

In the Language of Schoemperlen

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Volume 21, Number 1, Winter 1996

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/scl21_1int01

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Publisher(s)

ISSN

0380-6995 (print)

1718-7850 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Wetter, D. (1996). In the Language of Schoemperlen. *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 21(1), 131–140.

Article abstract

Fiction writer Diane Schoemperlen discusses her novel *In the Language of Love*, with Darryl Whetter focussing on the importance of form, structure, character, and gender, as well as the effect that motherhood had on her writing of the book. Truth, memory and story, along with the idea of the writer as a liar are also discussed, as are thoughts on writing and the novel by writers such as Kundera, Woolf, and Kroetsch. Schoemperlen also comments on the experience of writing a novel versus writing other forms of fiction, and on her place in the Canadian writing community.

IN THE LANGUAGE OF SCHOEMPERLEN

SCL/Élc Interview by Darryl Whetter

Diane Schoemperlen was born in 1954 in Thunder Bay, Ontario, where she graduated from Lakehead University. Since 1986 she has lived in Kingston, Ontario with her son, Alexander. She has published five books of short fiction: Double Exposures (Coach House 1984), Frogs and Other Stories (Quarry 1986; Winner of the Writers' Guild of Alberta Award for Excellence), Hockey Night in Canada (Quarry 1987), The Man of My Dreams (Macmillan of Canada, 1990), and Hockey Night in Canada and Other Stories (Quarry 1991). The Man of My Dreams was short-listed for both the Governor General's Award and the Trillium Award. Her first novel, In the Language of Love, was published in Canada by HarperCollins in the fall of 1994 and in the United States by Viking Penguin in February 1996. It will soon be published in translation in Sweden and Germany.

Nominated for the Smithbooks/Books in Canada First Novel Prize, In the Language of Love is a novel of one hundred chapters in which each chapter title is taken from the Standard Word Association Test.

The initial interview was held in Kingston in late December of 1995.

DW In his preface to *The Art of the Novel*, Milan Kundera claims that in writing a novel every novelist confronts his idea of what the novel is. Considering this is your first novel I'm wondering if you found this true and if so, what is your idea of the novel?

DS It's not something I thought about a lot during the actual writing. Having always written short stories before this, I wanted to write something longer, so of course I thought of it as a novel. Because most of my short stories are playing with form, it was quite natural for me to want to continue with this in a novel. It seems to me in retrospect that the most important thing about a novel is that you must have a story to tell, and the fact that it's longer than a short story is really what makes it different.

That seems like a simple-minded answer, but I didn't feel that differently about writing this book than I did about writing short stories, although I liked being able to take my time. I was no longer constrained by length. As long as you have a clear picture in your mind of what you are trying to say, you can manipulate the form as much as you want to.

DW Virginia Woolf claims "writers write atop a stack of books." One of the obvious loves in *Language* is a love of books. Did your reading alter considerably with this undertaking?

DS I think it did. I do read voraciously, and I always have, but I found when I was working on this book, what I wanted to read changed. Once I started working on the novel I wanted to read other novels. I was particularly interested to find any other novel that was not following a traditional Beginning-Middle-End form. I've always learned a lot from reading, from seeing what other people have done with form and structure.

DW Did any works satisfy this appetite for structure?

DS Well, I started writing it back in 1990 so it's been a long time. I can get back to you on that, I keep a reading list on my computer of all the books I've read since 1977.

[In addition to some old favourites from Margaret Atwood and Carol Shields, that later response included the following titles: Eduardo Galeano, *The Book of Embraces*; Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and *The Art of the Novel*; Michael Ondaatje, *The English Patient*; Stephen Scobie, *Ghosts: A Glossary of the Intertext*; Susan Sontag, *The Volcano Lover*.]

DW Language is very concerned with truth, memory and story. I would like to take Joanna's occasional thought about Plato as an invitation to discuss his concept of poetry as lying. Is writing lying?

DS I don't think of it as lying. I think of it as trying to tell the truth in a devious way. When I was a student at the Banff Centre School of Writing [1976], the head of the program was W.O. Mitchell and one of his favourite sayings was that writers have to be good liars. I can see his point but I don't think about it as lying. I do think that it's *telling* stories and I'm sure you know yourself that when you're telling a story to a friend or to anyone, you're trying for a certain effect. I think that's human. So you tend to make the

story 'better' maybe than it really was. You tend to structure things in a certain way. You tend to exaggerate, embroider on what actually happened. Although I don't like to use the word "autobiographical," much of my fiction does derive its impetus from something that actually happened. I take that impetus and yes, I guess I do lie a little, but not to try and fool anyone—but to make it a better story.

DW Do you think that fiction can affect someone as much as "something that actually happened?"

DS I think it can. A former student of mine had a saying that is quite true; she used to say, "This may not be reality but it is the truth." I'll say that in interviews for the next ten years! I think the whole idea of truth in the abstract is very hard to get at. Truth in daily life *should* be a simpler concept: either you're telling someone the truth or you're not. But it's not that simple when it comes to fiction. If you look up the word "fiction" in the dictionary, the definition has to do with feigning and invention and making things up. But, like most dictionary definitions, that's only the half of it. It does seem to me that there is some mysterious quality to the act of writing fiction and reading fiction that does approach that larger abstract truth. I think that's part of the reason why people like to read fiction: they want to know something, they want to read something and say, "Isn't that true?" As a writer, that's the feeling you want people to have even though you've entered into this little contract where you both know it's called fiction and therefore it's made up, right? Right? But as a reader, you still go to it looking for truth.

DW Lately you have been very active as an editor (Oberon's *Coming Attractions*) and judge of various contests (Eden Mills; *Prism*; Carousel). These roles are undoubtedly one of the faces of literary success, particularly in Canada, but they must be very time-consuming? Do you feel that success has demanded too much of you as *writer* and interfered with your day-to-day *writing*?

DS Only occasionally. It is important to me to judge these contests and to edit *Coming Attractions* because I feel that now I've reached a certain age and a certain amount of success, it behooves me to help the people who are coming up behind me. There were people who helped me when I was in the earlier stages. John Metcalf and Leon Rooke were very helpful to me and very supportive. I

want to be able to return that favour by helping in whatever way I can the writers who are coming along behind me, the ones who ten years from now you'll hear of in a more public way. But it's easy to get overwhelmed with editing, contests, readings, all of that, and it does take away from the actual writing.

DW Helping and being helped by other writers, is that one way in which you feel you are a particularly Canadian writer?

DS I do feel very much a part of the Canadian Writing Community, much as it's a scattered community. I do feel a real kinship with other Canadian writers. Now with this book coming out in the States I don't know if that will change. Will I feel part of a North American community? The book's also coming out in Sweden, will I feel part of an international community? Maybe I will. . . . I think it's important to feel a sense of community with other writers, whether that's confined to Canada or Kingston. I do think you need that sense of solidarity with other writers. I don't like writers who are too competitive with each other. I guess I'm a bit of a Pollyanna, I just want *everybody* to get along. It seems to me that there's enough room for lots of writers, for lots of different kinds of writers, that we should not be squabbling amongst ourselves or suffering too much envy over the successes of others.

DW In many ways *Language* is an extremely formal piece of fiction. Considering that it is your first published novel, are you nervous that it will be the form against which your next novel will be written?

DS Against which it will be written or against which it will be judged?

DW How about both?

DS What I'm thinking about writing the next time, or the time after that, and what I'm writing now, they're all completely different from this, although they all do have a fairly strong structural component. Not as strong as this, those hundred chapters were a very tight structure to work within. I found that quite comfortable. It took away some of the anxiety of writing a novel. As far as how will further works be judged against it . . . I'm not sure. When I read the reviews, I suspected that some reviewers had trouble with the structure. It seems pretty simple to me. Although it's different, I don't think it's difficult. I've always been fascinated

by form and structure, that postmodern thing. Over time certain things are expected of you; I know what's expected of me. In a review once it was said of my work that I was "challenging the short story form." I didn't know I was doing that. People expect a certain thing from a writer. I think what would throw people off most now is if I sat down and wrote a traditionally structured novel. That would be really confusing!¹

DW Was *Language* more or less difficult to finish than other projects?

DS It was difficult to finish. I had worked on it for four years and I had a little post-partum depression after it was finished. But it didn't last long because I already had definite plans for the next book. I plunged into the new project fairly quickly. I didn't take a real break. For me the best way of keeping that depression at bay is to just go on to the next project. One of the things I liked about writing a novel was not having that between-story feeling. It was so comforting to wake up in the morning and think, ah yes, I know what I'm doing today. But it was hard to finish. Finishing it was not as cut and dried as you might think, not just, "The End," "Amen," "Goodnight." The actual process of the book went on for another year after that because HarperCollins wanted to do some editing so there I was working on it again and still it kept going. Last year it was sold to Viking Penguin in the US and they wanted to do a little editing so there I was, going over it again from page one. I think it's finished now, but it was never a cut-and-dried finish.²

DW Do fact and fiction become interchangeable to you?

DS Yes, they become connected in a very complicated way. There are things in this book that are based very closely on actual incidents in my life. But I find when I sit down to think about a real-life incident as fiction, something changes in my mind. I'm not part of it anymore. It's me looking at characters, actors doing something. The line between fact and fiction is very blurry, to the point where (this is going to sound like I'm losing my mind) sometimes I can't remember what actually happened and what I just made up and put in the book. The whole thing becomes this seamless kettle of things that are happening, and some of them did happen and some of them didn't. When I was writing about Joanna she wasn't me, she was separate. When I stopped writing about

her, she could just step back in. But as soon as I sit down to write, the distance is there right away and so it's *all* fiction. There are conversations in the book that I've really had, but as soon as I start writing about them they become fiction.

DW Borges, and many others, claim that the novel's greatest strength is character. Did the writing of *Language* change your attitude towards character?

DS I think it did. I think before this I would not have known whether Borges's suggestion was true or not. I think before this I always felt that developing characters was one of my weaknesses. With the short stories, if I submitted one to a magazine and they returned it saying in the rejection letter, "We think such-and-such a character is not developed enough," I would think, "What does that mean?" While writing this book I learned about building characters *and* how important it is, but please don't ask me how to do it. I still don't know.

DW Let's examine character and gender. Joanna, your protagonist, is a woman and we are with her all the way until her mid-thirties. There is also her father, Clarence, her son, Samuel, and several lovers; the male characters are all periphery in this work. You tend to write with female protagonists. Now that you've honed these characterization skills with Joanna, do you think you might like to move on to a more serious usage of a male character?

DS Yes, I think I would. Now I feel ready to try things that are more difficult and for me writing from a male point of view will be more difficult. But I will try it.

DW *Language* is heavy with pregnancy and motherhood, particularly through the crucial events of Joanna's experiences as both daughter and mother. Has being a mother influenced your treatment of character?

DS Yes, it definitely has. This is the first time that I felt ready to write about motherhood and children. In my stories, very few of them have children, they're mostly about adults without children. By the time I sat down to write *Language*, my son was already five years old so I had been storing up the motherhood experience. As with any other experience you need some time to distance and distill it. I do think becoming a mother changes everything you've ever done, and there's something about that in the

book, how it changes everything, past, present, future. In some ways, for me, becoming a parent made everything more important. It makes you realize that this is not a dress rehearsal; what we're doing here is real. Everything becomes more important, in a good way. I also found that in becoming a parent I discovered parts of myself that I did not have occasion to exercise before: a true tenderness and genuine unconditional love. My whole way of looking at the characters in the book I think was influenced by having become a mother in real life. It has softened me in some ways, made me less cynical. Of course, having kids can be a pain in the ass sometimes too, but they give you a great deal of simple joy. That innocence rubs off, if you let it. It's all so new, that's exciting for me. It altered my repertoire of feelings, it added new things, and I was able to use those in the book.

DW With great lines such as "How much is zero?" and "What does a strawberry mean?" Joanna is very aware of her son's acquisition of language. Have your experiences with your son altered your own language experience?

DS It's refreshed it, that's the main thing. You stop and think about your own language while watching someone acquire it. It makes you realize simultaneously what a wonderful thing language is but also how inadequate it is. It's quite fascinating when you're with a child who's learning these linguistic tricks. That's part of why I included the dictionary entries in the novel. When you stop taking words for granted and really look at them, even the simplest word has layers and layers of resonance and meaning.

DW There's a great deal of intertextuality operating in *Language*. Did you find the Standard Word Association Test an invitation to bounce off other texts? I'm thinking of Chapter 85, "Lion," as an example with its stories from the Bible and *Aesop's Fables*.

DS To me it was a natural progression from this test of words to bring in other texts. In fact, in earlier drafts of this book there was more of that, but after a point I realized I was doing it too much, taking too much time with the intertexts and not enough with the story. In earlier drafts I had interspersed long quotes from the texts to which I was referring, but that turns out to be a nightmare when it comes to getting permission(s) to quote copyrighted material.

DW Dreams and dreaming recur significantly in your fiction, particularly with this book and the title story of *The Man of My Dreams*. Do you regard reading as an act akin to dreaming?

DS I think it is. I've always been by fascinated by dreams, and I do think that the whole idea of reading and writing is in some way connected with dreaming because it's another kind of reality, a different reality. Margaret Atwood said something once in an interview that I can never remember exactly, but it was something about how the vocabulary of dreams *seems* to be the same vocabulary we use when we're awake, but it's not. I like that, *seems* to be. I find in almost everything I write that there's a place for dreams and dreaming.

DW Games are also prominent in the novel, mind games and word games specifically. Do you think of the novel as a game?

DS To a certain extent, especially with the unusual structure. I didn't write the chapters of the novel in the order in which they appear, so in a way the writing had elements of a game. I stuck the one hundred words up on the wall behind my computer. I did write the first chapter first, but then I just picked from the list any word that I felt ready to work on. I wrote the last chapter last, but in between I wrote them in whatever order I felt like. Then I reassembled them in the order that they appear in the Word Association Test and in the novel itself. At this final stage there was the feeling of putting together a puzzle without knowing exactly how it would turn out. There were many surprises here in the way chapters and images ultimately fit together.

DW Because of its structure, *Language* is arguably very much a *made* story, yet Joanna is often *finding* stories or rewriting them into something of her own. I sensed a slight antagonism here between protagonist and text, that is, between finding and making. Is story made or found?

DS I think the most exciting parts of the story are the ones that are found, rather than made. When you're making the story you know what's going to happen and you're supposedly in control of the material. But the most exciting part is when something you hadn't planned on ahead of time comes into it and seems exactly right. Those found parts are the more sparkly parts. Things fall into place. It's no longer me pushing and manipul-

ing. This other sense of just going along and discovering things is so exciting.

DW Have you become any more aware of how that finding act takes place for you mentally?

DS Not at all, not at all.

DW Would you like to be?

DS No, I think it's one of those things that if you found out how it happens, it wouldn't happen. It's not something you can make happen, it's not *making*. It maybe happened more with this book because of the frame of mind I was putting myself into to do the associations. I was consciously trying to stop the everyday thinking we do, to not be so controlled. But I think if you spend too much time trying to find where those gifts come from, you could really ruin it. I once read an article in *The Writer* which suggested that if you start analyzing this part of it too much, it's like asking a caterpillar how it walks. The caterpillar becomes paralyzed, unable to move for having to think about doing it. Writing can't be all a mechanical process. There's something happening here that really is extraordinary.

DW Let's talk about these found gifts. Salman Rushdie, in a discussion of *Midnight's Children*, referred to the finding of Saleem Sinai's voice as "one of his most exciting moments as a writer." Did you have a moments in the composition of *Language* that were more exciting than others?

DS A big one was in Chapter 91, "Moon." Some of the chapters that were hard to write were the ones where I felt I had too much to say. "Moon" was one of them. I just felt there was so much I could do with that. For some reason I had a map of the moon. The names listed on the bottom of page 318 are real names of things on the moon: "... the Seas of Tranquillity, Serenity, and Fertility, the Bay of Rainbows, and the Lake of Dreams, there are also the Marshes of Disease, Decay, and Sleep, the Ocean of Storms, the Sea of Crises, and the Lake of Death. . . ." What really excited me was the top of 319 here, "In the south there is a small crater called Hell." This sentence just thrilled me. Another part that was quite exciting to write was Chapter 60, "Bible." Joanna remembers what she was doing the day JFK was shot in Dallas. What she's remembering is actually my memory. I was shopping

at Woolworth's with my mother on a Friday afternoon. I got so frazzled writing this chapter because I could not imagine why I was at Woolworth's when everyone else was in school. I called my friends and asked them what they were doing that day. They all remembered being in school. Why wasn't I? Finally I had to let go of the why and keep that mystery in the novel. This was a sort of find, although it's not as easy to explain.

DW One feature of your prose style that I was struck by was the frequent use of one-sentence paragraphs. Are you attempting to manipulate the pace of the reading through the creation of slower and faster moments in the prose?

DS Yes, very definitely. We are accustomed to thinking of rhythm in connection with poetry, but I like to try and do it with prose; it is conscious. I sit at the computer with my clipboard, I write everything out by hand first and then go to the keyboard and I go back and forth, but there is also a stage where I read it all out loud. I'm doing a reading of everything as I'm writing, so yes, pace is very important for me.

DW In Robert Kroetsch's *The Writing Life: A Likely Story* he speaks of "becoming a writer several times" as if it's an ongoing process. Have you undergone a similar new beginning with *Language*? And if so, how do you suspect that you will next "become a writer?"

DS I would agree. It's important to me to feel that I can continue to change and grow in my writing. I don't want to be writing the same book over and over again. I want to always be doing something different and new, that requires starting over and over. Of course, what happens in your personal life has a dramatic impact on what comes out in the book. You're becoming a different person in some ways. People change. Their books are bound to reflect that.

NOTES

¹ Diane Schoemperlen is currently working on a book of illustrated short stories combining public-domain line drawings and wood engravings from the last three centuries with contemporary stories.

² The US release date was February 1996.