

Writing as an act of optimism

INTRODUCTION: Irene Mock is a founding member of the Kootenay School of Writing and co-editor with Paulette Jiles and Luanne Armstrong of *Journey to the Interior: An Anthology of Kootenay Women Writers*. Mock lived in New York and Ohio prior to moving to Canada in 1972 and spent many years as a dedicated peace activist. She has worked as a psychiatric nurse and currently lives in Nelson with her husband and two children. Mock's short stories have appeared in such literary



An interview

with Irene Mock

by Arthur Joyce

magazines as *Grain*, *Matrix*, *Queen's Quarterly*, *The Capilano Review*, *Descant*, and *Fiddlehead*, among others. Her story *Inappropriate Behaviour* has been nominated for the 1997 Journey Prize and her short story collection of the same name was published in May 1997 by Beach Holme Publishing.

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JOYCE: Can you name some of the writers who have had an influence on your writing?

MOCK: Jean Rhys—as a stylist she's responsible for the use of white space—I love her writing. Raymond Carver, William Trevor, Alice Munro. I read constantly, voluminously. I'm interested in writers who can turn something known into a mystery. A writer I adore that nobody knows about is Saskatchewan short story writer Dianne Warren (*Bad Luck Dog*). She has a surrealist way of showing you what's just under the surface—I love that.

JOYCE: How much of your upbringing played a role in your becoming a writer?

MOCK: My parents were highly educated

people—my mother was a college instructor and my father an electrical engineer. My mother was a closet writer and I always had the sense that it was important to turn to literature for truth—books were my Bible. I won a short story contest in high school but it seems silly to say that's why I became a writer. It just confirmed what I already knew I wanted to do.

JOYCE: Did the theme of *Inappropriate Behaviour* come to you early in the writing of these stories, or did it happen later in their development?

MOCK: I didn't set out to write a book on inappropriate behaviour—the theme came from a novel I'd been writing that I'd shelved. Many of these stories arose because I was a nurse in a psychiatric ward—as a nurse you're taught to make that judgement

constantly, and I started seeing this in my life everywhere I went. I did not share the judgements of the people I worked with—that got me into trouble and I was fired.

JOYCE: Yes, I particularly caught that in your trilogy, *The Age of Analysis*, where your character Ellie challenges the supervising psychiatrist in the ward about a so-called schizophrenic patient who's locked in isolation for no apparent reason.

MOCK: The textbook definition is always black and white but human behaviour is

shades of grey—it defies classification.

JOYCE: In the title story I picked up the theme of 'who are the keepers and who are the inmates' as well, especially in what the patient Harold says about the freedom of walking around naked—that there was some genuine wisdom there even though he's considered mentally unbalanced.

MOCK: He's also stating what it would be like to be stripped naked of your identity—once

the uniform is off, you're no longer a doctor or a nurse, or whatever. The role is always there as a means of other people interpreting you—once you go beyond that it becomes very dangerous but also very vital—it's essential that we do that. When Ellie reaches out to touch Harold, what she's doing is considered wrong by the standards of her profession, even though it's a very basic human gesture. We crave human contact, and it does end up in disaster sometimes.

JOYCE: In many of your interviews you've stated how important you think it is to always be questioning established morés. However, at what point does challenging the status quo become a stance, questioning for questioning's sake? At times it risks becoming a safely noncommittal moral relativism.

answers. I got this letter from a reader who said, "I find myself agreeing with Isabel's father, despite not agreeing in the least with his politics, that Isabel had been made miserable by the peace movement." I wrote back to her and said, "I'm glad you see there is another view here." It would have been all too easy for Isabel to reject her father, but she has to go beyond her role of the dutiful daughter and he has to go beyond the father who has all the answers. It's tempting for the writer to have an easy way out, a solution, but much less interesting. But it is a cautionary tale—the car is our world swerving out of control, and it is my role as a writer to caution.

JOYCE: Your stories very effectively widen the focus from the merely personal to the universal, as any great

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MOCK: I think what I'm addressing are institutions and the roles within them—within marriage, a psychiatric institution, even the role of how the living should view the dead, (eg. *A Small Ceremony*) that as the living you must deny death, that you mustn't look death in the face—these are the tacit assumptions we accept.

JOYCE: I notice a strong ethical concern in your writing. Do you see yourself in the long tradition of English moralist writers?

MOCK: *A Small Ceremony* was a personal breakthrough for me—that's why Natsumi's there, for that moral vision, the personal mourning juxtaposed against the grieving over Hiroshima. I'm not proposing anything morally, I'm saying, let's look at war, let's look at privilege and power. There's this great quote of Kafka's about the writer being an axe coming down on frozen water and shattering the surface—it's always struck me that a writer serves that role.

I set out writing *Neapolitan* years ago from a very different point of view—the early drafts had my need to be right, thinking I did have all the

literature should do.

MOCK: I feel if I can't give voice to other peoples' concerns I won't have used my life to anyone else's benefit. I strove to have two narrative lines throughout the book—one being the personal and the other the global, and the intersection is between them. Narrative approach is very important to me and these stories have all chosen different narrative approaches for that reason. Many of the stories do have an element of the global in them—the nuclear issue, for example. When I first learned the capacity we have to destroy ourselves, it shocked me, it changed me as a writer—that's why moral vision is so important to me.

In *Fire* I deal with issues of sexual abuse, and when I first started sending that story out I had editors saying to me, "I'm not sure who the you is in this story,"—there's many different things going on. The theme of protecting children runs throughout the stories, the concept behind the Yiddish expression 'keneinehore', meaning "without the evil eye", that if you praise a child too

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