

An Interview with Gail Jones

08/03/2016

PG CWWN is proud to present

Unfolding Time with Gail Jones: an Interview

by Valérie-Anne Belleflamme

Gail Jones is the author of two short-story collections, a critical monograph, and the novels *Black Mirror*, *Sixty Lights*, *Dreams Of Speaking*, *Sorry*, *Five Bells* and *A Guide to Berlin* (longlisted for the 2016 Stella Prize). She is currently Professor of Writing at Western Sydney University.

V.B.: Over a timespan of twenty-five years you have achieved recognition as an important female author, not only on the Australian but also on the international literary scene. Your fiction has been translated into thirteen languages; it has, among other distinctions, been longlisted for the Orange prize, and has won many prizes including the Nita B. Kibble Award. These two mentioned literary prizes all share a particular interest in work produced by women. To what extent has your increasing international readership, with its specific expectations and demands and also with its diverse national and cultural backgrounds, influenced your own writing as an Australian female author? Has there been any evolution to your views about the role that female writers play, or ought to play, on the literary scene and marketplace nowadays?

G.J.: Imagined readership is not something I attend to in the writing of my fiction. I feel I have a commitment to the integrity of any project – its internal logic, such as it is; its wish to create a vivid and cogent world; its dedication to a spirit of openness in human encounters – these rather abstract principles guide my thinking and writing. The desire to recommend oneself as an exemplar of any kind seems to me a paralysing model of literary production. I also feel very humble about my own work – always hoping simply to “fail better” with each text – and try to detach as much as possible from the peculiar value system of prizes. I’m of course conscious of my role as a woman writer – but also see this more as a ground of possibility, as it were, than a determination of content or a fixed subject position on the world.

V.B.: Your latest novel, *A Guide to Berlin*, is named after a short story by Vladimir Nabokov. Interestingly, in the last section of Nabokov’s ‘guide’, the narrator, while watching a child observing the inside of a pub, muses in what appears to be a moment of revelation: “There is one thing I know. Whatever happens to him in life, he will always remember the picture he saw every day of his childhood from the little room where he was fed his soup. [...] I have glimpsed somebody’s future recollections” (Vladimir Nabokov. 1976. *Details of A Sunset and other Stories*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 98). What is it that appeals to you in this idea of future recollections, which seems to crop up repeatedly in your more recent writing – I am thinking in particular of the last chapter of *Five Bells*, in which this forward-backward movement in time, and the verbatim repetition of the phrase “will remember,” is particularly striking?

G.J.: Yes, you’re right: this is a preoccupation of mine. What moves me about the conclusion to *A Guide to Berlin* is that the ‘guide’ imagines that the little boy eating soup will remember *him*, with “(my) empty right sleeve and scarred face”. There’s a lovely tenderness here: the narrator of the story imagines that his own mutilated body will be recalled by the child in the future, registered in its moment and location, preserved in a kind of delayed

understanding. This encapsulates one of the truths of our relationships, that we know each other materially, through real-time contact and presence, but also immaterially, in recollection and the mysterious persistence of word and image traces. So this moment at the end of Nabokov's story captures something essential about the way people matter to each other, and how we must cherish those apparently inconsequential encounters. It's a small thought which recognizes the capacity of the ordinary to constitute memory and the apprehension that there's a temporal and even metaphysical dimension in which, as Nabokov puts it earlier in his story, "every trifle of our plain everyday life will become exquisite and festive in its own right." In phenomenological and existential terms we're always in a forward-backward rhythm, not often fully here in the present moment – or rather our present is inflected and intercepted by the past and the future, pleated and folded. Likewise if we were to see our contemporary world with the eyes of the future, we might see it suddenly aestheticized and made endearingly strange.

V.B.: In some ways *A Guide to Berlin* can be considered a companion-piece to *Five Bells*. Indeed, both novels narrate the coming together in one city of individuals carrying very different childhood stories and national histories. However, whereas (in *Five Bells*) the five characters meet unknowingly and form a community on the level of discourse, the six international travellers in *A Guide to Berlin* form a less unwitting literary community, based on a mutual passion for Nabokov's oeuvre. Significantly, both communities experience a terrible fate, characterised by loss, grief and mourning. In a sense, it is only through your knitted readership that a certain type of community seems to re-emerge in the larger world. Hence my question: what redemptive narrative responsibility does the writer wish to shoulder in the face of this sense of the precariousness and ephemerality of communities in the actual world?

G.J.: That's a difficult question. Communities are indeed precarious, and *A Guide to Berlin* is perhaps a pessimistic take on capacity of narrative to establish genuine community. But I hope too it's affirming random beauty, the mystery of patterns, and a final insistence that we share deep pleasures in language, story and friendship. One of the differences between the texts is the Japanese lovers – they are characters not damaged or enigmatic in the way the others are, but have been rescued by love, and are joyful and artistic. The Japanese perception of the fleetingness of things is for them both an explanatory mode and a sense of meaning – this is 'redemption' on a small scale, if you like. The film theorist Siegfried Kracauer talks about "the redemption of the real" through acts like photographic looking: this was the kind of thing I had in mind. Particularized redemption – and not as a general project. I like to think this book honours the final irreducibility of other people. We think we know the characters in *A Guide*, because of the candour of their disclosures, but there is always something held back, perhaps even wordless, that lies at the centre of their being. Judith Butler talks (in *Giving an Account of Oneself*) about how it is the *opacity* of others that finally obliges us to construct a robust interpersonal ethics: I like this idea.

V.B.: The five characters in *Five Bells* come to Circular Quay on the same train. In *A Guide to Berlin*, two characters, the Australian Cass and the Italian Gino, are obsessed with trains, stations, the S-Bahn and U-Bahn. More generally, the characters in your stories travel a lot, not only through space but also through time. To what extent do you see time and space as being interrelated, interwoven, and perhaps even interdependent?

G.J.: I've been teaching an MA level course on "time" and reading a lot of philosophy. I'm genuinely intrigued by *space-time* (Einstein's formulation of the indisociability of space and time), but also by figures like Michel Serres and Bruno Latour – especially Latour's mischievous model of the polytemporal. We all exist in many times simultaneously. It seems to me that lyric time matters (the time of stasis in which Being seems to unfold before you), but so does lost time, accelerated or decelerated time, and the various metaphors we engage to try to personalize this experience (rivers, folds, spirals, etc.) also have an effect on our being-in-the-world. Superimposition interests me. Nabokov famously wrote: "I confess I do not believe in time. I like to fold my magic carpet, after use, in such a way as to superimpose one part of the pattern upon another. Let visitors trip."

As to trains: in western modernity trains radically over-signify – speed, industrialization, even the holocaust – and this fascinates me. I like the fact that trains, seen at night, resemble old-fashioned film-strips, an image I discovered Nabokov also loved (the tram on a bridge at night). They carry our seeing, as much as they carry our bodies; and somehow differently to cars, since they're haphazardly communal and allow us a corridor of to walk against the direction we're moving in. So yes, interdependence and interrelation is at the base of this kind of

knowing, and this principle offers all kinds of poetic and symbolic satisfactions.

V.B.: During one of their meetings, the six international travellers of *A Guide to Berlin* exchange their views on their favourite places in the city. There is the Berlin aquarium with its jellyfish and Nabokovian tortoise, the fountains, among which the enigmatic Medusa head in Henriettenplatz, the Stattbad, a former swimming pool turned into a club, and the Bebelplatz, which commemorates the book burning of 1933. Interestingly, Cass and Gino respectively choose, as their favourites, the trains (the U-Bahn and S-Bahn), and the ruin of the Anhalter Bahnhof (the former point of departure for Jews sent to Theresienstadt). More generally, your own guide seems to focus more on interstitial places and spaces, as well as on timeless worlds and monuments. Why this particular, non-touristic approach?

G.J.: These days Berlin is celebrated for its hipster life-style and artistic freedom. It has always been a space of avant-gardist ideas and art movements. But my first impressions of Berlin (and these have in part remained) were of its rubble, its melancholy and its devotion to memorials. It was enormously moving to contemplate Eisenman's 'Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe', which is of course almost entirely abstract, with no figuration, numbers or words. Moving through obdurate shapes – the 2,711 slabs – obliges solemnity, reflection, some awareness of what eroded or destroyed representation might be, some need to imagine loss in wholly unsentimental terms. This was one of the starting points for my text – the places that exist, in Benjaminian terms, committed to the philosophy of ruins. Wordless places, thinking places: these ought to be especially meaningful to writers and readers. This all sounds rather grim, so I took care to include the spaces that also animate and enliven us – the aquarium, full of visions – those that generate wonder and delight.

V.B.: Quite ironically, *A Guide to Berlin* is a successful story dealing with “the failure of any tale”, to quote directly from it. It invites its reader to silent propinquity, shared understandings and empathetic imagination, and yet, by the same token, it acknowledges the failure of its extraordinary community of six when it comes to narrativising personal truths and secrets: its quintessence then lies in all that remains hidden and unspoken. Thus, beyond the nod in the direction of Nabokov, *A Guide to Berlin* includes a reference to itself as a meta-discursive avatar of Gino's personal, undisclosed guide. To what extent does your novel strive to encapsulate your personal acknowledgment of the failure of words to fully come to terms with traumatic events?

G.J.: Ah, “fail better”, once again! I'm pleased you recognize that there's a commitment in this text to the principle of silent propinquity – the standing *with* an other, the sharing of delights and griefs. But it's true too that there are many “guides” spiralling in this book, including Gino's inaccessible text, which may (hypothetically) be the most reliable. I'm hoping not to stick to Nabokov so much as to ask: *what guides us?* When we are in a city not our own, what surfaces in us symbolically to make sense of the signs we encounter? And as you state, there's a space here too for the wordless world of trauma, which does not always enter into linguistic expression. In these ways, yes, it's a deeply personal book, though I'm not Cass (I'm much more joyful!) and usually retreat – shy and embarrassed – from autobiographical readings.

V.B.: You seem to share with Cass an obsession with snow. Indeed, “Snow” is the title of the first short story collected in *Fetish Lives*; there is of course Stella's recurrent snow dream in *Sorry*; Pei Xing in *Five Bells* is mesmerized by snow; and, in *A Guide to Berlin*, it turns into an obsession for both Cass and Gino. What is it that fascinates you so dearly with snow? Can you comment on your decision to approach it as an “aestheticizing medium”, as you termed it in an interview conducted by Eleanor Wachtel?

G.J.: Yes, I am dearly fascinated by snow. In this text I decided simply to indulge my own enchantment, since the gorgeous transmogrifications of snow still seem a secular magic to me. I didn't see snowfall until I was an adult, and found the experience crazily exhilarating. Deeply sensual, world-changing, a combination of wholly unanticipated physical and cognitive effects. There's no doubt a kind of naivety to this response, a daft unworldliness, but I've tried to preserve those first immersions in a new sensorium as an experience of the poetic. As a child, swimming in the ocean with snorkel and goggles gave me the same sensory overload and sense of imaginative reconstruction.

V.B.: In *A Guide to Berlin*, Gino takes Cass along to the refugee-camps on Oranienplatz. One year after your twelve-month stay in Berlin in the context of the DAAD Artists-in-Berlin Program, the media are certainly arguing

that 'the refugee crisis' has reached worse than ever proportions in Europe. What role should literature play, in your view, towards reflecting and interpreting the severities and the injustices of today's world-wide migration phenomena?

G.J.: The plight of refugees today deeply concerns me. Like many readers and writers I consider this one of the great moral challenges of our times: how to be welcoming and open, how to combat racism and prejudice, how to imagine a future in which we better share global resources and opportunities. The distress of refugees is heart-breaking to witness, even televisually. The Oranienplatz camp was a big issue in 2013 (I spent a bitterly cold month in Berlin in March 2013); but was dismantled at the beginning of 2014. So there's a strange untimeliness and repetition to my writing of this episode: I wanted to emplace a refugee narrative at the centre of the text, but as a kind of provocation, and one unresolved and uncertain. Now, it seems a much harder idea to contemplate, since there's a different sense of scale and urgency. I'm old-fashioned enough to believe that literature has an ethical charter, and that imagination has a moral dimension.