

Interlude 5: some reasons for writing

Why do people write? Please don't groan and walk away, get ready to do some thinking. Sometimes they write because they want to capture the attention of others; sometimes because they want to sort things out in their own minds. These are not polar opposites. It's common for writers to do both, or at least attempt both, at the same time. Indeed it may be true that my distinction is no distinction at all; one has only to consider people who say that they want their letters, diaries or journals destroyed, when they haven't themselves destroyed them when they were capable of doing so, to realise that writing may be a secretive form of communication even when it appears to be most withdrawn, or private.

Why do people write? Answer, to release forces – ideas too – swirling around inside them so that, having been brought into the open, they can be adopted, adapted, kicked around, believed in, justified, or anything else that can happen to an idea. Ideas are necessary. We can't live without them. Ideas straighten us out. They give us a feeling that we understand, and that's a feeling we want very much. The question 'Why?' drives most of us to despair from time to time, and some of us can hardly break free of it. The question 'How?' is an easier one; there's usually someone to show us the way, or we may enjoy working out 'how' for ourselves. But 'why' is harder, and it brings in the endlessly difficult question of what our circumstances are, that is, what is it we are trying to explain. After all, if with an agonised voice we say 'Why?' someone is sure to ask in return, 'What's bothering you?'

To this we need an answer. We need to know what the world's like. We know, every one of us, that the world's bigger than our understanding of it. If *that's* impossible to accept, we can always retreat to a faith, swallow it whole, and condemn whatever it condemns. The problem's in our minds, but if we can convince ourselves that it's in something else, external to ourselves, we can attack the external stimulus, blaming it rather than us. Oh wars, oh crusades, ideological exterminations ... when will you disappear from this earth? Never? Oh dear ...

Why do people write? To be close to other people, because writers know that there are thousands, millions, out there musing on the things that occupy themselves. Writing takes us in, where the thoughts are happening, so, if we go inward too the things that trouble us, excite us, upset us and move us to the tears we greatly desire and need, will be closer, ready, perhaps, for realisation. We know, instinctively, that we can't control our feelings unless we're close to them, just as we know, also, that our feelings and our innermost thoughts can be dangerous, so going inward to examine them can be perilous. That's when writers are handy. They're one group who have the courage to go in and look, and when they've been inside for a time, and come out again, we expect them to give us ...

... what?

A story is always welcome, just as it's good to sit yourself in a theatre and let a group of actors, on stage or in a film, do the next

couple of hours living for you. You can always rid yourself of any responsibility by saying you didn't like what you saw. A story is not only a way of being close to events, it's also a way of being close – united, even – with the others who heard it with you. A story is a communal activity, even if, the act of reading being what it is, the many, many readings of a book may take place over years, over centuries even, rather than simultaneously. In that sense, then, a story is at one and the same time, potentially, private, just the reader and the writer, and it's a communal sharing. What did the reviewers say? What's this, they're going to make it into a film! What did you think of it, I want to compare your reactions with mine. Hey, my copy's not the only copy, they've sold twenty, forty, a hundred thousand of this book! It's an idea, a collection, an experience which I'm sharing with all those people I'll never know.

This doesn't satisfy everybody all the time. Scriptures, which are sometimes stories and sometimes not, embody messages of solemnity and faith. The King James Bible, from which I heard several readings a week for ten influential years, probably taught me more about language than anything short of Shakespeare. The majesty and passion of its verses told me, and no doubt millions of others, that words well used, words responsive to the thoughts of the brain, the feelings of the heart, and all those other intimations we depend on for our sense of the universe, are as necessary to keep us alive as blood pumping in our veins. The Bible, as I say, is full of stories, but it offers more. It tells us that words, well used, chosen with vigour and perused with care, can be used to straighten the

soul. Humans are not only active – stories abound to show that – but they consider. They wonder where they are. We hope for accurate description because it helps to locate ourselves.

My thoughts are moving in this direction because I want to look at the work of another writer who became well known for her stories, but whose writing has moved for some years now in another direction, in a quest which finally, and fairly recently (as I write) gave us Beverley Farmer's *The Bone House*, (Giramondo, Sydney, 2005).