



## Creative Writing

### *Approaches to Contemporary Fiction*

#### **Derek Neale**

Many of Jane Rogers' novels are contemporary. In her novel, *Island*, for instance, in the character of Nicky, what was her approach to that sort of voice?

#### **Jane Rogers**

Nicky's voice itself, Nicky's rant, is the substance of the novel and I heard that in my head as I wrote it and I saw the book, really, as a dramatic monologue, if you like. Even to the point at which I had discussions with my editor about lay-out, because I felt that as a dramatic monologue, we needed to give it the space that a script would have. I think I kind of worked around and around to get to Nicky really, because as with every novel, I find, what you end up with is very different from what you started with. [Laughs] I started with a, what felt like a rather poised piece written in the third person by a narrator who was actually one of the women who run the vegetarian restaurant on the island, they have a tiny appearance in the novel now, and she narrated these dramatic events in quite a hands-off, distant, poised kind of way, all this drama and fury and matricide or whatever it was and I thought it was a really nice way to tell the story. And I proceeded along those lines for quite a while. Until I eventually realised that I was distancing myself from the thing that I was interested in which was what was going on in Nicky's head and so then I had to kind of chuck it all out, keep my plot but start again with this very insistent voice. And I didn't find her voice difficult. Once I allowed myself to go into the first person, I had various little sort of flags in my mind of the kind of thing I was looking for, and one of the inspirations for Nicky is actually the opening lines of Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground*, which go:

*I am a sick man. I am an angry man. I think there is something wrong with my liver.*

[Laughter] And it was that kind of sense of sort of grumpy, kind of, you know, burr, here I am and you're going to listen to this, [laughs] even though it's probably not going to be very nice, that I was interested in and I was particularly interested in doing that for a female narrator because I think some would say there is perhaps a degree of prejudice against a female narrator not being nice whereas it's more acceptable for a male narrator to not be nice. And the whole point about Nicky is she's not likeable. I never wanted her to be.

#### **Derek Neale**

About Dostoevsky, *The Notes from Underground*, the narrator there is often seen as the archetypal unreliable narrator.

#### **Jane Rogers**

So yes, to what extent is she unreliable? Well, obviously, that's a game that I'm playing and the reader has to figure out how unreliable she is or isn't. One of the things that I was very interested in trying to achieve with her was that I wanted it to be clear that she had had a really, really horrible life and a lot of bad things had happened to her but I did not want the smallest ounce of self-pity in this because I think that's an absolute killer. So I wanted her to be pretty tough and for there to be to be quite a lot of black humour about the things that had happened to her. And a degree of self-contempt for her own inability, really, to hack it. So, what I think happened in the writing was that, in developing that quite tough tone for her and that quite ironical attitude to the bad stuff that had happened, I think that you sort of feel there is a kind of steely basis of truth in quite a lot of what she's saying which comes from her own distancing from it. Whereas a more self-indulgent narrator would, perhaps, be more obviously unreliable. I mean, there obviously are moments in the story where she's unreliable and you don't always trust her memories and her analysis of what's happened. But what I think and

hope is that certainly by about half way through the book, the reader is pretty convinced that most of what you're reading is pretty much what's happened.

**Derek Neale**

There's a certain paradox about the way she narrates in the novel, isn't there? There's a section called Lies...

**Jane Rogers**

Yeah.

**Derek Neale**

...in which she admits to everything that she says is lies.

**Jane Rogers**

She has actually tried to protect herself from the nastiness's of the world that she lives in by lying. So she's lied in order to get things to her advantage, to get moved from a children's home that she doesn't like and so on and so forth, she's told lies in that way. But also, that she sees lies as a refuge and that ties in with her love of story-telling. And so that lies provide an escape from unpleasantness and difficulty. And obviously, that notion that story-telling can take you out of a world which is terrible into a world which is wonderful is really the overarching idea of the book. Because in a sense, I mean, I conceived the whole book as a fairy tale which is about transformation so Nicky turns from a person who is incapable of love and incapable of being loved into a person who is capable. That transformation, that fairy tale transformation happens to her in the course of the book.

*You want to know what it's like being brought up in care? It's like the boy in the Snow Queen. He gets a splinter of ice in his eye, it changes everything he sees to cold and ugly. But number two is the real killer. The real reason I decided to go after her. There's a thing I used to get. I call it fear. Like this. I would feel it coming on. Like you see the shadow of a big building slanting across the street in front of you and you keep walking and you step from sunlight into the shadow and you feel the chill. Night was the worst. As soon as I closed my eyes, I heard noises. A hedge. A thicket of noises springing up around me. ( I wrap) alarm clock's tick (in the jumper, which) folded paper in the rattling window frame. Unplug the roaring fridge and the hissing radio. Someone upstairs flushes a toilet and the intensity of the noise drenches me with sweat. As I demolish each sound, there's a new intrusion, a shout, thudding footsteps, the roar of aircraft, the dripping of taps, the pressure of wind against the panes, the crackle of electricity in the wires and the gurgle of water in the pipes. There's a far away sound behind this forest of noise. I think it's someone screaming. I pull back the curtain a couple of inches. There's no one there. Just empty pavement and road, like a stage set. I'm frozen, waiting. Staring into the dark street.*