A Conversation with Four Newfoundland Women Writers

Marilyn Porter

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I have with me Helen Fogwill Porter (No relation!) Joan Clark, Carmelita McGrath and Bernice Morgan, all of whom are published writers, all of whom are women and all of whom are either from Newfoundland or have written from here for many years. So that is where we will start. What is a Newfoundlander, and what difference does it make to your writing?

Joan Clark
I'm a Nova Scotian, and every time I open my mouth, people say, "you're not a Newfoundlander, where are you from?" I'm a writer, but I'm not a *Newfoundland* writer, so it has to do with one's point of origin. It also has to do with what you write because if you do write about being here in Newfoundland, then you are a Newfoundland writer, but if you live here and you don't write necessarily about here, or you write, as I did in my last two books, about a thousand years ago, when Newfoundland was not Newfoundland, then are you a Newfoundland writer? Annie Proulx isn't a Newfoundland writer, but she wrote a book about Newfoundland.

Helen Porter
When I started visiting high schools in Newfoundland and Labrador, in 1976, we went to schools all over Newfoundland and Labrador, particularly in the rural areas, and I got really tired of the teachers introducing me as a Newfoundland writer and I said, "why don't you just introduce me as a writer? They all know I'm a Newfoundlander and they all know we're in Newfoundland." At that time, it meant a great deal to me to be seen as a writer and I felt that being called a Newfoundland writer was a little bit less than being called a writer. I've changed my mind completely. Last year, Veronica Ross quoted me this way, "'All my writing is set in Newfoundland,' says Helen." But growing up, I felt that I couldn't be a writer and be a Newfoundlander. I thought they were mutually exclusive things. I didn't even think much about being a writer at that point because the only Newfoundland writer I knew anything about was E. J. Pratt and what you heard was that he left here when he was 19 and he became a famous writer living in Toronto. So, there was always this thing about wanting Newfoundland and Newfoundland people to figure in writing the way that, quite unselfconsciously, it happens in the writing of British people and Americans.

Bernice Morgan
My background is very much like Helen's. It never occurred to me that a Newfoundlander could write a book. It never even occurred to me that Newfoundland could be the scene where a piece of fiction took place. When I started writing essays in school, I called the places I wrote about "villages," because everything I read was English, and I thought "outport" was a hokey word, and anywhere that anyone wrote about would have to be a village. It never really occurred to me that you could be a writer writing out of Newfoundland. It took some years and encounters with writers like Lydia Campbell, whose small book was a real revelation to me, and, from the point of view of women, Margaret Laurence. But to the basic question of what, or who, is a Newfoundland writer, I don't know. If you say you are a Newfoundland writer you *are* a Newfoundland writer.

Carmelita McGrath
I think, too, it's a different identity. I'll give you an example. I might write a story. People here consider it a Newfoundland story, but if it's read in BC they don't see that at all. They see it as a story set inside a family. But we're picking up on "setting" clues, like the rhythms of language and speech, so that when we set that speech down on a page, a person who knows the speech recognizes it. A person who doesn't know the speech just recognizes it is somehow different, or set in a different community, space, family, whatever. I wouldn't want to define it but I spent my whole childhood trying to imagine what it would be to be a writer from here.

Two people who had a big influence on me were Helen (Porter) and Percy Janes, both of whom I came across in high school. And it wasn't just that they were from Newfoundland, but the writing was contemporary. It wasn't in the past; it wasn't in my parents' time. The writing was contemporary and it was brave, it was in your face. It said, not only can you be from here and write, but you can *say* that, and get off with it. To me, it was just amazing.

Joan Clark
I suppose the reason I asked the whole question about what is a Newfoundland writer is because I'm a Come From Away here. I've lived here now for 13 years and this comes up because I was born in Nova Scotia, brought up in the Maritimes, lived out west, but I've never lived in a place before where the identity, your origins, your place of origin, was so important. I understand that because this was a country until very recently. Because I understand it, I only have difficulty with it when it's mean spirited or grudging: I only feel that when your right to have an opinion, your right to be not born here but be working here, is questioned. I think I'm prickly about that. That's where the question came from and why I asked it.

Helen Porter
I know it must be very difficult to come here from somewhere else. I think the person who comes here makes all the difference. We've had our experiences with people coming in here, telling us how to live, how to write, how to behave. Most of them were men as it happens. But Joan came almost with a quest, I thought, and of course, had established herself as a writer long before she came. The other thing was that she was so supportive and helpful toward other writers, especially women writers, and we could soon see that.

Marilyn Porter
I can't imagine anywhere else, with this size of population, where there are so many fabulous, published writers, to say nothing of the visual artists, or the musicians, or actors. What is it about this place, what is it in the air that makes people so creative?

Helen Porter
Is there something in the air and all that? Well, Joan did an interview with me for *Books in Canada* a few years ago, and she thought it might have something to do with being on the edge, literally on the edge. There is also our history of colonialism. I think that one thing all of us here have in common is wanting to break out of that. It was passed down to you that you weren't really expected to do anything extraordinary. When I was growing up, the colonial mentality was still very much around. If anybody came to our school from the United States or Canada (we weren't part of Canada then), they were immediately seen as being superior to the people who were already here. I think all of us would write no matter where we lived, but besides that, it's only lately that I realize that I feel this very strong urge and obligation to write as a Newfoundland writer, not to explain Newfoundland. I feel something, this sense of obligation. I feel that when I write I'm representing not just myself, but a lot of other people who, for one reason or another, didn't have the opportunity to write, like my own grandmother who certainly had more talent than I have, but who had nine children, and her husband worked away for years. She wrote and scribbled little stories and sermons for the Archbishop and things like that when she wasn't even a Catholic. There was so many of us in the past, women and men, who couldn't write. They never learned to write.

Marilyn Porter
Bernice, you said something similar to that about why you wrote *Random Passage*, about it being an obligation to your forebears.

Bernice Morgan
I didn't think of it as an obligation, but when I see places and things that people used, or you go into a community like Cape Island, where my mother grew up and all that's there are two graveyards and you know that for hundreds of years hundreds of lives put every bit of energy into that little bit of land, that little bit of sea ... and there's nothing. There is not even a record except what is written on the headstones and that's being wiped away slowly. It's some kind of desire to record that, to give it a shape and to make it mean something. It seems so awful that it should vanish, and vanish it is, because if I hadn't heard those stories in my own house, I would certainly never read them, for they were not set down. And now we are even farther from it, because what our children and grandchildren hear are stories from the USA. So, although I didn't think of it as an obligation, in retrospect, looking back at the feeling I had about the place, and the things, those piles of rocks where people kept clearing the land year after year and there were always more rocks there next spring. Every time they walked across that field they picked up another rock. To record that effort and that hopefulness is, perhaps, an obligation I feel.

Marilyn Porter
Carmelita, with you I see not so much of an obligation to place as an obligation to class especially in some of your poems.

Carmelita McGrath
Yes - there was such an indoctrination when I was growing up. From the time I was a small kid and I loved reading, I really *did* love the poems by dead men in frock coats. I loved the rhythms and I remembered them, and it was what my mother recited because it was what she remembered and what she got in school. But there seemed to be such a huge world absent, including the part of the world that I was in, to the point where you grow up and you feel that you are not in the world. You are only marginally in the world. You're just like a ghost, something floating around the edges of things. I wouldn't say it's overtly political, but there's probably some sort of imperative to write about these things, to write yourself in, to fill in the outlines and make yourself substantial in the world.

I'm not saying that I've done anything useful about it really, but when people, particularly women of my class, the working class, appeared anywhere in literature, I found they were so stereotyped and they were nothing like the people I know, and there was sort of a whole "they" about them, they were this and they were that and yet everyone I knew were individuals who didn't seem to be part of the record of anything, except the gravestone record, like yours, Bernice. There's plenty of that.

I'm also trying to be honest and I found it very hard to be honest because there's a big imperative amongst parents of people of my generation. Ours was the first generation that ever got the chance to stay in school. So there's this huge thing about pushing yourself forward and leaving it all behind. I think really that's what my parents wanted of us - to get past it and leave it all behind. Then if you do, if you walk completely away from it, you are floating again, ghostly and nowhere. Obviously, you have to go back and resurrect it even if it embarrasses the hell out of your parents!

Joan Clark
What do you see as the differences between our generation and yours? There is probably about 20 years between us.

Carmelita McGrath
Sometimes, I don't feel any distance at all, despite overt differences.

Joan Clark
Except that when Helen was starting to write, there weren't any models. You were saying that she was one of your models.

Carmelita McGrath
There's that difference. But I suppose that I don't even see that because for a long time I've been able to read good women writers. I don't even really

think of *my* generation, because there are so many differences. I think of this small section of people that I know, that I know intimately, that I would say I understand their experience. You find in the same generation, completely different experiences and completely different kinds of access to things. For example, I was born into a time without electricity and that is very odd to a lot of my friends. The man I live with was sitting down watching cartoons at age three, right? So there are all these differences from place to place, from setting to setting, so many sub groups and little communities and islands.

Marilyn Porter
I want to ask all of you what you think is your best work, the one you think is most important - the one that gives you the most pleasure when you look back?

Helen Porter
I suppose I could cite two things. One experience that I never had again is the one I had with writing *Below the Bridge* because that is probably the book that I most wanted to write. It's a memoir history about growing up on the South Side of St. John's in the 1930s and 1940s. That was a book I *had* to write. The others haven't been, or not so much. Sometimes when you look back on your earlier work, you're so disgusted with it and you think "How could I ever have written that?" Of my short stories, I think the one I had to write was "O Take Me as I Am," which was a short story based on something that happened in the Salvation Army, which I was closely associated with. I always feel a great affinity with that story and it's hard to say why. The play *For Every Man an Island* was written, like a lot of my writing, in reaction to male writing. *For Every Man an Island* is about resettlement in Newfoundland outports, which was a very big thing in the 50s and 60s. There had been a deluge of plays and stories and songs by men who talked absolutely from the male point of view about leaving the tiny places and how nobody wanted to leave. Of course, I soon realized that the men were gone most of the time anyhow, fishing and in the woods and so on. But in the outports I visited in Notre Dame Bay I knew how the women felt, and it was different.

Joan Clark
I find that an almost impossible question to answer, because I always think that what I'm working on now is what I'm most excited about. Having said that, I work primarily in two areas, children's fiction and adult fiction, and I tend to take ninety degree turns between my books, which makes it very hard to compare one with another. But if I was to equate ease of writing or the way something came to me, I would pick two books and one of them you probably never heard of, it's called the *The Leopard and The Lily.* It's almost like a poem. I sort of woke up and wrote it, and the other is *The Dream Carvers.* I'd been working on *Eriksdotter* for five years and all the time I was working on it *The Dream Carvers* was turning over in my mind, so when I came to write it, it was as if I'd already experienced it.

Carmelita McGrath
Just that question makes me feel conflicted, especially working in two genres so different, poetry and prose. You can't compare them because the writing experience is so different and they give you very different kinds of satisfactions and different kinds of stress as well. When I finish something I kiss it goodbye by publishing it, and I don't look back on it except to go and read it at readings. Whatever I'm at in the present is what I think is the absolute best thing I've ever written. So I have absolutely no perspective on it.

Bernice Morgan
I haven't read either of my books through, and I don't think I ever will - I don't have the courage. Every time I read it at schools, I hear kids say "that's not what's in the book," and I'm changing it as I go. There are bits in the book I love, and bits I hate. I wrote a short story years ago, called "Pictures," in *Newfoundland Short Stories.* It's about a visit to Bonavista North and it's written straight from life. It's not fiction at all, it's exactly what happened on that trip. It's about looking for the place where my mother was born. We didn't find it and I realised afterwards that I had been looking for it for years. When I read that story after it was finished, I knew then, I would have to write a book about it. So it's not because its a good story,

but because it triggered something.

Helen Porter
When you look back at your own work, do you ever sort of focus in on one thing, this is what I write about, everything I write is about this?

Joan Clark
After you write for a while, you realise that you have preoccupations and obsessions that keep coming up over and over again. I suppose this is the political agenda with a small "p." It's that you can never say enough.

But I was wondering about the changes in the way women are treated. It used to be that to be a woman writer was extraordinarily difficult, far more difficult than it is now. Now, well, we haven't even brought it up this evening, and it is often not even an issue, which it used to be.

Bernice Morgan
I really think that for me and for many women writers it was Margaret Laurence's books that made the changes. For me, she was the first writer that let me see that you could write about what was happening in the kitchen and it was important. What's happening inside a house - it doesn't have to be war or a boardroom. I always knew it was important but not that it was a legitimate subject for a book, until I read Margaret Laurence.

Helen Porter
I remember so clearly when I found Margaret Laurence. Having gone to school and learned poetry - the Canadian poetry we knew was Marjorie Pickthall. I just thought if it wasn't about leaves, it wasn't a Canadian poem. I was working in the library, the reference library at the Arts and Culture Centre, and there was overflow in the basement and I remember finding Margaret Laurence and Alice Munro and thinking, these are Canadian writers, and I felt the same as Bernice, that they were writing about lives that were so much like ours. I think that what I found about Margaret and Alice is that they told the truth. It was fiction, but they told the truth and Margaret always stressed how important it was not to tell any lies. I find the downside of writing as a Newfoundland writer is that people expect you to say only nice things and so I get very embarrassed sometimes about some things in some of my books where the seamy side is shown very clearly. Before there were a lot of old men who always wrote about how everything used to be fine, everybody helped each other in Newfoundland. It was only when I read Milley Johnson from Little Catalina, who probably wouldn't even consider herself a writer, wrote about the Depression, that I found out what it was really like in the outports.

Halfway through my writing career, I realized that I was writing about the family all the time and not necessarily conventionally. It can be any kind of a family, but, when one of Tom Wayman's books of working poems came out, I read my first poem about a woman having a baby. (Linda Pastan's "Notes from the Delivery Room" in Tom Wayman's *A Government Job at Last*). Do you remember that? We were in a group then with the Writers' Guild where an older woman writer who had been through a different period said to Gerry Rubia "Gerry, I wish you wouldn't write about the family." She saw Gerry as a wonderful poet, but, she shouldn't lower herself to write about the family.

Carmelita McGrath
The refreshing thing about some of those writers was that women could be bad. Because I *knew* women were bad. I grew up with very cantankerous women who talked about things. There were a lot of things hush-hush, like menstruation and child birth until you got to a certain age, but criticism of things was never hush-hush and recounting one's woes was never hush. And the sufferings for the last 200 years since some idiot landed us here was never hush-hush. I remember reading *Little Women* and I used to think, who *are* these people, they're so damn good, especially the mother. That mother, that long-suffering mother, she never took a nerve pill in her life! She had all the answers and her daughter could die and she had something good to say about it. When that happened in my community, aunts were up in the graveyard dressed in their wedding dresses late at night stomping on their husband's graves! So one of the things that I found in women like Margaret Laurence, and to

cross the ocean someone like Edna O'Brien, was that the things that women said and thought about and did weren't so restricted. It was very refreshing because there's a lot of pressure to be a redeeming woman in literature.

Joan Clark
The Writers' Union did a lot to make the playing ground more equal for women. Because it wasn't. All the juries and things were all men. It was so obvious, so naked.

Helen Porter
I was always doing things about that stuff and I got noted for it. An anthology came out, around 1971, with 69 men and one woman in it. That was true, that was happening and, if you mentioned it, it would be laughed at, "Oh Helen's like that. She notices those things." Perhaps because it's mostly women in the Guild, we are very anxious to promote women, because we want women, we want to give them that little jump ahead that took us so long to get. And now, you don't see it anymore. But I don't think the change came about by accident.

Marilyn Porter
I was going to ask you about the support mechanisms, especially for women writers. What are the supports that helped you write?

Bernice Morgan
The Writers' Guild. I guess we were in our twenties and newly married and suddenly enclosed. Three or four of us took courses, extension courses, at Memorial at night and that's when we met and when the course was over, we decided we couldn't separate, so we decided to form the group.

Marilyn Porter
One of the things I find about the Guild, is the way everybody comments on everybody else's work entirely democratically, nobody is allowed to stomp anyone else into the ground.

Carmelita McGrath
That workshop that I led for the Guild was amazing to me because I don't think I've ever been a facilitator for a workshop before where there was nobody there with a problem ego or who would cry if they were criticised or something. It was the most even group in terms of everybody saying all the right things to each other. People were very brave like that, and very egalitarian. I think that's a change from ten years ago.

Joan Clark
The Guild has a lot of experience ... 25, 26 years ... almost 30.

Bernice Morgan
And the Guild is not a women's group, but it is the absence of ego.

Helen Porter
We haven't had good luck with men. I mean we've practically given up on them. A few have drifted in and out. There's Andrew - he's good. He's almost as good as a woman in the way he accepts things! We've had so many men who come for very brief periods. As soon as they get our feedback, it's "how dare they?" and they don't come back.

What I think is marvelous about Carmelita's workshop was that someone who has been writing poetry as long as Gerry Rubia would even go to a workshop. This woman has been at this for years, she's very good at it and so on. But I know exactly what Gerry's attitude would be in that case.

Carmelita McGrath
And the neat thing was that people weren't intimidated. She wasn't intimidating, and people weren't intimidated. There was no sense of this is how it's done or anything like that. There are times when the whole thing shifts. Sometimes you invite someone in who isn't used to the situation, which seems to have evolved here, and later somebody will say, "I thought that was the weirdest thing, that was like a lecture." Lots of workshops are like that, but people, especially Guild people, seem to be less used to this.

Joan Clark
The Guild has worked together for a long long time, so I think there's been a real evolution there. There's an extraordinary amount of generosity.

When somebody comes out with a book or there's cause to celebrate something, people who haven't had a book come out will get together and they will be just as pleased. I don't think that's typical. I think it's very specific to this particular guild.

Bernice Morgan
I'm quite sure I would not have kept on writing if it hadn't been for the Guild. If I was writing in isolation, I would never have said to anyone in my family that I write, so the only people I had to talk about it to were the people in the Guild. I'm very fortunate to be a member of that Guild and it makes me sad to think how many women in Newfoundland outports could never have availed of that.

Helen Porter
That is one of the good things about a "Writer in the Library," which starts the young people off, as Joan has done. There are people, you know there are, people all over the place who love to write. They don't know who to talk to. Everybody else thinks they're crazy because they are not always talking about cookies. We all went through that. This is why the Guild was so marvelous. And St. John's is just the right size of a place. I think so. Do you, Carmelita?

Carmelita McGrath
It's that the distances are small. I'm not saying there aren't cliques here, because there are, but it's almost too small to be really clique-ish. There's not enough space between one clique and another. You almost need a couple of subway stops between cliques.

Joan Clark
When I first moved to Calgary, most of the writing was grass roots, except for the academic community. There was no literary magazine so Edna Alford and I started one. There was a frontier, you-could-do-anything mentality. The department of Creative Writing at the University of Calgary became very powerful. At the point at which I moved here 13 years ago, there was a tension between the community of writers and the department of Creative Writing at the University. We don't have that here, at least not to that degree, but there's always this danger of polarity between the university and the community.

You know, to go back to the first question about why there's so many writers in Newfoundland, and artists and musicians. It's not just an accident. Newfoundland has such a strong sense of itself. You can never mistake yourself for being anywhere else. You cannot say that for every place you go. If you go to southern Ontario, you could be in the United States. There are so many parallels between us and Quebec. Both provinces are so much themselves. I don't know whether there's this subconscious sense of obligation that if we don't stand up, saying it and making it happen, then where is it? Because culture is a dialogue whether you're a painter, a sculptor, or an actor, a singer or writer, a dialogue between other people and you.

Carmelita McGrath
I think a big part of that is being an island, the geographical fact of it. I used to have fantasies, sometimes I still do, about driving long distances and hopping abroad, and being for a while somebody else and then hopping back, but you just can't do that here. You've got to go to the ferry, you've got to have money for the plane ticket. It's all so complicated. You can't escape this place very easily. I've been in other places where you drive across the borders and everything changes. I was reading a book the other night and one of the first sentences is "the background is everything." What she says is, "You are who you are against this background. If the background changes, you are somebody else." Here, you don't get the chance to play with that very much. You don't get the chance to try different backgrounds. It is so hard to get out of here.

I talked to a woman a couple of years from St. Lucia and she was talking about literature and St. Lucia, about it being such a small place and an island. People think of it as a place for the tourists but she was talking about the fiercely identifiable literary and arts community there.

Helen Porter
But you know, Labrador is not an island, but it might as well be. I mean there's more than sea to

make an island.

Bernice Morgan
It's not just being an island. It's the geography. I'm always struck when I have been somewhere else and I come back to Newfoundland, how raw it is. The bones all show through. And there's nothing. Nothing is finished. And it can't *be* finished. It can't be smoothed out.

Joan Clark
That's why I love the north, which we are. I haven't been south that many times, but when I have, I've been struck by the opulence. It seems to be dripping with detail. You can't see the bones, but here, you have to invent the detail because all we have is the rock and the air and the water and the people.

Marilyn Porter
Let me turn back to feminism for a moment. Is there a Newfoundland *feminist* writer, a Newfoundland woman writer, or are our identities so interconnected that that is not an issue?

Helen Porter
I think feminism is in all our work. But not self-consciously, no.

Bernice Morgan
Not self-consciously feminism, perhaps, but as women.

Joan Clark
I think the voice is what takes over.

Bernice Morgan
When I started reading the old accounts of churches mostly in Bonavista North, it just infuriated me so much to have all those books with no women mentioned, when you know they were the backbone of every church.

Carmelita McGrath
It's interesting that you should say that, because it also happens to men who donated not materials, but who donated their labour. If you look at records from places like where I come from, Branch area and the Cape Shore, there are hundreds of community histories with so much detail about Mr. such and such, about how much was paid for the land, such and such raised the funds for the bell, but there were all these other people who were always building, on their knees making kneelers and every year having to give a day's fish in support of the church. There were too many of them and it happened too many times and they were never counted and everywhere it always strikes me that those men, their work is almost like women's work in that way. It had this great multiplicity about it that made it invisible in the eyes of people trying to record things.

Helen Porter
It's like St. Mary's Church on the south side that was torn down when it was 102 years old. That was built of volunteer labour and all the stones brought down from the South Side hills. It was mostly done by men, but the women would be making money, raising money by suppers and all kinds of things like that. It's like Carmelita was saying, this never gets recorded. There's never a stained glass window or a plaque or anything to those women.

I've never set out to be self-consciously feminist, but it's just there. Women are the major characters in all my work.