

JANETTE TURNER HOSPITAL

INTERVIEW

(Recorded by Ron Store on 5 October 1988 in Brisbane)

R.S. Janette, welcome back to Brisbane and Queensland. If we could begin at the beginning, you and your family moved to Brisbane when you were seven and you grew up in Brisbane in the fifties. Can you say what it was like growing up in Brisbane at that time?

J.T.H. Well, I always felt I lived in two distinct worlds and I voyaged like a space traveller from one to the other every day when I went to school because my family was fundamentalist Pentecostal. So the world at home was very warm and I had a very happy rollicking family. My father had a zany sense of humour which I think he bequeathed to us so that family dinners were wonderful, joke-telling rambunctious occasions. But there were many limits to family life prescribed by the faith, and daily Bible reading and prayer around the family dinner table was one of them. Nobody could get up from the table before Dad reached for the Bible and we took it in turns around the table to read it. Then there was family prayer which we also took in turns. I think this has had a long-term effect on my prose rhythms and style. I think the King James' version of the Bible is very much there in my sentences. It has an incantatory effect and I like that particular King James cadence which still affects my prose all the way through. I suspect that it is very noticeable in *Charades* partly because the writing of that book put me back in my childhood memories in a very vivid way. All of those rhythms of speech surfaced. My father actually tends to speak in a very peculiar way for a working-class Australian — in a kind of mosaic of King James English that has a curious anachronistic sound to the Australian ear.

And then we went to Church three times on Sunday. One of the outstanding things that I remember is that every Easter when everyone else was heading for the beach, the four days of Easter were real purgatory (a very non-Pentecostal term) because we went to church several times a day every day for Easter. It would be Easter convention and a very, very religious occasion. So on one level I lived this sort of contented, restricted, cloistered life; and then I crossed the Great Divide at school.

My experience of primary school on the whole is pretty awful because the costliest thing about being fundamentalist was that we were not immunised as kids. My parents believed that that was a sign of lack of faith in God's Providence and I remember bringing back letters saying, No, I couldn't have shots. Of course this happened very early on before I knew what the letters were about, or knew what "shots" were about, but the thing I became aware of very early on is that it made teachers angry with me and I didn't understand what they were being angry about. That was very frightening. I was guilty of some dreadful criminal thing but I had no control over it and I didn't really know what, in fact, it was. I was a very frightened child really at primary school.

R.S. A sense of threat certainly comes through some of your writing.

J.T.H. It does and the damaged woman is a constant theme in my writing. I feel in a way that it's luck that I didn't go under. I mean I was subjected to group bullying, after my brother contracted diphtheria, and when I went back to school. After that I was a sort of marked being, a "leper in residence." It is a very painful memory and, in fact, I suppressed it for a long time. Years and years later in Boston as an adult something happened that triggered the memory and all of that came flooding back and just swamped me and I sobbed and sobbed. I remembered those childhood incidents. But I do recall nights and nights being so frightened about going to school in the morning that I would pray that I'd die that night so that I wouldn't have to go. I never told my parents about this because I just sensed there would be nothing they could do about it, that it would just upset them, and actually from very early on in a curious way, although I was very frightened all the time, I remember having a sense that I needed to protect my parents from being hurt. So it was a strange childhood I guess, but there was another physical side to it — a pure hedonism.

We had a huge back yard with banana clumps and a mango tree, a paddock at the back of that, and I had three younger brothers and five boys next door and I was one hell of a tomboy. I think I was growing up with all the ingredients for being a feminist. Physically, I was always wanting to prove myself as being better, so I would be allowed to hunt with the pack. One side of me developed a very strong sense of self, and in a physical sense I am fearless. I really am. I've

done all sorts of dare-devil things and I like mountain climbing and dangerous things. I actually have a certain kind of addiction to danger in that sense, but I'm very frightened of what groups of people can do to you. Those things go side by side in my books. I'm constantly writing about pairs of women in all my novels: one goes under and one doesn't. The reason I didn't go under I think was just by sheer good luck.

When I went to high school it happened to be on the edge of another geographical area. Most of the kids from Wilston school went to Kedron High and I went to Mitchelton High and hardly anyone from Wilston went there, and it was like a fresh start. It was like leaving behind all this baggage of being a weird kid who wasn't allowed to do anything and who was contaminated with disease. All of that frightening stuff I left behind and I got a fresh start.

But you know I have a long history of association with very intelligent, super-intelligent, very sensitive women who are dead. My closest friend in high school was very, very bright, became a doctor, became Registrar of a hospital and then in her early twenties, killed herself. My other best friend in high school is dead by her own hand. She was very bright and seemingly a strong and invulnerable person to me then. I was absolutely staggered to learn only three years ago that she had hanged herself and left three children. If I'd been asked to pick who in our high school class would be the tough and untouchable and always laughing survivor, I would have said "Lorraine", and she's dead.

Bea in *Charades* is based on a grafting of two people: a childhood friend and an adult friend. The childhood friend when we were kids in Melbourne and in Brisbane (she did come to Brisbane) was my protector. She seemed to me the tough, invulnerable kind of woman. She is now in an asylum in Sydney. I divided her life between Bea and Verity. I'm deeply conscious of the terrible costs — in Western society in general, but especially in Australian society — for very bright women of my generation. I think the penalties were pretty heavy if you were outspoken and bright, and there have been a lot of casualties, really ghastly casualties, along the way.

I think one of the reasons I write, really, is the immunisation programme that I never had as a kid. Writing is my immunisation programme. I'm always writing in order not to be Verity or not to be Dolores or not to be Victoria or

Yashoda — the women who don't make it in my books. The other reason I write is that I am probing the issue constantly: "What makes it possible to weather terrible assaults on your sense of self and not go under?" If I could just locate the secret of that as a key in my hand, I could give it to women at risk and say: "Here, here's the secret". That's the other reason I write; just a constant exploration of this issue.

R.S. Did you find life at university a liberation?

J.T.H. Yes.

R.S. For many from similar backgrounds I think it was.

J.T.H. Yes, I think it was another escape. Though again, I was very frightened at University. High school was a wonderful time for me. It was four wonderful years of not being marked as the oddity — and here I would put in a very good word for Queensland school uniforms. A uniform gave me a chance to be not visibly different from everyone else, whereas at primary school I felt visibly different. I was required to dress in subtly different ways. A very religious background required that you were not supposed to look in any way provocative and when this is interpreted narrowly you could look pretty conspicuously dowdy. So high school was a golden time. In fact, one of the most extraordinary and moving things began happening when I was back here for several months in 85. After 25 years of non-contact, and of my being on the other side of the world, out of sight and, I would have thought, totally out of mind, I was amazed and delighted that old high school friends began contacting me (after reading in the *Courier-Mail* that I was back). A reunion was arranged. And now each time I come back, these reunions go on happening. And Teachers' College and university friends have been phoning, coming to my readings, and so on. It's astonishing. More and more people are coming out of the woodwork of my past, making contact. It is quite moving and deeply treasured by me.

University was intellectually, wildly liberating, as you say, for many of us whose intellectual growth was also restricted by a Pentecostal, or Methodist or any other conservative tradition. But socially again, I felt quite nervous. I felt conspicuously different. I lived at home and spent much of the time getting out to St Lucia on the trains and buses. Everybody else seemed to be having a wild social life at the Regatta and going to the dances and I did none of this. You know I was pretty shy, but I did make a number of refectory

friendships, which was for me the first social branching into the wider world — people who sat around and talked in the refectory. It was a bit like Viennese cafe society. I found that very, very exciting — people just sitting around talking about ideas. Though socially I was shy, intellectually it was a very exciting, liberating time and the University of Queensland is one of the places that is very dear to me just as a physical place. I could get quite emotional about how pleased I am that University of Queensland Press is my publisher.

R.S. Yes, it's good that University of Queensland Press is now your publisher. After University you taught in Queensland schools for a while. Your short story, "You Gave Me Hyacinths", describes some of that time.

J.T.H. That's the first story I ever wrote. I wrote that about seventeen years ago. It's a very, very early piece but it is about that first year of teaching: 1963, Mossman, north of Cairns. You know I was twenty, I was scared to death and I was miserably homesick. When I went there I had never been to a movie, alcohol had never passed my lips, I had never lived away from home, and I arrive in this town where the people tell me proudly that they have the second highest consumption of liquor per head after Mount Isa in Queensland. They made jokes about the fact that I wouldn't drink and at the beginning it felt to me frighteningly like Wilston school again. There's nothing that freaks me out faster and brings on panic spasms than something that threatens to recreate the sense of being alone in a playground and having a ring of twenty kids around you chanting and pushing. I can just really flip out, but I'm now learning to deal a little better with it.

One of the reasons I think I fell apart a bit after I was mugged in Boston last year (in March 1987) was the sense of being alone on a street and four guys coming up and holding a knife to my throat, . . . the fact that *they made a circle round me*. I have an absolutely atavistic response of terror to that, and I found it was months and months before I was reasonably okay again.

R.S. I couldn't help but compare "You Gave Me Hyacinths" with Thea Astley's novel *Girl with a Monkey*. I don't know if you know it. It is set in Townsville.

J.T.H. Yes, Thea is the other person who knows North Queensland well and writes of it superbly.

- R.S. Queensland keeps recurring as a place in your writing, of course.
- J.T.H. Yes, oh yes, it's absolutely in my bloodstream. There's a line in Jessica Anderson's *Tirra Lirra by the River* where her protagonist says her body has always been a Queenslander. I feel that about myself.
- R.S. Place is very important in your writing. It seems the characters grow out of the locale, and the place. You and Cliff moved to the U.S. in 1967?
- J.T.H. Yes, January, '67, because Cliff had a scholarship to Harvard.
- R.S. And it was about 1970-71 when you began publishing stories?
- J.T.H. No, it was later than that, although actually I wrote "You Gave Me Hyacinths", that first story, around about 1971 which was just when we were moving from Boston to Canada. Cliff had finished his doctorate and we intended to come back to Australia. We'd never had any intention of leaving, but because his Ph.D. was quite esoteric at the time (he's a Sanskritist, and comparative historian of world religions), there was nothing in Australia for him and he was offered a position at Queen's University. That's why we went to Canada. I think that was the point I wrote "You Gave Me Hyacinths" and I sent it off to a journal. It came back of course, as one's things always do in the beginning. I think perhaps I sent it to one other place and got rejected there too, so I just thought "Oh well I'm no good at writing and that's that." I didn't do any more for years, until '75, when I was feeling rather miserable and at quite a dead end. I had finished the course work for my Ph.D. in Mediaeval Literature at Queen's University.
- R.S. You had a scholarship there?
- J.T.H. Yes I had an Ontario Graduate Fellowship and also a Canada Council Doctoral Fellowship. I couldn't get a teaching job other than very ratty, rough, part-time teaching. I taught in the maximum security men's penitentiary.
- R.S. Out of which came some of the short stories?
- J.T.H. Yes, that's the thing about a very muddled and nomadic life — like being a housewife using leftovers. There's nothing you can't use eventually if you become a writer, and I think that's one of the reasons I became a writer. My life was dislocated so many times, there really wasn't anything else I

could do with all the junk, except become a writer. Once you do that, you are independent fairly much of place and it's all useable — even muggings in Boston.

R.S. So you sharpened your writing tools on short stories?

J.T.H. Yes, and I never thought of myself at that stage as practising on short stories in order to work up to a novel. I really thought then, and actually still think, that the short story is an exquisite form, harder to do well than a novel, because you cannot misplace a single sentence or, indeed, a phrase. I think it is a perfectly self-sufficient and exceedingly high art form and that's what I wanted to become — a short story writer. And I began to get published in a slow trickle in fairly obscure literary magazines.

R.S. But you published in some important journals too such as *The Atlantic*.

J.T.H. Yes, that was mailed back from India and I was so used to getting my stories back in envelopes with my own handwriting on them. (Your heart sinks when you see your own handwriting on the floor, when it's pushed through the slot in your door.) When I got back from India and it wasn't returned I thought "Oh, Indian mails. They never got the story." I was in Boston and I called *The Atlantic* and said "I mailed you a story from India. I guess you didn't get it. I've got a carbon of it. I'd like to resubmit it." They said, "Well, the reason you didn't get it back is that we're running it in the next issue." I was quite jubilant and it was given an Atlantic First citation. It was the Atlantic editors who took me to lunch at the Ritz in Boston — a very heady experience for a working class girl from Brisbane. Actually it was rather funny because I had never eaten, up to that point, in a ritzy hotel in my life — I was in my late thirties. This is rather embarrassing. I ordered fish and it came with all its bones in it. Here I was with the Editor-in-Chief and the Fiction Editor of *Atlantic* and for an hour I spoke to them moving fish bones around in my mouth because I was too embarrassed to know what one did at the Ritz with a mouthful of fish bones. I thought I had better not spit them out.

Anyway, they suggested that I write a novel and I was quite desperately, acutely in need of money at the time because Cliff was still in India. I had come back with the kids, our house in Kingston was sublet for the year but we had to pay the taxes on it, we were on a reduced sabbatical salary

and the Canadian dollar was plummeting. Every time that I got this reduced cheque in Boston, sent down from Queen's, it was smaller and smaller in American dollars and I was quite panic stricken that I would not be able to pay the rent, or buy food till the end of the month, for the kids and me. This is a very Faulknerian story. Whenever Faulkner got envelopes mailed to him, he used to hold them up to the light. If there was a cheque inside, he would open them and if there wasn't, he just tossed them into the waste paper basket.

I had no intention and no interest in writing a novel, but the *Atlantic* editors thought it would be a good idea, and I suddenly thought: There might be money in this which I desperately need.

So I called them and said: "How much would I have to do to get some money?"

And they said: "Well we normally do not give any money to first-time authors until we have a completed manuscript; however, if you gave us 100 pages and an outline, and we like it, we would give you an advance."

I said: "How much?"

And they said "\$1000" — which seemed to me an absolutely astonishingly huge amount of money at the time, so I worked my butt off for three weeks, in between looking after two kids on my own. As soon as they got off to school in the morning, I would work like a maniac all day, and in three weeks, out of desperate panic-stricken need, I had done 100 pages and an outline and I took it to *Atlantic* and they loved it. I got my \$1000, the panic was over, I had enough money to get by until Cliff got back, and we had enough money to get back to Canada. So that is the sordid little story of how I came to write my first novel.

When I finished the first draft, *Atlantic* quite correctly said "This is really rather unwieldy and there's a lot of stuff here that should be pruned." I felt devastated after the high of their initial response to the first 100 pages, so it languished in a box for a couple of years while I went back to the usual shit-cheap teaching jobs at penitentiaries and the worst classes in the local high schools and whatever I could get. I had to really crawl and beg every semester for some part-time teaching job.

In those days, I thought if something got rejected, that was it — it was no good. So I began another novel. I applied

for an Australia Council Grant and was turned down. I couldn't get more than fragments of teaching in Kingston. I was an Australian citizen and I couldn't apply for Canada Council Writing Grants.¹ I was very, very depressed. I was sort of terminally depressed, I think, but then someone told me about the Seal Award so I dug *The Ivory Swing* out of the box. I was teaching part-time and I had a few weeks before the deadline. Again I worked like a maniac on it: and pruned a bit, chopped out sections, retyped the thing in between grading papers, and had to send it special delivery to make the deadline. And then I didn't think another thing about it until March or April 1982. The deadline was 31st December 1981.

I knew absolutely it couldn't possibly win; it wasn't even set in Canada and I wasn't a Canadian and this was a very Canadian Award. I knew I couldn't win but I did feel by that point that I was writing well enough to make some impression, and I knew *someone* at the publishing house in Canada would have to read it since those were the terms of the contest. I thought that what would happen was that someone would say, "Hm, here is someone in Kingston who can write. We must make contact." I thought that I would finally make my first contact with a Canadian publishing house.

And then a very bizarre thing happened in late March. At the beginning of the week I got the rejection letter from the Literature Board of the Australia Council. They had sent it surface mail and it took months to reach me. I felt very depressed when I got it. It was just a brief form letter and I had rather hoped that since by that time I had published in *Atlantic* and *Commonwealth* and *Malahat Review* and a few other prestigious places, that they would at least say something like, "Even though you have an impressive publishing record, blah, blah, other people have greater financial need . . ." or whatever. There was nothing. It was just *Sorry, you are unsuccessful*, and I felt cut to the quick at the time.

Then at the end of the week I heard that I had won the Seal Award for *The Ivory Swing* — \$50,000, so it was a very strange week.

R.S. What is the Seal Award?

J.T.H. I think it's like the Vogel Award here. It's a first novel award, and the prize includes publication in Canada, the U.S. and in England, hard cover and soft cover, and the prize money is

taxable prize money because it is actually an advance, a non-returnable advance. You sign away all rights. I mean, I don't even own the copyright to *The Ivory Swing* which is a real pain now, to tell you the truth. We can't buy back the rights, and University of Queensland Press would like to do it in paperback. I would certainly like them to do it in paperback, because *Swing* is now out of print in Australia. I have no control over that book, so the Seal Award was a mixed blessing, although I would never, never complain about it because it bought me two years of writing time. I stopped having to scabble for part-time teaching jobs, and it gave me a terrific international kick-off. I've always felt it was a good exchange, but it does have its down side, and right now the biggest one is that I can't control getting the rights to University of Queensland Press.

R.S. Similarities between the Hospital family on Sabbatical leave in India and *The Ivory Swing* are . . .

J.T.H. All similarities are absolutely accidental. David and Juliet are fictional creations.

R.S. Well, was there a real Yashoda and a little boy who swept the bungalow?

J.T.H. Oh! Prabhakaran was our sweeper boy and Yashoda was based on an actual person, a widow, but the actual events of the fictional Yashoda were put together from newspaper articles. I mean all of those things were happening to a number of people in South India at the time. The actual widow I met was young and beautiful, and was creating a scandal in the area because she was walking in public and wearing jewellery she wasn't supposed to wear for a year after her husband's death. That gave me the idea — the scandal she was causing — and then I began collecting newspaper articles on what happens to young widows and indeed, unhappy young wives — lots of suicides and (it's felt) murders actually — of young wives by the families into which they marry, if they don't bring sufficient dowry, or if some complication occurs in the dowry negotiations. It's a very precarious existence for women, very frightening, and that's an issue close to my heart; you know, how women survive with the sets of social expectations they're given.

R.S. And then *The Tiger in the Tiger Pit* came along.

J.T.H. Yes, which, you see, I had started writing before the Seal Award occurred. You know, by the way, *The Ivory Swing* came out just a few weeks before I turned 40. I'm a very late

bloomer and I think of myself in the Olga Masters Society in Australia, or the Emily Dickinson Club in North America. Always when I conduct Writing Workshops, which I do a lot of in Canada, I have women in their 40s and 50s often very timid and insecure. I like to give support to people like that. "If Emily Dickinson could do it, and Olga Masters could do it, and I could do it," I tell them, "you can do it."

R.S. *The Tiger in the Tiger Pit* uses as its integrating architecture the fiftieth wedding anniversary of Edward and Elizabeth. They are a set of bizarre characters . . .

J.T.H. Some other people have said that sort of thing to me, which astonishes me, because I know a lot of people like these characters. It is interesting that that book has occasioned more private mail from around the world than any of my other books. It just seems that there is an enormous number of people in numerous countries who identify with that family. A number of people have written and said, "It feels as though it's about my family."

What I wanted to examine there is what I felt about my own family background, although it is not in any sense my family, but there's a kind of ethos that is part of my family experience; that is, the family as both the source of all comfort and security, but also the source of all harm. I mean, the restrictions my family placed on me brought about indirectly, and not through their fault, very terrifying experiences for me at school. In an indirect sense, the family was the source of harm, but also my family is very dear to me. I'm very close to my parents and my brothers, and *Charades* is dedicated to my parents. And so that's what I was exploring: the family as the source of comfort as well as the source of harm, and all the paradoxes and insecurities of that; and especially what I've seen over and over again in the lives of female friends of mine — tough relationships between strict, religious fathers and daughters trying to find a space for themselves in the world. Frequently, in order to establish a self at all, they have to flee as Emily does in *The Tiger in the Tiger Pit*, as I did, as many a young woman, especially Australian young women, have had to do. They have to get away in order to set up a space for the self at all.

I was very struck on this score, a few weekends ago when I read Phillip Adams' column in the *Weekend Australian* on Merilee Bennett. I was quite galvanized by that, because the Bennetts were a strong Queensland Methodist

family. Apparently the youngest Bennett daughter quite kicked over the traces, more strongly than I needed to do, but in a way that I've known a number of other women do, and she was completely at loggerheads with her father, and had not made peace with him when he died. She has made a very beautiful film about this, which I'd love to see. I haven't seen it. It won an Award at the Cannes Film Festival. Now it was that very same issue that I was really looking at in *The Tiger in the Tiger Pit*; that there tends to be in families like that. I could name you six families that you and I both know of, in Brisbane, where that's been the issue. There's one daughter who hasn't escaped, and who has, in a sense, had her wings clipped all her life by a strong father. That often was, in fact, the eldest daughter; and the younger one escaped and became rather wild. That was one method of escape. If the family thinks you are bad, okay, you become the official black sheep of the family. Or you get away. You go half way round the world. So it's a pattern I've observed a lot.

R.S. You've talked about the importance, the effect of the Pentecostal background in growing up. It seems to me that in some of your work say, *Borderline*, there are themes of guilt and sin. Are you aware that these kinds of religious themes are coming through and are they important to you?

J.T.H. It's funny, yes I've come to accept, a little ruefully at that, that I am really a religious writer. In fact, my husband, who, as you know, is Dean of a Theological College, was vastly amused because he knew I would feel a certain amount of chagrin about it, that an article in a Canadian newspaper, Toronto's *Globe and Mail* listed me as one of Canada's most religious novelists. I thought: "Oh, good grief can't I shed this religious thing?" But other people notice themes in your work before you do, I guess, and of course I'm steeped with King James' version prosody and themes, I suppose. And certainly academically, as a mediaevalist, I love mediaeval art and literature which is, of course, thoroughly Christian. There was no separation of sacred and secular there — it was just all the one whole cloth, so in that sense I'm imbued with those themes, and I still find them artistically beautiful. I absolutely believe in redemption, as a perpetual possibility.

R.S. That was the other thing I wanted to ask you about.

J.T.H. Redemption I do believe in. I don't believe in it in any narrow, Christian, dogmatic sense. I spent ten years being a staunch agnostic, and now I'm a sort of sheepish — I don't know

—wishy-washy, lapsed Christian I suppose. Dogma makes me nervous, but I do find the term “redemption”, used in a rich symbolic sense, not in a narrowly Christian theological sense, a powerful theme. And yes, I believe in it. I believe in redemptive moments. I believe that deeply flawed people are capable of, at moments, doing things that completely change someone else’s life. I’ve been conscious of it at stages of my life. Somebody’s act of warmth or kindness has made all the difference at certain times between staying afloat and going under. For example, a motif that occurs constantly in my work is that of bad Catholic boys. Now this does go back to my terrified childhood in Wilston school where, you know, Catholic kids in State school were the real baddies. They’d already been kicked out of Catholic school. I remember this kid who was such a baddy, he could risk doing kind things and not be thought a sissy. I had been pushed over in the playground and he came and put his arm around me and picked me up. Now, he’s the kind of kid who was regularly caned, and he was one of the official black sheep of the school, but you know I keep having these bad Catholic boys pop up in my work. Patrick Murphy is the prototype in the story “After Long Absence”. But he’s also Gus in *Borderline*, if Patrick Murphy had grown up and lived in Canada instead of being killed on a Queensland road. So I do believe that acts of kindness have potent redemptive force that can absolutely change the course of a person’s life, and I suspect that that’s all most of us are capable of — redemptive *moments*, since most people are a fairly shabby mix of good and bad. And that paradox is one of the things I keep exploring too: that quite nasty people can do very good things, and conversely that professionally good people can have rather nasty selfish sides. Bea is the redemptive force in *Charades*, you know; someone who’s considered a slut.

- R.S. I like Bea. I think she comes through as a very strong character.
- J.T.H. Yes, I’m certainly very glad to hear that. I see her as a saint in the rough — a rough diamond.
- R.S. Many of your female characters come through as strong characters.
- J.T.H. If they don’t go under, if they’re not the damaged one, then they’re very strong. Of course, I’ve come to realise I’m writing about the shadow side of myself in those damaged women, the fear which I used to think I’d got past. I was in

such bad shape after the mugging in Boston that I have come to feel that one is in a sense always negotiating one's life for survival, that there could come a set of circumstances where one could just crumple. So I'm still writing as my private immunisation programme.

R.S. Let's talk about *Charades*. You originally had another title chosen for this novel didn't you?

J.T.H. Oh, did I give you the earlier version? It was going to be much longer: *1001 Confections of Charade*. Yes, because I wanted to make sure that people realised it was a parallel to the *1001 Nights*.

R.S. How have you felt about the reviews?

J.T.H. Well, I was rather amazed that some didn't realise it was a *1001 Nights* parallel because I felt surely — from Scheherazade to Charade; and Koenig being the German word for king — I didn't want to clobber people over the head. Just to tip them off I put the invocation from the *1001 Nights* at the front of the book. So I thought you would surely have to be very obtuse to miss it. Seems like some reviewers have missed it.

R.S. Yes they have. I was surprised at that because you gave them the clue.

J.T.H. So I should have stuck with the earlier title of *1001 Confections of Charade*. But with lengthy titles there are practical problems — like fitting them on the jacket and spine of the book — and publishers don't like them. And then suddenly *Charades* seemed the perfect title, because you get multiple perspectives on Charade — herself, and one of the things the book is about is mental game-playing. And so the multiple perspectives, plus the mental game-playing, plus the suggestion of illusion which I think goes with the word "Charade" — all of those things seemed nicely contained within the one-word title.

R.S. Yes, I think there is a nice ambiguity about it. Much of your work is about illusion and reality, about the hall of mirrors.

J.T.H. Yes, I suppose because I've lived in so many different places and different countries. I zip around from culture to culture, and I come back here, and my memories of the past are very intense. When you come back to a place after absence from it . . . the people who have gone on living in the place, their memories are constantly adapting themselves retroactively, because the present is constantly working on that.

If you leave a place, there's no continuing present modifying the past. It becomes a sealed-off unit in the memory, preserved, a freeze-dried chunk. And so when you come back, you find this great clash going on. When I talk to my family at clan gatherings, my memory of events and theirs constantly conflict. Everybody is quite convinced that he or she is remembering the part accurately, so I've become very conscious of the way in which memory is selective. We remember what impinges on *us*, what is significant for *us*. We change our memories, we reinterpret our own memories, and I'm very conscious that historiographers are now saying that history is perpetually reinterpreted depending on who is doing the looking and what they're looking at. It was once believed that the best way to write history was through official documents, but you know, would one want to, in these days, compile a history of the Queensland Police Force by its official documents? That would obviously be a very inaccurate history, and so historians are starting to look at other things. So I'm conscious that history and the past are, in fact, artefacts of memory, which is a very slippery thing. That's one of the things I'm constantly looking at.

R.S. Obviously *Charades* was influenced by your time at M.I.T.?

J.T.H. Yes.

R.S. I have to confess I haven't gone to some of the physics titles you list at the beginning of *Charades*.

J.T.H. It shouldn't be necessary, I hope. I certainly didn't intend that readers would have to go off to a reference book on physics. But that was one of the things that was very hard to solve as an artistic dilemma. I mean, the idea of using physics metaphors just suddenly hit me as a flash of enlightenment. I was wrestling with how to handle writing about my childhood — I mean the issue of being terrified at school with other people not even knowing about it; going to school desperately frightened each day, but this being a very private thing, and nobody at home knowing the terror I faced at school — those two contradictory states co-existing. And the Zundel trial, which was really about the same thing, was going on in Toronto. And I was teaching at M.I.T..

My students were physicists, and I had colleagues who were physicists, and they were talking about quantum mechanics and saying these mind-boggling zen-like seemingly contradictory things about sub-atomic particles, that they exist and don't exist, both; and the whole wave/particle

paradox; and I suddenly thought, That's it, that's the perfect metaphor for what I'm trying to get at, about time, about history, about reality.

I wrestled with it with *Borderline* too, because I was constantly overwhelmed that people in Boston and Montreal could live within a mile of someone whose life was daily at threat, and could say things at dinner parties like, "Well I'm sure the refugee problem is much overrated."

So those opposing states, contradictory states, co-existing and not acknowledging each other's existence, was something I was trying to write about. It's precisely because they are contradictory states that co-exist, it is very hard to write about them and to shake people up. I write to shake people up, you know, to make them see that most of the time we slide through life rather glibly unaware of what's going on within a mile of us. Anyway, physics seemed a way to do it, and I spent a lot of time reading much more quantum physics than I ever thought I would be reading, and I was lucky in that Alan Guth, the physicist at M.I.T., was very very patient with me. I would keep taking my low-level little problems to him, and asking him to explain them, and he was very generous with time. Then I had to learn all that, but then absorb it, so that it could come out artistically in a way that would not obtrude too much and be an obstruction to getting at the material. I hope I've done that. That's what I wanted to do anyway.

R.S. You may not be aware of it, but I've noticed in some of the letters we've exchanged that you're using physics-type metaphors in those.

J.T.H. It is happening more, I suppose without my noticing it, but actually I find physics so exciting now. I must say I've found people like Heisenberg and Bohr and Einstein so exciting as thinkers and writers. I mean, they are the philosopher kings of the twentieth century in my opinion. What was pretty exciting was to find out how extraordinarily well Heisenberg, in particular, wrote. I mean, he's just a damn good writer. So yes, I keep reading more and more philosophical stuff by physicists because they seem to be inescapably philosophers as well as physicists. I do find it exciting, and I tend to assume that the educated person who reads reasonably well across the spectrum of politics, economics and science, doesn't need to have explained terms like "black hole" or "event horizon". One of the reviews specifically

mentioned that you had to go to a glossary to find out what an “event horizon” was. That did startle me. I thought that sort of stuff was so widely disseminated through TV science programmes and general articles, that not to know certain terms like that is to be culturally illiterate.

R.S. You have been in a privileged position at M.I.T. working with young physicists.

J.T.H. I suppose. I may be quite underestimating how widespread these terms are because they are just in the air at M.I.T.. I’ll be back there again for the first part of 1989. So yes, I’ve been in a scientific environment for a while now, and perhaps I’m taking things for granted.

R.S. Most people probably have some glimmer of understanding of “black holes” but not perhaps “event horizons”.

J.T.H. The event horizon is that point where a star comes into the gravitational force of a black hole, and it is so dense, the matter of the black hole, that once the star comes into its gravitational force, that’s it. The star just gets crunched up. Black holes eat stars. The stars get sucked into this totally dense matter so that once they cross the event horizon, they can’t reverse, they can’t back pedal.

R.S. Janette, could you tell us how you write. Do you revise much? Do you work intensely for short periods?

J.T.H. I work intensely for long periods. I work anything from eight to fourteen-hour days when I really get going, very intensely, and usually for six days a week. I get going about nine in the morning. I’m not necessarily *writing* all that time, but I am obsessively focused on what I’m doing. As far as I’m concerned, it is working time and I don’t take breaks. I hate taking breaks.

Two years ago, because I just wanted to get away from interruptions, we moved out to the country outside of Kingston. I’ve got an answering machine. It is hard for me to surface out of my writing at any time. You know, now that I’ve been four weeks on the move around Australia, I really have a craving to hole up like a bear hibernating in a cave and get back to work. It is my sustenance, it is what I would rather do than anything else. It’s often agonizing in the sense that I am tearing my hair; but it’s not agony in that I’ve got to make myself get back to it. Quite the contrary. It is very difficult, and it is getting increasingly difficult, for me to make myself do anything else *other* than writing.

Though I adore my two kids and spend a lot of intellectual time with them — you know, sitting around in the evenings discussing things; and I love it when they come home from University. Our younger one has just started University and a part of me feels tremendously liberated, you know. I paid these very lengthy dues of bringing up two kids, and writing in the spaces of all their needs, which I don't regret. It's part of what makes life for women dislocated, and hence rich, and hence full of writing material. But it is awfully nice now that time is less interrupted.

- R.S. Do you have any current projects in hand?
- J.T.H. I always have six current projects at least. I've been doing reviews while I'm on the move here. They have been very hard to write in the conditions of the last month, staying in people's homes and in hotels, and just having a half hour here and a half hour there, and pieces of hotel stationery, and going back to handwriting.
- R.S. Do you use a word processor?
- J.T.H. Now I do, although I did the first three novels the old way, which meant initially I would handwrite about five pages and then type them.
- R.S. Did you find it an easy transition?
- J.T.H. Oh, it gave me hell initially to make the transition, and I took lots of bets with people, and I said I knew that I would never, never be able to compose at a word processor because I never could at a typewriter. I always had to handwrite first. I find to my own astonishment that I can compose at the word processor. I'd say that I do about ninety per cent of the writing directly on to the word processor, but to start off a novel I still have to go through a little ritual of hunching up in a certain chair in my study and using yellow foolscap paper and a pencil. I have to have the immediacy of that tactile feeling, and the sound of the pencil on the paper, to get a novel started or to get a story started — like priming the pump. But once I get it off the ground then I can go, to my own amazement, and compose most of it straight at the word processor.
- R.S. Yes, something that a lot of people haven't yet recognised is that a lot of observation of the writing process of the creative artist is going to be lost with word processors.
- J.T.H. Yes, because those early drafts on the disk don't survive. But I can't edit on screen. I have to print off, and look at it on

paper to see if it's any good, and then I go through with my pen. Maybe it's the old school teacher habit. I edit myself on paper and then I feed those changes back into the screen. I don't know whether I'll ever change that. There are certain stages, at the very early draft stage, that I'll never have preserved now the way I did for the first novels, where I've even kept my handwritten drafts. I do at least keep an early printout and my editing is visible on paper.

R.S. Can you tell us about any of the current projects?

J.T.H. Only, oh well I've been doing these book reviews and I've got a slew of solicited short stories I'm committed to — various magazines, including *LiNQ*. For me a novel starts usually as a collision of some intensely visual scene and an abstract idea.

For *The Ivory Swing*, the *visual* part was this gorgeous place where we lived in South India in the middle of a coconut grove and beside a rice paddy. The *idea* I wanted to look at was the impasse of cross-cultural differences; that no matter how much East and West bent over backwards to understand each other there were certain intractable differences of belief that would eventually lead to clashes.

For *The Tiger in the Tiger Pit* the *idea* was the family as the source of all consolation and all harm. The *visual image*, the starting point visually for that novel, is in fact the climactic scene. I had no idea where that came from but I just had this image of a young man and a young woman naked and an irate father turning a hose full blast on them.

For *Borderline*, the visual image was the painting by Perugino of St. Mary Magdalene, and the image of the truck at the border with the refugees in it. And in *Borderline* I was starting to explore multiple time perspectives and multiple senses of time itself and they will be constant themes, I think, now. That's really the area I keep on exploring.

R.S. Yes, that's obvious.

J.T.H. In *Charades*, that visual thing was the rain forest. I just put myself inside it. I spent a lot of time up at Mt Glorious and Jolly's Lookout as a kid, and it was a safe place, you see. For me it had the sense of sanctuary. It was *safe*, away from these kids who were frightening me and bullying me. That was the image there; and contradictory realities was the idea.

About the new novel, all I can tell you is that it is germinating and fermenting and percolating at a furious rate

in my mind, and will be for months yet. Probably, I suspect around about next May when I finish the semester at M.I.T. and just before I come out to the University of Sydney, I will start writing at a furious pace. But while I am writing the short stories it will go on fermenting away. All I can give you at this point is a visual image that's going to have something to do with it. I don't myself yet know how. You may have seen it, as I think it was printed in an Australian magazine too, but on June 7 of 1987 the *New York Times* Sunday Magazine ran four pages of photographs of a gold mine in Brazil, the Serra Pelada goldmine, and there was a double-page-spread black and white photograph that absolutely electrified me. I have it pinned to the wall above my word processor, and it looks like a Bosch painting, or a colony on the moon, or a scene from Dante's *Inferno* or the *Purgatorio*. (Dante is another writer I'm quite well steeped in as a mediaevalist.) It's of thousands of people in Brazil, the desperately poor, who are flocking to this mine which is a vast scar in the earth's surface, and they're digging it out with little hand trowels, and they've roped together bamboo ladders that are hundreds — well, not hundreds I suppose, but they look as though . . . they certainly appear to be more than a 100 feet high. This photograph can bring tears to your eyes because it seems as though the whole range of human emotion is there: desperate need and panic and greed; and those redemptive moments as someone leans to help another up these precarious ladders out of the pit. The image of it is the abyss itself. I just felt pins and needles all over when I looked at this photograph, and it grabbed me.

I've always felt that topics grab *me*, rather than the other way around. I don't say: 'What will I write about next?' Always before I have finished the current novel, what the next one is going to be about has grabbed me like eagle's claws on the back of my neck, and carried me off, and I'm not going to have any peace until it lets me down when the novel is finished. So there's a constant compulsive, obsessive excitement for me about writing a novel. It's an addiction from which I never wish to be cured.

NOTE:

¹ Actually, eligibility rules have now changed and legally I could now apply. But I still feel that morally I should not apply for a Canada Council writing grant.

