

YOU CREATE YOUR WORLD

An Interview with Lucille Roy

by Keli Diao

LUCILLE ROY-HEWITSON, poet and novelist, has published three novels, three collections of poetry, and one critical essay. Chair of the Department of Modern Languages and Literatures at Creighton University, she holds two Ph.D. degrees, one from the University of Bordeaux, and a DU (Doctorat d'Université) from the University of Strasbourg. She served for many years on the faculty of Dawson College in Montreal, where she was also Chair of Modern Languages and Literatures, and Dean of Arts, Letters, and Social Sciences. In addition, she has held academic appointments at the University of Miami and at McGill University. Her research addresses comparative francophone literature and the poetics of the works of Anne Hébert.

Creative works:

Harmonies d'un songe, Poésie, Paris, Éditions DeBresse, 1979.
L'Impasse, roman, Sherbrooke, Éditions Naaman, 1980.
L'Appassionata, roman, Sudbury, Éditions Prise de Parole, 1985.
Angelita, roman, Montréal, Éditions Humanitas, 1994.
Entraves, poésie, Ottawa, Éditions du Vermillion, 1999.
Anne Hébert: entre la lumière et l'ombre, essai, Montréal, Éditions XYZ, 2000.
Fissures d'angoisse, poésie, Éditions du Vermillion, 2006.

Prof. Roy-Hewitson, it's an honor to have an opportunity to meet you. First I'd like to know how you became a writer. I mean the influences you received from your education, your parents, your friends, and your reading, and the difference between your character and others who are not interested in literature, that is, who are not writers.

I never make a conscious decision to be a writer. I was almost thirty when I published my first work, a book of poetry. And I never intended to create a poem. I just kept walking one day, and that made the first verse of the poetry. I came home for a rest. The poem came out. That was how the first poem was created.

Nor was it reading that influenced me as a child. I was always absent-minded. I lived in two different places. Above reality somewhere I had a dream world, which seemed more interesting; I was continuously dreaming about something even when I was communicating normally with someone else on a daily basis. People could see in my eyes that I was elsewhere. I was never completely with people, I just had too much to imagine...

What was in your dreams?

I liked to feel that I was in many places at the same time. I could see several countries together; I could never focus on one place. It always seemed incomplete. So I have a mind that embraces all things simultaneously. I have to live rooted in the world, and yet my mind reaches far above, into a world of ideas and abstract thought.

What did you read as a child?

I started to read at four. There was a room somewhat detached from our house where no one ever went. It was a small library containing all my mother's French books. The room was brightly lit, with a lot of windows. In the center of the room was a large rocking chair. I liked to sit there, burying myself in a book for hours on end. There I could disappear where

no one could find me.

When did you decide to write books?

I never really decided to write. Writing for me is spontaneous; it has to come from within. The origin of my writing is daydreaming, and the extensive reading I did in my youth. Everything marks me, but it has to affect me emotionally. I store these realities deep in my memory for years; then, when all that is accumulated, it eventually comes out in my writing.

Another thing that made me a writer is that I was very shy, and had difficulty speaking in public. Eventually, I had to learn to separate my emotional life from my logical life, since I was too sensitive to people.

I guess it must have been a long way to go from being a very shy, emotional person to becoming a writer of rich experiences and ideas. How did you find a way out from your shy and emotional life to be able to express yourself?

One day, when I had reached adulthood, it just exploded: I started to write. It was my way of telling all the things that I could never tell anyone. With the written words, I had to expose myself the whole world. That was the only way I could communicate my emotions.

Tell me about your first works?

My first work is a book of poetry, *Harmonies d'un songe*. It signifies the melodies born of dreams, which they weave into a web. My first poem is in the shape of a funnel, wide at the top and narrow at the bottom. I was walking along the road, and the first verse of the poem was dictated by the rhythm of my feet. I believe I was born to write poetry, with all its density. I always use very few words to express myself, because, to me, each word is full of meaning I eventually managed to finish the volume. It didn't take long, everything I write is written quickly. I rewrite it of course; I try hard to get the perfect words, the perfect form.

I wrote my first novel, *l'Impasse*, a year later. It was poetic prose, a novel of one hundred pages, which took a month. It was almost poetry, since it was written shortly after *Harmonies d'un songe*. What suffers somewhat is the development of the characters and the action. The novel takes place in the final years of Quebec's Quiet Revolution, around 1970, and is basically a quest for identity. A French Canadian who was born in Ontario and lived in Quebec and France is torn between three territories. He finally becomes conscious of his true identity at the end of the novel.

What do you find to be the difference between poetry and fiction?

Poetry is based on the polyvalence of the word and the sound it generates. Together they create an image; they do not create a plot or characters, and the poet does not inhabit the characters mentioned. Nor does he follow the course of their destiny.

A novel is more difficult to write, especially when it is based on reality. The novel has to evoke something similar to reality, yet sufficiently different to stimulate the imagination of the reader. Moreover, the novelist has to create powerful characters, combining characteristics of his/her own personality with those of others, and then fully inhabiting them, following the logic of their destinies in their various interactions with people and events. The novelist is carried by his own work into other lives, which may or may not resemble his/hers in the end.

So the novelist has to imagine what's going on with the character?

Seeing yourself as someone else, in interaction with others and everyday life, is that not the

destiny of a novelist? When I published my first novel, the critics asked how a woman could portray herself as a man. I happen to believe that all artists, because of their great sensitivity, are to some degree by-sexual and can successfully create characters of both sexes.

What's your view on feminism, since the word was used to comment on your works?

I believe that feminism was a necessary stage in the development of mankind. It is the link that was missing for society to realize the complete equality of the sexes in every field of human endeavor. Fiction is only one of the means by which feminism is expressed.

Good. Do you find writing changes you in one way or another, in your character or your view of life? Does writing make you a different person?

My writing has made me more aware of my inner reality, what was buried in my subconscious self, whether I want to believe it or not. It is there in black and white, on paper, and it has come out of me for the whole world to see. Therefore, it is part of me, and I have to integrate it into my conscious life. In that sense, writing has continually changed me. It is one of those experiences that enrich your life and form your personality.

What's your view of being a critic?

A critic always reads a work from a certain point of view, and then focuses on observations to support that view. There is no such thing as an objective critique. The value of a work is witnessed by the total of all opinions expressed about it.

Besides writing, you also do a lot of research., What is the connection between academic writing and creative writing?

In academic writing, you analyze objectively the quality of certain works. On the other hand, creative writing is essentially subjective and writers are rarely conscious of the quality of what they write, just of how *real* it feels.

There must be a different way of thinking between academic and creative writing. How do you divide your brain into different parts when you work?

We learn in school to use different parts of our brain, the logical side in sciences and mathematics, and the creative side in humanities and the arts. When I was young, I studied music for many years to complement my rational studies in school and that helped me develop both sides of my brain. I can use faculties, the analytical and the creative alternatively, but not simultaneously.

Has the love of music affected your writing in any way?

There is one thing everybody notices about my writing: it is musical, it flows. Whether in poetry or prose, there is a rhythm to it. I spend a great deal of time on the ending of each sentence or verse, for it is the rhythm alone that determines their length. In my creative writing, I have always spontaneously respected the musical elements of the text; I cannot write any other way.

Since all your works up to now are in French, if you accept that your books be translated, which book would you like to recommend to non-French readers?

I think that my best novel thus far is *Angelita*, It's about the adoption of a young Argentinian child by a Canadian woman. The reader follows the struggles of two North Americans who endeavor to understand and adopt the child, concurrently with the difficulties experienced by the child in leaving her country and accepting new parents.

Some Spanish dialogues are used in the novel to provide local color and help us penetrate into the child's universe, who remains throughout the novel, the essential character.

What do you expect from your readers? In other words,, who is your ideal reader?

An ideal reader is one who reads seriously, reacts to the work, and tries to understand it in depth, without judging it.

You are a critic yourself. When you write critical essays, sometimes you have to judge. You have your taste, your standards, and your way of seeing which novel is your favorite. What kind of writer do you appreciate and consider good?

I like writers with a depth of purpose and character. And I like the real world. Writers can choose anyone to write about, but the work has to *seem real*. I hate science fiction, because it is too far removed from reality. I belong to the earth, the land, and everything in fiction has to be somehow related to it.

What's your starting point when you begin to write a novel? An observation or just an idea in your head?

I think that it's a strong emotion; it can be a feeling of frustration. That makes the basis of the character of the hero or heroine in my novels. Every author is different in this respect, but that is my starting point in fiction.

If you had the time and space, what ideal work would you like to write? What is a perfect book in your mind?

There is no perfect book. I write what I am inspired to write at the moment, and I try to express it as best I can. Different books appeal to different people, but the author can only write about what he/she carries within.

What joy do you find in writing?

When I am *not* writing, I never feel completely happy. I feel empty because I'm not really in contact with my inner self, which is most of me. My subconscious life is so much fuller than my active life. I can travel more freely inside of me and I can live all the things I want. I feel more alive when I am creating a new book., because it awakes so many things inside me.

Writing also gives me a sense of power. The writer is creating a universe, that he/she alone can control. In that universe, I am discovering and mastering my emotions, setting lives in motion and watching where it will lead me. It's like giving birth to yourself and others, changing something in the world. To me, a work of art is as real as a child who is born and has his or her own destiny. The author gives it life, but it has its own impact on the world.

What is difficult in writing?

Finding the right words, and putting them in the right places.

That is a very classic definition of writing.

I am, I believe, a classic writer. I studied classics and I have a degree in it. Everything has to be perfect. The work has to be equivalent to the emotion that creates it.

As for the function of writing, do you think writing makes one different? Do you expect to change yourself or the reader by writing?

I expect to live long because of my writing; writing makes you feel alive and strong. It

makes you want to do things, to contact people and be part of life. If you like people, you understand how people are important in your life, and you write to communicate with them, to have some impact.. I write for the joy of writing and communicating with others at a deeper level. Will that change them? It will depend on other influences they may have had.

What is your definition of a writer? What makes a writer different from others, a scientist, an engineer, or a politician?

Writers create something original; in a sense, they are engineers of words. They work with a matter which is language. Out of words, they create a form or structure and a world which, being spiritual, can neither be measured nor quantified.

Literature and art is different from other branches of knowledge?

Yes, because literature and art enrich your life in a different way. They give you an in-depth view of life, which is important because people live on the surface. You have to bring them to want to delve into the depths. It's a capitalist world we live in, where the quantity of experiences is more important than their quality. I do not need a lot of different experiences, but to develop my inner life, to make it worth living.

Keli Diao, Ph.D., October 2006¹

¹ KELI DIAO, Ph.D., Associate Professor of English, Renmin University of China, is the author of *Poetic Salvation: On Literary Criticism and Great Writers* (2006), *Western Critical Theory of Author* (2005), *An Appreciation of English and American Literature* (2003), and translator of nine books into Chinese, including *Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (2003).