

Interview with Dennis Haskell: A Snapshot from 2008

Lucy Dougan¹
Curtin University, Australia

Dennis Haskell (Western Australia) is the author of 8 collections of poetry, the most recent *What Are You Doing Here?* (University of the Philippines Press, 2015) and *Ahead of Us* (Fremantle Press, 2016) plus 14 volumes of literary scholarship and criticism. He is the recipient of the Western Australia Premier's Prize for Poetry, the A.A. Phillips Prize for a distinguished contribution to Australian literature (from the Association for the Study of Australian Literature), and of an Honorary Doctorate of Letters from the University of Western Australia. In 2015 he was made a Member of the Order of Australia for "services to literature, particularly poetry, to education and to intercultural understanding." Haskell has worked across the whole range of research activities in English studies: journal and book editing, bibliography, literary scholarship, literary criticism, and creative writing. His interests range from technical aspects of literary language and craft to philosophical and social issues.

Abstract

The following interview with Dennis Haskell was commissioned by Donna Ward, who was then editor and publisher of *Indigo: Journal of West Australian Writing*. The issue appeared in the Autumn of 2008. In this sense it is a snapshot of Haskell at a particular moment of his rich and on-going career. My particular intention was to trace the ways in which Haskell's aesthetic and moral orientations as both a poet and a critic stem from his formative experiences, including family background, class, education, reading and the place in which he grew up. Beneath his honest and acute responses one can trace not only the lineaments of Australia's "poetry wars" but also the impacts of those real wars (WW II, Vietnam and Iraq) on his imaginative life and stance as a poet. Haskell is not a predictable subject to interview. For instance, his statement that "it is important to write about domestic spaces" would perhaps sit at odds with a male poet of his generation. Looking back down the years to this interview with a valued teacher and trojan worker for literature in many countries and many contexts, I would argue that it is Haskell's iconoclastic character that has kept his practice sharp, surprising and "on song." The question posed by the poem "Doubt and

¹ **Dr. Lucy Dougan's** books include *Memory Shell* (5 Islands Press), *White Clay* (Giramondo), *Meanderthals* (Web del Sol) and *The Guardians* (Giramondo) which won the Western Australian Premier's Book Award for poetry. With Tim Dolin, she is co-editor of *The Collected Poems of Fay Zwicky* (UWAP, 2017). She works at Curtin University. Email: lucy.dougan@curtin.edu.au.

Trembling” that I discussed with him – “How do we get by/ in a dubious time” – seems in 2019 more relevant than ever.

I want to ask you about your childhood, particularly your early reading, and its relationship to your creative life. In the introduction to your UQP Kenneth Slessor (1991) you write about how Slessor has this “Christabel” moment (Slessor xviii). He reads Coleridge and is completely awakened to “the eerie power of language.” Did you have a “Christabel” moment?

No, I didn’t have a “Christabel” moment at all. In fact, I grew up in a kind of culture where I wouldn’t have heard of poetry except at school. It was the kind of environment where you wouldn’t have dared mention that you read poetry, let alone write it. You would have got beaten up. I just sort of started writing and sending stuff off.

What age were you then?

I was relatively late coming to writing: about 18 or 19. It was when I started university full-time. I went part-time for two years because my school results weren’t good enough. These days they wouldn’t have got me into university! That was to do a Commerce degree, not Arts. But there was the Union of Students who organised a short story competition and I entered a story. It was judged by A.D. Hope who, of course, later wrote something about how terrible all the stories were and I’m sure mine was. It didn’t get anywhere but the first things I actually wrote were short stories and I really only did it after I’d left university.

After you left your Commerce degree?

Yes, and I went to what in New South Wales is called the WEA – a great organisation, I think – the Workers Educational Association. It’s like an outgrowth of the old Mechanics Institutes that Joseph Furphy and so on went to, so I’m sort of in the same boat in a way. I did some writing courses and I was encouraged by the people who ran them. I was interested in theatre. So the second things I wrote were scripts, or parts of scripts.

So you worked your way quite slowly towards poetry?

Yes, quite slowly. Poetry was the third thing I wrote; it was the last thing. I got to poetry eventually and never left it. But when I look back on my childhood we did always go to the local library. My mother, who was not a reader herself, used to take us there. That was the only way we had books. There were none in the house. My father and uncle used to swap Carter Brown and Zane Grey – those literal

paperbacks – so they would be floating around the house. But that was all. Somehow, I think, sometimes these things are just in you. I used to go next door just to read the encyclopaedia set. You know when Les Murray talks about growing up in the country and learning to read by reading the encyclopaedia? Well, I was mad on reading the encyclopaedia and I have Les's impulse to be interested in everything.

So there's a bit of the autodidact in you?

Yes, but I wasn't really an autodidact because I wasn't in the bush and I had a reasonably good education. I was a scholarship boy, so you read a bit because of school. We were the working-class boys who went to this high-school which was opened up, so there was a mix of working-class and middle-class kids. You always resented all those middleclass kids. I was the sort of high-school kid who refused to do anything that might make you a prefect or do anything for the school. It was a sort of class statement. But we would still, my mates and I, walk the long way home to the library. I just about read that local library dry which was in a working-class suburb of Sydney. So, I was a reader somehow. But we didn't read poetry books. We read about Robin Hood.

So you feel, just going back a little, that it's somehow in you, that there's an intuitive capacity?

It might have come from my Dad, I think. I only learnt later in life that he was determined that we wouldn't move around a lot because this had happened to him as a kid. When he was doing one of the last set of exams – this was in Adelaide – the teacher said he wouldn't do any good because he hadn't been there long. But I believe that he topped the state in English. He was bright. His father died when he was quite young and he left school, as you did in those days. He was helped through school by Legacy as his dad was a returned serviceman. He became an office worker and he hated it. He went into the navy when the Second World War came along. He came out of the navy and they offered him training courses for servicemen. He did a carpentry course and became a carpenter and that's what he did. His education was limited to halfway through high-school but he would sit in front of the quizz shows and answer the questions. We wondered how he ever knew that stuff. And I still don't know how he knew that stuff. He read the newspapers, *The Daily Telegraph*, the "raggy" sort of stuff. I think I'm a lot like him and I think that he could have been a reader in other circumstances. I remember I was still in high-school and Dad had a work-mate who was interested in reading and writing. He passed on books for me. I remember particularly the Hesketh Pearson biography of George Bernard Shaw, so I must have talked to my Dad about this kind of stuff.

I notice a strong vein in your work, and also from other statements that you've made, that you value simplicity and unpretentiousness and ordinariness.

Yes, absolutely. That's quite true. I think in a way that's what all my writing is about. No critic has ever picked up on that, not one of them.

How has that sat with being inside an elite institution?

Well, I think it makes me different. Apart from anything else, I came to the university after coming to writing. Most of my colleagues, nearly all of them who teach literature, have got to literature through education, through university. But I didn't. I got to writing before I ever did an arts degree.

So, how do you think that influenced you?

I think it's affected my attitudes enormously. It often puts me at loggerheads with a lot of the thinking. I value commonsense enormously. I value ideas, totally old fashioned but coming back into fashion, like the common reader and commonsense. I mean I know they don't exist but you've got to hang onto them, I think. It makes me very sceptical about things like postmodernism which seems in many respects an upper-middle-class way of thinking. I mean, I'm sceptical about postmodernism in the way certain feminists have been. They say there's no doubting that the oppression of women existed. If you're battling there just to put food on the table, you don't have questions about what reality is. It comes up and hits you in the teeth every hour of the day. I think I still have a lot of that in me. This sounds grandiose but I think I'm like Heaney in this. He has said that he moved from farmland to library-land and I sort of made the same move as a lot of people in my generation, from working class to middle class but you don't leave that behind.

There's certainly that generation that struggled through the war years, grew up in the depression, may have had strong farming connections, and moved to the cities and in a way shaped a lot of who we are.

We have in the family a diary that my grandmother kept. The family went and lived in Melbourne for a time and the eldest child died at the age of 21 of appendicitis. So that dates it, that kind of thing happened then, and they decided to move back to Adelaide. This family of kids – it sounds like Faulkner – took a horse and cart back to Adelaide without any money. They'd stop along the way and try to get work, go up to the farms and say, can we work to get some money to buy the food for the night. Returned service places in the country towns would

help them out and give them food, a place where they could park and sleep. My Dad was a young kid on this trip. That kind of world sounds like 200 years ago.

But it's not.

No, white Australia has a short history, I often think of that. For instance, the story of Patrick White meeting Banjo Paterson as a kid. It's like saying my father met Samuel Johnson! It does seem foreshortened in a way, the history seems so brief. Its recorded history is very short and I think that has an effect on our literature and it probably helps someone like me stay with more of those kinds of roots and the family stories. I knew my grandmother quite well. She lived to be 99 or 100 or thereabouts, no one knew, she didn't have a birth certificate. She outlived my father, in fact. I've written about her too, that generation. She was born in the nineteenth century for God's sake!

The overriding tone of your book, All the Time in the World (2006), is an elegiac one, I think, and I want to ask you why you think that poetry manages to explore loss so well?

Well, I think literature is the greatest of the arts because it says the most and it does that because it works with the impurest medium, with language, and it's through language that we express meanings. The other arts express all sorts of things I love but they don't really express meanings. They reach out to it, they pretend to – art critics talk about reading a painting and so on. But, I think that only language gets meaning and literature is the deepest form of language. When you come to try and write about that sort of emotional, spiritual dimension all the words are so feeble – you get a use of language which you could define as poetry. That's a better definition of poetry than stanzas and lines and the technical things, I think.

Sure. In Brenda Walker's The Writers' Reader (2002) you say "poetry speaks to your blood as much as to your brain" (Walker 162).

Oh yes, I absolutely believe that. I think that it tries to speak to all those parts of us that do take in meanings. Our experience of the world is partly intellectual but we also get a lot through just our sounds and our textures and touch and so on.

Our sensory life?

Yes. Some poets will say that they don't work in a sensory way. To me that is like saying I'm not a poet. That's being an intellectual. You might write verse that way but not poetry.

I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about what does trigger a poem for you?

I do believe in inspiration. I'm enough of a Romantic for that. When I was doing a critical book on Bruce Dawe, I found that he hates the idea of inspiration. He says when people start talking about inspiration, he wants to get a machine-gun out.

OK – he believes in perspiration.

Yes, he believes in perspiration. He has ideas and issues that he wants to write about. Something that upsets him, hence he writes those social comment poems. But he's a very religious person, Bruce, so his best poems move off into that other dimension. I mean I have a bit in common with Bruce and we got on very, very well. I love the bloke – that he writes on the kitchen-table. I certainly feel that I write wherever I am.

In the centre of whatever is happening?

I don't really write them here in the office but I certainly write them in the library and on my knee. So, I believe the best poems come out of emotional situations. The archetype for me is when my father died quite suddenly. He was relatively young, younger than I am now, and I was living in Sydney. He was on the central coast about 50 miles north when it happened and my brother rang me up in the early hours, really the middle of the night, to tell me and to ask me to go and tell our sister. And I thought, oh, wait a couple of hours before going over and I did drive there at about 5am. And while I was doing it lines came into my head and I said to myself I am not going to write this. I felt like a vulture and I didn't write it until the funeral and everything was over. Then I had to write it and I ended up writing a sequence of five poems. So, it's that kind of situation where you can't sort of resist it any more, where it pushes through. For me, these sorts of emotional things somehow create phrases, lines, images which you then tease out and follow on.

The thing that doesn't leave you alone, that persists?

Yes, basically, though some poems are different. I once wrote a poem entirely in clichés. It came out of teaching – saying to students you can't use clichés. Then I thought I would write something that was all clichés and I dedicated it to Paul Keating. This was a bit unfair because Keating was a good speaker but what got me was the way he would make a statement and then pause and repeat it. He spoke as if everything he was going to say was profound. So, I wrote just using

clichés all the way through. I'm doing another one of those which is full of different clichés, words like "interrogate" and "win, win."

The language of spin?

This is a management one. They deserve it. They really mean it. You hear managers talk what has become a pathetic kind of jargon. No one increases their businesses now, they all "grow" them. And they're so hopeless with language and I feel that you have to respect language above everything. We once had a popular novelist come and give a lecture. He said the first thing you have to respect is your audience but I don't believe that. The first thing you have to respect is the language. It's a bigger thing than you. It's a bigger thing than your audience. The English language is just such a fantastic thing and we are so lucky to be born into it. It's the richest language in the world. Its strengths come out of some terrible things, of course, running empires, but there is a benefit even to empires and this is probably the greatest benefit of all. So, I think you have to have this enormous respect for the language which might mean that you write something in clichés. It's quite possible but it does mean that when you come to write, even if you're writing not out of inspiration in that Wordsworthian sense, you still have to have that respect and if that doesn't come through in what you end up with, you throw it away.

It's not happening, it's not going to work?

I hope that I do that in every kind of poem, whether it's a satire or whatever it is.

I was very struck by the poem "Doubts and Trembling." For me, it was very important to find a poem that spoke to what it's like to be alive now – what it was like to have lived through the past few years, albeit from a distance. Do you feel you have an obligation to write about moral concerns?

That poem came out of that feeling. If you'd just asked me the question outright, I'd say no because I think you need to write about what you need to write about. It sort of chooses you rather than you choosing it, I think. For a poet, I believe in that. I was thinking about Iraq and there were Iraq poems about. You can predict there are going to be every time something like that happens. They're mostly a bit too obvious in what they do and although you agree with the attitudes the predictability is killing. I was in Washington DC. We lived there for half a year while I was a Visiting Professor at Georgetown University. This is while Bush is president. We attended his second inauguration and it's like living in Rome when Julius Caesar was around.

Like an imperium?

Yes, it's like an imperium. The buildings are built like that, they're copies of Greco-Roman architecture. It's the centre of the political world. So, people traipse through there looking for favours or money and agreements and alliances and all that kind of stuff. It's extraordinary in that way – who you see and who you get to hear and that intensified my feeling that I should write something but I certainly didn't want to write that kind of... well, I think Iraq is a complex thing. I don't think we should have gone or gone in the way we went. I personally believed in Hans Blix carrying out the full search and so on. But, to get rid of Saddam Hussein was a good thing you have to say. I was struck of course by that moral righteousness that Bush has. It seemed to me like a reversion to the attitudes of my childhood almost, which I felt couldn't happen. You know, think of the consequences of that disputed narrow vote in Florida for the world, it's quite extraordinary. I think this certainty, this self-certainty is so dangerous in anyone. I'm of the hippy generation. What is not ever said really is that in some way this was a very difficult time because everything was called into doubt. Everything that we'd been brought up with seemed up for questioning?

So, we're talking about the sixties?

The late sixties and, really in Australia, more the seventies because we were late getting it. But one thing that Vietnam produced once we realised what was going on was the same thing that was produced for Wilfred Owen and the poets of WW I – this sense of betrayal. Not just, “oh this is a terrible thing!” and “was it wrong?” but this sense of betrayal that lies behind those Vietnam marches and behind the vehemence of feeling on both sides. And Bush and Co. and a lot of things that you're getting in the election campaign here from the conservative side – you get the same sort of thing – this absolute sense of self-righteousness. No questioning, no doubts.

In All the Time in the World you don't seem to have shied away from the difficulties of writing about that?

No, I don't think you should shy away from any writing difficulties. You're liable to get better writing out of difficulty, the fascination of what's difficult is likely to produce better writing. I think our contemporary poetry is full of pretty easy writing and you get a lot of poets who are just churning stuff out all the time, including some of our “name” poets. And you think: what is the reason for this poem and the reason is that the poet wanted to write a poem. So they write the same kind of poem over and over and over or they express attitudes – maybe attitudes that you agree with but what the hell... or they express a kind of

mocking mode and ironic mode. You can do that forever but who cares? It's never bothered me about being a pretty spare sort of poet. Most of the really good poets have been pretty spare. We have a lot of prolific poets in the contemporary period, it seems to me.

So, when you say spare you mean not producing a lot of work?

You don't need to say it again if you said it once and said it well. But "Doubt and Trembling" was a different kind of poem for me to write really. It was also prompted by meeting Hélène Cixous. Derrida died and she came to this conference that the French department at Georgetown put on. She was terrific in some ways, terrible in some ways, just as in her writing, I think, but very poetic. Both of them were very poetic. Philosophically, I don't think they're worth the time of day... but poetic, yes.

Deconstruction has a beautiful poetry to its workings, to its conceptions.

Yes, play with language. That's what it is. You know the writer's question "what if?," that's what they do. I had published one poem before which said to live a life without self-doubt is a terrible thing. And that came out of a conversation with Gail Jones which just crystallised it for me. Gail said something about self-doubt and people who don't have it and I thought that's right. It really produces dangerous people. I don't think John Howard is like that but I think George Bush is like that. So I was sort of grappling with all that really. I used to do this walk to the campus because we had a flat that was 10 minutes away from the university and I put it in the main character of a woman. I don't know why but that seemed right. Perhaps Cixous influenced that. It's got an epigraph from Cixous which is about doubt. So I ran it as the woman walking to work in one of those offices down in the imperial centre. That's the kind of journey that she takes, though it's just the walk to work, it is a journey. For someone like me, someone from my generation who came through all that questioning in the sixties and seventies, I had to fight back to get to a level of sureness or beliefs and I think that that aquifer of doubt is always there.

That's no bad thing for an artist?

No, I think it's a good thing. I think it's an aspect of the 60/70s that's been forgotten and in some ways I think it was the most important aspect of it. And it really did hinge on Vietnam. There are parallels drawn between Iraq and Vietnam which seems to me that after all you can't compare them. It hasn't produced that kind of questioning. There's a greater complacency about materialism and so on. Where you'd look for answers is to see what young people are doing, of course.

And I don't see them... they don't feel betrayed, I think. It's like us now reading the war poets – the note there is betrayal but they went to war thinking it was still glamorous – cavalry charges – and found out it was all rats and stinking corpses and duplicity and generals and all that stuff. Ever since we've expected that that is what war is like. I suppose for this generation... we were shocked to find that our leaders and government agencies told us lies.

So you think younger people are a bit more sardonic, more wise?

Yes, they think advertising is lies, that politicians tell lies. Maybe it's what makes them switch off to it all, whereas we were passionately involved. The Vietnam marches were very emotional. People threw things at you. I was in the conscription ballot. You could be conscripted. That's another element we don't have. It was a very murky war close to home. Iraq's a murky war far away.

Can I just touch now on things like audience and effect? I've heard you talk about someone responding to your work by crying, and you said "Bugger literary criticism, that's what I want."

Oh yes, absolutely.

This reminded me of a quote from the visual artist Christian Boltanski: "This is difficult to say but my business is to make people cry" (Lubbock).

Or cheer or go silent. You do a reading and there's that sort of silence, that gasp before the applause. That's the best reaction. I think that's when you've stirred the depths. Sometimes readings can do it. Sometimes you get that... you can feel it in the room. It's an amazing thing that I suppose would be one of my bits of evidence for that spiritual dimension. Even in a lecture you can feel it. You know whether it's going well or not. You could detect it with your eyes closed. One of the most powerful readings I ever went to was by Joseph Brodsky. It was in London. He had just been exiled from Russia. He'd travelled for three days without sleep. They got him out and he came and gave this reading. He ran it completely on adrenalin and he marched up and down the stage. He recited in Russian and by god it was powerful. You didn't understand a word of it but you understood every poem he was reading and he wasn't talking to us. He was talking to Mother Russia. He was off in some other world. It was extraordinary but you didn't know the literal meaning. There's that kind of effect. You don't do much better than that. Literary criticism often misses the point.

Or are there different logics at work?

There are different logics at work, they're different spheres of operation almost.

One of the things that was never said in that sort of period of experiment – there’s all that stuff about whether you experimented or not and I was trying to write then – the hardest thing to do was to try and write without using irony and no one has ever said that or picked up on it. The real challenge would have been to write a poem without irony.

Is it fear of sentimentality, fear of mawkishness?

Yes, fear of mawkishness, fear of pretentiousness and in some ways these are very Australian traits. Then later I thought, the hardest thing to do was to write about happiness and so I tried to do it a lot and still do. I thought that was right but no literary critic has ever talked about that.

Or to write with sincerity?

And to write with sincerity post modernism, let alone post-postmodernism – the hardest thing. So I’ve tried to do that in poems.

Is that a question of tone or is it more than that?

It’s more than tone. It’s partly tone but it’s everything. It’s voice, stance and how far you push language. To try and push to the edge of sentimentality is a great thing to do, I think. It’s one reason why I do value ordinary culture in a sense. I do hate Barry Humphries and Patrick White’s contempt for ordinary people, the suburbs. I think it’s there in lots of John Forbes and John Tranter too. When Les Murray wrote his poems in the policeman’s voice he was standing up against that kind of thing and I admire that. He hasn’t been reliant on irony. Certainly, Robert Gray pushes sentimentality at times.

And do you think it’s a gender thing?

I do think it is, partly, that’s true. I think women are more emotional – you know the clichés – more poetic and intuitive. The clichés are true and come out of a raw reality. In one review that really upset me, the reviewer said I had never read a woman writer. There was one poem in the book that was so Emily Dickinson that I’ve never reprinted it. I was a bit embarrassed by it and, you know, people like Virginia Woolf are among my favourite writers. I think that women write about the ordinary world more readily.

And you’ve also written about Eavan Boland?

Yes.

And particularly on gender issues?

She's been very important to Irish writing for that. I write about my kids and about family and I think that it's important to write about domestic spaces.

Do you think there's a possibility for citizenliness in poetry? Can that break through the issue of the elite versus the less schooled reader?

I certainly think there's a chance for citizenliness or communitiness that poems like "Doubt and Trembling" are trying to reach to and I guess any poem that you think might reach to someone else thinking and feeling the same things is a kind of communitiness where you're dealing with a shared task and a shared reality – I certainly think that's true. I think there's a huge value in that, I really do.

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