

Interview with Janette Turner Hospital

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Author: Jorgensen, Cheryl

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CJ: Janette Turner Hospital is one of Australia's finest writers. She has produced eight literary novels, one crime novel- published under the pseudonym Alex Juniper - and four collections of short stories. Bom in Melbourne, she spent her formative years in Brisbane where she was educated, studying for her first degree at the University of Queensland. Here she met her husband, Cliff Hospital, and travelled overseas with him, living in India, England, Canada and America. Currently she is Carolina Distinguished Professor of English at the University of South Carolina- quite a leap from a Primary School in Brisbane. . .

JTH: True, via Canada, England, India...

CJ: And your husband is here today, looking as though he could be one of the heroes from your books ... has he ever appeared in your work?

JTH: No one in real life appears directly, but most characters have points of origin in real life. They're usually accretions of several real life people's components ... so I would say there are traces of him here and there.

CJ: Can you tell me where?

JTH: More in the short stories, actually; I was always fascinated by a story in Cliff's family.... W/hen his grandparents left England, they had a baby, and their parents gave them a gold coin, a half-sovereign, I think it was. They put it in the baby's hand. That baby died and was buried at sea on the voyage out, and another baby was bom on the voyage out. And so the short story, 'Uncle Seaborn'... Seaborn was the name given to the baby born on the voyage and this gold coin came down through the family to Cliff's sister and I've always been fascinated by that story. Particularly the hardships in women's lives.... Can you imagine? In a nine-month sea voyage a baby dies and another baby is born. It just boggles the mind. No matter how rough we women have had it in our time, nothing could compare with that.

CJ: All of your books feature fabulous women who cross borders, are independent and creative. Now, do you have a favourite amongst your heroines?

JTH: Oh ... all the feisty ones, I think. And that's because I wish I had that degree of independence and guts ...

CJ: I find that rather amusing- that you wish you had that feistiness, because you're certainly a feisty writer. And this is why so many women passionately love your writing; and so many more young women, who haven't yet read your opus will passionately love it.

JTH: Well, thank you Cheryl. In actual truth, though, in my High School group of six close friends- four women and two men- girls and boys in High School days- two of the women were suicides in their twenties, all of us, for various reasons, felt quite vulnerable in a way.... We were the first in all of our families to finish High School, even, let alone go to university. And, there was always a great fear, that I would be one of the ones who would go under ...

CJ: Who had the fear?

JTH: Who had the fear? I did.

CJ: When you say, 'go under' ... do you mean that you thought you would commit suicide?

JTH: Not exactly that. I mean, I never felt that I would be at risk of suicide, but those of us who were breaking new ground were pretty much alone in our fields. There wasn't much back-up, there were a lot of patronising male put-downs, so I was very aware that you might go under- or you had to be very, very tough to make sure you didn't. And so, most of the female characters in my novels are actually bifurcated, in that there's one who doesn't make it and one who does. There are three figures who, I guess, represent aspects of myself and the one in the middle was the sane, normal one. But I always feared that I might fall under, and to safeguard against that I'd better be daring and always face down fears. Which has been my path, actually, so I am delighted to find that you think it funny that I don't think myself feisty, when I've always been afraid of the other extreme.

CJ: Well, you always learn something unexpected about writers when you talk to them. Your books led me to believe that you were all of those strong women.

JTH: Well, the thing is, I am all of those women ...

CJ: I guess the stand-out is Elizabeth Carpenter. She is a really powerful woman. I loved her because she subverted that whole novel, *The Tiger in the Tiger Pit*. I laughed my head off at the end of the novel. And it was a very satisfying laugh ...

JTH: Well actually, she was loosely based on a woman I only met once, but had heard about for a long time when I was a librarian at Harvard, while Cliff was doing his doctorate there. A fellow-librarian was an Englishwoman and she and I became very good friends. She never married and she finally went back to England. And during the many years I knew her, she would talk about her parents. Her father was the Victorian patriarch and all her life he made her nervous.

CJ: Her name was Elizabeth, too.

JTH: Yeah. Do you know, I never thought about that. My friend's name was Elizabeth. I'm not even sure what her mother's name was. And she always thought of her mother as this wonderful, gentle person who put up with her completely tyrannical father. And finally, when our son was three, we went across to England and we stayed with Elizabeth. Her parents by that time had retired to Exeter; we camped nearby. But we had dinner with them. And I remember the father

was just as tyrannical as Elizabeth had always described him. He scared our three-year-old son and outraged me, by roaring: 'Eat your crusts!' and this was at a guest at the table. And Elizabeth's mother was this wonderful mellow, gentle person.... He would sort of point, or snap his fingers, and she would quietly get up and cater to his every whim. I thought Elizabeth had always portrayed him as a tyrant who bossed around her meek and nervous mother, but, over the course of this dinner, I thought he is totally dependent on her. She is the person who keeps this family together. So I told Elizabeth this as my profound insight into her family dynamic, and she looked at me and said: 'Well of course, we've always known that/ That the really strong member of that family was the mother, and so that's what I based it on. Elizabeth had a sister who'd had a complete breakdown and who lived in an asylum, so the book is partly based on that family.

CJ: I loved Elizabeth for two reasons: first, because she was a complete subversive; second, she was a sublime musician.

JTH: Well, I think lots of women of our generation learned to be quietly subversive as the best route to take.

CJ: You're not going to tell me who your favourite heroine is because they're all your favourites, but I must mention the fact, for those who are not familiar with all your works, that many of your novels have very strong references- in fact, almost love songs- to the State of Queensland, to Brisbane, and to the places around Brisbane. Now is this because you sometimes feel homesick when you're away, or is there a creative reason for this?

JTH: Both, I guess. For many, many years, I've been coming back every year. And, you know, I do passionately love the rainforest and Queensland beaches ... I discovered the love of the Outback much later, but I love that, too. We're staying in Caloundra now, and last week we were staying in the city and walking the river boardwalk every morning and I do think this is a stunningly beautiful city in a stunningly beautiful State, with which I have a lifelong love affair. And it's not just for plot reasons ... I get this warm, creative feeling when I think myself back into Queensland space. So even if you take *Orpheus Lost*, which, initially I didn't plan to have any Queensland in at all ...

CJ: Is that right? But the Daintree ... that was a perfect place for the Jewish family who were survivors of the Holocaust.

JTH: Well, I can't stay out of it is what it amounts to. I've got to create that thought space around myself, because that's where, psychically, I feel at home.

CJ: One of the things that I must compliment you on is that you tackle the hard issues ... a lot of writers don't. Now, you've been educated in Medieval Studies. Why haven't you written a book set in the Middle Ages?

JTH: I think because I would be too intellectually lazy to do the degree of research that you'd have to do to get every detail of a historical novel right. But also, I'm really much more interested in the present. I'm quite a political animal as well as a gardening animal. I love the rainforest because I love the vegetation. I am a passionate gardener. But I'm also very, very

interested in politics, so it's always what is the huge main topic ... and when I was writing *Orpheus Lost*, there was the risk of bombings and terrorism but, simultaneously, and of huge political importance to me, the horrendous over-reaction from the other side. That fear made people willing to inflict torture on anyone with a Middle Eastern background. I'm a member of Amnesty International, so I get information that is very disturbing. And it's usually the issue that grabs me first. And then the landscape of Queensland, that insists on creeping back into it. But at the time, it became politically relevant; hugely, too, because while I was working on the novel, I was back in Australia each year and I visited Villawood in Sydney, with someone who was working as an Immigration lawyer. And I saw that Australia was equally implicated in this, in detentions- hopefully not torture, but nobody is quite sure what went on at Baxter all the time.

CJ: I think the detention places, the buildings themselves are a form of torture, don't you?

JTH: Oh God, it was one of the most depressing things I've ever done. But that was detention at Villawood, and it did make a big impression on me.

CJ: Well it's a very powerful novel, *Orpheus Lost*, your latest. What are you planning on writing now? I know some writers don't like talking about their work until they've produced it, so I realise that you may not want to talk about it, yet.

JTH: It hasn't taken shape yet. The reason that I can't talk about it, in a way, is that it's all rather fuzzy in my mind. I have a sort of sense of what I want to do, but until I get a first draft finished, everything's up for grabs and might change. So to have something on the public record- when it might change utterly- I'm afraid of jinxing the whole process, if I talk about it.

CJ: Well that's interesting. A little superstition creeping in there.... But I wanted to ask you if your characters are fully formed in your mind before you have even started writing them, or do they grow in different ways and sometimes surprise you?

JTH: Both, is the answer to that. When I begin there is always a collision with an image and a burning question that I feel that I've got to figure out an answer to. So the novels, in a way, are always about my exploring and trying to find an answer to the question. In *Orpheus Lost*, it's: what is it that leads people to other human beings? How do you explain this? But images collide within it. In that case it was the image of standing on the subway platform in Harvard Square and listening to a street musician playing. And I thought: There he is, there's Orpheus in the Underworld. And literally in the underworld ... so that was the image. So I spent a lot of time thinking about the topic, reading about it, the whole horrible Abu Ghraib crisis and that sort of thing. And beginning to mentally mould the characters ... I usually have my main characters thought out a fair bit before I begin writing about them; but yes, they do take the reins and run once I start writing. And I've often had the experience where I've planned, intensely, for a certain thing to happen, but by the time I get to that scene, the characters have become autonomous and they announce what they will or won't do.

CJ: Well, they're obviously the best kind of characters, those that do take over.

JTH: You mentioned Tiger in the Tiger Pit.... The first two novels are fairly orthodoxly linear and then thereafter they're not. But in those two, I was giving my chapters to Cliff as my first reader, chapter-by-chapter for feedback then. For the third novel on, I haven't been able to do that, because they're much more Postmodern in structure and you can't really get any sense until the whole thing is written. But I remember, I was giving him chapter-by-chapter of The Tiger in the Tiger Pit and he said- I can't even remember my characters' names now, it was so many novels back- 'Is the woman who Edward thought was his lover ...'

CJ: Marta.

JTH: Thank you. He said: 'Is Marta going to show up for the reunion?' And I said: ? don't know. I'll have to get to that chapter to find out/ That was really how I thought about it. I don't really know what's going to happen till I get there.

CJ: Well that's good for writers to know. Because you are such a crafts woman, it's good to know that there are a few, ah, unknowns as you're writing.... I suppose this contributes to the suspense in your work. All of your novels are suspenseful; they're page-turners. But of course they're not genre novels, they're literary novels. Would you describe your work as literary thrillers?

JTH: I'm quite happy with that description. I don't, myself, call them anything. But I don't mind that description at all.

CJ: So you've written these literary thrillers and then you have also added a crime novel to your opus, A Very Proper Death- which, by the way, is impossible to buy. I had to order it from overseas. There is a copy in the Fryer Library, but apparently nowhere else.

JTH: It was published in Australia, so there must be used-book copies around. Actually it was an Ultimate Selection of The Crime Book of the Month in the US. There were two very specific reasons for writing that: one was that I had been mugged and a knife held at my throat in Boston, so it was an act of exorcism, because I was in very bad shape after that. The crime that happens in the beginning, happens on the very spot that I ... might have been killed. The shock of it was worse from a week later until about six months later. He held this whacking great knife, the kind you see in gourmet magazines, you know, those great big chefs' knives for cutting meat. And for a year or more, if I were turning the page of a glossy magazine and would see an ad for knives, I would just feel this instant nausea. So I was writing out my worst fear by having someone killed on that spot ... looking at the worst-case scenario and putting it away from me. The other reason was, I just wanted to see if I could actually make a lot of money by writing a crime fiction, because at that point the kids' college fees were coming up, and they're very big there. And I wrote it in ten weeks and made more money than any other of my books had made at that point- though not as much money as I had fantasised I would make.

CJ: Well it says a lot about you that you didn't continue writing in that genre, just to make money.

JTH: Believe me, as I get older I might try it again, because I could do with some more money.

CJ: Well, I'll look forward to whatever you're doing. It's all fun for me.... Now, in your novels there are characters who have very vivid dreams. Do you dream vividly? And when you wake, do you think those dreams have some significance to your life?

JTH: I do dream very vividly and very often - I've never directly used my dreams in a novel, but certainly my dreams have a bearing on my life. My dreams are about my fears and anxieties which tend to present themselves in a highly dramatic form.

CLIFF HOSPITAL: Well, occasionally, she does dream solutions to problems she's having in plots.

CJ: That's rather biblical, isn't it?

JTH: Yes, it is. And of course, I grew up in a family where we read the Bible every evening. And I think that I learned narrative pacing from the Bible, to tell you the truth. The Old Testament, because there are some great stories.... There's the story of Joseph and his brothers and the dreams he had.... When I'm at an impasse in a novel- and this might go several days or several weeks and I just can't figure out what to do something must happen in my dreams that I don't recall when waking, for I can wake in the morning and suddenly know what to do. Something must happen during sleep, for suddenly I know how to get out of this bear-trap I'm in.

CLIFF: It's a rather nice experience, actually, to see her suddenly wake up and she knows that she's got it. She may have been buried down in herself for days on end, trying to work out what goes on, and suddenly there's this bright light when she knows what she's going to do for the next step.

JTH: I'm very lucky to be married to someone very supportive and patient.... I think what he's trying to say is that I'm going around like a bear with toothache because I can't figure out what to do and I can't cope with anything else ... so I'm sure it's a huge relief to Cliff when I'm able to keep writing again. I'm very lucky to be married to someone who is a great first reader. Cliff was an English major, so he gives informed feedback, but he also knows that I'm feeling pretty vulnerable when a first draft is finished. He knows to give a certain amount of critical feedback, but not too much, in case I get depressed.

CJ: He sounds ideal ... as good as he looks, actually. Now, can I ask you, which writers inspire you?

JTH: A whole number of them. Patrick White had a huge influence on me. It was just so stunning, given the way English Lit classes went when I was an undergrad, to have someone mythicising the Australian landscape, and putting it on the literary map. It was really exciting. My favourite novelists are those whose style is lyrical and poetic, so Virginia Woolf and Henry James. Proust I love, and I can read him in French, terribly slowly- so I'm really reacting to the Moncrieff English translation- and then I became hugely influenced by Borges, the Latin American writer, and his intellectual riddles.

CJ: Well there are a few intellectual riddles in your own work, and I notice there are lots of literary references. I sometimes get the feeling that you're having a little joke with some of these literary references.

JTH: Yes, that's true. And when I was reading that excerpt from Oyster at the University of Queensland Centenary celebrations, I'd sort of forgotten, because I don't re-read my books unless I'm asked to do Literary readings- and when I was talking about someone going across the Outback, I said: 'Sometimes it is a woman, her camel, sore-footed and refractory...' and it startled me when I read it because it is a quotation from T.S. Eliot, but I was also thinking of Robyn Davison on her camel trek ... so sometimes these things happen spontaneously, and I'd forgotten I did them and I had a little inward chuckle when I was reading that aloud, having forgotten I'd put it there. But I think anyone who came up through the Queensland school system- at least when we were part of it- got a really good education. I'm not quite so sure that that still pertains, I don't know. And then, being an English major and doing the other degrees in English, and then teaching it, you become steeped in iconic English texts that permeate your thought, and they spill out. And actually my father did that with his very Victorian, in both senses, education- he was educated in the state of Victoria. His father was a school Headmaster steeped in everything from Chaucer to the late nineteenth-century. Plus my father was steeped in the Bible and his speech was really quite bizarre for a working class, blue-collar worker, for it was a mosaic of quotations from Shakespeare and Tennyson or from the Bible. So I grew up in that kind of atmosphere: that literature was something that informed the way you thought, the images you used, the way you spoke.

CJ: David Callaghan has written a book on your fiction called Rainforest Narratives, and he talks about the names you give your characters. For instance, in Oyster, you have Mercy Given, Susannah Rover, Dukke Prophet...

JTH: That was based on the Pentecostal Church I grew up in. There was someone- how should I say it- someone hysterically fevered, who had the role of the prophet, so I was thinking of him when I portrayed that character.

CJ: Was he as evil as the character in Oyster?

JTH: He wasn't really evil, but he was hard to take.

CJ: I found him downright evil in Oyster.

JTH: I mean, the real model wasn't.... Well, for example, I remember he railed against parents who let their children have the myth of Santa Claus. I mean, he was a real purist. So his attitude was rather punitive to any young people in the church who wanted to participate even peripherally (which was the only way any of us could participate) in mainstream culture. I definitely didn't like him ...

CJ: That comes across.... I got the feeling with the names you use, that you're creating a kind of parable with some of your stories. Is this your intention?

JTH: It's not much my intention so much as it just seems to happen inevitably in my stories, partly because I grew up in this Christian milieu where everything had allegorical meaning and the parables were very important to us. But I rather like the fact that Salmon Rushdie agrees with me. In *Midnight's Children*, which is a novel I love and teach all the time, his protagonist says: 'The world is thick with allegory, there's no escaping it/ And I feel that too. I think if you grow up in a highly religious atmosphere, it's inevitable, and then when you become a Medievalist, the Medievalists saw allegory everywhere. So it's not my conscious intention, it just seems to happen willy-nilly with me, because I got used to seeing the world that way.

CJ: Well, going back to your Medieval studies, you quote Dante ...

JTH: Another of the writers who has a huge influence on me, and I love Dante's work ...

CJ: And the Tarot.

JTH: Ah, yes. Well, there was a period when we were living in the Harvard community in the sixties, when it was the trendy thing to do. A Tarot reading was done for me at a dinner party. My theory about why the Tarot can affect people the way the first Tarot reading affected me is that it is a kind of a Rorschach test, and Freudian. With these archetypal images of the Tarot cards, you tend to interpret via whatever is on your mind at the moment. And I was very startled when this reading was done for me, and everybody was doing this thing, in the sixties, you understand ...

CJ: They're still doing it.

JTH: Well, it was a very sixties, hippy thing to do, and I was definitely a sixties hippy. And so I bought a set of Tarot cards and nobody seriously believed it or led their lives by it, but it was a good dinner-party trick.

CJ: Well, it's not the Devil's Picture Book, as it has been called.... Carl Gustav Jung used the Tarot to help his patients gain insight into their own lives ...

JTH: I will tell you that I certainly never let my parents know I used it, because they would definitely have seen it as the Devil's Picture Book. But I got rather good at reading for people and sort of stunning them ...

CJ: ... hence 'Queen of Pentacles, Nine of Swords'- one of my favourite stories . . .

JTH: ...because what you're doing is you're becoming rather intuitive with people's reactions, their physical reactions to the cards, because they are Jungian archetypes. They are like Rorschach tests because people see in them their pressing concerns at the time, and it actually becomes fairly easy, if you're a novelist or an intuitive, to tell them what they really want to hear.

CJ: In *Charades*, the dead man in the forest tells Charade Ryan a fable about the origins of a country which seems to bear quite a resemblance to Australia. 'The women of this country are despised, ridiculed and underestimated by their menfolk, and from this treatment the women

learn laughter and independence and are survivors. Do you think this scenario applies to contemporary Australian women?

JTH: I wouldn't be an authority on contemporary Australian women, because I'm in and out every year. I wouldn't be able to comment on that. It certainly was true of my generation. I mean, I wouldn't have said boo to a goose when I was an undergraduate at the University of Queensland. I was completely intimidated by the males in the class. They always spoke with the utmost confidence- indeed arrogance - so I think I was as startled as they were when I got all High Distinctions in my first year and some of them got Distinctions and Credits. Because I certainly believed they were infinitely more intelligent than I, and so did they. And you know, I didn't find out until ten years later, when I was applying for Graduate School in Canada, and my transcript was sent from Queensland with a reference letter. I had never been told- I'm sure it was not considered a good thing to give women self-confidence and arrogance - but apparently I topped the year in my first year in English. Nobody told me that until it came as a letter years later. There have been fleeting moments in my life when I have felt intellectual confidence, but they have always been fleeting.

CJ: I find that hard to believe.... Not now, surely?

JTH: Yes ... now. As a friend of mine who was another spouse at Harvard said: 'Janette, you have an anxiety disorder/'

CJ: Well, I would have to agree with her. I'm going to ask one last question. If we were about to be reincarnated, would you like to come back as a writer?

JTH: Gosh! You know, I would really not like to be reincarnated. I'm much more Buddhist than that. I think the aim should be to escape the cycle of death and re-birth. I would just like to be free of all the stress and live in the ether ... and yes, in the non-reincarnated ether, to be just free to create ... that would be nice. So, I suppose in a roundabout way I am saying that if I were to be reincarnated, I would either like to be a landscape architect gardener- which is one of my passions- or a writer without my anxieties.

CJ: AU of your books seem to have a secondary theme: the artist at work. You seem to be preoccupied about the making of art in some form or another. And though you do not want to tell us about your new book, I'm wondering what sort of artist will be featured. Do you know?

JTH: No, I don't know that yet. But right at the moment I am just finishing a story that needs to be at Overland by the weekend. It's set on Tangalooma, where I went last week, and it's about Humpback whalesong, and the artist in that is a man who's been traumatised and doesn't speak, but who communes with the whales and takes out whalewatchers. I guess the artist is always the marginal figure. You become an artist because you don't feel very good at negotiating life the way that normal people do, I think. And I do have to say that two things that endlessly give me pleasure are creating in the garden, and also in my writing. And the actual act of the writing, of making it come out right, making every sentence sound beautiful, gives me immense pleasure. The whole thing of negotiating the literary world does not give me pleasure. I always feel that publication is that unfortunate thing you have to do at the end of the creative process, in order to

get your ticket-of-leave to get on with the next book. Apparently this makes me different from a lot of writers who like the public persona of being a successful writer. I really don't enjoy that part, but I do love the actual act of- and I think this is partly why so many of my novels are in underground space- what I think of as climbing down into this cave, where I work and create- it's a sort of mental descent into this private space and the business of storytelling, like the princess who spins the gold every night and stops old Rumpelstiltskin getting her, or like Scheherazade, even ... I mean the business of telling the story to forestall some fate... that's pleasant to me.

CJ: Thank you so much, Janette Turner Hospital, for such an enlightening interview.

Since this interview on 27 April 2010 Janette Turner Hospital has taken up a position at Columbia University, New York.

Author affiliation:

Cheryl Jorgensen is the author of two books, *The 'Brook* and *The Taint*, and a book reviewer in print and on radio. She is enrolled in a PhD in the School of EMSAH, The University of Queensland.

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