

‘TIME AND TIDE’: AN INTERVIEW WITH CARMEL BIRD

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The contemporary Australian author Carmel Bird writes a fiction that blends real and surreal, mundane and macabre with inventive irony. In doing so, she reflects a perception of her birthplace (Tasmania) as a meaningfully multi-faceted island, whose picturesque surface masks deep secrets and is haunted by the ghosts of the indigenous peoples as well as those of the convicted criminals who were the first colonial inhabitants. With the themes of colonialism and genocide frequently infusing her fiction, Bird has edited a ground-breaking collection of the oral histories of Australian indigenous people who were forcibly removed from their land in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: *The Stolen Children—Their Stories*. It is perhaps this work that has brought Bird’s own stories, her fiction and essays alike, to a wide international attention. The motif of the dis-empowered is one of the key elements of all her work, colouring her response to the broader questions of life, love and justice. Her most recent novel *Cape Grimm* is currently listed for the *Dublin IMPAC Award*.

Bird is one of Australia’s most active and visible writers. Her fiction, while being highly individual and varied, sits within the Australian traditions of both Peter Carey’s fabulism and Thea Astley’s humane wit. The work has been compared with that of Angela Carter and Jeannette Winterson, and yet there is a rogue quality about it that brings it into the realm of Kurt Vonnegut and even García Márquez. This is a rare and heady mix that leaps categories and bears very close attention. It is work that attracts the imagination of film-makers, several of the short stories being currently in production. The story ‘A Telephone Call for Genevieve Snow’ was adapted for film in 2001 and won the *Silver Lion Award* at the Venice Film Festival.

She has published five collections of short stories: *Births, Deaths and Marriages* (1983), *The Woodpecker Toy Fact* (1987), *Woodpecker Point* (1988), *The Common Rat* (1993), and *Automatic Teller* (1996), followed by a recent collection of her best stories in 2005 under the title *The Essential Bird*. Among her novels, the most distinguished work is her *Mandala Trilogy*, which Bird is planning to convert into a quartet with the novel she is currently working on and whose title will be *Green Language*. The trilogy so far is made up of *The White Garden* (1995), *Red Shoes* (1998), and *Cape Grimm* (2004). Although freely bound up together, the pieces of this trilogy are connected by the concept of a charisma that, when combined with evil, can cause extreme damage such as mass murder. Bird speaks of ‘The Halo Effect’ that charismatic people exert on average human beings by radiating a mysterious aura and power that are finally translated into blind obedience. Bird fictionalises an unfortunately frequent reality, since, like Ambrose Goddard, Petra Penfold-Knight and Caleb Mean—the protagonists

of the three novels—charismatic leaders keep proving to be quite a powerful weapon of mass destruction.

As Wilde et al. (1994: 94) state, Bird is “a witty writer with a wide but always highly original tonal range”, who “raises what is often potentially sinister or horrific to something approaching comedy. Disease, deaths and violence are staples in her fictional world, which has similarities with Barbara Hanrahan’s Gothic sensuality and feminist irony, although Bird’s deadpan humour is a distinctive, determining element”.

The interview that follows is the result of two meetings (Granada, December 2001 and Sydney, July 2002) and further contact through e-mail, phone and letter. I have concentrated principally on discussions of the genesis and inspiration of Bird’s work and on her reflections regarding these central issues.

You have specified elsewhere (Walker 2004b:281) that the concept of charisma is the leitmotif of your Mandala Trilogy (The White Garden, Red Shoes and Cape Grimm). Actually, you describe the protagonist in Red Shoes, Petra Penfold-Knight as having a ‘Halo Effect’. In which way are the three main characters in this trilogy (i.e. Ambrose Goddard, Petra Penfold-Knight and Caleb Mean) charismatic? And then, would you say that Ambrose, for example, is as charismatic as Petra? Is there any difference in the halo effect of these powerfully attractive people?

I was only looking for a trinity (man, woman and child) where each character would be charismatic and evil, but different according to age and gender. Petra was, in fact, the only one I imagined entering a roomful of children and having the other infants drawn to her as moths to a candle flame. In that image there is the notion of the danger that the halo person is to others. I toy with the idea of having a character somewhere (perhaps in *The Green Language*), who is charismatic and good, probably someone like Mother Teresa or St Teresa. Goodness is harder to deal with than evil, because part of goodness tends to be humility. It would be interesting to put Petra, Ambrose and Caleb on a stage together and see who shines the brightest. Actors and singers have charisma to begin with, and this is bolstered by PR and lights and costumes, as indeed it is for Petra and the other charismatic leaders in the trilogy, and perhaps because actors and other famous people offer their art, they have a goodness and purity that was not available to Petra and the rest of the team.

As Shirley Walker has already acknowledged, “Caleb is the most unearthly and inhuman of Bird’s charismatic figures” (2004a: 273) and, indeed, after reading the Mandala Trilogy, one gets the impression that he is the creepiest of the three protagonists: Goddard becomes aware that he is a fake and commits suicide when this is acknowledged by society; Petra is also aware of her falsity after murdering Celeste, but she kills herself choosing to remain an immortal myth to her community’s eyes; Caleb seems to believe in his supernatural power until the very end and his death is not even clear. And yet it is as if, behind the fakeness of these figures, there is some truth to their supernatural power, like Petra’s ability to see her guardian angel or Caleb’s fatalistic signs—the plane that kills a mother and her daughter in his presence, Marina Galaxy’s accident while listening to his preaching, and his grandmother’s vision the day of his birth.

I sometimes think that the three of them lack a kind of skin that most humans have, a membrane that shuts the world of the supernatural off from more regular people. You could call it a gift—the skin-lessness—or a curse. The three have access to some power or at least to some ability or way of knowing.

The three charismatic figures in The Mandala Trilogy are terribly cold and wicked. Is there any of them that, despite this perverse nature, gains the reader's sympathy?

Maybe it is worth considering the tragic events in the early lives of Petra and Caleb, as they both suffered from the circumstances and events at that time. Petra was the child of her sister and the priest (Somerset Jones), although she believed she had the same mother and father as her sister. She was then sexually abused by Somerset, who was Petra's best friend's father. That she possessed the halo effect is something unaccounted for. It is seen to be a gift, like amazing musical ability or mathematical intelligence. It is just a feature of the person, a legacy they are born with. It could be argued that since Petra was born with so many strikes against her, a benign creator gifted her with the beginnings of her charisma. She used that charisma to rise to power over others, to enslave them, to force them to fit into the image of reality that she had developed gradually with the input of such people as Meena and then all the men who fell for her. I do not suggest that readers should feel 'sympathy' for her actions; I only suggest that her character and personality developed from the confluence of her heritage and her nature and experience. I imagine that at some point she could have used her powers for good. So I am proposing understanding, not sympathy.

Caleb was spoilt from birth: again his heritage told against him, being born into the community at Skye, and having the grandmother who saw the visions at his birth. He was doomed to be a little tyrant, although he could have chosen to be good. However, the easy path to power (or even, I suppose, the difficult one) can be like a drug: it went to his head as it did to Petra's. He seems to have been insane.

Ambrose is a bit different. He was a bright boy in a patriarchal society where he could fairly easily rise to power in his field, having images of himself as a great elephant. The point in his character that is sometimes sympathetic is his humour. He is sometimes funny—of course it is dark humour—and, although he is a vile criminal who dominates, rapes and murders, his take on things is sometimes quite funny. The humour in *Red Shoes* comes from Beau, the guardian angel, and his control of the narrative is in itself intended to be ironic and amusing. The mild humour in *Cape Grimm* comes from Paul's lack of self-knowledge. He does not seem to be able to see that he is the other side of Caleb. He is un-ironic and thinks he is so smart and good.

The philosophy underlying your fiction, which you have explained on countless occasions with different words and similes, is the one that Celeste Penfold-Knight summarises in Red Shoes: "Mama tells us that beauty is like a water lily, like the lotus, for without the mud and slime and darkness beneath the surface of the water, it would not be possible for the lilies to rise up and break into all the luminous grace and pure colour above the pool" (Bird 1998:189). Like alchemy, fiction is the gold that appears when facts and imagined events are intertwined by means of a third element that escapes any wording. Could you elaborate on this?

I see fiction like alchemical gold, appearing when facts and the imagination come together to make a new element. That is 'magic'. Something magical happens—the facts and the imaginings lock together and a new creature slips out: fiction.

Every writer has certain key topics and preoccupations. Could you summarise yours?

I am always looking for meaning, hence the playing around with the Mean family. Language, of course, is a preoccupation, and I know that *Mean* is only a word, but I like having the family just called that, without any comment—it amuses me that nobody has ever examined any of this. Nobody ever seems to comment on the fact that all of my books have at least an epigraph from some mad book by Carrillo Mean, and then he turns up in the text, more or less unexplained. Basically, I am seeking beauty and I always run up against its opposite too. To return to the metaphor of alchemy, I grope around in the slime under the surface of the pool, and sometimes I am rewarded by the appearance of the lotus.

There are recurrent images in my work, such as flowers and nature; animals and birds; gardens; sewing, knitting and houses; death and murder; power and powerlessness; children; religious iconography; loss; and psychology. I am crazy about the beauty of the opium poppy and fascinated by the fabulous poison it carries. It was nice in *Cape Grimm* when readers challenged me on the poisonous character of the hydrangea which Dorothea ate; people did not know that this plant was poisonous. Beautiful things are sometimes poisonous—snakes are very beautiful—and I am fascinated by the base stories, such as Garden of Eden, and also by the German folk tales which express in Western thought many of the deep problems in human life in such a magical and frankly matter-of-fact way. I love that tone, and I feel nourished by it.

Having said this, I must admit that my fiction is steeped in the Australian literary tradition, to which I belong owing to obvious geographical bonds. The settings of my fiction are often recognisably Australian, like Melbourne in *The White Garden* or Tasmania in *Red Shoes* and *Cape Grimm*. In this last novel, the keys to understand supernatural events lie in Tasmania—or to give it its previous name, Van Diemen's Land—and its history. Virginia has the visionary power to see the ghost of an aboriginal girl that takes the narrative back to the silenced chronicle of abused indigenous Tasmanians. Through this ghost, named Mannaginna, Virginia witnesses the 1820s massacres of native Tasmanians at the hands of white European whalers, sealers, soldiers and farmers, who arrived in Van Diemen's Land at the beginning of the nineteenth century. This central issue in *Cape Grimm* connects with the nineteenth-century Australian tradition of the novels of Henry Kingsley, brother of Charles Kingsley, and the many others who wrote about pioneer life. And yet, my scope is universal, since, also in the line of writers like Patrick White, my interest lies in the discovery of universal values.

The guardian angel narrator in Red Shoes (Beau) is a brilliant idea, very much in line with the classical child narrator or the figure of the stranger in such novels as Joyce's Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man or Swift's Gulliver's Travels. Did you pursue a similar effect?

I had imagined the story of Petra, and then I wondered how to tell it, who on earth would have the voice to tell this. It had to be bright and special, and suddenly—this is the moment of magic I spoke of earlier—the idea of a guardian angel came to me. I realised he could have just the job of preventing Petra from being in danger but that he would have no business with her morality, and this really appealed to me because I realised that guardian angels do not seem to have a moral dimension: they save people from physical danger or disease, but that seems to be it. Humans are left with the free will to choose good or evil. He developed into a captivating character; indeed, I think he goes a lot further than any such character in anything I have ever read.

Somewhere else you said that in your writing you need the organising force of a male narrator (Walker 2004b: 287) and yet, one gets the impression that in your novels the real force comes from female characters. That is the case of the women patients at the Mandala Clinic, Petra in Red Shoes and Virginia Mean in Cape Grimm.

You are right about the sometime female narrators, but often I do also like to have a male storyteller delivering the stories. My most sustained one is in *Crisis*, a comic novel, and when it was first published it had a male author as well as a male narrator—Jack Power, my surname before I was married, quite hilarious indeed—and then it was re-published under my name. Maybe the male is the organising force, but then the women often write diaries or deliver monologues within the framework of the male narrative, subverting the male sometimes, not always, but certainly in *The White Garden*.

There is, in my reception, perception and experience of life—particularly in my observation of the lives of women in my mother's generation—a vast un-tapped creative power in women, a power beyond the creative act of child-bearing, which is amazing in itself. And this creative force was often—and still sometimes is—dammed up and unable to find its expression. I think of my mother who channelled her creativity into the home and children, who loved to sew and embroider, to play the piano and sing, and yet there was a sense I had—this is not only in retrospect—that there was so much more she could have done, and I knew she could do, but there was no way of even discovering what that was. She gave me the wonderful gift of the opportunity to practise creative arts of various kinds, but the society of Australia in the years immediately after World War Two gave women of her generation very little chance to shine. So there was frequently a sadness in them. This sadness began to be acknowledged in the writing of Betty Friedan, but it was a bit late then. So I suppose that in the voices and the sometimes subversive behaviour of the women in my work, there is an acknowledgement of what I observed in the women of my mother's generation.

How did you come up with the idea of adding a footnote section to such novels as Red Shoes and Cape Grimm? What is for you the process of writing a novel as regards the orchestration of all the documentation and its filtering into the fictional product?

In the late eighties I decided to add a section to the end of my novel *The Bluebird Café*, called 'A Reader's Guide to *The Bluebird Café*'. My intention was to separate and yet integrate certain little bits of information, for example the titles of some of Carrillo's

books. The question is why I did not have a similar section in *The White Garden*. I honestly work fairly unconsciously, so I find it hard sometimes to answer sensible questions. With *Red Shoes* there was the joke of the 'Foot Note' and then with *Cape Grimm* there was so much history that I had to have the end bits. I puzzled for a long time over what to call them and then one morning I woke up with the words *time* and *tide* and could not see why I had not realised this before. Another trait of my fiction is that I like to include fictitious information along with the truth; for example, the timeline in *Cape Grimm* has dates of fictitious events, which are fairly obvious, but in the Tide section there are fake stories as well as true stories. I am very interested in the borderlines that run between the true and the false, and I know that fiction is the place to explore these slippages and boundaries.

Your real experience as a Tasmanian has definitely informed your writing.

Yes, I was born at the beginning of the Second World War in Tasmania, which was about as far from the action and realities of war as you could get, but I have always been fascinated by the war, by the year (1940), by the idea of being born just then. I seek out anything that happened in 1940 and feel a strange link and comfort to be derived from the fact: I think of writers who died that year and imagine myself moving forward as they move back, wishing I could have met them. The Tasmanian aspect of this is also significant: I have always been fascinated by the history of and geography and geology of Tasmania—settled by the British as a prison colony, so that there is a horrible prison history as well as virtual extermination of indigenous people who were a unique race, not the same as the indigenous people of Australia. As a Tasmanian, I have always felt cut off not only from the world but also from Australia—the island is often left off maps because it is insignificant. It is a very beautiful place, physically, but I believe it is haunted (literally) by the ghosts of its sorrowful past, and I am made melancholy by this. Thus, definitely, it does inform what I write.

Your fascination with the fairy tale seems significant to me in relation with the interest that it has aroused in other contemporary women writers such as Angela Carter, A. S. Byatt, Jeannette Winterson, to name just a few. To what extent is it important in your fiction and why do you think so many women writers have re-encountered a new value in this genre?

Carter and Byatt are the same age as I am, and I imagine they, like me, were nourished as child readers by the fairy tales. There was very little fiction for children then and the fairy stories dealt so elegantly with deep issues. A child or girl with the need to put into narrative the unspoken—except in fairy tales—themes of love and hate was instantly gripped by the way the stories could do this with ease and dead-pan language and brilliant images. In my opinion, the fairy stories are probably speaking a feminine language which appeals to women writers in particular. The stories are in one sense transgressive, and yet they were sanctioned by adults because they were 'literature' and because they were deemed to be harmless. I was given a beautiful volume bound in dark blue leather of Grimm when I was about seven and I wonder if my parents looked at the hideous—fascinating—little black and white etchings by Cruikshank—they were very frightening and engaging. There is also an urge in women writers to re-write these

stories, to explore their possibilities and meanings. As regards fairy tales, the beginning of *Cape Grimm* where Lady Jane Franklin brings the Grimm tales to Van Diemen's Land is metaphoric: the idea of European stories transmitted by a woman to nourish the minds and hearts of the children of Tasmania, so far away from the centres of 'civilisation'.

Quoting N. E. Solomon at the beginning of the Footnote section in Red Shoes (1998: 223), you say that "All stories rest in other stories which have gone before". Is there any writer/text, classic or contemporary, that has exerted a significant influence in your writing?

Yes, N. E. Solomon is invented and just means any wise person. What I meant is that stories keep building on past stories, piling up and up to build the big story—the whole story—which will be as big as a grain of sand in the end. I am very influenced by the things I love to read—too many to mention, I suppose. My favourite recent one is *Austerlitz* by W. G. Sebald. In *The Bluebird Café* the female narrator talks about how she feels she is writing a volume that is part of some great book along with all other books. There is a section of this novel that is called 'The Interviews'. The character, Virginia—you will see that I frequently use that name, since it has for me at least three meanings: Woolf, Queen Elizabeth I of England, Virgin Mary—is a writer, and she in fact goes on to be the narrator of my book *Dear Writer*. What I think of as 'The Virginia Effect' covers a wide range of issues in my work—issues of creativity and inspiration, feminism, image and language. I sometimes think of language itself as a whole universe of chaos from which is born thought, from which thought is shaped. It is like music, but that is a rather banal observation—yet a true one.

We have mainly discussed your approach to novels. But now that a collection of your short fiction (The Essential Bird) has been recently published, is your approach to short fiction the same as that to the novels?

With short fiction I think of a lovely idea and can just sit down, explore it, complete the writing and see the result quickly. In a short piece of writing, I do not inhabit the narrative for so long, but I do keep coming back to the stories in my mind and thinking about them. However, it is more or less the same technique as in a novel—dream it up and write it down. I like to say over in my head things I have written—but this applies to both short and long—they both have moments that I love to think about over and over again.

I love the discipline of the short story, the way that, in a few thousand words, a piece of short fiction can make a powerful point, can deliver such imagery and such music. I love the freedom to be found within the discipline, and the opportunity for revelation and discovery, and I adore the way the whole cavalcade of humanity can parade swiftly by in a handful of sentences. There is something so joyful, so satisfying about reading and writing short fiction.

For a range of reasons, Australian fiction has a deep tradition of the short story, and I feel that my work in this area sits firmly within this tradition. It is a nice place to be, although I must point out that Australia, particularly in its literature, still operates within what we here call 'The cultural cringe', whereby Australian readers still look to

the works of English, North American and European writers as the benchmark. Fiction from other countries is generally still more celebrated here than the home-grown variety. This is just a fact of life. My impression is that this is changing. I hope it is. When I studied at university in Australia in the fifties, there was no Australian text on the syllabus. Literature, students were led to believe, originated in the British Isles, North America and France, and to a certain extent Spain (I refer to Cervantes and Lorca, for example). Australian texts are today studied in Australian universities, and have even migrated to other countries. Nevertheless, as I say, the cultural cringe is still present in Australian literary culture. I am sorry to end on this note. I am, in fact, very positive and cheerful, but, I hope, honest and realistic enough.

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