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**‘NEVER FORGET THAT PEOPLE’S DEEPEST PATTERNS OF BEHAVIOR  
RELATE TO THEIR CHILDHOODS, THEIR DEEPEST WOUNDS,  
THEIR NEED FOR LOVE’**



Maggie Gee is a British writer, an author of thirteen novels, including *The White Family*, which was shortlisted for the Orange prize, a book of memoirs, and a collection of short stories. She became the first woman performing as the chair of the board of the Royal Society of Literature and is currently its vice-president. She teaches creative writing at Bath Spa University and gives public lectures in Sweden as a visiting Professor. In 2012 Gee was appointed Officer of the Order of the British Empire for services to literature.

In this issue, Maggie Gee talks about her recently published novel *Blood*, the importance of reading experience as well as ignorance in creative writing, and current challenges for contemporary novelists. Interview by Olga Dzhumaylo.

**Reading your books and knowing you personally, I keep thinking about the truly compassionate kind of bond you are making with your art. In telling and thus taking care of people, many of whom are usually overlooked in our mundane life, and environment, which is taken for granted, you make me think of the inevitability of care in shaping our life responsibilities. Talking about your newly published work, the highly acclaimed *Blood* (2019), what was driving you towards its genre and conceptual concern?**

Sometimes in recent years I have felt that life in Britain is like a black comedy. The 2016 referendum about whether or not we leave the European Union split the country in two, and increasingly, the different sides have become ruder and more hateful to each other. I took that one stage further in *Blood*, by creating a character, Monica, who is full of anger, incredibly frank, potentially violent, but redeemed, once you know her, by her comedy, her courage in the face of brutality, her love of literature and her compassion for the poorest and least apparently promising of her students. Maybe she is a kind of surrogate for Britain? She and her family cannot move forward until they have dealt with Dad, their corrupt old bully of a father, a terrifying dentist who abuses his children and his patients – perhaps he represents all the old men who dominate Britain

and the world stage at the moment, in both economic and political life, and do not let us move on. At the start of the book Monica's beloved younger brother has died as a soldier in Afghanistan – a gentle boy, he should never have been in the army, just as Britain and America should never have been involved in Iraq or Afghanistan, but Dad bullied and jeered him into joining up, then, to make matters worse, does not show respect by attending the memorial party arranged by Monica and her sisters and brothers. Monica is furious: and very shortly afterwards, Dad is found battered and apparently dead. What follows is framed like a murder mystery, which I hope will keep readers reading and make the whole book enjoyable and – edge-of-the-seat? – but really the central questions are emotional and moral. How can you put an end to violence without becoming violent yourself – and if you do, can you ever recover? How does one generation outlive the mistakes of the one before? The book jacket, which was chosen (not by me!) to appeal to the US crime market, and which is very generic, does not do justice to the book's subtler purposes, nor to its satire.

**Your book is about the cycle of violence and how to stop its wheels from turning. But it is neither a self-help book, nor obviously a politically-charged one. Is it important that the main character in *Blood* is a literature teacher at school? Does literature teach self-care as well?**

Monica loves language, and languages – her voice is a very literary one, even though it's constantly laughing. She teaches 'Shakespeare, and condom use' – thus she is both an idealist and a realist. Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy is often referenced in the book, and *Blood* is, of course, a revenge tragedy itself. I'm not sure that literature alone can help troubled adolescents, unless it is taught by an imaginative, caring teacher who helps them find, and listen to, their own voices as well. Monica survives, as a brilliant but totally neglected teenager, because one good teacher, Mr Stredder, notices her gifts, empathises with her, and teaches her to value herself. In the end she will pass that gift on, and save another life, as her own life was, metaphorically, saved by him. Nothing is more important to a humane society than good, valued teachers who pass on what they know and what they have lived.

**'Has liberalism exhausted itself?' – I often hear this question addressed to intellectuals and writers. Is it a question you ask yourself?**

Not of myself personally – if the root meaning of 'liberalism' is the Latin one, free, I still value freedom for myself and for all others enormously highly. Freedom to believe what we believe, freedom to say what we mean, freedom to play and be creative, freedom to love as we wish to; freedom for others to have different opinions from me without me despising or hating them,

freedom for us all to protest against injustice, freedom to tease and satirise, freedom to speak unpopular or unfashionable truths. HOWEVER. Look how badly liberal democracies seem to be doing at the moment! We are not really a racist country (when compared to other countries, I mean – partly because of our laws against 'hate speech', partly because there is so much inter-marriage in cities) and we have a reputation as polite and unemotional, but over the last three years there seems to have been more prejudice in the UK, more racist incidents, less politeness, more expression of rage and hostility in public. Husbands are still battering and murdering their wives, whether out of jealous rage or just as a matter of course. Liberal ideas are mocked everywhere – nothing wrong with mockery, I enjoy it, but have we lost sight of what human rights mean? The right to try for happiness, the right to live as you wish, in peace... The trans (gender change/fluidity) debate, too, is being conducted in a furious, unthoughtful way, here, and there is an attempt, often from the supposed left-liberal side, to stifle the voices of those who believe biological gender has some meaning. Meanwhile, look at our leaders! The Americans have elected Donald Trump, the British have elected Boris Johnson. I think this mostly shows that democracies haven't yet learned how to deal with the power of the massive lie, backed by massive power or wealth, in this era of instant mass communication and social media. It's an unprecedented situation: we've played with fire and got badly burned, but

that doesn't mean I think there's a better system than democracy – it does mean we have a major problem and don't know yet how to deal with it. The fight for freedom is always worth continuing, as long as it's freedom for everyone, not just ourselves.

**The novel setting is Thanet, Kent, Ramsgate, which is obviously connected both with the Brexit issue and the history of invasions of England/ Great Britain. Do you have in mind some local communal mentality thing? Is it also a local kind of embodiment, plunging into, or aiming at a full absorption in what Heaney would call 'touching territory that I know'?**

Thanet is the place where invasions have always happened, so the local populace have reasons for being afraid of 'elsewhere' – and forget that they themselves ARE the result of the genes from invaders marrying those who were already here. In the whole of Kent, only Canterbury did not vote for Brexit, and Canterbury is full of students and academics, who take a wider view. The Romans, the Saxons, the Vikings – all landed in this part of England – and the French, the Spanish and the Germans have planned to invade, but not succeeded. We have a military and naval history. All the same, let's not over-simplify – most of my own local friends were pro-European and anti-Brexit. My

job as a writer, though, is always to understand those who do not agree with me.

As for my own feelings for Thanet – the coast is very beautiful, the sands great for walking and swimming, the cliffs full of fossils. But then, I have always loved where I live. Getting to know the plants and animals and birds, finding places to walk, starting to understand the people: as soon as a writer moves, new material swims into view. I agree with Heaney about 'touching territory I know'. For me, 'research' is always about walking, looking, listening, meeting people, using all my senses, being open to things. Not believing what I'm told by other people's written or filmed accounts, but finding out for myself.

**In one of your essays you wrote: "Novelists and poets don't, on the whole, want to write down their 'oughts'; they don't want to be dutiful, they want to defy the parental voices in their heads. The deep origin of writing is not in the groomed self that adopts moral positions: it is in the wild self which registers love and fear". This idea is developed a bit differently in your lecture *How May I Speak in my Own Voice*, when you talk about overcoming taboos, and again slightly differently in the chapter 'The ... fight between the fathers and the daughters' of your profound essay on Woolf. Do you just accidentally put a daughter's rebellion into the plot of *Blood*?**

The daughters rebel against the fathers: the wives rebel against the husbands: women rebel against the patriarchy. The fight between daughter and father is absolutely central to *Blood*, and I lived that fight in my early life. (I wrote about it in my memoir, *My Animal Life*.) That does not mean that I did not love my father, nor that he didn't love me – he did, very much. But I had to escape him, and to find a different way of loving and living that allowed me to be free, and free from fear. Paradoxically – and this really is a paradox, but so be it, life is incredibly complicated – it was my father who told me one of the most important things I've ever been told: 'Don't believe what people tell you, Margaret.' That was very helpful, and continues to be so.

**Do you think that women's voices are still looking for a specific genre or style loopholes to express themselves?**

In a word, No. At least, speaking for myself, I want to be able to do everything, and make it new. Yet women's lives are still busier and more pressured than men's, because of childcare, which may make them particularly drawn to short forms – for sheer time reasons.

**You do care a lot about many things, including climate change, global warming, and environmental crisis, but is there anything about which you don't really care? And what do you see per-**

**sonally as the greatest threat to civilization?**

What don't I care about? Brands. It's ridiculous to pay large amounts of money to have someone advertise their product with initials on your clothes or possessions. (I do enjoy wearing beautiful or unusual clothes, because it's part of art, in a way, but I prefer to buy them second-hand, the older and cheaper the better, because they often have more work and detail in them.) I don't care about getting older myself and having more wrinkles, I'm just delighted with every birthday, because it means I'm still alive. I don't care what I weigh, though I like to keep healthy and walk a lot. I don't care what kind of car we have so long as we have one, and it works. I don't want a bigger house – I love our house. I don't care about whether or not we have foreign holidays – I've been to so many wonderful places, I prefer to travel for work, if I travel, and I feel better not flying and getting to know my local area on my own two feet instead. Yet I need my work to have a global perspective – so it's not a simple decision.

The greatest threats to civilization are human greed and our capacity to hate, which work their way out in global warming and war.

**I absolutely adore this passage from your essay on climate change: "My novels dramatize the unintended consequences of all this human activity, and most of my comedy is about people who**

do not understand what they are doing and never see the bigger picture". Having said that, another dominant theme of your writing, which is elaborated with verbal energy and humour, yet which sounds poignant in *Where Are the Snows* (1991), *Lost Children* (1994), *The White Family* (2002), *My Cleaner* (2005), and *My Driver* (2009), is your demand for a social and political sense of awareness. Is 'the bigger picture' of *Blood* also in line with 'the condition of England' novel? Are you engaged in efforts to express everyone's personal connectedness to a political and social agenda?

I never consciously do this, but just by living in a receptive, thoughtful, wondering way, and by writing about my own time and the immediate future, I end up writing politically. People are mostly unaware of their 'connectedness to a political and social agenda', and that goes for me as well, though I suppose I know how my politics might be characterized – but categories are always too simple. Also, never forget that people's deepest patterns of behavior relate to more intimate things – their childhoods, their deepest wounds, their need for love, the things they lack at a human level.

Your novels are written in distinctly different genres. With *Blood* you are revisiting crime fiction and allude to

writers as different as King and Walpole. What is something you learn through reading other writers in the genre? Are you ironic about genre conventions? How do you avoid being locked into certain genre ways of looking at the world, to avoid clichés?

Ignorance is a help! To be honest, I am often not deeply familiar with the conventions of the genres I use and invert because I get bored by genre books. I just need to know enough to be able to fly my own plane from that airport, you could say. And although that will annoy genre groupies, it allows me to keep my own voice and my own sense of form. Outsiders can innovate more freely.

'Make me a poet' – these words of Dryden seemed controversial to different generations of literary men. Nowadays it is a more than accepted attitude towards the art of writing. Interestingly though, talking about creative writing, the difference between the practices of the Russian Institute of Literature in Moscow and various English university creative writing courses is huge. Russian students have almost the same core disciplines as traditional philologists, and it is generally accepted that a good writer should first be a good reader of numerous canonical texts from Homer

**to Marquez. In contrast to this, and in tune with the contemporary spirit, English courses suggest more practice within genre conventions (popular genres included) and some understanding of the publishing industry and art management. When, as a creative writing professor and as a professional writer with three degrees in English literature, you talk about importance of finding your own voice, what do you think provides the best way for a writer-to-be?**

Well, in some ways I agree with the Russian way, in that I believe the best grounding for a literary writer is years of reading. In other ways, though, I know that many excellent students of literature never write themselves, despite wanting to, because they become intimidated by their models, and lack the confidence to try things out or play – they also lack a context where they can practice new things and find their natural voice. Creative writing teaching, done well, with a mutually supportive group of students, can give those latter things. I remember my year of academic English students at Oxford university: at my college, Somerville, there were 12 or 13 of us. At the beginning of the three years, many of us wanted to write creatively, maybe nearly all. By the end, only three or four of us still could. So beware too much criticism at a young age, or at least, keep writing somewhere secret, keep

your own voice alive. But you still can't manage to be a really good writer without deep and wide reading, I believe. At least, you can manage, but you won't achieve mastery.

**Which of Nabokov's novels has influenced you the most and why?**

All of them. I think I've read everything he's ever published. My particular favourites: *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, *Invitation to a Beheading*, *Bend Sinister*, *Transparent Things*, and the heartbreakingly beautiful, skillful and playful *Pale Fire*. I sympathise with his anti-totalitarian politics, but it's not the reason why I love him. I love him because, like Virginia Woolf in her own sphere, he is the master. The way he shapes a narrative, paces it, reveals that it's all an artifice while never stopping you believing in it, is unequalled. His voice, his range, his ironies, his lyrical sense and his capacity for tenderness and pity, balanced by a wicked sense of humour, have influenced me more than any other writer except, perhaps, those I read in childhood – Hans Christian Andersen, Robert Louis Stevenson's *A Child's Garden of Verses* and A A Milne's *When We Were Very Young* and *Now We Are Six*.

What might link all these writers? A sense of melancholy about transience, balanced by an inexhaustible capacity for joy.

**There are several ways to tell a story, several ways to enter a scene, several**



**ways to give a voice to your characters. What is your own way of starting a novel?**

The important thing is to begin somewhere. Tell yourself it's your own secret. It doesn't matter how good it is. And then keep going.

I personally write the end first, but that's because I need somewhere to go – otherwise the novel is so long, it's impossible not to be afraid of never getting there.

**Do you think of yourself as ultimately a defender or a critic of the contemporary publishing industry?**

A critic! A constant critic and unbeliever. I see the best people I teach unable to get published, and I know how random some publications are. Publishers should be ashamed of some of the

rubbish they publish. That said, there are devoted, highly committed publishers too, often small independents, careful, painstaking editors. Done well, publishing is a noble and creative art.

**As a professor of creative writing, a former chairman of the Man Booker jury, and, most naturally, a passionate reader, can you say what contemporary writers are still underrated by the general public?**

This tends to change all the time. I would have said Bernardine Evaristo until quite recently – then this year she won the Booker Prize! The people who are really underrated are those – and there are many, excellent writers with things to say – who can't get published at all. To them, all the rest of us seem lucky.

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