



Lapis Lazuli -An International Literary Journal (LLIJ)

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An Interview with

SUE WOOTTON

Conducted by Jaydeep Sarangi

Sue Wootton :Sue Wootton is a leading award-winning poet and fiction writer from New Zealand whose work has been widely published and anthologized.Her work includes three collections of poetry (*Hourglass*, *Magnetic South* and *By Birdlight*) and the children’s book *Cloudcatcher*.*Hourglass* contains warm and intelligent writing. Wootton was the 2008 Robert Burns fellow, and her second collection of poetry, *Magnetic South* was published the same year by Steele Roberts. Wootton has won poetry competitions, and has received a range of awards and prizes for her writing. In 2010 she was an invited poet at the VI Festival International de Poesia in Nicaragua. E mail: suewootton3@gmail.com

J.S.: Hello! You have been considered as *one of the most versatile and exuberant poets of NZ*.
How do you feel?

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SW: I don't set out to be 'versatile' or 'exuberant'; I'm just focused on the process of writing. So I'm surprised – and pleased – if others see these qualities in some of my published poetry.

J.S.: When did you start writing?

SW: I started writing as a child. I have many notebooks filled up with stories and poems, and kept a daily journal from the age of 12. But I didn't begin to publish any work until I was nearly 40. I had got sidetracked by other things, and needed to refocus my life. I spent several concentrated years in my mid-thirties finding my way back to writing.

J.S.: Would you share your memory of childhood days ?

SW: My parents immigrated to New Zealand just before my birth. They were both originally from England, but had met in Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), where my mother's family had moved after World War 2. I grew up in a small city in the North Island of New Zealand, and always felt like a bit of an outsider, probably because my family was so new in the country and we were still learning 'how to be Kiwi'. It seemed that the other children had some secret information about how to fit in that I didn't have. I think reading books saved me, as it provided me with a refuge from everyday anxieties, and showed me a larger world than the one I physically occupied. And books written by New Zealanders were really important, because they helped explain my life to me.

J.S.: Any mentor?

SW: I didn't have any mentor until I was awarded a formal mentorship with the NZ poet Elizabeth Smither through the NZ Society of Authors in 2003. That was a huge confidence-booster for me.

J.S.: You have a children's book , *Cloudcatcher*. What is it all about?

SW: *Cloudcatcher* is the story of a man called Mr Bellavista who is annoyed with the clouds because they are keeping the sun off his prize-winning tomatoes. He decides to catch all the clouds in the sky, and eventually – by virtue of his super-duper never-a-problem no-mistakes

Cloudcatcher invention – he succeeds. But of course it all goes wrong after that... and Mr Bellavista has to figure out how to make things right again. It's a book to be read aloud to small children, or for older kids to read to themselves. The language is vivid and rhythmical, and lots of fun to read.

J.S.: What are your major themes of writing?

SW: Well I guess themes change over the years, but fundamentally I write to make art out of experience. My poems are my records of what it's like to be alive (here, now and briefly) in a very large and inexplicable universe.

J.S.: *Your poems in 'Hourglass' "glow with heart"...How do you react to this view?*

SW: Again, I don't set out to provoke this reaction from readers. But I am pleased if someone thinks the poems have warmth, life and emotion. When I read other poets, I am most drawn to work which touches me and moves me. For me, these qualities in poetry are most important.

J.S. Your : short stories have been broadcast on Radio New Zealand National, and published in journals and anthologies. What are they?

SW: My short stories cover a wide range of settings, characters and points of view. My story *Virtuoso*, which won a place in a competitive NZ Book Month anthology in 2008, was about a disillusioned middle-aged city-busy lawyer trying to come to terms with the losses or 'failures' in his life, including dealing with his disabled son.

My story *Beyond Pluto* is about lost love and appears in *Slightly Peculiar Love Stories*, published by Rosa Mira Books <http://rosamirabooks.com/books/index.html>

In contrast, *Icy Noctiluca*, a story which was shortlisted in a 2011 Royal Society Creative Science writing competition, is set in Hamburg in 1669, and is narrated by the wife of the man who discovered phosphorus by boiling vats of urine. This and two other stories are to be published soon as an e-book by Rosa Mira Books

<http://rosamirabooks.com/books/index.html>

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J.S.: Are you satisfied with reviews on you?

SW: Mostly – although you can't please everybody all of the time!

J.S.: How about other contemporary writers from your country?

Poets I admire include Rhian Gallagher, Dinah Hawken, Joan Fleming and Sarah Broom, but there are many other poets publishing here whose work I'm moved by.

J.S.: How do you assess the Indian Writing in English or IWE?

I've been impressed by the IWE poetry I've read and heard. Much of it seems muscular and bold, as if each English word or phrase is being tested or re-forged – contemporary 'Indian' identity being wrested from imposed language.

J.S.: Do you believe we are still following a hangover relationship with the American/ Anglo/ French intellectual discourse in NZ?

Academically, there is still an emphasis on the American and Anglo canon, but then again these are undeniably the main roots of New Zealand's (written/published) literary culture. But New Zealand writing is very much its own tree these days, a tree with many branches.

J.S.: How much of real NZ is visible in your creative writings?

New Zealand is an island nation, a small land mass in a very large ocean, physically remote from the rest of the world. A sense of geographic and psychological isolation, and sometimes vulnerability, is often present in New Zealand writing, and I think this is true of my work. The landscape and natural world is often evoked: ocean, beaches, trees, birdsong, mountains, rivers, lakes and storms. I live in Dunedin, a university city in the south of the South Island, and Dunedin's character is very different to, say, Auckland. Auckland has a sub-tropical climate and a large, culturally diverse population, including the country's largest Maori and Polynesian population. Here in the south, the climate's cooler, the population smaller and more homogenous. So, while New Zealand's culture and geography do feature in my work, it's necessarily filtered through me, revealing only *my* 'real NZ': my experience of living in this part of New Zealand.

J.S.: Why do you write poems, a threatened literary species these days?

Because poems are charms, evoking the non-substantial and the mysterious, and we need these aspects of our humanity. They balance us; they are another route to meaning.

J.S.: What are your enduring themes; issues and concerns that pre-occupy you constantly?

Identity, ecology, equity, 'man's inhumanity to man', ill-being and well-being.

J.S.: Do you consider yourself a postcolonial poet?

Well, my life story, the very reason I was born in New Zealand, is a postcolonial story. But I don't like labels; they can be limiting.

J.S.: Do you think that poetry can be taught?

SW: I believe that an integral element of being human is being creative. As far as poetry goes, my observation is that young children are naturally and spontaneously creative with language, and, if given the opportunity, love to make poems. Growing up, we tend to forget or bury this instinct. So, can poetry be taught? What can be taught is how to find your way back to that particular place inside yourself that is already there. And since poetry is a craft, specific techniques of writing can also be taught. Writing classes can be useful, especially in providing a 'magic lake' of intense creative energy in which participants can splash, wade wallow and duck-dive. More useful in the long-term is self-discipline and what Flannery O'Connor called 'a habit of art'.

J.S.: Do you accept the view that 'nothing happens' in poetry?

No, if I accepted that view I'd stop writing poems. Yesterday I taught a poetry workshop with a group of 13 and 14 year olds who were initially skeptical about the value of writing or reading a poem. At the end of the workshop they were elated and excited; they had been moved and touched; their minds and hearts had been set working – and all by poetry. Whether gentle or violent, formal or "free", a well-composed poem changes those who read it.

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J.S.: Are you connected with social work in NZ?

SW: Yes. Publication brings an opportunity – and a responsibility – to speak about political, economic, and social inequities, and environmental issues.

J.S.: How about publishing industry? Are they willing to publish poetry and fiction?

Hmmm, the publishing industry here, as worldwide, is in flux. It is harder to get published, especially if you write ‘non-commercial’ work, or are new on the scene but not connected to one of the well-known writing schools. That said, there are a surprising number of books of poetry and fiction published here each year.

J.S.: How about Maori writers of NZ?

SW: Maori culture has a rich poetic oral tradition, which both predates and sits alongside (weaving with) the official NZ literary canon of written poetry. I’m not Maori, and am not an authority of Maori writing. But all NZ poets are influenced by Maori language and culture, consciously or unconsciously and to a greater or lesser extent. A lot of NZ work, whether written by Maori or non-Maori, embodies Maori imagery and spirituality, and popular poets have particularly absorbed the emphasis on oratory.

Maori writers whose writing has influenced me include Hone Tuwhare, Apirana Taylor and Robert Sullivan. An excellent introduction to Maori poets is Paula Green’s chapter *The Maori Poem*, in 99 Ways into New Zealand Poetry (Random House NZ 2010), edited by Paula Green and Harry Ricketts. (This book is a great introductory text for anyone interested in New Zealand poetry.)

J.S.: Could you please mention a few anthologies where you are included?

SW: Three excellent online sites for people interested in NZ poetry are the Best NZ Poem series at

<http://www.victoria.ac.nz/modernletters/bnzp/2004/welcome.htm>

[Tuesday Poem http://tuesdaypoem.blogspot.co.nz/](http://tuesdaypoem.blogspot.co.nz/) (updated every Tuesday with new work),
and NZ Electronic Poetry Centre <http://www.nzepc.auckland.ac.nz/misc/online4.asp>

My poems appear on all these sites.

Other online anthologies which contain my poems include:

Softblow (Singapore) www.softblow.org

Blackmail Press (NZ) <http://nzpoetsonline.homestead.com/>

Turbine (NZ) <http://www.vuw.ac.nz/turbine/>

Recent print anthologies in which my poems appear include Dear Heart,

150 New Zealand Love Poems, Random House 2011,

Our Own Kind, 100 NZ Poems about Animals, Godwit 2009, Swings

and Roundabouts: Poems on Parenthood, Random House 2008, and

Voyagers, Science Fiction Poetry from New Zealand, Interactive Press

2009. 'Voyagers' has been selected as a featured book at the 2012

Frankfurt Book Fair, and you can read about it here:

<http://newzealandgermany2012.wordpress.com/2012/07/28/highlight-voyagers-goes-to-frankfurt/>

J.S.: Do you see any change of readership over a period of last twenty five years?

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SW: Yes. Although the cliché is that poetry is dying, I disagree. I think it's thriving. The audience for poetry has grown. Part of this is because contemporary NZ poetry now speaks with a NZ voice, recognizably our own cadences, references, imagery and rhythms. It sounds like *us*, and not like being spoken to by some alien, remote public-schooled British authority figure. And readership, or involvement, has become more democratic because poetry is published more democratically, through blogs, websites, online journals, competitions, open-mic public readings, as well as through sponsored promotions such as NZ Poetry Day.

J.S.: Had you been to India?

No, I have travelled in many countries, but not yet India. One day!

J.S.: Any immediate wish.....

Yes, a very prosaic and selfish wish: for some grant money to let me focus on some new writing!
A most unpoetic wish!

J.S.: I'm honoured! My wishes for all you future writings....!

SW: Thank you Jaydeep. It has been a pleasure. And best wishes to you too.

Jaydeep Sarangi

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