

**WRITING AFTER WOOLF:
AN INTERVIEW WITH MAGGIE GEE**

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Interviewer. Virginia Woolf is very familiar to us, whereas your books have not been translated, as yet. How do you feel in relation to Woolf? Do you feel like a literary daughter, or what?

Maggie Gee. I don't think I feel like a daughter, but I admire her hugely and I love her formal sense, that's the way in which I think she has influenced me most. I mean partly I recognised her world, I felt this is what life is like when I read her books, but I don't think one author's world view influences another so that influenced me just because I found her very sympathetic. But her forms I find so very beautiful. This idea of the model whose form reflects its meaning --so in *To the Lighthouse* in the form of the trip to the lighthouse, and *Jacob's Room* in the form of an empty room-- and I found this idea very beautiful and moving and I think that in my novels I like it to have a very strong, formal shape and I think that Woolf has influenced a lot of writers. Most women writers in our country don't have this attraction to form, I don't know why but I think it is true. So that's what I think is unusual about the way she has affected me. I just loved that as soon as I saw it.

I. So, it is really the form independently of any other consideration, perhaps a woman's general views.

M.G. No, that I realised more recently. I never noticed that she was a woman. I have to be honest, I didn't, because I hadn't noticed I was. As a writer, I somehow kept my gender separate from my writing and only recently I realised. Of course, the reason why she was important to me unconsciously must have been because she was a woman and a model, but I never made that connection, I can tell you I didn't, that's the truth. That's shocking but it's true. I read *A Room of One's Own* and I thought isn't it brilliant? Isn't it funny? Isn't it charming? I didn't think it was about me. But now I do. Yes.

I. In that way we belong more or less to the same generation, in a way, I mean. That's exactly how I felt about Woolf, I discovered her late.

M.G. Well, I loved her, when I was nineteen, but I didn't see this. I loved her as a modernist really.

I. So, when you started to write, you started out more like a writer, a male...

M.G. I didn't see it like that, I didn't see writing as gendered. And I think I was attracted to what you might call feminine/masculine writers: Laurence Sterne, Samuel Beckett, Nabokov, these playful-- Vonegut, I mean, I was always attracted to this tradition of writing, not the empirical, and these voices seemed like my voice, I didn't think of that.

I. It strikes me, still in connection with Woolf, not just in terms of form, as it were in larger structures, but also in terms of prose rhythms, on occasion in *Where are the Snows* I felt it was Virginia Woolf.

M.G. Rhythms, yes. I forget that, I forget the rhythms in her writing. I don't see why prose shouldn't be like poetry and I don't see why one shouldn't use rhyme and rhythm, and I think in a way that's also the way I feel. If I have the feeling I'm writing my body I don't necessarily feel it as a female body I'm just writing the rhythms of my body. It's very important to me, the rhythm. And, when I read I like to read it sometimes aloud because you can use the rhythms, and, if I sometimes hear someone else reading a bit, I think but it has a rhythm, I forgot that, thank you for reminding me, thank you.

I. When reading *Grace*, it reminded me of *Mrs Dalloway*, the way you connect your passages. You know there is Mrs Dalloway walking and then Septimus crosses her path, and we follow him. In your novel we follow Grace, and then Bruno. So you see, the way you linked your passages reminded me of Woolf.

M.G. Yes, I like to do that. I think also about symbolism. I forgot that. I love to make symbolic use of things, because it's fun, and Bruno was a symbol really though he felt real as I wrote him. You know splitting, maleness and femaleness. And also Arthur has got his male and female side together.

I. In terms of themes, would you agree that a dominant Woolfian theme in your writing is something that you actually referred to in that interview in 1984: the decay that time brings.

M.G. Yes, absolutely. That's what attracted me so much in her writing in terms of her sense of the world. She sees everything very bright and very vivid but incredibly fragile, she really sees it in the light of eternity, doesn't she? The most everyday thing has this curious light hanging above it, because you know the feeling that the dark is moving in somehow. Yes, I always felt that a bit. No, not in a depressing way but it makes things more extraordinary, I think if they are not forever, more comfortable. Yes, that's Woolfian, but I don't know if it comes from Woolf, because, I think that when I read it I had this feeling 'Yes, yes!' I recognized it.

I. You can still connect this with Woolf: she found writing a very painful process, it really wrung everything out of her. Do you find that writing is that sort of experience for you?, Has it the same effect on you?

M.G. At the end of a novel yes. I can't say I find it painful in the sense that I feel very fully alive when I'm writing, and I enjoy writing, I love writing, but I do feel very exhausted when I've finished a novel. Yes, very, very. I don't think I have this feeling which she had. I don't feel it. I feel 'Thank God, I've finished it!', and I'm tired, but it's done so it can't escape. I've talked about this with lots of other writers, we all feel we are going to die at the end of a novel, before we finish it the bus will knock us over, or the plane will crash just on top of the house, and there will be two days before you arrive at the end, so it will never be published. But, I also think --because my domestic life is busier than Woolf's-- in a way writing, although it's hard work, is also a rest, so there's a different feeling about writing.

I. After reading *The Burning Book* I had the impression that maybe there was a contradiction between the universal scope of the novel at the beginning --with the mention of Hiroshima and Nagasaki-- and the end --the 'final violence'-- when Lorna and Henry hold hands in Kew Gardens, and you produce a 'happy' ending. Do you yourself see a contradiction?

M.G. But, do you remember what happens?. They are holding hands, they are about to be reconciled and then the whole world explodes...

I. Yes, but while I was reading, I was thinking, how is the author going to make England explode in 1985?.

M.G. But, you see I didn't want to. I don't want to, because I feel that if you invent nuclear war, if you invent the unthinkable thing, then it somehow makes it more science fiction, fantasy-like, so rather than imagining nuclear war, I just wanted to use real passages from what did happen: Hiroshima and Nagasaki. There is nothing there that is not first person, it is all from truth, and I didn't want to, because to me this is unspeakable and unthinkable and I didn't want to invent it, I just wanted to show the book break, and then to say... and you know Kew Gardens are meant to be like an image of the world because there are plants and trees from everywhere, it's like a Garden of Eden, and they are trying to start again, like a tide version of the beginning, because they are old --well, they are not old, I thought they were old at the time because I was young, she's thirty-nine I think. But, then I wanted to stop the book there and say 'Look, this hasn't happened' it's just a book and say to readers, we don't have to have our world be wrecked and our little bits of hope and meaning disappear, so I didn't really want to retreat from the universal. I think sometimes the only kind of meaning, ways of happiness, we can manage are small, you can be sure only about very small things...

I think there are huge unhappinesses, but it is not often --except at great Carnivals or something-- that everyone is happy.

I. So, in a way it's a warning.

M.G. Yes, I think so because when I said I didn't want to invent it, that was where I thought I would try to wake readers up at the end, so they didn't feel there was this

inevitable progression towards doom, and so put down the book terribly depressed, and thinking they were all going to die.

I. Still on the subject of *The Burning Book*, could we say that if for Shakespeare “all the world is a stage”, for you “our lives are a novel”. Because, again and again you stop the narrative and you make the reader aware of the fact that what s/he is reading is only a book. For example, when Angela wants to write a book she is using the very books you are using.

M.G. Yes, I wouldn't do that now. I liked to do that very much, all those selfconscious novel techniques that point to the fictive and say ‘this is just a novel’. I liked that then, and also I think I did it partly because I found that book very hard to write. That was the hardest book to write, and in a way I wanted to share the difficulty with the readers, and I was trying it out just to see but I don't really like that aspect of it now. It was also a way of being honest, I suppose. It was a way of saying “this is what I'm trying to do. How do we tell stories about these terrible things? How do we deal with these things?”. I sort of think, I've got more attracted now to really telling stories, to somehow telling stories for people. Maybe, it's that but also you know, I'd studied, I'd done a PhD on that tradition of self-conscious novel, so, of course, I was influenced by that. I thought, of course, I'll try it, and, then I think it puts people off. You're always saying ‘Come on, wake up. It's only a story’. And that's intrusive. I love metafiction, but I'm moving away from it.

I. Did you do a PhD at Somerville?

M.G. No, it wasn't at Somerville. I did a first degree and second degree, a thesis at Somerville, on surrealism in England. I did a PhD, I was a research assistant, at Wolverhampton Polytechnic, which isn't a kind of Somerville...

I. We wonder if one might see one of the key ideas in *Light Years* in this paragraph belonging to *The Burning Book*: “Henry spent all his life yearning to find a pattern. The world was a complex timepiece, immeasurably slow and vast. But you somehow had to build it yourself, and it had to be built through time”.

M.G. No. Life was in mind, though, because I did find writing this book so difficult, and when I talked about the pleasure of writing, I don't think I felt that very much. I wanted to write *The Burning Book* because I had very strong feelings at the time about the nuclear weapons that were in England and the cruise missiles coming to England, and to me there was my politics there and this thing seemed to threaten every kind of meaning, and literature certainly. Then there was my writing, and I thought if I can't bring the two together, there is not much point in your writing if I can't write about the thing I mind about most so I had to write it, and then I told myself all the way ‘it's okay, you finish this, then you can write a love story’. So, that was the beginning, that was to do the opposite thing: to write a book that was just for the pleasure of the pattern. *The Burning Book* is all torn apart and *Light Years* is an object..

I. All this makes *The Burning Book* a very difficult book to read.

M.G. Yes, definitely.

I. Just as well you give us at least the family tree...

M.G. Yes, I had to do this.

I. To impose an order?

M.G. Yes, to impose an order.

I. Thinking again about, well connecting with the interview of '84, then, when speaking about *Light Years* you said you were concerned not to construct sexual stereotypes. Looking back at the novel now, I was wondering, would you say you were successful in avoiding stereotypes of any sort in that novel?

M.G. No, probably not. What I meant was a strong woman. I had a very strong woman, strong but obnoxious, but strong, and she's the heroic one, she's stupid but kind of heroic and Harold is feminine, reflective and timid, so that's what I meant, I think. But I always do the same thing in my novels. I always want to break people up and then put them back together again. This is the thing I love. I love the idea of bringing things back together. I also tried in *Where are the Snows*. Here I was more aware of trying with things like Mary Brown, the whore/madonna thing, and I did try, and sort of say 'Oh, but you can't judge sexuality from appearances' and Mary Brown is really the sexual one, she's just as sexual as, apparently very showily sexual Alexandra. You try, but when you're writing, something else happens. But I think I was trying. I do like to write strong women, not role models, just strong ones with room in the book, and my husband says I write weak men, which annoys him, everyone will think it's him! I don't try that, but I do try to give the women enough room to be something.

I. We think that one of the achievements in *Light Years* is the skilful way in which it is structured, could you comment on the way you planned it?

M.G. That was the most planned of all my novels --in fact, none of the others were planned like that. In the case of *The Burning Book*, I just had a family tree and dates. With *Light Years*, I planned completely, I had to, because otherwise they wouldn't have been in the right place at the right time, and then I wrote it very fast, really fast, so fast I won't tell you how fast. Because I knew exactly what had to happen and therefore it was a joy, I really loved it, I felt I was dancing. I loved writing that book. I wrote it in seventeen days actually! Because Nick was going around the world, so we were separated. He was going around the world to write a book, and I had no child, so I went to the British Museum, and I sat there from nine o'clock till it shut, and then I went to a cafe and had something to eat, and then wrote till bedtime, and then I got up. You can only do it for seventeen days. I wanted to finish before he came back, and I thought, maybe I can, and

I did, and the terrible thing was he came back a week late, can you imagine the temper I was in by the time he came back?

I. So in a way, it is your first spontaneous book.

M.G. Well, it was both spontaneous and very planned, because I had planned it in advance.

I. Yes, planned but if *The Burning Book* is something you *had* to write, now you wrote something you *wanted* to write.

M.G. Yes, but I also wanted to write *The Burning Book*, it's just that it was so hard, in the end I didn't, I just wanted to finish it which is different, I suppose. What I have always enjoyed is making a pattern, and in *The Burning Book* I didn't really know. I had to do it, so I couldn't have that pleasure, and I do love getting the rhythms and things, but in *The Burning Book* the rhythm is obsessive, it is very, too, neat, it was the thing I was like clutching to, in *Light Years* I really tried to unpick it a bit, I tried to make it freer because I felt it was throttling me, I tried to write straight after finishing *The Burning Book* and I couldn't get away from this dumpity, dumpity, dum book, so I left it for about --six months-- I don't feel trapped by rhythms any more.

I. At the beginning of *Grace* you write "If you are subversive, you may legally be watched", and later on you give this ironic comment "...this is England, for goodness' sake, and nothing ever happens in England." How do you link these initial statements with the end of the novel?

M.G. The end is supposed to be symbolic. Bruno is employed, as many private detectives are, by the British Security Services. They use private detectives to do jobs that they don't want to be linked with themselves. With private detectives as you know, there is no register, they can be petty criminals or whatever. The book was based on real life, on the Hilda Murrell case, and the dominant theory seems to be, among people like myself, that she was killed by a private detective, and there is a private detective who was down in the council at the time I was writing this book, and who was found convicted for sexually abusing his daughters, who had a record of violence and he had been watching the Sizewell protesters, so there is a theory that what happened to Hilda Murrell was a perfectly ordinary surveillance job that went wrong. She came back and found somebody there and because she was a very brave old lady, she didn't run away. I didn't feel I could write about a sexual abuser, I didn't think I could do that, so I tried to make him into somebody who was split. Maybe that was a bit unfair to transvestites but I was just really trying to say it's the image of a man whose female side is split off, but he's also, of course, an image of the split atom, and an image of our country which I felt was so split. You know the book begins with Arthur holding a baby in the garden, and they're one and it's one --that chapter is called One-- and I mean the book to go in a complete circle, the characters are apart, they are all apart, and Bruno takes over. Bruno becomes the dominant male figure, and the characters are all apart, none of them are together and

at the end they are all brought together. Do you remember when at the end of the thriller, Alfred would have shot Bruno, what he does is hold him as he held the child at the beginning, and I say he holds him like the father Bruno had never had. So it's as if Bruno could be refathered, as if that whole split state could be brought together. That was my idea, and the final one, so it's not a literal ending, I am trying to say that there is some possibility, that maybe if that child... because I see that all violence comes from bad childhood, I was very interested in Alice Miller at this point, so I made Bruno a battered child, so I wanted to say, if we could refather Bruno, if we could reparent people, something, maybe, this terror could be stopped. That was my idea. It was supposed to be an inverted thriller. The whole book is a thriller. I like to use genres, but then turn them, so I tried to turn them from 'bang, bang you're dead' to...

I. Were you trying to reproduce Hilda Murrell's death?

M.G. Yes, without being a journalist. I was trying to sort of give an image of what I thought had happened, but I found it literally unbearable. I thought somehow her death was so silly. Why should it have been so, an old woman, it was more shocking to me than any kind of murder, other than a child's, so I just wanted to say: we *could* rethink it. It *could* be made, it *could* have been some happy ending, it *could* have been different, because it was only chance. I thought it was chance, so chance could have been different. It was my way of... you always write books to save yourself, in some way. Somehow psychologically it was very soothing to me to write *Grace*, I felt very happy at the end of it.

I. You thought you were changing the world?

M.G. I knew I wasn't. I always know I'm not. Just, you can invent another alternative world. I know you don't.

I. According to information at our disposal, you wrote your first novel when you were eighteen..

M.G. Nineteen...

I. Sorry, when you were nineteen, but *Dying, in Other Words* was not published until 1981. Were you involved in other activities in the meantime?

M.G. Well, that novel I never published, that wasn't my first published novel. In fact, I wrote another novel as well that I never published. I spent those years.... I did two higher degrees. One on surrealism, and one on Beckett, Woolf and Nabokov, then I worked in publishing --not the smart end: Encyclopaedia packaging-- and when I finally... the PhD was a mistake, I think, apart from the reading, I loved the reading, but the writing was hard for me, because really I wanted to be writing fiction. I think probably now academic discourse has been changed quite a lot. I don't know if I'm right, but is it now more permissible to use an 'I' in academic writing. That's what I found so hard, everything

had to be impersonal, and it was as if I had to be an institution. That went against the grain always having to be confident and that was hard. So, when I finished that I thought 'Okay, no more', and I worked in hotels for two years in London, which was much easier curiously, you know, because I wasn't using my brain or my language, and the novel was published when I was thirty-two. I had written it seven years before so I was getting to the stage of feeling I must publish soon, I must publish soon. I just did not know how to go about it. I am sure that there are lots of people who never publish, who are very good. I don't think that all the things get published that are good, and obviously lots of rubbish gets published. It's partly keeping going and having luck, and I just had some luck...

I. Who published that first novel?

M.G. Harvester.

I. So you worked for a publishing firm?

M.G. Yes, I worked for another publishing company before I did my PhD., when I was twenty-three, twenty-five. Then I wrote the novel, and I didn't publish yet, and then I did the PhD.

I. It struck us that your novels contain a wide amount of erudite information, and information about the world in general: Bolivia comes in --in *Where are the Snows*-- and Mexico...

M.G. Well, I've never been there. Nick, my husband has and at least he could check it. I got it all from books. I was doing writing and travelling I wish I had been doing, really. I wish, I would have preferred to go.

I. So, does the research take up quite a bit of your time before you put pen to paper?

M.G. It did for *Light Years* and *The Burning Book*. They were the most research-heavy ones. *Where are the Snows* not so much, really, because a lot of it was the story of the people. But I love doing research. It's so lucky to be a grown-up, educating yourself in something you want to, not to teach, but to sit in a library reading is heaven. I really enjoy that. Actually, for *Grace* I did a lot of research. It's also a way of avoiding writing doing research.

I. You have rejected the label 'feminist writer'...

M.G. Joined together - yes.

I. Would you say that feminism is manifest in your novels?

M.G. Yes, I think it is. So many men, they see you're a woman and they see you're right and they know you're a feminist and they say: "the Feminist Book Shelf: Maggie Gee

- feminist will do", or they'll put us all together. It's a way of avoiding thinking. What they're saying is: "Men don't read this." people think you're rejecting feminism when you say "I'm not a feminist writer" and I am a feminist, of course. Who isn't, who is intelligent?

I. A pattern that seems to repeat itself in your novels is that of women deeply concerned to have children, sooner or later. Is this because you see that to write about women involves a longing for children, or is it merely consistent in terms of the particular characterisation?

M.G. Well, it's not conscious what I write about women. I think I wanted children without knowing it. I never realized I wanted children, I was busy. I'm part of that generation, my generation of women in England, we were the first generation to have this foolproof contraception and I know so many of my contemporaries forgot, and I did too, we just forgot to have children and now we find out. I was lucky and had a child... Of course I write about it and now that motherhood is being revalued in the media, it is superficial but at least it's in the media, there are images of mothers and children. So maybe this new generation of women won't forget.

I. Do you think we risk becoming sentimental in this connection?

M.G. I'm not saying women must have children that's why I say I've never thought about it as an issue. I don't feel that and in this book. I know... I remember Margaret Walters said to me.. but it's not a choice between Alexandra and Sally, you know the image of Sally and her baby could be said to be sentimental but, on the other hand, it's the first seven months of that child's life and that is when you are incredibly absorbed... and I did feel like that... I think I also wanted to say in this book, if the characters are representative of anything, that human beings don't care about the future, that we live as though the future didn't exist. That's why I think their sexuality's completely divided from their reproductive self because they're trying to say we can be young forever, we are individualists, that's all that matters, there's no collective life, there's no future, there's no one in the world but us, so that's why for them this issue of a child is so important because it's "Is there a future or not?" For them, there isn't, till, suddenly, Alexandra realises that they live in time and through suffering she starts to see that there is a world outside her own... I think I was rather hard on her really... They left their children and I think that if you leave your children, you're punished. What I mean is that if you leave your children, something happens to them. I do believe that actually it's not about what mothers do, it's about what our generation does to the next one: nuclear waste, for example, what we do to the environment. We are abandoning the ones who come afterwards because all we're thinking about is how we can have a good time. Alexandra does behave very badly towards her stepdaughter, she insults her sexuality, doesn't she?. She insults her feelings and it's an image of a woman who has no way of relating to other women. She is not in touch with her female self but I did mean it to be something more than parent-child, I did mean it to be that the same women who forget to have children are the selfish ones who don't care about the future - this isn't true but one is an image of the other in a sense and I suppose to me that's what Alexandra and

Christopher are, they are the archetypal bourgeois individuals who go into the world and buy it, try and buy it.

I. Your latest novel *Where are the Snows* carries two epigraphs. The quote from Villon is a question in the original French, but not in the title of your novel. Is this because Horace/Maggie Gee knows the answer?

M.G. I don't like novels with question marks! I meant both epigraphs to be comments and I always loved the view expressed there and to me it's time passing. The publishers and my agent said it was a hopeless title; everybody tried to get me to change it. The one that was suggested was *A Blinding Passion*, which is not that stupid actually because it is blinding in a way but, on the other hand, we wanted *Where Are the Snows*, of course. It was catchy. In America it's going to be *Christopher and Alexandra*, they just hated the other title and in the end I gave in in America because I don't see it.

I. This novel is about time past and time future, is this as a result of an interest in the workings of time -as was the case in your previous writing- or reflecting a new direction, i.e. futuristic writing?. Are you interested in that area of novel writing?

M.G. I'm not really interested in futuristic things. Not really. It was more an image of the present, the present seen as the future. It's just consequences really, I've never thought I've been interested in time as a subject, just in time as it affects people. People's lives are measured by it, people's lives fall away from it. I must say I was interested and appalled by the stuff about virtual reality, about those machines. Now they're just beginning and these are the applications one can think of now. And to me it's an image of replacing the world completely with fantasies so everything gets thinner, in the end you don't need to go to Buffalo, you don't need to travel at all. You can completely destroy Buffalo, you can destroy it because you have a vision, so to me plastic reality was the worst kind of thing.

I. In the 1984 interview we have already mentioned, you declare: "If you have any sense of a democratic art, then you want to make it widely available." How would you relate your own and Virginia Woolf's writing to the statement?

M.G. You see it's also split my sense of that. To me, it's a tragic split we have between literary and non-literary, high culture and low culture; I loathe it. And publishers talk about it: "Well, OK, we'll publish you in May. No, we won't publish you in May because we've got a good commercial title in there". You know, there's the commercial and the non-commercial. And I really try in my books, maybe it doesn't work, but I really try, not to put in literary references that matter. OK., they're for people who want them, but you don't need to know them and I try to have a clear texture, a clear surface, and I try to have a story, you know a real story with things happening and emotion. I want to do this but it doesn't work because I'm categorised still as a literary novelist and the books are beautifully produced but they're very high brow, the way the design is done, and I don't sell very well, I sell quite well for a literary novelist but I would love to be able to

sell, not just for the money, although the money would be lovely, but I really want to write for readers and I try so hard to write books that aren't just to be studied, or whatever, but you see, I remember this book *Where are the Snows*, the problem is because it has a clearer texture I think, and it's written in the first person and it's virtually a female subject: romance. But the problem is the literary editors look at it, and they think: "Oh, romance-woman author." And they don't really see it as a serious book. So they lose the top and they don't get the bottom, not the bottom, but you know what I mean, you fall between, because you don't fit. So my idea of a more democratic way of writing is a complete fantasy. It just doesn't work.

I. Because of the commercialization of art?

M.G. Because of the stereotyped way people think about writing, you know that the only books people can read are airport fiction but it isn't true, it isn't true. How could so many people have read the nineteenth century novels and loved them? Someone like Vonnegut sells. And Fay Weldon, she sells too so somehow it's possible but it hasn't happened to me yet. And it does make me sad, actually, because that is the point to me, the point is to try and make something that tells a story but one just has to keep doing it.

I. Over the last decade it may be said that there has been a blossoming of the English novel, have you any particular favorites among those writing in the UK today?

M.G. Alasdair Gray. 1982 *Janine*. I loved it. It's a very brave book but some people hated it. He links sadistic pornography with the nuclear weapons establishment in Britain. It's a very, very brave, experimental book and it also shows beneath a man who works for these weapons establishments. There is somebody who is so totally unprotected and locked away and in this central bit of the novel it just lets that come out. It's a wonderful novel. Who else do I admire? I love Anita Brookner - they're completely different. I mean, every novel I read makes me angry, I want to say: "No, you don't have to do it, please stop." And yet I think she's a wonderful recorder of pain and of the damaged ego, don't you? It's devastating. I do like a lot of Fay Weldon, a lot of Fay Weldon is really good.

I. What do you think of Weldon stylistically?

M.G. Sometimes, I think she's got a very distinctive voice, sometimes she has a very unusual structure. I think in a way she has written less well perhaps because she didn't get the prizes but she could get the sales and why should she bother?. She does sell and her books are very didactic. She really wants to tell her readers things about the way the system works, about the social security system but she has an even voice, I think. She doesn't care any more; she writes faster I think. I liked Angela Carter's short stories. I liked *Heroes and Villains* very much but I don't think she's interested in the overall form of the book. She has this fantastic, volatile wonderful imagery, hasn't she? But for my personal liking, I prefer books with more shape. I loved Rose Tremain's *Restoration*. I thought that was beautiful but I loved that one much more than the others. Who else?....

Graham Swift. I love Graham Swift. Of John Banville's I really admired *The Book of Evidence*. When I was a Booker Prize judge, I really wanted that book to win: the language is so beautiful. But the Ishiguro won, but that was a beautiful book too so that was OK! By the way, it was only for the second time in the history of the prize that there has been an all-male short list. A few people said: "This is a bit surprising." And one judge said: "The girls weren't good enough to be invited to the party this year." But the interesting thing was -and I think Penelope Lively made this point at the Booker dinner- that if there'd been six women, can you imagine the outrage? Can you imagine and yet six men was neutral. But it would have been so political.

I. Speaking of Booker, Angela Carter praised Kureishi's *Buddha of Suburbia* in an article on the novel published in *The Guardian* whilst it was unfavourably reviewed in the TLS. Carter welcomed what she saw as a "Non-Booker Prize winner".

M.G. Carter has been singularly unshortlisted for the Booker Prize considering her status in our country. Certainly she is the prime woman writer. People really notice that she's not on this list.

I. Timothy Mo was here in Barcelona two years ago and he was angry about the Booker Prize.

M.G. But he's been shortlisted three times!

I. Yes, but in the end, he says, there's always something.

M.G. I think he should be quite pleased.

I. As every new book comes as a surprise, we were wondering what you have in store for us?

M.G. I don't know.

I. What would you like to see translated into Spanish first?

M.G. I suppose this one [*Where Are the Snows*], because it's my latest. But maybe, otherwise, *Grace*. I don't know, I can't say ... *Light Years*.

I. In the interview you spoke about literature working against hate. From certain things you have said today, you give the impression of seeing literature as something sacred. Would you agree that you see it in those terms?

M.G. Yes, but also in a very personal way when I say it works against hate. When I write about characters like Bruno or Alexandra: I would not like them in real life. By the end of *Where Are the Snows*, I really identified with Alexandra. By the end of the book, I

didn't really want her to be punished, I meant to say that her death wasn't really killing her. I meant to say that she can rejoin in some way by understanding, she could rejoin the stream of people when they go across the snow. I have very boring dreams --every night it's supermarkets-- but when I was writing this book, I had an extraordinary dream: there was a medieval house and I saw this small world where everything grew and there was a --you know how in dreams you think you understand something wierd. And outside, there was this enormous scale of people and it was so beautiful. I woke up with such a feeling of happines, and I wanted to put it at the end of the novel so really I wanted to put Alexandra into that. It was like an acceptance of her but, of course, reading the novel one doesn't know that.

I. Isn't it terribly difficult to write about somebody who's so different from yourself?

M.G. Maybe she's what I would like to be. Don't you think? Most of us spend a lot of time trying to understand, trying to adapt. Wouldn't it be lovely to be Alexandra, sometimes? I'm probably writing what I want to be and then telling myself why it's no good.

Barcelona, 31 October 1991.