



Helen Dunmore

TALKS TO DEBBIE TAYLOR

'If you are a musician and you don't keep to a very high standard, if you don't keep building it into your fingers for several hours every day, you will lose your edge. It's the same with writing.'

Helen Dunmore seems calm and serene, yet I found talking to her energising. Her view of the creative world is so pragmatic, she makes you feel anything is possible provided you keep going in the right direction. She uses the word 'professional' a lot when referring to her career. And it's clear that, though she loves what she does, she sees writing as a job that earns a living.

It's an attitude that seems at odds with the work itself. But she would argue that there is no such thing as 'the work itself'. The book reviewing she does, her 'hungry' reading, the tours and interviews, the admin., the 'three thousand emails', travelling to Morocco for the British Council, these are all 'the work' a professional author must do to support - and nourish - her writing.

She even 'goes to work' in the morning: to a sunny Sixties bedsit with pastel décor, geraniums on the balcony and a view to die for over the city of Bristol. It contains a bed and a desk. Books. IT equipment. That's all. No sofa or armchairs, so we talk in a big noisy arts café nearby.

Here she's solicitous, queuing up for our coffee and carrot cake, enquiring how *Msllexia* is progressing. She proffers a quality of attention, an approachability, that is partly inherent niceness, partly a legacy from her years pounding the circuit as a young poet, when audiences were hard to come by.

A highly intelligent child - she went to university at 17 - her first poetry was published when she was 22. 'I always had the goal of becoming a professional writer. I never had an alternative career, though I have done a lot of different jobs. But I couldn't earn my living from writing straight away.'

So she joined what she describes as a vanguard generation of poets determined to make a living from their art. They taught on the earliest Arvon courses, started creative writing workshops, organised their own readings, pushed themselves as reviewers - and patched professional careers together.

Twenty-five years on she now has those precious things Virginia Woolf thought so necessary for a writer: money and a room of

her own. But in the end it was novels, not poetry or her children's writing, that made her name. Her début novel, *Zennor in Darkness* (1993), about DH Lawrence, won the McKitterick prize. Since then she has written a novel every year. *A Spell of Winter*, about an incestuous brother and sister, won the Orange Prize. Her latest, *The Siege*, has been shortlisted for this year's Whitbread.

When you read Helen Dunmore's writing it is clear you are reading someone with a highly developed moral and political awareness. It's nothing heavy-handed (critics praise her 'lyricism and sensuality'): more a backbone that gives the work power and resilience. *The Siege*, for example, is about the first winter of the Siege of Leningrad, when half the population starved or froze to death. There is no mawkish sentiment, no voyeuristic portrayal of suffering. Instead it is a passionate and intelligent exploration of the human qualities necessary for survival.

The physically weak die. The depressed die. Those who are careless. Those who are lazy. Those who are selfish. 'It's about the value of work. The value of putting your own needs and desires second. What is needed for people to survive. What kind of love is needed.'

Anna, sturdy nursery assistant and thwarted artist, survives. Forced to grow up early when her mother died and she became responsible for her little brother, Kolya, and her impractical, unemployed, intellectual, infuriating, father Mikhail, Anna's determination to provide for her depleted family is at the core of the novel.

It's a book that celebrates the extraordinary strengths of ordinary people: Evgenia, Anna's bluff guardian angel who turns tricks to provide for her infirm mother. Marina, Mikhail's ex lover, who joins the household as surrogate aunt. Andre, the dedicated doctor, who learns more than anyone should have to about the physiology of starvation. He and Anna become lovers, more in spirit than flesh - their bodies soon become incapable of sexual response. 'Two hands, stiff, claw-like, fold into one another. They are not male or female and more.'

The value of intellectual work versus

'drudgery' are repeatedly compared. Is Anna's role as nursery nurse less important than her painting? 'I deliberately made Anna a nursery assistant because I've worked in that world and I know the lack of respect there is for people who work with young children. Her art is nourished by that work.'

And Mikhail, the depressed father? Is his laziness excused by his 'greatness' as a writer? 'His long fine fingers turned a page, and he asked, "What time are we eating Anna?"' without even looking up.'

Some of the most powerful scenes revolve around the appreciation of something apparently commonplace. Two jars of jam, hoarded for months, become a life-saving feast in the last weeks of the siege. The moment the two lovers first acknowledge their feelings, when Andre licks his handkerchief to wipe a mark from Anna's cheek: 'There they are. His spit on her cheek, like a seal.'

The Siege is also a book about the cold. Winter and its landscapes - snowy hills, swollen rivers, greedy mud, pine forests - run like veins through Dunmore's poetry and prose. This stems partly from the time she spent in Finland straight after university, when she was 20: two intense, vivid, formative years, when Finland was closely allied to the Soviet Union.

But there's something more, that comes out in some of her poems: the exhilaration

WORST EVER REVIEW

Martin C Caseley reviewed *Recovering a Body* (Bloodaxe, 1994) and a book by Kathleen Jamie together in *Stride* magazine under the headline 'The Whining Ego'.

'Both these new collections from well-regarded young women writers unfortunately leave me with an acute sense of disappointment...' (*On Recovery a Body*) 'The pieces fall into predictable curves and diary entries, memoranda rather than carefully-worked, inspiring epiphanies, and all the familiar stances of Strong Womanhood crop up... Is such ineffectual confessional poetry really making a reappearance?'

of physical challenge - 'my spirits lift when there's a hard frost' - and a deep awareness of the cycles of nature. And an almost claustrophobic distrust of warmth and the inside: 'First the bolt, then the chain, then the Chubb./You're outside. but ... you can't run the warmth off.' ('Frostbite')

The importance of living in the moment is also a theme that recurs in her work: in poems that celebrate the flawless beauty of youth - 'Tell the basketball player how tight/time is, how he's reached perfection' ('Basketball player on Pentecost Monday') - and the precious fleeting moments of a child growing up - 'my baby girl, I'll wipe her nose with the napkin,/ ... This is the present, there is no other.' ('Tea at Brandt's'). In these poems, and in the novels too, she stops time and urges us to dwell on our good fortune. This aesthetic gives some of her poetry a prayerful, almost religious, quality.

Living in the moment is also a technical problem for anyone writing a historical novel. 'You have to keep that sense of fluidity,' she says. 'Hindsight can make you impose patterns that people at the time were unaware of. Take the very fluid situation we're in right now with Afghanistan. Patterns will be discerned in it later. But at the moment we just see a multitude of possibilities, of dreads.'

Another thing Dunmore values is detail. Her books are usually about places and topics she already knows well or are the result of a tremendous amount of painstaking research. Often both. 'I have to get the sense of how people thought at the time, what it was like to make a cup of tea, what it was like for a woman to wear a type of dress that was too tight.' Detail is important, she believes, not so much for conveying authenticity, but so that the characters can move around comfortably in their world. If the characters are at home, the reader will be invited in too. 'They should not think of it as a researched book. It has to be an art that conceals art.'

So although *The Siege* begins with a

panoramic overview of Leningrad, she swoops the focus in close now and then, to place the reader in the scene she has just painted. Occasionally she even uses second person as a device to achieve intimacy, as in 'However old you are, you can't stay indoors on a night like this'. 'I have a very strong desire to draw the reader into the book,' she explains. 'Not as a voyeur, but as someone who is somehow a privileged insider.'

Her writing has a filmic quality, achieved in *The Siege* by her use of the present tense in combination with concise telling images, framed by her poet's eye. She finds the present tense very useful for writing history. 'You can move around in time very well from that starting point. In a historical novel, the present tense allows you to maintain that sense of uncertainty.' It also allows you to write flashback without the clumsy 'had had's of the pluperfect.

Noticing that certain themes and images recur in the poetry and prose, I ask whether she uses poems as sketches for her novels. She's certainly not aware of using them in this way: if anything it is the opposite. 'When I'm right in the middle of writing a novel, I'm probably not producing many poems'. As far as she's concerned, all her writing comes from a central well of interests and passions. If ideas recur it's simply because 'you have your own patch that you plough. You can't be every sort of writer.'

So what now? Helen Dunmore admits that *The Siege* has been the most physically and emotionally draining book she has written. Partly because of the subject matter, but also, technically there are a lot of different characters, several viewpoints, and a mass of historical information: 'I had a real difficulty letting go, stopping thinking about it, stopping adding things.'

But it did loosen its grip at last and she is already a few chapters into her next novel. But before she immerses herself in that, there is her latest children's novel to finish, an edition of Radio Four's Book Club to

record, an American festival to do...

She is enormously productive. Yet she has a seven-year-old daughter, Tess, almost exactly the same age as my own Isobel. When I remark on how much she has achieved in those seven years, compared with me - six novels, several books for children, three poetry collections - she gets almost cross. 'Count up all the hours you've spent on *Mslxia* in the last four years,' she says. 'Presumably you've made childcare arrangements, and you've put yourself in an office where you can concentrate. That's all I've done. I'm working full time at this.'

Paradoxically it was Tess's birth that forced the transition. 'She was a rather delicate child, and didn't really sleep for four years, so she needed a lot of looking after. I had a contract for a second book with Penguin, so I decided to scale my teaching right down and focus on writing novels.'

Her professionalism makes her suspicious of the concept of writer's block. Would a surgeon complain of surgeon's block when tackling a particularly tricky quadruple bypass operation? 'The more you do creatively, the more you can do. You have to keep the momentum going. If you are a musician and you don't keep to a very high standard, if you don't keep building it into your fingers for several hours every day, you will lose your edge. It's the same with writing. It isn't really the output that matters. Sometimes it's just the act of doing it.'

'I don't see creativity as this fragile little flame that needs to be cherished. I see it as an immensely powerful aeroplane. As long as you don't deliberately keep turning off the runway and going back to the terminal, it will take you wherever you want to go.' ■

HELEN DUNMORE has published seven novels for adults in seven years. *The Siege* was shortlisted for the Whitbread novel award. *Zemur in Darkness* won the McKitterick Prize; *A Spell of Winter* won the Orange Prize (all Viking, Penguin). She also writes novels and poetry for children. Her two short story collections, *Love of Fat Men* and *Ice Cream*, are also published by Viking, Penguin. *Out of the Blue, Poems 1975-2001* (Bloodaxe, 2001) contains new poems and selected work from her seven previous adult poetry collections. Of these, her 1997 collection *Bestiary* was shortlisted for the T S Eliot Prize.

100 WAYS TO WRITE A BOOK

#11 The Dunmore Method

■ An idea that has been growing in your mind for around 20 years starts to surface. Start thinking about it, looking at it from all angles.

■ Write a two-page narrative outline, sketching out the trajectory of the plot. Don't plan in detail. You want to leave room for development. If you feel you are just joining up the dots, you'll be bored.

■ Ensure there is scope for at least two of the following: frequent references to the natural world, a change in the seasons, intense cold, a strong female character, an immoral sexual act, a philosophical issue.

■ Test the outline with some sample chapters - three is a good number. If they don't work, throw them away. Do this firmly and without regret. You may have to do this several times. You may have to reject the whole outline.

The ability to recognise the dross and get rid of it is the hallmark of the good writer.

■ If the chapters do work, you will start to feel fear and exhilaration. A plane is on the runway, accelerating for take-off. It's time to abandon control and trust your creativity.

■ Start moving steadily forwards through the outline in approximately 2,000-word chunks, revising them, and moving on.

■ Use the present tense and first person if possible. Your aim is to draw the reader into the world of the novel.

■ If you are writing about an unfamiliar historical setting, describe events and experiences with some echo in the present day, so that readers can identify with the characters.

■ At various points you will find the storyline branching into unplanned areas. Your

characters will also strengthen and start to dictate the direction of the plot. Don't worry. Simply assess them as you did the first chapters, to see if the new developments work.

■ If they do, return to your outline and rewrite it to take account of the changes.

■ Never analyse your creative process. (You believe analysis is anathema to creative productivity.) By the same token, don't dwell on your feelings about the book. Your job is simply to build chapters, one after another.

■ Around the middle of the book, it will become increasingly difficult to proceed. A heavy torpor will overcome you. Plough on. A few more chapters and the end will come into sight, the feeling of acceleration will return and provide the impetus to take you to the end.