

## INTERVIEW WITH KIM ECHLIN

*The Interview took place at the Second Cup Coffee Shop, 1948 East Queen Street, Toronto, 14 June 1998. The ambient sound included chatter at surrounding tables and the regular thumps of the portafiltro of the cappuccino machine being emptied of grounds against a two-by-four. The interviewer was Bill Schermbrucker. The tape has been edited for clarity and to fill in background.*

BS I brought you the latest issue of *The Capilano Review* [Series 2, No. 25].

KE Thank you very much. You're a former editor?

BS Yes.

KE These are wonderful, these drawings [by Alexandra Dikeakos]. Like Blake. Quite stunning. Is this a man — no, it's a woman. I'm so glad you brought these to me. This kind of imagery is exactly what I'm working on right now.

BS Okay, let's talk about your first novel: *Elephant Winter* is a real revolutionary book.

KE I am delighted at your response. It's great.

BS I don't know what my students are going to say. I'm teaching this accelerated summer course, seven weeks the whole semester, so this gets one day. And then they write an exam on it, an in-class essay. I've never "taught" it before.

KE You'll lecture on it, won't you? What's the course?

BS Introduction to fiction, first year. Many in the class are Asian,

and they're very bright, very interested. We're reading Michael Ondaatje, Nadine Gordimer, your book and one of Robert Weaver's anthologies of short stories. So we'll see what happens.

KE I'd be interested to hear their responses.

BS I'll send them to you. I'll do some Xeroxing.

KE If it's not too much trouble. I taught in China for a year, Backgrounds to English Literature. I started the class with Greek and Roman mythology. I used Edith Hamilton's *Greek and Roman Myths*. Then we did a brief introduction to the Bible, and then we went through an accelerated history of English literature using whatever texts were available. The class was made up of advanced English teachers and I had some of the most interesting readings of western literature that I've ever encountered. I had a brilliant analysis of Molly Bloom's speech at the end of *Ulysses* by one of the women students. It was fascinating to re-read English literature from that particular cultural perspective. They loved *Waiting for Godot*, understood it perfectly, not as something absurd but as something real.

BS I suspect that I'll be sending you some interesting Xeroxes because there are some quite interesting people in this class. You include in *Elephant Winter* a dictionary of Elephant-English and diagrams of Elephant infrasound. What are these diagrams?

KE Those are based on real research. Katy Payne at Cornell University discovered elephant infrasound when she felt pressure changes against her ears. She recorded the silence around the elephants, sped up the tapes and could "hear" the elephant noises. Then she diagrammed infrasound. However, my diagrams and my dictionary are fictional.

BS And where was she doing that research?

KE She started in America.

BS So it was captive animals.

KE Yes, and then she went out and did it in Zimbabwe with wild elephants.

BS That's near where I'm from, you know.

KE Kenya?

BS Yes. And my relatives live in Zimbabwe, in Bulawayo.

KE In *Bulawayo*! That's where I spent most of my time.

BS Yeah, I got that.

KE Have you been back?

BS A little bit.

KE Wow, so you've seen elephants out there.

BS Yeah.

KE How many years did you spend there?

BS I came here when I was twenty-six.

KE Oh. So that's really your land.

BS Here's a hard question for you, Kim: This is *tour de force*, this book, right?

KE Thank you.

BS So what are you going to do next?

KE Well, I'm working on this Demeter-Persephone story. The working title is *Dagmar's Daughter*. It has a contemporary setting and the themes are from the Sumerian female hero story called "Inanna's Descent to the Underworld," an antecedent of the Demeter/Persephone story. I like working with the Sumerian version because the female character is very fierce and dark, like *Macbeth's* witches or Russian Baba Yagas, the hermit women that show up in fairy tales. So, I'm looking at the female quest, female adventure and initiation.

BS But will it be a completely different thing from *Elephant Winter* or is it in any way in the same vein?

KE It's hard to tell at this point. Although, I'll say this, and then I probably won't want to talk about it too much: The thing that I'm discovering most recently is that in some ways *Elephant Winter* is rooted in Western Christian traditions —



BS     *Very* Christian.

KE     Yes, the allusions to Donne and Arvo Pärt's music. It was unconscious, I was just working out of what I liked —

BS     Excuse me interrupting you: Actually, is there a mother in your life who played that music?

KE     No. That's all fictional, although I'll tell you a story about my mother after, my real mother. But what I'm finding with Demeter and Persephone is that you cannot work out of a Christian tradition to get that story right. It's too —

BS     Pre-Christian?

KE     Yes. And it's too violent, and too — not primordial but too archaic — in terms of how characters respond and act and so on. It's really interesting to go to the archetypes expressed in Sumerian and classical stories, rather than the Christian myths of *Elephant Winter*. It requires me to work from a different, in some ways much darker, place.

BS     Okay. The writing is so good. I was reading it to my son and his wife and kid as they drove me down here this morning. This kid has been sick, and he's just one and a bit —

KE     Ah-h!

BS     So they're just coming out of this, and they're living in a visceral way, you know, when you've got a sick kid in the house, so their life is a bit of a shambles. And this *book* is all about —

KE     Being in a shambles, yes!

BS     So I'm reading, and my lawyer son is driving, you know [*acts out serious driver*], and he says, "*God*, she writes well! *God*, she's good!" So talk about that a little bit. I haven't heard of your writing, much, before this book. How long have you been writing?

KE     I've been writing forever. And it's interesting what you're picking up there. I have a couple of books in the drawer, but they were not written from where this is written. I got to a certain point with each of them, almost published each time, and then it would

fall through at the end, and I partially gave up and thought, "Okay, this is too painful, too hard, I'm getting too old, I don't want to do this anymore." But I did. So about six weeks later I was back, but this time I started from a completely different spot. I said, "What I write this time is going to be *exactly* what I want to write."

BS What was constraining you in those other books?

KE I was trying to work in genres, one was a sort of mystery. This was what I really wanted to do, but it took me a while to find out how to do that.

BS Was there a death though, that this book came from?

KE I have lived through a couple of cancer deaths, not my mother's. So I'll tell you the funny story about my mother. When *Elephant Winter* came out, I said to my mother, "I have to prepare you for the response, because there are quite a few people who don't read fiction, especially written in the first person, and they're going to think it's me and you." She said, "Oh, don't worry about it." I said, "You just need one answer to people who say *anything* to you, because they will. You say, 'It's fiction.'" And she had this encounter in the grocery store. A man who hadn't seen her for years came running up to her and said, "Madeleine! You're not dead! I read your daughter's book and I thought you were dead." Anyway, she's had good fun with it.

BS Where does "Echlin" come from? Is that Finnish?

KE Irish.

BS *Really!* I asked some Germans and they were suggesting it might be Finnish?

KE I get both of those. My forebears came in the potato famine. We found an "Echlinville" in Ireland.

BS And you have one kid?

KE Yes. One daughter.

BS How was Penguin?

KE They were great. Very good to work with.

BS I notice you put your thanks to Cynthia Good in the paperback. I bought this first in hardcover. Did I write this in my letter? I was walking through the mall, and there was Coles, and they feature Canadian books. They have these little cardboard stands one on either side of the entry, where they discount the specials —

KE New hardcovers.

BS And you were the special of the week. Previously I'd bought Daphne Marlatt when she was the special of the week, and then *you* were the special of the week. And I remembered you from when we met at the CBC and I think you gave me your card, and I just went in and bought the book, and it knocked me out. Absolutely knocked me out.

KE Can I ask you, what are you responding to? Can you articulate it?

BS I think the intimacy. I mean, this book is very political, without overtly saying that it is political. I said earlier it's a revolutionary book. This book is coming out of feminism, you know this sounds so boring to say, but it's *real* feminism. It's not an agenda. It's felt feminism, felt community, intimacy, I . . . I'm supposed to be interviewing you, not you interviewing me, but —

KE I'm interested.

BS I do have some worry about the [Elephant-English] dictionary.

KE How did you respond to it?

BS It intrigued me at first. I thought, "Wow, this is great." But . . .

KE You can be honest. I've heard everything about this dictionary.

BS Well, I felt that it was an invention that couldn't be carried through. Because it sits there, and yet those words are never going to be used, actually. So you read it, and there's, what, five parts to it, or four. It was a one-shot deal, the dictionary. I mean you're not going to go back and *learn* Elephant. It was okay. It wasn't the best part of the book. But that's okay. It's a foil for some of the other. It's a different voice. The dictionary is this elegant, academic voice that



comes in, that gives you some relief from the viscosity of the dying. The mother and those bloody birds! They are so uncomfortable, those birds, sitting on the lip and picking at her teeth is such a gruesome image, so unreal, and it comes from tick birds or something in Africa, and it's so uncomfortable that when you get to the dictionary, you get —

KE A bit of a break. Yeah. It is complete in itself and represents an idealized matriarchal language.

BS It's interesting, but that's not the meat of the book. The meat of the book is the feelings in it, you know, I mean that whole kind of solidarity thing, that whole . . . I mean there's two elephants standing separated by a wall, and they're locating one another by sound, even though if they could get a quote unquote male view of the situation, they would know that they are on each side of the wall and they don't need to . . . but they don't. They are feeling from their guts. I don't know . . . the book knocked me out, Kim, completely knocked me out. It's the most interesting book I've read in years and years. I've been just talking it up all over the place.

KE Wonderful. Now, can I ask you just one more question, and then I won't keep doing this?

BS Yeah.

KE Do you think that your response to community and the ineffable connections between things has anything to do with your coming from Africa?

BS No, I think it's *you*. It's not about me, it's about you. It's about the fact that *you've* been to Africa, and *you've* felt something there. I liken this book to say Michael Ondaatje's *Coming Through Slaughter*, or something like that, where he gets right into the feelings. You have brought Africa into this book. The fact that I come from Africa probably mutes my response to it because it's not as startling to me as to someone born in North America, maybe, because I recognize some of this stuff.

KE Fundamentally it's not about Africa. It's about a psychological state.

BS Have you read Kristjana Gunnars' book *Zero Hour*?

KE Yes. I like her.

BS I think she's more intellectualizing the situation, which isn't to put yours down. You have a great deal of intellectual layering in your book. But her book also knocked me out. I guess the fact that she decided not to make it fiction limits it a little bit, because she wasn't able to go . . . It's a different book.

KE Different genre, yes.

BS But I felt similar about reading that book. And it wouldn't have mattered to me whether I had been to Oregon or not. She's into the blood and guts of living and feeling and dying.

KE Yes.

BS What gave you the idea of running the two plots? I mean you've got Sophie and the dying mother, and then you've got the men and the elephants.

KE I don't know. You can find reasons afterwards. If you extend the metaphor of the elephants as far as it will go, the elephant is the symbol of power, destruction, wisdom, long memory, so it's both dark and light, it's destructive and creative. In nature it's a matriarchally structured group, so the males are coming in and out but they're never part of the community until it's time for procreation. Sophie is working out her feminine concerns, how to nurture her own mother, and how to become a mother herself, how to become a woman in the fullest sense of that word, in connection with the male world but also separate from it.

BS Where does Alecto come from, with his speechlessness?

KE The *name* Alecto is one of the three Greek furies, so that explains a lot.

BS What does it mean?

KE It's one of the names of the three furies. It means "without speech." Their role in the original stories is as irrational forces that disrupt. Alecto, even though he's presented as a scientist, is in fact



an irrational force that's come in to disrupt the harmony that exists among the elephants and Sophie and Jo. The potential for disruption always exists around the edges of human life, forces that change life, destroy harmony when we forget to be attentive.

BS I'll ask a question for my students. They'll be shocked at the promiscuity in this book.

KE Now this is curious! This is the second time in ten days this has come up. Really?

BS Yeah.

KE Are you?

BS No.

KE Good.

BS I don't *believe* it, the Bulawayo stuff, the kind of sleep with whoever's around stuff, especially with AIDS and all the rest of it. In the 90s it seems shocking, because people are so careful now.

KE When I was growing up [*laughs*] it was pretty normal! It's interesting though, you know, that question. It's not something just to be laughed off. This summer I'm reading the Brontës and their biographies. Women were *so* constrained! It was difficult or impossible for the Brontë sisters to get sexual experience young, and yet they were constantly writing about it. Whether we act on sexuality or not, depending on what time period or psychic stage we're in, and how available or not available, possible or not possible it is to do, it seems to be a necessary —

BS Obsession?

KE — passage. A passage that a person of a certain age has to go through. In that sense for your Asian students or any students who are shocked, even if it's not possible to entertain that idea as a reality, it is possible to entertain sexuality as a psychic reality, whether it's acted on or not. When I was in China, halfway through my year there the central government said that it was alright to play rock music. That was the first time since the Cultural Revolution. Everybody *had* rock music but nobody played it in the open. When the

music was allowed to be played out in the open, there were dance parties for the first time since the Cultural Revolution. Several generations of young people had not grown up hearing this kind of music, and there was a *huge, huge* pulse of sexuality at those dances, something nobody would recognize openly. It was very, very interesting. Nobody would talk about it, but they were dancing it. There was this electricity of that possibility in the air.

BS But that pulse of sexuality isn't there in the promiscuity of this book. It's just kind of background or wallpaper or something.

KE This book's not about that.

BS What about the elephants, one, two, three, four, five? Were you consciously choosing to cast five different characters, one an African, or how did that happen?

KE A lot of the elephant stuff was fun. The Elephant-English dictionary was fun. So was the lore.

BS Were there any forerunners for this to you? Had you seen anything like this done before?

KE Well, I'd seen all the usual dictionaries and glossaries such as Anthony Burgess. My introduction is full of allusions to Samuel Johnson's preface to his dictionary which is full of jokes and personal takes on language.

BS It seems very original.

KE It's not, but it's not something that's done very often. It's not an easy read. And people don't — I mean even when I read Anthony Burgess — he always puts his glossaries at the back — it's not the sort of thing that you — depends how deeply interested you are in language *per se*, whether you want to read it or not. But the cast of characters was just for fun. I mean Alice and Gertrude is obvious. Lear is obvious.

BS And Sophie. And how about John Donne? Where does that come from?

KE I love John Donne's poetry. I love how *he* brings together

sexuality and spirituality, how he lets them come together in the same imagery and language.

BS How did you have the nerve to leave so many gaps for your readers to fill in? Because this is not like a first book at all. This is a very mature book. This is a book that says, "Come over into my world if you want to." And then, one is rewarded, because the connections *are* there to make. How did you know to do that?

KE Maybe it's the way I like to read too. It's quite boring to be given everything.

BS Had you published in magazines or something where you'd learned to do that?

KE I'd published no fiction. I'd done journalism.

BS Where?

KE I'd done book reviews. I'd always done some newspaper journalism since a teenager. I did a high school column, and then as an undergraduate I wrote for the *Sunday Express* in Montreal. I've written for documentaries and produced a lot of television.

BS Was that underwritten, or was that overexplicit? It would seem to me those kinds of things generally are overexplicit.

KE That's just the nuts and bolts of writing, and turning it out every week.

BS Where did you learn to be so minimalist?

KE I don't know about that. People afterwards said to me, "You must have worked very hard to get so spare." In some ways I think it was a desire for clarity.

BS Let's go back to Alecto, may I?

KE Sure.

BS How come he doesn't speak? Where does that come from?

KE Much of the book is about communication. The elephants communicate in a language that we can't hear. But though the elephants use infrasound, certain humans — Sophie, her mother, —



intuit their communication. They understand being tremendously connected to each other and to their surrounding world, and are tremendously communicative with their own language. Alecto doesn't understand that. He tries to penetrate this world, to destroy it, or has the potential to destroy it. He does not have language that connects him to others. The kind of language he has is the language of disruption. The rhetoric that he uses in the bar scene with Sophie, for example, is drawn heavily (since you're interested) from the language of Satan in *Paradise Lost* trying to decide how to disrupt the hierarchies of God and heaven.

BS Did you know that when you wrote it?

KE Yeah. There are precise quotes. The rhetoric he *does* use on his board doesn't come from him, it doesn't come from soul, it comes from justifications and rationalizations. So his language is incredibly limited, and what he does have is not connected to his soul at all.

BS Have you read Jung?

KE Yes.

BS Do you feel influenced by Jung?

KE I like Jung a lot. I'm very interested in the archetypes and how he uses them.

BS So is Alecto *logos*?

KE No.

BS Is this all *eros*? Is *Elephant Winter eros*?

KE No. I'm not comfortable with interpretation being so one-on-one, signs not symbols. I have a deep respect for *logos*. We can't have one without the other. Alecto is not *logos*.

BS He's evil?

KE Well, in a Christian context we'd say that. In a Greek context we'd say he's disruptive.

BS Where does that come from? Can you tell me a bit more about the Greek disruption?

KE The Furies are simply sent for irrational reasons. Even though in *Paradise Lost* we've got evil versus good, I do prefer to think of Alecto in the Greek sense of furies that are irrationally sent. We cannot predict where they will come from or why, and we can do nothing against them. They are a potential that is all around us and in us.

BS Where did you learn the Greek stuff.

KE Just reading.

BS You didn't go to Greece?

KE No, I'd love to.

BS It's such a chauvinistic culture, you probably wouldn't stand it.

KE Oh, but it looks so beautiful, the pictures and so on. And I'd love to go to the seat of the Eleusinian Mysteries.

BS Is there an elephant park in Ontario?

KE Yes, there is a "Safari." The one in Ontario is called The African Lion Safari, up towards Guelph. There's also the Bowmanville Zoo, which is a very small zoo but keeps elephants that go out into the community. They use the elephants from the Bowmanville Zoo for the Little Beach Easter Parade which is a small community event.

BS So you had them on Parliament Hill. Have they been on Parliament Hill?

KE [laughs] I visited Katy Payne in Cornell, and she played me her tapes of the elephant infrasound. It's very beautiful, especially the estrus or mating chant. It sounds like a long song. But she also played me their infrasound. When I got a chance to visit real elephants, I asked the keeper if he was aware of this. He didn't have much time for the whole idea of infrasound and language, but he did say that his elephants greeted him every time he stepped up to them. I spent a day walking round the Canadian National Exhibition with him on the elephant ride, and by the end of the day I was picking it up too. It's a very, very low sound, and every time he came, even if he just went to get water, she would greet him. At

Bowmanville, TVO took me to the elephants for an interview and one of the crew said to me, "Make the elephant talk," as sort of a joke. I said, "Come on, guys, it's fiction!" But the keeper said, "You can get shots of her with them," so the elephant was right there, and I started clicking to it, just like you'd do to a baby, just to make any sound, and she started clicking, really clucking her tongue "*Kluck! Kluck!*" like that, back at me. It was quite moving, because she clucked to me, but she wanted me to follow her rhythm too. She slowed down her rhythm and when I slowed down to match hers, then she made hers join mine.

BS     Wow!

KE     And so all that stuff I'd been reading about, I really did experience, but long after I'd written the book.

BS     This was when you were publicizing the book?

KE     Yes, it was marvellous, because I had imagined all that stuff, and I knew it from research, but it actually happened. I felt "out of time" with that elephant and when I laughed she made a sound like a laugh. It was just unbelievable.