

JACK CAMERON STANTON

INTERVIEW WITH Michelle de Kretser

JS: When you first started writing and writing seriously for publication, how did you do that?

MdK: I'd read an awful lot of novels, that's the preparation really.

JS: That's interesting because when people ask me about the education or the best form of education I've had I always tell them it was working five years at a bookshop.

MdK: Exactly. Writers come from readers.

JS: It's interesting to see a writer such as yourself who writes only novels. Have you considered writing nonfiction?

MdK: I've written a 13,000-word essay on Shirley Hazzard. I found it so much easier than writing a novel, which requires imagining a world and its people in intricate detail, and then coming up with a compelling narrative about it. Talking about another writer's work was much easier and such a pleasure. I loved it. *I loved it.*

JS: Do you know if there are people you know who see themselves in some of your work?

MdK: It would be unlikely because my characters are always made up. They might have a trait or a gesture or something I've observed in life, but by the time it gets on the page it's so mixed up with characteristics that I've invented or borrowed from completely different people, from completely different periods in my life, that no single borrowing is significant. My characters are their own people. Simply describing someone I know, without that layered imaginative work of invention, wouldn't be interesting to me.

JS: When you write your novels, do you find there are certain ideas or experiences that tend to resurface?

MdK: I think I'm always interested in the encounter between what we might call History with a capital H, and the individual. I'm interested in people who find themselves living through a particular moment in history and how that affects their lives. I think that comes up again and again and again.

JS: Pretty much all of your novels do play with different historical moments. *The Hamilton Case* of course and *The Rose Grower*; both of those were set in a historical past. Even though the recent novels such as *Questions of Travel* and *Life to Come* do deal with contemporary Australia, they still venture back into the past as well.

MdK: Yes, and by history I don't necessarily mean the past. I mean significant political events—contemporary history. Perhaps what I'm interested in really is something like the self and social change or the self and politics, if you like. The politics of race, class and gender are all of great interest to me.

JS: Do you read reviews?

MdK: No, I don't.

JS: Why not?

MdK: A couple of reasons. I think a favourable review would be flattering and an unfavourable review would be depressing. Neither of those things—being flattered or being depressed—would help me write better. The other reason is that so often writers can quote a review from 10 or 20 or 30 years back, and what they remember is always something negative. Which is unsurprising—we remember criticism because it hurts. Martin Amis says somewhere that he stopped writing his famously blistering reviews when he realised how hard writers work, how much they care and how long they remember. I decided very early on that I didn't want to remember. I didn't want to carry that negative stuff with me. Also, it's Australia we're talking about, it's a small pond. Inevitably you run into people who've reviewed your work, and I'd rather approach those encounters openly rather than with resentment or bitterness.

JS: When you write, do you have a particular audience in mind?

MdK: I think it's fatal to think of a reader.

JS: I have a little quote here—well it's not really a quote—are you familiar with George Orwell's short essay *Why I Write*?

MdK: Yes, of course.

JS: He says there are four reasons that people write: sheer egoism, aesthetic enthusiasm, historical impulse—

MdK:—Imperative, I think—

JS:—and political purpose. And so I think you've partly answered this question which is that you're interested in the historical moment. I think aesthetic enthusiasm is self-explanatory, but what about sheer egoism and political purpose?

MdK: I suppose just thinking that what you have to say is worth hearing is egotism. Political purpose—well, I don't think my books are going to change anyone's politics. I've never really seen a novel change someone's political beliefs. If a reader is wavering it might, but not otherwise. But I write for my own satisfaction, to bear witness, to say "These things happened or are happening."

JS: I see your books more as satirical than political.

MdK: Well, those two things are not mutually exclusive.

JS: Do you think your own writing carries a political message?

MdK: I hope I'm always on the side of the underdog, the person who is ignored, whether it's by society or by politics, or by other individuals. I'm on the side of the vulnerable. I think that is a deeply political stance.

JS: Do you see yourself as a satirist? As a social commentator?

MdK: Yes, in some passages in my books. But I see myself as an ironist rather than a satirist. They're not so different in that they're both concerned with gaps and slippages. Irony depends on a difference between the way things are and the way things appear. In the case of satire, it's a difference in the way things are and the way things might be or should be. A satirist is more of a moralist, in that sense.

JS: Whenever I receive work that has a strong progressive political charge, I think as an editor I have an added anxiety about ensuring that any negative feedback is really well justified. Especially when the editor is somebody like myself—someone people assume is an Anglo man.

MdK: Of course. But if you're a good writer, you never assume. Literature is about seeing the person, seeing the specificity of the person and the specificity of situations, the specificity of things. [Points] It's about the specificity of that ironing table, the specificity of that iron. It's not about what irons are like in general, or what people called Jack Cameron Stanton are like in general. That's what art is. It's not generic.

Marxist literary theory tends to be suspicious of the novel's focus on the individual. Well, that to me is the wonder of the form. The main characters in a literary novel aren't generic: they're individuals in all their complexity, ambiguity and difficulty. It's often said that novels create empathy—I think that's wishful thinking on the part of novelists. But I do think the literary novel works against the generic thinking that lumps people into groups—that's what underwrites racism, misogyny and a host of other reductive ways of understanding the world. You know, the kind of thinking that says, Muslims are like this or women are like that, or whatever. The literary novel isn't interested in Muslims or women. It's interested in particular Muslims, particular women.

JS: In *The Life to Come*, one thing I was particularly interested in was the literary rivalry we have between George and Pippa. There seems to be this age old divide that you've presented between "literary" fiction and more "pulpy" fiction. Do you think this divide really exists?

MdK: Yes, if we're talking about novels themselves—see my previous answer. Commercial fiction soothes with stereotypes and clearly delineated good and bad characters, whereas literary fiction complicates and questions our reactions to people and situations. I can't remember who it was who said that tyrants love simplicity. Moral complexity, ambiguity, nuance—they constitute the ethics of the literary novel.

If you're talking about the characters of George and Pippa, I'd say that they represent aspects of myself. Pippa longs for recognition and success, while George wants to withdraw from the gossipy chatter and buzz of literary life, to stay aloof from it. George's position could be seen as cultivating an admirable detachment from worldliness, but his position can also slide into pretention and remoteness. On some level, George is unable to deal with life. When Christabel is blindsided by Pippa's distorted portrayal of her, George can only see an aesthetic problem with Pippa's book—the human dimension passes him by. As for Pippa, her longing for success is on the one hand completely understandable—whatever one does, one hopes that one will be successful at it. On the other hand, her position tends to slide into ruthlessness and a dependence on the markers of success. Their respective positions—wishes might be a better word—are present in every writer, I would say, including myself, to varying degrees. So I don't see them as being in opposition so much as representing complementary forces that come to the fore or recede at different moments or phases in any writer's working life.

JS: What do you think of this controversial idea that you've either got it or you don't when it comes to writing?

MdK: You can learn to write better, absolutely. You can. But I see, reading students' work for example, that some writers have a wonderful natural ability that others don't. That doesn't mean that the first group will go on to be successful and the second won't. The people with flair don't always put in the work. It's like anything else. If you're good at maths, if you've got a feeling for numbers, you might think, I can pass this exam without doing much work. And you do pass the exam. But someone who feels unconfident about their abilities might actually do so many practice problems and exams that they end up getting a better mark. I've seen that happen with writers. A writer who slogs away and practises their craft, attends writing workshops, reads attentively to learn from other novelists, and so on, ends up way out in front of a writer who starts out at the same level but who thinks "Near enough is good enough" and just doesn't *bother*, doesn't revise their work, doesn't treat the sheer slog of writing with respect. It comes down to humility, I think—being able to say "I need to keep learning."

When it comes to writing, you can certainly teach craft. Having said that, I've read work where the writer simply has no feeling at all for a sentence. They might get better. But will they ever be great? I doubt it. We're talking about literature here. We're not talking about writing well enough to write a computer manual.

JS: What do you think are those, let's call them natural strengths or talents, that you see in people's writing?

MdK: I can't tell you but I can tell you straight away if I see it or not. It's one of those things. That's a very annoying answer but it's the truth!

JS: How many drafts of a novel do you usually do?

MdK: Five or six. Maybe more—depends on what constitutes a draft.

JS: Does it take a while for an idea to emerge? Or do you find you're writing through to discover what the book is about?

MdK: I certainly write to find out what the book is about. And I go on finding out even after the book has even been published, I think. But I wouldn't start writing a book unless I had certain things nagging at me. Associations, ideas, images, phrases come together and prickle my mind, and that's when I start. Sometimes I need to find a particular rhythm for my sentences—I can't begin until I've found it.

JS: Do you discuss a work in progress?

MdK: Not really. I think all creative projects need their seed time in the dark. Talking about novels before they've found their way can kill them. I'm quite superstitious about that.

JS: I wonder whether you revisit work once it's been published?

MdK: Never. Why would I want to? I can't change a published book. It belongs to other people now, it doesn't belong to me any longer. I have a passage or two for those occasions when I have to do public readings and I read those passages and I don't look at anything else.

JS: I remember I read an interview with John Cheever, and he says it's because he always likes to look in front, never behind.

MdK: Yes, that too, you're pulled back into the world of the previous novel. You should look ahead, absolutely. I once checked the French translation of one of my novels. It was useful, in that I picked up quite a lot of minor mistakes, but it was dire because it took a long time and plunged me into the past when I should have been getting on with the next book.

JS: One of the things I like about your novels the most, and I guess it's more than one thing, is that they're very full worlds, rich lives. Another thing I really like, the more of your novels I read the more I understand how to read them. And I think that's because while there are definitely stories, they're not necessarily plotted in a conventional sense, and that's exactly why they become full. I just wonder when you actually sit there and write do you have a particular vision for how you want them to look or feel?

MdK: No, but I like reading novels that create satisfying worlds, that create a world on the page. So I suppose I'm aiming to reproduce that. But as to how things are read, I really think that once a novel has been published, you have no control over how it's read. For better or worse, you have to accept that and move on. I believe in that strongly. Readers make their own meanings—which is something I enjoy and lay claim to as a reader.

The other thing is that everyone reads a different book, which is why you will love a novel, and I will loathe it, or vice versa. We bring our experiences, our past, our selves, our minds, to a book. One of the great things about a novel is that it's the product of an individual mind. The meaning that's produced through reading comes from the individual mind of the reader meeting the individual mind of the writer. Every time, a different reading is produced. You're probably too young to do too much rereading, but I sometimes have the experience of having really loved a book when I was younger and not loving it so much when I read it now. Or the opposite, which is more surprising and satisfying. There are novels that left me underwhelmed when I was young and which on rereading made me think, "Oh, this is wonderful; I just missed so much." And it doesn't have to be that extreme. When you're at different stages of your life you simply see different things in a novel. About ten years ago I re-read *War and Peace*, which I had previously read in my twenties. There are things in that book, for instance about growing old, that you don't really notice when you're 22—your eyes simply glide over certain sentences. You have no experience of ageing and no real interest in it. But Tolstoy strikes you with his truthfulness about something like that when you're in your fifties. So you read a different book every time you re-read, too.

JS: Why do you think it's so hard for a lot of novelists to capture that ironic voice? I think maybe one of your real gifts as a novelist is this mighty power of irony that underlies all your work.

MdK: I suppose I read a lot of Jane Austen when I was at school. Actually, I adored Richmal Crompton's *William* books when I was a younger still, and their humour is deeply ironic, which is rare in children's books. So my ironic bent probably goes back to that childhood reading. Perhaps some novelists mistrust irony because there's a tendency to conflate wit with triviality—that's a mistake that critics can make as well. There's a tendency to feel that what is worth attention, what is serious, what is literary has got to be solemn—quite wrong, of course. Dickens gives the lie to that. And Rabelais. And Chekov, Penelope Fitzgerald, Shirley Hazzard—the list goes on. All of them are both

funny and serious. But the comic has always been undervalued in relation to the tragic—it goes back to Aristotle, I think.

JS: When you were beginning to write novels, were there other writers' works whose feeling or experience acted as impetus for your own writing?

MdK: I thought that Penelope Fitzgerald's historical fictions were among the most wonderful books that I'd ever read. I still think that. I don't know whether I was re-reading her while writing *The Rose Grower*, but I would probably have had her work in mind. Mind you, I never got anywhere near her heights.

JS: Do you read novels while you're writing yourself?

MdK: Yes. But I'm careful while I'm at the first draft stage. If I'm trying to create a convincing imaginary world, I don't want to become immersed in other people's fiction because the result is too many imaginary worlds competing for my attention. So at that stage I try to read novels that are very different from whatever I'm trying to write. They might be set at a different time, or have a completely different narrative voice, or operate in a different mode—they might be much more experimental than anything I'm writing, for example. I probably instinctively pick out certain books that I want to read and avoid others. I suppose there's always the danger, too, that if you do read a wonderful novel while you're writing, it can make you feel depressed about your own wobbly work. On the other hand, a good novel can spur you on—it lights sparks in you, it affirms the value of literature.

JS: Do you think it's important to be in contact with other writers and a community of writers?

MdK: I certainly think it's important to read them. Yeah! I have friends who are writers because that's what happens when you're writing—through festivals or through your publisher, you meet other writers. And I place a very high value on the conversations I have with writer friends—we recommend books to each other, we discuss books and writing and ideas. But I shouldn't think that it's a disadvantage if you live in a smaller place where you aren't meeting lots of writers—it might even be an advantage. There's a lot of distracting white noise around writing—around the business of publishing, around prizes, around festivals—augmented these days by social media, and NONE OF THAT has anything to do with what really matters, which is the words on the page.

The important thing is to read. And you can do that anywhere. If you're living somewhere that doesn't have a bookshop, well, the internet has made it easy to get hold of books, anyway. That's a great thing.

JS: Certain writers say that they almost lose control of a character or a scene, that the work develops a mind of its own. Do you find that with your own work, or do you feel very in control when you're writing?

MdK: I don't think that that's really what happens. I think that those writers are actually talking about that stage of writing their book when they really know what they want to say and how to say it, and so the writing comes easily at that point. They're utterly in the world of the characters and the novel, and ideas bubble up because they're immersed in that world. When you immerse yourself in a project, things come up that you couldn't possibly have anticipated at the start—writing produces writing, and it seems magical. But my characters always do exactly what I want them to do.

JS: Do you enjoy being edited?

MdK: Yeah! I used to be an editor at Lonely Planet, and before that I edited an academic journal called *Antithesis*, and I really love editing. As a writer, there's nothing more satisfying than feeling you're in sync with an editor. My monograph *On Shirley Hazard* is only 13,000 words, and it's nonfiction, which in some ways I imagine might be easier to edit than fiction. In any case, Chris Feik, who commissioned the project for Black Inc, was wonderful to work with. When I was reading his editorial feedback I could sense his intelligence bent to the page. He made no large structural comments, it was always about small, crucial adjustments at the line level: do we need this sentence, do we need this phrase, is this the right word, and those comments were always worth thinking about. It's relatively easy to make big, sweeping, editorial comments: delete this chapter, make that one twice as long, alter the structure like this, bring out this character more fully, that kind of thing. And it might well be essential advice. But the REALLY great editor will always give you detailed feedback at the line level. That's pretty rare. It requires time because the editor has to immerse herself in the text as fully as the writer has done—she has to enter and live inside the world of the novel. A problem with editing these days is that editorial budgets have been pared back. There's a lot more money allotted to marketing than to editing. Marketing is important of course—and it can do great things to draw attention to a book—but it doesn't make a book better and it does mean that editing is under-resourced in most publishing house. So editors are always working to a very tight budget. The problem is exacerbated when you're talking about freelance editors, and the majority of publishing houses use freelancers these days. There are wonderful, self-sacrificing souls among freelance editors who will do what is essentially unpaid or atrociously paid work and put in all the hours good editing requires. But others—and you can't really blame them—maximise their fee by editing a manuscript as quickly as possible. If you're being paid let's say \$3000 to edit a book, obviously it makes more financial sense to spend 40 hours on it than 60 hours. The book suffers, but the editor's bank account benefits. There's also the very real temptation of taking on work from more than one publishing house at the same time and cutting corners on both projects. (A publisher doesn't know, and in fact has no right to know, what work a freelancer is doing for a different publishing house.) But as I said, editors who skimp on editing can't really be blamed. The system offers them a choice between making a living and doing dedicated work.

I understand that. I truly, truly understand that. And yet, as a writer I say, “Not in my back yard.” I get a shot at bringing out a novel every—what? Three years? Four? I don't want anyone who's not bringing all her skill and all her attention to bear on my book while editing it. I don't want someone editing my work in the morning and yours in the afternoon and back to mine the next morning and so on. How can that editor truly enter the world of either your book or mine? She just keeps jumping between them. She can't hear your distinctive narrative voice, she can't hear mine. She confuses them.

JS: So it's not their fault really. It's just how the industry is now functioning. It's quite frightening.

MdK: It's very frightening. That's one reason why I always advise writers to develop good editorial skills. Never count on an editor to rescue you. Revision is where literature happens. It might be in the first draft for some writers, but for most it's in the second, third or fourth. And if you can't do that, if you can't revise, if you can't be ruthless when it comes to assessing and improving your work, then you won't get your manuscript beyond a certain standard. Literature is in the writing. The same story can be told in many, many different ways, and some will be brilliantly compelling and some will be utterly tedious.

JS: I do this thing now when I go to a bookstore—I don't read the blurbs anymore. I just open the front and start reading. And if for a little while I'm no longer in the bookstore, I'll say: "You're coming with me."

MdK: Yes! I do the same. The other point is that no one can assess their work accurately and revise intelligently when they've just finished a draft. No one. That's why I say leave time, really leave time, between drafts and then kill your darlings. They're no longer your darlings by then, so it's much easier to see where the problems lie. Time really does make it easier to see that.

JS: And when you edit your work and take something out, do you ever miss it? Do you ever feel like actually, no, that should go back in? Or is it almost as though when you edit out some work you go "Ah that's better"?

MdK: Well, if I weren't thinking that, I wouldn't be editing it out! I'll give you a rule that I try to use: every word is optional unless it's necessary. You look at every sentence and apply that. Then you look at every paragraph and you say: every sentence is optional unless it's necessary. Take out the optional sentences. You look at each chapter and say: every paragraph is optional unless it's necessary. You can take out an awful lot of stuff that way. And the book will be better. I assume you work on a word-processor? Most writers do now. So when you've finished a draft, save it, and revise a copy of the draft. Then, if you really find yourself thinking, "Oh God, I should not have taken out those three lines of dialogue," well, go back to your saved draft and get those lines and put them in. It's not hard.

JS: I'm reflecting on my own writing now. I'm sure there are some optional sentences.

MdK: Don't angst about it too much now. Get to the end of your first draft. Then you take out what's unnecessary, then you edit. But leave time between ending your draft and re-reading. That's the important thing. Go away and do other things before coming back to it eventually. There are problems you can't solve at the start of a book that you can solve at the end. Solutions become clear to you when you reach the end of that first draft and return to the book after a break. You think, "Oh yes. I need to shift this bit over here, and that will solve a problem in the next chapter." Or whatever.

JS: Do you think it's a good idea to show someone a work in progress?

MdK: I believe it's a great mistake to show a book to anyone until you've got a complete draft.

I don't know, maybe everything I'm saying is nonsense. All I can tell you is what works for me.

JS: Do you have an intuitive moment where you reach a certain point and you go "And now it's over, this is where it ends." How do you know when you get to the end?

MdK: I always know from the start what the ending is going to be, so the novel ends when I get there! It's just a form of security. It gives me something to work towards. It's like swimming in a pool—a very, very long pool, mind you—as against in the ocean. I've tried the ocean. But when I haven't had an ending in mind from the start, it hasn't worked, I've given up.

JS: *The Rose Grower*—was that the first novel that you wrote? But not every novel that you’ve written has been published?

MdK: Oh, every novel I’ve completed has been published.

JS: But in between there are some books?

MdK: I once wrote 15,000, maybe 20,000 words and abandoned that book. That was between my first and second novels.

JS: Very good track record.

MdK: It is a good track record, but I started late in life.

JS: When did you start writing the *Rose Grower*, because it was 1999 that it was published?

MdK: Yeah, late 1999. I wrote it over the course of 1998.

JS: I was speaking to Debra Adelaide about either *The Women’s Pages* or *The Household Guide to Dying*, I think one of them was longlisted for the Stella when it came out. She said to me, “there’s nothing worse than getting longlisted.”

MdK: It can feel like a public rejection, I think. That’s the problem.

JS: I would rather go unobserved.

MdK: I find that longlists in particular can be cruel. People do buy books that are on the Booker longlist, but apart from the Booker? So being longlisted doesn’t really boost your sales. The bigger prizes, like the Miles and the Stella, give longlisted writers some money. That’s great. And being longlisted for a prize *might* make it easier to get your next book published. But I think Debra’s talking about the emotions that prizes stir up. Once you’re on a list, short or long, it’s impossible not to think, “I might win.” However detached you are, however poorly you rate your chances, that thought will cross your mind. The problem is how you deal with not winning, or not making it onto the shortlist from the longlist—it’s how you deal with disappointment.

The first point I want to make is that if the book that does win is a really good one, it’s a win for literature. That’s our common cause, and it’s pretty easy to feel good about that. Any disappointment you feel is over before it’s begun.

In other cases, one way to limit the power of disappointment is to admit to yourself that you’d have loved to win. Why wouldn’t you want that? Prizes don’t necessarily go to good books, but they usually make a huge and wonderful difference to the life of the winning writer. Admit to yourself that you’re disappointed and it’ll be much easier to leave it behind.

At the same time, don’t fetishise prize culture. You can’t be completely detached from it if you end up on a prize list, but don’t make a habit of following prizes and obsessing over them. If there are people on social media who do, stay away from their feeds. Read independently and widely. Don’t limit your reading to prize lists. And always, always look for ways of supporting your fellow writers. If you’re at a prize ceremony and your book hasn’t won, congratulate the winner *and mean it*. Someone got lucky and it wasn’t you. You’d have loved to win but it’s not a big deal. If you think your book was

better, well, that makes you the winner in the long run. Because the only thing that really matters is the work itself.

I'm not saying that any of this is easy. Debra is quite right to say that being on a prize list can bring on a certain kind of dread. But the only way through all this is to dedicate yourself to writing better—I feel certain Debra would agree. I'm sure you know Beckett's line: "Fail again, fail better." Learn to fail better! Hard work and being open to the idea of improvement gets you a long way. I've seen writers whose first novels are pretty ordinary, but who are writing at a much higher standard by the time they get to their fourth or fifth book. Recognition follows. In between, those writers have worked hard. Everyone can write better. Everyone has stuff to learn—and that's as true of writers with multiple prizes to their names as it is of rookies. The enemy is complacency. Work, work, work. I think of Chaucer: "The life so short, the craft so long to learn." Look, I feel I'm just starting out when it comes to writing and I've written five novels now.