

Riding a Rolling Wave A Conversation with Joan Clark

Joan Clark is the only writer in Canada to have been awarded both the Marian Engel Award for a body of adult fiction (1991) and the Vicky Metcalf Award for Children's Literature (1999). A resident of St John's, Newfoundland, for 20 years, Clark was born in Liverpool, Nova Scotia, and grew up there as well as in Sydney Mines, Cape Breton and Sussex, New Brunswick. The author of 14 books, she has won the prestigious Mr Christie Award twice for two children's novels—*The Dream Carvers* (1995) and *The Word for Home* (2002)—each of which explores a different aspect of Newfoundland history. Clark's adult work has also received many award honours, in particular for *The Victory of Geraldine Gull* (1988), and *Latitudes of Melt* (2000).

Both Acadia University and Memorial University have recognized Joan Clark's many achievements by awarding her honorary doctoral degrees. This conversation via email took place on the eve of publication of Clark's fourth adult novel, *An Audience of Chairs* (Knopf Canada, 2005).

DANIELLE FULLER (DF): Having just finished reading *An Audience of Chairs*, I have been moved by your protagonist's (Moranna's) story of loss and reconciliation with her two daughters, her journey through various mental states (one medic in the novel suggests that she is manic depressive) and her experiences of love—romantic, sexual but most importantly, it seemed to me, parental and sibling love. What was the starting point for you?

JOAN CLARK (JC): The starting point was my knowing a woman who, as a result of her madness, lost her children: a tragic situation that affected me deeply. I attempted to write the novel 30 years ago, and then again ten or twelve years ago—and on both occasions frightened myself off. It's a rare family that hasn't been touched by some form of madness, and mine is no exception. There was a time in my life when I was seriously, though briefly, depressed. For these reasons, I was afraid of becoming too deeply immersed in the story and had to wait until I was ready, which, in this case, meant safe.

Readiness is a huge factor in writing fiction and in some cases it's better to wait until you've grown into the story. When I came up for air after finishing *Eiríksdóttir* (1994) I realized that, while working on the novel, the hardships and difficulties the Greenlanders endured got me down. For the most part, their lives were brutish and short and to do what I wanted to do with the novel I couldn't avoid that fact and so, when I was writing about those people, I sometimes felt like I was hauling a heavily laden sled over pack ice. When I turned to *Latitudes of Melt* (2000), I felt like I was holding onto a balloon—Aurora's flying over the Barrens as she's dying comes directly from that feeling. Because I am so impressionable—I frighten myself—I was apprehensive that *An Audience of Chairs* would be dark and I was delighted to be able to indulge my zany sense of humour and have fun.

Having said all that, I think one of the starting points for my adult novels is that I am drawn to women like Geraldine, Freydis, Aurora, and Moranna who don't fit the norm: women who are on the outside. My preoccupation with loss and what we can retrieve from it is another starting point, a preoccupation that is probably rooted in the loss of my first son shortly after he was born, and the death of my mother—when she was 65 she was killed by a speeding truck.

DF: I think you've articulated a relationship between a writer's life and her work that is not adequately captured by the term "autobiographical." You seem to explore, transform—translate?—particular life events into fiction. Moreover, you've revisited and re-imagined certain incidents over the years: I'm thinking particularly here of the way that your mother's death informs two earlier stories: "From a High Thin Wire" (title story of 1982 collection) and "Sisters" (*Swimming Toward the Light*, 1990). In relation to *Audience of Chairs*, you've identified experiences of loss and depression as influential experiences. Am I going too far if I

suggest that lived experience is employed by you as a form of knowledge that requires expression in fiction rather than in a supposedly “factual” genre such as the essay?

JC: You put it well when you suggest that lived experience is employed as a form of knowledge that requires expression. Because I am a storyteller, that knowledge finds expression in fiction which allows endless freedom to develop and explore, whereas I think of the essay as bound by facts. When you are bound by facts, your emotions are not allowed to roam as they can and do in fiction.

DF: I’m struggling to find appropriate words to describe your prose style: it has held me rapt for the length of the novel. As a reader, I find your style almost addictive. Clean, clear, calm in tone. Unadorned. Unforced. Not heavily imagistic. Deceptively easy to read. These descriptors are inadequate really. I know that you are a writer who revises your writing a great deal (something you have in common with Alice Munro). Could you comment upon your experience of that process—do you, for instance, spend time working over each line, each word? Do earlier drafts of your prose look very different from the published version?

JC: My early drafts are all over the place as I try to locate the heart of the story, its inner life and how it plays out in characters’ lives through time—making decisions about how to manage time is one of the biggest challenges facing a fiction writer. This was a particular difficulty in *An Audience of Chairs*, which criss-crosses time throughout. I call this part of the process “wrestling the dragon to the ground.” At this stage, I like to keep the story flexible and open to change—I don’t like to nail down a story too soon, especially before my editor Diane Martin sees it. Throughout this process I am developing a voice, the trajectory that will carry the story and dictate style. By voice I mean the narrative voice which includes the characters’ voices as well. I like a narrative voice that is clean and clear without sacrificing subtlety. I want the prose to be natural, unadorned yet strongly visual. It takes three or four drafts of cutting, trimming, always trimming, to reach the point where I lean hard on the language, weeding out the clichéd and obscure, using words that are precise. I also pay particular attention to rhythm, reading the manuscript aloud to make it flow. I find this part of the process addictive and sometimes think I could revise forever.

DF: The drive for precision, the attention to rhythm and the reading of your work out loud all appear to inform your prose style. You have also

worked closely with several translators. Could you tell us more about your experience of the author-editor and author-translator relationship?

JC: I think writers owe a considerable debt to translators and editors who care so much about realizing the best possible book, and are willing to throw themselves into the melée of publishing with its many uncertainties. Lori Saint-Martin was the intrepid translator of *Latitudes of Melt* and she picked me up on several slips in precision. I also listen closely to what a good editor has to say about my work-in-progress and consider her comments and suggestions carefully. If I disagree with a comment or suggestion, I don't act on it, but that is rare. I've been fortunate with editors and have only encountered one who was controlling. Mostly I see my editor's task as a laying-on-of-hands. I know writers who, after pitching a scenario, work with an editor chapter by chapter. This probably saves time in the long run but I prefer to involve my editor only after I have wrestled the novel in place.

DF: You've spoken about language. Now could you speak about narrative form and when you know if something is going to be a short story or part of, or the germ of, a novel?

JC: An interesting question. It has been said that a short story is a slice of life, meaning that the narrative is concentrated on selected scenes that focus on a particular time in a character's life. Extending that metaphor, a novel is the entire life of a character, if you like, the whole pie. Over-simplistic though this analogy may be, it does point to the fact that the determining factor in writing short or long fiction is time and space. Having the time to develop an idea/impulse/image/germ through narrative allows me to think big at the outset, and to craft a structure with plenty of space to move around—imaginative not page space: I aim for clean, economical prose. When I wrote my first collection of short stories, *From a High Thin Wire*, I had only two hours a day, if that, to write. When I wrote the linked stories in *Swimming Toward the Light*, I had an hour more a day. My inclination was to track a woman's life but, lacking the time, I used the short story form. As my children became more independent, I had more time and turned to the longer narrative form.

For me, the short story has more in common with a poem than with a novel. Although the novel, the short story, and the poem are sparked by observation, insight, incident and feeling that occurs in daily life, the novel quickly moves you away from that life and projects you into another

reality that for years tends to distance you from the contemplation of the life you're living. With the short story and poem you are usually set free within weeks and months. When working on a novel, my attention is necessarily on the imagined world and I sometimes wonder how much of my life slips away uncelebrated and un-remarked.

- DF: A decade ago, in an article that was published in *Books in Canada*, you wrote, “the difficulty of any story has to do with what is being risked, with how the story shifts and slides, with problems of craft rather than genre” (1995, 19). Do you still feel this way? Are you prepared to comment on “what [was] being risked” in *An Audience of Chairs*?
- JC: What was being risked in this novel (quite apart from the personal risk mentioned earlier), was the portrayal of a woman whose life was a compilation of “many varieties of error”—to use Virginia Woolf’s words. It’s always risky writing about an anti-hero because many readers want a character they can like. I’m aware that for some readers Moranna’s overweening pride and madness may make her difficult to like. What’s important to me as a writer is not so much liking a character, but gathering insight into who she is. I’m interested in understanding my characters (especially within myself). I want to be inside them, feel their delights and the rawness of their nerves. All that is risky and whether or not I pull it off has a great deal to do with craft.
- DF: Could you comment further on the process of that craft, in particular how you feel your way into relating to characters in your historical fictions for children and adults?
- JC: To begin with, when thinking about character, I don’t set up barriers of gender, age, culture, or history. Of course I take these factors into account but they never override the essential humanness of a character. When I was writing *Eiriksdottir*, for instance, I asked myself if the Norse, that is the Greenlanders and Icelanders of a thousand years ago, were more like us today than unlike and came to the conclusion that they were more alike. From reading the Icelandic sagas, I understood that basically the Norse had the same passions and desires we do. But there was one significant difference between us, which I learned from researching their daily life, particularly their work. In order to survive the harsh life on the edge of the then-known world, the Norse risked death on a daily basis, which made them psychologically tough—there was no place for the pamperings, self-indulgences, and sentimen-

tality we take for granted today. As Newfoundlanders would say, the Norse were “a hard crowd.” Once I had established that key difference between people living then and now, I was away to the races.

In shaping character, I was also helped by my decision to write the novel using a stripped-down language of mostly Germanic-rooted words, and this gave the characters the effect of being a practical, sober-minded, pragmatic people—with exceptions of course. Using language in this way—which was the biggest challenge in writing the novel—also created a voice that seemed to be coming from a long way back, a voice of authority that, like the saga voice, I hoped readers would be disinclined to challenge.

DF: Can we speak now about a different sense in which “voice” is important to your writing, namely, your interest in oral storytelling? Aunt Hettie in *An Audience of Chairs* is the latest in a long line of storyteller characters who appear in your work. Madge’s father Laddie in *Swimming Towards the Light* looms large in my memory, but there are many others. Could you comment on the role and theme of storytelling in your work?

JC: I’m what you might call an instinctive writer and the compulsion to tell stories is strong. My father was a storyteller (but not a reader) and told stories over and over again and at length. I was a good listener but not a storyteller. I was shy, and better at soaking them up. Having been imprinted by my father’s storytelling, I am drawn to collected stories and myths. But my view of time is also a factor. I see the past as part of the present and not necessarily historical. All too often, the preoccupation with the present is arrogant and short-sighted.

DF: Could you comment further on the impact of oral storytelling upon your craft as a writer—rather than an orator—of stories?

JC: My father’s stories were often about odd and unusual people and absorbing them, I understood the importance of character, and how people revealed themselves through dialogue, which is an essential component of the craft of writing fiction—as Alice Munro has said, “Dialogue is everything.” I also understood that my father’s stories were rich in incident. Something happened. There was cause and effect, a shape, an arc. Character, dialogue, incident are, of course, ingredients in the craft of writing fiction.

DF: To turn to your children’s novels, *The Moons of Madeleine* (1987) and *Wild Man of the Woods* (1985), how did you envisage your child readers:

what age group did you have in mind? And did you envisage them as being read to or as reading by themselves? And how did you shape your themes and concerns to appeal to a child's perspective?

JC: I avoid aiming my children's novels at a particular age group and never second-guess whether the story will be read to a child, or by the child. The only age I concentrate on is the age of the children in the story, in an effort to understand and maintain their point of view. Children who are good readers—and if I aim a book at all, it's for good readers—usually read about children several years older than themselves. (They are, after all, forward bound.)

DF: How do you see the relationship between your writing for adults and your writing for children?

JC: For me, the key differences are point of view and the idea or impetus that sets the novel in motion. If the idea suggests a highly complex story then I know I'll be writing an adult novel; if the idea is relatively straightforward, then it may well turn out to be a children's novel. (To avoid complicating the issue, I'm assuming novel writing here.) The challenge in writing a children's novel is to suggest complexity without the story being complex, which is not to suggest for a moment that it be oversimplified. As for point of view, if the idea is a preoccupation I share with children, then I know I'll probably be writing a children's book. Now that I've been working in both genres for a while, I find myself alternating between the two, which serves me well, because it offers a kind of breathing space while enabling me to continue writing. I don't pretend to understand it but for some reason it works. Inevitably, working in both genres influences how I write in both.

DF: I've enjoyed your novels "for children" a great deal, and I've noticed a number of stylistic and thematic connections to your adult fiction. I was struck, for instance, by the mythic quality of many incidents in *An Audience of Chairs*: Margaret McWeeny (Moranna's mother) literally hooking her future husband while fishing in a river; Aunt Hettie's appearance to Moranna in a tree; the old woman and her stories of Callanish encountered by Moranna in the Highlands, and later, Moranna's epic trek around the Trail after Ian's and Edwina's sudden deaths. Could you comment on your (long-standing) interest in myth, fable and the fantastic?

JC: Myth looms large in my imagination and in the imagination of many Canadian writers—especially those writers who live or have lived close

to a wilderness of one kind or another. I think it has to do with the emptiness of the land and our need to furnish it, much as a child would furnish an empty doll house. Another dichotomy because now I'm talking about a miniature, enclosed landscape (which also fascinates me), not an immense one. Myth-making is a way of taming a wilderness that is often cold and bleak without a warm fire nearby. Also we have a relatively short history—which is why we have to invent our own through myths.

DF: You are adept at realizing vivid, recognizable worlds for your characters. At the same time, your work repeatedly demonstrates an interest in creative expression and the place for the fantastic that it can construct within people's everyday lives. Can you speak further about the "split level" quality of realism and the fantastic/ mythic/ visionary in your fiction?

JC: One need only look to the other worlds of much of today's fiction to realize that for many of us venturing into fantastic and unknown worlds helps us to understand what being human means. I prefaced *Wild Man of the Woods* with a quotation from Oscar Wilde, "Give a man a mask and he will tell the truth." I understood this to mean the truth about himself. In both *Wild Man of the Woods* and *Moons of Madeleine*, I was interested in exploring those parts of ourselves we don't understand or even know exist. When Stephen and Madeleine don masks, each becomes someone else and enters another reality, an experience akin to acting. In *Eiriksdottir*, entering the fantastic allowed me to embark on the quest for Vinland, that utopian world of the Norse, and to explore what it could mean to a dreamer like Helgi. To create Vinland, I transformed Carter's and Summerville beaches on the south shore of Nova Scotia and if anyone were to follow the sailing directions in the novel, they would lead back to these beaches, where I spent the summers of my childhood re-imagining the landscape. I think the "split level" quality of realism and the fantastic has been in my head since childhood and it's second nature for me to use it in my fiction to achieve what I otherwise couldn't in a novel.

DF: Your notion of myth-making as a form of—or even substitute for—history has been articulated by many Canadian writers descended from settler groups. Do you think it has any particular resonance for non-Aboriginal Atlantic Canadians?

JC: There are notable examples in Atlantic Canadian writing. Wayne Johnston's *Colony of Unrequited Dreams* is full of myth-making, thanks to Sheilagh Fielding, and Patrick Kavanagh's *Gaff Topsails* is soaked in myth. Alistair McLeod's *No Great Mischief* relies on the myths of a childhood in Cape Breton to assuage the pain of homesickness.

DF: We could also add Bernice Morgan to this list. It strikes me that the younger generation of Atlantic writers such as Lynn Coady, Leo McKay, and Lisa Moore are less interested than the writers you mention in myth-making as theme or form. What does cut across the different generations of contemporary Atlantic Canadian writers is their preference for the genre of realist fiction. David Creelman maps the long tradition of this genre in *Setting in the East: Maritime Realist Fiction* (2003).

To return to *An Audience of Chairs*, Hettie's narratives about the MacKenzie family history are crucial to Moranna's self-construction as a "proud" person of Scottish ancestry with the strength to face down opposition, criticism—even ostracism—from others. Moranna's prolonged visit to Scotland echoes the journey of Margaret Laurence's Morag, in *The Diviners*, although Moranna has a greater need to keep the ancient stories alive it seems to me. However, she can also satirize her "reconstructed ethnicity" by donning a wig, kilt, and knee socks as a pose for tourists who come to buy her wooden carvings! What are the dangers and pleasures for a contemporary writer of exploring Maritime "Scottishness"?

JC: Moranna's pride in being a MacKenzie was monumental and her shifting sense of self found an anchor in the fact that she was Scottish. Prey to delusion, she always came back to that fact, needing to celebrate and exaggerate it. But as a canny businesswoman whose male descendants were grocers, she wasn't adverse to playing the eccentric Scot in order to draw attention to her carvings. As a writer I had fun playing with this dichotomy and used it to point out the stereotypical view of Scots. It has been said that Cape Bretoners are more Scottish than the Scots. The Gaelic Mod, the kilt and bagpipes, the Highland dances and games are more than tourist fare, and oatcakes are a staple in Cape Breton supermarket bakeries. The danger for a fiction writer exploring Scottishness in Canada is to avoid stereotyping by challenging it, which I tried to do by using humour.

DF: Perhaps we can talk a little now about the importance of place and landscape in your writing. It seems to me that your fictional geographies are

informed by the histories and geology of specific, recognizable places, but also by an acute observation of power dynamics as they operate within families and small communities. I've particularly enjoyed the picture of the Cape Breton community that you paint in *An Audience of Chairs*: a contemporary society in which much change (not all of it beneficial) has occurred, and one that is connected to other places through the internet, television news, economic globalization, environment change, the Iraq war, tourism, the sea, and histories of migration. What prompted you to write a story based largely in Cape Breton after writing several books (for both adults and children) which are located in Newfoundland—your home for 20 years now?

JC: My father was a Cape Bretoner, a proud Scot (although he had never been to Scotland) who passed that pride on to my sister and me; in part, the novel grew out of that pride. Also, I lived in Sydney Mines for four years when I was in my early teens: those formative years that lay claim to a huge part of you.

DF: Your oeuvre maps a series of domestic, physical, and emotional landscapes for your characters. In much of your work, the ocean is a space where the imagination has free rein, even as the physical body may be placed in danger. How important is the landscape and the ocean to you as a Maritime writer?

JC: Very important. Alistair McLeod's wonderfully evocative title, *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood*, encapsulates the primal pull of the sea. I was born and grew up beside the Atlantic. Smelling it, watching and listening to it inspires and restores me. It's a well-spring. Also, when I'm beside the sea, the horizon is in the right place—as it is on the prairies.

Carol Shields and I shared similar views on many aspects of literature but we parted company on the issue of landscape in fiction writing. A sense of place was central in Carol's work, but for her the idea of landscape was too ephemeral and imprecise to be taken seriously. For me, the significance of landscape in the process of inspiring and writing fiction is an emotional not an intellectual issue—but that in no way diminishes its importance.

DF: You've just mentioned two fine Canadian writers, so I'd like to ask you now about your portrayal of Canadian writing in *An Audience of Chairs*. I laughed out loud at Murdoch, Moranna's pragmatic brother, reading *Cape Breton Road* by JH MacDonald at his wife's behest when he'd rather be reading Churchill (she thinks it would enable him to make

interesting dinner party conversation). Canadian Literature gets short shrift in this novel: Moranna prefers the British canon and imagines an epistolary relationship with Robert Burns. I loved the image of her stolen library copy of Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners*—the only Canadian novel she believes worth keeping. Could you comment on these references and images?

JC: Well, I was having fun! Moranna considered herself an authority on so many subjects, dismissing people left and right (no wonder Davina, her sister-in-law, disliked her), that I couldn't resist the temptation of showing how wrong-headed she was on the subject of Can Lit about which she knew nothing. Her reading choices were limited to her father's library which, like many others in the 1950s and 1960s in Cape Breton, were the tried and true. (I don't know what I would have done without my mother's Book of the Month Club choices and the *Book of Knowledge*.) As for Burns, when I was Writer-in-Residence in Edinburgh, I fell in love with him and drafted a novel about him and the women in his life which will rightly remain unpublished.

DF: What types of books do you remember reading from the Book of the Month Club? Were there any writers or books from those early reading years that have particularly shaped your own work? Do you read poetry?

JC: Most of the Book of the Month Club books were forgettable—*The Queen's Physician* by Frank Yerby for example. In high school I was much influenced by Shakespeare, Dickens, Coleridge, Dickinson. I have always read poetry and in fact wrote (and published) it before I wrote fiction. Four years ago, I tried to write a poem and couldn't do it—which saddened me.

DF: How important is a sense of "Canadianness" in your own writing—or is a regional awareness more important?

JC: Thomas Raddall and Hugh MacLennan were on my mother's bookshelves and, although they were Atlantic writers, I didn't really appreciate the fact that they were Canadian. I read their work without connecting with them at a profound level. It wasn't until I was living in Calgary and discovered Margaret Laurence, Alice Munro, and Marian Engel that I made the connection, probably because they were women and, like me, mothers of young children. Until that awakening, I had a colonized mind—everything written elsewhere was more highly valued than home-grown fare.

Now, many books later, I never think of the “Canadianness” of my own writing. I assume it’s there along with regionality. How could it not be? It’s not a question of being more regionally than nationally aware, of owing more allegiance to a region than the country. Literature is about transcending boundaries of all kinds.

- DF: Could you comment on how your time in Alberta and co-editing *Dandelion* affected your awareness of Canadian writers and writing?
- JC: Edna Alford and I began *Dandelion* (foolishly, we often said, as we struggled to find money to get started!), because there was no other literary magazine in Alberta at the time, the *Snow Goose* having died an early death. Once we were launched, the manuscripts poured in, manuscripts by Guy Vanderhaeghe, George Bowering, Claire Harris, Gloria Sawai, Christopher Wiseman, Merna Summers, Robert Kroestch, Robert Hilles, to mention a few. Edna and I worked out of the Dandelion Cooperative in the Deane House where we ran an artists’ gallery on what had once been the veranda and, from the beginning, the magazine was highly visual. The veranda was where new art shows opened and Dandelion readings were held. As a mother of three children living in a Calgary suburb, *Dandelion* was a heady experience for me, and a lifeline connecting me to Canadian writers and writing.
- DF: It’s not only younger Atlantic writers who have been gaining visibility lately, since the media have also drawn attention to some regional “classics.” I’m thinking particularly here of Frank Parker Day’s *Rockbound*, first published in 1928, and resurrected to win the CBC’s Canada Reads competition in 2005. Would you care to comment on this phenomenon?
- JC: Having been immersed in the final editing of *An Audience of Chairs*, I haven’t yet read *Rockbound*, but its inclusion in Canada Reads brings to mind Thomas Raddall’s work and in particular, *The Nymph and the Lamp* which, unless I’m mistaken, was also published in a new edition a few years ago. Ernest Buckler’s wonderful *The Mountain and the Valley* is a Canadian classic, as is Hugh MacLennan’s *The Watch that Ends the Night*. Quite apart from their fiction, I admire these and other writers who worked without benefit of the Canada Council and, except for the Canadian Author’s Association, without writers’ associations and the numerous workshops, readings and festivals which make a writing life more possible today.
- DF: Here we are, having an email conversation for a special issue of *Canadian Literature* on Atlantic writing. Other Canadian academic and

literary journals have also recently celebrated Atlantic Canadian literature with themed publications. Moreover, since the late 1990s writers—especially novelists—from the Atlantic provinces have been far more successful in producing “bestsellers,” winning international awards, and generally attracting attention from readers, the media, and publishers. What do you make of this “rising tide” of Atlantic Canadian writing?

- JC: There is some truth in the fact that we were largely overlooked and dismissed by academe and media critics in Ontario, Western Canada, and elsewhere for so long that we had nowhere to go except up. And because we had been working all along, by the mid 1990s when we began to be noticed, we had something to offer: solid work and a unique point of view firmly rooted in place. So it was partly a question of timing, hanging in there and being ready. Also, we have isolation working for us. And magnificent scenery. And the sea. When it came, the rising tide, aided by electronic communication, energized and validated artists in Atlantic Canada, creating a rolling wave we’re (hopefully) still riding.
- DF: That seems like a highly appropriate image to end on! Thank you for taking part in this conversation.

