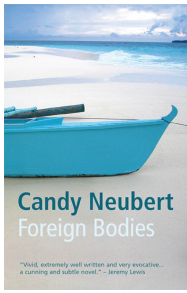


Interview: September 2010



SEREN

“Deep down she had always known that the world was like this. It was incredible to think of all those people in their offices in London still living their grey lives, while here in the Philippines ... this. Life bursting out everywhere.”

Fresh from the UK, Emma thinks she has fallen in love with a place and a person, and sets out to pursue the man of her dreams with a colonial zest. But for all her ideals, she seems unaware of the destruction she may leave in her wake.

A beautifully written first novel, *Foreign Bodies* explores the spaces between people, and their encounters on the other side of the world.

Candy Neubert lives in Devon but maintains strong ties with South Africa where she lived from 1990 - 1996. South Africa much influenced her writing and was where she was first published. She has received numerous literary awards, the most recent from Kagiso Press/ First National Bank.

Cyprus Well was delighted to have the chance last week to ask Candy a few questions about her new novel, and the writing world in general.

***Foreign Bodies* is your first novel. Can you tell us a bit about how it came to be written?**

It's set in the Philippines, where I spent some time in my twenties. Back in England I wrote a poem about the pang of missing a place, of missing one's self in that place, of feeling mis-placed. I had no thought of a novel about it until more recently, when "we" went into Iraq. Having a conversation about the huge consequences of one culture invading another, not just in the military sense, but also in business and as tourists, I realized that I had done that very thing. A single person can land in a place and fly out again when convenient, but in a small way the consequences still ripple out in their wake. So I dug out the poem and the story began there.

Have you already started work on a new project, and can you tell us a bit about it?

Two are under way at the moment: a second novel in manuscript which is also with Seren, I'm happy to say. It's closer to home this time and based on the Channel Islands, where I was raised. The other project is poetry, which has always been my starting point. Both novels take place on islands - you'll recognise a bit of a theme here. The book of poems is called *Island*.

Small bits of land in the sea are powerful places – often yearned for, places of romantic holidays. Then islanders who live there all the time are in a very different head space and sometimes long to leave. This is a good metaphor for so many things – this pull to be elsewhere, how people struggle to be content. I have a particular idea for this book which is to use it in exhibitions with artists around the South West coastline.

Do you have any advice for new writers starting out?

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That's a hard one! My immediate thought is: not really. Writing is such a personal thing, I mean the nuts and bolts of it, and each path to publication will be different. I would say, don't be in a hurry. Also, when ready to send something out into the world, choose a likely home for it (publisher/editor/agent/magazine) and then choose a second one. When it comes back from the first, send it to the next straight away, keeping it alive, not letting it die in the cupboard. The first choice may just have been not the right one; have confidence; believe in it.

How do you plan your novels? Do you know exactly what will happen, all about the characters, how it will end and so on?

No – and yes – more or less. I do have an overview, I like my work to have a shape. This is probably a poet's discipline.

Foreign Bodies takes place in a definite amount of time; the main character Emma, (our anti-heroine), has a ticket to fly home on a certain date and her story ends there. What continues are the letters written to her which speak into a silence – we don't hear her reply. I used this as a device to convey how those left behind knew nothing of the world to which she had returned, were literally left in the dark.

With the next novel I've used a different structure and it's in 3 parts. The short middle section drops in as if from nowhere but reveals itself at the end, in fact, in the last word. I saw it as a bridge with a keystone in the middle. Mostly I have to be god and make the decisions, but within that the characters create themselves to some extent, and don't always behave themselves. This comes through the dialogue – they take on habits of speech which emerge as I go along. Dialogue is important in both stories and in both books I use some local dialect; this is to emphasise being somewhere *other*.

Do you have an ideal writing environment and process – for example a particular room, a set number of words, pen and pencil over laptop?

I have always written longhand and this is definitely the process for me – a love of the physicality of writing, handling the paper, putting lines and arrows and asterisks all over it, shuffling the paper into piles, covering the floor with it. After a first draft I jot the names of the characters to which each page is devoted, on the top right hand corner, each in a different colour. Then at a glance I can see if too many pages are weighed in one direction and I can balance this. Cutting and pasting means scissors and glue. Doing this on a computer screen would be quite different – I need to see the whole thing, and have it in my hands.

Particular room? The kitchen table, the front room floor, my bed if I'm busy with it in the small hours. It's intense at the time, then long periods of seeming to do nothing ...

Can you tell us a bit about any writers you particularly admire?

I've thought of specific titles, rather than writers. Emily Bronte was an early love, and early loves tend to stick. That narrows it down to one book, really. I read *Wuthering Heights* before I was old enough to understand half of it, but I felt it – I think I learned that strong writing can make some magic happen which is way beyond plot.

Then Dostoevsky, Chekhov and Tolstoy had me in their grip. Of these, it's Tolstoy's short stories (which are mostly quite long) which I re-read.

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Having written *Foreign Bodies* I wonder how much other books set in the Far East have left their impression. Conrad, especially. I'm thinking of *The End of the Tether*. Also a book long out of print by Jan de Hartog, called *The Spiral Road*

Cyprus Well asks everyone about the revolution in digital books, the Kindle, iPad etc. How do you feel about these new developments, as a reader, and as a published author?

I guess question 5 answers this one. Reading is like writing – I like a physical book, the grain of the cover, the smell of the paper, the quietness of it. I like going to a library and ordering one from real people, that each book is a unique object, actually handled. I've been asked to contribute poems for websites and declined; counter-productive to a writing career, but still. Now that my novels are with a publisher they're out of my hands to some degree, but for me, yes, I'd like them to remain in actual book form, only.

A writer without a publicity photo is quite unusual?

Years ago I came across my first John Updike, an old Penguin edition with orange panels, the little penguin silhouette, the title and the author's name. Nothing else. Inside the usual copyright and publication date but no information at all about Updike. I knew he was a man, that's all, and it was curious how effective that was. The words stood alone with no bias about their author.

Now I usually see an author's face on the cover and I'm told she was born in a certain year and a certain place and now lives in Berkshire with her lawyer husband and three daughters. What kind of dogs they have, perhaps. I can't help this information seeping into my interaction with the book; I can almost see her in Berkshire, writing.

It was better with Updike – he wasn't there, it was just me and the book he'd given to me, all alone. Liking that so much, I prefer not to do too much in the way of 'Biog', or photos. On the other hand I don't entirely need to live under a stone – I love going to Book Clubs and actually meeting people.

Thank you, Candy. To win a 15 copy set of *Foreign Bodies* for your Reading group, [click here](#).

Cyprus Well would like to thank Vicky Humphreys at [Seren](#) for all her help in arranging this interview.