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**OH 835**

Full transcript of an interview with

**GILLIAN RUBENSTEIN**

On 6 & 7 November 2007

By Dr Susan Marsden

For the

**EMINENT AUSTRALIANS ORAL HISTORY**  
**PROJECT**

Recording available on CD

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J.D. SOMERVILLE ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION, STATE LIBRARY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA: INTERVIEW NO. OH 835

**Interview with Gillian Rubinstein conducted by Susan Marsden on 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> November 2007 for the Eminent Australians Oral History Project of the National Library and the State Library of South Australia.**

DISK 1

**This is Susan Marsden and I'm interviewing Gillian Rubinstein. This is tape one of the interview with Gillian Rubinstein who has followed a distinguished career as an author, and we are speaking today for the Eminent Australians Oral History Project – I tell you, they keep changing these forms – conducted by the National Library of Australia and the State Library of South Australia.**

**On behalf of the Director General of the National Library and the Director of the State Library of South Australia I would like to thank you for agreeing to participate in this program.**

**Gillian, do you understand that copyright is shared by you and the libraries?**

Yes, I do.

**This being so, may we have your permission to make a transcript of the recording should the libraries decide to make one?**

Yes.

**Thank you. We hope you will speak as frankly as possible, knowing that neither the tapes nor any transcripts produced from them will be released without your permission, your authority.**

Fine.

**This interview is taking place today, on 6<sup>th</sup> November 2007 at Gillian's house at Goolwa, and can we begin? So we will.**

Let's go, yes.

**And, of course, with an eminent person we start with your birth and your background, so perhaps you can tell me the date and place of your birth.**

I was born on August 29 in 1942 in a little village outside Birkhamstead in England. The village's name is Potten End and my father and my mother rented a house there in an area called 'The Hamlet'. The house was built in 1939 and they rented it just at the beginning of the War. My sister was born in January 1941 at the West Herts Hospital in Hemel Hempstead, but I was actually born at home.

**And your sister's name?**

My sister's name is Jocelyn. My mother's name is Margaret Jocelyn and my sister's name is Jocelyn Susan and I'm Gillian Margaret, so we both have something of my mother's name. And my father was a research chemist in the War working on carbon fuels, so he was in a reserved occupation so he was at home all through the War, but he was in the Home Guard.

**Ah, that's interesting. What was your mother's maiden name?**

Wigg, W-I-double-G.

**And your father's name?**

Hanson, H-A-N-S-O-N.

**And it was Thomas?**

Yes, Thomas Kenneth.

**Hanson with an 'O'.**

Yes.

**So there were just the two children?**

Yes, and my sister's about nineteen months older than I am.

**A good gap – you must have been fairly close, then.**

We were very close, yes.

**Can you remember what are some of your earliest memories as a child?**

I remember that house quite clearly. I remember – I guess it was just after the War when Britain was still on double daylight saving so that we had to go to bed when it was (laughs) still fully daylight and I remember being terribly upset about that. It was a thatched roof and we used to lean out of the window and pull long straws out of the thatch when we were supposed to be in bed.

My father says that I spoke from a very early age, but I don't remember that at all, obviously.

It was a very small village, I remember things like playing in the woods around our house with the other children from The Hamlet, and my best friend was somebody called Robert Wace, and I also had another very good friend called Barry Cheetham. Barry was a bit older than we were and he was rather gorgeous, I seem to remember,

and I was always rather flattered that he wanted to come over to our house and play with my sister and me. I was going to say something else then and now I've forgotten it. I guess it was very much a sort of ordinary wartime childhood.

We were also very close friends with another family who lived in a nearby area called Frisden Copse, and I should talk about them now because they later became our foster family when my mother and my stepfather went to live in Nigeria and my mother met the mother of this family, who was called Lavender Hatt-Cook when she was pregnant with my sister, and Lavender had been told by the district nurse that there was somebody else expecting her first baby and Lavender had a six-month-old baby then. So she turned up one day at the house and they became very, very close friends. So the four of us children kind of grew up together, we were always in and out of each other's houses and we always went away on summer holidays together, we always swapped over in the school holidays later on – we would go to their house for half the holidays and they would come to our house for the other half – and then we ended up actually living in their house for seven or eight years. So it was sort of one of those kind of *ad hoc* English things which were fairly common in those days because lots of people's families were overseas and a lot of people seemed to end up having other children staying with them or living with them for long periods. So that was one of the things that happened right from when I was born, that I was growing up with this other family.

Other things that I remember about the War were something that we used to call 'blackcurrant jujube', which was blackcurrant purée which was given out to people when orange juice became really scarce, and so children had this wonderful thing called blackcurrant purée, which was full of Vitamin C. And Lavender used to make the most wonderful ice cream with it, which we called 'beetroot ice cream', (laughs) because that was the colour; and that is really one of my strongest memories of the War, is eating beetroot ice cream.

I think there was one bomb scare: my father's lab was bombed by mistake; but apart from that the War hardly impinged on me at all as a child. I've got no memories of it, other than always feeling very anxious when I heard the BBC<sup>1</sup> News signal and I can only think that that was from a very early childhood of my parents' anxiety listening to the BBC broadcasts in the War.

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<sup>1</sup> BBC – British Broadcasting Corporation.

**So you were nervous of it just because of what it might be telling you.**

Yes, I just always hated to hear those chimes of Big Ben and when it started saying, 'This is the BBC News.'

**Do you think you had a sense – and I'm trying, I suppose, to tease out some of the influences on you as a writer – did you have a sense of great evil, of great threat? Was there a sort of brooding presence or not, or not that strong – – –?**

Perhaps there was. I had terrible night fears as a child so I guess that there probably was a sense of great fear, and certainly when – this is sort of going on a bit but people often ask me when I started being interested in Japan and I certainly was of the generation that grew up under the shadow of the Bomb, and so the earliest Japanese words that I heard were –

**Hiroshima.**

– yes, 'Hiroshima' and 'Nagasaki', and because I was so frightened of my own sense of potential victimhood I think it gave me a very strong interest in a place and a country that had actually suffered that and I think that that was what started my identification with Japan.

**Which is an interesting contrast with an Australian child of that era, because [Japan] was a much more palpable threat for Australians.**

Yes.

**My mother talks about she was at school during the War and the Japanese were on their way, basically. So I suspect there would have been less – so they would have been much more conscious of Japan during the War.**

Probably far more, and also far more conscious, as you say, of the threat and everything. But also there was – I mean, Japan definitely was the enemy for the English in the War, and so early memories were always very negative of Japan and so on, and my mother still has a great antipathy towards the Japanese and hates it when I go there. 'Oh, what do you want to go there for? I can't understand why you're interested in that country.' And I think there's also an element in that of wanting to go to the place that your family *don't* like or that is the most foreign to them, you know. It's a form of doing something that is entirely your own and entirely different from your family, so there was an element of that in it, too.

**But your first actual foreign experience was in fact, presumably, going to Africa – or Europe, presumably, before that. Did you visit Europe?**

In fact, going to Nigeria was the first time that I had ever been overseas –

**Was it?**

– apart from going to Guernsey – I mean, that isn't really overseas but it feels like overseas to somebody from England because it has got such a French influence and it feels so completely different from boring old England. So yes, my mother and my father divorced when I was around ten and they both remarried and my mother and my stepfather went to live in Nigeria when I was fourteen, and six months after they left my father was killed in a car accident. So that was a very bad year for my sister and me.

**So your mother didn't move to Nigeria till your father died – about the same time, was it?**

Just before.

**Just before.**

Yes.

**And so who had you been living with up until then, your mother?**

Well, we had been going to one or the other, sort of flitting between the two. But my father had some kind of nervous breakdown after the divorce, I've never really quite known what it was, but he was physically quite ill and also I think mentally very, very ill as well. And after he had recovered he and my stepmother went to live in Woodbridge in East Anglia, in Suffolk, and they bought a house which was to be the family home for me and my sister and my stepmother's daughter, Jane, who was eleven then, and then we spent three weeks there of the Easter holidays and then my father died shortly after that. So we never actually lived in that house other than the three weeks that we were there with him.

Then my mother and my stepfather were in Nigeria, and we always thought that they went partly so that they could start a new life on their own away from family and everybody else, and we went out for the holidays, for the long holiday usually, for the summer holiday.

**And this was in Kano, was it?**

Kano to start with and then after that in Lagos for about three years.

**I was struck by the fact that one of the very sympathetic characters in your early books is Victoria in –**

Yes.

**– *Beyond the labyrinth*, and whose parents of course lived in Nigeria, went or moved to.**

Yes, I gave her the same background as me, yes.

**Yes, I wondered about that.**

And staying with a family and everything so that you're with a family that you have known for a long time but you're not really a child of the family.

**So yes, I thought that was an identifiably autobiographical bit.**

Yes.

**What did your stepfather do, was he a similar – not a plant geneticist, I assume?**

No, he wasn't at all, no. I think I sort of gave Victoria idealised parents of the sort that I would have preferred to have, maybe. And Victoria's a much nicer person than I was when I was a teenager, too. My stepfather worked for Esso, for Standard Oil, and he was opening up service stations in Northern Nigeria, so he was really in a sort of sales capacity.

**What was his name, your stepfather?**

Richard Lock, L-O-C-K.

**I'm assuming your surname now is your married name?**

Yes, it is, Rubinstein, yes, it is.

**So you presumably went to local schools in primary school, is that right, or did you start going to boarding school fairly young?**

The first school I went to was called Rothsay, it was otherwise known as 'Miss Saw's School', that was in Birkhamstead and it was like a sort of little private kindergarten. And then where did I go after that? Then we moved to outside Abingdon in Berkshire, Drayton, when my father changed work; he actually also went to work for Esso then. And in Abingdon I went to St Helen's and St Katharine's School from the age of seven till when I left to go to boarding school, which was when I was twelve, and the boarding school was called Queen Anne's, it's outside Reading.

**And how did you find boarding school?**

I didn't like boarding school at all, I don't think I was temperamentally suited for it. A lot of really awful things happened then, too, and I was just really unhappy for large periods of time at boarding school. But I did have some very good friends and I think I had a very good education there, and a lot of the things that I really like now I got from that school.

**Such as?**

Languages, French and Spanish, and a love of history, music – all of those things, yes. So I think that the education was good, although it was and still is quite a sports-focused school and I was not particularly sporty. I liked playing tennis but I wasn't very good at sport. I liked swimming, too, but other than that I was not very good.

**Now, there's an obvious question here, but your enjoyment and reading: when did that start, or can you pinpoint it?**

Not really because it seemed as if it was always there. I can't remember learning to read, I think my sister taught me before I went to school, but I was already reading when I went to Miss Soar's kindergarten and then I just was a complete bookworm, all the way through my childhood I read absolutely voraciously. I was absolutely addicted to reading and always have been, really, I just love that sense of escape that you get when you go into another world with a book.

**And you've talked about loving books that had lots of things packed into them: Robert Louis Stevenson.**

Yes.

**I went to his house recently in Samoa, it was fascinating.**

Oh, did you?

**It was wonderful.**

Oh, I would really love to go there.

**It's wonderful.**

A friend of mine is descended from his family so we've always said that we ought to go there together on a sort of pilgrimage, yes.

**It's quite close, it's only five hours' flight from Sydney.**

Perfect.

**Oh, that's interesting. So it was your father's family or your mother's family?**

No, a friend of mine.

**Oh, friends of yours, oh, right.**

Yes.

**So – yes, to go together.**

Yes, close friend.

**And so you read presumably all of his work.**

Yes, I did, yes, but I just love *Treasure Island*, it was and still is one of my favourite books.

**It is a lovely book, isn't it?**

I think the characterisation is so great and, I don't know, I think that the narrative voice is really interesting and as a child it was almost the first thing that I had read told in the first person like that, so I like that very much.

**You also talk about being mad on animals, and that's also –**

Yes.

**– had an influence, if that's the right word.**

Yes, that's an ongoing thing, too. Yes, I was mad about horses and rode whenever I could and loved dogs and cats – all animals, really.

**You dedicate *Foxspell* to your father.**

Yes.

**Why was that?**

I think probably it's – it's got a lot about – I have no idea why I did. (laughter)

**I wondered whether it was because it's about foxes –**

That's hopeless, isn't it?

**– or because it was sort of mythic?**

Maybe because it was mythic, maybe because I hadn't dedicated anything to him before that and I did want to do something for his memory, yes. He was a very

strong influence on me, on my love of words and poetry and books and everything and he had a great sense of humour and loved poetry and had a sort of inexhaustible store of quotations that he would produce at apposite times.

**Interesting, that generation: the education system must have really taught children to quote poetry in a way it stopped doing.**

I think everybody learnt a lot of things by heart, didn't they? We certainly had to at school, there was an awful lot of learning poems by heart, and I did something called Elocution at Queen Anne's because I had a very bad stammer when I was a teenager and that was also probably one of the formative things of my life, was being silenced for a large part of my teenage and finding escape in books and being quite withdrawn and very shy and very awkward.

**Finding a voice, really.**

Yes. Yes, finding a voice. It's amazing how many writers do stammer.

**And also again the importance of language which you emphasise so strongly – literally, in your case.**

Yes.

**Interesting. And what about your mother's influence, do you think?**

That's harder to talk about. My mother was quite a sort of scary presence in my childhood, I think. I was scared of her, she was extremely critical and very short-tempered and you sort of never knew when she was going to fly off the handle at you over something and I learnt to watch her all the time and work out her moods and try to approach her, and when she was married to my stepfather he was also very similar. He was very, very unpredictable and very moody, and in a way (laughs) my sister and I always say, 'Thank God they were away in Nigeria all that time', because we weren't totally in that atmosphere all the time; but it was –

**Quite fraught, isn't it?**

– it was fraught, it was very hard to cope with. And she decided when she got married that she was not going to live in the same country as him, and so she went to Canada and I was really upset and – – –

**I'm sorry – your mother went to Canada?**

No, my sister.

**Oh, your sister – oh, heavens.**

So my sister went to Canada so that she wouldn't have to live in the same country as them, and I just felt totally abandoned and thought, 'Well, if I have to live anywhere I'm going', and I met my husband who was Australian –

**Oh, was he? I didn't realise that.**

– so we decided that we would (laughs) move to Australia and live, and in a way it was a way of keeping the peace in the family because we could handle at a long distance something that was very difficult to handle close up, so we've always had this rather sort of distant relationship with our mother who in a way we felt started it off when she went off when we were still –

**Quite young, yes.**

– still only teenagers, yes.

**So she left you, really, rather than the other way round.**

In a way, yes.

**Interesting. It doesn't come across so much in your books, I was thinking – I made a note for myself earlier on about the importance of childhood friendships, which comes across very strongly, and a family life which is quite inclusive of comings and goings of other children, I'm struck by that particularly with the *Space demon* series where the children are always coming and going and so you have the parents' reactions, too – – –.**

What was that? No, it wasn't, it felt as if something – oh, I don't know, must have been just one of my nerves going.

**And that comes across very strongly.**

Coming and going, yes. I think that was because my foster mother's house was exactly like that, it was always open to anybody and it was always full of people coming and going – or maybe it was an idealised thing that I just thought that this is how houses ought to be.

**Family life should be.**

Yes, how family life should be. And I think that that generation of parents were very hands-off and that children were far less supervised than they are now; and certainly with our friends, Pippa and Mark, the Hatt-Cooks, we would just disappear for the whole day and our parents didn't know where we were. We would be out

somewhere, the four of us, exploring and walking and taking picnics and that sort of thing. It was very much an outdoors childhood when the weather (laughs) allowed it, although often even when it was pouring with rain you'd be out of doors. And I think that that freedom was very important to me, to be able to be outside like that.

**And I suppose then also imaginatively populating your surroundings, too, you were living in circumstances which would have encouraged that, I would have thought.**

I did play a lot of imaginary games with my sister and with our friends, too. We would play sort of ongoing dramas that we would make up the stories to and we would all have our different characters and so on, and they would sometimes go on for weeks. And we played those a lot with Mark Hatt-Cook, who was the younger of our two sort of semi-demi- –

**Foster sisters, yes.**

– foster children, and Mark could do that but Pippa never did it, she just wasn't that sort of a child, she was much more realistic. Although sometimes we did, we had a secret club, which is what the one in *At Ardilla* is based on, so we always used to play that with the Hatt-Cooks and we'd have slogans and code words and our own secret language and so on and it was very much something that we did that the G-U's, as we called them, the grown-ups, didn't know about.

**Because I'm struck by that particularly again in your early books, that sort of parallel lives, really, between the children and the adults that they're living, that touch, that intersect with the family –**

Yes.

**– the parents, but they really do have very serious things going on that the parents are completely unaware of, or pretty well unaware of.**

Yes. I think that my mother was very unaware of what was happening in our lives. I think that she was just that sort of a mother. She was not a very maternal person and we had a very, very complicated relationship with her but I think mercifully she was not there (laughs) a lot of the time. Which sounds terrible, because I'm now very fond of her and we get on really well now, but she was not an easy mother, no. She just wasn't a very motherly type and not very sympathetic or understanding.

**A better mother when you're an adult. There are some mothers like that.**

Yes.

**Yes, yes.**

Yes, very much so.

**When was she born, how old was she? When was she born?**

Nineteen fourteen.

**And your father?**

My father was born in 1913.

**So they were quite close in age.**

Yes. But my mother had a very serious illness as a child, she had osteomyelitis in her hip and leg, so she had endless operations and was bedridden a lot in her late childhood and early teenage, so I always felt that that made her very stoic and, you know, quite strong in herself. She is a very strong person. I think it had a big influence on her, though.

**I should move you along a bit more from your childhood years.**

Okay.

**I mean, later, as I think I explained before, we'll probably come back to your childhood as one of the formative influences on your writing, but we talked a little about your education and then you went to university. Can you talk a little bit about that?**

Yes. At my boarding school – I'm not sure where to start on this – I went to Oxford in 1961 when I was nineteen and had three years doing Modern Languages. I was offered a place at Lady Margaret Hall and what can say about it? It was a wonderful time.

**Did you have a passion about going to university, was it something that – – –?**

I did by then. At first I sort of didn't really. Again, it was fairly complicated. My sister was also offered a place at Oxford but she didn't take it up because it hadn't been explained to her that she could change subjects once she was there. And I think it was a time where it would have been great to have had a bit more parental guidance about what to do and so on and I think it was one of the times when we both missed our father very much because he had been to Oxford and he was very much in favour of us both going there; but he had been dead then for five years. I was very happy to

be there and I was very proud of having been accepted there and so on, and yes, it meant a great deal to me, really.

**Why did you choose languages?**

I don't know. I sometimes think that was probably a mistake because I was still stammering at that time and so I wasn't very fluent in either language.

**This is French and Spanish?**

Yes. I've always loved languages, I love studying them and I love working out the way that they're put together. And I got then and still do a great buzz out of being able to read literature in its original language. But I also did History at 'A' level – in England I ended up doing four 'A' levels, which was fairly unusual then: I did French, Spanish, Latin and History because I was going to do just the languages but I missed History so much that they let me do the 'A' level History course as well, which is the one that I actually got the distinction in, an 'A' in, whereas my language marks weren't as good. Anyway, so I think that that love of history was always there and perhaps I should have done History at university; but I didn't, I did languages, and I wasn't ever sorry about doing it, it was a great time.

**So did you enjoy Oxford?**

Yes, I did. I mean, it was also fraught, it's all so up and down, you know, there's so much to cope with. There's all of the work side and the social side and everything.

**Which college were you at?**

Lady Margaret Hall. It was there that I started doing theatre because I had started being very interested in theatre and my earliest ambition as a writer was in fact to be a playwright, and so I had decided that I would work in theatre so that I would understand how plays were put together, and I did a lot of stage management in Oxford and worked with OUDS<sup>2</sup> and ETC<sup>3</sup> and so on and in fact I was the first female member of OUDS because they weren't allowed –

**Of – – ?**

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<sup>2</sup> OUDS – Oxford University Dramatic Society.

<sup>3</sup> ETC – Experimental Theatre Club.

– of OUDS, the Oxford University Dramatic Society – and when I was there it was still only men, but because I was working in stage management and the stage management side tended to be the rather sort of socialist side of the organisation I was co-opted onto the management committee, which meant that I had to be a member. So I was a sort of co-opted member. And I think I did have a lot of experience in theatre then which was marvellous – maybe not quite so good for my degree; perhaps I should have spent more time studying – – –. (laughs)

**There must have been – what are you talking, '60s, that was quite an exciting period for theatre in Britain.**

Yes, it was, it was very exciting. It was sort of just around the time of all of the great comedy things starting, so *Beyond the fringe* of course was the big hit and that opened the year that I went to Oxford, I think. And so all of the undergraduates wanted to be the next sort of discovery and doing skits and that sort of thing, so there was a lot of comedy going on. Two of the Monty Python team were contemporaries of mine there.

**Did you meet them?**

Yes, I did, I knew them quite well: Terry Jones and Michael Palin were contemporaries at Oxford.

**Is he still going strong?**

Michael Palin is still going strong, yes.

**I was thinking, he's still writing, isn't he?**

Yes.

**You come across his work sometimes. Must be getting on. And did you actually – did you put on comedies yourself or did you try to write it, or – – –?**

I tried to write them, yes. I wrote some stuff for the – there was a university play done called *Hang down your head and die*, which was on capital punishment, and I did some of the writing on that.

**Did you perform as well?**

No, because I stammered too badly. Yes, I was far too shy.

**Mind you, it might have been a baptism of fire if you had actually had to perform.**

Well, maybe it was, because when I first started having to do public speaking, I'm less likely to stammer if I'm having to project my voice. I still do it from time to time.

**Not your favourite occupation, then.**

No, not really. (laughter) I was very glad to be able to opt out of it.

**So I should take a couple of steps back – I've taken you through to your education, which I'd like to talk more about, but we've only touched on Nigeria and I'm sure that was an important experience for you, too.**

It was. I don't know, it was so unlike anything else that I had done, and we flew out – I can't remember how we actually got to the airport because of course it was only six weeks after my father died that we went out for the first time so we were still in a state of shock, I think. And so we flew out there and I remember being picked up at the airport by my stepfather and my mother and it was raining because it was the rainy season, and my stepfather just drove us around for about an hour, just so we could look at the place.

**Is this Kano?**

Yes. And my eyes were nearly falling out of my head, I'd just never seen anything like it.

**What was it like? Tell me what it was like.**

It was sort of wonderful and shocking. I was really upset by all the stray dogs that were covered in ticks and everything; and I was amazed by so many people, it as much more crowded than anywhere else I'd seen there; it was very colourful, beautiful flowers and greenery and everything and there were still a lot of mud brick buildings then so the mud was always wonderful dark, orangey-brown colour and a lot of traditional-shaped houses, so they were sort of squarish houses with sort of rabbit-ear decorations all around the outside, they were very, very striking looking; and palm trees and these great piles of sacks of peanuts because that was the main crop there and they would stack them up in great big pyramids at the railway head. And the smell was amazing – peanuts, 'ground nuts', they were called there – ground nuts and people and cattle and horses and just the smell of the air –

**Smoke.**

– smoke, yes. But it was – I guess it’s changed hugely now – it was just wonderful, I just loved it. There were a real mix of people, a lot of different nationalities, and my parents were kind of interested in everybody so that they made friends all the way through the expat community and also with some African people although not very many, I have to say that. But we just thought it was great going to the ‘French store’, as we called it, *Compagnie Française de l’Afrique Occidentale*, CFAO, where you could buy all sorts of goodies imported from France that we’d never seen before –

### **Interesting.**

– and we always used to say to Mum, ‘Oh, let’s go to the French store, let’s go to the French store’, because lots of big companies then had a cold store and there was a Leventis which was Lebanese-owned so they had lots of stuff from the Middle East; and then there was UAC, which was the British United Africa Company, and they would have all of the stuff imported from Britain or from South Africa; and then the French store, which was our favourite, because it had the most interesting food and we could go and flirt with the French guys working there. And it was a very small European community there. There was a rather sort of scruffy club called the Kano Club, which had a swimming pool where all of the children used to go and hang out, children and teenagers, where we used to go every day and swim, and coming from England and having had two or three years which seemed to have been just one trauma after another it was just kind of like paradise. My stepfather made friends with a Lebanese man called Rex Raccah, who they were one of the big Kano Lebanese families, and Rex was very keen on polo and he lent us his polo ponies to ride on, which was –

### **Wonderful.**

– the great hit of the summer for us. And always every year that we were there the horse boys, the *doki* boys, used to bring the horses around to our house every evening round about five o’clock, three evenings a week, and then we would go off and ride for a couple of hours through the bush, and it was just the most amazing experience. It was very bonding for my sister and me because it was something that we both really loved to do, and we could just have so much fun. Mum used to say that she thought that we were safer there than in London; I’m not sure whether that would be true now but certainly then it was true, yes.

**Fascinating.**

Yes.

**Almost like another planet, really.**

It was, yes. Yes, it was, and I think that it would have changed so much now. It was very stable then, probably more than at any time before or since. It was just after independence and the southerners and the northerners seemed to be getting on quite well and there were –

**This is Northern Nigeria?**

– yes – and there were clinics and schools and everything worked quite well.

**Interesting. Because we're talking late '50s?**

Yes, late '50s, '57 was the first year that we were there.

**So then over the next few years you were doing this in the long holidays, were you?**

Yes, every year, and our parents used to come back for one leave, so they were usually back over Christmas and then we would all go and stay at the Hatt-Cooks.

**And you said you had a stepsister, was that right?**

Jane, yes, but I didn't see her. After my father died I lost touch with her completely. She was my stepmother's daughter.

**Oh, I see, right, okay.**

The other side, yes.

**Where were we? I've lost my train of thought.**

Nigeria.

**Nigeria and then the holidays –**

Yes.

**– and then back at university.**

The thing about Nigeria was I think that it was the one thing that made me so interested in languages, because everybody there spoke so many languages. You know, all the Africans spoke two or three African languages and usually English or French or Arabic or all three, and an awful lot of the people working there spoke Hausa and Fulani and English and French, so I just thought this was wonderful. I

don't know, I had a very romantic view of people who could speak lots of different languages.

**That's interesting, isn't it, because England and Australia are essentially monolingual, aren't they, really, especially at that point.**

Yes.

**Even though there were lots of people speaking other languages you could easily grow up without ever hearing them. In my case – I'm a little younger than you – I happened to grow up at a time of great immigration of Europeans, so we were constantly exposed to children who'd just arrived –**

Yes, right.

**– who were speaking Greek, *only* spoke Greek or what have you. But that was – whereas my mother's generation didn't have that at all, and I would have thought that in England in your childhood there [you] wouldn't have come across many people – if you'd stayed in England only you wouldn't have come across many people speaking other languages.**

No. Although everybody of my age in England was expected to know at least some French, that was very much part of our schooling was to learn French.

**Did you learn Latin as well?**

Yes.

**You did, yes. That was another standard, wasn't it?**

It was, yes. Well, then if you wanted to study languages at university then you had to have 'A' level Latin, which is understandable because it's the sort of basis that so many languages come from.

**Stands you in good stead as a writer, too, I would have thought.**

I think it does, yes.

**And again having that basic structural understanding of your own language is probably a good thing too, I would have thought.**

Yes.

**And I suppose the other influence I would be interested in is the myths and legends thing. You talked about your father being interested in that. Was that a conscious thing as a child or just part of the general cultural context?**

I don't know, I guess when I read them I loved them, when I read them they really spoke deeply to me, so I had this absolute passion for the Greek legends and the

Norse legends and so on. We had a book called *Pictorial knowledge*, which was a set of encyclopaedias which went into all of the myths and legends; and maybe it was very well-written, but it certainly made a very strong impression on me. And one of my aunts, I think, gave me *The story of King Arthur* – might be by Carola Oman, is that right, does that sound right? And then I just fell completely in love with the Arthurian legends.

**Well, people do point that affinity, shall we say –**

Yes.

**– to the Otori legend, don't they?**

And I read T.H. White, too, when I was at school and –

**Yes, I love my T.H. White.**

– absolutely adored it, yes.

**Yes, wonderful.**

I just wonder why they haven't ever filmed the rest of those books, you know, that they did *The sword in the stone* as a cartoon, but the other three in that series are so marvellous.

**I remember reading him to my own children. There's that English tradition of whimsy as well which T.H. White was very good at too, I think.**

Yes.

**It's both myth but it's also humour, there's a humour and the playfulness –**

Yes.

**– which is another element I think that's important, isn't it?**

Yes, my father loved nonsense verse and stories and so on and I do like that, I did like that very much in things like *Jake and Pete* and the rhyming books and I think I was sort of consciously then trying to re-create some of that English nonsense and fantasy and making up languages and – – –.

**Sorry, what about religion?**

Oh, religion. Yes. (laughs)

**Was there any?**

Well, I had the sort of general English Church of England religion. I think I was quite a non-religious person until later on in life. When I was confirmed I was kind of disappointed not to feel more, I thought that I would have a great religious awakening, which I think I was always looking for as a teenager but it never quite 'took', and by the time I left school I was saying, 'I'm not sure that I believe in anything any more', and that went on for some years. Though I loved the Bible stories, again, and there are some Bible characters who are still great heroes of mine like David, for instance, I just love the stories about David. And I think Jesus is an utterly admirable sort of person, but I'm not sure about the 'Son of God' thing. But then when we were up in Byron Bay when I was in my late thirties, Suzy had just been born and we joined the Uniting Church there, partly because I wanted the children to be part of a community and it was a really lovely church, it had a great church family there. And then it went through a sort of charismatic time, which we got very much caught up in, and I did have the kind of spiritual awakening that I'd always wanted and was very involved in the Church for several years after that.

**Was this still Church of England?**

No, this was the Uniting Church.

**Oh, Uniting Church, yes.**

And then when we came to Adelaide I was trying to find more of the same sort of thing, but of course Adelaide was very different from the North Coast (laughter) of New South Wales and people were a lot more –

**Staid?**

– cool about it all and staid, yes. But we did make some very nice friends in the Uniting Church and I got involved in the Christian Dance Fellowship because I've always loved dancing and did a lot of Christian dance, which was kind of weird and wonderful. And then I started writing and it was as if everything that I had put into spirituality was immediately diverted into writing –

**Fascinating.**

– and I realised that what I had been seeking in a kind of other-worldly sense was all within me and I wanted to put that energy into writing. And writing is much more important to me than anything else, even than God, so that was the direction I went in. But I felt that in that period first of all I got a lot of healing for all sorts of things,

just from the sense of the community, and I guess a kind of awareness of something that is larger than us, and I wouldn't call it a personal god any more but in a very mystical sense it's the ground of everything that we are and it's what we came from, both physically and that spark that makes us conscious, and that's what we go back into.

**I'm struck – not knowing this, but I'm struck also with some of your themes that are carried right through, which is for example the whole question about violence and how's it's handled –**

Yes.

**– that seems to me in some ways very Uniting Church, really.**

Oh, really? (laughter)

**Haven't thought of this before, but they're very good about trying to address that, aren't they, really, in a way?**

I felt that when we were in the Uniting Church and what I read of them now was that they were prepared to grapple with some issues that other people weren't, you know, the whole thing about ordaining women and homosexuals in the Church and all of these things that seem to me to be kind of basic to our society now.

**But also just in discussing it I've been struck by that with Uniting Church and with the Quakers traditionally who do this too –**

Yes.

**– where the community tries to grapple together with these – intellectually, really, there's quite a strong intellectual tradition in those churches –**

Yes.

**– of trying to debate those kinds of issues.**

Yes, maybe that's it. I mean, I've always been quite appalled at the violence that I write about in all sorts of ways and I switch off my sort of conscious mind when I'm writing so that I'm not editing it out, and I think I'm always trying to find that rift in between the life that I live – which is very orderly and calm and my children have had a very calm upbringing, and we've always taught them to try to solve conflict by rational discussion and seeing the other person's point of view and all these things, and that side of my life, which is I think very much Australian too, you know, it's very much Australian middle-class way of life, isn't it? – and the horrific things that

I've seen in the world in my lifetime and which have always haunted me and nightmares and fears and panic for my children about what will happen to them in the world and so on. And so those are the things that I kind of look at in my writing, at the terrible violence of humans and how – I mean, I don't think that it will ever be solved: I think war is a part of human nature and that it just comes in cycles and try and we might that we'll never eradicate it – and yet I've kind of listened to stories about happy endings and peace and everything (laughs) and can never quite bring myself to write the happy ending. And so I think I have a really split personality in that, like I can write very light-hearted, funny stories about cats who find a home and yet also write the ongoing tragedy of the Otori series.

**Yes, yes, which comes across very strongly. But it also comes – I mean, your very first novel got an award from the Psychologists Against Violence, didn't it?**

Yes, it did, yes.

**So they're certainly picking that up too, aren't they?**

Yes. Again, I think it's something that I find wholly admirable in human beings is that they keep on struggling with these issues and that you get characters like my heroes, Shigeru and Takeo who kind of never give up on struggling against violence, even though it is part of their lives, and I think that this is something that humans do and we see it all the time in peace organisations and everything, there is so much of it that people do keep on trying to grapple with it.

**Although it seems to me also in your work that you've also addressed it by way of fantasy. There was a quotation I wrote down where you said, 'Reality is harsh and I mitigate it with fantasy', or something like that.**

Yes.

**And yes, I wondered whether that was another – – –.**

I think it's much easier to write about some issues in a fantasy world than in the real world. I certainly find it a lot easier to sort of look at it obliquely and set it in a fantasy world.

**I want to stop you now, only because the tape's going to run out and I don't want to get into another really –**

Okay.

**– engrossing discussion. Don't leap up before I turn you off, though.**

END OF DISK 1: DISK 2

**This is the second tape of the interview with Gillian Rubinstein on 6<sup>th</sup> November 2007 by Susan Marsden for the National Library and for the State Library of South Australia. We're a little concerned that the first tape may not have recorded as well as it should have and I won't completely repeat that first one, Gillian, but we might just briefly at least review, perhaps.**

**For me some of the things that struck me about what you said about your childhood, for one thing – which I hadn't properly thought through – which was just being born during the War. Do you want to make a comment about that, having been born in 1942?**

I guess the things that would strike me mainly about that were that it was a time of great uncertainty. In fact, my father used to say that before I was born everything went against the allies but after I was born (laughs) things started improving, which I thought was a nice way to put it. Because '42 was the sort of turning point of the War and up till then everything looked really pretty bleak. And also it's only now that I've sort of realised what an enormous effect the War had on all sorts of families in England and how it broke families up and broke communities up and scattered people over the world and was just enormously traumatic for everybody living through it; and maybe for the English, because they actually won the War but they really came out in a very bad way at the end of the War because rationing went on for a very long time. And I think everybody at the end of the '40s was very dispirited and just tired, you know, people were exhausted, and I guess that growing up in that era had some sort of effect on me as a child.

**And the death of your father at the age of fourteen, what kind of impact apart from the terrible shock it must have been at the time would you say did it have on you as a person and as a writer?**

It's still something that's fairly hard to talk about. We weren't allowed to go to the funeral and so for ages I didn't really believe that he was dead, I thought that he'd just gone off somewhere else, he was in South America or somewhere. I dreamt constantly of him still being alive. And this year actually my sister and I went back to Woodbridge where he lived on a sort of pilgrimage, which was the first time that we had been back in fifty years. So I think when you lose a parent as a child that it has a very profound effect on you. I think it sort of means that your worst fears have actually happened, which is something terrible but also something kind of liberating. It's interesting that after my father died the things I was actually afraid of grew less,

in a way, because the worst had happened then so I stopped being quite so frightened of everything, as I had been up till then. But the loss of somebody like that who can never, ever be replaced and you just miss him for years and years to come — — —.

**Well, you commented about that when you were both going to university, really missing your father's advice.**

Yes.

**As an immediate, practical example.**

Yes.

**And effectively you lost your mother about the same time, didn't you, really, by her moving to Nigeria?**

Yes, yes, I felt very sort of parentless at that age; and I think during teenage, too, it's so important to be in a family and to be part of a family and to have someone who you can talk to [about] all these things, all the things that are happening to you and so on, that you really need to have that everyday closeness, even though teenage is often quite stormy I think it's very good to go through that with your family.

**Were you conscious when you started writing of dealing with some of those things in your writing, or was it unconscious?**

Well, an awful lot of my books have children who have lost one or both parents or whose mothers have disappeared for some reason, like Ellie in *Space demons*, her mother just takes off, and it is an ongoing theme of mine, yes. And I guess that's because — well, it's both that I am writing out all of those themes for myself and exploring those feelings, and it's also because that's the sort of person that I identify with, having been through that myself.

**Are you also revisiting Englishness? Even though your novels aren't set there, are there elements of your English childhood that you think are also reflected in your work?**

Well, certainly the childhood that I have I kind of transport into South Australia and update it, so it is a sort of mixture, I suppose, of my childhood and my children's childhood, which was going on as I was writing. It's a sort of combination of the two.

**Because we were talking earlier about the freedom, the physical freedom, that you had as a child.**

Yes. Yes, I did, and I tried to let my children have the same freedom, and I think that they were lucky because they were born sort of just before everybody got so paranoid about children being out on their own; and also we didn't have a car for the first, I don't know, eleven or twelve years of my son's life so they got very used to handling public transport and to walking places and so on, and I think that that gave them a sort of freedom that is very different from the other freedom that you have if you have a car, you know, that you're free to go to lots of different places but maybe you aren't so free to find your way around a city or around the suburbs and so on.

But when I moved to South Australia and I started seriously thinking about writing, I was very conscious of being an adult migrant in Australia and of not really knowing very much about Australian culture, and apart from the identification with the child hero or heroine I don't know that I'm sort of naturally a children's writer and I always think if I'd stayed in England I probably would have gone straight into writing adult fiction. But I didn't know anything about Australian adult society; the only thing I knew was the society that my children were in, (laughs) which I knew well because I was in it every day with them. So in a way I was sort of writing myself through an Australian childhood in a very funny mixture of my own English memories and trying to come to terms with living in South Australia and learning a new landscape and learning a new culture.

And something that you said earlier made me think about that, too, which was that I've always been kind of adept at slipping into another country and taking on ways of behaving and customs – language, too, obviously, but also very aware of what the people are like there and wanting to adapt to that, and I suppose I started doing that when I first went out to Nigeria. I didn't want just to live an expat life there, I wanted to know an African life, too, so I was – – –.

**You were a good age for that, too, though, weren't you –**

Yes.

**– because you were how old? Fourteen?**

Fourteen, yes. So very open to all of these different experiences and watching all of the different ways that people behaved and being very influenced by all of these different cultures and lifestyles that seemed to be sort of all congregated on Kano.

**Did you have close interactions with the Africans?**

Not a huge amount. Some, yes, but not a huge amount.

**Yes, I wondered that. There was still something of a divorce between the expats and the locals.**

Yes. Because Nigeria was never a settled colony as such, because people just went there to work really, there was no colour bar or anything like that or no segregation or anything, so there was more interaction probably than in some other of the colonies. But I don't know, because I was still very young.

**How long did you go out to Nigeria, how many years did it cover that your holiday ---.**

Overall, seven to eight years.

**Oh, right. It's quite a long time, then, isn't it? Yes, definitely long enough to have had a major influence on [you].**

Yes, yes, it was a huge influence.

**And we've talked also about your love of languages, which was a big thing, and I suppose also reinforced by the formal study. Did you complete – you obviously completed was it a BA at Oxford?**

Yes.

**You didn't want to go on at university?**

I would have liked to have gone on then, actually. In fact, what I would have really liked to do was to go to the School of Oriental and African Studies in London and learn Japanese, which is quite interesting. That was one of the things that was on my mind then to do because I really wanted to learn a language with a different writing system. It was just something that had always fascinated me. But it wasn't possible then –

**Wasn't it? No.**

– and I was keen to earn my living. Well, I had to go and earn my living, anyway.

**And so you were already interested – you had mentioned this on the first interview – in Japan by then.**

Yes. Yes. Yes, I was. I told you earlier about hearing the words of 'Hiroshima' and 'Nagasaki', and one of the films that I saw when I was still at school, still at Queen Anne's, was *Hiroshima mon amour*, the Alain Resnais film, and for some reason the combination of French and Japanese influences in that film had a very strong

influence on me (laughs) and I don't know how I got to see it, actually. It was quite funny. I was staying with a friend from school for the weekend and her parents said, 'Let's go and see a film.' So we looked at what was on and I saw the name of this film and I had heard of it somewhere and I said, 'Oh, that's meant to be absolutely marvellous', so they very kindly took us and I don't know what they thought of it. (laughter) It was somewhere in the wilds of Berkshire, I don't know where we went to see it – Newbury, perhaps – and I always thought afterwards it must have been quite a surprise to them. (laughter) Anyway, I thought it was wonderful.

**Had you seen anything else Japanese at all?**

I don't think I'd seen anything then, but when I was at Oxford I saw some of the Kurosawa films then at the Oxford Film Society, and of course they made a huge impression.

**As you talked about earlier, too, your passion really at that age was theatre –**

Yes.

**– so did you want to pursue that after university?**

I would have liked to but of course it wasn't terribly easy just to walk into something in theatre. I mean, I did all the ordinary Oxford things of going for fellowships with the BBC and so on, you know, that was one way into the arts then, and didn't get anything; but when I was working after leaving university I had a part-time job at the LSE<sup>4</sup> helping somebody on a research survey – I was called a 'research assistant', something like that, anyway – and I did a course with a television company and the company was called Fenestra and it was just something set up to help people who were interested in that sort of thing get into television. I can't remember what he charged; it was moderately expensive and was probably not an awfully ethical company, (laughs) but I had a lot of fun with it.

**Was that your first job after university?**

The LSE job was the first job, yes. Oh, while I was at university I had a holiday job at Bumpus's Bookshop in London.

**Did you?**

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<sup>4</sup> LSE – London School of Economics.

That was great fun. Yes.

**Well, you had thought of writing plays, of course, at that point, and you did actually write whole plays while you were at university?**

I wrote a couple of one-act plays, yes. And scenes of many other plays (laughs) that I never finished.

**And were they performed?**

No, no. I don't know that I ever even showed – oh, I sent one in for a competition and I think it got a third place or something like that. But anyway, no, they were never, ever performed.

**I've always felt with being a playwright, as with being a conductor, that there's a very narrow room of opportunity, isn't there, really, because it's not like writing a book which might at least get published; with a play you actually have to get it performed and so –**

That's right, yes.

**– that's another whole level of difficulty of achievement, isn't it, really?**

Yes, yes, that is so true. It is terribly difficult to get anything performed; and it's also I think *the* hardest form of writing. It's terribly difficult writing for theatre.

**Do you think, however, that early interest in writing plays had an impact on your writing techniques as a novelist?**

I think it made me very conscious of dialogue and of listening to the way that people speak and re-creating that, and I think that I've always been very good at imitating styles and I think that that was something with languages that when I wrote in Spanish or French, even though it might not be grammatically correct, it sounded French and it sounded Spanish – that was what my tutors used to say to me – which was a strength of some sort, I don't know, that it was a sort of mimicry, you know, and I think that maybe that comes from theatre as well.

**Plus your study of languages, the two are really combining.**

Yes, and the study of languages, yes. The other thing that I've always thought was I was always really thankful not to have ever studied English Literature as such, so when I read Chaucer and Shakespeare and everybody else I read them purely for pleasure and I wasn't studying them because I was actually studying French and Spanish literature.

**That's interesting, yes. And so similarly with reading the European myths, really, it was a childhood pleasure more than a formal study.**

Yes, very much so. I did Medieval Spanish and French, that's the other thing I should say, I suppose.

**Did you? Interesting.**

Yes. Oxford didn't really teach Modern French. I think they stopped at about 1914 or something – very early on, anyway – and I didn't particularly want to go through the nineteenth century again because I'd just done it at school and I thought, 'Well, if I can't study modern French writers I'll go back and do early French writers.'

**So that's another medieval period that you've been immersed in.**

Yes.

**Apart from Medieval Japan.**

I often think – yes; and also because so much of French medieval literature is based on the Arthurian stuff, so that was also very interesting for me, I liked doing that.

**But you also have a warrior culture and a romantic culture – – –.**

Yes, and the Spanish stuff as well with ..... and so on and there was a lot of warrior stuff, yes.

**And we also touched on religion, which I won't drag you through again, but I thought that was interesting. So your family background was vaguely Anglican.**

Yes.

**And it was really, as you say, quite a lot later in your life that you developed an interest in religion.**

Yes. I'd always been interested in it but I suppose that going through this stage in the '80s made me very interested in why people are religious and what it is about it, and I think that that's interesting now because I had kind of felt, I suppose, in the '70s that religion was over for the West, you know, that that was it, it was finished; and it seems to have made this great comeback now again (laughter) and I think that that's really interesting, and I certainly hadn't meant to write so much about religion in the Otori books, and yet when I started writing it seemed to be so much part of the story and so much part of the medieval framework was to be set in a believing framework, because everybody believed in something.

**But for yourself you were explaining – I thought that was fascinating – which was in a way the book writing became a substitute, is that too strong a word, for the religious practice?**

Yes, yes, it was, really. It was just something that seemed to answer all the needs that had been fulfilled by the spiritual journey and when I started writing that was what seemed to be much more real than anything else.

**And do you still feel that?**

Yes, I do, yes. I'm not sure; maybe – yes and no. Still thinking about that one.  
(laughs)

**That's the nice thing about a long human life, isn't it? You can change your mind.**

I know, yes.

**And I suppose the other thing that we touched on also, which we've just talked about again, was the whole business of family but also the friendships between children which seems to me is partly coloured by your own close relationship with your sister, Jocelyn. Would you say so?**

Yes. We were very close. We have also had periods of estrangement when we haven't been so close. I think both of us regret that in our teenage, when we were going through this awful time, that we weren't really very much help to each other. I think we were both too lacerated to be able to help the other one much. You're just sort of thinking about your own grief and your own self-preservation in all sorts of ways. But we are very close now, yes.

**But you were talking earlier about being in Nigeria, for example, and exploring.**

On the horses, yes. That was a very bonding thing. We used to go out – not every afternoon, but three afternoons a week usually – on the horses on our own without anybody else around and just explore the bush around Kano.

**There's a strong line of very strong girls in your books, which is nice to see – this is a woman who, when she used to read to her children and she loved the Enid Blyton books, but I used to substitute the girls for some of the boys because I thought the girls should be a bit stronger than they were.**

Oh, really? (laughter)

**And it seems to me that, although on the one had you say you were a shy child and you stammered and that was an awkwardness for you, but in other ways you were quite a bold child and so both those characteristics come out in your books, too, it seems to me.**

I suppose early on I was quite bold, yes. I guess that my – and I think quite a lot of women feel this – that there's a child that you are up until eleven or twelve that you feel was much more your real self, was the free self, you know, the sort of one that hadn't yet been burdened by puberty and sex and all those other things – and I guess that child *was* bold, yes, and adventurous and outdoors and all of that. I mean I *was* always very scared of all sorts of things, but I also almost always made myself do the things I was frightened of, so I had the two things in me.

**And were you writing as well as reading as a young girl?**

I did write quite a lot of things. I wrote a lot of poems and plays at school. I had a very close friend called Eileen Mayne Reid and we were both – when I look back at us, I think we were so funny, we were such little intellectuals. We loved reading plays and putting plays on, and we did encourage each other in our poetry and writing plays and talking about it all and all those things. I guess I did want to be a writer then but I also didn't at the same time; I think I was aware that I kind of needed to have a long space of life before I did any real writing and I was wondering, really, how to fill my life in until I became a writer. (laughs)

**So you were quite determined upon being a writer, were you, from – what, young adulthood?**

Probably, yes. Yes, I think I thought that I would always end up as being one.

**But that you felt in a way you had to serve an apprenticeship before then?**

I think so. But I was always doing all sorts of different kinds of writing. I did journalism and I wrote about films and started writing bits and pieces, told stories to the children. When I was a young child – just to go back to that – I had very, very poor handwriting and so I found it very difficult to actually write long things, but I did use to make up stories all the time to myself, that was my one thing, and I was usually acting out some drama inside my own head at any time of day or night.

**Do you think the fact that you stammered as well was so the alternative way of communication was stories?**

I think very much so. And I also think that when you stammer you get a very good vocabulary because you're always looking for words that will help you over the chasm, (laughs) the words that will form the bridge for you, and there are some words

that are harder to say than others. And you're always thinking about alternative constructions to sentences as well.

**Becomes almost second nature.**

Yes, it does.

**That's interesting.**

Yes.

**Yes, I hadn't thought about that side of things. And perhaps also it's being very oral so you are thinking about how the words will sound.**

That could be it too, yes.

**Which again ties in with your interest in languages, perhaps.**

Yes.

**If you had to speak in another language would you have the same problem?**

Fairly much so, yes.

**Did you?**

Yes.

**I wondered whether it might have been easier to speak French than English.**

Sometimes, sometimes you find it easier to speak another language, but no, I had problems in all languages. It's very mortifying having a stammer.

**Oh, I can imagine.**

Yes. You know, people think you're an absolute idiot.

**And try and fill in for you too, I suspect –**

Yes.

**– yes, which must be so frustrating. Have all your sentences finished for you.**

It caused me an enormous amount of pain. You know, you can sort of laugh about it now – and people *do* laugh about it; it's one of the great comic turns, isn't it, to have someone with a stammer. People think it's hilariously funny. (laughs) But it's not for the stammerer.

**Seems to be very English, too, doesn't it? You don't see much made of it in Australia, do you, but it's a very sort of English – piece of English humour that you have someone –**

It is, isn't it, yes.

**– doing that sort of hesitation.**

But I haven't met many Australian people who stammer.

**No. When you said that I thought, 'I haven't, either.'**

So I think it's a very English thing.

**Which is interesting and you wonder why.**

I think it comes from being over-corrected as a child or various things.

**Was your family strict?**

My mother was very strict, yes.

**Was she?**

Yes, very strict about things like manners and speech and – – –.

**You said about her being a bit frightening, but I wondered whether that was also – – –.**

Oh, she was terrifying us.

**Oh, dear, poor little thing. But that doesn't necessarily mean she was strict, but if it was that as well – – –.**

Yes.

**But not your father?**

I don't remember him as being quite so strict. They were from a slightly different class. She was more sort of middle-class and he was more, I don't know, lower middle-class, I suppose you'd say, and those things mattered an awful lot in England then between the wars. His family I think were more easygoing, perhaps; hers were very strict. Everything had to be done properly.

**Tell me – we've touched on it; well, two things now: one is your post-university career in London, was it, was it all in London that you were working in?**

Yes, it was, yes.

**So you went up from Oxford straight to London?**

Yes, I went up to London. I lived in a bedsit in Earls Court and did –

**Yes, amongst all the Australians, aha!**

– yes, with all the Australians – and then my mother had to go into hospital for three months so I went home to help look after my stepfather and my grandmother, who also lived there then. Then I went back to London and worked for the Greater London Council for nine months, I think it was, or a year.

**What were you doing there?**

It was called their ‘graduate intake’, so I was administrative officer, grade three. (laughs) And I worked in the Treasurer’s Department for some reason, I don’t know why they put me there, and I went into it because I had an idea that I would like to work in the area of arts funding, and so I guess that’s why I ended up in the Treasury. But I was actually in an office, I was the only girl and there were twelve men in it of various ages and they didn’t like me at all because I was a graduate and I hadn’t come up through all the levels. But they were dealing with compensation payments after compulsory purchase orders and it was actually really rather fascinating because we used to have to do field visits so we’d go out all over London where they had bought up shops and things to drive a new motorway through or whatever and talk to the owners about how much money they thought that they should be compensated for, whereupon they brought out their other set of books – not the ones that they used for the Tax Department – to prove that they hadn’t actually been running at a loss for ten years. Oh, I saw some really funny things. The whole thing was really sort of Dickensian.

And then I had to write reports about it, so I let my descriptive powers go, (laughter) and my boss, when I left, said that he really loved reading my reports, he was going to miss them. I put in all the details like the dogs that were howling outside and the boarded-up windows and the graffiti.

**Oh, that’s lovely.**

And then I left that because an old friend of mine from Oxford came back from Europe and asked me to marry him, and I was so fed up with my job and my life –

**You did!**

– that I said ‘yes’.

**What was his name?**

He was called Ion Will, W-I-double-L. I-O-N, it is, 'Ion'.

**Oh, W-I-double-L-N.**

No, Will; but his first name is Ion, I-O-N.

**So how old were you when you married, what year was this?**

I was twenty-three, and we went away to Europe for – '65.

**Thank you.**

And we went away to Europe together for about eighteen months and then we came back and sort of amicably separated. I mean, nowadays you just wouldn't bother to get married, you would just go and have an affair, but – – –.

**So most of that marriage you were actually in Europe, were you?**

Yes. Yes, in Italy and France and Spain.

**Just travelling around?**

Yes. He was working for something called the Green Continental Telex Directory, so he went around selling space in this international telex directory.

**What were you doing in that time?**

Not much. (laughs)

**No? You had this romantic idea that suddenly you were sort of struck by the desire to start writing and scribbling in lots of notebooks but you probably kept a diary and that was probably it.**

I sort of scribbled a lot. I wrote to my mum every week –

**You wrote?**

– to my mother every week, and funnily enough I've always done that since I was fourteen, you see, I've been writing to her every week; not so much now, but for years and years and years I wrote to her every week and she kept all those letters so I've got them all now back here.

**Oh, wonderful. She's given them back, has she?**

Yes.

**That's lovely. I'll have to ask about donating them. (laughter) Oh, how wonderful. That's a great record to have for you, isn't it, really?**

Yes. It is, because I didn't often keep a diary. I have kept diaries intermittently in my life but they're always terribly boring, they're sort of just the bare outline of what I did in the day, no inner thoughts or anything like that. And my letters to Mum are really fairly much the same, they're just a sort of chatty travelogue about where we were and the meals we'd eaten and so on.

**So you came back to London and separated '67?**

Yes.

**And then obviously had to find something to keep body and soul together again.**

Yes. Well, then I did a shorthand/typing course for three months and then I started applying for jobs and I got a job with a publishing company which was run by a man called Tom Stacey, and he also had a stammer which we always used to say was why he employed me, because he wanted to have somebody else stammering in the office. How are we going for time on this one?

**Fine.**

Okay. And he had actually started doing something called 'Correspondence World-wide', and this was something – it's hard to imagine now in days of Google and everything else, but in those days when there wasn't anything else they did a service which updated every single country in the world with population and languages and all of these things, and it was in a loose-leaf folder and they would update every two months or something and send it all out to journalists who subscribed to it, and that was one of his projects. Then he had a contract to do the Year Book for Chambers Encyclopaedia, so I was actually employed to be the Arts and Entertainment editor on the Year Book, but I did all sorts of other things for him as well. And he decided that the trouble with the Year Book was that his staff were not really fully-employed most of the year other than in between the end of December and the beginning of January when you had to write the whole thing, so he thought that he would find subjects for us to write about, and the Science editor did a book on pollution, one of the very first books on the environment, and I was asked to do one on nudity in stage and screen, and I did a book – – –.

**Oh, that's nicely bringing together your interests, isn't it?**

Yes, it did rather, didn't it? So I did this book called *Original skin*, which was my title –

**That's lovely – *Original skin*?**

– *skin*, yes –

**That's lovely.**

– and did this book about the history of nudity on stage and screen.

**How wonderful. Is it still in print or is it still available?**

It's not in print any more. It's still around here and there – it's under the name of 'Gillian Hanson' – and really it was just a look at all of the films, and I went and interviewed a couple of London filmmakers and theatre directors and so on and see what they thought about it all, and it was fun to write, it was interesting. I went to interview the Chief Censor, John Trevelyan. He was terribly funny – he made a huge pass at me in the lift, which I thought was so funny, yes. (laughs)

**Were you still writing plays, were you still interested in writing plays at that point?**

I don't know that I was actually doing anything. I was still thinking about it a lot. And then it was while I was working for Tom Stacey that I met Philip and we got together and got married and came out to Australia in – – –.

**Back, back, back.**

(laughter)

**That was much too far! Skimmed over that one. I wasn't concentrating. So this is Philip.**

I met Philip, yes.

**When did you meet Philip?**

Must have been 1970.

**So you met him – he was going out with a friend of yours, you said?**

Yes. So I had known him since '65 but I met him again in 1970. I hadn't seen much of him in the interim.

**So he was in Australia by that stage, was he, and was he visiting back in England or had been in Australia?**

He worked – he had been in Australia since the '50s, but he'd always worked in England and America so he had been going to and fro for some years by then.

**Right. Was he a psychologist?**

Yes. But then he was in advertising.

**Oh, was he? Okay.**

Yes, and market research.

**So when you met him again he was back in London, was he?**

Yes.

**So you got married in what year?**

'Seventy-three.

**Oh, so it was the year that you migrated, you came out fairly quickly.**

Yes.

**So you got married in '73. Now, why did you decide to come to Australia, apart from the fact that he had been living in Australia?**

Well, in the early '70s Europe didn't look like such a good place to be and we thought it was a better place to have children, and his parents were older than my parents so we thought that it would be good to spend some time with them.

**They were here in Australia?**

Yes. And so we just decided to come.

**We did say earlier, we talked about the fact that your sister by that stage was living in Canada.**

Yes.

**So there was a sort of a 'push' factor in a way, wasn't there, perhaps, as well as a 'pull' factor, would you say?**

Well, I didn't really want to be the only one left in England with my stepfather and my mother. They were very, very difficult people. It was not easy seeing them or anything and my stepfather was very dominating and very hard to get along with. And, as I said before, we felt that we could just about manage to maintain a distant relationship when maybe if we'd all been at close quarters it might not have been so easy.

**You didn't come to straight to Adelaide, though. Where did you go?**

We went to Sydney. We were actually heading for Melbourne but Philip came out earlier and I was booked to follow him on Qantas. But I was pregnant and I didn't have a smallpox vaccination and in those days you had to have one to get into Australia. So when I got to the airport they said, 'Well, we're very sorry but you can't fly.' (laughs) And I had this terrible vision of being stuck in England with my mother until the baby was born! Even though my mother was actually being very nice to me then, for a change. No, she was; she was being lovely. I think that she was just so happy that I was married to somebody, anybody, now. (laughs) So I discovered that if you came out to Australia by ship that you could get in without a smallpox vaccination – extraordinary regulations, I'm not sure why – so I left England on a Russian ship – you know, one of those, what was it called? Not CBC Line but something like that.

**Pretty rough, was it?**

The *Fedor Shalyapin*, and got as far as Panama and then I had some bleeding and whereas they'd said that there was a fully-equipped hospital on board and everything and an English-speaking doctor, and of course there was no such thing. So the doctor, who was this really ancient Russian doctor who spoke no English at all, (laughs) panicked and told the captain that they had to turn the ship round –

**Heavens!**

– and they left me in Panama.

**Oh, no!**

Yes. (laughter)

**Oh, dear. Oh, dear, this is a saga. And you've never written a novel about this?**

I should, shouldn't I? So then the ship's agent came out, the shipping line agent came and was really nice and looked after me and booked me on a flight to LA<sup>5</sup> and from LA to Sydney, and I kept saying, 'But they won't let me in if I go by plane', and all of the doctors in the American Forces Hospital in Panama kept assuring me, 'No,

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<sup>5</sup> LA – Los Angeles.

no, it'll be fine,' you know, 'we'll just write these letters and it'll all be fine.' And when I finally got to Sydney I *did* have to go into quarantine for two weeks –

**Did you?**

– at North Head Quarantine Station.

**Gosh, that's a historic spot.**

Yes, so I was probably one of the last people to be incarcerated there. So due to all of this Philip, who had been looking for somewhere for us to live in Melbourne, came up to Sydney and I came out of the quarantine station just in time for Christmas and we stayed in a house of some friends of ours who were away over the Christmas holiday and we just liked Sydney so much that we decided to stay there. So we lived in Sydney for five years.

**Did you, whereabouts?**

In Paddington.

**Understandable.**

Underwood Street, Paddington – a house that we still own. We bought it in 1974 and we still own it; it's rented out at the moment but the girls lived there for some years. So Matt was born there and then Tessa came along and then –

**Was Suzy born there as well?**

– no, then Philip was offered a job up in Lismore with the Healthy Lifestyle campaign on the Quit Smoking side of it.

**On the ---?**

On the Quit Smoking, giving up smoking.

**So was he working for a health department by that stage?**

He was working out of St Vincent's Hospital and I think he was the Health Officer for the City of Sydney was his title, when he was the only person in the whole department. (laughs) People treated health differently in those days. It's grown to be such a huge industry now, hasn't it?

**Yes, hasn't it? Isn't that funny: when I saw that you'd been in Byron Bay I thought, 'Oh, they obviously did a counter-cultural bit in that period, the '70s.'**

Well, we did a bit. We were sort of weekend hippies in a way, yes. And so Phil got this job in Lismore and we went up – well, he was offered it; so we went up to have a look and stayed a fortnight in and around Byron and just absolutely loved it.

**Beautiful.**

And I think we just got back from there when I thought, ‘I really feel very strange’ and I realised I was pregnant again, so Suzy was born up in Byron.

**Was she, in Byron Bay itself?**

Yes.

**So although Phil was working in Lismore you lived in Byron Bay.**

Yes.

**Not that far, is it?**

It was about forty-five minutes’ drive. But it was so much nicer living out by the beach.

**Yes, wonderful. So you said you flirted with the counter-cultural stuff, did you, at that stage?**

Well, a bit. We had a lot of friends in that sort of thing and we grew all our own vegetables and I was like a real earth mother and baked and did all that. But we sort of lived in a proper house – although we did have people staying in our shed, and we, I don’t know, we sort of had friends that were in and out of the alternative lifestyle thing there.

**You were obviously pretty busy with having children at this point. Did you have other work in this period, in Sydney or in Byron Bay?**

Well, in Sydney we were friendly with the Uniting Church, again, minister at Paddington when he was setting up the Paddington Markets, and he asked me if I would do some baking for the market just to get the whole thing going, so I used to make quiches for the Paddington Market in a (laughs) time when nobody knew what a quiche was. It was terribly funny. People would say, ‘What’s this, what’s this “kwitchy” here?’ (laughter) Hard to believe now.

**Oh, that’s lovely.**

And I used to make – – –.

**So you've contributed to the culinary changes of the Australian population.**

Yes.

**Another claim to fame.**

So I used to make about ---.

**I didn't realise it was the Uniting Church that started the Paddington Markets, I must admit.**

It's in the church grounds there and he actually started it because he wanted to do something for the community, and the people that sort of got together doing this little food thing there was a Dutch guy with an Indonesian wife and they did Indonesian food; and an Italian who had gone to India to study Ayurvedic medicine and had changed his name to an Indian name, so he was called Prageet, and he did freshly-squeezed juices; and I did the quiches and somebody else did cakes and things like that.

**Wonderful.**

Yes, it was great, it was really good fun.

**What was the minister's name?**

Russell Davies.

**Russell Davies. So it really did start off as a food market, did it?**

Yes, and then everybody started bringing in little stalls and –

**It's a lovely market, I always enjoy going –**

– second-hand clothes and it –

**– if I can when I'm in Sydney.**

– grew and grew, yes.

**Yes, but it is much more now it's clothing, really, there's a lot of young designers.**

Yes, it is.

**That's wonderful.**

So yes, that was fun to be in on that. And in Byron Bay I did a little bit of baking of brownies and things for the local shops.

**So you continued the association with the Uniting Church in Byron?**

Yes. And in fact it was probably because of Russell that when I felt like going to a church, you know, for that community thing that I ended up going to the Uniting Church.

**So where did you do the Christian dance, in Sydney or in Byron Bay?**

In Adelaide.

**Oh, did you – not till you came here?**

Yes.

**So I should ask you that, seeing how we're getting on; we've got about another eight minutes on this tape. Why did you come to Adelaide? Was it again with Phil's work?**

Yes, it was. He'd been working for somebody called Bernie McKay, I think his name was, who was then running the Lismore health thing, and Bernie was offered a job in the South Australian Health Commission and he asked Phil to go with him. And we were just starting to get a little bit disillusioned with Byron, there was a huge amount of heroin coming into the town then, and also wondering what would happen to the kids when they were older there –

**High school, yes.**

– and so we thought that it would be fun to come to South Australia. And I'd heard of things like Come Out and all of the other things that were there for kids and it seemed like a very sort of child-friendly state, so we moved.

**Did you think it was a good thing to do? Leading question.**

Took us ages to settle down, to be quite honest.

**Did it?**

Yes. The whole family was really terribly unhappy. I just really missed Byron Bay and all my friends there. We found Adelaide very difficult to break into at that time – this was '81 that we moved here – and people seemed to be so sort of involved with their families that there wasn't room for outsiders.

**No, newcomers, no. I've heard other people say that, yes.**

And so every week we'd say, 'Oh, let's go back to New South Wales, let's go back to New South Wales', (laughs) and somehow it all got to be too much effort. (laughter)

**It's interesting because I talked earlier about the obviously autobiographical element of Victoria in *Beyond the labyrinth* with the parents in Nigeria, but it hadn't crossed my mind that there's that autobiographical element then in *Foxspell* obviously, because the –**

Oh, yes, when they move from – – –.

**– family there's just come from Sydney, haven't they, I think.**

Yes.

**Were you conscious of writing that at the time?**

Maybe, yes. So I've always had this sort of pull to go back to Sydney and now our son lives there too and he has a house in Balmain and I've actually just been over there for the weekend and I just love being there. I love the feel of the air and it's got so many memories for me now.

**Yes. Just the humidity is such a contrast with this very dry atmosphere here, isn't it, yes.**

Yes.

**It's completely different geography, isn't it?**

The air feels so soft.

**So where does he live, sorry?**

Balmain.

**Oh, he lives in Byron Bay, okay.**

No, Balmain.

**Oh, Balmain – oh, it's beautiful there, no wonder. Right on the harbour.**

Yes, it's lovely.

**So it's interesting, I suppose also you'd been living – in a funny way you'd been revisiting village life, hadn't you, by being in Byron Bay, in a way, because you were brought up in a village.**

Yes. Yes, it was. I mean, it isn't really anything like an English village, it's quite different; but it was a nice size and I really liked it that it was that size and really close to the country and you can see the hills at the end of the street. It's not like being in an urban environment at all. And in fact when we moved to Lynton one of the things I absolutely loved about it was that if you looked straight ahead or over to

the right you could see all of the lights of the city but the bush is dark, and I actually use that in *Foxspell* because at the left at the end of our streets there are no lights at all because it's that wild quarry area, and I just love that. I love dark night landscapes.

**Yes, you do get that bulk of the hills face, don't you –**

Yes.

**– and at night-time it is that sort of great, dense blackness, isn't it? Yes, it is a lovely contrast. Yes, that's interesting. Well, *Foxspell* and *Beyond the labyrinth* seem to me the two most imbued with place of your Australian books.**

Yes, I think they are.

**Yes. I think it's partly that the children also are very much in the landscape – on the beach in one case and on the hills face in the other.**

Yes.

**And were you conscious of doing that when you were writing them?**

Well, when I wrote *Beyond the labyrinth* it's probably based on the summer holidays that we had on the Yorke Peninsula.

**Whereabouts?**

Coobowie and then over at Hardwicke Bay.

**Sorry, Coobowie – – –?**

And Hardwicke Bay.

**Hardwicke Bay. Yes, because you talk about going up the road, up the Gulf and going along the Gulf and then going down the Peninsula.**

Yes.

**Yes, that rather dreary expanse of nothing much.**

It made a very strong impression on me and it has a sort of curious beauty, I think, the Yorke Peninsula.

**Takes a while to adjust, though, after New South Wales, doesn't it?**

Especially over the other side, I think, is prettier, the Spencer Gulf side is a lot prettier than the St Vincent Gulf side. Yes, coming to South Australia did have a

very strong effect after New South Wales and I still do really miss forests and big masses of trees and so on. I miss that about England, too.

**Sorry?**

I miss that about England, too.

**Oh, I could imagine, yes. I would imagine that would be quite hard, actually, that contrast.**

When I was over in England this time I kept looking at beech woods and thinking, 'I just absolutely *love* beech woods.' (laughs) They're just so beautiful and the trees are so massive and so old.

**But also simple things like carpets of wild hyacinths or these sorts of – where here we painstakingly grow one or two, it's that sort of – – –.**

Yes, that's true, yes.

**It's interesting, isn't it, actually. And we still have a sort of oasis mentality, I think that's why our gardens are so important, really –**

Yes.

**– here, and that's why it's such a tragedy about the loss of gardens now because they're even more precious because we're conscious of how much effort they take to keep going.**

Yes.

**Interesting. I'll stop it here because we're reaching that point – three minutes, I seem to have this infallible thing to say three minutes.**

That's very good, yes.

**So we take a break for you, but that's really lovely.**

Okay.

**Thank you.**

END OF DISK 2: DISK 3

**This is Susan Marsden interviewing Gillian Rubinstein, this is tape three, on 6<sup>th</sup> November 2007 and we're almost – we're on the bring now of talking about her writing career; however, before we do, one thing I would like to ask – well, you've touched on your children – perhaps you could give me their names and dates of birth.**

Yes. Matthew was born 28<sup>th</sup> February 1974 and Tessa 19<sup>th</sup> January '77 and Suzy 18<sup>th</sup> June '79.

**So they were all born in ---.**

Susannah, I should say.

**All born in New South Wales.**

Yes, they were.

**Interestingly, therefore, when you write about, as you said earlier, Australian childhood, in some ways you're really writing about a New South Wales – well, to begin with, aren't you, even though it's set in Adelaide?**

Well, we came over here when Matthew was seven, so they spent really most of their childhood here in South Australia and I didn't start writing until 1985 when Matt was eleven, so I was actually writing about them and their friends.

**Can I ask you why you started to write? What triggered off the writing?**

It's really hard to know exactly. The story that I always tell people is that Philip suggested I should go out and find a job and I couldn't think of anything to do so I decided to see if I could write a novel. And that's kind of how it was.

I'd been telling stories to the children a lot while they were growing up and so I'd really got into a story of storytelling mood, and I was aware that for Matthew and his friends who were mad about computer games that there was very little around that actually had anything about computers. I think children's stories were fairly either suburban or pastoral still, then, there was very little that was really set in a city or that dealt with technology in any way. And I did literally decide that I would give myself three months and see if I could write a novel, and the kids were all at school then and I suppose I felt, 'Well, now I really have some time to do what I want to do and I will give this a try before seeing if I can find a job.' And I wrote *Space demons*. The first draft of it was very different from how it ended up and it was called *Waking dreaming* then. It had all of the same main characters but the story was very different.

***Waking dreaming.***

*Waking dreaming*, yes. But the story was very different, although it had all of the elements of the final story in it. And when it was finished I gave it to a friend of mine and it was still written out longhand and asked if she would read it and tell me if

I was wasting my time or not. I trusted her judgment on that. And she read it and she said that she thought that I ought to type it up at least and that it had gripped her and kept her reading. So I typed it up and something else had happened just before that which I forgot to mention then, which was that an artist called Knarelle Beard, who I had met I think it must have been through the Christian Dance Association, I'd started writing poetry – I'm telling this story backwards, no.

**Tell it how you like.**

Let me get to the real part of the story. When I was doing the Christian dance, when we came to Adelaide and I started doing Christian dance, I went to some very inspiring workshops with a woman called Sister Kate –

**Sister Kate?**

– yes. Forgotten what her surname was; think it might have been Fitzpatrick or something like that. And she was at that time a nun and I think she was associated with Cabra.

**With ---?**

Cabra, you know, the Catholic college.

**Oh, was she? Yes, yes.**

Which I think is Dominican, isn't it?

**I think so.**

So anyway, I think she taught there. And she was very interested in movement and dance as a form of healing and as a form of community, and I went to several workshops with her and something about the workshops unlatched something in me and I started writing poetry. And a lot of the poetry was for movement, to be read so that people could move to it, and through this I met Knarelle Beard, who is an Adelaide artist, and she had done several years before some illustrations for a story, and everyone had always said that the illustrations were marvellous but that the story didn't grab them as much as the illustrations. So she phoned me up one day and she said, 'Will you come over? I want to show you something.' And she just showed me the pictures and said, 'Would you be able to write a story around these pictures?' Which is sort of a hard task to do, but it's not unlike writing a (laughs) prequel, in fact.

So, looking at them – and in fact the story did suddenly jump into my mind and I could see the characters involved and I felt as if I knew their back story and I knew their situation – and I wrote a story for her which was quite different from what the illustrations had originally been for. Anyway, she was very pleased with it and she showed it to Omnibus Books, who were just starting up then, as you probably know, and she took it to Jane and Sue there and they read the story and were terribly encouraging about the writing. Although they didn't particularly want to publish it, they felt that it was a bit too – it didn't quite match; but anyway, they were extremely encouraging about the writing and said, 'Well, you must go on with writing and if you do anything else show it to us.' And by a very strange coincidence, which hadn't dawned on me until I actually met Jane, she's the daughter of a cousin of the family that we used to live with in England of the Hatt-Cooks, so I had known of her since ever and I'd actually met all her older sisters because she's the youngest of five girls and her older sisters had all come over one after the other on 'the big England trip' when I was a teenager, and of course had come down to Salisbury where we were living then and stayed with the family that I was staying with, and I had met them all. And it seemed like a very strange coincidence, and so when I finished *Space demons* I asked Jane if she would have a look at it and she said that she really loved it and that she would really like to publish it if I would rewrite it. So after a lot of discussions with her about where the story was going wrong and everything I went off and I rewrote it two or three times and then they finally said, 'Yes, this is okay and we will publish it like this', and signed a contract with me. So that was how it all came about.

**How exciting. So this is Jane – it was Hatt-Cook, was it, did you say? Who was the person who encouraged you to – – –?**

Jane Covernton.

**Jane Covernton.**

Yes.

**So at that point did you think you should get an agent? What point did you then get an agent?**

I got an agent some time later, although the next book I wrote in fact I finished the manuscript the same month that *Space demons* was published, so 1986 I had finished *Beyond the labyrinth* and I took it to Omnibus and they didn't want to publish it,

which I was rather upset about, because it was too different, they thought it was too strange, they didn't like the language in it and they just found it too unusual, I suppose. So I forget how this next stage actually came about but somebody gave me an introduction to an agent in London and said, 'Well, she might be interested in it', and I sent it to her and she was very interested in it and in me as a writer, and I went to see her several times – you know, because I was going to and fro to London quite a lot then; actually, *not* a lot then, I'm lying, but I *did* go to London in '86 and I did go and see her then.

**What was her name?**

Elizabeth Something-or-other, I can't remember. So I was already thinking about an agent. And in the meantime I'd sent *Beyond the labyrinth* to Anne Godden at Hyland House by the simple expedient of looking at the books that I had really liked that had been published in the last few years and thinking, 'Well, they do quite unusual books which seem to do very well', as they did. 'I'll send it to them.' And they were a very small outfit, there were only two of them working out of a backroom at that stage.

**In which city?**

In Melbourne. And it took Anne ages and ages to read the manuscript and I kept phoning her up and saying, 'Have you read it yet?' 'No, no, I'm sorry, I'll try to get around to it this week.' Anne was marvellous, and we actually had all sorts of other connections which we found out later. She had also lived in Nigeria, and she was a child in Birkhamstead in the War – she's about ten years older than I was – so we were there at the same time during the War. And she was very English, up to the end of her days – you know, rather like me – she never lost her English accent. So she would reassure me down the phone that she was going to read it, it was the next one she was going to read.

***Space demons* hadn't actually been published at this stage when you finished *Beyond the labyrinth*? Or had it been?**

By the time Anne was reading it it had been published, yes. And then she phoned me up one day and she said, 'Oh, this is absolutely marvellous,' she said, 'I think this is going to be a Children's Book Council Book of the Year. Why didn't you tell me about it before?' I said, 'Anne! I've been trying to tell you all this time!' (laughter) So she was wonderful and always terribly, terribly encouraging and a marvellous

editor, so she was just so influential on the three main books: that one, *Galax-Arena* and *Foxspell*, because she was the editor on all of them.

**We've rushed you ahead a bit. So you wrote *Space demons* or rewrote *Space demons*.**

I'm still talking –

**Yes, you are.**

– I'm still talking about the agent, I'm trying to get to the stage of the agent. And in the meantime *Space demons* had been published and had been very successful, and in '87 I think it was Magpie Theatre asked me if I would do a three-month writer in residence with them, which was rather lovely to be asked out of the blue. And it was when I was working with them that Cate Fowler, who was then at the Adelaide Festival Centre doing the Something on Saturday program – she's a theatrical producer, she's the head of Windmill now – decided that *Space demons* would make a great play to do for the next Come Out, and so it was adapted by Richard Tulloch and it was while we were talking about the contract for the play that I realised that I really needed an agent then and so Jane and Sue suggested Caroline Lurie, who was then a Melbourne agent, and that's how I ended up with Australian Literary Management. Further down the track they sold the Melbourne side of the business to Jenny Darling, who's my agent now.

**Thank you. Yes, I thought it would be good to work that one out.**

So that was the agent story, yes.

**Taking a couple of steps back to *Space demons* now because we've leapt rather wildly over that whole process, did you find it easy to write after all this time of actually thinking about stories and telling stories verbally and reading them too, as you say in the blurb to *Space demons*?**

Yes. Well, I just absolutely loved the whole process of creating fiction. I just thought it was the most exciting thing that I'd done for ages – almost as good as having babies. So it was just amazing, I loved doing it. I didn't like the rewriting side of it so much, I found that very difficult and I found dealing with Jane and Sue very difficult because it was often very hard to sort of pick yourself up again after a meeting with them and go home and say, 'Well, I've absolutely got to get it right this time.' There were several times during our association when I thought, 'I just can't do it, it's too difficult, I'm going to throw the whole thing away.' But I kept going

and I mean it's, you know, sort of thanks to them that it got published at all so I'll always be terribly grateful to them.

**Did Omnibus publish other books of yours or was that it, just *Space demons*?**

They did *Answers to Brut* –

**They did, did they?**

– and *Melanie and the night animal*, and then they also turned down quite a lot of books because for ages I would send everything to them first. And the *Space demons* trilogy.

**And the – – –?**

And the *Space demons* trilogy.

**Oh, they did all three, did they?**

Yes.

**Right.**

And they did *At Ardilla*.

**Was there a difference in your treatment, apart from being accepted or rejected, by the different publishing houses? Were they very different in the relationship they had with you?**

In a way I always felt that dealing with Anne at Hyland House was like two adults meeting and with Omnibus I always felt it was a sort of parent–child relationship, that the author was the child and the publishers were the parents. So yes, there was a bit of a difference. For a long time because Omnibus was the only children's publisher in Adelaide I think they could take exactly what they wanted to take. So it was very much that they were the more powerful ones in the transaction. And publishers almost always are with authors; there are far more authors wanting to be published than there are publishers available. And I think Anne Godden was always more concerned with the work and how I wanted it to be, whereas I think other publishers I've worked with have been more concerned with the market and what will suit the market, so again it was like being treated like an adult writer and not like somebody who is just writing for the children's market.

And, as I said earlier, in all sorts of ways I think I wasn't really a children's writer, which is why my children's books always tend to end up being much darker than I

had intended them to, and I feel much more comfortable now that I've said to myself, 'Well, I'm writing to adults and that's it', so I can just say what I want to say how I want to say it.

**So were you conscious therefore of holding back because you were writing for children?**

I think that you do. I think that you can't help yourself, you're sort of thinking about what the child reading it will take from this book – I mean, I'm speaking as a child who had terrible night fears and was frightened by all sorts of things I read. I was very conscious of not wanting to be too scary, not wanting to be too dark and too depressing, I suppose. But I guess I always have that tendency to be like that.

**Well, you touched on that earlier talking about leading a safe life yourself but in a dangerous world.**

Yes, that was it, yes. I suppose that I should go on a bit more about that. So that's always been the tension between writing about the world as you really see it – I mean, that's why there was the swearing in of *Beyond the labyrinth* because I was kind of obsessed at the time with portraying teenagers as I saw them around me and as I'd heard them speaking, and I hadn't quite grasped that there's this other world (laughs) where they don't speak like that, which is the world of books that are allowed in schools and so on, and it's strange how everybody feels that a book should be much, much more polite than the society that it's representing when it comes to children – you know, which is fair enough because we need to have standards for children; but there is always the pressure on children's writers to write textbooks or to write like those little books that you had in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, little models of behaviour and so on.

**Yes, morally uplifting.**

Yes. Yes, that it should be morally uplifting and that it should – – –.

**Do you think your sequel to *Space demons* – you actually preface it by saying, 'This is for all those who asked for a sequel' –**

Yes.

**– once you had written – and that was very quickly popular, what kind of pressures then are coming on you of expectations, not only from your publishers but from your readers?**

I think it has been one of the things where if I had stuck in one genre it probably would have been more sort of marketable, if I can put it like that, because there is definitely a feeling among booksellers and everybody else in the trade that they like to have people as a brand and to be easily recognisable. But all of my books seem to have been so different, because the next book to be published after *Space demons* was *Answers to Brut*, which is quite an old-fashioned adventure story-type, and I did hear that booksellers were disappointed that it wasn't the sequel to *Space demons*. But I don't know, I think it's very hard writing sequels – I mean, other than the Otori ones which sort of seem to go like that – but to write a sequel after the first book when you hadn't really meant to write a sequel is sort of difficult. So I think *Skymaze* works, but I'm not sure about *Shinkei*, I think that that just gets too complicated and it was one of the books that I wrote straight onto the computer, you see –

**Did you? Ah.**

– and I think that one of the dangers of writing straight onto the computer is that it's too easy, that you go off – for me, it's all too quick so that I'm not actually thinking about where this is going to take me, I'm just writing scenes that interest me and the book's getting longer and longer and more and more rambling. (laughs)

**Well, I was going to ask you about computers so it's a good point to do so because I've made a note here particularly because of the topic of that trilogy and of your observation about your own children, or Matt in particular. So would you like to say something about when you first acquired your own computer and what impact it had on you?**

Well, the first computer that we had, it must have been late '86 or early '87, I think, and it was an Amstrad and we bought it really for Matt because he was so keen on computers and on programming and everything and he was obviously going to be one of those kids who just love that sort of thing. And it was in the very early days when all of the games were still down in arcades and so kids used to go down to the deli or down to the service station and play them there, or they would go to Downtown and play on the games there.

**Well, you have Mario playing – doing that, don't you, in *Space demons*, yes.**

Yes. And I was absolutely fascinated by the way that the kids got so involved with the games and how they obviously identified totally with these little moving figures, and I liked the games themselves: they seemed to be funny and inventive and

creative. And at that time hardly anybody else over the age of fourteen seemed to have noticed that they were (laughs) going on, and so it did seem to be a nice idea for a book. But I never really knew that much about computers and I used to feel kind of a bit of a fraud because I was writing about computers (laughs) without really understanding very much about them other than from the imaginative side of them. But *Space demons* is still in print, which seems amazing to me after twenty years, it seems terribly out of date to me. I had some letters last year from children who said that it seemed a bit old-fashioned to them, ‘But we understand that you wrote it in the ’80s’, they said. (laughter)

**Back in the ancient times.**

Yes, and ’80s seems like the Dark Ages to them now.

**That’s great. You were right there at the beginning, like the Ark.**

Yes, right then in the beginning.

**And as far as using the computer yourself as a writer, though, you don’t or you didn’t, did you, or not except later in the process?**

Yes. When I started writing I wrote by hand and then typed everything up, and then I started writing straight onto the typewriter, and then – I can’t remember if it was *Skymaze* or *Galax–Arena* which I wrote straight onto the computer, but one of those two was when I made the jump into composing on the computer. But, as I said to you earlier, I didn’t think it was very good for my style and when I wrote the last children’s book, really, or the last YA<sup>6</sup> book was *Terra–Farma*, and when I finished that I thought I wanted to go back to writing by hand. And when I went to Japan I didn’t want to take my laptop with me the first time, when I had the Asialink Fellowship, and so I just took a notebook and bought some gel pens in Japan and sat down and wrote *Across the nightingale floor* out by hand into a notebook.

**Which seems very appropriate, seeing that you were in rural Japan.**

It does, really, doesn’t it, yes.

**Doesn’t it, yes. You should have done it in proper calligraphy, of course, but – – –.**

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<sup>6</sup> YA – young adult.

Yes. But it seemed right in a pre-industrial society to be writing in a very low-tech way like that.

**And as you say in one of the interviews you were able to do it anywhere –**

Yes.

**– which I guess you could do with a laptop too, but not quite as portable as that.**

Somehow not in quite the same way. There is something marvellously portable about a notebook.

**Yes. And that's how you still write, are you still writing in that way –**

Yes, I am.

**– on the right-hand side of a notebook?**

Yes, yes.

**..... it's not – I thought when I read this that this was something that you had always done and therefore were continuing to do it, but it was really a more considered decision than that, wasn't it?**

Yes. And when I wrote the first three books I hadn't actually grasped that it made more sense just to use one side of the page to start with and then you had room for corrections, so they're incredibly messy with scribbles all over them and I had to type them up myself because nobody else would have been able to read them. But when I wrote the other two they are on one side the page –

**And that works well?**

– with corrections. Yes, I think that's an ideal way to write, actually, I'm very happy with that, having finally discovered it after twenty years. (laughter)

**Well, that's as it should be, isn't it?**

By trial and error, yes.

**And did you try – you also say at some point you don't like to talk about what you're writing at present, but did you sound the ideas out with your own children, or did you read bits to them or did you wait until you'd finished?**

The only one I read to them as I was writing it was *Flashback*, which I was writing in the summer holidays, and I used to start work very early in the morning before the kids woke up and write a thousand words and then when they were up at some stage in the day I would read it to them and see how it all went.

**So that was published 1990, so yes, they were still fairly young.**

Yes.

**Did you get good feedback?**

They've always given me very good feedback, they're very nice, they don't like to hurt my feelings. (laughs)

**You talk about Matt being your first reader when you finished, did you at one point, you said that he was often the one that was your ---?**

He was the one on the Otori books, yes.

**Because he was typing them.**

He was typing them, yes.

**Well, that's a good way to be reading, isn't it?**

He was the first reader on them, yes.

**That's interesting. And did that actually influence what you then wrote when you rewrote it, his response?**

A couple of things he made comments of stuff that he hadn't thought were quite clear or names that he hadn't grasped or something or other, yes. But mainly he just typed it for me. It was a wonderful thing to do.

**Yes, isn't it? They're big books.**

He's a very, very good typist and very quick.

**So, you see, you were rewarded for all those years ago buying a computer for him.**

Yes, absolutely, that's so true.

**I suppose because *Space demons* was successful so quickly, I mean financially it was probably wasn't anywhere near as good as getting a 'proper job', but it must have – but were there any times when you still thought that you still needed to go and do something else, or did it just sweep you along then?**

There was a sort of lull in between when it was published and when it started selling really well, and it did sell very well in Australia. When I was very short of money and Omnibus very kindly let me go back and work for them as an editor for two days a week for a few months, which I thought was a wonderful way of subsidising me, and then I got a couple of Australia Council grants – I think 1988 and '89, something like that – and one was for one year and one was for three years, so that was amazing.

That was a real turning point for me. It kind of gave me independence and was incredibly affirming to say, 'We really believe in you', and I've actually had a lot of help from them and then I – because I've had three or four playwright's commissions as well, that they pay the theatre company a commission for you to write the play, and even though each one isn't a huge amount of money it's enough to sort of tide you over. And then there were school visits and things like that, so – – –.

**Yes, so it was a sort of money coming from various directions –**

Yes.

**– not just from royalties, no, which obviously wouldn't have been enough to keep body and soul together – or might have been, but – – –. What was it, something about – an article in the paper the other day, that writing for a living is an oxymoron.**

Yes.

**For an Australian writer. Yes, that was interesting. So it was *Space demons*, *Beyond the labyrinth* or *Answers to Brut* and then *Beyond the labyrinth*, and then you had *Melanie and the night animal* –**

Yes.

**– which was different again, wasn't it?**

Yes.

**How did you – I'm sure you get asked this a lot but I have to ask it – how did you decide on the topics that you were going to write about?**

Well, I just wrote about – if a good idea came to me I thought about the sort of perfect form to express it in, and I think one of the great things about writing for children is that you have such a wide range of genres that you can choose from, and I think it was quite a golden age of children's writing then, in the '80s and '90s, because there was so much scope – picture books and short stories, junior novels, full-length YA novels with serious themes.

**Why do you think that was so?**

I don't know. I think there was a sort of burst when everybody felt that they wanted to read Australian writers. I don't know if it is still like that, it may well be, but I'm so out of the children's literature scene now that I don't really know. But certainly then there was a huge amount of interest in children's books and a lot of seminars and

conferences and so on and a great feeling of sort of friendship among the writers. Two of the writers that I was contemporary with then are still very close friends, Libby Hathorn and Nadia Wheatley, and –

**Oh, Nadia Wheatley? I love her work, too. Wonderful.**

– yes. Yes, she’s a great writer, isn’t she? I love her work.

**And who was the other person, sorry?**

Libby Hathorn.

**Oh, yes, her work’s lovely, too. Well, it’s interesting, I was thinking as you were saying this, coincidentally my children were of the right age for all those books and all those writers, too, so they’re all very familiar to me –**

Yes.

**– because I was buying them and reading them to the children. In fact, Nadia Wheatley – – –.**

I think that there were several things. Agnes Nieuwenhuizen can’t be underestimated – do you know her? She’s Agnes Nieuwenhuizen.

**No. Vaguely, but not – – –.**

She’s a sort of mover and shaker of the children’s world. So she was inspiring a lot of conferences and that sort of thing, and Mark Macleod was publishing at Random House and he has been very influential too, and then there were Jane and Sue at Omnibus.

**So there was the sense of being part of a movement in a way, was there?**

Yes, yes. I think so.

**Not when you were writing *Space demons*, though, I presume. You were doing that – – –.**

I was doing that quite isolated without knowing anything about it. But once it was published I suddenly found that I was in the middle of this wonderful circle of people.

**You were writing – and I should ask you where you were living during all of these phases, because some of it you’ve touched on in your books of that period, too. Can you tell me where you were living when you moved to Adelaide?**

We lived first of all in Fullarton.

**Whereabouts, what street?**

Francis Avenue.

**And how long were you there?**

We were there from '81 till '86, and then the children went to play with some friends from school who lived in Lynton, and they came back saying, 'Oh, Mum, it's lovely, it's just like in the country.' And so Phil and I went up to have a look at it and there was a house for sale in Seaview Road and we just really liked the house and –

**You were in Seaview Road?**

– yes.

**It's a gorgeous road.**

It's lovely, yes.

**I can remember driving up and down and thinking, 'Wow, are any of these houses for sale?'**

Yes, it's just the most lovely street, yes. And the street then was full of children who were all the same age, sort of upper primary school, basically, and they all just used to play out in the street together. They had the most wonderful social life. There were three children next to us and then our three, and then three girls over the road and then a girl and a boy in the house almost opposite, and then three more children in the house next door but one to that, and they were all good friends. And so it was really nice for them, it was really lovely.

**Fantastic. So describe their surroundings, because that comes across very strongly in *Foxspell* of all of them.**

Seaview Road runs down to the quarry that's in the foothills just below the new Belair Road, so there's a big stretch of quite wild and rocky land going down to the south from us, and the quarry was always wonderful, it was a great place for the kids to go and play, and at the end of our street you could go into a little area and then there was a creek that comes down the hills there and it always used to flood every spring so there'd be masses of water around and frogs and all sorts of things, and then all the water would go and there'd be lots of wildflowers coming up. It was a very, very pretty area, we often used to go there and take a picnic or something and just

walk down to the end of the street. And it just felt as if you were miles out in the country somewhere.

The other interesting thing was that there was the Lynton Dump on the other side of this little creek, which of course is also in *Foxspell*, and the dump was quite a strange, weird place, too, with lots of – I don't know, there was just something quite creepy about it and it actually did have that disembodied alarm that's in *Foxspell* that we used to hear ringing out through the night (laughter) at three in the morning or something.

And then it was on the train line too, of course, so that we'd always hear the trains going up and down the hill. And Seaview Road itself looks out over the city and over towards the sea, straight over to Somerton Park I think is the beach, and has lots of trees, lots of gum trees, and lots of birds, and it was a really nice place to live with teenagers, and we were there for eleven years.

**And, as you said, they had in a way the best of both worlds being quite close to the city as well so you had that double – – –.**

Yes, they could be very independent because of the train line and we were close enough to the city to do everything that we wanted to do. And in those years, too, the girls got very keen on horse riding and we kept horses out at Onkaparinga Hills, they were agisted out there. So we did a lot of going out to that area, too, of Adelaide and – – –.

**Does that come up in any of your books, the horse riding?**

Only *Pure chance*, I think.

**Well, you do mention the love of horses coming up in a couple of your books.**

Yes.

**I hadn't read *Pure chance*. It's nice to have different aspects of this coming up in different books, isn't it, really?**

Yes. Well, it is one of the great things about being a writer is that you use everything from all sort of parts of your life and all ages of your life, too. Sooner or later everything gets turned into a book.

**Are there elements of your children's personalities in those books, or is it more just your observations of their social lives and interests?**

I've never thought that there were really elements of them because I always think all of my characters are more like me than other people, so even if a book is set in an area where it might have been them, for instance the girl in *Pure chance* could have been Suzy, but she's not really like Suzy, she hasn't got the same character. I did try quite hard not to write about children I knew or about my own children, not to use them in stories. I felt as if their lives were their lives.

**It does seem to set up a lot of resentment, in my observation.**

It does, doesn't it, yes.

**Yes. I remember a friend of mine who's very friendly with a very well-known Australian novelist and he gets quite cross because he sees himself or their experiences turning up in her work and he's not very impressed.**

I think it's one of the reasons why I feel so much happier with fantasy, because I have often thought that I would love to write a real novel, that's just ordinary fiction about ordinary Australian people, and just thinking about it I think, 'But everybody I know would think it was them and how would I avoid using things?'

**It would be hard, actually, wouldn't it – even unconsciously.**

I think it's terribly difficult. I did use something: Matt was once – he fell off his bike and had something called nominal aphasia, which you probably know what that is, it's when you forget the names of nouns and things.

**Temporarily, one hopes.**

It was quite specific. It was really funny – he couldn't remember the word for 'bucket', for instance, and it was what he really needed because he was going to throw up. (laughs) So I used this in a story in the collection that was edited by Nadia, and the story's called 'The lady is my night nurse'. I think the collection's called *Landmarks* or something like that. Anyway, I used this thing of somebody forgetting the names of things in that and Matt was quite upset because he said, 'That happened to *me* and that's *my* story, that's *my* experience.' (laughter)

**Yes, I could understand the indignation in some ways, although – – –.**

And sometimes I use clothes that the kids have worn or objects that they've really liked and so on. But you would have to ask them, really, if they thought they were in the books, if they saw themselves in the books and if they felt it was them.

**That's true, actually, you would. Yes, it's interesting. What about Phil, then? Presumably he doesn't put in an appearance?**

No, not really, no.

**And did you ever ask him to read what you had written?**

I think he read *Across the nightingale floor* before it was published, but I've never asked him to read things while they're in draft form, no. I'm fairly secretive about that, I don't usually share it with anybody until it's final, until I've really finished it.

**So therefore at what point did he accept that you'd found yourself a job?**

I don't think he really did until the Otori books. That was when he started to relax. (laughter) The number of countries kept increasing, and ---.

**That's a bit naughty to ask that, but I thought ---.**

No. Well, he felt safe enough to retire some time ago so he must have thought it was all okay, that it was going all right.

**Do you think it helped or hindered, living in a place like Adelaide, to be a writer?**

I think it helped enormously and I think that one of the things that I'm always grateful to South Australia for is that I think it's a great place to be an artist or a writer.

**And why?**

Well, when I first came I thought it was because there was nothing else to do.

**That has been said by others. No distractions.**

No distractions. And if I'd stayed in Byron Bay, for instance, I would never have written anything because I spent the whole day talking to all my friends there. But in Adelaide I didn't have that luxury; I had to do something else. And I think the landscape here is very inspiring in a strange way, especially down here. It was down here that I started writing the Otori books and this was my great sort of inspiration, walking around here and walking on the beaches and so on.

**And yet it's a complete contrast to the landscape you were writing about.**

Yes, it's strange, isn't it? Yes, very strange.

**A very spare landscape, quite different I would imagine to – I've never been to ....**

Very different. I mean it's far more lush in Japan, much more mountainous and forested and much wetter. More extreme, I suppose. Snow and frost and real winters.

**So there wasn't a problem for you of isolation as a writer here, being here, or did you – that wasn't a problem because you could always fly elsewhere?**

Isolation –

**Physical isolation.**

– in the sense of being isolated from other writers, or – – –? Well, I think I've been able to have a lot of contact with other writers. You know, there's the children's book writers' group here, Ekidnas, which I was one of the founding members of, and that's been going for at least ten years now, I think longer, and so that in the early days especially for me was a very good group support. And I've had close friends here who are writers – Eleanor Nilsson, Caroline McDonald before she died and so on, Ruth Starke.

**Did you join the SA Writers' Centre?**

Yes, I did.

**What, as soon as you started writing or afterwards?**

Probably in '88 or '89, I think.

**And was that helpful, do you think?**

It was helpful in it was a great place to meet other writers, yes, and a great place to sort of contact other people and feel part of the whole community.

**Because one of the interviews you've done, you've actually said you don't – if they ask if one of your influences on your writing was writers' centres or writers' groups and you said no, in that interview, which I thought was interesting, or that you wrote in isolation.**

I don't think that they ever influenced my actual writing, no. No. I think that I've always thought that my inspiration comes from that isolation and from being alone, and I think it's a sort of psychological thing that I got used to and it's almost – – –.

**And nor do you workshop your writing, I guess that's the other –**

No.

**– that's really what she was asking, I think, wasn't she?**

Yes, yes. No. I just don't like to have other people's opinions on it. I think that it's up to me to find my voice and to write it.

**When do you think you found that voice?**

I don't know. Because it seems to be different all the time, so it's not a question of finding one voice, I don't think. I think it's a question of finding the best way to express a particular idea that comes to me of something: it's either going to be a long novel or something else, but it's just the idea and I feel as if I'm the slave to the idea, really, that I just have to slog away until I've got it out properly and then wait for the next one.

**And yet you've said – because there's a huge range of age groups, really, that you've written for, too, isn't it? I guess that's another element of the voice, isn't it: which age group you think is most likely to be reading a book.**

Yes. Sorry, shouldn't say just 'yes'. (laughter) Say 'yes' while I think about how to answer it. It's also sort of exploring different parts of my personality. So sometimes I can be in a sort of playful mood and feel like playing with words and feel like entertaining, and sometimes it's more introspective and the work will be longer and more demanding, perhaps. But it may reach a different age group.

**There's a vein of – I mean, it's implicit, mostly – but there is a vein legitimately of criticism of Australian society in your books as well and do you think that's informed by you coming in as an adult from somewhere else altogether? Or not?**

Well, I think – in what way do you mean?

**Well, I'm just thinking about you coming here as an adult, coming to Australia as an adult, and having been shaped by very different culture, really, in lots of ways, and so how that might have influenced what you write about when you talk about Australia.**

What sort of criticism, though, did you mean?

**Well, things like materialism and affluence and – those would be the main things that come to mind.**

I guess, but I don't think that that would be specifically Australian; it's more generally Western society now. And I think again that that's part of being part of that generation who lived through the '60s and '70s and had our children in the '70s when there was so much more – you know, that whole sense of going back to the land and everything and being frugal and not wasting things and so on. So I guess that that

comes out in the writing, but I don't think it's specifically a criticism of Australian society so much as of generally Western culture and some of its materialism.

**Are there other elements, however, that come through in your writing that do reflect you having consciously chosen to come here rather than having been brought up here?**

I'm not sure about that. (pauses) I think my books have always been about outsiders in Australia, haven't they, and so there's always that sense of the main characters being in exile in some way, and I think that is probably the reason why they've never been a sort of mass-market success, because maybe people do feel that there's an implicit criticism there; there isn't meant to be, it's just that I can't ignore the fact that I am a migrant here and I'm not writing about my own society. And the thing that I think I miss most about writing here is there's no body of myth to draw on, there's no sense of an ancient myth that's open to me to use, and I think that it's one of the great gaps in Australian writing, is that Aboriginal mythology is closed to most white –

**Yes. You have writers like Patricia Wrightson –**

– white Australian writers.

**– trying to draw on it, don't you?**

I think that what she did was amazingly brave, but for a long time even what she did was held to be not the right thing to do. And so because people don't want to tread on anyone's toes or upset –

**Appropriate.**

– or appropriate, they steer clear of it and so that means that there's nothing, there's a big emptiness there, I think –

**That's interesting.**

– and that is one of the things that I think I tried to tackle in writing and it's in all the books, I think, it's in *Beyond the labyrinth* and it's in *Foxspell* very much, too, that sort of absence of myth.

**And with the books written for younger children, too, or do you think that more you're really there trying to be more entertaining?**

I guess that they are more entertaining, yes. I don't think that there's a lot of angst in them. (laughter)

**No – good thing, too!**

At least, I hope there isn't.

**Even just running my eyes over them, they're lovely titles. Did you find it difficult deciding on titles?**

Not usually, no, no, they just seemed to sort of crop up. It's part of the process.

**I found the *Galax–Arena*, I remember them very vividly from when my children first – the series there, and the cleverness of thinking you're off out in space and they're not. And you say not being – the other thing is people trying to push you into a particular genre, science fiction or fantasy or what have you, but that really wasn't your intent, was it, to be a science fiction series.**

No, no. I don't think I'm a science fiction writer, either, and not really a fantasy writer. I mean, you know, this is made very clear to me in that I haven't ever been accepted in the fantasy circle in Australia, I'm just not one of them, and the same thing with the science fiction, I'm not one of them either. So I'm just always doing something that's slightly from the outside, from the margin.

**Well, it's ironic, isn't it, really, because South Australia's developed quite a reputation for fantasy and fantasy writing – people like Sean Williams – – –.**

Adelaide has, yes, yes.

**Much later than – – –.**

Yes, very much so.

**Yes, and I wondered whether you had been sort or caught up in that or at least considered to be one of them.**

Not really, no. No.

**That's interesting. You don't necessarily want to be either, I suppose, that's the other question.**

No, I don't, I don't really want to be put in any genre like that, I just think that it's too limiting.

**And I wanted – I won't now, because I've only got about five minutes on this side – but I wanted to talk about the very deliberate decision to take on a new persona and a new name and move into adult fiction writing.**

Maybe we should save that till tomorrow.

**Had you done so before the Otori series? Yes, tomorrow.**

Yes.

**Had you actually tried to write or wanted to write adult fiction before the Otori series?**

Well, I wrote an adult story for Crime Collection and I wrote it under the name of G.M. Hanson, which is my maiden name.

**Oh, did you? Yes.**

And I wrote that after my first trip to Japan, so it was the first piece of fiction that I actually set in Japan. But when I was writing *Terra-Farma*, which is the sequel to *Galax-Arena* – have you read that one, too? –

**Yes.**

– I realised that I was just getting more and more adult and I was finding it harder and harder to make the book a children’s book or even a young adult book. And in a way I was just really tired of being Gillian Rubinstein, I just wanted to end that and (laughter) be somebody else.

**When you originally wrote I suppose it wasn’t really an issue: had you ever thought of taking on a different persona, giving yourself a different author’s name, before Lian Hearn?**

Not really, but I was always kind of sorry that I hadn’t done it earlier. If I had thought about it, I wouldn’t have called myself Gillian Rubinstein from the start, I would have chosen something else then.

**Yes, I wondered about that, because you can’t predict the success either, can you?**

No, that’s right.

**And it even seems a bit egotistic if you do and you say, ‘Oh, well, I’m going to be so famous I’m going to call myself something else.’**

That’s so true, because it sort of did cross my mind when *Space demons* was published what name I wanted it under and I thought, ‘I’m just an ordinary person, I’ll just use my ordinary name.’

**And there wasn’t a temptation to call yourself by your maiden name? I guess that was one thought you might have had.**

I have thought about that, yes. And when I did the Lian Hearn books I did think about using ‘Hanson’ then, but Hanson’s got rather bad connotations in Australia now, so – – –.

**Ah, that's true. I've got to stop you right now because we've only got seven seconds to go, bang.**

**END OF DISK 3: DISK 4**

**What I'd like to do – this is Susan Marsden interviewing Gillian Rubinstein. This is actually tape number three but it's the second day of interview so it's 7<sup>th</sup> November 2007. I'm speaking with Gillian for the Eminent Australians Oral History Project conducted by the National Library of Australia and the State Library of South Australia, and again on behalf of the Director General of the National Library and the Director of the State Library I would like to thank you for agreeing to participate in this program and, Gillian, do you understand that copyright is shared by you and the libraries?**

**Yes, I do.**

**Thank you. This being so, may we have your permission to make a transcript of this recording should the libraries decide to make one?**

**Yes.**

**Thank you. We hope, again, that you'll speak as frankly as possible knowing neither the tapes nor any transcripts produced from them will be released without your authority.**

**I'll try, yes.**

**Thank you. And, as I said, this is taking place at Gillian's house at Goolwa in South Australia on 7<sup>th</sup> November 2007.**

**Gillian, we were talking yesterday, we'd managed to get – I won't say we worked through all of your books but it's a very impressive list, but we had I think reached two points: one is that I would like to talk with you now about some of your plays and your work for and with theatre –**

**Right, yes.**

**– going right back to England, and then perhaps move on to really your current career as an adult fiction writer.**

**Right. Well, the plays, I had always wanted to be a playwright, as I said. In fact, when I was about sixteen I was staying with my aunt and uncle in England and my uncle asked me if I'd ever thought of being a writer and I said to him then, 'I would really like to be a playwright.' And he said, 'Have you ever written any?' And I said, 'No, but I think a lot about it.' And he said, 'That's the most important thing', which I thought was quite encouraging. But I didn't actually – well, I tried to write a few plays but I didn't really have any success with anything. It's really hard to finish anything.**

But when I had just finished *Space demons* I was approached by Magpie Theatre, who were then the youth theatre side of the State Theatre Company of South Australia, and they asked me if I would like to do a writer in residence with them, for which they were going to apply for an Australia Council grant, which they did, and the grant was given. So I actually worked with them over a period of six months. The grant was for three months but we sort of spread it out so that I would have a long time with the company. And I wrote two plays with them while I was there: the first was a sort of cast- and writer-devised play called *New baby*.

***New baby, singular?***

Yes; and the second one was an adaptation of *Alice in Wonderland*.

**And you collaborated with one of your recent collaborators?**

Yes, Kathryn Sproul was the designer on *Alice in Wonderland*, so that was when I first met her. And the director was Angela Chaplin, I seem to remember – yes – who has since gone on to do many wonderful plays. Angela Chaplin. Doing *Alice* of course was absolutely wonderful because it is a book that I know very well indeed and I had often thought about it a lot and about all of the background and everything, and we set it in the drawing room of the mother of the Liddle family, who were the family that Lewis Carroll based *Alice* on. So we had these two young men, Lewis Carroll and his friend, going in and out of this rather elegant, upper-middle-class Oxford drawing room with sort of picnics on the river and afternoon tea and everything, and then everybody started to metamorphose into the *Alice* characters. And it had the most wonderful design, it was done on two levels in the theatre and it looked great; and it was very, very well received, it had a great buzz afterwards, everybody loved it.

**Where was it put on? In the Festival Theatre?**

It was put on in I think it was called Theatre 61 then, it's in Thebarton.<sup>7</sup>

**On Sir Donald Bradman Drive?**

Yes, yes, that theatre. I'm not sure what it's called now; I think it might have changed its name. But it was in there, anyway.

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<sup>7</sup> Actually Theatre 62, the first professional theatre in South Australia, founded by John Edmund in 1962 at West Torrens on Burbridge Road (later renamed Sir Donald Bradman Drive).

**Yes, I'm not sure whether it's Sir Donald Bradman Drive, but yes, I know where you mean. That's a good spot for it.**

Yes. And then the next stage after that, by which time I'd really got the bug for working in theatre – and I think when you write novels that you are very isolated, you spend a long time on your own, and the theatre process is so different, it's so collaborative, and I really enjoy going in and spending time in the rehearsal room with the actors so that you can see the whole thing taking place. And the next thing that I was involved in, although not to any real extent, was *Space demons*, although I did no actual work on that, but that was a play that was done. And then Patch Theatre asked me if I would adapt *Melanie and the night animal* for them. They had been one of the co-production companies with *Space demons* and they asked me if I would do *Melanie and the night animal*, and the director then was Christine Anketell. So that was my next play. Then I did another one for Patch called *Paula*, which was about a little girl in hospital, which I found very difficult to do. It was sort of done to somebody else's idea and I was more like the commissioned writer on it, and the idea was to do a play about children in hospital so I went and interviewed nurses and children at the Royal Adelaide Children's Hospital; but for some reason I found it very difficult to write the actual play.

And after that I did the adaptation of *Galax–Arena*, which was done for Come Out, again with the Adelaide Festival Centre and Patch Theatre, and the director was Nigel Jamieson, who has also gone on to do – well, he was already doing great things, but has gone on (laughs) to do even greater things, absolutely marvellous director of physical theatre. So that was great working on that, and one of the people in the cast of that was Scott Grayland, who's an acrobat, and he is the one who broke his ankle during one of the performances. And so while he was out of action he and I thought that we would try to write a play that did his skills, that showed his skills, so we worked together on a non-verbal play which was just pure image theatre called *Wake baby*, and that was directed by Peter Wilson for Skylark in Canberra, so you might have heard of them. Did you know their work when you were in Canberra, Skylark?

**Yes.**

And that play – Nigel directed it, too; Peter did the puppet direction and Nigel did the physical theatre direction. In the end Scott was not well enough to be in it again so we had other performers, but it was very successful. It went all around the world. I

think having no words made it very accessible to all sorts of people. And it had the most wonderful imagery and things in it, it was just really beautiful.

And then after *Wake baby* I was approached by Kim Carpenter from Theatre of Image in Sydney, who had read *Jake and Pete* and wanted to do a play of it with the Umbilical Brothers.

### **I've heard of them.**

So I did the adaptation for that, and that was also a very successful piece which has gone around the world. And then I did several other plays with Kim. What was next? I did a play called *The gypsy boy*, which was about Romany people, and when Kim asked me to do that I was just thinking about – I had already started thinking about *Across the nightingale floor*, and because I knew that my hero in that was going to be from some despised group of society I was quite interested in the connection with Romany people, and so I worked on that and did again a lot of interviewing, and the play was on in Sydney in 2001 or '02, I think, maybe 2001 – I've forgotten the date of it. And then I did one more play with Kim, which was an adaptation of *Robinson Crusoe*.

### **Back to childhood.**

Back to childhood. Which had always been one of my favourite books, I absolutely love it, and it was just great to work on that, I really enjoyed doing that. And then I decided that theatre was just getting too time-consuming and too much (laughs) hard work, really, and so I haven't done anything since then.

### **Haven't you? You have quite distinctive phases in your professional life, don't you, in a way?**

I forgot one other play, which was *Each beach*, which I did with Patch Theatre.

### **Sorry, which was that?**

Patch Theatre, *Each beach* it's called. And Dave Brown approached me to ask if I felt like doing an original play for them after all of our various collaborations, and I'd had an idea that I wanted to do a play set on the beach using the sort of rhythms of children's rhymes and songs and so on, so it's written almost like a little opera for very young children and it's got all of the – a lot of the dialogue rhymes or is based on children's skipping rhymes, that sort of thing.

### **Did you use June Factor's work?**

Yes, I did; and the Opies'. So yes, yes, I drew very strongly on them. And it had songs written for it as well by – oh, I've forgotten the name of the composer, how awful. Kieran somebody. I'll have to look him up. So we did a CD of about eight songs, I think there were, and the CD would be sent out to the schools that were going to come and see the play so when the songs came up in the play the children in the audience were invited to join in and sing –

**Sing, that's lovely, sing along.**

– and of course they knew all the tunes. They were very simple but very catchy tunes. And it was lovely. Yes, it's great. It's very, very colourful and it uses puppets as well as actors.

**Which is what – the Japanese play that you've been working on a couple of years ago –**

Yes.

**– does the same, doesn't it?**

Yes.

***Moon* – – –? What's it called, that play, in Japan? *Moon play*?**

*Moon play*, yes.

**It is *Moon play*.**

*Moon play*. I suddenly thought, 'Is it called *Moon child*? No, that doesn't sound right.' *Moon play*.

**That's why I hesitated; it is *Moon play*, isn't it?**

Yes. And then of course *Moon play* came in there, too, which came from both times that I went to Japan on the Asialink Fellowship I had an introduction through Cate Fowler, who I have worked with a lot, on a lot of these plays she has been the executive producer on them. She introduced me to the theatre company Urinko Gekidan, and we'd always wanted to see if we could work on an Australian–Japanese co-production with this theatre company, and so I was in close contact with one of their members who I will talk about later – Kimora Mio[?] is her name; she became one of my closest friends in Japan. And when I was in Japan for my second stint of three months in 2002 I went to see this theatre company on several occasions and we started talking about this idea for *Moon play*, and Peter Wilson was to be the director

and Kathryn Sproul was to be the designer, and Cate Fowler's company Windmill were to be the Australian side of it. But in the end Windmill pulled out of it, they couldn't meet that commitment in the end, and so the play in the end only went on in Japan. But Peter and Kathryn and I went to Nagoya for a period over three months to do the rehearsals and to see the play put on, but I didn't stay for all that time; I went in for the first couple of weeks and then I went off to England and then I came back for two more weeks and then I came home again. (laughs)

**At least Tokyo is roughly on the way to Europe.**

It is on the way, really. Yes, yes, it's a very good stopping point, yes. But it was fascinating. It was fascinating working with the theatre company in Japanese and seeing how they put the play together and so on.

**Was it very different to how an Australian company works?**

*Very* different, yes.

**In what way?**

Well, for one thing, Japanese actors do everything and they don't have any unions to protect them, so if they're running out of time they just work day and night for it to be done. They do all of the set-building and they made all the puppets and they made all the props and sewed all the costumes and did everything. They worked really terribly hard, whereas in Australia now if you keep actors after five-thirty you're paying double time or whatever, because Equity looks after all of their actors now.

**Do you think that affected the actual production itself, that difference?**

Well, I don't think that we would have been able to do it without that sort of extra commitment, to be quite honest, because it was under-funded and there wasn't very much time. It was just a really, really difficult show to work on. For some reason this theatre company wanted to work with Peter and he's a director of image theatre and puppets and yet this theatre company hadn't ever done anything like that, they'd only ever done acting – *acting* theatre, you know – so they had to learn puppet skills and they had to learn how to make the puppets and it was just huge, and at the end of it everybody was (laughs) absolutely exhausted. It looked beautiful, it had some marvellous moments in it, it looked absolutely wonderful.

And then this theatre company again is like a sort of co-operative company and it's got forty members, which is quite unlike what any Australian company has, and they

work in four groups of ten. So we had one group of ten so we just got whoever was in that group, and of course to bring ten Japanese actors and the lighting designer and everybody else to Australia was just out of the question, it was just far too expensive, so it ended up in the end being (laughs) quite impractical, and probably if we'd all thought it out beforehand we would never have embarked on it; but on the other hand it was a marvellous experience.

**Was it filmed?**

I think there is a video of it, yes.

**What about your earlier plays?**

There are archival videos of all of them, yes. Somewhere. I've got no idea where they are now, but – (laughter) I've got some of them.

**Have you?**

Yes. I have to make sure they get left somewhere.

**The process of collaborating, looking back now over all of that and comparing, contrasting that with writing – you talked of course about the differences in the sense of one being very isolating and one being its exact opposite, really – and the other important differences as a writer?**

Well, you just have to be much more flexible and much more willing to compromise what you think is the ideal thing to be doing at that moment and realise that the overall important thing is what will be finished and what will end up on the stage in the theatre, and that's what everybody has to think about all the time, not about whether your words sound great or whether you want this particular gag or this image; if it's not fitting into what will eventually be presented to the audience then it has to go, and sometimes that can be quite tricky with people arguing about that, what they want and what they don't want. And I tend to be very – I don't think I'm very dogmatic in these situations; I tend to sort of defer overall to the director, because I think that they're the one that has the overall vision for it.

**So how much do you therefore write at the outset? Is it fairly sketchy, or do you do a complete script?**

Well, I think this is why I do really like working in image theatre, and when I've worked with Kim Carpenter, for instance, he will sketch out how he sees the look of the play and he sort of storyboards it, and if we can tell the story with images then we

do, and if not, then we fit in enough dialogue or words to carry it on. And I really like working like that, I like working with images, and so I think it's something that not very many writers can do, to be quite honest, because most writers want the word to come first.

**It's a struggle for historians, too, believe me –**

Yes.

**– when you're working on an exhibition, to get the word length down.**

And Kim has told me, he once said, 'Oh, there's nobody but you who can do this' when he was trying to persuade me to work on something else. And it's true, I think, that there aren't – there weren't then – all that many writers in Australia who could have done that with him. Richard Tulloch is another one who he often works with.

**It was still focused on children's theatre, wasn't it –**

Yes.

**– rather than adult theatre –**

Very much, yes.

**– which is a shame, really, because it brings such pleasure to – and there's long traditions in other countries of mime and puppetry and so on that doesn't make a distinction.**

Yes. Well, I think both Kim and Peter feel that their work isn't really only children's work, and Peter has done adult works with images and puppets. He did one very moving one about his mother, called *Mum's the word*, I think it's called, which was really adult work. And Kim always feels that his work is for family audiences of all ages. But they do struggle with this, with not getting the recognition and respect that *they* feel that they deserve and *I* think they do, as well, really, yes, because it is an amazingly original line of work to be in and you have to have this unique vision of what you want it to be.

**An obvious step, it would have seemed to me, would have been for you to go from there into films and filmmaking: was that never an option?**

I did try to do some scripts. I've worked on a couple of scripts and an Australian director wanted to do *Galax-Arena* and she had an option on it for a long time and I

wrote several drafts of the script for her, and in the end I felt that my vision and her vision were just going further and further apart and I didn't want to renew the option.

**Do you want to say who the director was?**

Her name was Kathy Mueller. Do you know of her?

**I don't think so, no.**

No. She has done a lot of teaching of film and so on, but I don't think that she was really the right person for it. And then an American producer, Susan Adler, wanted to do *Foxspell* and I did quite a lot of drafts of *Foxspell* for her, too. But I don't really like writing film, I decided, because I just felt that for me it was a kind of – I had gone off down a blind alley with it. I did a lot of work on both of these, and you're always doing things to deadline, it's very, very demanding, and rewriting and – – –. I don't know, I just found it really difficult and I also felt that it was not a good way for me to be going, that it was kind of wasting time on things that I had already had the idea for and it was wrong to keep on going back to old stuff and trying to do it.

**So that was different to adapting them for theatre, you felt differently about that?**

I did, yes, for some reason. I think because theatre was much more immediate. You see, doing film I was still on my own all the time and then just sending it off and getting other people's comments and having to cope with that, and I just didn't like the process at all. (laughter) But it was good to have done it and to have found out that I didn't like it, so that was fine. And I don't think I've been approached to do any more film like that.

Around this same time, though, a couple of the shorter novels, *The mermaid of Bondi Beach* and *The whale's child* came into being because I was approached by a Japanese English-language paper, the *Asahi Weekly*, to write a serialised novel for their readers, in English.

**How Dickensian!**

Yes, isn't it? (laughter)

**What was it called?**

The *Asahi Weekly*. And it's a weekly for students of English, so it's sort of bilingual, and they always have a short novel being serialised every week. And they have gone

through I think practically every single American living in Tokyo to do it, and then somebody gave them my name and they wrote to me and asked if I would do one for them. And I'd had the mermaid idea already so I thought that I would try to do that, and wrote that for them as a serial.

**As a serial?**

Yes.

**So before you actually had written the whole thing you wrote it as a serial.**

Yes.

**Ah! So that's very Charles Dickens, isn't it?**

And then it was published as a book.

**Yes, it's wonderful.**

And the same with *The whale's child* as well.

**And how did that – that would be an interesting thing to do as a book that actually has to have, presumably, a dramatic incident in each – – –.**

It was quite interesting doing it, yes. It's in twenty-six episodes. So I actually did like half a chapter for each episode. But I wasn't actually thinking of them as a book when I was writing them, so they were written purely as episodes and they did each one end on a sort of note of, 'Oh! What happens next?'

**Yes, 'What's happening next?'**

Yes. (laughter) But it was fun to do because you could write it in very simple language and it was also, compared to Australian rates, incredibly well-paid, so writing one of them saw me through six months of the year.

**If only there were more of them.**

Yes. And because they don't like to use the same author all that often I gave them the names of a couple of other Australian writers and they have also done a couple for them, which is really fantastic as well.

**Wonderful. That's a lovely, unexpected – – –.**

Yes.

**I'm fascinated too by the very different, in some ways, origins – you run your eye down your list of books and you don't realise the different reasons for doing them, in a way, and also therefore the different techniques that you [use].**

That's right, yes.

**Have to elaborate.**

I guess people need to – – –. I think it's one of the things that unless you spend ages and ages explaining your work people don't know about, and I'm always kind of interested that reviewers, for instance, don't spend more time looking these things up because when *The mermaid of Bondi Beach* came out it actually says in it that it was originally done as a serialised story for the *Asahi*, and yet some reviewers said, 'Oh, the language is very simple, why is this?' and you think –

**'Read the introduction.'**

– 'Read the introduction and work it out', yes. (laughter)

**Like my husband says to me, 'Watch my lips.'**

Yes.

**Oh, that's lovely.**

So there's always some more story behind everything, really, but you can't endlessly explain everything so some of these things are just lost in the mists of time, I suppose, and no-one will ever know.

**No. But it's interesting and it's good to follow these up, I think –**

Yes.

**– because it does shape what you write and not only the content but the actual manner of its presentation.**

Yes.

**I think that's interesting. Were there any plays, were there any backwards where you did something as a play first and then published it as a book?**

Yes, *Each beach* –

**Oh, *Each beach*, ah, right.**

– was a play first.

**Was a play first, yes.**

And then a Sydney design company approached me and said could they do it as a picture book, and I had actually thought of trying to turn it into a picture book so that seemed very good, and so they did it as a picture book. But I don't really think it works as a picture book; I think it's a bit wordy.

**That's interesting. Well, when you think about it, I was visualising it, it sounds quite vivid from your description of it, especially with all the children in the audience taking part as well.**

Yes, but it was kind of ---.

**Be better as a website, probably.**

I think you're right. It was very hard to translate the moving images in the play which tell a story because they're there into the static image in the picture book which isn't really telling a story. I don't know. They may have chosen the wrong illustrator for it, so it could be that.

**I wanted to ask – that is one of my questions about working with illustrators, actually, you mention that a couple of times in a couple of your interviews and what that process involves.**

Yes.

**Would you like to talk about that a little?**

Well, sometimes it can seem to be quite distant because you don't actually get together and talk about how you think it should look. I think illustrators don't really like that, they don't like to be dictated to, they want to read the text and let whatever comes into their mind work for them. So quite often the first thing I see is when somebody sends a rough of what they think the story is like, or sometimes they'll be even more finished, they'll be quite finished drawings. But it is a wonderful process. Again, it's something much more collaborative in that you have to let go of your one-person-controlled text and you've got to let somebody else come in and then let the finished picture book you hope be more than the sum of its parts.

**Yes, that's interesting. I've always been struck by that with Julie Vivas and Mem Fox's collaborative work –**

Yes.

**– with *Possum magic*. I mean, really, although Mem Fox gets rightly a lot of the credit but the pictures are so wonderful it's very much a –**

They are, aren't they, yes.

– **combination.**

Absolutely, and that's true of every picture book, I think. I've done a lot of work with Terry Denton and I think that he in particular is such an amazing artist at bringing something extra to the text.

**I was going to ask – dare I ask – about your favourites, what were some of the best collaborations and some of the best illustrations, for that matter, from your point of view.**

Yes. Well, I think Terry's wonderful, and then I really like the stuff that Craig Smith did for *The giant's tooth*, just because it was a difficult one to do because I just told him that the giant's part should be in cartoon style in some way, so all he had was the dialogue of the giant's section, and he decided to put them into the Wolf Cub uniform, which I think is so hilariously funny (laughs) and so the giants are going off camping in their Wolf Cub uniform.

**I like his work, too.**

And I think that he did the changes in style very well in all of those books and the changes in scale.

**And in lots of ways, I was thinking just looking at the surroundings here with all the beautiful Japanese prints – I presume they're the French covers for ..... Otori –**

Yes, they are, yes.

– **really lovely, really beautiful.**

They are wonderful, aren't they?

**Yes, they are. Partly the charm of the French translation of the titles, too, which is so beautiful.**

Yes.

**It's the combination. But the drawings are just beautiful. But you have obviously a very strong visual sense.**

Yes. Yes, I do, I've always been very – I don't know, just sort of very open to everything visual and to beautiful design and colours, and as a child I remember being almost delirious about the combinations of colours that I saw, I just loved them so much. And at one stage in my life I did quite a lot of weaving and I've always

thought if I weren't a writer I would love to be a weaver and make beautiful wall hangings out of beautiful colours.

**Did you weave the jacket you had on last night?**

No, no, I just bought that one.

**You didn't? That was lovely, yes, that's beautiful.**

So yes, I have got that side to me as well, which I always feel is a little underdeveloped apart from in the books, it's all gone into writing, really.

**Because – well, the Otori series is so visual, isn't it?**

Yes.

**It's really in some ways a series of visual images; even when people are talking to each other you talk about the fall of the hair – and the sound, of course, as well.**

I think that was part of my fascination with Japan, too, was that I just had such a strong response to the visual aspects of the culture, I just find the aesthetic so deeply pleasing.

**For me it's been the place that's been the most where it's been the most important, where aesthetics has been so important in that culture.**

Yes.

**It's really interesting, isn't it?**

I think it must have been, yes.

**Which is not to say there aren't very ugly places, but – – –.**

Well, it is funny because there are some very ugly places and some very incongruous images. You get a lot of stuff side-by-side which is really jarring. But I think there is a sort of Japanese way of seeing that only sees the beautiful, it sort of blocks out everything else, it's quite extraordinary. Very focused gaze.

**And you stand there in this ghastly spot but you're admiring a pine tree.**

Something like that, yes. (laughs) You're able to make all of the ghastly stuff just disappear. Which is sort of what I was doing with my Japanese landscapes, because it is very hard to find Japanese mountains now that don't have antennae on the top of them. (laughter)

**Yes, you don't get many medieval scenes, I suppose, untouched, do you?**

You just have to make all of that disappear.

**Interesting, isn't it? I'd like to talk more about the theatre, but I'm conscious of our time, I'm going to wear you out completely ---. It seems to me – and just your whole experience, I suppose, at that time also with the, how would you call it, arts administration, I suppose: that was the period when you were involved, was it, with the Australia Council and with the South Australian body?**

Yes, it was. In the '90s I think it would have been I was on the Literature Board of the Australia Council, just when it was actually changing its name to the Literature *Fund*. So I think I was on the Board for half a year and then it changed its name to the Fund and I was on that for three years. And round about the same time I was on the South Australian Arts Department Advisory Board as well, which of course is handling grants for artists, writers.

**How would you describe your experience on those bodies?**

Well, it was really interesting. I felt that it was a very good time for me to be on it because it was kind of at the peak of my involvement in the whole writing world, so I was very much out there in that world far more than I am now. I was going to see a lot of theatre, I think I saw practically every single new Australian play during that period, so I did have some knowledge of the genres, both in children's literature and in theatre. And I was also reading a lot of Australian fiction and in touch with a lot of writers as well, so I found it really interesting to be part of the whole scene and to be able to have some input into it, too. Of course, there were always awful frustrations about grants – there's never enough money, you always want to give more than you can – and again it's a very collaborative process, so you see some of your favourites disappear and so on. But it was just really interesting, really fascinating.

The heads of the Board while I was there were, first of all, Marion Halligan, who was a fantastic champion of writers; and after that Ed Campion, the historian, who again was really fantastic; and I think I learnt a lot about the way that they had to deal with the bureaucracy side of it as well as with the artistic side of it. It was very eye-opening.

**I can imagine. I was thinking – I had the name 'Les Murray' flashing across my brain and thinking of the violence of the criticisms – I'm not sure whether that was then or a bit later – of the grant, who received them, basically.**

Yes.

**Were there criticisms ---?**

John Tranter got terribly cross with us when I was on the Board because we didn't give money to his poetry magazine on the web, and – (laughs) I shouldn't really say this because it's all meant to be confidential – for ages afterwards it was on his website –

**Really?**

– with all the Board's names listed.

**Oh, golly. Did people lobby you?**

No, not at all, no.

**And did people criticise?**

Except I think there was an unspoken assumption that I would stand up for South Australian writers.

**And did you?**

I tried to. I think once there was not a single [South] Australian writer who had an Australia Council grant, and I felt terrible about that. But sometimes there either isn't anyone suitable or there are some suitable but there are others more suitable, you know? What can you do? And it shouldn't really be done on a state-by-state quota, but it does seem to be very much weighted towards the eastern states and I think all of the smaller states say this, and it just seems to be the way it is.

**And it was always oriented towards fiction writing, it was not history, wasn't it, at that point, or did you deal with history as well?**

Well, we certainly dealt with non-fiction, and playwrights as well and all of the genres, too – you know, children's literature, poetry and so on. I don't know if we did deal with non-fiction, actually, now I've said that. I would have to go back and check. It obviously didn't make a deep impression if we did, because –

**Can't remember.**

– I can't remember! (laughter)

**Were there political pressures, or was the more through the head?**

Political pressures: there were a bit, yes. I don't know if I can really talk about these things because I think it's meant to be confidential –

**Of course, yes.**

– but there were incidences where I felt that there was a political agenda running through the Board as well. And of course the appointments to the Board have to be okayed by the Government, by whoever is then in power, by the Minister for the Arts and so on, so – – –.

**You were there during the Labor Government –**

Yes.

**– at the national level, weren't you?**

Yes.

**Yes, and South Australia – – –?**

But shortly after that the Government changed and the composition of the Board began to change as well. But we did have several historians on the Board because, as well as Ed, we had Patrick – surname escapes me.

**Yes, writes about Irish Catholic – – –.**

That's right, yes. From Tasmania. It's not Martin, is it? Martin, no.

**No.**

Anyway, him.

**Yes, that's interesting, isn't it?**

And he was appointed after I was; and then Frank Devine was also appointed.

**Who was that?**

Frank Devine was also appointed after me.

**And you had to go to Canberra for the meetings?**

To Sydney.

**Oh, Sydney, of course.**

But we had one meeting a year in Adelaide to coincide with Writers' Week.

**Interesting. Were you ever involved in Writers' Week?**

Yes.

**Obviously as a speaker, but in terms of organising it?**

No, only ever as a speaker.

**And how did you find that?**

Well, I've got very mixed feelings about writers' festivals. I mean, they can be enormous fun, but they can also be kind of – I don't know, it seems to me that the more writers' festivals there are the less people buy novels, (laughter) and that seems to be an outcome that nobody's really looked at. And it seems to me one of the functions of our time that to be a writer means that you go off to festivals and swan around and be 'a writer', but in fact the number of readers is dwindling all the time, (laughs) so what went wrong? So I haven't been to any festivals for some time, but I am going to Writers' Week this year, so I will give another assessment on it. I mean, it's always heaps of fun, you meet lots of old friends and sit around under the plane trees, it's a beautiful setting at Adelaide.

**That is a lovely one. But then it is one of the early ones, isn't it, so it has that advantage of longevity, too, I think.**

Yes, I think so.

**And it's still got that casual atmosphere –**

Yes.

**– because it is on the lawn under the trees.**

And I have been to all of the major writers' festivals and some I have enjoyed very much more than others, but I've always had the sneaking feeling about them that I don't know if they're really that much of a good thing. But that seems such a weird thing to think because there they are celebrating books and literature and writing and everyone has a great time at them and I always feel very churlish when I say what – – –.

**Well, you are a writer so you have a very valid – I mean, it's a valid question, isn't it, even not criticism, not ask that? Because surely the primary thing is the writing and the reading of the books itself.**

It is, isn't it? Yes, it should be.

**Interesting. Taking that step back – and this is putting you on the spot – because you were so immersed in Australian drama, both creating it and helping to fund it and going to it, and ditto fiction writing, can you make an overall comment about it – then, at least – Australian writing for theatre and fiction at that time?**

Well, for theatre I thought that there was some absolutely marvellous stuff going on. One of the grants that I was most proud of somebody getting was to Daniel Keene,

the playwright, who was working on a series of plays with Ariette Taylor, who is a fantastic director, and I just thought he was marvellous and I was really happy that he had got that. But he gets very little recognition in Australia, although he's *extremely* well-known and highly thought of in France. So I think Australians underestimate their real intellectual high flyers. (laughs) I think it's rather funny that Alexander Downer told Kevin Rudd to stop showing off when he was speaking in Mandarin, and that just ---.

**And then boasted that he could speak French.**

And that just made me and Phil just go, 'Oh, God', you know. But that is so true, I think, of Australian attitudes towards the intellect is that it's not something that you should be showing off about, and I think that that means that there's such a loss to Australian culture.

**Absolutely, yes. It's not as if we've got big critical mass, either.**

No. You know, which is why we lose all of our really great intellects to overseas – Peter Carey and Clive James and so on, people who are really great thinkers and great writers, too.

**Is that something you wanted to address or that you felt that you could address?**

I suppose I've always felt a bit diffident about commenting on any of these things, and I was actually thinking about this last night: I think I still feel that I'm not a proper Australian, even though I've lived here for thirty years –

**And your children are all Australian.**

– and my children are all Australians. I still feel that it's not really up to me to be saying these things, you know.

**It is, believe me.**

Oh, is it? (laughter)

**What's more, do it on record and go into the National Library, so there.**

I'll say something about it during Writers' Week, then, yes.

**Because it's a distinctive view you have, that you bring, having lived here, having observed the place, having grown your family here and being a writer and having been involved officially, if you like, in actually having to make assessments of**

**Australia's intellectual endeavours. And so I think it's a valuable – feel free to comment.**

But then I made the sort of conscious decision when I started writing *Tales of the Otori* to move out of that world altogether and to just concentrate on the writing, and I think it was for several reasons. Is there time to get into that now, or shall we save that – – –?

**No, you can. You've got ten minutes, probably.**

Okay, that ought to be enough.

**That's why I was looking at the time. Yes, ten minutes and eighteen seconds, actually.**

Because it was sort of at the end of all of this immense activity, and I'd also done a lot of shorter books because I was the only person earning an income then because Philip had retired but the children were all still at home.

**When was this, end of the '90s?**

Yes, end of the '90s. I'm not sure when Phil did retire – '96 or '7, I think it was, but anyway after the middle of the '90s – and that was probably the time when I was under the most pressure with –

**Being breadwinner, basically.**

– being the breadwinner, yes, basically, and having lots of commitments – children at school and at university and so on. And so I had been working very hard and I think that I was really tired; and also having done all of this outside stuff as well. And when my novel *Terra-Farma* came out, which was – actually, it was kind of indicative of a lot of things that I had been feeling, I went to a dinner with – you know how publishers arrange dinners and everything, and I'd just had the feeling lately that I was starting to not have a voice any longer, that I'd moved out of being considered in the field any more. Maybe it was because I'd only done shortish books for a while and they hadn't been the sort of thing that people were expecting. And I went out for this publisher's dinner and there were several people there from the children's book world and the idea was to launch the book, and several of them said, 'Oh, I haven't had time to read your book yet.'

**And it's so insulting.**

And I was insulted but also I thought, ‘This is the way things are going to be from now on,’ you know, ‘I’ve stopped being important in this world.’ And the book only had I think one review or something, it sort of sank without trace, and it was both mortifying but it was also what I knew was happening anyway so it sort of just proved what I knew was going on, and that was when I thought, ‘I just have to get out of this world. I’m not going to be Gillian Rubinstein any more, I’m going to go away and be somebody else and change who I am.’

And it just had sort of worked out so well that I had already written the first draft of *Across the nightingale floor*, I’d been to Japan and I had all of the rest of the books down in draft form and everything, so I was just able to make the transition with hardly – I mean, I just withdrew from everything and I thought, ‘I’m not going to do interviews for the new books, I’m not going to do any publicity. I just hate all that world, it’s so competitive.’ And it had actually by then got to be very competitive. It was almost at that stage, I think, when it started to happen that you had to have some hook to sell your book, you know, you had to be either young and beautiful or you had to have some fascinating background or something about it; it was no longer enough simply to write a book. And so I was able to pull out of that world completely and just re-invent myself. And I do think I was very lucky because not many people get to do that at age sixty or whatever I was then, (laughs) and so that was how I decided to do the name change and everything.

**It was about that point that you moved to Goolwa too, wasn’t it?**

It was, so that also tied in very well with everything, yes.

**So that was ’97, did you say?**

Yes, it was, ’97.

**And that was because Philip had retired?**

Yes.

**Why the choice – – –?**

So we moved down to Goolwa and I actually started writing – I went to Japan to start writing the books in ’99 and I had the three months away then and that was when I started writing *Across the nightingale floor*, and I gave the manuscript to my agent in 2001.

**What was the name – we’ve talked about agents way back.**

Jenny Darling.

**It was Jenny Darling.**

Yes.

**And she had been your agent for a while at that stage?**

For some time by then, yes.

**And she’s here in Adelaide, or – – –?**

She’s in Melbourne.

**Melbourne. This is the thing: you pick up one thread and follow it and then it gets left behind.**

Yes. But I haven’t ever really talked except to family and friends about that period, but I did want to kind of get into that just to explain what was happening to cause me to make the break as well as everything else.

**No, it’s fascinating, actually, yes, because I do wonder, and in a sense it’s symbolised by you taking a different name, isn’t it?**

Yes.

**And I’ve got four minutes, so you can tell me why you changed the name and where it derives from, because I’ve seen two different explanations for it.**

Oh, well, there are actually two; but just before the manuscript went off to publishers – so this would have been September 2001, in fact just after 9–11 I think it was, and Jenny said that she would still go to Frankfurt even though everyone was saying –

**‘Don’t catch a plane.’**

‘No-one should go in planes, don’t catch a plane, don’t catch a plane.’ So she very bravely went off to Frankfurt with my manuscript. She just had the most amazing belief in it from the start because she thought it wasn’t like anything else she’d ever read, and I said to her then, ‘I’m thinking about a pseudonym’, and she said immediately, ‘That’s such a great idea. I think you should really do that.’ So we only had a few hours to come up with something and I had kind of wanted to use the name Hearn because of Lafcadio Hearn, who’s one of the writers that I admire, who was able to go to Japan in the late nineteenth century and just slip into Japanese society. I always thought that was quite unusual at a time when most Europeans were

very racist towards Japan. And Hearn also means 'heron', so since that was one of the key symbols of the book that seemed to fit in very well, too. And Lian is the other half of Gillian and was a childhood nickname of mine.

**It's a beautiful name, it's a wonderful ---.**

It's lovely, isn't it? I really like --

**Yes, it's really a beautiful name.**

-- I was really happy with 'Lian' because I like it and it's said 'Lee-an', not 'Lee-ann', but I didn't realise that so many people would read it as 'Liam'.

**Yes, you do. I had to watch myself, actually.**

And so people thought I was a man.

**Which is probably not a bad thing.**

And I also hadn't realised, although I sort of vaguely knew, that it is an Asian name, too, it's a Chinese name, Lee-Ann or something like that, and so I suddenly got a sort of reputation which was unintended of being a male, maybe either --

**Part Asian, part Chinese or something.**

-- yes, some sort of Asian name. So anyway, off it went under that name. Yes, it's a nice name, it sounds nice --

**It does.**

-- and it's nice to have a name that starts with 'H' because that means that it's right in the middle of the bookshelves. (laughs)

**Good point. We'll stop at that point, that's wonderful.**

END OF DISK 4: DISK 5

**This is Susan Marsden, this is tape four of the interview -- yes, tape four of the interview with Gillian Rubinstein on the second day, which is the ---. No, it's not tape four, it's tape five -- doing well here -- tape five of the interview with Gillian Rubinstein and this is 7<sup>th</sup> November 2007.**

**Gillian, we have finally embarked on the *Across the nightingale floor* journey, and I'd love to hear you, and I know you've talked about it before, but it would be good to have it in your own words and in your own voice.**

The first time I went to Japan in 1993 the idea for this novel came into my head -- and the two main characters, in fact; I knew that I wanted to write about this boy and this

girl, although I didn't have names for them at that stage and I didn't know very much about them. So from 1993 onwards I had it at the back of my mind that I would try to write a high fantasy – you know, one in its own world – that used Japanese landscape and so on as its world, as its background. And so this seemed to be rather a scary thing to contemplate and I had all sorts of misgivings about it: I didn't want to seem to be misappropriating the culture or anything like that or just using it in a cynical way as a background for a novel. So I started learning Japanese then and also started reading widely about the culture, and went back to Japan several times in between then.

Then I thought that I would apply for an Asialink Fellowship and see if I could have some sponsorship to go to Japan for a length of time, and I applied for that in 1998 and was granted a twelve-week scholarship. As they said – they gave you twelve thousand dollars then and, as they said, it was not an awful lot of money for expenses in Japan, and it's sort of not income, it's expenses rather than anything else. But one of the co-sponsors of the Japanese side of the Asialink Fellowships was the Akiyoshidai International Arts Village in Yamaguchi Prefecture, which is how I ended up there at the end of September 1999.

And I went there first off, I split the trip in half, partly because I wanted to see as many seasons as I could and partly because it just suited me personally better not to be away for the full three months at a time, and took off to Japan in 1999, as I said, with the idea that I would start writing the book then and also do some more research for it. So my journey started in Nagoya, I went first to the theatre company that I had the contact through Cate Fowler with, and I spent a few days with them. Then I went down to Kyoto for a week and stayed with a friend of a friend and did lots of exploring around there, went out to Hikone and saw the castle there, and then I made my way down to Yamaguchi Prefecture, which is right at the far west of the main island of Honshu, and on the way down I stayed at Himeji, Okayama and Kurashiki to look at various other places.

I'd actually been to Himeji and Kurashiki before when I went on the school trip in 1993.

**Really? Oh, so that was the reason for your first trip.**

That was when I went, yes, with my daughter who was studying Japanese at the time.

**Suzy or Tessa?**

Suzy. And we went with an absolutely wonderful teacher, Jenny Allen, who had lived in Japan for two or three years and spoke, read and wrote it fluently, and she had a great interest in all sorts of things and was very game, so we had the most wonderful trip and she and I got on very well on it. She was a great help to me in all sorts of ways.

Anyway, then I ended up in Yamaguchi and went to the arts village for my five-week stay there and on about the second or third afternoon, when I could no longer put it off, I sat down and started writing. And I'd had the voice of Takeo in my head for some time, so I knew what he sounded like and I knew that I wanted to write the story in his voice, and I had a vague idea of some of the things that were going to happen in it. But it really was a case of just sitting writing with my notebook and my gel pen and allowing the whole thing to unfold, and at the end of five weeks, when I had to leave, I then went down to stay with another theatre company in Fukuoka, in the northern part of Kyushu, and I just had got almost to the end of the story – well, not almost to the end; but I just realised what the end of the story was going to have to be, and it was so amazing, I realised that it was not going to be a very happy ending but something terrible was going to happen, that I was going to have to kill off my favourite character; and at the same time I thought, 'Well, this is exactly the right thing to do for the story.' And I was very kind of exhilarated by it, very excited by what was coming into being.

So when that was finished, I finished that around the end of the year I finished the actual writing in my notebook –

**But when you were back in Australia?**

– when I was back in Australia –

**Still handwriting?**

– still handwriting, yes – then I almost immediately started the next book, because I realised that it was not going to fit into one story, that I had to carry on, and I went away again for the second half of my Asialink trip in March that year, I wanted to see cherry blossom.

**Two thousand?**

Two thousand, yes. So I actually timed my visit to follow the cherry blossom up through the island and saw it almost everywhere, went back to the arts village and

stayed there probably another week or so and, with my notebook, I was writing all the way. On the way home – that’s right, I’d been asked to do some international schools while I was there, so I stayed in Tokyo for a week and did three international schools there doing school visit-type things, and then I went on my way back to Jakarta and was at the British International School there for ten days.

**Were you asked to do that by the Australian – – –?**

No, I was asked to do it by the actual schools.

**Really?**

And I’m just trying to remember how that happened. We could digress into that slightly, shall we?

**Please do.**

All right. In, it must have been quite early on, I was asked to go to the international school in Kuala Lumpur, so that was the first one I went to, and I did a week there as the writer in residence, and so the next ones were the Japanese schools, and then somewhere in between, maybe before this trip – yes, some time before this trip, I think it was – I did four weeks in Hong Kong doing the English language schools there, and it was kind of one of the things that practically finished me off, because (laughs) I did fifty-one sessions in four weeks, and so at the end of it I was just absolutely exhausted.

**And no voice.**

No voice at all, no, absolutely no voice, and it was seventeen schools altogether.

**So what would you do, just speak?**

That was sort of marathon. I spoke and did workshops, writing workshops and spoke to all ages, from little children through to final year of high school students, and it was absolutely fascinating. I loved it, I loved Hong Kong and I stayed with some really wonderful people there. But it was exhausting.

**And once again you weren’t writing, that’s the frustrating thing, isn’t it?**

Yes, that’s right, and I got so tired of the sound of my own voice. And I think that you do, that you just get sick of hearing yourself talk, and you can’t help but start to get into a groove, and you just say the same thing over and over again, and I used to

get quite annoyed because teachers would ask me if I could do this or that, and I would think, 'No, I don't do that. I just do my talk and that's all I can do.' (laughter) I then had to say, 'Oh, no, I've got to do something different, I'd better try something new.'

Anyway, all the time that I was at the school in Jakarta, because I had quite a lot of free time and it was too far to go back to the hotel, I was writing *Grass for his pillow* then. Then when I came back to Australia I finished writing the three books by 2001, but I had only typed up the first manuscript, which was *Across the nightingale floor*.

**You wrote them as a whole, then, you wrote it as one and then divided it into three?**

Yes. Yes, I wanted to – one of the reasons why I stopped doing anything else was I just wanted to stay with the same voice, because I'd learnt when I had done the *Space demons* trilogy, which I didn't think was awfully successful as a trilogy, that you change so much in between finishing one book and starting another one, especially if there's a long gap in between –

**As there was.**

– as there was – that you change and you aren't the same person and it's very hard to go back and recapture what you were before. And I didn't want that to happen so I didn't want to do anything else except write in the same voice and stay the same person. And it kind of happened very similarly with the sequel and the prequel that again I just wanted to stay in that world and stay with the same voice. Now, unfortunately I had already contracted to write *Terra-Farma* with Penguin, and it's the only book that I've ever signed the contract and had the advance for before I've actually written the book.

**Really? Golly. Bet that was exciting.**

It wasn't, it was a big mistake for me, really, because it sort of paralysed me and I felt really obliged to write it and at the same time I didn't really want to write it, I just wanted to –

**Do the other.**

– go on with my other one, and yet I had to finish this book. I mean, I had the outline of the story, but I did have to go back and rewrite it several times. And it was the last

book that I worked on with Anne Godden because she died a couple of years after that, she became really ill and had to retire and then she died after that.

Then of course it came out and it was sort of minimally received, it seemed to get no attention at all, and I thought, ‘Oh! Why did I waste my time doing that?’ And so that was a big lesson, really, never to take an advance and never to write something that I wasn’t completely wholehearted about, because I had said that I was going to write a third one in the series, too, I don’t know if you noticed that, that there was to be a final one called *Universicus*, and I started writing it and just realised that it was not going anywhere and I didn’t want to write it and I was not going to write it, so I abandoned it.

**So somewhere it still exists in manuscript.**

Yes.

**And some future person will publish this unfinished – – –.**

It’s over there on the shelf, in fact. There’s not very much of it, there’s about a third of it, I’d say.

**Interesting. So you were right in a trajectory, really, as you say, of the Otori series and writing it – – –.**

Yes.

**Here comes a visitor. Curious about what’s going on, that dog. And I’m struck also by the very tangible feel of Japan, so it’s not only the sort of history and culture, it’s the physical landscape.**

Yes, I thought it was very important to spend as much time there as I could and to set it in this very strongly-felt physical landscape. So I kind of exaggerate the landscape, too, I make it more extreme. I don’t know if it’s hotter because it does get very hot, but it’s certainly colder and there’s more snow and the snow is more intense. But then –

**Could have been, back then.**

– the Japanese weather *is* very extreme and Japanese people are *very* conscious of the weather and how they live at the mercy of it and have done almost all through their history. And I guess also that I was kind of influenced by the fact that when you go to Japan now you see what efforts have been made to tame the landscape and the weather and all these things and how extraordinary the typhoon defences are, the sort

of guards they have now for the ports and how they have restructured the whole of the river estuaries so that you don't get these massive floods any more, and built up mountainsides so they don't slide down on roads and all of these things. And so I think that the Japanese relationship with their extremely difficult topography and weather is kind of part of what has made them how they are, so that was just a very interesting ---.

**Yes, and that every part, no matter how natural, has been in some way altered by human agency.**

Very much so now, yes.

**But also commented on – I'm struck, I bought *Narrow road to a far province* when I was in Japan –**

Oh, right.

**– it's wonderful – and he keeps referring to beautiful things on his way, and that's what, seventeenth century, eighteenth century? But he refers to a poem that was written five centuries before about the same landscape –**

Yes.

**– so they've got that incredible tradition of recording and responding to that landscape.**

Yes, it is amazing, isn't it? Yes. And they've always been great travellers, too, so the sort of travel tradition has been set up for a very long time in Japan. And you are kind of expected to respond to the landscape when you go there, and one of the things that I loved was how if you go into famous Japanese temples or homes or small museums you take off your shoes and you just sit down and absorb everything you can see, and that seems to me to be such a wonderful way of sightseeing. It really is sight seeing, you know, rather than traipsing around cordoned off from things you can actually sit in the room as it was or on the open doors looking out onto a beautiful garden and you sit so that you see it at the right level, and it's just wonderful and that sort of appealed to me as a way of experiencing a landscape.

**You've talked in interviews also about the influence of Japanese language on what you write, writing silence –**

Yes.

**– being influenced by the rhythms of the poetry. Do you want to talk a little about that?**

It did seem to me that one of the main things I could do to make myself feel confident about writing about another country was to learn the language and that that was the first requirement, and I do think especially with a country that is so different from the European experience like Japan that if you don't learn the language you're at an enormous disadvantage of always seeing through European eyes. So learning Japanese was actually one of the most inspiring things for the novel, just the look of the characters and the way that sentences are put together and the idioms that I learned, and just once I could start reading Japanese when I was in Japan I found that I understood so much more. And even reading children's books and simple historical Manga, you just immediately get a Japanese viewpoint which I think is just essential if you want to write about another country. And I suppose that my language training at university had kind of prepared me for this, because we were always encouraged to read French and Spanish critics rather than English ones when we were studying the literature and to always make that conscious effort to see through the eyes of the place and the time, which is actually something that I hadn't thought of till now, but when we were reading things like Chrétien de Troyes and so on to actually put yourself back in time and see through his eyes and understand the history and the culture. So in a way the whole of my intellectual background had made me ready to do that, and that seemed to be the way to approach it. And I'm very glad I did, because it has been –

**Well, it's a combination, as you say –**

– so enriching.

**– of history and language, isn't it?**

Mm.

**Yes, yes, because you talked also earlier about having studied Medieval French –**

Yes.

**– so it wasn't only another language, it was another time.**

That's right, yes. And also, on the language point, I was after a specific style, and actually the one of the reviewers in the New York Times picked up on this and said, 'It reads like a fine translation from the Japanese', which was the effect I was after. I wanted it to sound as if it was written in Japanese while being written in perfect English. So again it's that sort of mimicry thing coming back, too, that you kind of

mimic what a language sounds like if it were translated into English. It's rather a strange thing.

And the other thing that I tried to be very careful about was the use of the vocabulary, to use words that sounded old, not to use words, for instance, that have been taken into English from French because that seemed to me to break too much into the world that I had constructed.

**Such as?**

'Liaison' was one that I had great trouble with finding an alternative for. (laughs)  
And 'incognito' is another one.

**That's Latin background.**

Yes. So I also tried to avoid words that were terribly Latinate and to use Anglo-Saxon words and so on; and there's something else that caused me problems and I'm not quite sure what that was now. Can't quite remember. But anyway, there were words like this that I tried to avoid. 'Assassin', that was one of the words.

**Which one?**

'Assassin'.

**Ah! From the Indian, isn't it?**

Yes, it is. And I did feel that maybe I should try to find something else for that; but –

**Failed.**

– in fact it's very difficult to, I failed, and 'assassin' is such – it exactly what it is now, in English –

**There's nothing else, nothing else.**

– and in fact one of the Japanese words for 'assassination' is *ansatsu*, so that had similar sounds in it so I felt able to use 'assassin'. (laughs)

**Talking about the sound, we were talking last night about the different sounds that animals make as they are said in other languages –**

Yes.

– and it's fascinating that 'Meouw' is 'Meouw' in Japanese and Australian, or English. Yes, that's fascinating. Yes, there must be times you think reluctantly, 'No, I'm just going to have to use that word, there's nothing else that's quite right.'

Yes, that's right.

**Yes, that's interesting, isn't it? But on the other hand you're absolutely right: it's a real irritant if you read something misplaced like that, that you think, 'Oh, they wouldn't have used that word then' –**

That's right, yes.

**– let alone in another culture.**

Yes, it is, yes.

**It really jars, doesn't it? Yes.**

My mother was very funny about that because I use the word 'piss' because it's very difficult to find anything else that doesn't sound too modern, and my mother read the book and she said, 'I don't think a Japanese boy would have used the word "piss".'

**'Pick'?**

'Piss'.

**Oh. Oh, really?**

And so I said –

**But he'd have a Japanese equivalent, though, wouldn't he?**

– 'Well, Mum, what *would* he have said?' And she said, 'Mm, I'm not sure.'  
(laughter) So I thought that was very funny.

**The one thing she should pick up on.**

Yes, of course. (laughter)

**But it's sort of the right level of sort of gentle crudity, in a way, that you know there'd be a Japanese equivalent even if it was a – – –.**

Yes.

**Yes, that's an interesting thought.**

So anyway, that was just one of the words that came up that she tripped over on.

**Criticised.**

Yes.

**I was going to ask your reactions – you say that you don't solicit responses to what you're writing when you're writing it.**

Yes.

**Are you affected by your immediate family and friends' responses when you have written, do you think?**

Well, obviously I really like it when they like it and I hope they'll tell me that. My mother was very funny because she *did* like it but she did say to me, 'Oh, I was so afraid I wouldn't like it', and I thought that was quite a typical response for her. And my sister has been very supportive over them, although she was not all that keen on the final book because she likes happy endings and I don't.

**It is a bit distressing.**

So – yes.

**Oh, no – you go, 'Oh, no.' I didn't ask your mother's new married name.**

Lock, L-O-C-K, yes.

**That's right, yes, you did give me your stepfather's name.**

So I guess that I do love it when the kids love them, for instance, and say that they love them and so on. When the books first came out I was terribly anxious about the reaction and I find reviews difficult, even good reviews, I don't really like them.

**Because you feel influenced by them or you might be influenced by them?**

Partly that; also partly because they always seem to miss the point. But maybe that's inevitable. And I guess I've got something in me that says, 'Well, if you're not going to be swayed by the bad reviews, then why should you be happy with the good reviews? Let's just treat them all as one thing and try not to be influenced by them, good *or* bad.' So I kind of try not to read them on Amazon, for instance, I never look at the books on Amazon because I just don't want to hear them.

**What about the Japanese response?**

Well, I sort of try not to look at that, too. (laughter)

**Well, given your original concerns about – – –.**

Although friends of mine have said that they really like them, very nicely; and some of the ones that I have read of the Japanese response have been – I mean, they just run the whole range of 'How can a foreigner know so much about Japan?' to 'How does a foreigner dare write about Japan?' So there's some of each, yes. But some of

them are really great. I had one from a friend last week, actually, and her opinion I would really trust about it, and she said some very nice things about the book.

**This is when I go phonetic, but who are some of the key Japanese friends, do you think, in this journey of yours through Japan and through Japanese culture, then?**

Well, the first ones are the ones who I stayed with as my first home stay family when I went in 1993, who are still very close friends, and their names are Mogi, M-O-G-I is the surname, and Akiko is the woman's name and Masaru is the man. They've been very helpful, they've sort of guided me to see things and read things and they checked all of the names for me, and Akiko is a big fan of the books and has read them all. Then there's my friend from the Japanese theatre company and her name is Miyo is her first name, M-I-Y-O, and Kimura is her other name. They're all in the back of the books. And then I have another very close friend, who I met in Akiyoshidai Arts Village, in fact, and she's a photographer and we just hit it off from when we first met there, and her name is Hiroi – H-I-R-O-I – Yamaguchi is her surname, like the prefecture, and she and I have done some travelling together and we just get on really well, she's a good friend. And then this other one was one of the staff at Yamaguchi Arts Village and her name is Manami, M-A-N-A-M-I, Kori, K-O-R-I.

**I can check those out with you later –**

Yes.

**– but I thought it was good to have some people's names.**

So they're the ones who I – just trying to think if I've left anybody out. Oh, and there's also a young couple who were here in Victor Harbor, I got to know them here but they're back in Tokyo now, and the wife is called Yoko, Y-O-K-O, and their surname is Imahori, I-M-A-H-O-R-I.

**I'm just writing 'Victor Harbor' correctly, because people always get it wrong.**

Yes: H-A-R-B-O-R. And then I have another friend here in Victor who I got to see once a week and we talk Japanese together.

**Wonderful. Is she Japanese?**

Yes. She doesn't speak any English at all –

**Which is good.**

– so it's kind of nice for us both. Yes, it's great.

**And what's her name?**

Her name's Yuriko, Y-U-R-I-K-O, Mafune, M-A-F-U-N-E.

**I was going to ask if there were Japanese in Australia or locally, because it seemed to me that it would be a good combination of being inside–outside again, being Japanese but also being able to see Japan from the outside.**

Yes, yes, it is. And then they teach Japanese here at the local school at Investigator College, so they've got quite a strong sort of Japanese-oriented community there and they often have Japanese natives come over and help for a year in the school. So we had a conversation group going for a while which the year eleven and twelve students used to come to too, but that seems to have fallen by the wayside now.

**And you went to that?**

Yes, I did go to that, yes. That was fun.

**A bit unexpected for a South Australian country town, really.**

It is, isn't it? Yes.

**You wouldn't expect that, would you? Bonus, really.**

We have a French conversation group here, too, which is also going strong. So four or five of us meet every week and speak French together.

**Wonderful.**

Yes.

**I wanted to ask the subtle thing how being an Australian of English background has affected your writing of this series.**

Well, I think Australia seems to be closer to Japan than England. I think Australia has very close links with Japan and it's not that hard to get to from here. It's in the same time zone so that you aren't struggling with jetlag, and there does seem to be a good two-way flow of artists and culture and trade and all sorts of things – school visits and so on. But England and Japan have a similar climate and they're in a similar latitude, so really Japan is a sort of meeting point for me in between England and Australia and I usually stay there on my way to England or on my way back again, so it's my kind of way station. And I love going there – when I went there in '93 I realised how much I had missed the Northern Hemisphere winter with the light

and the bare landscape and everything like that – the cold, even; the frost – because the things that I really miss about England, they're weird: they're sort of empty November landscapes and – – –.

**Not what's usually missed.**

No, not that's usually missed. And on my second long trip in Japan I went to the Shuho-cho Cultural Exchange House for three months and when I was there into November and I would wake up in the morning, and 'Oh, there's a frost, there's a frost', and it was freezing cold and it looked so beautiful and I was so happy. It's weird. So Japan having that Northern Hemisphere seasons and everything is also kind of quite important to me.

It's kind of strange, too, because the Japanese admire the English very much for some reason, so they're always very happy when I say that I was born in England. They like the Australians, too, but they have a deep admiration for the English. I don't know, maybe it – – –.

**Plus I suppose some cultural affinities, interestingly enough. I was thinking with the mythic – being back in a place which has long mythic attachments to the landscape –**

Yes, I think so.

**– the foxes and the – – –.**

Foxes, yes, are there, and castles and all sorts of ruins and their woods and all those things that I love. I don't know whether that answered the question enough.

**No, it does, beautifully, thank you, yes. Because we touched briefly on that you should be writing about a landscape so different to this one, at Goolwa.**

Yes, we did, didn't we? And I thought then that it is – I mean, it's not really similar to the English landscape, but it is a little bit more similar –

**Than this –**

– than this, yes.

**– which is totally dissimilar. Yes. But you haven't thought about writing in the same way about this landscape or about this place? Or would you do it very differently if you were going to do that?**

Well, as I said before, if I were going to do that I would feel that I wanted to draw on the Aboriginal legends of this place, I would want to go to the Ngarrindjeri and say,

‘Can I write about your stuff, please?’ And somehow I don’t feel able to do that, although I have had ideas from some of the things that I’ve learnt about Aboriginal legend that are very tempting and you think, ‘Well, that would make the most wonderful fantasy’, but I don’t know if that’s appropriate or not and so – it’s such a minefield, I guess – and yet it seems strange that I should have been able to –

**In Japan.**

– have done the same thing in Japan, yes. But maybe, you see, when people talk about appropriating another culture, I don’t feel that about Japan because Japan is a great, big, strong, ancient civilisation that –

**It can cope.**

– it can cope, yes. It’s not a weakened one, it hasn’t been affected by Europe in the way that Aboriginal cultures have, and people say that you go to countries as a tourist or that you go there to work, but you can also go there as a migrant or as a visitor, there are all sorts of different ways that you go to and fro to countries and I don’t think that you have to necessarily go there and just appropriate – which is why I was keen to make my relationship with Japan not one where I just went there to write a book; it had to be something more long-term and more ongoing.

**And a mutual exchange, really.**

Yes, that’s right, and that’s why my Japanese friends are very precious to me as well.

**Too engaged with the conversation, forgotten the next question. It’s gone. No; usually I jot it down but I didn’t this time. Well, it’s an obvious question: what are you working on now?**

Well, when I went back to – one of the times when I was in Yamaguchi city they have a tea house there which was moved from somewhere else and it’s supposed to be where some of the famous people from that area met to plot the events that led to the overthrow of the shogunate in 1868, the Meiji Restoration, and when I looked at their marvellous faces in the photographs I thought, ‘Oh, I’d love to write about this from the Choshu point of view. And so this had been in my mind and I kept reading about it and finding out lots of stuff about it, and when I was at the arts village I met the woman who’s also another important Japanese link and her name is Yuko Santo – Y-U-K-O S-A-N-T-O – and she was running the cultural exchange program for this small village, Shuho, which had an old house which used to be a doctor’s house, an

old traditional Japanese house, which they gave rent-free to artists for periods of up to three months at a time. I asked her if they'd ever had a writer and she said, 'No. Why don't you apply?' So I did, and they allowed me to go there for three months in 2002. So I was there on my own, which was absolutely wonderful, it was just such a great experience, and I applied to write this novel about the Meiji Restoration, because it struck me as very strange because it is one of the major events in East Asian history and yet hardly anybody knows about it in Australia or why it happened or what caused it or who the key players were and so on. And so I went back to write this one and spent the time that I was there reading and researching for it; but at the same time once I was back in that landscape it was the Otori characters who started to come alive again in my head, and that was when I thought, 'Oh, I've got to write more about Shigeru and finish off the story', and that was when I decided to write the sequel and the prequel.

So the result is I'm still researching my Meiji Restoration novel, but I feel almost ready to start writing and I will probably start writing after Christmas.

**Will you? At what point do you decide that? That's a question I ask as a historian, too, because [one] keeps thinking, 'More research, more research.' Is there a point you think, 'That's enough'?**

I feel this year was a sort of off year for us because we have been renovating this house, so it was obviously hopeless to try and write then. But I really miss writing, I just love being able to sit down and write every morning, and I think it's really my driving need to start doing that that is going to push me into doing it because I could keep on doing research endlessly, there's so much to find out, it's such a huge subject.

**I almost dare not to remind you of the collection in the National Library. Thinking, 'Oh-oh!'**

I did think that last night. I thought, 'Oh, I really ought to go and have a look at that. But that'll put things off.' But in fact I think Robert Graves said when he was writing *I, Claudius* that he wrote what he wanted the story to be and then researched what he needed to afterwards, and I think I'm at the stage now where I could easily do that. I can start writing the story and then I'll find out what the gaps in my knowledge are, and so that seems to be quite a good way to do it at this stage.

**I had wondered that. I mean, the obvious thing for a historian if you were going into fiction would be to write historical fiction.**

Yes.

**And I felt the real trap would be to just endlessly research, because you're so conscious as a historian of having to get it right, and therefore making it far too ponderous.**

Yes, I think that that is a danger.

**And it's the deftness; and you make a comment at some point in one of your interviews about it should be background in a sense and it should be – it's part of people's normal lives –**

Yes.

**– but they're not necessarily commenting overtly on what's going on, because you don't.**

I think that that's quite important. I think somebody said something about *Across the nightingale floor*, because it actually had some quite negative reviews when it first came out in Australia, which I think was partly to do with the big hype about the sales and everything and the pseudonym, because Australians generally don't like people using pseudonyms, it makes them very cross: people should use the name they were given – – –. (laughs)

**There's quite a strong tradition in Australia of the women – like Henry Handel Richardson – using pseudonyms, you're in good company there.**

Maybe that's what gets up their nose. But when I was doing film reviews I do remember that Muhammad Ali had just changed his name and yet all the Australian papers constantly referred to him as 'Cassius Clay' or 'formerly known as "Cassius Clay"', you know, as if 'Who's this upstart, thinking he can change his name and be somebody different?' which struck me very much at the time and I thought I detected a little bit of that. Anyway, so it had had these quite negative reviews, and one of them was, 'Oh, a bit disappointing, why didn't it give more background about Japanese history and the training as a warrior?' And I felt then he had misunderstood the fact that it's told in Takeo's voice so we only know what he knows and he's a sixteen-year-old boy taken out of his environment: he doesn't know a lot, he's just explaining what happens to him day by day as he hears it, which I think is one of the charms of his voice.

**Although you've used the first person *and* the third person.**

And the third person, yes.

**Yes, which is interesting.**

But then we only see things through Aunt Kaede's eyes, so it is a restricted point of view, it's not ---.

**That's right. But still, you're still restricted to her situation.**

Yes. And she's also very young.

**Yes, that's true.**

So anyway, it's nice to be able to get back at some of the reviewers on this.

**Yes, that must be a big temptation.**

Give *my* point of view. Yes. Well, you never can answer them back because it sounds stupid and petty but there are things that some people have said that have riled me and that I argue with in my mind; but maybe that's a good thing, maybe it helps me clarify my thoughts.

**Well, unfortunately, people do read the reviews and the reviews are in print so people can go back to them.**

And now they're around forever because of the internet. They sort of used to disappear, but now they're there forever.

**Speaking of which, when did you develop your website, when did that happen? Your first one, the Gillian Rubinstein one?**

The Gillian Rubinstein one I did – oh, the first one I did a long time ago; and then David Macintosh, who I forgot to mention as one of my favourite illustrators, who has done the three picture book poems, did the drawings on the website for me. And Ruth Starke's daughter, Petra Starke, designed it, must have been around – oh, it was before we moved down here so 1996, probably, and it badly needs updating. (laughs)

The other one, the Lian Hearn one, was designed by my daughter, Suzanna, Suzy, and that went up a year ago so that's only been up for a year.

**Did it – '06–07.**

Yes.

**It's very beautiful, it's really lovely.**

Yes, we sort of like it. It's kind of elegant and understated and it's got some nice little things with the blossom comes and goes and the heron walks across.

**Yes, that's lovely. Yes, that's a lovely touch. It's interesting, isn't it, the interaction – I was thinking, with the fourteen minutes we have left, I should also have – we haven't for a long time, but sort of the nuts and bolts of a writer's career, even if you wanted to withdraw just to write you still have to be caught up in all that too, you've got multiple publishers around the world, which I haven't really asked you about and how your dealings with them and perhaps you might like to comment on that.**

Yes. The Otori series has sold so well in so many countries – it's in thirty-eight countries now, I think, so that's thirty-six languages – and it has sort of created a huge amount of administrative work for me, although my agent helps me with it enormously and on the other side my accountant does a huge amount for me, too.

**Good.**

(laughs) Which is good.

**So they should.**

So I sometimes think that I could just stop now and just handle being Lian Hearn for the next few years and that would sort of occupy me fairly fully, except that I miss writing too much so I should do that. I couldn't do any of it without my agent, it would be impossible, they just deal with all of the overseas sales and (dog shakes noisily, pads across floor) the translations and all of those things.

**And dealing with fan mail, how do you deal with that? Or just hang onto everything?**

Well, in fact –

**The dog's walking through, here we go.**

– yes – I don't get a huge amount of fan mail as such, which I'm extremely relieved about. I had some unexpected letters last week to Gillian Rubinstein and I've just got no idea how to answer them so (laughs) I haven't done anything about them yet.

**To put on that hat.**

Yes, 'Who's this person?' And I find that with the Lian Hearn stuff most of it comes to the forum on the website, which is a fantastic way of dealing with it all. I don't have to sit down and write a long letter, I can just answer very quickly. And I think readers now really like that: it's very immediate, and other people can read it too so that you don't get lots of people asking the same question over and over again.

**That's a very good point, yes.**

So it's a really good way, I think, of keeping in touch.

**Yes. I did follow one thread on your website and they all got talking amongst themselves: 'Oh, do you learn French and Spanish and something, too?'**

Oh, that's right, they're so funny, yes.

**I was really amused by that.**

Yes. There's a group of about – oh, I don't know, a hard core of about six or eight of them who are on a lot and who sort of chat amongst themselves quite a lot.

**It's quite lovely, isn't it?**

Yes, it's really sweet.

**And then sort of take off by themselves.**

Yes.

**And I should – because I'd love to keep talking about this, but I did say when we had a break that the whole business of your relationship with, well, children in the first instance and school children and if you actually formally acknowledged a couple of high schools with some of your earlier books.**

Yes.

**Would you like to talk about that and what that relationship involved?**

My relationship with children?

**Yes.**

Well, I think when you start writing that you write for your inner child, you write for the child in yourself, although I was writing when I had children of the same age that I was writing for, and I guess it would be disingenuous to say that I wasn't also writing something that I thought they would enjoy reading. And I did know the sort of things that they liked reading because I'd read so many books out aloud to them for years and years and years. And the relationship with children in schools gets a bit more tricky, I think, because you don't realise when you start writing to what extent children's books are used in schools really as a textbook, even though it may be for silent reading or for the teacher to read aloud to the child or whatever. But sooner or later there has to be something shown that this activity is productive and children should be writing about these books they read and so on, and so they end up having to write about the characters or what they think of the plot and so on.

And then you get asked to go into schools to speak to children, which in a way – it's a sort of two-edged sword, really: it is very interesting for the writer to go in and meet children and talk to them, but also you're there as a sort of teacher because you are expected to be imparting something to children, often about writing, and I've got great misgivings about children as writers and about encouraging people too young as writers, because I think writing is one of the things that you do at any age but you don't necessarily do it all the way through your life, and often if you start too early you sort of go nowhere. And it's one of the things where children are encouraged to write a lot and they're told that they're very good, but their work isn't going to be published except in extraordinary circumstances as children's writing; there are very few great novels published by children –

**That's true.**

– or even great poetry or anything like that, because children don't have the ability to create a sustained piece of work, even though they can have marvellous insights and a marvellous way with words and everything. So I think you can do all of those things, but I think encouraging children to be writers is, in a way, a falsehood.

**Interesting. So you really see writing as a lifelong craft?**

I do, yes. Yes.

**I should ask you to say –**

Very much so.

**– how did you see writing. I'm putting words into your mouth, sorry.**

I think writing, it is a lifelong craft and I think that you are constantly discovering how to do it differently, so that was one of the things that I had misgivings about, going into schools. And the other thing is that it's just really tiring because, unlike speaking to adult groups who are interested and are there because they want to be there, with the children they are there because they've been told to be there by their teachers and you feel obliged to entertain them and engage them, because if you don't engage them you have an hour of very disruptive children, which is horrible for everybody. So you are in fact putting on a performance for them and you have got to be an actor who's the only person on stage for an hour and you've got to vary your performance and take questions and think on your feet and deal with somebody in the front who's being disruptive and it is very tiring. For authors it's often the way that

they make their major income, which is also a terrible, terrible drawback because it means that you don't have the energy to give to writing.

**Do you think that's a particular problem for Australian writers, given the small market?**

It could be, yes. I mean, certainly while I was in that area it was a marvellous thing because so many schools wanted you to go, and on the plus side it was great that they were interested in your books and they were reading them to the children in the schools and you had lots of interesting questions and the kids have obviously thought about the books and been really engaged with them. So that is a big plus. But it is a tiny market in Australia, but I don't think it's all that different elsewhere in the world. I think to earn a real living from your books is fairly rare in all countries.

**And you've done so.**

And I've done so, yes.

**You've done so, which is great. But it's been very hard work, hasn't it?**

Yes. Yes, it is hard work, yes. I mean, I've been lucky in that I was able always to balance it with theatre work and so on, so that I had a very varied career; and also being able to do the longer-term writer in residence, where you have say a week in a school but you don't do sessions all day long, is also quite good because you have got time to do your own writing and so on. Those things, yes.

**Yes, I hadn't asked you about them. There's too much to talk about. And I've got about five minutes and I think we've reached nearly the end, although there's far more to talk about. I wanted to ask you – I did warn you about this – about – I know you're reluctant to do this, feeling that you're a recent comer to this country – but some of your personal views of South Australian life, life here in a river town, in Goolwa, drawing on your own experiences and as a writer your observation. If you were going to be visiting from Japan, for example, and writing here, ..... yourself, what do you think would strike you? How would you write about it?**

I suppose the physical landscape here is very beautiful under certain circumstances. I think Goolwa's very strange because it can look both incredibly beautiful and incredibly ugly. Sometimes it looks as if you have arrived at the end of the world on a bleak, cold day when everything's grey and there's no colour anywhere. I quite like that because I like winter landscapes, as I was saying earlier. I know that I've actually had a couple of comments from Japanese people who live here, and they just are amazed by this place because it seems like the end of the world to them, there's

nothing here, (laughs) it's very different from Japan, it could hardly be more different. So I think that you have to get out and engage physically with the landscape here. I like kayaking a lot, so that's my great outlet is to kayak down the Coorong and see it in all its lovely moods and see the changing light and everything and understand something of its history.

But I suppose the other thing that I would like to say is the quality of the friendships that we have down here is amazing, we have some really close friends, and I think – somebody once said to me ages ago about the English countryside is that you work much harder at your friendships in the country because there are fewer people available; but it seems to me that Goolwa attracts a very nice sort of person and we have made some very good friends down here. Most of the people we know, though, do travel a lot: people are always coming and going from here, so that maybe keeps them interesting and alive.

**Including your own children.**

Yes, they also travel a lot, yes.

**You've got both daughters home, temporarily.**

They love to come back here, they love it here, and so they're always happy to come back, which is lovely.

**But all three of them have been living in New South Wales more recently?**

The girls have been in America this year, but before that they were in Sydney for about six or seven years.

**As the young do.**

Yes.

**Well, thank you very much. That was wonderful, really wonderful.**

Fine, yes.

**And I hope you haven't lost your voice altogether.**

No, I'm sure I haven't, no.

END OF INTERVIEW.