"A Sense of Completeness, of Understanding, Enfolding All Difference": An Interview with Maggie Gee

MINE ÖZYURT KILIÇ

Maggie Gee (OBE) is an innovative and unusual contemporary novelist whose work has been translated into thirteen languages and short-listed for two prestigious global literary prizes, the Orange Prize and the International Impact...
Award. In 1982 Maggie Gee was selected as one of the original twenty “Best of Young British Novelists” and became a Writing Fellow at the University of East Anglia; from 2004–2008, she was the first female Chair of Council of the Royal Society of Literature, and in 2006 she and Hilary Mantel were appointed as the two Visiting Professors of Creative Writing at Sheffield Hallam University. In 2012 there was an international conference about her work at St. Andrews University, and in the same year she was given an OBE for services to literature. She is now a professor of creative writing at Bath Spa University.

As she says while explaining her frequent use of big public scenes in her novels, Maggie Gee longs for a sense of completeness, of understanding, enfolding all difference in her work. Accordingly, some of her novels, such as Where Are the Snows (1991), Lost Children (1994), The White Family (2002), My Cleaner (2005), and My Driver (2009), explore social problems, such as consumer culture, split families, lost generation, class conflicts, alienation, racism, and homophobia, with a narrative technique that can be largely categorized as realist. In The Ice People (1998) and The Flood (2004), Gee employs different narrative modes, such as dystopia, fantasy, and science fiction, to illustrate contemporary problems, including climate change, global warming, and environmental crisis, that add to the already crippling and unsolved problems of modern societies. Her autobiography My Animal Life (2010) addresses the question of what happens to people when they lose their physical, biological context, and the way this state is reflected in literature. The author of twelve novels and many short stories featuring a wide range of important and controversial subjects explored in different literary genres and techniques, Maggie Gee makes a significant contribution to contemporary English literature.

MÖK: In your review of Virginia Woolf’s A Writer’s Diary, you say you “love the intimacy and clarity of [her] voice,” and tried for a similar directness yourself in My Animal Life, “taking the reader into the secrets of [your] heart.” Graham Swift mentions two different sorts of writers: the defensive and formal writer hiding the personal voice behind, and the vulnerable one, presenting herself as one of us. Do you see a constant development in your writing, rendering the writer less impersonal, less formal, and more intimate and vulnerable?

MG: Good question. I sense that I need to defend myself less as I have grown older. When I began as a writer I had just finished an awful lot of academic, theoretical, literary work, and in my first novel perhaps I just wanted to claim to be a part of experimental tradition. Also to prove I was clever and had read a lot of books. Showing off out of insecurity. But now I no longer feel the need to show off. I did an immense amount of literary education, I read constantly and my whole life is dedicated to this craft, so the stitching and technique can all be inside, under the surface. It’s the voice that interests me now. And structure: but I want that to be felt, not grappled with. It is a risk, though. Because critics can look at the
page you have worked so hard to make appear limpid and simply think it was easy

to write. Writers often understand that clarity and lightness are hard things to

achieve, but critics don’t. Young male critics sometimes prefer writing that makes

overt claims, with lots of cultural references. I can’t be bothered with that.

MÖK: When I think of your three titles *The White Family*, *My Cleaner*, and

*My Driver*, it seems that you are one of the very few white English writers who

deal with the tension that still exists between the white and black people in

contemporary British society. Of course, there is a new generation of black

writers like Zadie Smith, Monica Ali, Andrea Levy, and Bernardine Evaristo, who

are critically acclaimed. How do you see yourself in the literary landscape of

contemporary Britain?

MG: I do deal with the relationship between indigenous British people and

the people who come here from the former Empire, so this often means the

relationship between white and black people. I am interested in other incomers too: in my short story “The Artist,” I show the relationship between white

indigenous people and white people coming from the Balkans to work for them,

and who are undervalued. Yes, it’s a central theme. And I would relate it back
to reading about the injustices of apartheid in South Africa as a child – my early,
ignorant ambition was to go there and write against apartheid.

I guess I am proud to be one of the only white writers in my generation who
takes this theme on. The reason why people don’t take it on is not because they
are racist. It’s just that the black and white social worlds are still relatively separate
here, however much we claim to be postracist. It’s true of the worlds of white

and black writers, too. If you go to events where black writers are reading, there
are still very few, and often no, white writers in the audience. We are a country

with a great deal of intermarriage, and London is an interesting and exciting city
partly because it is a great genetic mixing place, but, for example, I recently (2014)
attended a literary salon for women. There were more than twenty intelligent,
liberal American and British women, but there wasn’t a single black woman there.

I lived for over twenty years in Kensal Green, a very mixed area, so I have black
friends and white friends in London, not all of them writers. I am attracted to
exclusions as something of an outsider myself, to a certain extent in class terms,
to a certain extent in a literary way because I have never been a typical British
novelist. This makes me very interested in other outsiders, and in the relationship
between the center and the outside.

In terms of relating to the contemporary landscape as a reader, I read the
writing of Bernardine Evaristo, of Andrea Levy, of Zadie Smith, Diran Adebayo,
Valerie Mason-John, Salena Godden, and many other black, Asian, and mixed-race
writers. They are part of the cultural pool where I swim, the water that I drink. As
a teenager I was influenced by James Baldwin. But I am indebted to earlier British
writing, too: to Stevie Smith, to Jean Rhys, to Virginia Woolf. And of course to
nineteenth-century British writers like Charles Dickens and William Thackeray; William Blake; and French and Spanish writers.

I did three degrees in English literature, so I have read widely and I know what games I am playing, with the tradition, and up to a point how I would place myself in it. I am not a postmodernist, more of a modernist, though with more politics and jokes than the average modernist. But I want to be myself, more than anything, which might explain my desire to take on new areas.

I don’t judge this or that contemporary writer for what they don’t write about. Writers take different risks and have different obsessions to write about. I do feel, though, that we often like to present ourselves as postracist, particularly in journalism, but we don’t have the literature to prove it, nor a postracist Britain. Not yet.

**MÖK:** In your new novel *Virginia Woolf in Manhattan* (June 2014), you go back to one of your major influences and place her in an American context. Did you see Woolf in your mind’s eye, for example, in modern-day Bloomsbury, where you now live some of the time?

**MG:** I probably wouldn’t write about Woolf in modern-day Bloomsbury or indeed in the Bloomsbury of her own day. I don’t want to recreate Woolf in her own time and her own space, because this would be too near to stealing her soul. I did not describe the real Woolf, I transplanted a Woolf figure into twenty-first century New York, where she never went, so that everybody knows she is not the real Virginia Woolf, she is *my* Virginia Woolf. The point is that during the time when I was learning to fall in love with, and be shocked and amazed by, America, I also brought my British heritage, in the person of Virginia Woolf, with me. Like me, she found it beautiful and visually amazing. She was also very shocked to see that Bloomsbury is almost unknown in twenty-first century New York – and by a decline in literacy and bookshops. She has much to learn, rather more than me as at least I belong to this century.

It’s something I do when I am trying to understand: I put an ignorant character in the same place, so I use my ignorance, just as I did in my Ugandan novels, particularly with Vanessa in *My Driver* – a stranger figure learning about a new culture. Ignorance is interesting: the gap between the known and the unknown. It’s all about how you survive that gap.

**MÖK:** So, you are not treating Woolf as a historical figure. I am wondering how you perceive the contemporary writers’ interest in memory and history. With the novels of Hilary Mantel, Rose Tremain, Jeanette Winterson, Pat Barker, Nicola Barker, and Sarah Waters, interest in history has almost become one of the common trends in contemporary women’s writing.

**MG:** By creating a Woolf figure in my fiction I am of course linking my book to a very powerful and charismatic figure whose audience may in some way perhaps
increase mine. (That was not my motive, but since I observe a form of parasitism in other writers’ historical fictions, I should apply the same cold eye to myself.) Tracy Chevalier identifying her novel with a very famous Vermeer painting in Girl with a Pearl Earring, Pat Barker using the first-world war poets in her Resurrection trilogy, Hilary Mantel writing about Thomas Cromwell in Wolf Hall, all of them are linking themselves to powerful memes, to use Susan Blackmore’s 1999 concept derived from Richard Dawkins’s The Selfish Gene – that is names or images that already have a strong recognition factor, which will make people automatically interested in their work.

By writing a book called Virginia Woolf in Manhattan I could be seen as taking advantage of the same phenomenon, but in many ways my project is totally different to historical fiction. My Virginia Woolf has come back to life in the twenty-first century: she is, in part, my device for showing the differences between early twentieth-century culture and twenty-first-century culture, between England and America. She wakes at a moment when the book is at a critical point: the bookshops are closing all over New York. My Virginia Woolf has to understand cyberspace – both our addiction to it and the terrible, fascinating conundrum that inside her modern companion’s computer there is knowledge about her own husband’s, sister’s, friends’ lives after her own death, and images of them as she never saw them (she tries to open a laptop with a fruit knife at one point.) She is fascinated by some new forms of freedom, appalled by others.

All that is an invention, but I did have to deal with some aspects of her real personal history- if she came back to life, she would have to remember, and try to come to terms with her suicide and its effects on those she left behind; she would also have to bear the sorrow of knowing that everyone she knew has died.

Yet she is happy to be alive again, and excited. And glad to find that her reputation sits so high with us. It was enormous fun, though a huge challenge, to write.

MÖK: Writing is a challenge; there are always some preconceived ideas about writing and fiction, some taboos, some ghosts that die hard. Speaking of Woolf, do you have ghosts or angels to kill while writing?

MG: A lecture I wrote in 1996, published by Birkbeck as How May I Speak in my Own Voice – there’s an updated version of it in the forthcoming Gylphi collection of critical essays edited by Sarah Dillon and Caroline Edwards – lists the taboos most writers have to overcome, social taboos against speaking about death, class, race, etc. I don’t have the same angels or demons to kill as Woolf, of course. I did not have a mother who was taught to be an angel and a beauty, like Woolf’s mother, Julia Prinsep Jackson. I identify Woolf’s claim in “Professions for Women” that women writers cannot write freely about the body, and sex, as a specific claim to action, and I do write about sex, through Woolf, in this book – it is a taboo I think modern women feel much freer to break. Of course, like Woolf, like all writers,
I am afraid of negative judgements of my work, but not enough to change or muffle what I write.

I did have specific fears rewriting about Woolf, because she is such a dominant figure in the canon, and she is so gifted, such a flexible, natural writer. I can’t better her voice, but because I have been reading her for such a long time and know her work so well, perhaps I found part of my own voice that was believable for her perceptions. There are many many things she could do and I can’t, but I must concentrate on the things I can do and she couldn’t, and fortunately there are some of those. I do more satire, I am less internal, and I have the advantage of my very different class and educational background, so much more broadly based than hers.

I have good ghosts as well as bad. I was enriched by my own mother, who was very verbal, very funny, very accepting, and encouraging to me as a writer. My family have no literary writers before me, and yet there were fluid female voices. My grandmother, who was a domestic servant, wrote and sold birthday card verses, my mother wrote verses and stories for competitions in magazines and newspapers and found rhyming very easy and natural, and my daughter also has the rhyming gene. In the female line, we all chatter like birds.

MÖK: There is now a young voice in this female line; your daughter Rosa Rankin-Gee is also a writer. She won the first Paris Literary Prize of 10,000 euros with her unpublished novella The Last Kings of Sark. Since then she has published (2014) an extended version of that work with Virago. How do you feel about this as a writer and as a mother?

MG: I felt immensely happy and proud that Rosa won the prize, her writing is, as the Times reviewer said, “stunning” – and yet there are also anxieties. You feel protective to your children. This profession is a wonderful one, but it’s one where you make yourself vulnerable to rejection, and you have to be very determined. It can take a very long time to succeed. Rosa is active, sunny, and very sociable: I am less sociable, so I thought she would do something different from me. She always loved writing stories but she also loved singing and writing songs, and I half-hoped she would go that way because it might be more fun for her. However, whenever she showed me something she had written I said it was wonderful – because it was, she is a very, very good writer. We E-mail and text each other all the time with jokes, it is like a verbal river between us.

There is also, maybe, a sense in which, though different, we are part of one another. Perhaps if she does become a writer I will feel freer to die one day, because the genetic line of writing will go on.

On the other hand I don’t want her to be seen as part of me by others. “Oh, yes, of course she is a writer because Maggie was a writer, of course Maggie helped her!” I don’t want to take anything away from her. I am very glad that the entries in the Paris Literary Prize were anonymous to the end.

There aren’t many mother-daughter writer duos. But there is Anita Desai and Kiran Desai, who I interviewed together on stage at the South Bank. They were
very relaxed and loving with each other. Anita never won the Booker, but Kiran did, so I always wondered how Anita felt about that. She told me in effect, “I am so glad Kiran didn’t have to suffer as I did in the early days.” Now I understand what she meant: I am so glad the writing life has begun more easily for Rosa.

**MÖK:** Your work represents similar difficulties, tensions and challenges of being a writer, and shows intellectuals, journalists, editors, novelists, and scholars who have to tackle many problems to survive. How do you feel about writing about “the writer”?

**MG:** I do do that, and yet my fictional writers are always in the context of many other kinds of people with different professions and life-styles. I don’t want to do novels that are just self-conscious novels. I am aware of the world, looking out of my window, the sycamore tree, the wood-pigeons, the roofs of many houses, people hurrying to work, and I want to go out and meet them all.

Back to writers; Moira is the first, Angela the second, caricature of parts of me – not so much caricature as puppet-figure. In *The Flood* I think I was most aware of doing portraits of writers and the different way in which their lives may go. I was consciously making a conflict and contrast between Angela, who became a successful literary writer and Moira, an earlier incarnation of myself, who never escaped from academia, and was wretched. I am actually neither of them because I have neither become a bestseller nor an academic, but the conflict between them was very interesting to me. Moira is writing a study of Angela, but is mad with jealousy.

**MÖK:** And then we have Vanessa and Mary, two other women writers in conflict, both in *My Cleaner* and *My Driver*. These novels feature Mary Tendo, the cleaner, as an antagonist to our woman writer, creative writing professor Vanessa Henman, with a good dose of comedy. Thinking of your earlier works, I think this comic voice starts a new phase in your writing. Would you agree?

**MG:** Yes! After I escaped from *The Flood*, I wanted to do comedy. I needed to write about this wonderful, invigorating Uganda, which gave me a new writing life after I went there on an exchange for Cheltenham Festival in 2003. *My Cleaner* and *My Driver*, both inspired by Uganda, are very happy books; they have a lot of comedy, a lot of humor. Many readers enjoyed these books, alone or in reading groups, and both books sold their film rights.

And, yes, there is Vanessa – “Ah, Vanessa,” as I sigh in *My Driver*. Of course Vanessa is not me, only now perhaps could I feel safe enough to do a complete parody of me, a ridiculous woman who has written two unsuccessful novels and has a painfully brittle ego, but with some physical similarities to me or to the way I might be perceived.

But making comic versions of yourself can make other people uneasy. Doris Lessing, who in her late years became a friend, said she really liked *My Driver*, but
she was uneasy with my presentation of myself. I think it was something she would not do herself: in her fiction she rarely if ever makes the writer figure ridiculous. I think she wanted to say “You are not like this,” and perhaps she felt it was self-wounding. But actually I enjoyed laughing at myself. Perhaps it was preemptive? Most people don’t want to mock themselves, but I don’t mind, because I know I am really not Vanessa at all. Because I could make her up, I cannot be like her.

About the relationship between Vanessa and Mary Tendo, the Ugandan woman who in the first book works for her: I am saying that as well as the writers we all know of, there are all these other writers, like Mary, who are not heard. They might have the talent but not the chance. Some of them might be seen as servants or inferiors because we don’t know who they really are (this is also the theme of my short story, “The Artist,” I published in 2003). In My Cleaner, sections of the book are from the autobiography that Mary Tendo is secretly writing. Mary has a more powerful voice than Vanessa’s as a writer, and a publisher picks out a piece of her writing that Mary has secretly inserted among that of Vanessa’s creative writing students. Yet in the sequel, My Driver, Mary has not become a writer, because she quarrelled with the publisher who tried to change the way she wrote: instead she is successful in hotel management. But her failure as a writer reflects the truth that there is no large-scale publishing industry in Uganda, and that Ugandan writers who try to publish in the United Kingdom have little chance. So I am just trying to reflect the fact that there are people out there with powerful stories to tell, but many of them are forced to do something else instead.

Nevertheless, Mary is happy, she has made a life for herself and had another child – I am not saying the Ugandan writer is a tragic figure, they are possibly less tragic than us with all our illusions and competitions. And, of course, now that some writers like Moses Isegawa and Jackee Batanda are starting to make it in the international arena, we can hope that things are changing.

**MÖK:** The author today is more of a public figure, giving readings and signing books, responding to events happening around, writing for papers, teaching and giving interviews, etc. Do you think this affects the writer’s choice of subject, attitude, or style? How do you see the place of the contemporary author in this continuum?

**MG:** I am very interested in what the initial readers I show it to say, and also in what private readers say after publication. I listen to what they say and I have learned from it. But I must also be true to myself and my own observations and opinions. It is not the response of publishers I am most interested in, important though that is, pragmatically. I learned from the early rejections of The White Family not to be deterred by publishers. I showed My Cleaner and My Driver to two good Ugandan writers for their comments, and I made many changes accordingly. But it is no good trying to write to win readers. A woman writer particularly must beware of writing to please; I used to try too hard to please everyone,
parents, boyfriends, everyone. I still try to please socially, but not in my writing. On the other hand, I think it is very bad manners to write with a difficulty that is not deserved or earned, so in that way I do think of the readership: will they understand this? Could I make it clearer while still being true to my intention? That is something I have integrated into my style. I hope I have made it into a particular kind of machine that incorporates respect for the reader and wanting to be understood.

**MÖK**: Your novels deal with complex social problems; they offer a critical perspective, yet do it without the burning anger of the traditional satirist. As such, they are examples to what Katherine Hume calls “diffused satire,” making criticism in a way “less simple, less partisan.” I am wondering if you see social commentary as something essential in your writing.

**MG**: I am interested in the context in which my work will be received. I am interested in social satire, and I can’t look at my society without laughing a little, of course. Satire helps you deal with certain aspects of life, but only empathy and a long, deep look helps you understand others. A completely satirical view, from outside, would be for me over-controlling, because that would dictate my material rather than letting it grow organically and from within. I don’t want to describe people as types; only very minor characters are seen as a joke. If I am anything, I am more like a “sceptical realist,” the name Elaine Showalter suggested in the interview she did with me for She Writes (Dec. 2009). So I am partly a realist, yet I am aware that the world I am creating is artificial, just as Thackeray was in Vanity Fair, so that’s where the “sceptical” bit comes in. But I also love life, and this is not a satirical perspective, more a lyrical one.

**MÖK**: Almost all of your novels present a crowded, panoramic picture of the world: the educated and the drop-outs, the rich and the poor, the politically aware and the ignorant, young and old, and many major and minor characters. These scenes evoke both a strong sense of community and a deep-seated hostility, or a chronic indifference. Is it because there is an underlying need or longing for unity in them?

**MG**: What I long for is a sense of completeness, of understanding, enfolding all difference. I always want to include at least one big public scene in a novel. In Where Are the Snows, for example, rich, spoiled Alexandra is at the millennium party in New York and the crowd is all surging around, feeling together. And she is suddenly lonely. Although she is one of the self-elected rich and “special” people, she just wants to be one of the crowd. I think I feel in carnivals and demonstrations and days off, everyone has a new role and can escape their normal selves: these are “holy” times, holidays when all the rules are suspended. In Light Years (1985) there is a scene at Tucktonia, a real-life miniature model Britain, a
public context where I say and show something about our whole society. I do have a yearning for wholeness, and maybe that’s why I like these big scenes.

When I look at the security state, its evils seem to stem from secrecy and conspiracy. Secrecy and conspiracy come from fear and breed more of it. I don’t like secrets and I don’t really even like confidences, because they set out to make a secret club, and you include one person by, say, excluding six others. Maybe I like big public scenes in my novels because I grew up in a nuclear family and later had my own small family, and I always wanted to have a bigger one. You’re right.

MÖK: You also write about relationships, marriage, problems that couples can have. You write about sex through your characters. For instance, in My Animal Life, you write frankly about your life as a young woman and later as a wife, a partner. You do it without resorting to the fantastic, gothic, or grotesque. How do you manage this delicate balance while writing about sex as a woman writer?

MG: I have always thought sex is something very interesting and enjoyable to write about, though it’s challenge to write about it well, not embarrassingly. It is part of adult life and part of being a human being. I personally enjoy sex, and in my work, repressed sexual urges drive people mad. Virginia Woolf’s remarks about sexual taboos show that it’s good that women can now write freely about the body, and that visual artists like Tracey Emin can show the sexual body so graphically in her work. There aren’t that many writers who write well about sex: Nabokov does it beautifully, and in a high literary way, and Somerset Maugham, surprisingly, wrote brilliantly about heterosexual sex in Cakes and Ale. I don’t like the style of Anäis Nin, for example: too gushy. The novelist Monique Roffey’s new memoir about her sexual liberation late in adult life, With the Kisses of His Mouth, is very good I think, truthful about her feelings and about the physical acts. I did not like Catherine Millet’s very famous The Sexual Life of Catherine M: it’s a kind of female Don Juan book, but it is an endless series of sexual encounters, with no humanity or feeling and no sense of the woman having pleasure. To me, if I am going to write about sex, I will write about sexual pleasure. But there are still taboos. In my memoir My Animal Life, sex is just a small part of the whole tapestry, but I say one thing, which is obvious to everybody, that one of the things men like very much is being given oral sex. It’s just a sentence really, but it was enough to make two very silly middle-aged male writers giggle together at a literary event. That’s only interesting because it shows there is still a taboo about women writing about sex.

MÖK: I think that your work deals with gender issues in a very effective way without being over-graphic. What is your vision of writing about gender?

MG: I do deal with gender issues all the time, but not in a conscious or preprogramed way. I do not feel the need to show positive female role models, for example: what we are now as women is partly the result of the deformations of the past, and we are far from perfect. But of course I have very strong female
friendships, and if I am a judge in a competition, I ideally want an equal number of women and men on the shortlist. I want women’s work to be looked at with the same respect as men’s. That’s in real life, though. I don’t think fiction has political responsibilities, I don’t want to have any “ought”s, or I will become unfree and therefore untruthful.

MÖK: Speaking of truth; well, there are sad, truthful passages in your writing about loss of beauty, of youth, and ageing, ageing women and men. Do you see ageing as an important theme in your writing?

MG: Loss is integral to life. Each day, another bit of it is gone. Of course through diaries, photographs, mementoes you try to save beautiful images, you try to save your life. But I don’t think ageing women are one of my main themes. In my first published story, “Rose On The Broken” (1983), in Granta, I wrote about an ageing woman, but I was very young at the time. I am not a Botox person, nor obsessed with ageing. I am not anxious in that respect, partly because I have a husband who is blind (not literally), and who makes me feel beautiful. Angela Carter once said something to me on a train that was like a revelation; there will always be men who will look at you, they’ll just be men with white hair. I love that – and her for saying it. But of course ageing is a great theme of literature, and I was always aware of being young, that it was something special that would not last. I am still aware of being lucky: my body still helps me, I can hurry, I can exercise, and I am well. One wants to keep hold of these precious things, though. I find goodbyes very hard to deal with, I don’t like goodbyes, and I don’t like endings, endings in my daughter’s life for instance, the end of junior school, the end of this and that. It’s part of an elegiac sensibility.

MÖK: There is a lot in your writing about art and artists as well as writing and authors. We have characters who are art students, art dealers, and collectors, as well as works by famous artists featuring as integral to the setting, like Munch in Where Are the Snows, Hopper in The Flood, Bonnard in Light Years. And they also make strong thematic suggestions. How do you find writing about visual art?

MG: Visual art is my passion, so that’s why it’s always in my books. I probably prefer it to music or writing. It’s something I have written about, but not enough. I would like to review more. I have written a few long pieces about art: I interviewed Paula Rego for the Telegraph and wrote about Hopper and Turner, for example, for the New Statesman, and reviewed the major “African Remix” art exhibition at the South Bank for the TLS (the Times Literary Supplement). These were important pieces of work to me. There’s an essay called “The Deluge” that I wrote for a collection of essays called Writing on the Wall: Women Writers on Women Artists. The Tate asked a dozen women writers to choose their favourite paintings by female artists, and hung them in an exhibition, and the essays were published to accompany it. I chose Winifred Knights’s painting “The Deluge” from
the stacks. And that essay, “The Deluge,” is the origin of *The Flood*, the novel, and the brave little red-clad girl in the painting was the inspiration for Gerda, Angela Lamb’s rebellious daughter in *The Flood*.

**MÖK:** Many of the critical scenes in your novels have a visual dimension too. The funeral scene in *The White Family*, for instance, gives a vivid portrayal of people from different families, origins, and belief systems together. Funerals are outstanding in your work. There are also vivid birth scenes in *Where Are the Snows*, *My Cleaner*, and *Grace* (1988). Do you use them as structural devices?

**MG:** Of course birth and death are great energisers and shapers of human life, and therefore of plots and books. But death has a particular meaning for me. The great taboo in my family home was death. I talk about this in the Birkbeck College lecture mentioned earlier. My father was born in 1914, and his mother’s two brothers, the only two boys in the family, were both killed in the 1914–1918 war. His mother mourned for years, which would have been his formative early childhood, so he became allergic to mourning and never went to funerals. There was a strict veto by my father: we mustn’t talk about death or even time passing or the past. There was no life insurance and was no pension for my mother. He liked to say “You mustn’t look back.” So naturally my first novel was called *Dying, in Other Words* (1981) and was all about death – the return of the repressed.

**MÖK:** As you write about birth, you also explore the theme of motherhood. You also wrote a story for *Fruits of Labour*, a collection of short stories on motherhood. How do you relate your experience of motherhood to your writing about it?

**MG:** The birth of my daughter changed my life and was probably the happiest day of my life. But I know some women who did not like the joyous way I wrote about birth and the happiness of the new mother in *Where Are the Snows*. One of the reviewers, Maureen Freely, pregnant at the time and now a friend of mine, detested those passages, and I know all births are not joyful. I never knew I wanted to be a mother, it was never a part of my universe, but it came, and it was the strongest experience, of my life, so of course I put that in my books. I don’t want to be coercive by suggesting that having children always brings happiness. It doesn’t. For my generation of women it was enough of a struggle to become ourselves, and many of us did not have children, nor want them. I don’t think parenthood has to be biological, though: it is just the human need to give new life. My character Grace is in her eighties and childless when she helps a young girl to give birth in a very important scene in my novel *Grace*, and I am saying that Grace in a sense is the parent of that new baby, just as Arthur in a sense fathers the villain Bruno when he picks him up and restrains him.

**MÖK:** You have many important child characters. They often take us away from the philosophical worries and back to the heart of life, to the here and now.
You also feature lazy teenagers, depressed, different, standing out and lonely – Justin in *My Cleaner*, Jamil in *My Driver*; young children left behind in *Where Are the Snows*, the son in *Light Years*, the daughter in *Lost Children*, and the babies in *My Cleaner* and *Where Are the Snows*. Do they help you envision the future, and comment on the present? How do you see them as readers? I mean, do you think about a young readership at all?

**MG:** Yes, I do think about the young readership. Teenagers and young people like my books actually. Particularly *The Ice People*, because that has rebellious teenagers in it, and there are lots of jokes against adults. Teenagers are often jesters, or they criticize implicitly by rebellion or depression. In *My Cleaner* and *My Driver* I write about the depressed children of ambitious single women who have lost the support of their families. Both Mary and Vanessa left the country to go to the city and in some respects moved into a void. Justin is the child of a writer mother who is socially isolated; Davey Luck in *Light Years* is the son of a selfish single mother. But many of my children are thoughtful, witty, and physical. There are happy, if ignorant, teenage girls in *The Flood*; Davey, in *Light Years*, is a very wise boy, wiser than his mother, with an understanding of politics and the conceptual intelligence to looks at the stars, whereas Lottie is characterized by blindness. Davey’s friend Smeggie is a kind of David Bowie figure, a jester whose theft helps Lottie see how rich she is. Children are very often part of comedy, satire, and disruption.

Gerda, who first appeared in *The Flood*, daughter of the writer Angela Lamb, is the central child in my new novel. I took her name from Gerda, the heroine of Hans Andersen’s great fairy-story *The Snow Queen*, a girl who goes out into the world alone to find and rescue her friend, a boy, Kay – Gerda saves Kay from the icy queen with her courage but also with her love. She kisses the boy – not the usual pattern of the boy kissing the girl – and the kiss and her hot tears melt the splinter of glass in his heart. (There are other fascinating female figures in *The Snow Queen* — the Robber Maiden is boyish, animal, half in love with Gerda, an ambivalent, possibly lesbian girl, very brave and resourceful; she lives with, and enslaves, animals, and is happy with her animal nature.) Any way, Gerda is the wise child in *The Flood*, the daughter of Angela Lamb. In *Virginia Woolf in Manhattan*, Gerda has become a stroppy, creative teenager, and she’s the third important character in that book. She befriends Virginia Woolf after initially detesting the idea of her.

Gerda has to make her mother Angela give her what she needs. This is something I felt with my own daughter. Not always, but sometimes, she could tell me what she needed, what I was doing wrong as a mother.

**MÖK:** You published a collection of short stories, an autobiography, and novels from different subgenres, but a strong narrative voice is central to all of them, a voice waiting to be heard and understood. In return, with their stories, it is these voices that bring the talismanic power of words to warn, share, and heal. How much of your motivation is to tell stories? Considering the musical quality of your writing and the presence of rhythm revealed through repeated words and phrases
and through rhythmical shifts in narrative perspectives, I wonder if you would like to try your hand in a different genre, move toward oral storytelling, or recording your writing?

MG: I will always love storytelling. But I sometimes want to do it in other ways than fiction.

In 2010 I attended a playwriting course at the Arvon creative writing foundation as a student, though I usually teach for them. What they taught me about writing plays fed into *Virginia Woolf in Manhattan*, much of which is set out like a play. Melanie Abrahams, the arts entrepreneur and curator, asked me to write a monologue for performance on the South Bank. I wrote one about my mother and the relationship between my generation of women and her generation of women, later broadcast on Radio 4. I envisage a series, maybe called *The Mother Monologues*, both like and unlike the famous *Vagina Monologues*, about the complex relationships of mothers and daughters. I want to go on finding new things, experimenting. My own daughter, now aged 27, has been an inspiration. She loves DJ-ing. Through her I’ve come to lots of music that has found its way into my novels. I always liked soul and jazz, but through Rosa I discovered hip-hop.

Maybe my new attraction to performance is partly based in insecurity about the future of the conventional printed text. But storytelling in one form or other will not die.

MÖK: You like telling stories, and to be told stories: I am wondering which contemporary writers you admire. Which contemporary writers, do you think, will be read as classics representing the complexities of the age?

MG: I read everything of J. M. Coetzee’s. I admire his sense of form, the way not a word is wasted, his unflinching intelligence, his big vision of what we are: but his eye is too cold to love.

I love Alasdair Gray, the Scottish writer and visual artist. A genius. I particularly loved *1982 Janine* and *Poor Things*.

I love, love Bernardine Evaristo’s *The Emperor’s Babe* and *Lara*, and I read all her work – funny, surprising, and moving.

Zadie Smith is a subtle writer and a wonderful critic, human, sharp, insightful. I love confessional-come-satirical poetry like Lucy English’s and Salena Godden’s, which also have heart: I thought Salena Godden’s 2014 autobiography, *Springfield Road*, was exceptional.

I read everything of Doris Lessing’s and Anita Desai’s. Kiran is very, very good too. I would nominate *Fasting, Feasting* and *The Artist of Disappearance* by Anita Desai as modern classics.

MÖK: You are not just a novelist; you also teach how to write novels. As a judge for many prizes, you also see many unpublished works – you represent
this in a fictional form in your My Cleaner, while the cleaning lady’s manuscript is accepted, that of the creative writing professor’s ignored.

**MG:** Mary gets the “Yes” from the publisher because she has a) a genuinely original voice and b) genuinely original subject-matter. These things can’t be taught. But everyone has a story, if they can hear their own voice. (Most people can’t hear their own authentic, internal voice.). Then you need the willingness to keep rewriting till it is as good as you can make it. Woolf had an innate genius for writing, but she also wrote reams nearly every day. Her Diaries were the place where she exercised her writer’s muscles – you get better at a craft by doing it.

**MÖK:** What do you think are the strong and weak points of contemporary writing? What would you suggest to young writers, young women writers?

**MG:** But it’s too easy to say “The younger generation don’t read.” Some of them don’t, but some of us, the older generation, don’t keep reading new things either. I think many young writers have a lightness and speed and directness that partly come from constantly E-mailing, texting, and tweeting.

I just hope they will keep trying big things. It’s easy to lose confidence with the break-up of all the old illusions and the infection of everything by irony. In the end, irony doesn’t get you through the big things in life, birth, death, the future of humans on a stressed planet. It’s fun to write about meaninglessness, drinking or drug taking and hangovers, but it’s limited, too. If the old meanings don’t work, be brave enough to find new ones. And if the big publishers are only interested in making money, try small publishers or self-publish – Virginia Woolf did! Keep writing and hoping. I have.

Doğuş University, Turkey
mozyurtkilic@dogus.edu.tr