Interview with Jane Urquhart at her cottage at Loughbreeze Beach, Colborne, 14TH of July 2010, 10-13am.

Interviewer: Marijke Boucherie (ULICES - University of Lisbon Centre for English Studies)

Marijke Boucherie  Just checking the record-player.

Jane Urquhart  Okay. We can try a couple of questions and you can check it again if you want to?

MB.  Yes, thank you.

JU.  I once poured a full cup of coffee, cream and honey into my computer. (Laughter)

JU.  That was, that was (laughing) the end of the computer!

MB.  Jane Urquhart, you began by writing poetry and when you were working on your first novel, The Whirlpool, I heard you saying in an interview that you were unsure about the genre of what you were doing and therefore referred to the manuscript as “the thing”. Can you elaborate on that?

JU.  Well, as you say I’d always — until that time — been writing in shorter verses, I’d been writing poetry with a great deal of pleasure but I found that I was moving towards narrative and found also that I wanted to write in voices other than my own. And then I began a series of short stories that were, in fact, related to images that my husband was drawing at the time, and I found that very satisfying as well but even the short stories were interlocked. If someone had told me that I was going to write a novel I wouldn’t have believed them. I think I would have been frightened by the notion of the novel because it would have seemed like such a great big commitment; and because I had been attracted to these shorter — though interlocking — ways of expressing myself, and also because I was so interested in language and in poetic form and in style, really.
I had been attracted to a kind of prose poetry. So, essentially when I began what turned out to be *The Whirlpool* I thought I was writing poetry; I believed I was writing a prose poem, or a series of interlocking prose poems, not unlike some of the poems that were in the book of poetry that I had just finished at that time, which was called *The Little Flowers of Madame de Montespan*, which in turn went on to be a book entitled *Some Other Garden*. In the beginning what I was doing with *The Whirlpool*, was just taking images and perhaps fragments of experience and writing a few paragraphs about something that might or might not be connected to what I had written about the day before. So it was a very loose and unstructured approach. It began to structure itself as it went along, but even then I was unwilling or unable or, — in fact it never occurred to me to call it “a novel”, and so I didn’t. I referred to it in my mind as “the thing”. In the beginning I just convinced myself that I was writing a series of prose poems relating to a series of poems that I had already written about Niagara Falls and about my husband’s grandmother who had operated the funeral home there, and gradually as it grew — because it was starting to gain a bulk — I couldn’t really call it a series of prose poems anymore...but, because I didn’t know what else to call it, and the notion of a novel had never occurred to me, I just called it “the thing”.

MB. *When you describe the way, “the thing” — your novel — came into being as a kind of prose poem, I feel you’re still doing this. I feel your books live a lot from a voice, a cadence, a rhythm, that one of the structural principles of your book is rhythm ... a rhythm..., a cadence, a melody, and also analogies and echoes between images. Would you agree with that?*

JU. I do agree with that, but I also have to admit that I’m not really conscious that I’m doing this. I think I made reference earlier today to the one conscious echo that I placed in my previous novel (... I now can say “previous” [laugh] because there’s a new one coming out), *A Map of Glass*, and that was the calling of one of the main characters, Jerome, and having the Patinir painting of Saint Jerome with the lion be a central image in the novel. And then Jerome has an orange cat and I was astonished that no one — except for you — mentioned that in any of the writing that was done about the book! And yet, things that were completely unconscious on
my part were noted and commented on. Most of the time I don’t … I only know what I’m attracted to in terms of images, I don’t really know what it is that is going to happen with that attraction.

MB. *You know what you are attracted to, when you start a novel. How does everything that you’re attracted to come into being? Is it a detail, is it a …*

JU. In my case it’s usually a number of details or images, or even preoccupations that start to make themselves known to me as a possible narrative, I guess. Or, sometimes these preoccupations become exactly that: they become something I can’t forget. So if I can’t forget about the Mexican labourers I’ve seen in a field (I’m thinking of my current novel), or the butterfly tree that was at the end of this lane every summer when I was a child … that … or various lighthouse stories that may have come to my attention … if I can’t forget them, then I know that those things are insisting on being put in a novel.

MB. *This is wonderful…*

JU. I hope it’s wonderful! It’s almost like playing, it’s a … it’s a great pleasure for me but I’m never sure whether it will work as a novel. It’s something that I have to, um … well, in fact it doesn’t really interest me whether or not it’s going to work when I begin to write it [laughs]. I’m just interested in what I’m writing about. So, for example, in the novel that I’ve just finished there is quite a long section about a lighthouse in Florida … and you might wonder how that could possibly relate to South-western Ontario, which is where the book is set and … Mexican labourers … and it’s as if I might have created the image in my own imagination, but I saw the lighthouse and I could not forget about this lighthouse. And so I knew that, somehow, it was significant to the novel.

MB. *You just said that you’re not really interested if it’s going to work or not: you have to do it. So writing is something you have to do.*

JU. Yes, it’s something that I have to do, I feel … empty without it. And it’s really just a continuation of childhood activities … I was a child that was solitary most of the time, at least during the winter and fall, the spring
months of the year. But I had very active summers that were not solitary; I was in the country with lots of cousins and lots of interaction. But I would say 70% to 80% of the rest of the time I was alone so I was constantly making things up, inventing imaginary playmates and that sort of thing.

**MB.** *This connects to something I'm always reminded of when reading your books. I always feel that your books are about inner space, the space of the imagination, where things can flow and exist without being immediately used for a purpose. Would you agree with that?*

**JU.** Well, yes, I think … I believe that the books come from that space and in some cases, yes, they are … I think you're right — I think that the inner lives of the characters are more important to me, more interesting to me than the outer lives of the characters [laugh]. So, the inner life of any main character is very dominant on the page … and of course they — the characters — exist in *my* inner life, so it becomes a kind of play between me and them.

**MB.** *The dedication in A Map of Glass says: “To A.M., to the east of me and to A.M., to the west of me” and I wondered if the initials might refer to Alice Munro and Anne Michaels. This is my guess, because of the “inner space” I asked you about; because you and the two other writers seem somehow to preserve the mystery of life although without direct relation to a religious context.*

**JU.** You … you're correct, in that those two initials are terribly important to me in terms of relationships that I have with people, and among those people are the writers that you've mentioned. And then of course there's Alistair Macleod, who's even further east. But one of the people I had in mind was a visual artist called Allan Mackay who … who is tremendously interesting and who also … right in the middle of the time that I was writing *A Map of Glass*, included me in a project where we spent some time in The Fryfogel Inn, a historic site which, as you know, appears in *A Map of Glass*. This was like a little gift in the middle of the book, to be presented with this project. I … in fact, don't know Allan all that well, but his works of art are very resonant and profound and he's an interesting thinker. So he was in that collection of people whose initials are A.M. I think it's fascinating in a way how many there are! And so rather than list
them all I just thought “to the east of me and to the west of me” — and that’s a very Canadian thought, I now realize, because we think “east / west”.

MB. Yes?

JU. That’s the way we Canadians think here geographically. We really … I mean, people talk about us as thinking “north”, but we don’t, because our cities are strung like beads across the American border — ALONG the American border — and therefore, whenever we’re going anywhere to visit anybody we’re usually either going east or we’re going west.

MB. You speak about being surrounded or inspired by other artists and in your books this is very visible. In all your books there are visual artists, there are poets (Browning) and … I have many questions here, but the first one is: how are other artists important to you as a writer? And secondly: in how far are CANADIAN writers and artists important to you, in your writing? Or is this not a necessary distinction to make?

JU. Well, I’ll begin with the whole notion of artists. And I’ll start with visual artists. Um … visual artists have been … I’ve been married to two of them, that’s the first thing. My first husband was a young and exciting visual artist who died at a very early age, and for the last, who knows how many years, thirty I guess — more than thirty! — I’ve been married to Tony Urquhart, who’s a well known Canadian artist.

I think that visual art is really important to me as a writer; partially because visual arts have taught me how to see and creating a visual world on a page is one of the things that I enjoy most of all. This has always been important to me as a reader, as well, the ability to see what happens when we read a book, and what we visualize when we read a book. So, for example, when I taught Creative Writing (which I did a couple of times — I haven’t done it much), I would always ask the students to write a description of some house that is well known in literature, Wuthering Heights for example: the inside of one room of Wuthering Heights, the central room where things happen. And in each case, every time I did this, each student would write a different description, because the way we visualize what we read is that we pick images from our own memory, on the one hand, and we construct other images that sometimes come out of nowhere, and we
combine them, I think — to make the literary rooms we walk through, and the literary landscapes that we look at. So of all the artists, visual artists are terribly important because they not only render the perceived world, but they invent other visual worlds that don't necessarily exist. And that whole process is fascinating to me. I have no desire to paint beyond the odd watercolour now and then, or to draw, but I like the process, I like the way of thinking that goes hand in hand with visual art … and the way of seeing and the combination of those two things … and thinking visually just seems miraculously wonderful to me.

Whether or not these artists are Canadian, is in the case of visual art — interestingly — not as important to me as is the literary art. I'm very interested in, I would say, Western Art. Obviously I'm fascinated by Asian art as well but I don't know it, I don't feel as intimate with it as I do with Western Art, and so it doesn't necessarily affect what I do, though I admire enormously art from anywhere. But … I was, and continue to be, I think, very affected by what has happened in Canadian Literature. And … Canada is a wonderful place to be, we're very privileged at this moment of time because Canadian Literature is also WORLD Literature! So we have authors such as Alice Munro, who are world class authors, but we also have people like Rohinton Mistry or Dionne Brand who were born and brought up somewhere else, who bring a whole new perspective and yet are absolutely Canadian authors. And so that combination of the national and international happened … and began to flourish about the time that I began to know that I was going to be a writer for the rest of my life, whether I was to be published or not, [laughs] was … quite miraculous and wonderful for me.

MB. Yes… there’s definitely something wonderful about Canadian Literature: what you just described, this coming together of many worlds. There is space for many different worlds. So, your books are very visual and, as I said before, I would like myself or someone else, to do a study on the OBJECTS in your books. You know, the small visual details, small concrete details, which sometimes connect the different parts of your books … I want to ask specifically … because the conversation reminded me of it: of the character … the painter who paints over what he paints, …
JU. Oh, Austin Fraser in *The Underpainter*.

MB. Yes! *The Underpainter*, yes yes, so sorry! [laughs]

*This is an amazing book; can you talk a little bit about this? The artist painting realistically what he sees, what he remembers, and then painting it over so it can’t be seen?*

JU. Yes that … that book was … very important to me because, apart from everything else, it was written from a masculine point of view. And written in the first person! I began writing it in the second person, from a masculine point of view, but found that I needed to get much closer to the character in order to be able to really see through his eyes, and so I changed it to the first person … so I had to use the word “I” and “me” and, uh … I, I believe that it was an investigation in some way, looking back now …, of the … the masculine in all of us, really. The patriarchal, the controlling … um, the … the part of us that makes the rules… the part of us that obfuscates things. To be fair, one need not necessarily be a man to have that operating with a great deal of enthusiasm in one’s psyche. And so it wasn’t … it wasn’t really an exploration of men and why they do the things they do, as much as it was an exploration of this masculine principle, this whole … [sigh] I suppose, in a way, the kind of opposite of … the way I wanted to live. And not really a judgemental exploration either. I became quite fond of the character as I moved through the process of building his character, but then other people have told me that they were not as fond of him as I was [laughs]. But, while exploring this masculine principle — for want of a better way of saying it — through the eyes of an artist, I realized that when a man leaves the room, or when a man like HIM leaves the room, *he leaves the room*, he’s gone. When a woman leaves the room, she usually takes quite a lot of the room with her.

MB. That’s interesting…

JU. And, therefore, men are driven, to a certain extent, or the masculine principle is about being driven to such an extent that things are discarded and left behind or, I suppose, painted out. So that, while a woman will be reflecting about the experience that has just taken place, a man will be having another experience [laughs] at the time the woman is reflecting.
And, and so, I guess that’s why I decided to have him paint out his pictures which were all about memory … and then, of course, to reconstruct them again, through the process of writing this narrative.

MB. Memory comes back in all your books, doesn’t it?

JU. Well, yes.

MB. For instance, in your last book, A Map of Glass [the very last one which is coming out next month, Sanctuary Line, I haven’t read of course] there is the whole process of memory of the character Sylvia. At a certain point she says: “I scrape my memory like a glacier”. She has memories that are not shared by other characters, and she is thought to invent them and to hallucinate. Tell me about this.

JU. I think, and this is something else that I have said to students — again during these brief periods of time in which I’ve been teaching Creative Writing, — there is a rule that is often stated in Creative Writing classes, and that is that one has to write about what one KNOWS. And… I agree with that, but I think you can know something that you invent as intimately as you can know something that exists in the so-called “real world”…”

MB. Interesting…

JU. And so your inner life can be as known to you as any kind of outer life. And in some cases, with some people, their inner life is much better known to them than what we would consider to be daily life.

MB. Speaking of memory, in a Map of Glass, a character says that perhaps to live is an exercise in forgetting. Do you remember that?

JU. I do

MB. Yes?

JU. The character Sylvia said that. And I think she said that because in A Map of Glass I was thinking about forgetting as well as memory… because each of the characters, each of the main characters has some kind of “disability” — I hate that word — a condition, as I called it in the book.
And of course her lover forgets, in an extreme way. Now of course lovers can forget but this lover really forgets, he forgets everything and that seemed to me to be an exaggeration of what can happen anyway with the passage of time in relationships or with almost anything. Things become indistinct if they don't disappear altogether. And Sylvia was the kind of character for whom time did not diminish things. So it would have been an observation she was making about other people's lives, not her own. About how staying alive essentially is an exercise in forgetting which to a great extent is true I think.
now. So the glass itself has a whole narrative associated with it. It's a bit like something else my mother told me. When she was in grade school she was asked to write the life history of the penny.

MB. Yes?

JU. It's a bit like that but I think there is more to it, because the penny is not necessarily something with which a particular individual is intimate, not that particular penny: But I am very interested in emplacement, as you say; the fact that things can remain the same, the actual objects can remain in place while the lives change. The interior of rooms can remain static while what happens in those rooms is constantly changing.

It's fascinating to me that after I finished writing A Map of Glass my mother died and when my mother died I was forced for the first time in my life to think about the maintenance of a house and the fact that without maintenance things don't remain the same.

MB. Yes.

JU. because the house in which she died and the house which is now my house had not been maintained for a number of years and suddenly, for the first time, I was struck by the notion that a house which seemed to me so permanent and so emplaced was nevertheless a great, big decaying box. And I had never thought about that before. And I had lived for six decades before having to consider that! And for the first time I thought, Gosh! You know, if you leave them alone they will really eventually fall down. So nothing, not even a physical structure is permanently emplaced, and that is what I had to eventually admit.

MB. It's strange what you say because, at the same time, loss is a great theme and runs through all your books.

JU. Yes.
I think loss, and the recapturing of events, places, relationships... is a great deal of what drives a number of authors to the page. I believe that in a sense it is a way of recapturing things. (telephone rings: JU. just ignore that)
MB. I was thinking of Proust suddenly and it is not the first time that I think of Proust when I read your books, also because of the kind of breath of style, the kind of way the style moves… there is a feeling of books where loss can, as it were, exist. I am very often reminded when reading your books of Winnicott’s expression “holding environment” as if your writing was meant to contain loss… but this is already my interpretation…

JU. No, I am just thinking about that right now while we are talking. Certainly it is at least partly a response to loss … and in that way contains it, names it, in a sense. And when I say “a response to loss” I say that in a personal, known way. The characters always experience loss themselves: I think that narrative often moves toward that eventuality. But the impulse, again, is to try to capture something that has been lost. And so Loss is a motivating factor as well as something that is being examined and expressed.

MB. Yes. I’m returning to a Map of Glass because it is so near me. It begins with a four page long, let’s say, “fugue of loss”. The character dies, he gradually forgets everything and he dies. And in the last sentence the dying character says something like this: ‘I have lost everything’ and then the chapter concludes. … “And there is nobody to hear his voice, nobody at all.” But then the whole book, of course, is about what the dead man forgot.

JU. So again, the opening is, I suppose, … a statement of intent, although I had never thought about it that way before (Laughter). When I began to write that section it happened very, very quickly. I saw everything that was going on, I … I knew exactly where the character was and I could see the branches around him and I could see the snow and I could see the tumbled fence, I could see everything. What I now understand to a certain extent is that it was also an expression of intent, a description of how things would come very close to him but he would be unable to put out his hand and touch them or grasp them. Memories would start to come and words, words had already disappeared for him at the opening of the book, but he had fragments of words. So fragmentation was very much on my mind at that point and the idea that you could take that fragmented vessel that was his mind at the time and reconstruct everything that had once been there.
MB. You were saying you saw everything very clearly when you started to write that book. Can you explain a little bit how you compose a book, how you see a part and how the rest then comes along?

JU. I am trying to remember how A Map of Glass began. It began certainly with that passage which was written, in a sense, independent of what was going to follow even though it was central to that which would follow. I mean I really had no notion of who he was, when I wrote that opening, “fugue” as you call it. But the rest of the book would be an effort to try and find out who he was and why he was where he was. It is often what happens to me: I will be presented with something or someone in my mind and it will be kind of unfocused and vague and I am curious about it and I want to know who he is and what has happened to him in the same way that, hopefully, a reader will later want to know. I'm not really the most energetic person so, in a way, I think that what keeps me moving through a book is this desire to understand what it is that is taking shape in my mind, a desire to clarify.

MB. Yes, that's perhaps the reason why the reader really follows a process of discovery of unveiling.

JU. And that's essentially what I'm out to. I suppose a bit like an exercise in coming to consciousness, because I really am so unconscious: in the beginning, I am not aware of plot or structure or even characterisation when I'm writing, certainly not in the first draft, anyway. I become more aware when I am working on subsequent drafts but when I am in the compositional stage I have to let the book take me over and I have to believe that it will. So far, [touching wood here] I haven't begun anything that I haven't finished.

MB. So you say part of the process is unconscious, things are unconscious and you make them conscious through writing.

JU. Yes, by going back.

MB. By going along...

JU. In the beginning the process itself is quite fragmented in the sense that I might write a couple of pages and then go away and do other things
for 2-3 weeks and then come back to it and do a little more. But as time passes I become more and more committed so that, in a way it's like a relationship, perhaps you meet someone and you like them and you spend a little bit of time with them and then you go away for a long period of time, you come back, you meet them again, you spend a slightly longer period of time with them and then you want to see them again… within a shorter period of time and then eventually in a fully significant relationship you want to see that person often and on a daily basis. So that's really what happens with me and a novel. In the beginning, I am curious, but I have really got to know it yet, so I spend time doing other things but I would say that by the time that I am about a hundred pages in, I want to see that novel every day.

MB. OK. OK.

There were two questions that I asked you in Lisbon and I want to ask them again. One is about intimacy. You just spoke about intimacy in a very broad sense, but in your books, the way you render intimacy between a man and a woman appears to me to be very beautiful, impressive and very rare. How do you do it? How do you manage to capture the way a woman may love a man and at the same time resent the love she feels because of the freedom she loses in wholly surrendering to her love.

JU. Well, physical love to me seems to be one of the great miracles of human existence and yes, I’m also insistent on true intimacy. I think intimate physical love is rare enough or magical enough that in a sense it is almost spiritual.

MB. Yes.

JU. The word casual seems to me to be almost a brutal word in this context, and in fact if you push that word far enough it becomes casualty which I think is an interesting progression of meaning. For an intimate physical life to take place — for someone like me and by extension for my characters, my female characters anyway — it has to be a fully intimate experience and — it has to be an experience that becomes known while at the same time excitingly different under different occasions. This knowing … essentially, in a really full physical relationship you know another person’s body better than you know your own.
MB. Yes, that's true.

JU. And I likely wouldn't have been consciously aware of that had I not had someone's body that I knew that well removed from my life in a particularly violent way at a very early age. And so it is really quite clear to me how special and rare that kind of knowledge is and also irreplaceable in many ways, so that in all of the silly rumours that sort of float around the notion of a woman who is a widow being someone who is kind of on prowl looking for any piece of flesh in the store, is ridiculous because, of course, after a loss like that, it would be a known landscape that would be looked for. I think physical love is a very, very meaningful part of our lives and one that, as you say, has not often been fully investigated from a feminine point of view.

MB. No. Thank you. That was beautiful.

Another question I MUST ask because it is so visible in everything you write. In almost every book you write there is a character that is special, odd; a character that refuses or cannot cope with the rules of common sense. In The Whirlpool there is this little boy who does not speak; there is Tilman in the Stone Carvers, there is Sylvia and her condition in A Map of Glass... and this attracts me immensely in your books. How do you know about these people, these characters, how do you create them, how do you understand them?

JU. I think of those characters as the animating spirits of my novel. It really doesn't matter which subject may have been taken up by me for the novel or which series of subjects... that little animating spirit will always walk into the narrative even if I don't invite him or her to enter. I think those vital characters may represent the creative life itself... I believe that's what it is, who they are. But, again, I would never think about that consciously when I am working. I'm thinking about that now because you've asked me but, in hindsight, I believe that Tilman, or "the boy" in "The Whirlpool" have something to do with the creative life spirit that enters me — and hopefully the book — in some way.

MB. When you were in Lisbon I asked you if your books were about creativity and you were quite adamant and you said: "I cannot answer that question", but now, in a sense you did.
JU. Yes, yes. I guess the reason I thought I could not answer was because the question seemed to me to be about a conscious decision to make my books about creativity, whereas, now, I see those characters, not me, as the enablers. They’re the ones who allow the book to happen. In some cases they’re main characters, but not always. For example, you mentioned Tilman. At first he seemed to be a very minor character in the Stone Carvers. He insisted, however, on more space (laughter) and he becomes a very memorable character. But he wasn’t the main character. To a great degree a character like Tilman is also the character who brings the disparate parts of the novel together.

MB. Just — when you spoke about intimacy — you used the word “spiritual,” and when I’m reading your books I feel that there is a spiritual dimension that is growing. In your last book (Map of Glass) it’s there even in a visible way: there’s a prayer in it, there’s a whole dimension of a kind of transcendence... I don’t know how to say it otherwise. Are you aware of that?

JU. I’ve always been attracted to Saints like Jerome... to the various manifestations, shall we say, of my known spiritual world, which would of course be Christianity. I am not a practitioner, I’m not even sure that I’m a believer, but I find the manifestation of that kind of spirituality in art and narrative to be extremely moving because sacred art can only be motivated by something beyond itself; it’s not about self aggrandizement, it’s not about money, it’s certainly not about business. When you think about all the people who worked on Chartres Cathedral, for example, that they didn’t even get to sign their names, and, in some cases, they didn’t live to see the completion of the work they’d been doing on what would become one of the greatest works of art in the world! So, I — I’m very attracted to the idea of entering a work of art without bringing a lot of ego baggage with one. It’s something that I try to do, and probably I fail miserably. But some kind of spirituality in a work of art is lovely not only because that work relates to something beyond itself but also because it allows — it’s permissive and inclusive in a way that it might not have been if it were ego driven, or driven by some other factor. So, yes, I love stained glass windows, I love reliquaries, I love religious painting, I love all of that. And I think that great literature does have a spiritual component. When
you finish reading a book that is deeply moving and haunting, you know that that book would have been (or would have had to be) written: it had to be written regardless of circumstances surrounding the author.

MB. Yes, that’s what you said in the beginning, that something has to be written.

JU. Yes, so that the author is almost irrelevant in a way, the book needed to be written and it was there to be written.

MB. Thank you.

Before we started the interview you were speaking about how your personal life — taking care of children and being alone in the house... — helped you to become a writer; they are or were the circumstances that perhaps made you a writer. Can you speak a little about this?

JU. When I married my husband — to whom I’ve been married now to for almost 35 years — he was living alone with two children who were teenaged girls and I was very young myself. He also had two other children who lived with their mother and who visited on weekends. These children had not had a lot of domestic attention — they had had a lot of love, but they hadn’t had much of the kind of care that we think about as being part of the daily life of children. And so, there were things that needed to be done. And likely, that was part of the attraction for me, because I was recently widowed and I therefore was kind of cast adrift in a sense, and this gave me some sort of purpose. And also I was young enough that I didn’t have to take on some kind of judgmental, parental, older person role with these children. I could look after them, I could do their washing, I could talk to them, I could have fun with them, cook for them, and at the same time not have to carry either the responsibility, really — or, the notion that there should be any discipline involved. So it was a very happy time, in fact, and at the same time I needed — though I may not have known that I needed it — I needed a world of my own, a singular world that, in the face of this collective world, which was kind of unlike any world I’d lived in before, I needed a singular world; and as a result when the house emptied — which it did every day because people went to school — and even after I had Emily (she was there but she claims I made her nap every day for ten hours), suddenly this interior domestic space became all mine
and there was a sense of enormous freedom, which I would not have had, had I been attached to any kind of outside distraction; and I could do anything I wanted, really, as long as I managed to struggle down to the washing machine. And so I spent a lot of time daydreaming, and a lot of time inventing things, listening to old records, old Broadway musical records and things like that; and thinking about my own childhood, and thinking about — I had not many ambitions by the way, none, I had no ambitions, which in itself was a kind of freedom, I now think. And so as a kind of almost recreational activity I began to write every day; and I had written as a teenager as well, and I had written as a young — young, young woman, I'd written a lot of love poetry and things like that, when I was with my first husband in the beginning, but as we were both (and speaking of my first husband), as a couple we were trying to organize our lives and get started in life, gradually that writing faded away. And of course I was writing papers for university and that sort of thing — although I have to say that I didn't take any of that with the kind of seriousness that I should have, likely. What happened when I was with Tony, then, my second husband, was that there was a space of time where I was tied to the domestic chores of the house on the one hand, but my mind was not tied at all, and I think that's when — perhaps a little animated person in me started to flourish. And again, as I say, completely independent of any kind of ambition.

MB. Please continue…

JU. I would never have believed at that time that my books, would ever — my books, I didn't even think about them as books [laughs] — just what I was writing down — I would never have believed that what I was writing down would ever develop into anything that was out there, in the outside world. I just — if someone would have told me that my books were going to be published in other countries, etc. I would have been dumbfounded, I would not have believed it, I would have thought it was nonsense.

MB. And how is it to receive this feedback from your readers? Is it important?

JU. It is important, but it doesn't really change what it is that drives me back to the desk. It's important in the same way that bringing home your report card from school [laughs] is important — I'd say that I'm more
concerned about the reaction of the people around me, and the people I'm close to, and the people who have my best interests at heart, than I am about what this means in terms of the work. Because I can only write what I can write, I can't change it. And I know I can't — so I'm kind of immune in a way to whatever is being said in the outside world, simply because, as I've said, the act is so unconscious that I wouldn't have any idea how to go back inside it and change it, I don't feel that I could do that. And so, obviously I'm pleased by positive reactions, and mildly concerned about negative reactions — neither one of them really affect me to a great degree, not because I'm above praise or condemnation, simply because I wouldn't know how to go in there and move things around to please those who feel the writing should be different, or go back and continue to do whatever it is that I do that pleases those who like the work the way it is.

MB. Before we finish this interview: is there one of your books that you particularly like, or one of your books that you feel that is not sufficiently loved by your readers, or by the critics?

JU. I would say — well those are maybe two different things...

MB. Yes, they are two questions.

JU. Well, first, is there one of my books that I particularly like? ... I love them all. I — I can't think of one that I like more than another, to be quite honest. Of course it is always the most recent one, the one that I'm most familiar with, that I feel closest to. But, oddly, it's also the one I'm usually the least sure of — as if it hasn't quite had time to set.

But, if there's one book that I feel has not received sufficient attention, that book would be Changing Heaven.

MB. Yes, I was going to talk to you about Changing Heaven.

JU. I am very fond of that book. I go back to it every now and then. I approach my published works with a lot of trepidation, because I'm terrified of opening to, say, page 112 and thinking "Oh God, I wish I hadn't written that sentence!" But so far that hasn't happened. But with Changing Heaven, I find it to be a whimsical sort of book —
MB. Yes, yes, and the idea is brilliant... I mean, you know, having Emily Brontë as a character.

JU. It was another one of those times, I was completely obsessed by... especially Emily Brontë at that moment, and also, very interested in the history of art. And I knew I had to bring those two things together, somehow, in a novel. I just allowed myself every possible freedom when I was writing that book; and I had a wonderful time writing it. Tony and I spent six months on the Yorkshire Moors as well, which was a great bonus.

MB. And you seem to know everything about meteorology, I mean, the information about winds and everything in Changing Heaven is impressive —

JU. Yes that — I was very interested in wind. I was unprepared, shall we say, for the wind up there on the moors in Yorkshire, it was such an insistent force, it was always there, and it was always rattling the windows and drubbing down the chimney and it was never quiet. It was like a physical presence that wound its way around and insinuated itself into your life, and you could not ignore it. So, therefore you had to get interested in it, since it was always demanding your attention. And eventually it became a person; it became a character in the book. I did a lot of reading about wind and about the Beaufort Wind Scale, one of the world’s great metaphors — this wind scale... what can be done under varying conditions of wind and weather. Weather is one of the more interesting things on the planet and yet is considered to be also one of the most banal subjects of conversation, which is a mystifying combination.

MB. But in almost — in all of your books, there are certain things you really go into, you really research — I’m thinking about portrait and arts décoratifs in The Underpainter; so how do you do this research? In each novel, you become a researcher on a particular item.

JU. Yes, I do. In some novels more than others. Certainly The Underpainter was a case in point because I needed to learn about porcelain and china; and I, who had never been interested in that, became completely obsessed and ended up demanding sets of porcelain du Sèvres for Christmas, which was impossible to obtain because it's too expensive. But I really wanted a
collection myself, I could feel it in me, I wanted to start collecting; and yet, when the book was over, the desire to collect rare and expensive porcelain disappeared. It’s almost as though you’re in a particular ecological zone when you’re writing a novel, everything around you starts to become pregnant with meaning. I was very interested, went to the Sèvres factory and museum in Paris and I spent a lot of time in the Gardiner Museum in Toronto, — which you should visit if you get a chance, but you probably won’t have a chance — the Gardiner Museum, across from the Royal Ontario Museum, has a wonderful, wonderful collection of porcelain. I became extremely interested in those tiny little landscapes that are painted on the porcelain — and then, by extension, I began to think again about the kind of art that is created not for the ego, not to become one of the greatest and most famous artists, but for reasons other than the self. What makes a huge Tintoretto so much more important than a tiny landscape painted on a cup?

MB. And to finish, can you say something about your novel that is coming out next month? Or do you prefer not to?

JU. No, I can say something about it. Again, because it hasn’t really settled for me yet, it’s hard for me to say what it was that drove me to write that particular novel. It is called Sanctuary Line, and I think it has something to do with looking back, from this stage, on childhood — and what childhood means to us when we get here, which is a long way away from that. I believe that must have something to do with it, coupled with the fact that I myself have moved back into my childhood landscape. This perhaps would be what an academic or critic may call my — a more “realistic book,” in the sense that it is set in the present — the now of the book, the big event of the book is set in the 1980s, and the narrator is narrating — is looking back on that event, so the actual time of the book is right now. I have not done that too often, although it was certainly an element in A Map of Glass so I’d been moving in that direction. But I’ve found this most recent book tremendously — not really upsetting — but moving, in a way, to write — I’ve rarely been as emotionally affected while I was writing a book: I couldn’t read it aloud, for example.
MB. *That’s important.*

JU. I think it must be important. It felt — and this is an odd word — it felt cellular, and I don’t mean that in terms of telephones, I mean, it felt as if it was coming out of my own self, my own muscles and bones.

MB. *Yes, yes. I understand.*

*Is there a question I didn’t ask that you would like me to ask you? Or a critic, or anyone?*

JU. Gosh… [pause].

MB. *Something you would like to say about who you are, what you are, what your books are…about who you are when you’re not writing your books…*

JU. Well, I think I would like to go back to that whole notion of external reactions, and how for me it’s important to get to the place, (nobody gets there fully, but I’m working on getting much closer) where I don’t trust either the positive or the negative external reactions in that I realize that neither matters. I’m extremely gratified by attention, and certainly by new readers who are, perhaps, not always likely to have read a book like mine before, I find that very gratifying. It’s still important to remember, however, that nobody knows for sure whether or not something deeply important has been created. I think time is the only thing that can tell us that and we are not going to be here to receive the news. Only artists have the luxury of knowing that success or lack of success during their lifetime can be quite inconsequential except, of course, in the most practical of ways. I often quote the Canadian poet Joe Rosenblatt who once told me “Time is the great anthologist.”

MB. *Yes, that comes back in A Map of Glass. So, what you are saying is that the important thing is the space in your mind and the writing connected to it.*

JU. Yes… I think that the important thing to me is that, not only am I permitted to continue to have access to my own inner life, but that something in my work will encourage other people to both understand how important inner life is, and to feel free to inhabit their own inner life.
MB. *I think this is the perfect conclusion. Thank you very, very much, Jane Urquhart.*

JU. Thank you, it was great!