

## **Eva Merz in conversation with MAGGIE CRAIG, writer**

*Ruthven, Huntly, Friday 12/12 2003, 1 – 3.30 pm*

*Maggie has given me precise instructions of how to get to her house.*

*I pass Huntly and driver further out in the countryside, the roads getting narrower as I go. It's already almost dark and the heaviness of grey clouds covering the landscape astonishes me; I have to stop the car, grab my camera and take a few pictures. Who knows? They might turn out to be for the cover of this book.*

*Maggie and I have met before. She is the kind of woman I will immediately respect, and that's the main reason I've asked her for this interview.*

*I turn left at an old, red phone box and there's the house. Maggie takes me straight to the kitchen, and we sit down at a table next to the warmth of an old Raeburn stove. I make sure the recorder is perfectly set this time:*

*Me: Maggie I must admit that I haven't read any of your books yet. So... where are you from?*

*Maggie: I'm from Glasgow. I grew up there. I've lived in the North East for about 12 years now. We came up here because Will, my husband, is in the oil business and that's concentrated in Aberdeen.*

*And you moved into this house?*

*Yes. And it actually started me writing. Even though we were moving within what people think of as a small country, it's very diverse. The culture of the West and the culture of the North East are in many ways like chalk and cheese. It was a big chock! But a lot of things amused me, so I wrote an article for a Glasgow newspaper, The Herald, about it. you know a lot of people were moving to the North East because of the oil. I hate generalising, but nations are within nations, there's definitely a different mentality between those two places and lots of other places of course.*

*So this started you off writing. What did you do before that?*

*I did languages at university. I was a translator, mainly from German into English. And I was a Scottish Tourist Guide for 10 years, taking people around Scotland, usually Germans. They sailed to Hull in the North of England. The boat came in there and you would meet them and take them first to York, then to Edinburgh and then around Scotland. It was great because you tell stories all the time. They love stories.*

*Is that where it kind of started?*

*No, I always wrote. Like a lot of people I wrote terrible poetry when I was young and I was brought up in a family where people wrote poetry. We are supposed to be descended from a poet called Robert Tannahill, who was a poet in Paisley in the 19. century. Everyone in the family has always written poetry and a few have written articles. So it was in the blood really. But part of becoming a published writer was getting the confidence to go out there and say, "I'm a writer".*

*What was your first publishing?*

*I published a couple of things when my son was born. He's 22 now. People were going on and on and on about natural childbirth and I had a very high-tech childbirth. I got annoyed with people saying that you couldn't bond with your child if you hadn't had a natural birth. So getting angry was the impulse for writing and saying, "Yes, you can bond with your child", and if I hadn't had a high-tech birth, he might have died and I might have died. So that was the first thing. But then I didn't do much because I had two children. Then we moved to Switzerland for two years. And that helped with the writing because I was terribly lonely in Switzerland. When you're lonely you sort of fall back on your own resources.*

*I know that from travelling. That's the only time you really write long letters to your friends or even write in your diary!*

*Yes! I don't keep a diary except for when I'm miserable! I will write sheet after sheet. And I did this in Switzerland. The kids were in a nursery school and I would sit in my little car with the snow piled up outside and with a flask of coffee and write! Sometimes I wish I could still do it because there was nothing else to do. You had all that time to write and that seems wonderful to me now.*

*What happened to that writing?*

I wrote a romantic novel. In the snows of Switzerland! But that book has never sold. I've still got it. Now, when I read it, I think it's awful. But it was my "prentice piece. I would never fling it out, but also I would never let anybody read it! It's so bad and it's just unconsciously copied from every author I'd ever read.

*How many novels have you published?*

I have published 5 and 2 works of non-fiction.

*You have recently published a new novel and had a reception in Huntly?*

Yes I had a book launch in Huntly, which was great. I have had loads of support from people in Huntly. And Pat Scott of the Huntly Express has been supportive from day one. My novels are called family saga novels; they are genre novels. And they are all set in Glasgow in the first half of the 20. century. Classically these books are about a working class girl who drags herself up and makes something of herself. I think they are a cross between a love story and social history. You can sort of use great events - like the big event in Clydebank was the building of ships. And during the Depression they stopped working on the Queen Mary and everyone was thrown out of work and they were so poor. So the first book was about that and how people were trying to keep things going when there was no work. And the heroine of the first book was an artist and a potter. Working class girls were not supposed to be artists. That was of interest to me, because the people from whom I come were working class people. And they all painted or wrote or made music. Both the women and the men. Women slightly to a lesser extent because women were more likely to be making the tea, as is woman's fate, I think still today in 2003, and thinking of what to have for tea, when you've only got £ 5 to last for the weekend!

I get annoyed when I read books where the working class at that time are being portrayed as just brutish and only wanting to go to the pub and, you know, any sort of sexual encounters are nasty and horrible.

*A stereotype of working class people?*

Yes. I just read a book within my family saga genre where the working class characters are all stupid. And I think they weren't. They were kept down by the social conditions of the time and by poverty. There are so many people in my upbringing, who were creative against a background of the woman at home, when housework really was hard, and the man who was out working 8 – 10 hours a day. But he would still come home and go back out dancing or something. I suppose that's my mission in my books. They tend to get dismissed as romance because they come within that category. And, yes there is a big love story in them and that's really important, but I'm also trying to say that these people were living lives that were difficult, but they were full of grace as well. They did something with their lives. They didn't just sit and watch Big Brother.

*You have got history in your books and maybe also political ideas?*

Yeah. Well I was brought up as a socialist. My father was a socialist and I find it really hard to slough that off, really!

*Hahahaha, that's good! You said you got inspired when you moved up here, but the location is still Glasgow... why is that?*

That's because it's where my roots are. And because the publishers want urban books. They feel perhaps that modern people can't relate to rural settings. And more people live in cities. I have often thought about this. Research is more difficult when I'm not based where I'm writing about. So that means I have to go back and do speed research, as I call it! You go into the library and you say, "Get-me-the-newspapers-from-1932"! And you go through them in a very short amount of time. But the advantage is, and I have spoken to a lot of people about this, that it refines your view, like looking at it through a magnifying glass. I lived in Glasgow for 40 years, and where ever you live as you're growing up is the place that's imprinted in your head, I think. I have walked those streets so many times. I just have to close my eyes and I'm there again. In a way it would be very difficult to write about Aberdeenshire. But I have written historical articles about the North East. I'm really interested in Jacobites and the '45 Rebellion. A lot went on in the North East.

*Is that 1745?*

Yeah. That's a very romanticised period of history and it's all attached to the Highlands now. But there was an awful lot going on in the North East and I sort of got the bit between my teeth and wanted to find out about that. There was a lot going on at Cairnie and in Huntly, which was called Strathbogie then. I wrote some articles. It is good to be able to just drive for 20 minutes to be in the places where things had happened. I have to go to the places where I set my writing. I have to walk the streets and look at the buildings. I take a lot of photographs before I start writing. And

then I pin them up on my pin board. To get the feeling. I call them inspiration boards. I take photographs of buildings and of odd things, like designs of windows and the way stonework is decorated. I go through loads of books on costume and the history of clothes. I make photocopies and stick them up too. Also I go through magazines looking for my hero and heroine. It's amazing what you can write, just by looking at a picture of somebody's face. It has to be someone you don't know. It can't be a film star because you've got some sort of idea about them...

There are lots of nuts and bolts about writing, but inspiration is important. I listen to music a lot too. The book I'm currently writing is about dance halls in Glasgow in the 1930es. I've been listening to tango music. In fact Will and I went to learn Argentinean tango in Huntly, which was wonderful. It's so sensual and you had to be lead by your partner and allow him to lead you, you know, it was dead sexy! Yesterday I was listening to a tango CD we bought and I had to go upstairs and write two pages, which had just come from listening to the music.

*But tango was not the music they danced to in Glasgow was it?*

Yeah, they did tango. Tango had come over early. It became a kind of stylised tango, a less exciting tango, I think. They did the fox trot too and the quick step and the waltz and that sort of thing. And dance halls were like palaces and all these working class people would go out after work and dance the night away. That's what the current book is about. I'm having a lot of fun with that, dancing around the living room!

*What about your non-fiction books?*

The first book was called "Damn' Rebel Bitches", which is about the women of the 1745 Jacobite Rebellion. Conventionally there's only one woman ever mentioned. That's Flora McDonald, whose picture you'll see on short bread tins, and there's Bonnie Prince Charlie, all-handsome, kissing her hand.

I knew there were an awful lot of women involved. I've read about it. 1995 was the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the '45 Rebellion. I thought that somebody would write about the women, but they just kept writing about Flora McDonald. So again I got angry. Anger is a great push, I find. I started writing and that's become a kind of definitive book about the women of the '45. A lot of people say, "How could women get involved, they didn't even have the right to vote?" Which is such a stupid observation because men didn't have the vote in 1745 either. If you wanted to conduct politics you went out to a battlefield. So women could be just as powerful in raising men to send to battle or in organising supplies or being spies, passing on information. So I have a mission about these women. My second book was about Duff House, "Footsteps on the Stairs". There's masses of information at Duff House, which was built round about the same time as the '45 Rebellion. There are accounts of people selling wood and stone; a lot of them are women. So women were in business and women were doing things. I think it was the Victorians that made us think that women have just always been in the home. I think that's wrong; it's a false image of the past. And I end up being in the home myself!!!

*Where do you do your research about these women?*

For that you have to go out and do the leg work, which I love. You start with some of the older books. A lot of them have references to the State Papers Domestic, which are kept in London at the Public Record Office. And there's something called Baga de Secretis, which is bag of secrets in Latin. These papers would have been kept secret up until a certain time. Now we can read them, 250 years later. I phoned the Public Record Office and said these papers are about Scottish people, and asked if they would not have been sent back to Scotland, and the answer was, "You're not independent yet!" So I had to go down there. And it's wonderful. You look at the catalogues and you'll think that it sounds interesting, but you're not quite sure what you're getting. The best thing was once when I was tired after speed researching for hours and hours and really wanted to go back to my hotel. And I opened up a brown cardboard box and inside were all these love letters from Jacobite soldiers to their women at home. The letters had been captured when the men marched into England. It was heart breaking. Some of it was like, "Sell the cow and make sure you get a good price for it..."

*WOW!*

Some of them are so eloquent and the really touching thing was that they all said, "Don't worry - we'll be home by Christmas" and you know how they said that during the First World War and you think that soldiers must always have said that, "Don't worry..." I love that! I love that research where, suddenly, you've got a real person there. And if you meet them again in a different box, in a different library, you say, "Oh, it's you again..."

*Yeah, you get to know people...*

Yes, you can pick up quite a lot. It's a big volume of work, particularly for women, because you tend to find them tagged on to the story of the men...

*Because the history was written by men and so the women will be in the background?*

Well, in the 18. century the tabloid papers of the day, pamphlets and so on, were real scandal sheets. They loved to write about the women – it was sex and violence, which has always sold newspapers. I have read so much of this. When you come up to the 19. century you can see that the Victorians start to airbrush the women out. They didn't fit in. Women weren't supposed to draw swords and say, "Come and join the army". Which some of the Jacobite women did. But the Victorians disapproved, so they just moved these women out of the history. My book is trying to let their voices be heard because they had been silenced, effectively... I hate the Victorians, I loathe the Victorians!

*First time I heard about you, you had done a speech at a Burns's Night, and in Huntly that was the first time a woman had done that?*

There are different toasts and speeches at a Burns Supper. And it was the first time in the history of Huntly Rotary Club that a woman had ever proposed the Immortal Memory to Robert Burns. My philosophy has always been, that if someone asks you to do something, then you say yes. And you get off the phone and you think, "Oh my god, how am I gonnae do that?" So I phoned somebody that knew about Robert Burns and she said I should phone Jane, the landlady at the Globe in Dumfries. The Globe is the pub where Robert Burns used to go drinking. Jane said that it is quite unusual for a woman to do it, even now.

I loved doing it because Robert Burns can be shrouded in all this myth and deference almost. And he wasn't a deferential person. He couldn't stand pomposity and all that. I thought, "Well, I'll take you on". He was a spectacularly unfaithful husband. I think fidelity is important and I think he ought to be drawn over the coals for that! He was a wonderful poet and a wonderful man in many ways; that was also a part of his character. But I wasn't going to not speak about the bad part because you've got to be honest. Robert Burns was an honest person.

*It doesn't make him a less great poet that he had his weaknesses...*

And he wouldn't have written such wonderful love poetry if he hadn't had so many love affairs!

*So your speech was about...*

It was about him, but very much about his wife. I feel that she, Jean Armour, never gets the credit for putting up with him. She did put up with all these affairs and she even took one or two of his illegitimate children in and brought them up herself. You know, she's always portrayed as this sort of lumpen boring wife at home, and like she wasn't his match intellectually. And I think that's just a justification for his affairs. I think she was a lively sort of woman. To make him appear better, she has to be portrayed as less interesting. I felt she had to be brought back into it...

*How did the guests at the Burns Supper respond to your speech?*

They loved it! We made a joke that I was an Immortal Memory virgin. And virgins and Robert Burns tend to lead to all sorts of interesting jokes! I was slightly nervous cause I sort of imagined that some of the men might be sitting there thinking, "We canna have a woman do this". But it wasn't like that at all. It worked very well.

*You said that people in Huntly were very helpful and open to you. But have they always just been nice to you as an outsider – with your Glasgow accent being pretty obvious?*

I think I said to you once that I'm probably as much of a foreigner as you are here. I have been thinking about that a lot, you know. I suppose, with some people, I feel that I'm always going to be that Glasgow woman. I don't know if that's fair. Then you hear people with accents from way down in the South of England, and they don't seem to feel that they don't belong here. I don't know whether that's the perception of someone who is doing something different, like writing. Perhaps you actually need to perceive yourself as an outsider. The thing that brought it home to me happened at a party we were at not long after we came here. I asked someone, "Have you always lived in Huntly?" - and the person responded, "Oh goodness no, I was born in Rothiemay!"

*Hehehe! How many miles away is that?*

About 7 miles. And they really didn't understand why I laughed. I find that attitude a wee bit in Huntly and I find it a wee bit annoying since I've moved all over the world in my life. You have to get in there and get on with it. But mainly people have been friendly, and people in Ruthven have been hospitable from the beginning and helpful. This little part of Ruthven is home; this is my kingdom. Glasgow will always be home, but I don't know if I will ever go back there. It's in the

past and you can't go back to the past. I need to go back occasionally though, for my fix of city. There's a heartbeat in Glasgow; it beats really fast and passionately.

*My boyfriend just calls it civilisation! You know, we live in Aberdeen.*

Well, at the risk of being lynched, I hate Aberdeen!

*Hehehe! I hate it too!*

The minute you step off the train in Glasgow you can just feel it... you know?

And the way people talk, the things they say to you and the sense of humour... The sense of humour is hard to find here. It's there and it's very dry, and once you start to appreciate it, you can spot it. But the sense of humour in Glasgow is up front. I think maybe I was a bit diffident about being a Glaswegian when I first came here. I was a bit more reserved.

*Were you too careful not to... run over people?*

Yes, I was too careful about not being a big mouthy Glaswegian! But now I'm inclined to just say things, and I get a good response back. That's really interesting, that whole thing about whether you're entitled to be where you are, and if this is your place? And then you see someone else, who hasn't been here 5 minutes and you think, "Hmmm, you obviously feel you belong here". So why is it that I don't feel I belong here? I don't know...

*Aberdeen, I will never feel at home there. What do you most dislike about Aberdeen?*

It has no soul. It's too comfortable; there's no edge. This is an awful thing to say, but when they talk about Glasgow and crime and things, part of me thinks it good that they haven't smoothed it all out, and I'm pleased that there's still roughness there. What don't I like about Aberdeen? It's just smug.

*What's smug?*

Well, it's, "We have a clean city, we have Union Street and we have this and that and it's all perfect...". Aberdeen is very dismissive of the rest of Scotland. I love and adore cities. I love Inverness. There's a heartbeat in Inverness. Glasgow has got that, and I love Edinburgh because of the history. And I love the underside of Edinburgh, which is there all the time. But Aberdeen just doesn't have that for me. No heartbeat. You know, I just can't imagine ever feeling fond of Aberdeen.

I'll get lynched if you publish this!

*Hehehehe! No – many people say the same. Well... do you live from the sales of your books?*

I have a roof over my head because of my husband. But my income is a significant part of the family income, and becoming more so. Just about now with 5 major books, I could put a roof over my own head. But it's been quite a long haul, and it wouldn't be as nice a roof as this one!

The book, which has just been published, has sold 25,000 copies in the first month, which is great. And that's double of what any of the previous books have sold. You start to build up a readership and people are waiting for your next book to come out.

*Where do they sell?*

All over. Waterstone's, Borders, Ottakar's, Amazon and WHSmith's, all the big book shops and the supermarkets as well. ASDA has just done a big promotion and they took 12,000. That's on top of the 25,000 all ready sold.

*In that way you don't know where your readers are, because you're selling to chain stores?*

Yes, well, you know a bit because writers get something called PLR, which is Public Lending Right. Every time someone takes a book out of the library we get 4 pence. So you know from those samples where you're doing well, and you can check the Internet and find library catalogues, which you do when you need a boost to your self-esteem! My books sell very well in the rural counties of England; in Hampshire, Dorset, Cornwall and those sort of places, which surprises me. But people seem to like to read about Glasgow, Liverpool and London, so I'm told by my publishers. And my books lend well and sell well in Aberdeenshire. I asked a librarian why books about Glasgow sell well here, and she had a thought about it and said it's the emotion. And that's another of the differences. Glaswegians let their emotions out more. So Aberdeenshire people enjoy going on that emotional ride because their emotions are kept more to themselves. That's interesting I think. When we first moved here, we had two deaths in the family. My mother was from Aberdeenshire; so one of the deaths was at Old Meldrum. We went there to bury my aunt. I said to my husband, as we came out of the church, "Let's go up the road, I'm going to cry". I thought that only in Aberdeenshire would you hide your tears. Whereas at a funeral in the West of Scotland everybody will cry. So I thought that was a real sign of the differences. Glasgow is more, kind of Irish, you know? More Celtic, I suppose. My mother, who, as I said, was from

Aberdeenshire, she kind of despised the hanging out of your emotions. It was the stiff upper lip philosophy for her; she always said, "Get up and get on with your work", if you were depressed. It's not a bad philosophy. I occasionally say it to myself, if I'm fed up! And she always said that the Glasgow side was, what she called, "Chicken hearted". They had no bravery, they just moaned and cried. It's all a matter of perception isn't it?

*Very much!*

I'm definitely more reserved than I was years ago in Glasgow. But I don't know whether that's age or the influence of living here. Before I would always be in the conversation, but now I'm more inclined to stand back. And listen maybe.

*It's funny – you're here, way out in the country, and your career has started here in this house. I think it's interesting with this domestic life – where you are both a professional writer and a housewife...*

I'm not the world's greatest housewife. Anyway, I think it's no occupation for a grown woman to do nothing but look after her house! On the other hand, houses do need to be looked after. I have tried having cleaning ladies, but I don't like to have someone else in the house, when I'm trying to work. And sometimes housework is great if you're stuck on a scene and you come down and you make soup or clear out your cupboards! And as you do that your brain is still working. But the other thing about housework is, that nobody notices unless you don't do it. Like you've done 3 loads of washing, thrown out 3 bags of useless rubbish, fed the cats, and your husband comes home and asks, "Did you not put any bird food out?"

I have always had that domesticity; I have never escaped it. And I would love to escape it for a few months. Just be somewhere where somebody else would do all that stuff. There is a saying; "I could do great things if I wasn't so busy doing little things!"

But I'm really disciplined about my writing. I start work first thing in the morning. The morning is sacred. I wake up; get brought a cup of tea in bed, which is very nice...

*WOW!*

As long as I have the life giving fluid of tea I can start working as soon as I get up. And it has got to be a rule that I go to the computer straight away. I think it's really important not to let the world come in on you because you're close to your dreams when you wake up. And you've got to stay in that state if you can, which is why I don't want to answer phone calls. That takes you out of it. I have a study now, which was my son's bedroom. It's wonderful and it's only about work. I won't let anything in there that's not to do with my work. I have this thing about negativity – I won't have anything from the income tax or household bills or anything in there. It all has negative vibes.

*Do you do so and so many hours every day?*

I have a target number of 2000 words a day. It's doable; it's okay. That usually takes me till about 12 or 1 o'clock. And then the day just degenerates into chaos!

It's ludicrous how little time I've got. I don't sit down and read a book in the afternoon. And I would love to read a book. It makes me laugh when people think, that because you're an artist working at home, you're living this very relaxed and laid-back life. You're not! You're going from deadline to deadline, living from check to check. But obviously there must be something that we enjoy about it, or we wouldn't do it.

*Artists are often thought to have these glamorous lives, and of course there's freedom, which is desirable. But you keep yourself busy, as you're your own employer. And there's the insecurity about where the next money is going to come from...*

I have always traded less money for more time. I always wanted the time for myself, and that's really important. And I always knew I was going to be a successful writer. Okay it's taken me 52 years to get there. But I always knew...

*Did you?*

It's funny because I lacked confidence, but I always knew it!

*Now I think we need a break...*

Yes. Would you like some soup?

*And we have the nicest homemade soup with tatties, carrots and nice big slices of sausage and we admire the cat that Maggie once rescued and we talk about animals having personalities and how stupid horses can be... and other things - off the record...*

*... you said you always knew – how did you know that?*

I just always knew that I would do it. I can't explain that. I think I maybe wasted time doing other things. No no, time is never wasted, is it? It's all experience. But the counter point to that is, not having the confidence to send things out. Because you get failures, you get rejections and you have to realise that it's part of the boulders on the road to where you're going. You have to cope with that. And you get better.

*Did you get rejections?*

Oh, loads of them. I mean, I still do. I still write articles, some get accepted and some don't. But that's just part of it all. It doesn't bother me now. I have had a review in the current Leopard Magazine, which has got me spitting rivets. It's an odd review. It says, "I couldn't put it down but it's a worthless book", basically. It says my story is candyfloss. Aaahhh... I'm not hurt by it. I'm just deeply irritated. I think the reviewer didn't see what I was trying to do. But obviously that's my fault if she didn't see it. But I can cope with that because 25,000 other people have bought the book and it's had several excellent reviews else where, so...

Part of this conviction that I was always going to be a writer was my family background. Writing was just a natural thing. I always wished that I had gone into journalism when I left school. But I didn't, you know, and that's it! One of the nice things about writing is, when you read it again after a gap, you will suddenly realise where you got an idea from. It can be something taken from your own or a family members life. It can be a very negative thing that happened, but you've taken it out of some sort of mulch or compost and used it. That's kind of satisfying. Maybe you think about a horrible job, when you were stuck somewhere in a tiny office for 6 months. But something has come out of that. It's the tough things that make your personality.

*The hard times!*

What doesn't kill you makes you stronger!

*You sell to supermarkets... I did an interview with Annie Lamb, who owns the bookshop in Huntly and we quite agreed that it's unfair that supermarkets get such a big part of the book market.*

It's the Net Book Agreement. Books used to be sold at a certain price. But now a supermarket can sell a book at whatever price they want. My book should be sold at £ 5.99. And they sell it at £ 3.73. But on the other hand I get 12,000 sales I wouldn't otherwise have had.

But authors are getting fed up because the discounting means our income is getting cut all the time. So you can have loads of books out but your income is going down. My boss, the head of my publishing house, is talking about "Seven seasons to zero". Supermarkets are cutting the price so much that he reckons in 7 seasons time they will want books for nothing. That'll be the logical progression. And it has actually been said, that writers should write for love, they shouldn't expect money!

*That's this notion about starving artists and that it's how they get their inspiration, which is bullshit of course!*

All though it does help. When I first started out writing, you know, we were broke quite often. But when I could sell an article and immediately go shopping with the money, it was a huge satisfaction. That, what you had done with your brain, had actually put food on the table.

*Yeah, but that's different... This one article was appreciated and paid for. In the same way, if your books are appreciated, they should be paid for. But if the supermarkets keep cutting down, they are the only ones making money in the end. That's not fair. It's just like the farmer's situation with meat and dairy products. They have a really hard time. What can be done about that?*

Well, there has just been an excellent article in the "Bookseller", which is basically saying that there's nothing you can do about that - the supermarkets are too powerful. They will do what they want to do. It's really a big problem.

The trouble is if you write, you do it because you have to, so they know you're going to keep writing. But a lot of us are getting very resentful of how books are being discounted. As a consumer it's great to go and buy a book for £ 3 instead of £ 6. But it's devaluing books.

*What if you said that you wouldn't deal with supermarkets?*

Ooohhh, I tried to stamp my pretty little foot with my publisher. I realised that, just as you can't fight city hall, you can't fight a publisher. They hold all the cards.

*Would you consider this as being a compromise from your side, since you don't like the idea of supermarkets selling cheap books?*

But part of me does like it because it's a romantic image as well! Some woman, who maybe doesn't have a lot of money to spend, can say, "Well I can afford that, I can put that in as a wee

treat for myself". And I'm all for accessibility. The supermarkets make your books accessible, and the readers appreciate that.

The supermarkets are there - they can't be fought.

*I guess so... I don't know if you have any opinions about this: The Marr Area Committee has given a grant to Deveron Arts, who pay me for this interview project. The committee is interested in cultural development in rural areas. But some people might say that it doesn't make any difference. The big question about subsidies for arts is, if it's doing any good for anybody but the artists?*

I don't honestly know... But I can relate to what you say. It's like residency programmes support individual artists. But your residency in Huntly certainly provoked a lot of discussion, which is good. No, I don't think there's anything wrong, if the artists are going to contribute to the life of the place they are in. I think I would have that as a prerequisite. And I think you did; you talked to all these people and got to know them. You obviously like people. I sometimes think that they should look more closely at the personality of the Artists in Residence. It can be very counterproductive if you have someone that just thinks the town is lucky to have them there. And people do ask what art is about. And it can't just say, well it's for itself. I suppose that's like saying that art has to justify itself.

*And when and how does it do that and who is to judge? I had something against teaching school children just because I was an Artist in Residence. I thought that what I did was already educational – for anybody. Sometimes I think it should be seen in a bigger scale, and maybe it doesn't have an immediate impact...*

I know what you mean... Claudia (Zeiske, Director of Deveron Arts) asked me to be a Writer in Residence in Huntly and she had got the money and everything. I thought really hard about a project I could have done, which would have been about inclusiveness, rather than excluding people. But then I couldn't stand the thought of my time being under the control of other people. You know what it's like. Inspiration exists. If you think there's something you have to do right now, you don't want to be committed to go into the primary school to talk about something else. I would find that very difficult. And that's a lot to ask of an artist. It's that balancing thing isn't it? If you're being given public money, you do have a responsibility. I don't know how you balance it out. I think it's good to support the arts. But sometimes I see people who get public money and I think they're not being sincere... I don't know, I think I'm a crafts woman, not an artist.

*You don't look at yourself as an artist?*

No. You see, what I write is popular fiction. There's a whole lot of people that look down on it because it sells! But I have never understood the philosophy, that because a lot of people like it, it can't be good. And I really work hard to make it good. It's a difficult one. Sometimes I have a defensive attitude when people, who think I'm just popular and commercial, get big grants themselves. I think, "Excuse me is that not a commercial transaction you're undertaking there?"

*I'm here because I consider you as being an artist. I consider most creative people as artists in some sense. I would like to see the arts in a wider perspective, not only being restricted to galleries and museums. I could probably interview a lot of people around here, but my kind of parameter for this book is that they are professionals. That they live from their work or at least live with it. You know, I'm probably looking for some kind of obsession, not a hobby.*

I write because I have to. I hope to make money, but I write because I have to. It's an artistic imperative in that sense. I have only recently begun to see myself as creative. Of course I'm creative - I have created these books. But for a long time I didn't see that because it's just what I do. I make up stories all the time. My husband laughs at me sometimes, at my imagination. It has to do with spinning stories and I always imagine things about people I see. It's what I've always done.

*So it's within you and that makes you an artist.*

As far as writing is concerned I don't see it as a completed transaction until someone reads it. I'm not writing for myself. Lots of people do it for themselves. But to me it has to go to the reader. And even though I'm not with them, then that's it completed. It's the mental, intellectual and emotional thing that's happening. It's not a commercial idea. I have had these people in my head for up to a year, and when they go in to somebody else's head it's wonderful. So you have a responsibility to give your reader as well crafted a piece of work as you can. Then you go inside their emotions as well. It's important that you take that seriously.

*But if it's not well crafted in the first place people wont even get there, they'll stop and say it's crap, badly made. This is a discussion in the visual arts as well, with especially conceptual art. Sometimes it's more about an idea than good craftwork and a lot of people don't accept that...*  
The best answer I heard to that was at Duff House. It was a show with some twigs, which had been set up to look like a wigwam and the artist had put a light inside it. It looked fantastic, wonderful. Somebody said, "I could have done that", and one of the wardens at Duff House said, "Aye, but you didn't!"

The variation for writing is, "I could write a book too, if only I had the time"!

*Hehehehe... you don't have the time, you take it!*

*I think that's pretty much it. I always ask for a final comment...*

Well... I start working at 8 o'clock and I look up and it's 12 and I have got good words down and it's just the best feeling there is. Despite all the difficulties of this life it's the only one I want to live and it's a great satisfaction!

*WOW – that's not bad!*