

Jane Alison, email interview with Fiona Cox

FC: Could you outline your background in Classics, both during your school years and at University?

JA: I went to large public (in American terms) schools in Washington, DC, where we were lucky enough still to have someone teaching Latin. In fact I signed up for French, but there was a mistake, and I landed in Latin by chance . . . I studied it for four years before going to Princeton, where I majored in Classics (more Latin than Greek). I continued in a Classics Ph.D. program at Brown for a year before deciding to switch to visual art and fiction.

FC: *The Love Artist* (2001) joins David Malouf's *An Imaginary Life* (1978) and Christoph Ransmayer's *The Last World* (1988) as a novel inspired by the *Tristia*. Do you have any thoughts on why a turning towards the *Tristia* seems to have taken place towards the end of the twentieth century?

JA: Perhaps in this globalized era we're more likely, through work or family or marriage, to find ourselves living in places that aren't home and where our language is foreign. It could also be a generalized sense of alienation or personal dislocation brought on by countless aspects of our over-technological world—a nostalgia for a place-time that's lost. (To add to your list of work inspired by *Tristia*: Bob Dylan's 2006 album with several songs reworking lines straight from it.)

FC: In *The Love Artist* Xenia imagines an Ovid who gazes back to her from the future ('She could still see his face, ancient and boyish, laughing from millennia ahead. [143])— is Ovid our contemporary?

JA: I so like to think so . . . Not *our* contemporary, but nevertheless contemporary. I was responding most to the last words of his *Metamorphoses*: "If a poet's visions are ever true, I'll live on in fame forever." I'm working on translations of parts of his *Metamorphoses* right now and reading lots of exciting new critical work on him, and all of this makes me feel more than ever how modern—or postmodern—his work can be.

FC: In *The Love Artist* you depict a Rome that has collapsed back into countryside in terms that recall *Aeneid* VIII – is Virgil also an important author for you?

JA: Not in the same way that Ovid is, although I did read Virgil first. That image came more from my own nature-centric longings, as well as from a Piranesi etching of the tops of columns jutting out of the earth in the Campidoglio—as well as what you do see in Rome, those cats wandering and lounging in the grass in the ruins.

FC: In both *The Love Artist* and *The Sisters Antipodes* you give powerful depictions of the ways in which mythical characters are embodied within living humans. What lessons can Ovid teach us today?

JA: What lessons can't he! Now that I'm translating his stories of sexual transformation from *Metamorphoses*, I'm astonished again at the depth, complexity, and truth in them still. What does it mean to have thoughts and passions trapped inside a changeable body? What is a *self*, and where are its edges? If someone can pierce you in sex and in love, how do you survive? And if your outer form changes, what lasts?

FC: Do you have any thoughts on why the *Tristia* are particularly in vogue among women writers? I'm thinking of your own novel *The Love Artist*, but also Marie Darrieusecq's recent translation of the *Tristia* into French (2008), Julia Kristeva's novel *Le Vieil Homme et les loups* (1991), Josephine Balmer's use of them in her poetic work *The Word for Sorrow* (2009) or, more recently their presence in the poetry of Jo Shapcott, especially *Or Mutability* (2010). Was your own response to Ovid in *The Love Artist* particularly shaped by your gender, would you say?

JA: I think it might be just as much in vogue among male writers (given your listing earlier, and my addition of Bob Dylan!). My response to Ovid in *Love Artist* was surely shaped by my gender, but (unlike some of the book's women readers I've heard from), I relate to, and simply like, "my" Ovid, slippery as he is, more than the figure of Xenia. Ovid's voice in his *Amores*, *Ars Amatoria*, *Metamorphoses*, etc., constructs a persona that seems to be so interested in his female characters and thinks about them so intently, that, especially when first reading him, I evolved a personal, almost sexually charged engagement with the voice. I suppose that's gendered.

FC: In *The Sisters Antipodes* you write: "Hair sprouts between your legs, a bottom pushes at your jeans, blood's a surprise on the toilet paper; no wonder it's mostly girls in Ovid who are transfigured, becoming laurel trees, drops of myrrh, bears. This must be when the shift begins, when yearning for those pantheonic fathers who had dwelled in the ribs turns instead to men on the street, and when you might or might not become your mother." (152) Is there an especially gendered response to Ovid?

JA: See above . . .

FC: How well did Ovid understand women?

JA: No way of knowing for sure, although his representations of them show astonishing subtleties of understanding and empathy, as well as that genuine *interest*. But we know him only through his literary production—not biographically—and this, together with the two thousand years between him and us, and his vastly different language, culture, and society, make me wary of trying to read him in such terms. Not that I haven't done so anyway, of course, as a reader setting aside scholarly scruples and just falling into his vision.

FC: In *The Sisters Antipodes* you depict your relationship with Jenny as if the two of you are both halves of a hybrid form. The underwater struggle you had with the girl next door offers an image of the relationship – you say ‘As if our family were a watery element in which only one of us could displace the other’ (53), and later in the book you observe that ‘The language of entomology nears that of myth, where human patterns and transformations are codified, especially the interesting ones where something has gone wrong (186). Is it true to suggest that Ovid has furnished you with a template with which to make sense of a childhood and adolescence marked by turmoil and change?

JA: Yes, indeed—although he gave me a template even more when I was older, in college, and struggling with the next phase of relations. In the preface to the translations I’m working on I describe Ovid’s story of Echo and Narcissus as a gemlike portrait of what I was suffering at the time, a portrait that seemed to give my own painful condition form and beauty. The templates continue to come.

FC: In *The Sisters Antipodes* you write of Sutter – ‘He was not like Amor in Apuleius’s *Golden Ass*, but that’s what I was reading in Latin, so I made him Amor, too.’ (167) Is there a sense in which your life as a Classics student made your other life more dangerous, by offering a specific set of explanations and patterns? I’m thinking also of the passage: ‘When I was nineteen, twenty, I seemed to have an alternate self that lived away from my consciousness, wanting and doing things I couldn’t believe I’d do and refused to remember. Like an Ovidian figure of Hunger or Greed climbing out night after night and leaving me wrecked.’ (199)

JA: That’s an awfully interesting question. I think, at the time, it seemed instead that the classical stories gave order, not paradigms of horror that might provide license—but you might be right. Classical literature, myth especially, delves so much in extremes—fathers eating children, sons castrating fathers, women killing husbands—and is always staring coldly at the limits of human life. If this is the stuff you feed on each day as a reader, your blood’s sure to be coloured by it all.

FC: Ovid’s exile seems to haunt *The Sisters Antipodes*, as well as *The Love Artist*, in so far as it is a memoir of displacement, and an account of longing for a sense of home. Is it fair to say that the *Tristia* live on, in your account of the stories of emigration to Australia, especially in the nineteenth century? These narratives of exile offer evidence of the persistence of the classical world in surprising places: ‘Around Jenny’s grave are others, the remains of the first settlers and their children, the ones who didn’t survive this strange new world. Inscribed on the gravestone of a little girl laid to face the ocean: *What hopes have perished with you, our daughter.*’

JA: Yes, I think you’re right that the sadness and longing for home of *Tristia* infuses my memoir, too. I’m interested, though, that in the second part of this question you seem also to associate emigration to Australia with exile: I’ve thought of Australia so much, instead, as a new world that was sought (my forebears there having been optimistic settlers, not

convicts), and then, for me, as the land from which I was exiled. Complicated. But either way, yes the *Tristia* surely live on, in just about any story of leaving home and wandering. I think David Malouf, in *Remembering Babylon*, explores the idea beautifully regarding Australia, as does W. G. Sebald in the *Emigrants* regarding European Jewry—and these are books, together with Ovid’s story (and Nabokov’s), that affected me deeply. (I also tried to write about this in my third novel, *Natives and Exotics*.)

FC: Your memoir offers other instances of the new and surprising ways in which Ovid’s myths acquire new life: ‘Jenny wandering up on the sixth floor in the air, transformed to light and shadow. Like one of Ovid’s girls who’d been raped and humiliated and turned into a bear, but then, as a grace, altered once more to a constellation. Helen has done something you can do these days : designated a star to be Jenny’s.’ (275) Do you have any comments to make on how Ovid is made new, almost by chance?

JA: I think that Ovid’s stories become most new when they’ve sunk deeply into a reader and later arise again unconsciously to provide meaning—or a portrait—of an experience; but by now they’ve been modified with details of one’s own life. One of my first senses of such a personal revision of Ovid revolved around his telling of Europa: that image of the young girl clutching the horn of a white bull as he carries her over the sea became, unintentionally, conflated in my mind with my stepfather’s terrifying stories of sharks, and his advice that, if I ever found myself in the sea with a shark, just to grab its fin and ride. My stepfather was, let’s say, that shark, the frightening but crucial figure I had to hold onto to survive, as he carried us over different seas.

Stories that consciously set out to “retell” Ovid’s have a harder time making him new, I think.

FC: You are unusual in having so solid a background in classical languages and literature among contemporary women writers responding to myth. What level of classical background can you assume in your readers and how does this colour the way you write?

JA: I’m afraid I assume no classical background in readers; it’s rare to find these days. I don’t want to alienate either those with no background or those who do have some, though, and I think this makes me ultimately engage classical names, images, etc., as they genuinely feel to me, not as scholarly references. I hope I don’t seem pedantic but probably do.

FC: What is the future for classical languages and literatures, do you think? Does it depend on their prevalence within popular culture today?

JA: In my lifetime classical studies have been mourned as gone forever and then celebrated as newborn half a dozen times . . . When I worked at Tulane University in New Orleans in the early 1990s, we had a new chancellor who decided that Classics was not a cost-effective department and wanted it abolished, but he lost that fight; at my own university now, in Miami, we’ve in the past few years actually *created* a new Classics department. Classical

scholars themselves are tenacious and likely to preserve the texts and their study like their monkish forebears—and new work being done these days on gender and sexuality studies is extremely rich and stimulating. My secret hope: a sophisticated animated film based on Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, something as true as possible to the text and—because it is so compelling, dark, surprising, intense, sexy, witty—intoxicating to young viewers, who have seen so much that ultimately stems from Ovid but not Ovid himself.