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An Interview with

Jillian Sullivan

Conducted by Jaydeep Sarangi

Jillian Sullivan writes fiction and non-fiction for children, teenagers and adults. Her work has been published for over twenty years and includes four novels, three collections of short stories and over sixty short stories for children and adults, published in New Zealand and America.

Awards & Honours

- 2011 Kathleen Grattan Prize for a Sequence of Poems, how to live it.

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- 2011 Student City Arts and Cultural Awards, Outstanding Single Achievement in the Arts.
- 2011 Fishing from the Boat Ramp selected for The Great New Zealand eBook scheme.
- 2006 Children's Literature Foundation of NZ Notable Book for 2006, What About Bo?
- 2005 Maurice Gee Prize for Children's Writing, The Secret about Knowing Everything. (Manuscript in progress) Victoria University.
- 2003 Tom Fitzgibbon Award, Shreve's Promise
- 2002 Sunday Star Times Short Story Award, runner up, – Getting On
- 1999 Highlights Fiction Award, USA
- 1998 Highlights Fiction Award, USA

Scholarship:

- Massey University Undergraduate Scholarship 2007
- Highlights Foundation Scholarship to USA 1997
- Certificate of Achievement awarded by Nelson City Council, 1989

Jaydeep Sarangi is Sahitya Gourav Indian English poet. He is a bilingual writer, academic, editor, translator, academic administrator and the author of a number of significant publications (including thirty books) on Postcolonial issues, Indian Writing in English and Australian Literature in reputed journals/magazines in India and abroad. Dr. Paula Hayes (USA) in her

Introduction to the book comments, “A few of Jaydeep’s poems reach toward asking metaphysical questions.” Professor Dora Sales of University Jaume I, Castellón, Spain comments, “As we all know, India has a rich literary tradition. Jaydeep Sarangi is a splendid member of this endless family. Truly, a poet of note.” About his latest book of poems, 'Silent Days' “Jaydeep Sarangi gives a fresh paint to everyday living. ‘Small rivers’ near tribal villages are his haunts. His language can be unorthodox, where a rock can turn into a ‘reckless flow”, but his poems are a rewarding read, with the scent of herbs coming through the pages.” comments Keki Daruwalla, one of the leading Indian writers in English and the recipient of the Sahitya Akademi Award. "A Door-Somewhere?" (2014), his latest collection was released at Rzeszów University, Poland. E mail: jaydeepsarangi@gmail.com

Jaydeep Sarangi: This interview might have an audience beyond the readers in New Zealand or India so could we start by you telling us a little about your childhood, places, schooling and tertiary education?

Jillian Sullivan: I was born in Masterton in 1957, in the North Island of New Zealand. My mother was a songwriter and teacher and my father a tradesman and keen sportsman. They divorced in the sixties. We shifted around as it was difficult for my mother to get work teaching. I changed high schools four times. Over the years I brought up my children, I studied as an extra-mural student for my Honours degree and a Masters in Creative Writing through Massey University.

Jaydeep Sarangi: If you had to pick five writers only who had a major influence on your own writing, who would these be?

Jillian Sullivan: Mary O'Hara, Joy Cowley, C.S. Lewis, Katherine Mansfield, Brian Turner.

Jaydeep Sarangi: You have been writing for two decades or so. Is there any change in you (as a writer)?

Jillian Sullivan: When I had five children living at home, and my house was full of teenagers, that was my world and I was passionate to write for this age group. The change now, with all the family grown up, is that I'm writing more reflective work, poetry and memoir, and mainly for adults. My work has always been character driven. I've learnt by experience to trust the hunches more, the small leads, the strange idea or juxtaposition of details.

Jaydeep Sarangi: Who are some of the most important Kiwi writers these days?

Jillian Sullivan: How do we determine the meaning of importance? Is it by number of books sold, by popularity, or by the way the authors add to the discussion on what is important in life? My list is topped by Joy Cowley, who has done much around the world by her books and by her teaching to bring a love of reading to children. She is also a novelist, short story writer and memoirist for adults (her memoir Navigation). Her books sell in the tens of millions worldwide, making her important across all three reasons. Her generosity and kindness to beginning writers worldwide sets a wonderful example for other writers to follow.

My list also includes the poet, biographer, activist and essayist Brian Turner, former NZ Poet Laureate, whose passion and attention has always been on the community to which we belong, including that of the landscape (his poetry collection Elemental); Vincent O’Sullivan, current NZ Poet Laureate, for the breadth of his work as poet, playwright, short story writer and novelist (his poetry collection Us, Then); Philip Temple for his wide-ranging work and his latest novel Mi Story which concerns the future we may all be facing; Owen Marshall for his short stories and teaching (The Best of Owen Marshall’s Short Stories); Eleanor Catton, winner of the Man Booker Prize, for her novels (The Luminaries); Fiona Kidman (The Book of Secrets) and Fiona Farrell (Limestone) for their novels and poetry and generosity as mentors ; Nicky Hagar for his expositions on political behaviour (Dirty Politics).

Jaydeep Sarangi: Can writing be taught?

Jillian Sullivan: There are aspects of writing that can be taught. Errors can be pointed out that will help a writer to write more clearly. When I began writing there were no courses. I taught myself to write novels by writing novels. When writer Joy Cowley told me to put my sixth unpublished novel in a drawer, spend a month on deep character work for my characters and then rewrite the book from scratch, I finally learnt the power of knowing my characters. Now I teach this to my students. It’s one of the two best hints I’ve learnt about writing.

The other hint is to write without stopping when I don’t know what happens next. A favourite exercise is to have my character say “I want to tell you...” and then write for ten minutes. That way I give my wiser, unconscious side the chance to work things out. In the end though, the

quality of a piece of work will come down to the voice and to what is being said. These things can't be taught, these will arise.

Jaydeep Sarangi: How did you come to writing?

Jillian Sullivan: I wrote my first 'book' when I was six. I had an impulse as early as I can remember to write things down, to make poems about what was happening in my life, to write stories. I wrote lists of titles of novels I would write when I grew up. I loved reading so much I wanted to write books of my own. When I was sixteen I read a story by Katherine Mansfield and I was struck by the realization this was what I wanted to do with my life; to write short stories. That urge to write things down and so discover the world – perhaps it is a madness we are born with.

Jaydeep Sarangi: Regarding your collection of poems *Parallel*, Selina Tusitala Marsh writes, “A sensitively connected sequence ... held me from beginning to end with its tender, understated sophistication.” ...How do you read this statement?

Jillian Sullivan: I was happy to hear my writing described as understated. The book is a narrative sequence mostly centered in middle-age; that time when your parents can die, your children leave home, grandchildren arrive, and the possible loss of a partner. To be able to write about these times of loss and new beginnings without becoming sentimental, to write about such personal issues in a way that could open out to a universality of human experience, these were

my challenges. In some poems I've used metaphor as a way to convey emotion, or have linked two different stories to extend the personal into the universal.

Sophisticated I take to mean the poems are written from an authenticity of experience.

Jaydeep Sarangi: Could you please name a few poems that represent you as a poet?

Jillian Sullivan: In my book parallel, the poems Masks, Straits, There aren't any instructions, and Choosing.

Jaydeep Sarangi: You have a book on mythology. What kinds of myths have you included?

Jillian Sullivan: Included in the book are myths I've retold from Australia, China, India, Greece, Japan, the Pacific Islands, as well as Celtic, Maori and Viking myths. I wanted to include myths from the major cultures represented amongst New Zealanders. The themes include the gift of life, the gift of fire, the journey into darkness, trust and betrayal, the heroic quest and the reluctant hero. One of my favourites is King Great Virtue from India: a story about a King who would not use violence and yet retained his kingdom by the example of his peacefulness and strength.

Jaydeep Sarangi: You also write novels and short stories. Could you please mention a few important prose works by you?

Jillian Sullivan: *Fishing from the Boat Ramp – A Guide to Creating* (also the EBook *A Guide for Creating*) is a philosophical exploration of the process of creating, told as memoir. *What About Bo?* is my favourite young adult novel, a story about a boy who longs for his father. *Launched and Other Stories* is a collection for young adults.

Jaydeep Sarangi: What are the recurrent themes in your stories?

Jillian Sullivan: Many of my stories for young people concern children who grow up on the edge in some way, who are outsiders. In my adult work there are themes of the search for connection and living a life true to your own values.

Jaydeep Sarangi: Do you have any agenda when you write?

Jillian Sullivan: To do justice to my characters.

Jaydeep Sarangi: I'm going to ask you the same question I have asked others. For P.B. Shelley, "poets ...are not only the authors of language and of music, of the dance, and architecture, and statuary, and painting; they are the institutors of laws, and the founders of civil society..." Do you think that quote still holds true in this digital age fraught with what could be called cybermania?

Jillian Sullivan: I think that quote needs to hold true. In an earlier generation in New Zealand, poets had come through two world wars and a major Depression. After that came protest against

the Vietnam war, against nuclear weapons, against apartheid. We are now facing a threat to our existence from the effects of humans on the environment, and a continuation of child poverty, of domestic violence and inequality. But where are the poets protesting against this? Only a small number in New Zealand.

Jaydeep Sarangi: Basho said, "A poet doesn't make a poem, something in him naturally becomes a poem." Do you think he's correct?

Jillian Sullivan: Yes. You can't plan to write a poem that works. A poem arises when you are in the state of writing poetry. It's something discovered. And often by the time you get to the end of a poem (or a story) you say something you did not know you would say or would come to.

Jaydeep Sarangi: Writers can now publish their work on the Internet (websites, blogs, online journals and so on). Do you think this ease of publication, often without peer or editorial review, encourages a lowering in the quality of poetry?

Jillian Sullivan: I think ease of publication gives the chance for work to get out to readers. It means poems people may have kept in drawers will make it into the public arena. This can act as an encouragement to others to write and express themselves. Excellent poetry will continue to be published by poetry presses, and be revered, remembered and loved.

Jaydeep Sarangi: Are you familiar with contemporary Indian writers?

Jillian Sullivan: Only with a small number, including Arundhati Roy and Salman Rushdie. I am enjoying your interviews with Indian writers and look forward to reading their work.

Jaydeep Sarangi: You are from NZ, now you live in USA. Do you carry a cultural heterogeneity on your shoulder? Is it a help or hindrance?

Jillian Sullivan: I still live in New Zealand, though I travel to the USA each year to teach writing for the Highlights Foundation. While in America I am mainly in contact with other writers. What we have in common is the desire to write and a love of reading. I am very much in a homogenous culture of writers. Because I come from a small, island country there is a sense that in New Zealand we have more power over our lives. To a large extent, though, the North American writers I have met have the same concerns as I do for the environment, for the well-being of children, and for the freedom of expression.

Jaydeep Sarangi