

MERIDIAN

The Semi-Annual
from the
University of Virginia

Issue 9 ♦ Spring/Summer 2002



Claire Messud photograph by Robin Farquhar-Thomson

RENÉ TODD

An Interview with Claire Messud

AT A TIME when most first novelists were producing thinly veiled autobiographies molded into coming-of-age stories, Claire Messud, then twenty-eight years old, published a novel about two middle-aged British sisters who surprise themselves by discovering that they might not be the people they thought they were. The novel, *When the World Was Steady*, was a finalist for the PEN/Faulkner award and evoked comparisons to British novelists of manners: Jane Austen, Barbara Pym, and E.M. Forster.

When Claire Messud did decide to write a coming-of-age novel, it was not her own. Her second novel, *The Last Life*, is the story of a French teenager striving for the meaning of her family's history in revolutionary Algiers. With its lush, intelligent prose, and its intense examinations of the questions of nationality and identity, *The Last Life* brought new comparisons—this time to Proust, Henry James, and Tolstoy—and won Britain's Encore Award for Best Second Novel.

Since then, Claire Messud has published short stories, reviews, and—most recently—two novellas published together in the volume, *The Hunters*. In all of these works, Claire Messud writes the stories of people and the places in which they find themselves—by immigration, on vacation, by accident. Messud herself was born in North America and raised in Australia and Canada. She graduated from Yale and Cambridge and studied in the M.F.A. program at Syracuse University. She has lived in London, Washington D.C., and currently is Writer in Residence at the University of Amherst, Massachusetts where she lives with her husband and infant daughter.

You've written novels, novellas, short stories, and reviews. Do you find that, as a writer, you resonate with one particular form: are you a novelist who writes short stories, or do you feel that form is dictated by other considerations?

The quick answer would be, yes, I do think of myself as a novelist—not exclusively, I hope, but fairly definitely. To me, short stories are as different from novels as poetry is from prose. I can't really write short stories—the *Zoetrope* thing [*Erotomorphia*, published in *Zoetrope: All Story*, Summer 1998, Vol. 2, No. 2] was like doing an assignment. It was great fun and I loved doing it, but “the muse did not speak to me,”

as it were. I can think of only one other story that I envisioned as a story, completed as a story, and was happy with as a story.

The novellas are obviously something somewhere in between. I am someone whose impulse is always to write more. Graduate school [at Syracuse University] was a problem for me—I was pretty young at the time and I wanted to please people. I kept thinking, “I know I can write something,” and I would write these short stories and they’d be terrible. I’d turn them in and people would say as nicely as they possibly could, “You know, this is terrible.” It was always mitigated by something like, “There’s a paragraph on page four that is really good.” But mostly it was, “This story is terrible.” So finally I gave up trying to do the story thing and I have been much happier.

Why novellas? Was that a reaction to the significant length of your second novel, The Last Life?

That was part of it. Writing the second novel was, in all sorts of ways, very taxing. I found it hard to write and I wasn’t sure how to do it. Even halfway, even three-quarters of the way through it, I was running around tearing my hair out. I applied for jobs in management consulting; I filled out applications for graduate programs in international relations. I kept thinking, *This is unbearable, I can’t possibly keep doing this*, and *No one is going to want it when I finish it*. But when I came to the end, I thought, *I can’t start again. I can’t take on another four and a half years*. So that is part of it.

But I also love to read novellas—some of my favorite books are novellas. There are especially some from the late 19th, early 20th century, some 70–120 page things that somehow seem to me among the most important books—stories—that I’ve read.

What are your favorites?

It sounds like English 101, but the first novella in *The Hunters* is actually an homage to Flaubert’s *A Simple Heart*, which is one of my great favorites. *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. *Death in Venice*. Obviously Conrad wrote a bunch of them, and Henry James.

There is an absolutely amazing novella by V.S. Naipaul, called *In a Free State*, written in the ’70s. This novella, which is set in Africa, is about two white people taking a car trip, in a state in turmoil, from the capital back to the town in which they live. They are both incredibly disagreeable people, and they’re being disagreeable

with each other. Yet, there is something about the way Naipaul writes, something about the vividness and honesty of it. I have a terrible memory, so I know when I remember something that it has actually made a big impression, and it is a novella that I remember really well. It is not a pleasant or comfortable work, but it is remarkable.

I love in The Hunters that you had such very different projects for the two novellas. In particular, in the title novella, The Hunters, you specifically choose not to reveal the narrator's gender.

It's sort of too bad about that—I feel that people end up seeing that as the main intention of the piece. It's the first thing people think or ask—it becomes a big preoccupation. And in fact, that was not what I set out to do. I heard this voice—it was very explicit. I had nearly finished the first draft when I realized that this person had not disclosed any gender. And that became something to think about. The character is many things, but above all, in the way of voyeurs, is someone who does not want to be revealed. And yet, of course, the narrator reveals a lot about the self despite that. Gender seemed to be exactly the sort of thing that this person would withhold, thinking that it would keep them mysterious, when in fact we see more profound things about them, deeper things, very clearly, just from the things that this person says. So that was the sort of guiding notion behind it.

I think that a lot of people have a problem with the narrator because it is such a not-nice person. There is not even a redemptive ending—this person is selfish from beginning to end. The novella's epigraph is the Baudelaire quote, *Hypocrite lecteur, mon semblable, mon frère*, which means “Hypocrite reader, you are like me, you are my brother.”

We don't have cable at my house, but we mysteriously get three cable channels, and one of them—I think it's MSNBC—had this sort of endless variety of one-hour true crime sorts of things. It seemed that any time you turned on the television, there was some story of a ghastly crime committed by a 17-year-old boy in a small town in Oregon, or the woman who drowned her children. I would sit and just watch these stories, and there came a point that every time I sat down in front of the television I felt sullied. Yet I remained riveted by this. I do think we live in a culture that is titillated by the idea of other people's violent misfortunes.

So part of the project was to get into the mindset of a character who is projecting or wanting or in some way engaging with the story of somebody else's life. While

part of the thrill is knowing that it is real, part of what makes it safe is that you don't really believe that it is real. It's not yours—that wouldn't happen to you. And that isn't really different from reading a Daphne du Maurier novel. It's been made into a story; it seems neat and tidy and you thereby contain all your anxieties. I think that we do that every day.

One of the things I loved about the character is that he—or she? The pronoun issue becomes a little troubling....

I know. That's why I keep saying "they." Even though I have in my mind my high school grammar teacher saying, "If it is singular, it cannot be they."

OK—"they." The narrator feels victimized when Ridley shows up perfectly innocuously bringing them hollyhocks. The narrator's reaction is, "Oh, now she's drawn me into her world, and I can never escape these people. They've ruined my summer." It's so wonderful that their expectation is turned on its head.

The narrator is a particular highly neurotic, highly self-obsessed weak, sort of strange person. This is true. But in some odd way, I think of them as someone who knows themselves.

One of the things I was trying to write about—what all of us are trying to write about—is the disjunction between the world inside our heads and the world outside. Which reality is the more powerful? This narrator is somebody for whom the isolation inside their head is more powerful than the reality outside. And so, in some way, when Ridley crosses that threshold, it doesn't really matter who she is or what she's like, because already when the narrator says that—"I knew she was going to ruin my life"—that's about the projection that the narrator has created: the fictional Ridley that the narrator creates right from the beginning. And so the two trajectories of Ridley's life—the imagined one and the real one—are inevitably headed in opposite directions. Another way of putting it—if she hadn't been there, the narrator would have invented her.

Ridley is as good at the inventing process as the narrator is. You manage to create not one, but two incredibly unreliable narrators.

We're all making it up all the time. In teaching my students about the importance of giving the reader concrete details, rather than all the abstraction of someone's interior, I use this wonderful Edith Wharton analogy. She said, "Two people are like two

great estates.” Isn’t that so Edith Wharton? That wouldn’t have occurred to me. “And all you ever know of somebody,” she said, “is the part of the estate that borders your own.” From that, you project what the men over the hill might look like. Based on whether the fence is in order and whether the grass is mown and whether you see some cows, you project this whole idea of what the interior is like. It is very Edith Wharton and hilarious, but it’s also sort of true. We are always looking at a world of projection.

I understand that your next novel—the novel that you are currently working on—takes place in New York. That makes it your first novel set in America, aside from portions of The Last Life. Do you find that makes your project any different?

Yes. Well, one of the things I am finding hard about the project is that I now have a baby and I’m not actually writing anything! That makes it hard. But another thing that makes it hard is, of course, September 11th. In a way it’s good that I’m sort of in the middle of a hiatus at the moment—because of teaching and the baby. And I actually think that’s good, because maybe when I come back to it I’ll actually have a clearer sense.

We moved a lot when I was growing up. There are people who can’t remember when something happened in their childhood. For me, I remember where I was living and then I know when it happened in my childhood. We lived in one place until I was two, until I was four, until I was five, until I was nine, until I was thirteen, so everything is broken up into these manageable chunks. My chunk in America hasn’t come to an end. It’s ongoing and so I don’t really know how to step back and look at life here.

One thing about *The Last Life*, the bits that were set in America: The narrator’s come from outside America. So she’s looking at America differently, as an outsider. And I always feel, myself—I don’t know what I know about life. It’s just my life. So every time I think of writing this novel, I think, *I don’t know what that’s like*, or else, *I know too well what that’s like*. One of the problems I have been having, setting the novel in New York, is that I did not intend for it to be satirical, but it is becoming satirical of its own accord. I was writing about the sort of life that I know about in New York—middle-class people in New York City doing middle-class things. Suddenly it seems all sort of frivolous and inexcusable in some way.

I’m writing about someone who’s working for an online magazine, and I

couldn't help myself making fun of the online magazine. It was an online food magazine and I called it *Yum*.

Do you also find it hard to write while you teach—not only because of the time but also because of the project of teaching?

Yes. It invades your mental space.

I always imagine that teachers try to be the teachers that they liked—or the teachers that they wanted—when they were students themselves. Is there something that you do or want to do as a teacher or to pass on to your students?

There is one thing that I don't know how to teach, but that I try to impart. I feel that there are special pressures in a workshop because what works best in workshop isn't always what works best for individual writers. If there is something that I can impart, it would be to sort of fortify people to take the risks and do the things that they really want, rather than to feel that they were trying to conform to some idea of what is good or what is successful. And I don't know how to do that.

If I could teach something it would be “be free.” I left the writing program [at Syracuse] for all sorts of practical reasons, but then all of a sudden—and I know everyone is different—when I didn't have to show my work to a class anymore, it was great. I had always been showing my work in class—as an undergraduate and then when I was in England, in a writer's group, and then graduate school. And all of a sudden, I got out into the world and didn't have to show it to anybody.

When you start writing, when you're a kid, there is this incredible joy about it. There is this thing and it's mine and I can do what I want with it. It's all mine. And then I feel like, in school, I sort of lost that. And then when I got out in the world, I thought, *It's mine, I can do whatever I want with it. This is amazing.* And it wasn't about, *Will it ever be published? Will anyone ever read it?* No, it was, *This is just my little secret thing*, and it was wonderful to rediscover that.

But, as a teacher... okay, maybe the two are incompatible, the classroom and that secret feeling of joy. But you can remind people that it's there or should be. Because, after all, nobody else cares if we write, so why do it if it's not good for us?