"Concrete fragments": An Interview with Henrietta Rose-Innes

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Abstract

South Africa has a long and rich tradition of short story writing, stretching from the early oral-style tale (MacKenzie, 1999), through the writing of the "fabulous fifties" (Driver, 2012; R. Gaylard, 2008), to the most recent post-apartheid texts. In this interview, Henrietta Rose-Innes describes her practice as a short story writer, noting how it differs from that of writing novels or poetry. For Rose-Innes, the short story offers a way to capture her view of the world; that is, in sudden, intense moments, rather than in wholly narrative terms. Combining a number of short stories into a collection, Rose-Innes suggests, can offer some perspective on the plurality of contemporary South African life. Over the course of the interview, she discusses her exploration of conventional gender categories, her unconscious use of Gothic tropes, and the possibilities for political writing in contemporary South Africa. Throughout, there is a concern for how her works negotiate questions of space and place, particularly in the context of South African writing.

Keywords

J. M. Coetzee, Gender, Gothic, Henrietta Rose-Innes, Ivan Vladislavić, place, politics, short story, South Africa, space, white writing

Henrietta Rose-Innes was born in Cape Town in 1971. Her first book, *Shark's Egg* (2000), was shortlisted for the 2001 M-Net Book Prize, and was followed by *The Rock Alphabet* (2004). Her short story "Poison" (2007) won the 2007 South African PEN Literary Award and the 2008 Caine Prize for African Writing. This story, as well as several others, appear in her short story collection, *Homing* (2010). A more recent story, "Sanctuary" (2012), was awarded second place in the 2012 BBC International Short Story Competition. Her stories have been published in, among other publications, *The Granta Book of the African Short Story*, *AGNI,* and *The Best American Nonrequired Reading 2011.* Her novel *Nineveh* (2011) was shortlisted for both the *Sunday Times* Fiction Prize and the M-Net Literary Award before winning — in French translation — the François Sommer Literary Prize in 2015. Her most recent novel, *Green Lion* (2015), was shortlisted for the 2016 *Sunday Times* Barry Ronge Fiction Prize, and has also recently been translated into French. She has held residencies all over the world, including in America, Italy, Scotland, South Africa, and Switzerland. She currently lives in Cape Town, South Africa, while completing work on a PhD in Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia.

This interview focuses on Rose-Innes's use of the short story form, and particularly its ability to refract societal concerns. Graham Huggan (1994: 71), discussing Nadine Gordimer's short stories, has argued that their "concentrated form" makes the "enormity of [societal] discrepancy" felt more keenly, and so provides a form that "may well cut deeper than the ostensibly political novel into the fabric of society". In Rose-Innes's stories, this intensity of focus and compression of form are particularly visible in her use of setting and spatial organization. Land, landscape, and the built environment have been abiding concerns of South African literature, from the earliest

travel writing, through the apartheid years, to the post-apartheid present (Barnard, 2007; Coetzee, 1988; Glenn, 2012). Rose-Innes's writing responds to the spatial organization and material conditions of life in contemporary South Africa, but it does so in highly mediated ways, transforming and transcoding the world into the unique terms of her fictions. The following interview began in the Kirstenbosch National Botanical Garden in Cape Town in January 2013, and continued over email until August 2016.

GR: I'd like to ask you some questions about the short story to start off. As a big fan of this form, I was happy to see your collection, *Homing*, come out in 2010. I hoped you might like to say something about how you see your short stories in relation to the other forms you write in — the novella in *Shark's Egg*, or a novel, such as *Green Lion*, your most recent.

HR-I: I like the agility of the short story. It allows a quick response to events, and to one's own emotional climate. When I'm engrossed in a novel, it pretty much empties out my writing life: there's just this one big slow thing going on. In between novels, there's more of a day-to-day engagement with the world, because I'll be offering up stories, seeing them published, reflecting on the responses and so on. Writing long pieces feels as though I'm taking myself out of the flow, disappearing for as long as two or three years, whereas a medium-slow drip of stories is a helpful way to stay visible.

Any publication is heartening. Especially for writers starting out in this tough publishing climate, platforms for short stories are a lifeline. Story competitions, those for African writers in particular, were very important to me in getting a foothold.

Single stories were a way to find international readers, long before I was able to place my novels "overseas". Some of my stories have worked very hard for me, appearing in several different contexts and collections — another thing that makes the story a handy form.

GR: Do you think that the kind of experience you might describe is different as well, or is it more a question of quick response?

HR-I: The short form feels like a natural fit for my way of perceiving things and my skills as a writer. I think I apprehend the world in concrete fragments, singular images and intuitive flashes, rather than in terms of an overarching narrative or abstract scheme. For me, short stories have always felt not easier than longer forms, but perhaps more in my gift.

These brief, eclectic contributions also feel like a natural and appropriate way to consider South Africa now, or perhaps any fractured, various, rapidly changing milieu — particularly for someone who is wary of sweeping statements. It's hard for anyone to have a good overview of what's happening with our country, to the extent that it can feel artificial and hubristic to try. Rather than a magisterial narrative, it may be that a mosaic of stories, its overall form undefined and with the capacity for new elements to be added quickly to the mix, might be the best and most honest commentary on our condition.

GR: I've noticed that in a lot of your stories, and even in some passages of prose in your novels, the writing almost tends towards prose poetry, a very condensed language with very dense imagery.

HR-I: Like many writers, my first love was poetry, and I aimed for that kind of richness and density in prose. But that intensity can feel constrictive, claustrophobic even, in a way that I associate with aspects of my childhood. It's been said about my writing that it can feel "airless". With the stories, and especially with the novels, I have tried to wean myself from that. I became interested in spinning something out longer, for a more complex or multi-layered payout. It is liberating to step back from that breathlessness, to learn a more loping pace, to take a longer view. But also difficult to learn.

GR: For me, that intensity is what I love about your writing! I remember reading *Shark's Egg* and the combination of an aquatic imaginary with a sensation of being bodily dunked into the text for the duration of the book gave a similar reality warp to what you sometimes get when reading short stories. You feel like you have been pulled right out of your world and into this other one for the duration and then you're thrown gasping back onto the shore afterwards; I thought that was extraordinary.

HR-I: [Laughs] I'm sorry. Well, I like that. I suppose that was originally my conception of what a writer should try for: those moments of transport and transformation. And maybe it still is. Recently, I've been feeling that the next challenge for me is to reverse direction, in a way … I'm turning back towards compression and stylization. Deep down, the transformative, hallucinatory quality of language is what I still value most. I hope, though, I have gained more ability to use it without suffocating myself or my readers. Or at least to suffocate in a thrilling way. I

can see myself whittling things down again, lengthwise, too — I'd like to write poems again before I die.

GR: I noticed that *Homing* sits somewhere halfway between a collection and a cycle of stories. I mean, it's geographically quite restricted, and there is a lot of recurring imagery, although you don't go so far as to have characters that reappear. It struck me while reading it that it gives the impression of a camera, shifting perspective around one object. Perhaps that object might be Cape Town?

HR-I: The stories were written over the course of about a decade, and never with the intention of them sitting alongside each other. It was a revelation to me, when compiling the collection, to see the structural and thematic similarities that emerged, to an almost embarrassing degree. It seems I have been rather obsessively slogging along the same paths, back and forth and round and round: concerns, landscapes, imagery. I have made my peace with this! It is possible and legitimate to build a body of work that traces a series of routes round a complicated thing, like a city or a mountain. (Ivan Vladislavić's work on Johannesburg helped me to see this, and encouraged me.) And it does give the collection more unity that I had reason to hope for.

I find it a bit exhausting, though, the idea of setting out to write a linked cycle of stories. Each story idea comes to me as a singular phenomenon, and they don't come easy or often. I will work on each story very thoroughly and for a long time. It's such a relief to get one out, that to consider coming back at the same material from a different direction, over and over, is quite daunting — even though that's what I seem to have effectively ended up doing, over the years.

I also have a fondness for single-author collections that are eclectic and all over the place, like a lucky packet — maybe one day I'll manage one of those.

GR: One recurring device I noticed coming back across the collection was that of dramatic changes of visual perspective. One minute you are on the ground and then suddenly you see the same scene from some elevated point. You often use these reversals and telescoping of perspectives in your stories, things that are big suddenly appearing small and the inverse. This also appears in the form of miniature models — I'm thinking of "Burning Buildings", in which an artist makes a scale model of a house, or *The Rock Alphabet*, in which there is a scale model of a mountain. It seems to be an image that pulls you back.

HR-I: I do often express human motivation in terms of the external environment, rather than through internality. I find it exciting to think about the ways the physical world compels and interacts with us, and I like the dynamism that those reversals of perspective introduce — useful in writing where plot is not the strong driver. I fear, though, that my reliance on these devices can become a bit of a habit, or even a gimmick. For example, I have a great number of journeys out and back, and often these are negotiated via architecture or geography — a character might venture to the top of a skyscraper and down again, or, as in *Green Lion*, a mountain.

Miniatures, architectural models and scale models are a related fascination … I think this is partly about a desire for control, which I associate with childhood and being little myself. Anxiety about the world out there, and a desire to make it small and close and graspable.

GR: Is this also perhaps part of what pulls you to the short story form?

HR-I: I think that's true. I have an intuitive sense of the whole shape of a short story, indeed an aerial view; something I can take in at a glance. And it's something I can tinker with more confidently than with the sprawling material of the life-size novel, with its troublingly large cast of characters and its disappearing horizons.

GR: Often, though, one would associate these aerial perspectives with a position of power — the view down from above. But yours imply more of a sense of danger, of precariousness. In "Falling", there's a man spread-eagled across a glass dome. Or the adolescent in "The Boulder", standing at the top of a mountain with a huge rock that, like Chekhov's gun, seems certain to go off, or rather roll down, by the end of the story. On the one hand, an elevated position makes the world safer, brings it into your sphere, but at the same time …

HR-I: It never works [both laugh]. All of the situations you have just mentioned are fundamentally the same: someone who has aspired to ease or power, but when they attain it, it is uneasy, or as you say, precarious. I think I'm interested in undermining not exactly power, but false assumptions of power, of where power lies. I don't think my characters are ever completely comfortable or easy in anything, especially not attainment.

GR: To stick with "The Boulder" for a minute, what stood out for me was something to do with masculinity. I've noticed that men are becoming more present in your fiction, and that their characters are more fully developed than they perhaps were

before. Is this something you have been thinking about — about men in South Africa at the moment? It seems that masculinity is going through some kind of change there; it's being interrogated more than it was in the past.

HR-I: I have indeed been writing more men. Part of it is due to increased confidence on my part. In *Shark's Egg*, the protagonist is very close to myself in age, gender, race and every other marker: at that point I was intimidated to write beyond those bounds. As I've become more experienced, my central characters have become more distanced — which is considerably more challenging and more interesting, for me anyway. Of course there is debate as to how much one can or should attempt to inhabit other bodies, but it is exciting for me to find those limits. It can invigorate writing to "swap" roles occasionally, and that bit of distance can add clarity and freshness too.

Green Lion has a male protagonist, and in part deals with masculinity, sexuality, and male friendships. But no, I haven't set out to address a crisis in South African masculinity. I think my concerns are more directly personal: these characters' unease with their roles, their imperfect inhabitation of their male skins, reflects my own unease with conventional gender identity as much as anything. This is related once again to childhood in complex ways. I was a boyish child whose ambitions for adulthood were all attached to male figures. Creating male characters is way of fulfilling this impossible desire and also critiquing it.

I do try to write characters that are unorthodox, to different degrees, that disturb gender assumptions and gendered social roles. And perhaps writing as a woman from a man's point of view — and no doubt getting it wrong here and there — adds a necessary element of strangeness and estrangement, which can both upend expectations and add power to the writing.

GR: Are you conscious of yourself as a woman writer, or a women's writer, or perhaps a woman who writes?

HR-I: Sometimes I'm more one than the other, but I'm not sure they're divisible. I am all of these things. Unless I specifically set myself against those identities, or perversely try to mask them — how could I not be? I don't reject those labels and I think they can at times have strategic advantages. "Women's writing" creates a gap for an author like me to exist, and there are precious few gaps for writers these days. Sometimes it's helpful, and emboldening, to embrace that, and it's good to feel solidarity with other women writers. In other contexts it's of less relevance and can be counterproductive, in which case you can, ideally, choose to define yourself differently. I don't think these labels are useful for describing the writing itself: whatever kind of book I produce, that's what a woman's book looks like.

GR: A lot of these stories have appeared individually before, and I noticed that from their previous incarnations to how they appear in *Homing*, some have been changed slightly, and some quite a lot. I'm thinking particularly of a story like "Tremble", which first appeared in an anthology of erotic writing (Shimke, 2008), but in *Homing*, it's become something else. It's more nostalgic, there's more of a play of memory.

HR-I: The stories feel like a continual work in progress. (I'm also an unrepentant rewriter and tweaker. Nothing is ever perfect, and if you give me a chance I will attempt over and over to make it so.)

Part of it is the time-warping oddness of putting old stories alongside new ones in a collection. It's hard not to condescend to one's silly younger writer-self, and to resist pulling that sensibility into line with the older and wiser one. You want to create a coherent identity for this author who is in fact multiple authors over time.

I find I often start out trying to make the time-frame shallower, more urgent. I want my characters to be free of their pasts, to move through the present unburdened by backstory. But when I return I always find myself layering in the past, unwillingly adding the telling childhood anecdotes that make sense of the story and give it weight, in every way. These very often are drawn from my childhood, which is still the most potent generator of creative ideas for me. You try to shake free of your own history by writing, by inventing characters with their own lives, but that's just wishful thinking.

GR: Some people have described writing since apartheid ended as being less political, others say that it is more personal, but is inherently political as a result. Do you feel these concerns are relevant to your writing?

HR-I: When it was published in 2000, *Shark's Egg* got a bit more attention than it was due, I think, because it was perceived as something new: a small intimate story that did not overtly address the politics of the day, or of the past. There were very few writers doing that at the time (and in fact, hardly anyone of my immediate peer group being published in South Africa at that point). It was seen as "apolitical". It's always made me uncomfortable that it was received like that. I was not setting out to proclaim myself an apolitical writer, and of course the book was political: it was saturated in the politics of the era and setting, in the identity of its protagonist, and in its own conscious and unconscious biases.

I think South African writers have a responsibility to acknowledge where we come from and what is happening around us, to not wilfully shirk or deny our history or our present circumstances; but within that there are a great many kinds of story that that are important to tell. Light and heavy, big and small, they are all necessarily political. You write the ones you are best able to write.

GR: What gave me a feeling of political engagement in *Shark's Egg* was, firstly, the social milieu of the setting, and also the kind of Gothic doubling that partly structures the book (see G Gaylard, 2008; Joseph-Vilain, 2012). I found that this doubling gives some sense of the societal unease in South Africa, of lives running parallel and rarely meeting.

HR-I: There is that tension and alienation, to some extent, in everything I write. (And in quite a lot of South African literature, as has been noted.) It's partly temperamental, but it's also very much a reflection of how we grew up in white South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s. I recall a generalized sense of anxiety resulting from state propaganda, from the violence and abnormality of the society, and from the distrust and fear South Africans felt for each other. These divisions and inequalities continue to disfigure the country. The sometimes eerie doubling you speak of is, I think, an acknowledgement of this separation, but also in the twinning is an acknowledgment of wounded kinship and frustrated desire to connect.

GR: Along with the doubling of characters, the other Gothic element I noticed was ruined houses. They come up in *The Rock Alphabet*, and in *Homing*. I hesitate, though, to use the term "Gothic", because I think it can be dangerous to apply these

very general categories, particularly when it is a European category being used to describe South Africa. It can erase a lot of the subtleties of very different situations. There is something unhomely, though, about these buildings and spaces that become repurposed into dwellings. It creates a feeling of haunting in a spectral sense, but also in terms of the places you frequent, "your regular haunts" — the word "haunt" has roots in the German word *Heim*, or home. I felt this dual pull in your writing, between home as a familiar place and as an uncomfortable, uncanny one. I suppose the title *Homing* suggests that "home" can be thought of as a process as much as a place … as well as having ballistic connotations.

HR-I: It's always fun spotting, after the event, the ridiculously clear tropes that I was clueless about at the time of writing! But I share your hesitation: the resonances of a stone-age rock shelter in the Cedarberg are different to those of a ruined tower. The spaces I've written about are (I hope) strikingly strange because of their curious juxtapositions, but I'm not sure if I find them classically Gothic, or unhomely, exactly. I've been talking about "abandoned" spaces but most of them are being used — repurposed, as you say. Much of their emotional power for me comes from the signs of hopeful re-inhabitation of spaces that might otherwise be considered desolate and inhospitable. (The pigeons and their feeder resolutely occupying the alleyway in "Homing", the domestic touches in the seaside cave in "Bad Places", and so on.) They are uncanny, haunted spaces that turn out to be familiar — if not at first to our protagonist, then to someone or something, flesh and blood.

As you suggest, this sometimes unsuccessful striving to make a home, to be at home, is consciously reflected in the several meanings of the title, but for me there

was no undercurrent of threat there. (I often take a sunnier view of my own writing than my readers do.)

GR: To come back to the idea of alienation, particularly in relation to place, whether it's nature, wilderness, or Cape Town. I was wondering if you could say a bit about how you think people and their surroundings might affect one another, particularly in terms of writers and landscape? I understand J. M. Coetzee supervised your creative writing master's, and his book, *White Writing*, explores this fraught relationship. He has described Sidney Clouts as having an "unsettled habitation in the landscape" (Coetzee, 1988, 173), a turn of phrase that I was reminded of when reading your work.

HR-I: There is the sentimental and historically dangerous attachment to the idea of an empty land, so astutely identified in white South African culture by Coetzee. These echoes are inescapably there in my writing. They are present in an attraction to abandoned places, places emptied of other humans and the challenges and stresses that encounters with them entail. This of course is troubling in the context of our bloody history of land appropriation and ongoing land struggles.

However, I don't think these spatial preoccupations are always malign (or crude ruin porn). Abandoned places can represent the compelling mystique of other people's lives. They offer the opportunity to imagine oneself into another's space, and they do, in a way, facilitate meetings with inaccessible strangers — via their leavings, their poignant remains, the cryptic signs of their presence and occupation. These interactions are potentially fraught and strange, but also vital.

GR: But your landscapes are by no means romanticized and empty ones. I mean, *Nineveh* is positively teeming with life.

HR-I: *Nineveh* is a hopeful book, although not everyone has read it that way. It's about acknowledging and even celebrating all varieties of habitation of our shared urban space, human and non-human, even if it comes in forms that are unpredictable, uncontrolled and unwelcome. Certainly in the insect-overrun, swampwater-flooded housing estate that is Nineveh, the "empty land" has never been empty at all — it's just being used in ways that no one planned, and that are initially invisible to the city's conventional powers.

Green Lion, on the other hand, is a bleaker book. With its theme of animal extinctions, it shows the enforced emptying out of a landscape by the forces of environmental destruction; this is a sterile, unromantic emptiness, that leaves the characters more isolated than before. The humans are alienated, from each other and from the non-human world; they long for a "teeming" landscape to cure them of their loneliness in it.

GR: I understand you are writing a longer work at the moment. Would you like to say anything about that?

HR-I I'm currently completing a third novel in the loose trilogy begun with *Nineveh* and *Green Lion*. I'm calling it *Stone Plant*. It takes place, you'll be startled to hear, on a piece of contested urban wasteland on the outskirts of a Cape Town southern-like city. There is a historical dimension to this one, and it expands my exploration of human/non-human relationships into the slower rhythms and life-cycles of the

vegetable realm. I think living in the UK for a bit has somewhat loosened my writerly attachment to the actual, contemporary Cape Town. With *Nineveh* and *Green Lion* and now even more so with this new book, I think I am moving further from the real and deeper into dreamlike territory, while still engaging with the local concerns we've been talking about.

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