to be herself. She is imaginary, but my imagination was fed by going on courses.

Q: So there is an intentional comic edge?

A: Of course. Some readers have said she reminded them of Margaret Thatcher. It's a Thatcherite book set in a Thatcherite era – so I'm fine with that.

Q: I'm wondering if there is a pattern in your work. At the start, we often see two or maybe more women who have separate stories; by the end they are connected. This is the case in *Here Today* and *Other Names*, particularly. It is in operation in a different way in *Closing*. What do you think?

A: It's a progression in terms of narrative energy: people who are separate come together. It's a shape for a story. Of course, it can work in reverse, with people who are together coming apart.

Q: Is there any conscious or unconscious gender point there about separation versus community, about women working as a group?

A: Not really – it's simply that I mainly write about women. There are men in the books, but I focus on the women. Men are not excluded.

Q: I'd like to ask you something specific now about *Here Today*. Firstly: is the title partly ironic, in the sense that it's about invisible people? Secondly: is Antonia, the central character, an everywoman in a sense?

A: You're right about the irony of the title. But nobody is everyman or everywoman. One of the things to aspire to as a fiction writer, and it's particularly true of the short story, but true in novels as well, is to look at and write about something small and particular. If you try and write about everyone, you may end up writing about no-one. But if you focus on one single incident, person, difficulty or even word, and if you get it right, it will cast its light and shadow more widely.

Q: That reminds me of something in *Here Today*. The scene is when Antonia takes Paul to meet her father and stepmother for Sunday lunch at their home:

For lunch they had cold breast of lamb rolled round sage and onion stuffing and tied with string ... There were three salads, all different colours: a red one with beetroot, tomatoes and radishes, a white one with cubed potatoes and spring onions, and a green one. None of the salads was dressed. (50)

Can you comment on why you include this meal, with this much detail?

A: Because everybody is interested in food. Even if someone is anxious about it, they still have an interest in it. It is universal, and I like writing about it too. It can also indicate something: the precision about colour in the extract tells us something about the person who has prepared the meal. .

Q: There is a similar instance in *Daddy's Girls*. We are told that 'Lunch at Elizabeth Blackwell Hall consisted of gigot of lamb with mashed turnips and boiled potatoes, followed by arctic roll with golden syrup put of a jug' (318); shortly afterwards Janet as narrator tells us that dinner is 'Chicken à la King, mashed potatoes and chips, green beans and lemon meringue pie'. She has also been eating 'sweet, floury scones' and 'thin triangles of shortbread' in the afternoon ... (320)

A: It evokes living as a student in a hall of residence at that time [the late 1960s]. This is an era before the great awareness we now have of the importance of dieting and health. You have these largely sedentary young people living together in a communal hall being served these huge meals – cooked breakfast, three-course lunch, afternoon tea and cakes, and a three-course dinner.

It was like that for me in my first year at St Andrews – 1967/8. And of course there was the anxiety of the first term away from home, and discovering that, however clever you may have thought yourself when you were at school, at university there were some *really* clever people, people who left you standing. I don't think I was the only one who sought consolation from the arctic roll and the golden syrup!

Q: So details which to some readers would appear insignificant are there for a reason, even if you don't consciously think about them. I noticed an example in an early scene in *Closing*: 'She boiled water in the kettle and made herself a cup of tea, adding all three of the foil-capped pots of milk' (26). Can you tell me about this?

A: Let me quote from Chekhov: 'Don't tell me the moon is shining; show me the glint of light on broken glass.' He means, I think, don't try and tell everything. Go for the small, telling detail. I'd also quote William Blake's desire to 'see the world in a grain of sand ... hold infinity in the palm of your hand / eternity in an hour.' If you try and write about everything, you'll end up writing about nothing. The right small detail will evoke, and cast light and shadow on the world around.

Q: So foil-capped milk pots evoke a certain kind of hotel! Clearly, for you, a meal can also be illustrative.

A: A meal, or an object, or a few lines of dialogue, can cover a huge amount. If you're not going to show things and give your reader a pleasant, or unpleasant, sensory experience, what's the point?

Q: There is a very striking example of food used in a different way at the very start of *Here Today*:

The entrance to *Here Today* was a dark doorway off a Soho street, a tunnel with a frayed brown carpet. To the left there was a sex shop with a window full of plastic flesh, frilly underclothes and weapons. To the right a huge doner kebab revolved slowly in the window of a Greek takeaway, browning and dripping alongside a low heat. (11)

That's really interesting as we have food and sex together – it links to your previous point.

A: Yes, that was deliberate. Both are commodities. The doner kebab is manufactured food in the way that the sex doll is manufactured sexuality – and Antonia has to pass between them.

Q: If we go back now to my own favourite among your works, *Other Names*, it's interesting to look at some criticisms made of it. Kate Figes felt that you were involving yourself in the backlash against feminism, in the way you showed women easily giving way to a handsome male; even that your view of feminism was 'disheartened'. Would you say they have misunderstood the novel?

A: Women don't always get it right, any more than men do. In *Other Names*, two women are attracted to a handsome but not-very-nice man. That's the story I'm telling. It happens. People of both genders and all orientations are sometimes attracted to unsuitable people. It's called sex. I make no apology for writing about it.

Q: We've talked about narrative progression, and about money; do you feel it is also a novel about class, as in levels of power?

A: The term 'class' is used very loosely, within the women's movement and elsewhere. Sometimes it refers to a person's own job and circumstances, but with women it often refers to the job and circumstances of their father or husband. So you are not comparing like with like.

There is a scene in the novel where Heather's mother challenges the socialist-feminist women in her group who describe her radical-feminist politics as middle class. She has identified the fact that 'middle class' is often used as a term of abuse by people whose circumstances are actually quite privileged, but who insist they are working class, because their father had a working class job.

I was once interviewed by a journalist who wanted to know my social class. I said I was middle class – a property-owning university graduate with a professional job and enough money to meet my needs. She wouldn't accept this, probably because those criteria fitted her life too, and she preferred to identify as working class. She tried to insist that I tell her my

father's job, which I refused to do, not because it's a secret (he was a chartered surveyor) but because I think a woman's social class comes from her own circumstances, not someone else's.

Q: So would you agree that it's more useful to see Heather as someone marginalised from society, than as of a particular class?

A: Yes: Heather has chosen to be a writer, which for her means being poor – but she is intelligent and could quite easily have taken up a middle-class profession. The important question is not 'what class are you?' but 'what access do you have to money?'

Q: If we stay with that novel, and take up again the idea of details and particulars of characters that you think are important, how about the name you chose for the central male character, Boniface Bennett?

A: Names can just come to you. I don't know where it came from. I think it's a good move when naming a character to give them an unusual first name and a normal surname – or vice versa. It's easier to remember. It might have come from a reference to Pope Boniface.

Q: It wasn't an ironic or cautionary hint to the reader – as in 'bonny face' sounding superficial?

A: No – you just want your characters to be memorable. An alliterative and unusual name helps.

Q: I wondered if perhaps the character of Boniface, who is a charmer from the same school as someone like Wickham from *Pride and Prejudice*, perhaps was intended as way of saying women beware: this type will always exist and wreak havoc?

A: The women are not victims. If an adult woman falls in love with a not-very-nice man, she is not a victim – she has made an unfortunate choice. People are sometimes attracted to unsuitable people, and it has been going on since history began. If we say that all women who are involved with exploitative men are victims, we are saying that women have no power or choice. No one was duped, raped or even seduced here: it was a mutual seduction.

Q: So this wasn't a gendered or political point, but an illustration on a more universal level.

A: It's a novel.

Q: Can we talk about *Stand We at Last* now? I'm interested in how you created and documented the nineteenth-century sections, particularly the pie shop run by Pearl and Aunt Sarah, as you obviously couldn't go there as you did with your later novels! You achieve a real feeling of claustrophobia and very hard work. What was the inspiration, and what research did you have to do? I think this is particularly interesting as historical fiction is now very popular and taken seriously; *Stand we at Last* was written before this happened.

A: Because of the way class and money were set up in Victorian England, Pearl moves between classes. She begins as the daughter of an oyster seller/prostitute, but once her middle-class father accepts her, does she become middle class? She marries a pie shop owner, who dies. Both these events cause a potential change in status. The social class of women like Pearl was dependent on the men they were linked (or not linked) with; this goes back to our earlier point and illustrates why we as feminists should be very suspicious of the term 'class'.

The pie shop was partly just imagination. I might have gone to see *Sweeney Todd*. I read a lot of contemporary newspapers and magazines; I find raw data more useful than books about the period, where information has already been filtered through the mind of another author.

Q: Very interesting that our discussion comes back to class again.

A: Before 1870, married women in England could not own property. And yet people talk about 'middle class wives'. Class is about property, so how could someone who was legally debarred from owning anything be middle class? Class is a very patriarchal notion here. There are clearly different levels of power within a household. I wanted to work that out in fiction.

Q: While we're discussing this novel, could you tell us about Sarah as the 'spinster' aunt?

A: She is the matriarch with no children. I wanted the lead character in this saga to be a single woman with no children: it seemed to challenge the family saga genre, and pleased me.

Q: Was this because such a character could have existed, or because you wanted to do in fiction something that might have been rare in reality? Was it a projection of the imagination backwards in time, with optimism – *Benefits* in reverse?

A: I think both. I'd refer here to Sheila Jeffreys' *The Spinster and her Enemies*. I think the fact of the single woman's contribution in those times is an important one. I wanted to challenge the idea that you only gained historical validity as a woman if you married and had children.

Q: Are there any other instances in your work where you have shown the power of the single woman?

A: Heather in *Other Names*, Viv in *How Do You Pronounce Nulliparous?*, Daphne Barclay and Teresa in *Closing*, and Miranda in *Daddy's Girls* are all single. But I don't think it's so much of an issue today – the distinction between married and single is much more blurred and temporary. There are different ways of being married, different ways of being single.

Q: Perhaps we could say that, as a contrast to Sarah, your books set in the contemporary world show the potential invisibility of women – *Here Today* and its ironic title, where a woman has disappeared.

A: Well, so much work is temporary now, and the idea of a job for life has disappeared.

Q: Let's bring some 'isms' together: feminism and realism. For many people they are seen as incompatible; for many feminists realism equates with patriarchy, and many feminist writers have found more appropriate forms to be postmodernism, gothic, fantasy, and science fiction. I get the sense, though, that you don't think feminism and realism are incompatible.

A: They're not incompatible. They have to be compatible. I don't see the point of feminism, or any other political movement, if you can't even imagine a situation involving real human beings in which it works, it's relevant and it's important and worth writing about. Feminism is an ideology about the practical ways in which people live their lives. If it's not, there's no point. I don't really follow the argument that says 'realism equates with patriarchy'. Why does it?

Q: I agree! In terms of your view of yourself as a novelist you have said that 'being on both sides is not a very comfortable position to be in ideologically, but it is the perfect posture from which to write a novel.'

A: I think I said in the context of writing *Benefits*. I was on both sides of the Wages for Housework debate, and *Benefits* was the result. If you think you know the truth about something, you don't write a novel, you write a manifesto or a leaflet. If you see a predicament or a dilemma that you think you may have an angle on: well, that's when a novel or short story is right.

Q: The novel is an investigative process, perhaps?

A: Among other things.

Q: Can I ask you about short stories? You've been publishing them since the 1970s, and your most recent publication was the collection *How Do You Pronounce Nulliparous?* As a form the short story is hard to define and means different things to different writers. What does it mean for you?

A: In his introduction to the *Oxford Book of Short Stories*, V.S. Pritchett says, 'the novel tends to tell us everything, whereas the short story tells us only one thing, and that, intensely.' That's what I strive for as a short story writer, and enjoy and admire as a short story reader. I also like Raymond Carver's comment: 'At the risk of appearing foolish, a writer sometimes needs to be able to just stand and gape at this or that thing - a sunset or an old shoe - in absolute and simple amazement.' Look at one thing with enough intensity, and it will take on a universality that you will rarely achieve if you set out to write about everything.

Q: Is there any short story writer you particularly admire?

A: I tend not to have favourite writers. I have favourite short stories, one of which is *Lunch* by William Boyd. It's in his collection *Fascination*. In around 2,000 words, it tells of the decline

and fall of a businessman, who goes from being the sort of person who, at the start of the story, eats lunch in a restaurant where the bill for seven people comes to more than £900, to bingeing on cheap fast food on an intercity train. By then he's lost his wife, his job, a lot of his money, and his child. The entire story is told through lunch menus. It's extraordinarily inventive. It's another example of keeping things small. The big story is told in seven lunch menus and one man's comments. That to me is the essence of the short story: it's small, but in some ways it is as big as a novel. It *suggests*, and carries the seed of itself. We know that if this man wasn't so obsessed with his own appetites, which is shown by the notes he makes on the food he eats, he wouldn't have got into this mess. The fact of the story is what happens in the story. I admire it hugely.

Q: With your own short stories, I was very interested in 'Bus Ticket'. I like the fact that it is self-reflexive and considers the writing of a story, has an anecdotal air, and, in 'Bus Ticket Revisited' becomes a short story containing two stories. Can you comment on how it was put together?

A: The original story, 'Bus Ticket' was published in *Tales I Tell My Mother*, and its genesis is as explained in the story. It seemed to strike a chord with readers, perhaps because it is about something small, with wide repercussions. I had lots of enquiries about it from people abroad putting together English language teaching materials.

But later there was this other episode, not about a ticket but about someone attacking someone on a train for apparently looking like an asylum seeker, when in fact the so-called asylum seeker was British born. I linked up the innocence of the first story, where although what happened was very annoying, I didn't feel in danger, with the second, where physical danger was a possibility. Everyone there felt jumpy. The stories seemed to fit together, and I wanted to link them into a longer story, which I called 'Bus Ticket Revisited.'

Now there is another version: 'Bus Ticket Revisited Revisited'. I wrote this third version because I realised there was a lie in the second version. Just as in the first version, I reveal at the end that the bus conductor who was harassing me for calling myself 'Ms' was a woman, I realised there was a chime between not wanting to admit this in the original story, and not wanting to admit that I didn't feel safe in a London train in the second. Someone on the train expressed appreciation for the respect that I was apparently showing for her religion. I wanted to correct her and explain that I don't have respect for any patriarchal religion. But in the context of possible social disorder on a train, I didn't dare.

Q: The first story was written in 1974 and the second in 2002: I wondered if you were trying to suggest or show a wider cultural change?

A: I was just trying to tell a story. I saw a parallel between my preference not to announce my marital status every time I give my name, and this other woman's wish to wear an Islamic headscarf. We were sisters under the skin, and had both been verbally attacked. It was a similar story in a different era. But in the later story, any intervention I made was in the interest of calming things down: I was tired and I wanted to get home.

Q: I think this story, like much of your other work, again shows what might be called ‘anti-didacticism’: it’s as if you want to investigate both sides. Can you comment on this?

A: It wasn’t a simple situation in ‘Bus Ticket’. There was a feeling that was drummed into some feminists by some lefty males that our concerns, particularly if we identified as middle class, were unimportant. How could we think of reporting a working class person for something as trivial as scribbling on a bus ticket? There was a feeling that we should be making common cause with the workers, not complaining about them.

Q: The title story of your most recent collection, *How Do You Pronounce Nulliparous?*, is really interesting to think about alongside your definition of a short story, as it seems to do something more, and to be about more than one thing or one narrative.

A: I wanted to write about a woman who had never wanted to have children but was coming to an age at which it would soon be too late for her to revisit the decision.

I did think for a while that it would be a novel. If I had decided that she would have a baby, or try to have one, it would have been a novel. It would have been a novel about the special problems and joys of being an older parent. When I decided it was going to be about someone who thinks about it and then realises she was right the first time, it didn’t seem to be worth a novel. It didn’t seem to be a big enough idea to carry one. It’s almost a novella – it is about 12,000 words and has a lot of sub-stories in it. I think there’s a lot in what you say, and it does deviate from what I’ve quoted about how a short story should be about one thing. But it is about one dilemma, which manifests itself in different ways. If I were writing it from scratch now, I’d write it in a different way.

Q: I do feel that it works; it doesn’t feel that characters or narratives appear and are not developed.

A: I’m pleased to hear you say that, as that length of fiction is very difficult for both the reader and the writer. It’s the worst of both worlds: you’ve got all the hard work of a really long story, without the satisfaction of a novel at the end of it. I’m a big admirer of Fay Weldon’s ‘Polaris’ and her ‘Christmas Lists’, both of which are long short stories. If I were writing my story now, I might be looking for a structure like that in ‘Christmas Lists’. Just as Boyd’s ‘Lunch’ is a list of menus, this story is about twenty years of a marriage, linked by the lists the wife makes for Christmas over the years.

Q: Perhaps the variance we have found between ‘How Do You Pronounce Nulliparous?’ and your quoted definitions of the short story form show that it, like the novel, is always plastic and ever-changing, and can’t be subject to rules.

A: Yes. One of the most individual of the many treasured emails I’ve received from strangers came from an Egyptian man in his twenties, who had found *How Do You Pronounce Nulliparous?* in the British Council Library in Cairo and totally identified with the title story. I

thought that was fantastic: a story about a middle-aged British woman deciding whether to have a baby or not, had reached out across gender, age and culture.

Q: It shows there can still be such a thing as 'universality' in literature! My final question is about your aims as a writer. Many writers have wanted to experiment with form and language, and make the novel 'new'. Do you have any ambitions like this?

A: Not in any didactic way. My main concern has been a practical one: how can I do it, and how will it work? It's a process of trial and error, and finding the right shape for it. I can't imagine beginning to write with the question: what structure will my novel take? The first question is: what's it about? The structure will develop from that. There's a lot of prescriptive talk about things that don't need to be prescriptive. There is room on the shelf for many different books.

As for making the novel 'new' – every novel is new.

Works Cited

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