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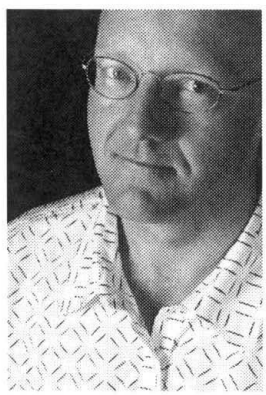
EXPLORING THE HIDDEN SELF
AN INTERVIEW WITH MALCOLM KNOX



Malcolm Knox is a man of paradoxes. He answers questions with the same strident voice from his prose, fulfilling the promise on the blurb from his latest novel, *Jamaica*, that he is an "unflinching observer of fallibility, hypocrisy and thwarted ambition." Face to face, however, his pale blinking eyes, masked by strong prescription glasses, slight build, and the tense line of his mouth portrays a man not at ease with himself. There is an intriguing sense that, perhaps, he harbours the same sort of secret shared by his dark characters.

Jamaica is about a group of six former private schoolboy friends who travel to Jamaica to compete in a swimming marathon. The protagonist, Hut, (Jeremy Hutchison) is tolerated by the group, even though he has new money and is inclined to be the continual butt of gaffs. Unbeknownst to Hut, whilst preoccupied to the point of obsession with seeking approval from his obnoxious mates, the one certainty in his life, his wife, Pen, is travelling to Jamaica to announce she is leaving him.

We meet in September the day after Knox receives the $10,000 Colin Roderick Award and the H.T. Priestley Medal for 2007 best fiction. When listening back to the interview, underneath the confident answers, there is a slight stutter. Knox is discussing Hut's sense of failure.

"The actual scene that was the germination of the book was that swimming race that real people went on to Hawaii. There was an image of the one guy who let the others down and was sitting with his head in his hands after drifting down-current and wrecking the race for the others."

"When I heard that story, the image of his loneliness in his failure was — it rang a bell for me," adding, after a pause: "that sense of the tragic."

Knox has professed in other interviews that fiction allows him to write about "the hidden self."

"Many, many, many novels are in fact creative nonfiction, but they deal with private events so they can safely be held to be novels — as you can't corroborate them from external sources."

Four of the characters in the novel are based on people he knows "very, very" well. The idea for the narrative came after a dinner party attended by close friends. The story of the race was told through several courses. People were still talking about it, he says, well after dessert was served.

"After I wrote — I can't remember what draft: it was fairly well advanced — I showed it to them and three of them read it and had no problem with it at all. They were quite amused by it the way I jumbled together all sorts of different things. Nobody," he adds defensively, "said I had unfairly appropriated these stories."

Knox himself attended Knox Grammar School. Like the characters in Jamaica, his four best friends are still the same people he met when he was eight or nine years old.

"I grew up in that area in the North Shore. I had a very lucky upbringing in a happy family," he said. "I did want to look at friendships reaching their use-by date: or how friendships, long after they've past the point of where these friends have anything in common, only have their own pasts."

He admits there has been "a little bit of friction" with one person in particular who, he adds, "didn't actually read the book."

"My closest friends, those particular friends, do completely different things and they don't read my work in journalism or books. They're not readers at all," he said.

Knox, a journalist with *The Sydney Morning Herald*, says he doesn't have a lot of faith in his powers of imagination, preferring instead to write about what he knows and then "massage the facts" to throw readers off the scent and to "depart from the truth" about the real source for his characters. As a journalist, he is well aware of the problems of litigation.

"At the very, very end I did that to protect people a bit more. Unlike in journalism, you can do that in a novel and you can have fun doing it. That's why writing fiction has been such a great release from the strictures of journalism," he said.

Knox defends writing from the real

"I still feel I want to go into memory rather than conjuring something up out of nothing because I want to do something original that no-one else has done and I feel the more I'm imagining something, the more I'm cooking it up out of nothing, the more I'm going to tend towards common imagination. It always seemed to me that fantasy literature could all have been written by the same person whereas things out of my experience are things that only I could have known and only I can remember it."

Knox is well-used to dodging the autobiographical question of how close the book sits to the truth given that he straddles both fiction and nonfiction through his books and journalism.

"To me there's a very clear distinction between the autobiographical and the fictional because I know the autobiographical stuff wasn't anywhere near as complicated or as tragic as the words on the page," he said.

The "success/failure" tag engendered in private schools is something, he ventures, that he "can make real observations about" as is his view about the way a privileged upbringing retards entry into adulthood.

"My friends are among this. Either they're in their forties, or around forty years, old. I don't see it as a midlife crisis novel. I see it more as a coming of age novel so their crisis is more a crisis at becoming an adult. The fact that they're only becoming adults in their 40s is a result of their privilege ... but when they do meet that coming of age crisis — it should have happened when they were 19 — because it happens when they were 40, it's got that much more time to build up."

Knox, you sense, has a stamina born from resilience. His career has spanned tough assignments including his Walkley-award winning story which unearthed Norma Khouri's literary hoax, *Forbidden Love*. The "memoir," which sold 200,000 copies in Australia, was reportedly about her best friend in Jordan who was stabbed by her father after she fell in love with a Christian. Knox pursued Khouri, where others failed. He confesses that he is attracted to covering stories "on the dark side of life."

"I'm fascinated by wrongdoers," he says. "Certainly when we gossip and gossip is very often a more primitive version of art — the staples of gossip of people's misdemeanours and scandals — I don't think it's that unusual to be interested in the darker side."

He approaches fiction with the same ruthlessness, describing his approach as Darwinian.

"There's a lot of false starts. I often write 15-20,000 words that I think is a novel then it stops and I lose interest — onto something else. It's a bit of a Darwinian eco-system where the fittest and the strongest will survive and that will be the one I keep going on and have a passion for."

He says you never learn how to write a novel: "... you just learn how to write *that* novel. It doesn't necessarily teach you anything about the next one."

Knox writes several drafts, the first establishing the plot and the others honing his language, confessing that with *Jamaica*, in particular, he really wanted to make "a self-styled book."

"My first drafts are always action propelled by action, getting the forward movement of the plot right so that things make sense with one thing leading to another. I don't concentrate on the finer detail of physical setting, or people's appearances or style or interior, the psychology of it, that tends to come in the successive later drafts and accumulates bit by bit. And those stylistic terms which are probably more in this book than the other two novels ... It's between draft number 15 and number 16, walking along daydreaming and an image comes to mind. Because the book is sitting there you think that will fit in at that point in the book and by that time, you know the book so intimately you almost know it off by heart. You think that image will go there and if you do it well, it will come out in the book as though it's quite seamless."

The next one, you imagine, is never far away. Knox, with the well-developed goal-oriented speak from his childhood, will inevitably keep churning them out.