# Interview with Kathleen Hill

***Barbara Brooks***

Kathleen Hill is that rare writer who possesses not just talent and imagination but also discipline and determination to see her work through to a thing well made, a piece of sober and impressive fiction. Inkwell is happy to print this set of insights into the mind of a writer we admire for a career of enduring achievement, a prose artist of exceptionally warm and affecting stories and novels.

She began writing when her children were in high school and now, some twenty years later, all of her work, except the new novel she hopes to finish this year, has been published. Two of her first stories appeared in the Hudson Review (26, 3 and 40, 1), and her first novel, Still Waters in Niger (Northwestern, 1999) was among the Notable Books of the Year in the New York Times, Los Angeles Times and the Chicago Tribune. Its French translation was short listed for the Prix Femina Etranger. Her next two pieces appeared in the Yale Review (86, 3) and the Michigan Quarterly Review (37,1). The Anointed, which first appeared in DoubleTake (5, 4) was anthologized in Best American Short Stories 2000, Pushcart Prize XXV and The Pushcart Book of Short Stories, the 25-year anniversary anthology. She earned a B.A. from Manhattanville College, an M.A. from Columbia and a Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin. She currently teaches in the Writing Program at Sarah Lawrence College and lives in New York City.

**Your novel, Still Water in Niger, has been called "semi-autobiographical." What would you say distinguishes memoir from fiction?**
I think it's a very perplexing distinction, as so many of these distinctions are, because one category slides into the next. Perhaps these labels are more useful to bookstores that have to place books on one shelf or another than they are to writers. I think of my book as fiction, certainly, although in writing it I tried to be completely faithful to fact insofar as the place is concerned. It was very important to me that there not be any inaccuracies I could prevent--about Niger, its geography, or things that might be said or not be said by people there. Everything that I saw--that I described--I hoped would be true to the place. But I took complete liberty with everything that had to do with my story. So the book is certainly not accurate in terms of recorded speech, or in terms of facts about the narrator's or her daughter's life. I do hope the book was emotionally accurate. I hope it was emotionally true to whatever the feelings were that I wanted to capture about that time and place. But to me, it wouldn't qualify as memoir.

**Did it disturb you then, that critics interpreted the book as "semi-autobiographical"?**
Not really. You know, it's strange. The book was translated into French, and the French reviews made no mention of these categories at all. It was simply assumed to be fiction. In this country these things seem to matter more than in France, for example.

**Why is that?**
I think it's partly a matter of literary tradition. In France, whether it's Proust, or Marguerite Duras, or a host of others, there's a strong tradition of fiction based frankly on autobiographical material, perhaps more so than in this country.

**Colette, too.**
Colette, exactly; Colette would be a perfect example. All these writers, too, are given to lyrical

prose, which may put them more firmly in a poetic tradition than would be true of our own novelists. And it may be that what we think of as plot is a bit different, too. But the novel it seems to me is a very flexible form and we needn't worry too much--whatever the tradition--whether any given work conforms to certain prescribed standards. Think, most recently, of W.G. Sebald's work. In any writer's hands, the material will take the shape it must. There's a huge divide between whatever it is in your life you bring to your work and what you try to make of it, the thing I would call fiction. But I'm not really strict about these lines. I mean it never occurred to me that what I was writing – while I was writing it – wasn't fiction.

You know, I think of a story by Isaac Babel called "In the Basement," that begins with the sentence, "I was an untruthful little boy." And it talks about the boy's love for telling "lies." What he came to realize in time was that it was the "transcendent truth" he was after--and to be challenged about what was "true" or "not true" wasn't the point. I suppose if you're writing memoir, or if you're writing fiction or poetry--or whatever it is you're writing--you're looking for that underlying truth. I think you write to find your way to something that you don't already know, and so you're looking for what Babel calls the "transcendent truth"--whatever it is that you haven't been able to grasp, or discover. Something that presses; the elusive thing.

Of course I did know that the book was based loosely on a moment in my life that involved Africa, a newly grown daughter, etcetera.

**Then you did spend a year in West Africa when your daughters were young, and you did return to visit your eldest daughter many years later?**

Yes, yes, all of that is fact, a matter of historical record, if you want to call it that. But the dialogue attributed to the character of the daughter, Zara, in the novel, the narrator's own dialogue, is completely different from anything my own daughter and I said to each other, for example. The character and the actual person are quite separate. I think what I was really working from, now that I think of it, is that moment just after a child is grown when a mother (or a parent) wonders what role she has played in the suffering of her child. When it has become "too late" to alter the course of her child's life. So the book was written out of that particular moment in time. I felt as though I had to write through something in order to get to the next point in my life. There was a lot of personal pressure to write through whatever this was.

**How much writing did you do before your novel?**

I started writing when my children were in their teens. I started with stories--I guess there were about five or six of them--and they were published, so I thought I would work toward a collection. And then I did go visit my daughter in Niger, and when I was there I was so overwhelmed by what I saw, and the extraordinary opportunity of the return--because I think in the middle of your life these returns hold something that is quite stunning. I returned from Niger and I tried to keep working on the stories, but I kept hearing Niger behind everything. Always Niger. I really think there was something that I had seen there that was unusual for a person like myself--a European or American traveling in Africa--partly because my daughter spoke the language so fluently, and because as a health worker she was very, very, much part of a whole world of women. I really did see something that I thought was not being recorded--things about Africa, for example--and I wanted very, very much to tell about the extraordinary generosity and resourcefulness and patience of these people who were being devastated by famine. That would be one part of it. I wanted to pay tribute to an Africa that the world of journalism for the most part ignores. I felt as if Africa was the great gift of my adult life, completely unanticipated, you know, going to Africa in the first place, giving birth to two children there. I felt as if I had to respond in some way.

**And yet in the novel there is a theme of estrangement and the dislocation of travel, and not understanding.**

I began to see that, in fact, just when something looked most foreign or difficult to understand, it was because it had something to tell me about my intimate life that I hadn't even begun to grasp. In Niger, it was the behavior attached to this concept of koumia – a word that is sometimes translated as shame. It's a very strong thing in the culture. At first I thought, isn't this strange, how could this be, and it had seemed very distancing. And then I realized, oh, not at all, why haven't I seen this before, this thing in fact is very close to my own unacknowledged experience. And I have come to believe that within your own life, when something in the world, in another culture, seems particularly strange, unrecognizable, often it is because there is something in your own life that hasn't been acknowledged that you see reflected there. It's as if a mirror is being thrown up to you. You can't see your face immediately. It looks like a stranger's.

**You've written that the experiences of a parent and child, or even the experiences of two siblings, may be felt very differently. If that is so, how do people ever share an experience or a memory? That question is at the core of much of your work.**
I think it's like Kafka – what does he say? – that a book must be the axe for the frozen sea within us. Both in the characters and in life, what keeps us apart has to do with this frozen sea within. I don't know what one ever knows of another person – or of oneself – but I think those things are very much connected: what one doesn't know of oneself is very much like what one doesn't know about somebody else, and these are the things that keep us apart. But even with all this, I believe it's the act of imagination that releases us. It's as though all of a sudden, the person you're in a struggle with becomes human, something shifts, something changes, and you see that person as isolated and in pain, like yourself. One hopes for that moment, or looks for it, or tries to wait for it. Again, what does Kafka say? "Art like prayer is a hand outstretched in the darkness waiting, seeking for some touch of grace which will transform it into a hand that bestows gifts." It seems the attempt to write is the attempt to stand there waiting, in hopes of receiving whatever it is that is given.

**I have the feeling you write fairly slowly.**
[Laughs.] Oh yes, very slowly. It takes me a long time to see what's there.

**Over what number of years did you write the five or six stories before your book?**
Maybe about six.

**Did you write other things?**
I don't think so.

**So then everything you write is elegant and beautiful and it all finds a home?**
I could show you a bookcase that is stacked with piles and piles of revisions, and I've thrown most of it away.

**For how long did you work on the book?**
About five years, I think.

**And an average story?**
A year, by the time it's written, shown to friends, revised, revised, revised. It might take less. And then there's life. Both my parents have died during the last decade and I was much involved with them during these last years. I teach.

**Do you work on more than one thing at a time?**
No. One thing. That's all. I've found that I don't have an easy way of finding a form, and that is

what increasingly takes my time. I start out, and I say, okay, how do I tell this? Still Water started as a fictional journal. I worked on it for about three or four months, and then I read it and I was very depressed, because it was all wrong. There was no voice, there was nothing. Then I went away to Yaddo. I had had a very unhappy year; nothing I wrote seemed to be working and I was very anxious about how I was going to do anything with this material. I thought, well, I'll just rest my bones while I'm here. Restore myself. But no sooner did I stretch out on the bed than I heard a voice, and I got up and began putting down words. Weeping. This isn't the version I ended up with, but because of this huge emotional response, I knew I was closer than I had come before. So I had a voice, finally, for something, and the first pages came out of that time. Then during these early days of writing I saw the books as whole. I'll have Zinder at the beginning, I thought, and Zinder again at the end, and Matameye in the middle--that's what I'll do! And I also want to say--and this is the factual part and perhaps the immediate reason I decided to write the book at all--that just like the narrator at the end of the book, I returned to Zinder alone, and there was a one-legged boy who appeared at intervals and accompanied me as I wandered from one place to another, who sat with me, waited out the hours. I felt as if I'd have died of loneliness without him. As I left, as I got on the autobus, he and the little girl were there in the sand, waving goodbye. And so when I got back to my daughter's place in Matameye, I told her that something had happened. But I knew I'd have to write it all out in order to know what it was that had happened. There had been something overwhelming in seeing them wave goodbye to me. You go on a journey and somebody completely unexpected gives you the thing you've never been able to find. They just hand it to you. I guess it's the welcome given to the stranger.

**But wasn't it your daughter, from whom you were seeking some kind of recognition?**
I don't know. For the narrator it's as if the questions have changed. The narrator bought those sweets for her daughter, but she winds up giving them to the boy. Who is your child? Whose child are you? Maybe the person out in the street is your child. Maybe you're the child the one-legged boy takes care of.

**In your early stories – and your book – you are very concerned with a mother's fear that she has failed her children.**
"Sisters and Brother," yes. "Flood," yes. "Solstice," too.

**Where does that fear come from?**
I suppose that fear is one of those demons--or angels--that appears everywhere but can't be looked at directly.

**Then after the novel came what looks, in hindsight, like another set of three stories – all of which explore the way reading can change one's perception of being in a situation, or a place.**
Yes, I'd always wanted to write about the book, The Diary of a Country Priest by Georges Bernanos. I was fascinated by it, reread it often, but was never able to understand its mysterious power over me. I'd scarcely known anybody who'd read it. I thought, this time I'll try to write about how imagination, the way you experience things, is formed by your reading. When you look out at the world, you see it differently if you've been reading a book that very powerfully affects you.

**But in that story, "Avesnes: Reading in Place," you also suggest the possibility that reading can be a barrier to engaging the real world around you, and that the reader may be hiding, in that she is looking at things through a filter.**
Directly after living in Nigeria, my husband and I spent a year teaching in the French

countryside. The whole time I was waiting for the year to end. We had two babies; we didn't have a bathtub; we didn't have a washing machine. It was cold. We were making salaries that didn't give us enough to heat the place. Reading was a refuge. Yes, sometimes an escape.

**The story begins with an epigraph from Proust: "Reading is at the threshold of spiritual life; it can introduce us to it; it does not constitute it."**
I think what Proust means is that reading should lead us into ourselves. It should be a jumping off place, something you do that leads you more deeply into your own life, opens a door that may allow you to discover your own truths. He felt, certainly, that writers must decipher the truths of their own lives--that reading can move one into these places, but it's not the thing itself. The thing itself is the exploration within.

**Proust appears in a few places in your writing. Do readers of your work need to understand him, to understand you?**
I hope not. But he's a writer I cherish and, you know, I've been teaching Proust. At first I thought, well, this going to be impossible.

**Maybe we need a "Proust for Dummies."**
No, not at all. I've found that students – especially MFA students – absolutely adore him, because the narrator of his great novel is a writer who takes forever getting to it, who keeps putting off the day when he'll begin. But Proust himself, the actual person, wrote and wrote and wrote, but quietly, without people knowing, and nothing ever hung together, and people were always saying, oh poor Proust, he seemed such a talented boy, who would have thought. And meanwhile, there he was, writing and writing and writing, trying to find a way. It's a very moving story, how he does finally begin. His narrator is a kind of spoiled writer, somebody who thinks he might like to write some day but never gets to it. And then when he does, when he's finally decided to sit down and begin to decipher the truths of his own life, that's when the book is over.

**Sounds a bit like Joyce's A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man.**
Yes, yes, that's right. I did my dissertation, before I started writing fiction, on Proust and Joyce.

**While we're on the subject of Proust, did you read Proust to Diana Trilling in the last years of her life, as your narrator does in your story "Reading with Diana"?**
Oh, yes, yes. That's all true. I mean fact. When Diana died, I was plunged in grief. We had had a friendship that extended over many years and she had exercised a huge influence on my life, an older woman who had pursued a writing life. And she was extremely funny. I loved her in a number of ways. I thought, the only way I can survive this death is to begin to write about her, to be in her company day after day. I thought, she's been written about very often as a prickly character. I wanted to say something else about her.

**How do you fill in the fiction around the fact in a story such as this?**
I got out all my old journals, I reread accounts of conversations we'd had. But there were difficulties. How do you put two people in a room, sitting there talking and reading year after year, and make something of it? How do you make the reader feel the passage of time? I settled on the gingko tree in the window going from green to gold, to little bare nubby branches and back again. I wanted the spirit of Proust to somehow fill the room. I had to arrange and rearrange, but I'm sure I didn't include any dialogue that was invented.

**Was there anyone to show this story to, to verify your memory?**
I knew because I was there. And Diana and I spent nearly all our time together alone. I thought, well, I'll take what my experience was, and I'll try to turn it into a tribute to Diana. No,

that's not it, that's not it at all. [Long pause] I think it was that Diana was old enough to be my mother, and having her in my life was such a relief. I was always looking for wise women--you know, somebody who would help you through your dilemmas, throw open a window. I thought, aah, to find a wise woman! There didn't seem to be anything you couldn't talk about with her, and she did take my writing seriously, the writing for my dissertation. Long before I began to write fiction. She was married to somebody who was very well-known, certainly in this academic community in Morningside Heights, and she had been a woman struggling to do her work all those years. And then, she was hilariously funny, just like Proust. She made me laugh and laugh. I'd go over and she'd give me tea and little cakes or something. I felt very mothered by her. We understood each other emotionally. She talked about her life with an amazing kind of honesty.

**Next you wrote "The Anointed," which is probably your most commercially successful story. Was the process of writing it different than for your other stories?**
"The Anointed" was a story that moved restlessly within long before it was written. There was a boy I knew in school, not at all well; I remembered--couldn't forget--that we had had a little understanding, not so much from talking, but by way of an occasional shared silence.

**Did his father kill himself?**
He did. When I thought of that period of my life, junior high school, I remembered that I'd started reading books that grownups hadn't suggested to me, that I discovered on my own, adult books. It was then I read Willa Cather for the first time. In my mind, when I thought of this period in my life, these things--the boy and Willa Cather's Lucy Gayheart--didn't seem connected in any way. But yes, a mood held them together, something remote, something I couldn't grasp.

**And did you have an early love of classical music?**
No, I don't know anything about music. It was just that there was a music teacher who had an extraordinary way of teaching. I don't know that she spoke like the Miss Hughes of the story, but I do know that she told us stories about her life. I do know that there was some great grief, some great sense of not having done what she most wanted to do in the world, which was to have been a musician of some kind; it might have been an opera singer, I don't know. She told us the story, and then the story would change, but the changes made no difference at all. The point was that she hadn't done what she most longed to do, she felt she had terribly, tragically, missed out. And what she felt she'd missed out on was expressing her feelings through art. This was something entirely new to me, someone with these feelings about music, about any art. Maybe she was the first person I met with that kind of passion.

**Did you have your own passion for writing by then?**
Oh, no! I wasn't a child writer. But she communicated something. It wasn't as if she was trying to make music interesting for children. It was more like: listen! And because her own passionate life was involved in the music, that was all right. It wouldn't have been all right if she'd tried to impose music on us in a cold kind of a way. No, not at all. But we all felt it, in one way or another. As it was, we all sort of sat there and listened.

**Miss Hughes really honors her students by believing they are capable of considering huge thoughts, for example, the idea that there may be little difference between sorrow and joy. What a frightening thing to suggest to a room full of children.**
Yes, but when in the realm of art you feel something very, very deeply, these divisions cease to exist, don't you think? For example when you're writing, and you know you've touched

something profound--is it joy, is it sorrow?--these are just names we put to things. It's an overflow of something; I think that's the right word. She did respect us by talking to us about her life. But in the story--as distinct from the teacher of my memory--she plays a requiem. You'd think a requiem would be obvious, wouldn't you, yet it didn't come to me until the very end. Of course, it would have to be a requiem, and it would have to be Mozart's Requiem, but for a long time I didn't know what it was going to be. And then one day, there it was, staring me in the face.

**Where do your ideas come from? Memory, an image, a voice?**
I think of it as something that refuses to go away, that calls to you over time. It's as if there is something, some sort of a question being asked, and the writing is an attempt to respond.

**So, the writing, then, is the "axe for the frozen sea within," as Kafka said?**
There's the desire to go more deeply, and the further you go, the greater the mystery. I remember once somebody at a colony asking me why I'd started writing so late. I had no answer and then somebody who was there, listening, said, but it's not up to us, we're called. Well I guess some of us are called later than others. I think that when you do move into a writing space, everything starts to quiver.

**By the time you come to the end of a story, do you know what the question was, or is?**
No. But I think the attempt to get at it is the attempt to pay tribute. To the suffering child in Niger, to pay tribute to that, or to how deeply all children suffer. Norman suffers. Miss Hughes suffers. I think of her as throwing out a lifeline to him.

**That's a beautiful scene, where Miss Hughes asks, "Is there anything we can do for you?"**
That is the only line in the story that comes directly from memory. There he was, isolated and stricken, and that's what she said to him. It was unforgettable. She recognized something in him and she spoke across this terrible barrier of grief and isolation.

**How has teaching influenced your work?**
I think teaching at its best is very moving. There is so much despair and unhappiness in the world, and to see students, week after week, spin things from their imaginations is really extraordinary. It confirms for me the extraordinary importance of the arts, of writing. It's of supreme importance.

**Are there certain things you hear yourself telling your students over and over again, so you think, aah, these must be important.**
Yes. Write often, often, often. Honor the impulse. Watch your inner life. If you're moved by something, if you feel something, don't let it go up in smoke.