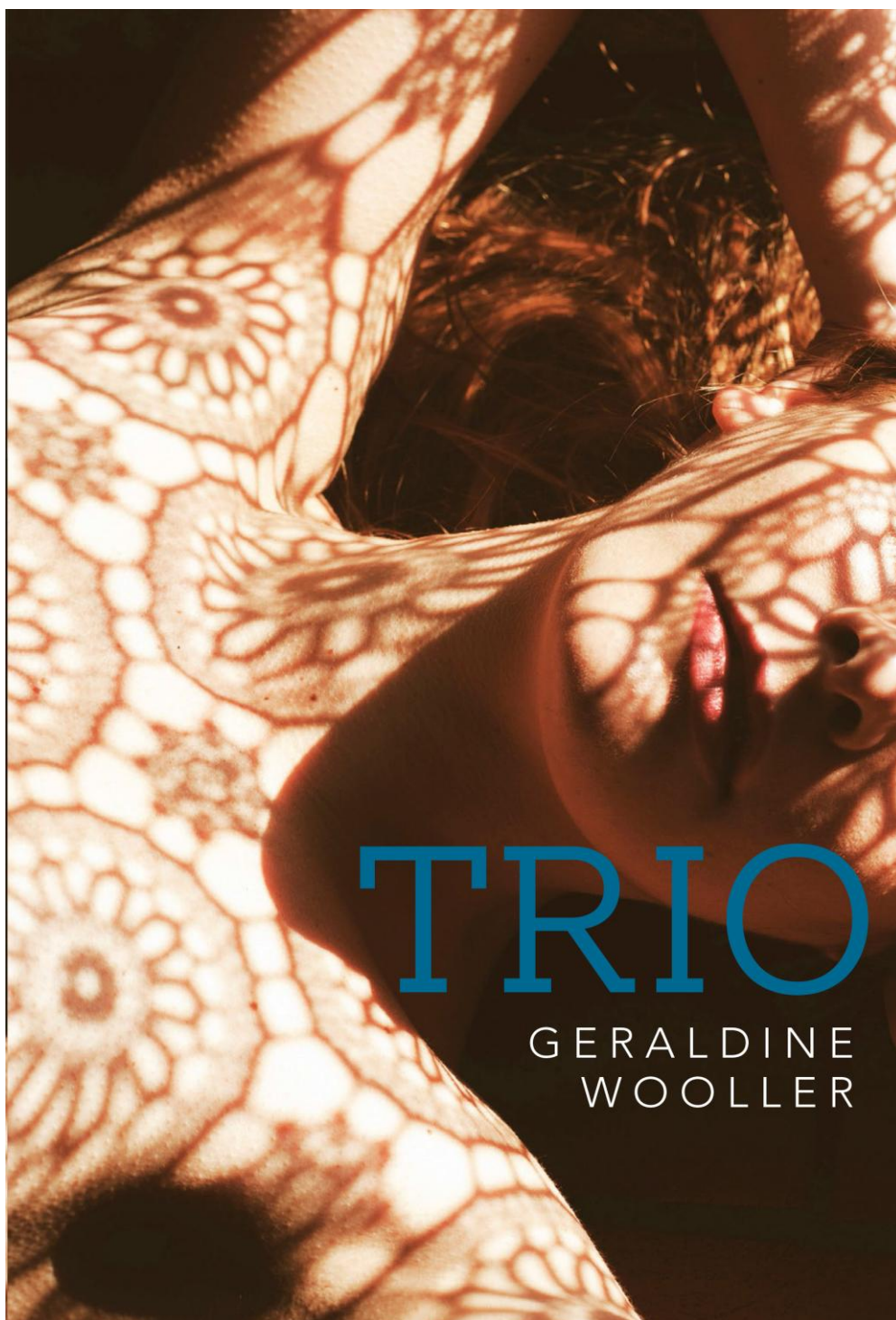


A Mag with Geraldine Wooller, author of *Trio*



By Van Ikin

## A Mag with Geraldine Wooller\*

Questions by Van Ikin

\*Mag: To talk rapidly and to little purpose  
(Macquarie Dictionary , 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, 1991)

Geraldine Wooller is a “late-blooming” Western Australian writer of fiction. Her short stories have appeared in *Womanspeak*, *Patterns – An Anthology of Women Writers*, *Inprint*, *Westerly* and *Redoubt*. Her first novel, *Snoogs and the Dandy*, was published by Minerva in 2000; her second, *The Seamstress*, was published by University of Western Australia Press in 2007 and was shortlisted for both the WA Premier’s Award (2008) and the Barbara Jefferis Inaugural Award (2008) and longlisted for the International Impac Dublin Award (2008). Her third novel, *Transgression*, was published in 2011 and her latest novel, *Trio*, was published by Transit Lounge in 2015.

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*IKIN: You have sometimes spoken about your “late development as a writer”, usually with a note of regret – or certainly wistfulness – I think. But can’t that also be a badge of pride – a sign that you’ve completed a proper apprenticeship?*

WOOLLER: Yes, I sure have done a long and late apprenticeship, and I suppose there’s something to be said for having persevered. I’m regretful because my mother was no longer alive to see the publication of my first two books. Nor my favourite aunts, nor my dearest friend who made her way (though by no means rudely – rather, humorously) into my second novel. But, paradoxically, I wouldn’t have had to write *The Seamstress* if it hadn’t been for my mother. That is, if she had not experienced the decline she did, but had achieved a better death, I wouldn’t have been impelled to write about her.

Also I’m a little sorry that I didn’t recognise my love of writing earlier, as many writers have, so that I might have started learning how to do it at a younger stage. But I suppose I wasn’t ready, didn’t need to ‘be a writer’ as a teenager or even in my twenties.

When I was young we wrote letters. I liked telling stories of my travels and adventures – some of them, anyway – in a way as funny and original as I could: long missives from one side of the world to the other.

Anyhow, there is a certain value in experience. By the age of forty, one has read a great many books and begun to notice the pitfalls good writers have not fallen into. It’s not easy for example to write about death and its aftermath in a way that’s your own. I don’t think I could have written about Kate in *Transgression* and the

complete collapse of a marriage, when I was younger. Or about Mickey, a favourite male character of mine in *Trio*: I wouldn't have had the compassion for him that I have now. The handling of scenes that involve death and loss can be ham-fisted if they're overdone. So I suppose I had to learn about economy of words, where sometimes less is more. My work, then, is more likely to err on the side of leanness rather than what I see as burdening the reader with too many words and chapters. And I write about people I've known and loved. This latest book *Trio* is longer than my first three and I think more understanding of the complexity of friendship and affection. Nothing is perfect; there are different forms of love; there are no guarantees. Don't you agree?

*IKIN: When did you start writing? Tell us about the evolution of your career.*

WOOLLER: I've been more of a reader. I almost gag when someone asks me what I do and I want to say "I'm a writer"; I end up saying I'm a teacher, which I am – a teacher of Italian and English as a Second Language. But I've spent many more hours and years writing than teaching, especially if you include the hours sitting motionless staring at nothing over the top of my computer.

Writing started over 30 years ago, when I was in my late thirties. Probably I had a sneaking wish at that time to write a novel but the thought was so daunting, so audacious, that I concentrated for some years on doing short stories. In about 1979 I attended Elizabeth Jolley's creative writing evenings at the Fremantle Arts Centre. By this time I was nearly forty I felt I had something to say. Then Bill Warnock said to me one day at a function where he'd given me a prize: "You ought to write a novel." I was pleased and grateful for that, and I kept thinking about it.

Then later at Curtin University in the 1990s I took a Graduate Diploma in English and did a number of Creative Writing units. That was great fun... I liked the rapport with the other students and the generosity of exchanges.

Slowly, slowly some short stories were published –the first called "The Rome Experience" by a feminist publication call *Womanspeak* in about 1982. Then another by the Fremantle Arts Press in the same year, a couple in 1984 – and so on, but it was all very slow going, getting them into print. However I was writing like mad by then, whenever I had some time.

In the Graduate Diploma year we had to write "fragments of a novel", which seemed to make the writing of a novel easier, since all I *had* at the time were fragments! There was no coherent structure in mind. I knew I wanted to write about my mother at the time, as she was very ill (this is in about 1990), and so *The Seamstress* was born. But my dead *father* kept getting in the way. What I mean is, I realised that I thought about him quite a lot and could only resolve my rancour and vague nostalgia for him by writing and getting him out of my system, so to speak. So it was a cathartic impetus. But once I got going on *The Dandy* (as *Snoogs and the Dandy* originally was) I realised it was enjoyable writing about his good side, his yarn-spinning and great sense of humour. I wanted to tell at least some of the story of my parents' dreadful marriage from his point of view. It was hard to do and I think I ran out of steam because essentially I didn't know him past the age of eleven or twelve, and really I believed he hadn't the right, as my mother and I did, of *having* a point of view. It's very complex. I wanted to absolve him and also stop blaming him for my own shortcomings. He died in 1974 and I saw him shortly before. *Snoogs and the Dandy* was published in 2000 by a London publisher, Minerva.

At that time I was already working on a novella about my mother whose descent into Alzheimer's Disease was daily becoming worse. She died in 2000. The novella was rejected and reworked many times over. I finally realised I wanted to mould the manuscript into a full novel, taking into it the celebration of her life; not a biography but the story of her young womanhood in sketches and vignettes, starting from about the 1930s – the snapshots of her adult life. So I set out to write about this laughing, dancing, loving young needlewoman and tailor who married and became my mother. The manuscript was *almost* accepted at least twice, and rejected outright in both its earlier and later form, I don't remember how many times, and finally published in 2007 by UWA Press.

So at the same time as one manuscript (*Snoogs*) was on the point of being published in 2000, I had the other one (*The Seamstress*) on the go, and I had been working on *Transgression* – a manuscript that was reincarnated from its two former titles before a final one, and even many years before that, when it began life as a short story.

In 2007 I was granted a scholarship to enrol for a PhD in Creative Writing at The University of Western Australia. For the creative component in this I had to write a novel whose final title has also undergone two changes. It's finally called *Trio* and will be released in early 2015.

IKIN: *Both Transgression and Trio are partly set in Italy, and I think The Seamstress also gives at least a passing nod to Italy – so your muse is always quick to book the tickets to give your characters an Italian experience. Why is that?*

WOOLLER: The infatuation with the Mediterranean and especially with Italy probably started when I was twenty-one and hitch-hiking through those southern European countries. A few years later I returned to Rome from Australia and got a job as a bilingual secretary. The work I did there was good material for comic relief scenes in my novels! But it was more than that: it's obvious, I think, that I have a deep love of the country and of Italians. Many formative events happened for me there.

A return to Perth after those two years in Rome saw me started on a long course of study in Italian and French as a part-time student. I took out a respectable though not brilliant Honours degree in Italian and Linguistics in the late 1970s.

Whenever I've had the chance and money I've gone back to Italy, lately to the southern regions, and have recently started reading again in Italian.

IKIN: *In Trio, your forthcoming novel, the character Celia says: "Italy was for me the sense of the possible; where pageantry was the norm. Where people are fully alive." This reflects your own experience?*

WOOLLER: Oh yes, being witness to the pageantry. And I don't mean just the religious processions. The evening stroll, the *passeggiata*, is more than just a walk: the show's the thing, as Luigi Barzini says in his classic book *The Italians*, and I've reiterated it in *Trio*. There's quite a degree of vanity in it. Italians are always aware of appearances and the importance of making a good impression, and the shame of making the opposite, a *brutta figura*. It seems superficial to us, yet it makes for a high standard of manners and dress ... and the hair and dress thing begs the question: do we forgive others their superficiality and vanity if they always present a

smiling, well turned-out presence? Hmm ... is this in itself shallow? – to love people for being beautiful? It doesn't mean you can't love those who are not overtly beautiful, does it?

Even though there are a lot of things wrong with Italy, I appreciate the way people seem capable of *living in the present*, I suppose it's called. All things are indeed given their due. I'm inclined to idealise them. Still, when a fruit vendor lovingly prepares his barrow for the day he's living in the moment, giving full attention to the placement of each orange or peach – and the artistry of it, is something I haven't noticed elsewhere.

In another context, I've talked with Italians, such as our cleaning lady, who do domestic work, drudgery, and who see the performing of simple tasks as noble. Last year I talked with a young woman who had undertaken a task of hot filthy work, clearing and burning off part of her mother's property. When I, a guest, sympathised that it was taxing work she smiled and said, *Sì, però è bella*. Yes, but good work to be doing.

*IKIN: Do you think the preoccupation with Italy represents a dissatisfaction with Australia? I feel that your fiction reaches beyond the simple "binaries" of, say, satisfied/dissatisfied – it's as if you see Italy as a supplement to the positives that Australia offers, rather than an alternative. To me your mindset is expansive: it reaches out in the hope of embracing and expanding and cramming in more, rather than criticising.... But how do you see this?*

*WOOLLER: Well, that's a generous observation, to see my mindset as expansive. As a young woman I was dissatisfied with Australia and yearned to get to Europe. But in the '70s Australia started to be much more interesting; I was finally at university, became politically aware, enjoying the excitement of the Whitlam era. My undergraduate years in the '70s were intellectually rewarding and I became more confident, found interesting work in administration and teaching. Until then my working life had been automatic, humdrum.*

*I'm glad to live in Australia now. Yet there is always a certain longing, an itch, to go abroad every so often; overseas for me is usually Europe. I want to hear the different languages, practise my Italian and French, stroll around the streets and gaze at historic buildings, many of which they have had the sense to retain or rebuild after the war.*

*I grieve for that in Perth –the sense of history that has been destroyed almost absolutely, by development. All those lovely old Victorian and federation buildings: the old Barracks where the outcry of the 1960s managed to retain merely the solitary arch, standing there like the lonely stone portal it is, deprived of its body. There was the splendid AMP building, the fine old Bank of New South Wales, the Colonial Mutual building, the Esplanade Hotel, the art deco cinemas, the Embassy ballroom where generations had gone to balls and dancing festivals. Other societies preserve their history while keeping up with new cultural and technological changes... Sorry to go on... Except to say that if I wanted to write about my city set in say, the 1940s I'd have to do a lot of research it to see it all on-line, because there's scant evidence of it left. Gledden Building remains – that beautiful, New York style building at the corner of Hay and William Streets.*

*On the other hand, everything is easy and agreeable here now. Life is pretty free-wheeling, services are easily found and transactions can be done quickly. In a*

capital city in Europe, certainly in Italy, I couldn't run my dog in the park and throw balls for her; it's not allowed! Or have picnics and barbecues in the park. Here you can have a game of cricket on the sand at the beach, adults and kids together, or play ball. The same with parks: we can *muck around* here a lot in a casual spontaneous way whereas to get the same exercise and pleasure in Italy you'd have to join a club, which is expensive. A couple of these sentiments I've expressed through a character in *Trio*. I liked writing in *The Seamstress* about the inner-city area in Perth where I lived for many years: the cosmopolitan nature of it, the languages you can hear all about, and the characters. Much of those old areas is still relatively unspoiled though 'progress' is inevitably gaining the upper hand.

*IKIN: What's the point of writing, for you?*

WOOLLER: It gives me an opportunity to rant and put my thoughts into the mouths of my characters. More seriously, it's my only creative mode of expression. I can't paint or sculpt to express the way I feel and the ideas that come. I know there are practically no new ideas under the sun, but there are different ways of phrasing them and new contexts.

When I started to write ideas that turned into stories, over thirty years ago, it was more a matter of outpourings because I was at a rather low ebb and was out of work. No one wants to read about unremitting sadness but initially, writing served that purpose of getting things off my chest. It proved to be almost as effective as chopping loads of wood. However I became very interested in learning the craft of writing stories and at the same time finding a style of my own.

Because I live alone now and have no children I have quite a bit of time to develop my thoughts. You could say I have to write because much of the time there's no one to talk to. My computer – once despised by me! – has become a fast means of thinking out loud. Someone, a writer, recently said – and I wish I knew who it was – that writing is like talking without being interrupted. But whether I'm working on a theme or a character, or else simply amusing myself, sitting and writing at my computer is something I have to do.

*IKIN: Even if writing is a compulsion, it forms itself into focal points – various themes and issues, and so forth. As I said before, I see your work as reflecting an expansive and engaged mindset.... What do you see as your grand overarching themes?*

WOOLLER: Is that for me to say? For better or worse, I think the current wisdom is that these are matters for the reader's interpretation, rather than a case of authorial intention. I suppose common themes in all my writing are the age-old ones: love, loss...perhaps the fragility of friendship, the balm of time and nature.

*IKIN: I'm not entirely convinced that the bulk of readers do believe that the author is dead and their own interpretation is supreme. But all the same, I take your point about grand themes – they're for me as reader to find, and for you as author to confirm, deny, or meet with a tantalising silence.....*

*I do think there are deep-seated themes that run through your fiction, so let me work through how I see this, in order to gauge your reaction.*



*In Snoogs and the Dandy, and the new novel, Trio, we find characters wrestling with the challenges of living together. It's not communal living as addressed by, say, Moorhouse or Wilding or Garner, and it's not what we think of as "a threesome" because the sexual dimension is not central – yet it usually does involve three people.*

*It would be easy to explain this as "a yearning for alternatives", and an explanation of that kind could readily be supported by pointing to the numerous places in your fiction where you criticise the narrow short-sightedness of our society. But that doesn't get to the nub of this.... Can I draw you on this point?*

WOOLLER: Well look, the old cliché holds of writing what you know about. I never wanted a conventional life of marriage and children, though I like children and there have been a few exceedingly nice men in my life.

It's true I suppose that my books have probably reflected a longing for alternatives. And parochial attitudes in my home city years ago sent me packing. I no longer find Perth parochial – it's now one of the most pleasant places on earth.

Without boring readers with personal details I'll just say that religion was a big factor in my early life and alternative countries to live were a constant magnet, especially the Mediterranean. In Rome – the centre of Catholicism – I reluctantly but sedulously dropped my Catholic faith once and for all when in my twenties. And also avoided communes and fashionable cults; they seemed phoney to me. But I like to write about religious arguments and love visiting and admiring ancient cathedrals, even though some contain shocking images of cruelty to saints who wouldn't abandon their faith. You can't escape religion in Italy: wayside shrines in nooks, along any path or road abound in every town and village. The mix of the sacred and the secular continues to work for a tolerant, amiable society.

So as far as subject matter for my work, it had to be about people and places I've known and loved. I've been emotionally attached to men and to women in my life and have wanted to show in the writing that love is love, no matter who is involved, and that as well as sensual passion there is also such a thing as deep, celibate love.

At one stage about thirty/forty years ago, thinking of the alternatives you mentioned, there was a trend to engage in Women's Writing. As an early feminist I could see how it arose, but I never wanted to be part of it; I needed my work to be recognised in the mainstream, you could say insisting on it – until it gained acceptance.

*IKIN: Any reader of your novels would say that you are concerned with "ways of living" or the question of "how to live". That is certainly one aspect of your fiction which I find cogent and provocative, and I'm particularly drawn to your treatment of this theme. At the level of the individual, you understand that "living" is about being happy, feeling fulfilled and useful, feeling a sense of being "connected" or of in some way "belonging" or having "a place" in the world; but you also grasp the need for living to be ethical so that people can flourish collectively, at the community level. So you are a pluralist through and through – you have an impressive ability to understand and accept the differentness of humans.*

*Again and again I see in your characters a quiet, unassuming decency. In their humble ways they strive to live a life that is fulfilling for themselves but which does not hurt or disadvantage others; but they understand that they will at times hurt*

*or disadvantage others and so the act of living involves acquiring the life-skills that allow one to feel regrets without being overcome by them.*

*Does that sound like you?*

WOOLLER: How to live. We all need each other but proximity itself is often the problem. Whether you're living three or two in a house, tensions will arise, someone will be 'left out' or hurt – unless you're a trio of saints. I've tried in *Trio* to lay the dilemma before the reader, with the characters seeing it all as a matter of *where* you live. Sometimes it seems that if you up sticks again you'll be happier; your life will fall into place, but it's an illusion.

I think we all know that in living together everyone has to be looked after or given some due; a small gesture or kindness needs acknowledgement, even with a touch as you walk past their chair. Some people, let's say some couples, are better off being together in the sense of being in contact each day, being faithful to each other, yet living separately.

Many people have religious faith to sort out their difficulties. Celia in *Trio* obviously has a Catholic background and Mickey teases her for resurrecting old habits when she enters a church; she defends herself staunchly. It's a matter of great interest to me, the question of how people with no religious background at all find their moral compass. If you haven't been taught the rules or guidelines of mutual tolerance and a certain forbearance – a religion or a philosophy such as say, Buddhism, in your youth – where do you get the vaguest notion of it from? You learn of course what's legal and illegal, and how badly you can behave without suffering the consequences – but there's more to living with other people than that.

*IKIN: In the course of our conversations over the years you have frequently expressed worries about plot – or rather, about not having “plot” in your novels. Have those anxieties haven't eased, in view of your publishing successes?*

WOOLLER: Well, if I had anxieties about plot, they have eased. After all, some of the best writers don't appear to always bother themselves unduly in having a very slight plot; two of my favourites are John Banville and Shirley Hazzard – both of them formidable writers. Hazzard once said openly in an interview that plot doesn't matter. Alison Kennedy wrote a brilliant novel called *Paradise* which could be described as a tragic, picaresque romp. The two main (drunken) characters reel from one situation to another. There's no complex story, but the sheer quality of Kennedy's prose and the diverse texture in the encounters with other characters stop and hold us in her grasp. There's deep compassion in the novel, amid the hilarity, and the mother-and-daughter scenes are heart-wrenching in their tenderness.

One needs some kind of story but not necessarily a convoluted, multi-dimensional set of conflicting circumstances, to make it interesting. And I don't think publishers reject manuscripts because the work is bereft of “plot”, but rather because they're not going to sell enough copies. Many big publishers seem to prefer books with plenty of drama and action (is this what “plot” is?) rather than the quieter, philosophical ones. The former are more commercially desirable, since they will appeal to millions of people who are not drawn to literature so much as to borrowed excitement. I've just thought of a good definition of plot: wanting to know what will happen next. What do you think?



For myself I'm not interested in writing works about assassinations, chases, crime or warfare. It's the minutiae that concern me, the dynamics of relationships, neighbourhood disputes – the intimate details of existence and how things can go wrong. Fortunately there is a market for these kinds of stories, witness the work of Marilynne Robinson and her so-called domestic novels, such as *Home*.

Having said all that, I do sometimes admire a good, well-written detective yarn, either on television or in a book. However it's the written words that that I'm hooked on – the memorable sentences, and more than anything, the characters who take us along with them.

*IKIN: That's a good place to end, and since we were talking about plot let me conclude with a marvellous quote that took my eye whilst reading Australian Book Review. Adam Rivett, reviewing Chris Flynn's debut novel Tiger in Eden, says "It is gratifying to read a book that does not bend at the knee to plot, does not assemble dull events in the hope of sustaining that forever wandering readerly attention. Don't mistake those last two sentences for criticisms – not that there's anything wrong with plotlessness, no matter what creative writing teachers say – but there is a fidelity ... to voice and the slow accretion of human details that transcends the mere necessities of plot." (I should mention that Rivett finds Flynn to offer this in abundance.) What a superb defence of literary fiction!*

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### **Some key quotes from the novels of Geraldine Wooller**

They were tired and went to bed thankfully but the wild family across the road went into another bout of roaring, followed by a cacophony of metal being beaten with a heavy implement. Marcia reckoned it must make them feel they're alive, with so little to amuse them, or worse, no means of knowing how to amuse themselves. But when it had all died down she heard the wife calling to her beloved cat in the sweetest accents, the raucous voice completely gone.

(*Trio*, 2015)

Nevertheless she believed that the world was still invested with a lot of meaning because Celia for one would be here to look at the sky, grow passionate and tearful at music, grieve at the death of her cat. You can't dismiss the world by any means just because you yourself no longer have the strength or capacity to enjoy it.

(*Trio*, 2015)

Rome! Imposing clocks, mainly showing the wrong time, are still mounted on the pavement at intersections, and along busy streets; they mark her progress along Via Nazionale. No one cares so little about time mis-spent or late appointments as Romans. A bus lumbers up, throbbing, unlike any kind of bus she knows; now squelching and farting, it could be fuelled on onions and beans. She sees its innards filled not with black moving mechanical parts but with groceries and vegetables, the gourmet's bus.

(*Transgression*, 2011)

Flying towards Europe on this trip, she cast around her, palms sweating. Hurtling through air space was not natural; human beings shouldn't be up here. In a quiet moment with Peter once, shortly after they were married, they were talking about microcosms. Placing that past conversation side by side with her present anxiety, she thought that if he'd been with her now, and still in love with her, he might have put that draughtsman's hand over hers and told her that an aircraft was a living organism: numerous hidden elements streamed through it; light, air, Muzak, voices making announcements, images on screens. And she ought to be impressed by such a miraculous vessel, equipped as it was to entertain and make comfortable its occupants. She should simply be grateful for it, not frightened or in awe.

(*Transgression*, 2011)

The cadence of their voices, the laughter. They were homebodies; they lived their lives gaily and decently, with the occasional indecent act. They didn't attend public meetings, nor did they worry themselves about political events. Life was too busy bringing up the children and keeping the home front in good order.

And organisers with it. In earlier times, because they all lived at some place along the railway line between the outer suburbs and the big city, they made arrangements about looking after each other's babies according to train timetables. Using one sister as headquarters – the only one with a telephone – or else “dropping a line”, they would settle on a certain time, then pass their offspring through the train window to the other, like a bundle of goods, while each one went off to town for essentials, or to buy a new hat. Sometimes they went in pairs to town and a third sister would do the child-minding. The homecoming from the trip to town would be a gathering at someone's house for a cup of tea to collect the bundle.

(*The Seamstress*, 2007)

If ever we had a tiff, her dog was sent with a note. I'd be in my study with Juno, the poodle, me licking my wounds. A wet piece of paper would be stuck in Rover's ever-salivating black smiling mouth, which I had to lean over and fastidiously remove. *Would you like a cup of tea?* the courteous missive asked. I loved her civility.

How profligate we are with love.

Every morning as I went to work she'd tell me they were lucky to have me, that I looked beautiful.

Wasn't all that enough for me? Why couldn't we have tried harder?

(*The Seamstress*, 2007)

The notice had described one of these rooms as: *Flatlet, mod cons, Cosmopolitan area, near shops and cinema, two pounds per week*. It smacked of bohemian utopia. Who could have resisted it, in 1963? Clare earned four pounds a week, and she didn't splash it about. Buying fancy cuts of meat was out, as was exotic fruit, i.e. passion fruit or rock melon, and for that red cantaloupe. But she had taken this bed-sitter on her own, reluctant to share. Independence had its price.

(*Snoogs and the Dandy*, 2000)