



Angela Carter has been described as 'the most consistently interesting and original writer of British fiction today'. Among her most recent books are *The Passion of New Eve* and *The Bloody Chamber*. The film *The Company of Wolves* is based on one of her short stories, and she also co-wrote the screenplay. This interview is taken from a session at *Marxism Today's Left Alive*.

*Are you conscious of directing the reader to think in a certain way when you write?*

It's very tricky because people are different and people have different responses to fiction. But it's impossible to direct and I think it wouldn't be a good thing if you could do it. Reading a book is like re-writing it for yourself. And I think that all fiction should be open-ended. You bring to a novel, anything you read, all your experience of the world. You bring your history and you read it in your own terms. And therefore it's impossible to quantify what the reaction should be. I went for a long time thinking that perhaps really I should write agitprop, but I couldn't see how I could. It would come out very odd, it would come out most peculiar. It would come out in such a way that I couldn't imagine anybody enjoying reading it. And this seemed to cut away, to pull the carpet out from under myself.

*If you are writing propaganda you are using the conscious part of your mind to work out what you want to say. Do you do this with fiction? For example, could Countess P in *Nights at the Circus* be Mrs Thatcher as well as other people - other villains?*

Well, of course, she's not really a character. She's a proposition. In that story there are two characters. There's the main character, the woman - Olga. And she's a proper rounded, three-dimensional character with a history and with a personality, with a lot of low peasant cunning. We know a lot about her. We know a little bit less about the person that she makes contact with. But it's obvious that it's a real person even though she's just hinted at. But the countess - she's the law, she's a certain kind of authority. And therefore she doesn't have to have a character. She doesn't have to

# The Company of Angela Carter

## An Interview

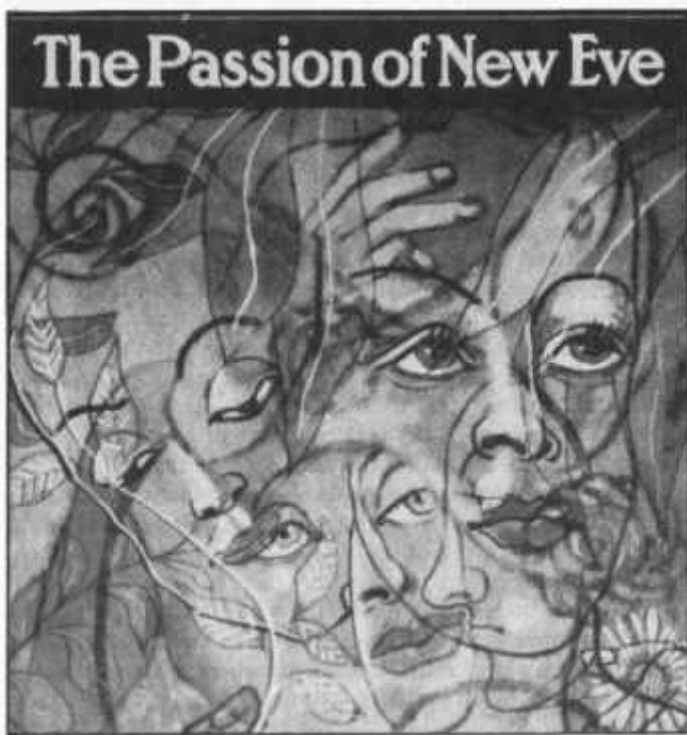
have all this naturalistic apparatus, because all she has to do is sit in the chair and go round and round and round, and be authority. And therefore you can project upon her Mrs Thatcher or the Pope. She can be any authoritarian figure. One of the difficulties of writing fiction that's supposed to have a lot of meaning and can be read as allegory, is the tension between what people expect from the fiction, which is rounded three-dimensional characters that they can believe in, have empathy with, and the fact that that kind of character doesn't carry all that much meaning. They can't carry all that much freight of meaning. They can't be all that, unless you can try very hard and make them move out of character a lot. It's a problem that Brecht grappled with, quite successfully.

*Do you think fiction that doesn't have that sort of credibility is also valid?*

I'm not sure. I quite enjoy relaxing and writing about people with pimples and ticks because the way that you make a character in 'straight' fiction is actually quite simple. You make a sort of checklist of peculiarities. The first editor I ever had said 'well, say what kind of trousers he's wearing'. In fact, creating a believable character is something that is quite schematic. There used to be a thriller writer called Peter Cheyney and all the characters in his thrillers were chain-smokers. It took me about three years to work out why this was. It was because 'he lit a cigarette', 'he inhaled thoughtfully', 'he stubbed a cigarette out' - that's 25 words already and we're working towards a strict 60,000 words. There's all kinds of functionalism about mainstream fiction.

*Can I ask you a question about your personal life, because I know you've just had a baby? How do you organise, how do you make time for work and have you had to redefine yourself as a mother?*

It was a year ago. He falls over now. I can't answer the question because I haven't actually done very much work since he was born. I keep remembering J G Ballard, who is a single parent, saying how terrific it was that he's a writer because it meant that he could look after the children as well as earning a living. I keep holding on to that. I keep saying well surely if he can do it, dammit. But in fact really neither me nor my son's father have done very much work for the last year. I really don't know how I would have managed if I'd had children when I was young, before I'd established a body of work. I don't know what kind of a person I would have been, I might have been a much better writer. You can't guess these things. But certainly organising your life is almost impossible, especially when you're used to having a certain kind of rhythm of work which has to be completely changed. You only have so much time before it's necessary to go and pick a small person up. I was forced after 43 years of evasion, to come to terms with my own incompetence. There are lots of things that you can brush under the carpet about yourself until you're faced with somebody whose needs won't be put off. You can't actually tell them to go away and come back in five minutes. I realised that I'm actually an extremely incompetent person and I idle a lot. I've got to learn to live with that. But I think I was too old to redefine myself. I couldn't redefine myself as a mother. I'm proud of my child but I'm not proud of myself as a mother.



*Surely you're wrong. Women much older than you are still redefining themselves everyday of their lives, as women and as people?*

I know what you mean. Obviously you change. One changes all the time but I can't get into the habit of thinking that my being has changed completely just because I've done what most women do.

*Do you make an effort to write differently when you are bringing male characters into your work?*

One of the things that people always say about women writers is that the male characters lack credibility. So when I was a girl I made a conscious effort to make the male characters as credible as I possibly could and to write sometimes in the first person, male. It still didn't stop people criticising the writing. I suppose I do what I tell writing students: I occasionally get a young man sidling up to me and saying that he was very nervous about writing even the character of a woman, about *making* female characters, these days, because he thinks that we're all going to stand around hitting him with our handbags. And I say, this is perfectly correct, 'yes indeed. This is what will happen to you.' But what you must do if you want to create a really credible woman is just imagine what you yourself would do in a particular set of circumstances and that's what she'll do. Except things like peeing against walls. We tend not to put that in nowadays. One of my students wanted to write about a pregnant woman and I said 'have you ever felt seasick?' and he said 'well, yes'. And I said 'well, there you go.' If you start off everyday, except when you were lying down, seasick, you'd start realising what it's like. Obviously I try and exercise empathy with every person I'm writing about. It's part of the task to understand things.

*How do you teach creative writing?*

I teach on an MA course at the University of East Anglia. The students on it are very highly selected, are *extremely* highly motivated. Many of them have published quite a lot of work before they come. I see my function to do exactly as a copy editor in a publishing company does: to go through a piece of fiction and say, 'look he's wearing odd socks here, what do you precisely mean, here, would so-and-so say such a thing. What are you really trying to get at?' You have to start out with people who know what they're doing from the outset.

*What about the people who can't get on a MA course in creative writing, who've had a minimal education? It's going to be a bleak future, isn't it?*

Well, it didn't matter too much 100 years ago. We were producing very, very much better writers in this country when people were leaving school between twelve and fourteen. I don't mean to be intemperate but I think this is very important. Reading and *living* are the real training for writing fiction. This may sound smug but it's true. What usually happens is that people who actually need to do it will find the time. Often it doesn't work out. People can put themselves through the most extraordinary privations to write a novel. And then it turns out it's no good. I'm afraid that's life. It has happened to me and it was very embarrassing and painful. What I used to do before I wrote a movie and became successful was to organise my life so that I would save up in order to write a novel. I'd put aside money. I'd squirrel it away in building societies. I wrote my first novel in the evenings and at weekends. It was when I was still a student and I did the typing in the summer holiday. As I got better at it, as I became more and more absorbed in the actual work and craft, then it did take me more and more time and I had to do it more and more intensively. It wasn't possible to do it in a part-time dilettantish, hobbyish sort of way. Then I really did have to start thinking about organising my life in such a way that there would be time to write fiction. I used to do a great deal of journalism to regulate the cash flow. And I'd actually have to clear a lot of that away.

*The Company of Wolves and The Bloody Chamber both reveal an extraordinary empathy between human beings and animals.*

Well, we are animals, after all. I said this once to somebody after I'd read *The Company of Wolves* story. She was terribly upset. She said you mean we're nasty, hairy, dirty slaving *beasts*. No, no, no, it's all right. We're mammals. Bipedes, mammals, carnivorous bipedes, primates and everything. 'It's all right', I said. But she would not be comforted. It was as though a door had opened into hell. I realise I'm sentimental about furred and feathered beings but they're never dull. I have a minor but quite passionate interest in natural history, I'm a Darwinian. I like animals and I'm interested in animals. I'm also interested in human beings' projections upon animals of negative qualities, which very often the animals don't have. Take wolves - the film is a bit less of a libel on wolves than the story. But the story is an absolute libel on wolves. Wolves in the wild are really quite safe, they don't mess with human beings unless they're bothered by them. Their social organisation is somewhat fascistic but who in Britain is to complain about them. I'm interested in the division that Judo-Christianity has made between human nature and animal nature. None of the other great faiths in the world have got quite that

division between us and them. None of the others has made this enormous division between birds and beasts who, as Darwin said, would have developed consciences if they'd had the chance, and us. I think it's one of the scars in Western Europe. I think it's one of the scars in our culture that we have too high an opinion of ourselves. We align ourselves with the angels instead of the higher primates.

*Could we change track a bit and ask where you see yourself in the current debates in the contemporary women's movement on myths and metaphysics?*

I'm quite old-fashioned about this. If you don't believe in metaphysics, and indeed you don't approve of metaphysics, then that puts you in a certain position anyway. I'm interested in justice, really. And I think you can do an awful lot more with legislation than people will permit themselves to believe. We seem to be going through a period when the idea that the situation is hopeless has got a certain kind of dark glamour. The idea that one can do nothing seems to be attractive. A lot of people said before the last election that it doesn't matter whether you vote Labour or Tory. They were capable of saying there's no difference between them but as far as the details of everyday life are concerned there's all the difference in the world. I suppose I regard myself as just a rank and file socialist feminist really. That's all. I worry a lot, obviously. The idea of the soul is a very attractive proposition but nobody has ever been able to prove it to me. I'm very pleased I don't have religion because all the great religions of the world concur in denying women's souls and that is such a relief. That is so wonderful.

*In The Bloody Chamber you are dealing with fairy tales. Folklore seems to be central to much of your writing?*

I'm a great admirer of folklore. Truly, I think the degree to which the bourgeoisie has appropriated the culture of the poor is very interesting, it's very shocking. Fairy tales are part of the oral tradition of Europe. They were simply the fiction of the poor, the fiction of the illiterate. And they're very precisely located.

If you mention folklore in Britain, people's eyes glaze over with boredom. They associate it with people wearing white suits with bells round their legs. It is associated with the embarrassing, with the quaint. Therefore people are genuinely shocked when they look at Grimms' stories, which the Grimm brothers collected from the German peasants, to see them full of the most ghastly events. One of the stories that I don't deal with in *The Bloody Chamber* is about children who are left out in a wood because their parents would rather they starve out of their sight than under their eyes. This, of course, was an everyday fact of most people's lives in Europe until the industrial revolution. The imagery is perpetually enchanting because a lot of the imagery is the imagery of the unconscious; beautiful and refreshing, it refreshes the imagination. But the circumstances of the stories are simply transformed accounts of ordinary people's lives. It's something to do with Western Europe that these stories have gone into the bourgeois nursery and have been dissociated from the mainstream of culture.

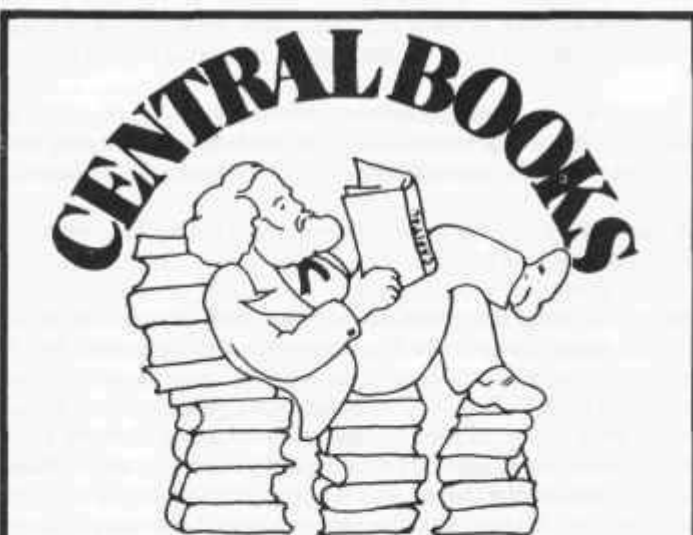
*Do you think there is anything escapist in your more recent work, especially say The Company of Wolves? Does the success of the film have anything to do with the fact that we are living in a recession?*

I would hotly deny that the movie was a piece of escapism. If you

gave me five minutes I would be able to construct an absolutely foolproof argument that would convince you that it was about the deep roots of our sexual beings. The Thatcherite censorship certainly found it subtly offensive. They couldn't put their finger on it but they knew something was wrong. Obviously, depression and recession are great for the entertainment industry and a certain kind of escapist movie is obviously going to be very big at this point in time. I don't think *The Company of Wolves* is that kind of film.

*Do you feel that in the current political climate it is important that writers are more overt in their politics?*

Yes, I suppose I do. There's a line in a poem of my youth, a poem by Alan Ginsberg called *Howl* in which he issues this dreadful warning: 'America, I am putting my queer shoulder to the wheel'. But that sense of weighty responsibility with which some writers approach this fills me with a kind of wild terror. I don't think art is as important as all that and I don't think you can do all that much with fiction. It does seem to me that artists, far from being the unconscious legislators of mankind, tend to be parasitic upon those in productive labour. And therefore we really have a big responsibility to deliver the goods. I mean most people would prefer to be artists than to work for Ford in Dagenham after all. Therefore there is a responsibility to deliver the goods, to cheer people up by suggesting that possibly there is hope. I feel that if we all put our queer shoulders to the wheel together, it may be possible to move it an inch, a quarter of an inch, a centimetre, shake it. But it's very difficult knowing where to start because a certain kind of bland quietism seems to have taken over the intelligentsia.



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