

# *On Art and Life*

An Interview with Rose Tremain

by Gilles Menegaldo

*Rose Tremain was born in 1943 and graduated from the University of East Anglia. She has published seven novels and three volumes of short stories as well as having had numerous radio and television plays performed. She won several literary prizes including The Sunday Express Award for Restoration and the Angel Literary Award for The Swimming Pool Season. She was shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 1989.*

*Rose Tremain teaches on the MA course in Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia. She also is a literary critic who reviews regularly for press and radio. She is a convinced francophile who spent a year at the Sorbonne and also lived in Dordogne. Her latest novel is set in Paris.*

*East Anglia, a rural area of Britain, is the setting for most of Rose Tremain's novels. She enjoys its landscapes which convey an ambivalent feeling of beauty, wildness and even fear. It is also for her a land of secrets and discoveries. She tends to focus on seemingly minor or marginal or even dull characters, such as that of Ruby in A Letter to Sister Benedicta. She is concerned with their predicament, their problematic relation with the outside world. The story takes the form of a quest for identity which usually entails conflict with the family surroundings or society in general as in Sacred Country where the heroine Mary Ward wishes to become a boy. Indeed another feature of Rose Tremain's fiction is an exploration of the unknown, of the unfamiliar which often implies a transgression of various boundaries, either social or sexual. As she herself states: "We all have a person inside us we wish to be and we spend our lives trying to discover it". She has an uncanny ability to identify with the other as in Restoration, where, following the career of Robert Merivel, a student of anatomy, she inhabits the body, heart and mind of a seventeenth century man, capturing his language and his idiosyncrasies. In Restoration, her best known novel, she indeed reconstructs very convincingly a remote and little known*

historical period, featuring some major dramatic episodes (*The Plague* or *the Great Fire of London*) or characters such as King Charles II, while most events are filtered through the consciousness of the main protagonist who gradually becomes aware of the existence of authentic values and is thus “restored” to a more positive image of the self.

Rose Tremain’s novels are indeed an experiment in terms of narrative voice. She easily shifts from first-person narration to a more polyphonic strategy in *Sacred Country* where most protagonists are also concerned with a problem of identity in a time of post-war changes. In *A Letter to Sister Benedicta*, Rose Tremain experiments with another device which enables her to play upon a fragmented structure and interwoven narrative lines while unravelling little by little the secrets of an ordinary life. The letters have a kind of cathartic function for the main character and help her to cope with isolation and a state of psychological crisis. In her latest book, *The Way I found Her*, the writer again seeks a different fictional territory and adopts a new voice, that of a thirteen year old boy. Thus, most of her fiction, including the short stories, is concerned with a voyage (outer and inner) which brings to her characters a better awareness of who they are and where they stand. Rose Tremain makes them live for us through grim or tragic situations where the pathos is often alleviated by humorous touches and where a certain form of redemption remains possible whatever the circumstances.



Could we start with your first emotions as a reader of fictional literature in general?

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My first year at school in England—I was sent to a boarding school in England—I think we didn’t read anything after about 1945; the literature programme then in the 1950s, early 60s, was very basic, it was the classics really, and nothing contemporary at all. And so, I think my contemporary reading really began later. It probably began with Lawrence Durrell, whom I read at the age of about 15 or 16. I don’t particularly admire Durrell now, but then I saw that Durrell was doing something very rich, something very different with language, and I couldn’t have been precise about what at that time, but I felt inspired; I remember thinking about these books not just as texts, but as objects that I wanted to ingest in some way, I wanted to eat them. So that was a key moment and then, later, when I was at university, I had as one of my professors Angus Wilson. There was no writing course running at the university at that time, but he was teaching seminars on Dickens and

Dostoevski, the writers that he most loved, the big 19th century writers; and he talked about the characters in Dickens and Dostoevski as if they were the people down the road, as if they were the neighbours, and so it was wonderful to learn from him, this idea about treating literature as if it was part of life. It had never really occurred to me then that literature was life, that literature was what we were thinking about and dreaming about and doing day by day, and it was not until then that I really understood this. So those were sort of key moments in my reading, I think.

*Apart from your reading, obviously there were other reasons for you to become a writer, especially concerning your family background?*

Well, yes. My father was a writer, and we grew up in London and a great deal of reverence was given to the *act* of writing. I remember there was this little study where my father worked, and we always used to be told by my mother “shhhh, your father is working, be quiet...” when we were little. He was a playwright and his plays were put on in small theatres in places like, I don’t know, Colchester or Watford, and then there was a moment in about 1956 when he wrote a play that almost came to London. There was a management interested in it and everybody was very excited, and then the actor who was going to play the main part pulled out at the last minute and so it didn’t come. And there was a terrible disappointment and so I think I grew up with this idea that writing was a very honourable thing to do, but that it was also doomed... And then in fact, soon after this disappointment, my father left home, which was a bad moment and I was sent off to boarding school. And that’s when I started writing really. In retrospect, I think I was probably writing as a kind of therapy because I was very miserable there for the first year anyway. I was writing little stories and poems, not exactly about my situation but just about things. And I think from that point on, from the age of eleven say, I was always a writer in my mind anyway.

*Your first published book is Sadler’s Birthday. What gave you the idea for that book which seems to me, maybe I read it too quickly, a curious subject matter for a first book?*

People said that at the time but it was strange. I was about 28 when I wrote it. The central character is a man of 76 who lives alone and who is thinking over his past life. There are two timescales in that book: the day in question which may or may not be his birthday, that’s the title, and then he does a sort of a looking back over key things that have happened in his life. In a way it is odd but it also draws on certain things that happened in my own childhood. They’re very displaced in that novel but I think they’re

there. For instance, where we lived, we had quite a small ordinary little house in London, but in the holidays, we used to go and stay with my mother's parents, my grand-parents, who had an enormous house in Hampshire in the countryside, a very beautiful place it was, a sort of paradise really. My grandfather was a farmer and he owned I don't know how many thousands of acres. So we went from this very ordinary life to this extremely rich life for about three weeks each holiday. And this house was run like an Edwardian household... there was a butler, and there was a cook, and there were maids, and there were gardeners, and the whole big thing, you know. And of course then the years went by until I was a university student when all of this had to be re-examined and questioned and tortured. If you had a kind of background like that, you felt in the 1960s, that you needed to atone for it. So I think what I was doing in that book was reversing the role. The central character is the butler, who by a quirk of circumstances inherits the big house, and he has nobody to leave it to, so eventually it has to be left to the state. So we could say it's quite a socialist novel, but I think all that sort of rich life that I experienced as a child is in there, I think done with some affection but also with a little bit of anger about it; I think that the house owner, this colonel and his wife, are slightly based on how my grand-parents were... So there are autobiographical elements in that book even if there is no character in it like me.

*What about the butler's relationship with the boy?*

I was thinking about this book the other day and I think now one might see it as almost an abusive relationship. But I think in 1975-76, when the book was written, I certainly didn't intend it like that. I didn't think it would seem like that. This is somebody, the man Sadler, who has been effectively deprived of love. His mother, who loved him, dies very young, he's always been in this role of servant—"serviteur"—and then there is this one moment of deep affection, deep love—the fact that the love expresses itself physically. If I was writing that book now, I might have thought twice about that happening, but I don't see it as abusive actually. The child doesn't feel abused by it, he feels protected by it, and there is a great kinship between him and Sadler. In a way, as somebody pointed out to me recently, which I think is true, Sadler is also making amends for the child that he didn't have.

*You said that you wish to be "elsewhere" when you write. Elsewhere doesn't mean simply in space of course but also in time, in terms of borrowing other people's identities in a way. Restoration is an obvious case in point, and even Sacred Country: it starts in the 1950s, and even*

*though it corresponds to your own personal experience, it is obviously displaced. Your latest novel is set in Paris, and you wrote something about Sicily. Could you tell us about this displacement in time and space. We could either start with time or space. How do you select landscape? What's your relation to landscape? You said once that you find it difficult to write about landscapes you knew, for instance the landscapes you knew when you were a child.*

I think I find it difficult to be detached about the landscapes that I loved as a child, in other words certain parts of London, and exactly this landscape in Hampshire where there were these just brief sort of paradise years. I find it difficult to write about those landscapes in a detached way because I feel very passionate about them, very deeply attached to them. A lot of my books have some location in Norfolk, in East Anglia, where I now live and I didn't encounter this landscape until 1967, when I was a student, and so therefore it's not a landscape out of my childhood. I feel ambiguous towards it. As you know, it's a kind of flat region of England, rather wild; when I was a student there, almost no roads led from London to Norwich. They led up to Cambridge but not really out to the East as far as Norwich. So it felt like a sort of lost part of England, and I liked that because it felt like a place where, in a small country, anything could still happen. I sometimes envy American writers this great vast landscape that they've got to write about, where little towns can feel "lost". Every foot, every inch of England is known and charted, and I think it is known and charted in a literary way also. East Anglia as a sort of inspirational landscape has served me very well. As I said, I feel ambiguous towards it. There are moments when it is really beautiful and others when it's kind of dark and gothic and quite frightening and wild. I have made it a kind of landscape with my imagination in a way, and it keeps recurring.

*Graham Swift also uses this notion of something being archaic or gothic about places.*

Yes, he uses it. Graham Swift's *Waterland* is set in a very, very particular piece of landscape. It's a piece of landscape that is very flat really. It used to be unusable marshes. I think it was actually in the 17th century that drainage started to be done, and so it started to be an area that could be cultivated, the Fenland, and it is in that area in fact that I have set the middle section of *Restoration* where the character goes and helps his friend work in a bedlam. Again it's this question of a landscape which is "outside" of the rest of the country, in fact outside the orbit of the court, almost outside consciousness. It's in fact as if landscape didn't exist in

people's minds because few people have come there... So it's perfect for that.

*Since you are referring to Restoration, why did you choose this historical period which is not very well-known, at least for French people?*

I started with the notion of something contemporary, but I didn't want to talk about some of the things that I found really oppressive in the 1980's. Being a child of the 60's or a student in the 60's, I sort of grew up with this idea that things were going to get more equal, that society was going to go in a certain way which had to do with equal opportunities, all those things that we believed in the 60's, and of course would be absolutely proved wrong in the 1980's, particularly if you lived in England under Margaret Thatcher. People wanted to show off their cars, their designer clothes, all their material possessions. There was a sort of terrible parade going on in the 80's, the vestiges of which are still with us. That said, I don't think I'm taking an extreme moral stance against things, and I think, as a group, writers were just as guilty as anyone else, they wanted to be paid better, etc. That was enough to make me think I want to explore a period of time where these things are going on, and how does the individual survive in them? Does the individual sort of float up, can he hold on to what he believes in or is he lost? And I didn't want to write about contemporary England; it seemed to me that a lot of people were doing that already. So when I went back to the Restoration, which is a period of history that I knew quite well, I found some parallels which were enough to get me going. It seemed to me that at that time, the King was a sort of almost mesmerising light that people watched, everybody had their eyes on the same thing; they wanted something of this light to fall on them. And I thought this was a very good metaphor for how we regard money, so the story came out of all my thinking about that, and then it broadened out way beyond that into I hope more universal things about time itself, about a tendency, when things become painful, not to want to see them. There's a moment in the book when Merivel, the central character, says "you know I've seen the night—his work as a doctor has been very dark, very painful to him—I've seen the night, and now comes the morning," and from then on, he doesn't admit that night is ever going to fall again, and he gives up medicine and starts redecorating his house, which was sort of the pattern of some people's lives at that time. And then of course, he realises that the darkness will come again and it's getting to be a darkness much more frightening than any he's ever seen.

*A number of characters in your novels have problems concerning physical disgrace or some difficulties to cope with life. Merivel is disgraced*

*physically, as is forcefully asserted by himself at the beginning of the novel. Mary Ward is also in a way a kind of ugly duckling, and the heroine of Sister Benedicta is not exactly favoured by nature either. Some other characters, for different reasons, are also marginalized. So why do you choose that kind of characters?*

I could say anything, couldn't I? Writers often rationalise tendencies that they have, and say "Oh well, I did this for a particular concrete reason." One doesn't necessarily know, in the kind of concrete way that readers hope, exactly why something is so in a novel. Maybe one can see it more clearly later, not necessarily at the time of writing. It has to do with a feeling that I have that people who are not valued or are marginalized or experiencing difficulties vis-à-vis mainstream life in some way are likely to have a more unique and original perspective on life. And I believe that's what I'm after, this voice which is coming in from the wings, "dans les coulisses," looking at things, emphatically not on the main stage but from this kind of... tangent, a little bit like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern look at *Hamlet*: the play is going on but they as minor characters are getting quite a different vision of what is happening both to them and to the supposedly central protagonists. I think it's what I'm striving for. With the character Ruby in *Sister Benedicta*, the reader probably starts off by thinking that he or she is going to get very weary of the company of this rather fat woman who tramps round this little area of London and doesn't do much, is not educated and all these things. And I think that actually, on the whole, this character is greatly loved and quite soon into the book, because through her humour, which is quite intense and quite sharp, and through her self-deprecation, you get a view of London, of her life, of her treatment by her family and so forth, that you don't expect. She redeems herself from inside out, so by the end of the book you have come to feel some affection towards her. In some sense, it's a small salvation but she's found it... This idea of the thin person inside the fat person that is trying to get out, I think there's some element of that. And the certainly huge element of the "trapped" person inside what the world sees in both Ruby in *Sister Benedicta* and obviously in Mary Ward.

*To turn to Restoration, how did you deal with documentation, with research work, how did you manage to free yourself from a mass of sometimes rather fascinating information, in order to create fiction or to transmute it into fiction?*

Well I started with the Pepys diaries which, if you're going to write about that period of the 17th century, is the only place to start. The thing about Pepys is that he had an appointment at the naval office, and so he

had access to the king and therefore to everything that was going on at court.

So he's a wonderful spy, if you like, into 17th-century court life. But he's also very interested, and interesting, about every facet of life, from the river to the theatre, to what's going on in the musical world, to various trades and industries. He's a man of intense curiosity, intense energy, and if you try to follow Pepys, he takes you everywhere, he takes you right through English society at that time... So I followed him for a while. And then, once I had decided what my story was, there were all those areas of research that I had to do, research into medical treatment of that time, research into how mad people were cared for, research into sort of simple things like food, dress and costume and how the court was arranged and all that. So I had a long period of research which I mainly did in America actually. I was working in America for a term, and actually it was at Vanderbilt University: they have an absolutely brilliant library there. So a lot of this material that I use in my book I actually found in the Vanderbilt library. I did probably about a year of reading and just sort of making card files and notes and then... This is a thing I believed in: if you're going to fictionalise a historical time, you need to do this research in a very thorough way. I'm not a very scholarly person, so I wouldn't do it as marvellously as a university professor, but I did it as well as I could do it for me, which was reasonably thorough, and then I think it's important to throw it away really... You've got your notes, you've got your index, you've got enough data... Because something else has to happen between taking on board this information and then being able to write the novel... I've described this as a kind of alchemy, a transformation which has to happen between the raw material, which is what you've researched, what you've found, and the imaginative thing. And I think that period of time also needs to be quite long, you need to sort of partly forget the research and yet be inspired by things that you've found to invent other things. And in *Restoration*, I played a kind of game with the readers, because a lot of the things that I found were very extreme, even just simple things like what people ate, very peculiar things, like boiled lettuce and cream and radishes for breakfast... There are some strange things which we think were really odd in our society going on, and so, for every strange thing that I found I thought I would invent some other thing, and I bet the readers would not be able to tell which is true, which is invented. And indeed they often think that the things I had invented were the ones that were true and vice-versa...

*Could you give an example?*

One classic example is the scene, quite early on in the book, where Merivel and his friend actually witness this man who has had a terrible

accident. There's a hole in his chest, and the beating heart is visible. And he invites Merivel and his friend to actually put their hands into the thoracic cavity and touch his heart, to discover that they could hold it quite firmly, almost squeeze it, and the man doesn't feel any pain... Which is an absolutely beautiful metaphor of something I wanted to say... but everybody believes that this is purely invention. In fact I was reading a life of William Harvey, the 17th century physician who discovered that blood circulates—actually, it was very interesting because there was no microscope, he couldn't see the capillaries, he couldn't just make the chain join up, but he realised that this had to be how it happened, without being able to verify it. I was reading this life of Harvey—not an autobiography but a biography—and it recounted this incident where Harvey exactly encounters such a person and is invited to put his hand in. I got onto a friend of a friend who is a heart surgeon and I asked: "Is this true that if you are able to touch an internal organ, the person does not feel pain?" He said "it's not that you don't feel any pain, you feel much less pain than on your external organs." The internal organs are not so sensitive to touch as our eyes, or our hands, or whatever. So this incident which appears extraordinary in the book is actually based on something which is allegedly true. Part of me wondered if I could believe it. I had it verified by the heart surgeon, but I would have used it anyway even if he had said no, this couldn't possibly happen.

*But you didn't know that?*

I did know that, yes. It's very well accounted for in Harvey.

*Could you give an example of what you invented or what you added?*

My invention in that scene is really not so much what happens, but the kind of astonishment and terror that surrounds it. It's an extremely useful moment for establishing something important in the character of these two people. Merivel is the one who does dare touch the heart, and his friend Pearce who is morally superior in every way, is the one who is afraid. What Harvey did was just a sort of gentle touch, whereas they put their hands right inside the body of the man to actually take hold of the heart... I invented taking it further, that's all. The other inventions just have to do certainly with food and house decoration and medical cures. There are various lists of ingredients that were used in medical cures and I invented others. There are also a lot of anachronisms in that book. I still occasionally get letters from Ohio or somewhere saying "this had not been invented by that time, you should take it out." But I don't mind them being there.

*I don't mind either; it's not a historical novel.*

No, it's not a historical novel, exactly. Soon after that book came out, people started to ask me to review serious scholarly books on Charles II or the 17th century, which would have been quite inappropriate. It's called *Restoration*, it's set in the Restoration, but it's my restoration, it's imagined.

*Did you invent the episode concerning the medicine that the King gives Merivel to reveal the truth?*

It's partly invented. The King did have this laboratory and he was interested in dissection; there is a famous scene there where he dissects a toad. In parenthesis, I think in England what most people remember about Charles II, is that he had an affair with Nell Gwyn, that he was a great womaniser, that he was very handsome, and that is all. The minute you start to research his life, you find somebody much more interesting: he was very restless, he was very clever, he was terrible with women. It was part of his restlessness. Good things happened in that time, as regards buildings, as regards music and so forth. The creative side of him established this laboratory. So I was interested in the work that he did there. There's an account where he states that it would be a marvellous thing if he could make this concoction: a truth-revealing substance in people. He would then be able to know who was plotting against him, and there were a lot of plots against him as you know. Maybe if he does it to somebody as susceptible as Merivel, it's going to work, and it does.

*Obviously, an important aspect of Restoration is science, new scientific discoveries leading to a new world outlook. Couldn't we say that Merivel partakes of two approaches, an old one, that of his time, (and its limitations), but also a modern one. How far have you conceived him as modern, I'm referring to what he says about psychiatry, the treatment of mad people, but also to his relation to art, to painting; why try to capture the essence of nature even though he cannot manage to express it fully?*

There has been a great deal of argument about this, because the 17th century specialists rightly said that this is completely unhistorical: how could these ideas have come to him, there was no precedent? How could he suddenly have gotten quasi impressionist ideas of how to render the view from his window. It was also told that his ideas about the treatment of his patients were too far in advance of their time. He is a modern man in certain ways, but the way that I defend this is to say, "wait a minute, what I've established here is somebody you can despise if you wish because of

his excessive nature". He is excessive in all senses, he is greedy, lascivious, he is not tactful. And it came to me that if this sort of excessive person, this restless nature, took up painting, which Merivel does in a sort of amateurish way because he is bored, he would not follow the rules of perspective, the idea of classical painting that prevailed at the time. He would try to find his own expression of his own internal chaos. His painting is an expression of Merivellian chaos and likewise with the cures that he proposes for the people incarcerated in the bedlam. At that time the main, really barbaric cure, was blood letting, and the letting out of body liquids of all kinds, and he logically points out, "why not let out sweat and why not let out weeping, shouting?" So he thinks that if you could get people to dance, they would make themselves very hot, and then they would sweat and you would be letting out supposedly the sort of bad humours, which is the idea behind blood letting. And also, if you played music and let them dance and sing and scream if they wanted, you would be letting out internal anguish in another way. It's not that he's suddenly leapt two hundred years and arrived in advance of Freud. It seems to me these were exactly the kinds of things that a man of that nature would think of. He thinks them up and they all think he is crazy, which he is in a way.

*He is in a way ahead of his time...*

He is ahead of his time, and I agree that there is some license taken there. People have taken me up on that point quite reasonably enough. That's my response to it. I can't stand it in novels where characters that you've grown to be accustomed to suddenly start to act out of character. What's more important to me is that these things he invents or suggests, are perfectly in character with all the rest of his chaotic behaviour.

*The idea of spectacle is interesting. The fact that he involves the insane people in a kind of dance. Dance has a lot of symbolic implications as well. But in Bedlam, the Mark Robson film, the mad people are led to put up a show to entertain the nobility, in a rather grotesque, ridiculous way, to make them appear as no less than animals.*

Sort of like a circus with the fat woman and the bearded lady.

*Yes, like a circus, exactly. So it's the exact reverse approach that Merivel uses.*

Yes, because they're not a spectacle. It's for them, the dance.

*How do you establish that distance between Merivel and his age? Are there any specific literary devices that you use in terms of character approach?*

I don't know whether I would dignify them with the name of devices exactly. My approach to that book was a difficult one in that I started with the idea that I would write it as a third-person narration. I did something like about fifty pages written in my voice, and it just seemed to me to be banal; it sounded like every other historical novel. I don't know about France, but in England, the term historical novel is quite pejorative really. It's a genre that one equates with superficial romance, it's not ever a genre that is deemed to be inquiring into anything. *Restoration* is a historical novel but it does not quite take the usual form of the historical novel. So that was a false start. I'm sure the quest for the voice of stories and novels relates to this search for a perspective from the edge of mainstream life. And then I had a second idea: to tell the whole story from the perspective of a minor character, the painter who becomes a spy by the middle of the book. I felt a spy was quite a good character to try and see everything. But then there were terrible logistical problems with telling the story from that perspective. I thought in fact, I had to have the courage to throw myself into being a character, into *being* Merivel. He is a man, and he lives in the 17th century. When I told people I was embarking on this, they said "you're crazy. How can you come by this? How can you imagine yourself into this mind?" I thought, well, it's like walking on a high ledge or something like this. Don't look down and just keep going. Once I had decided to do that, I thought I was just going to keep going because I was enjoying this. It seemed to me to be very enabling actually to be in the first person. It is a narrative device, or form, or mode that I like very much. In the book that I have just finished, I had exactly the same thing, again a false start: fifty pages written from an authorial, classic third-person narrator perspective. I hated it, I thought it was dull. My new narrator is also masculine, but a young boy. People also have said to me "well, you're mad again. How can you think yourself into the psyche of a thirteen-year-old?" But again, I've enjoyed it. This kind of displacement seems to be in my case quite enabling.

*Merivel is very convincing, or you're very convincing as Merivel.*

I wondered when the book came out if the women readers would say "yes, it's fine" and the male readers would say "no, you've got this wrong, and you've got that wrong", but it hasn't proved so.

*The other male characters are foregrounded: Pearce the Quaker in particular is a very striking, very effective character, acting as a kind of*

*moral conscience for Merivel. Conversely the women characters are on the whole rather ill-treated and mostly reduced to the status of sexual objects.*

They were ill-treated. Some people said to me “Why did you have to have a male?” I said, “well I wanted my character to be a doctor, to be a physician”. There weren’t any women physicians. They could be nurses, they could be helpers in medical professions, but they weren’t physicians because nobody would train them to be doctors. They weren’t able to have professions. Out of necessity they are a little bit fragile and in the background. But when we get to the middle section, this sort of dark section in the Bedlam, the women there, Eleanor and Hannah are quite strong characters. In fact—this is historically accurate—the Quakers, who didn’t believe in religious hierarchies or hierarchies of any other kind, were very advanced in the way they treated women in their societies. The women were very much treated as equals. And the women, Hannah and Eleanor, do the same work as Pearce, Ambrose and all the others. They’re all part of what we would consider as this contemporary-style team of people, all sharing responsibilities and duties. Those women are strong, and the strength and simplicity of those two people at a certain moment does strike Merivel as very important. And it does make him think, vis-à-vis his own child who turns out to be a little girl, that he will educate her to have an existence of her own which is not simply dependent on lovers or husbands. Whereas Celia, who is the King’s mistress, the root of all the emotional turmoil in the book, is treated extremely badly by everybody. That’s how it was.

*She’s also a rather negative character in a way. At one moment you seem to hesitate to transform her into a more congenial one, and finally you choose not to.*

I didn’t really want her to be negative exactly. She’s a pawn, she’s the little pivot around which this saga revolves, and then she floats out of the narrative. I felt quite tender towards her; she’s an innocent really, and she doesn’t have a very happy life. She’s the false focus of the book, and I didn’t want her to be too vivid. When this book was recently turned into a movie, this was the one element that caused the great difficulty. They wanted the character of Celia to be central, so, in a way, they turned the story into a romance, and it isn’t a romance.

*At one point you can see that maybe things will change. She is a sentimental girl, in a way, and the death of the bird is one element in the book that brings them together. And then again she becomes as*

*cruel as ever to him, and finally she's dropped out. The film is probably doing something wrong if it sets her as central character.*

I think it is doing something wrong; it unbalances it, and then how do you end it? If she's the focus of the story, where does the story then go?

*What part is played by Pearce in terms of Merivel's redemption?*

As you said earlier, Pearce is very much his moral conscience right to the end. Pearce dies about two-thirds of the way in the book, and he bequeaths him this silence. We all need silence in which to make decisions, and at the beginning of the book Merivel is a very noisy man. He's never even had a second of silence, and so the greatest gift his friend bequeaths him by dying, is for him to learn silence, for him to put himself into a space where he can think. At the beginning, he acts before he thinks, but at the end he's thinking first.

*Why did that theme, that motif of insanity become so important in the book, as specific locus, but also in terms of symbolic significance?*

It's important simply for a story-telling reason. That's where Pearce chooses to do his work, and he has a very paternalistic view of the insane; he thinks that they're like children—he has a sort of Christ-like view of them—that they're little children to be protected, not harmed, whereas as we know, mainly in the 17th century, insanity was equated with evil, and people who were crazy for one reason or another were deemed to be possessed by the devil. And my research has yielded the fact that the Quakers had a slightly more humane attitude to the insane. The conditions of the bedlam are still very primitive, and you still have the worst cases who were chained up and so forth. In the first third of the book, I think the reader is inclined to think that Merivel himself is slightly crazy, not seriously mad, but excessive in a crazy way. And then when he gets to this place, you start to see that his own craziness is actually a beneficial kind of craziness, he becomes a kind of Sainted Fool.

*You were talking about the coherence of the character. I think it's a much better choice to have him relapse in his faults, in his physical shortcomings, indulge in the pleasures of the flesh so to speak. If he had steadily acquired some kind of sanctity, it would not have fit with the image we have of the character.*

It's quite interesting in the course of the book that my emotional plan for him changed. When I was planning this out, I insisted on the influence

of Pierce, and the moral strictures that he places on the behaviour of the Stuart King. He endlessly says to Merivel: "Look! don't trust in these people, they'll betray you. They're not to be trusted. You must rid yourself of this ridiculous affection that you've got for the king because it will cause you grief, it will bring you to no good". I thought: "Yes! That's what he's going to learn. That's the way the book is going to go." Then I realised at a certain point—I don't know where exactly—that in fact I had created somebody whose attachments were very deep. And that's something that I think one likes about him, that he's incapable of ridding himself of that affection. And it's with him till the end, to his dying day.

*Indeed, if Merivel is fascinated by Charles II, you also give a rather positive image of that king. Is it simply to respect historical truth, or do you share that fascination?*

Well I think once you begin to really look at his life, you do find somebody who's actually clever who has a very broad-based mind: scientific enquiry, artistic enquiry, all balanced against his sort of reckless behaviour, treating women very badly, a sort of evasiveness vis-à-vis the government. People were not paid, issues that needed confronting were not confronted. But almost on a just scholarly level, you find somebody who really is very sharp, very aligned with what's going on, who wants to do things, who wants progress to happen, who wants to create beautiful new buildings, who wants England to be in the forefront of scientific discovery and so forth. And I became quite seduced by him in the course of researching him. The book only concerns the beginning of the reign. Things get much bleaker later on; he gets lazy again, and then he gets entangled in the wars with the Dutch, which is a disaster. He can't talk to the government, and politically it becomes disastrous really. But at that point he's a very interesting man I think.

*So you don't idealise him?*

Oh yes, he's idealised completely in the book. He has to represent three things to Merivel: he has to represent the father, who dies very early, and that's a very important moment in the book, the father who dies in the fire, then the King himself, and all that the King represents at that time, which is so new for people. Merivel tells the reader that he's lost his faith in God very early on, partly because of the death of his good parents that he sees as a sort of terrible act of cruelty. So the King for him becomes a kind of God-like figure. But this does not mean that he became a God-like figure for me! I think the reader feels that way very strongly, that the king is deified.

*At one point Merivel comes back to prayer.*

Yes he does, but it doesn't work for him. He's trying to imagine this sort of prayer going, and all he can see is this tiny little blip of light. But he thinks his prayer is a bit feeble, which it is.

*He seems to come back on his refusal of the notion of transcendence in the way he expresses it at the beginning of the book.*

Yes. In terms of being able to write that book, it was important to me that he does lose his faith early on, because I thought the most difficult thing about writing a story set in the 17th century, particularly a first-person narration like that, is that people's mind were very very informed by faith, and it, I think, influenced all the decisions they made, the way they behaved, the way they thought about the world, everything. So in order to be able to see, to imagine Merivel in a truthful way, I had to dismantle that, to a certain extent anyway.

*Contrary to Restoration, Sacred Country is a polyphonic novel which alternates between an omniscient, almost authorial, voice and various subjective voices. Could you comment on this shift in your strategy?*

It's a very complex story, and I wanted a complex way of telling it. It's a story about a little girl who believes she's not a girl but a boy. And so, the central strand of it is that she undergoes this thirty-year struggle to alter her gender. And the complexity of that story alone, some of which I gathered in fact in my research period by talking to transsexuals, and that extraordinary layer upon layer of agony they suffered, was just bewildering and striking. It almost made me believe that I couldn't encompass this subject. Then I thought that I'd do it because I wanted to do it, because I saw it as something very interesting in itself. So I wanted to find a form where this complexity not just of Mary's life but of all the things surrounding Mary, would be echoed. So I chose a three-voice narrative, one of which is Mary's, straightforward. Not that it is quite straightforward, but it is Mary talking, right from her childhood till the end of the book, when she's about 30. And then the second voice is me, if you like. It's a kind of knowing voice who's able to flit from place to place, and see everything and understand what people are feeling and thinking and looking like. So it's a kind of locating voice for the reader. And then the third voice is the voice of Mary's mother, who's the character Estelle, who again is not completely mad but has a very fragile sensibility, and in the course of the narrative, she's put in and out of a mental asylum. And so the idea with her is that she always functions like a Greek chorus, as a crazed commentator,

not only of the actions, of what's going on in her family, and how she perceives Mary's life, but on what's going on in England in those times between 1950, when it starts, and 1980, when it ends, which is a significant period of my own life. There are acute changes in the landscape, in the way people saw the world, their access to what's going on and so forth. So I thought with these three voices perhaps I could convey some of the complexity of this dilemma.

*Are you happy with the French translation of the title? What did it mean to you originally? Because the problem is not only with Mary, all the characters are seeking some kind of sacred country.*

It was explained to me that the literal translation, "Pays sacré" or "Terre sacrée," would suggest something just uniquely religious, so that was not what I wanted at all with the title in English. It has three meanings really: the country of the self, body-soul, which is in Mary's case abused by people and by life, but remains sacred to her and she has to undergo this alteration in order for it to be made whole. So there's that, the sacred self. There is this other question which relates to England, to one's own country about which one feels ambiguous. Things haven't gone too well in the late 20th century, indeed they haven't gone well for any of us in Europe really. Yet, it's very difficult to get rid entirely of one's feeling, of this sort of preciousness or sacredness of one's own country to which one is, despite everything, extremely attached. There is also this element which is much more kind of light-hearted, of country music, which is a slightly weird element in the book but in fact very important. Walter, the character who's also destined supposedly to live in this little village for the rest of time, discovers that he's got this wonderful voice and actually makes this kind of pilgrimage out of England to America, to become a country western singer. By circumstance, he also, through his journey, enables Mary to go there and start a new life as Martin.

*It seemed a bit strange to introduce that story of someone who wants to become a country musician, but in fact, it enlarges the scope of the book, which might have been too closed otherwise.*

I think it would have been closed and also very glum (this is the word that my editor really finds amusing, "glum"). This gives it a surprising little edge somewhere. I was listening to country music when I spent some time there—in fact that period of time when I was doing my research for *Restoration* in Tennessee—and that part of me just wanted to use this country music material. But I think that country music is still so popular because it concerns very raw, basic emotions about love, about betrayal,

about loss, which do inform everything. There are very raw things happening in that book, and country music is an appropriate expression for these things.

*“The Cupboard” also is a story about closure. Why do you favour that theme?*

I am interested also in the idea that we have one life and it goes on a certain direction which is determined mainly by things completely beyond our control. But we also at certain moments have a very acute sense of the person inside, the person we would like to be, who is more intelligent, wiser, more circumspect, whatever we want to be, funny, or clever. All these things you want to be. And there are moments in life—I think that most people would probably agree with this—where this person, the interior person, is present in the room. And there are many moments where that person is buried, is enclosed exactly. So the idea that my characters make these journeys, often quite painful, not always, but often quite painful, which lead them towards realising or getting nearer to the person they would wish to be, is I think an eternal subject.

*In some stories, you deal with the relation between art and life, with art being presented positively as in Restoration for instance. In “The Garden of the Villa Mollini,” the garden represents artistic creation or the recreation of nature, at the expense of the life of the artist. How far do you see that as a metaphor?*

It’s really an observation on the lives of artists. By artists I don’t necessarily mean painters but all people who create, writers or people who give themselves to one art or another. Very often, these people in their personal dealings are quite cruel; creativity is sometimes bought at a great price. There is a lot of dereliction going on and around artist’s lives and in fact their work is absolutely superb, but their personal life is affected, other people are suffering and so forth. So the story is a look at that really, it’s a look at the way in which things and other people are sacrificed in order for artists to produce.

*It is the same theme which is dealt with by Poe in “The Oval Portrait.”*

Yes.

*A few words about your last book, The Way I Found Her?*

I wanted to write an urban novel. I know *Sister Benedicta* was set in London, but it’s a very small area of London for this enclosed little story. And I didn’t want to set another novel in London. The other two cities that

I know quite well are New-York and Paris. And Paris seemed to me to be perfect for the two things I wanted to express, perhaps the two things that actually draw people to cities. One is the enchantment in life, the richness of experience in cities; the other is this terrifying aspect of cities. So this is a story about a boy who is taken to Paris. He's thirteen, in other words, one toe in childhood, one toe in the adult world. And it's exactly at this moment that he arrives in Paris, and certain things happen to him which are extremely significant, and which can change his life forever.

*Wasn't it difficult (foolish) to think that you could write from the perspective of a 13 year-old boy?*

Not to me. Isn't this one of the prime tasks of the novelist, to empathise sufficiently with people unlike herself to be able to 'become' them in a narrative? And we can all remember what adolescence is like: the fragility of one's knowledge, the terrifying swings of mood, the loneliness... and this was a way the story had to be told—from the point of view of the 'confused innocent', the boy from rural England, who arrives in this glamorous world of the 8th Arrondissement in Paris knowing nothing, and learns, in two months, more than he's ever learnt about the world in fourteen years.

I also decided that the kind of *acceleration of time* that one experiences as an adolescent (everything happening faster and faster, so that one is almost never in control either of one's feelings, nor of events as they unfold) was perfect to how this narrative unfolds, with a kind of 'roman policier' at its centre, with the boy, Lewis, acting as amateur detective.

This said, I believe this book draws the reader in only if that reader can believe absolutely in Lewis and forget about me, his creator, entirely. Readers who aren't able to do that won't be interested in the book. The voice is nine-tenths of the whole—as it was in *Restoration*.

*Where will you go next? Have your struggles with this adolescent voice worn you out?*

Not really. I think I will always be tempted by the first-person narrator who is distant from me in age or place or time. My next novel is going to be set in 17th century Denmark, in the reign of King Christian IV. It will have a young musician as its protagonist and will be a novel about how, in the wake of lost love, the human mind is disposed to embark on a philosophical quest for meaning within human existence.



