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Resumen

El estudio de la cultura y la literatura australiana no es muy común en Venezuela. A partir del año 2001, el Centro de Investigación 'Culturas y Lenguas' de la UPEL Maracay, en la línea de investigación 'Lengua, Literatura y Cultura', ha dedicado su atención al estudio de este tema. El siguiente artículo escrito presenta a una reconocida escritora de la literatura australiana; su nombre es Elizabeth Jolley (Dribble, 2007). La riqueza de este documento es que es una entrevista que se le realizó en 2001, antes de que enfermara y falleciera en 2007. Para todos aquellos apasionados por la literatura, ya sea como críticos, estudiantes o lectores, no hay nada más fascinante que leer las voces propias de un escritor y adentrarse a sus sentimientos y percepciones sobre el tema. En esta entrevista hay una visión amplia acerca de cómo esta autora comenzó a escribir y el sentimiento de la escritura en Australia.

Palabras clave Elizabeth Jolley, Entrevista, Literatura Australiana.

Exploring Australian Literature through an Interview with Elizabeth Jolley

Abstract

The study of Australian Culture and Literature is not very common in Venezuela, since 2001 an area of the research cluster 'Language, literature and culture' that is registered at the research center 'Cultures and languages' at UPEL Maracay has been dedicated to look for information related with this topic. The following written paper introduces a well-known writer in the Aussie literature; her name is Elizabeth Jolley (Dribble, 2007). Now the richness of this document is that it is an interview that was conducted to her in 2001 before she became ill and passed away in 2007. For all those who are passionate about literature, either as critic, student or as reader, there is nothing more fascinating that reading the own voices of a writer and to have a look to her or her feelings and views about the topic. In this interview there is a broad view about how she started writing and the feeling of writing in Australia.

Key words Elizabeth Jolley, Interview, Australian Literature.

Elizabeth Jolley is an Australian writer who was born in England 1923 and passed away 2007. She was established in Western Australia since the late 1950s. She started writing at the age of 20 but it was not until she was 53 when her first novel was published; she wrote 15 novels, three short stories books and three non-fictional books. Her publications became acknowledged in the 1980s with the revival of women's literature. She received several awards (Hackett, 2007), including the Miles Franklin Literary Award, the most prestigious one in Australia. Her narrative is well-known and appreciated as part of the Australian literary heritage. Her books are: *An Innocent Gentleman* (2001), *An Accommodating Spouse* (1999), *Love song* (1997), *The Orchard Thieves* (1995), *The Georges' Wife* (1993), *Cabin Fever* (1990), *My Father's Moon* (1989), *The Sugar Mother* (1988), *The Well* (1986), *Foxy baby* (1985), *Milk and Honey* (1984), *Mr Scobie's Riddle* (1983), *Miss Peabody's Inheritance* (1983), *The Newspaper of Claremont Street* (1981) and *Palomino* (1980). The short stories books collection and radio programs are: *Fellow Passengers: Collected Stories of Elizabeth Jolley* (1997), *Off the Air: Nine Plays for Radio* (1995), *Woman in a Lampshade* (1983), *The Travelling Entertainer and Other Stories* (1979), *The Well-Bred Thief* (1977), *Five Acre Virgin and Other Stories* (1976).

Jolley was also professor of creative writing at Curtin University – Perth, Australia. Several of her students became laurate writer; the most well-known is Tim Winton. She was an avant garde writer, she wrote about controversial topics in her time. Professor Webby indicated that

Jolley's work was important because she was the first female writer to abandon the realist style.... She played games with the reader by mixing fiction, fantasy and dreams in a way that only male authors such as Peter Carey, Michael Wilding and Murray Bail did, Professor... Some of her earlier writing was regarded as controversial ... part of it was that she wrote about sexuality and lesbianism and that was considered improper for a woman writer (Taylor & Gosch, 2007).

I had the chance to meet her in early 2001 and here is part of a long interview that she kindly accepted to do. The idea was to allow her to speak freely about literature and her experience as a writer. I found a very humble Elizabeth Jolley, quiet and in her place I had the pleasure to meet this great writer. 1

E: Elizabeth Jolley -

B: Head of the School of Communication and Cultural Studies at Curtin University

R: Rosa

R: I would like you to say your name please, your name

E: Elizabeth Jolley... you may

R: That's for the recording

E: Alright, yes. It's just that I don't feel very competent in a scholastic way to say anything about the Australian writing, except, of course that it has changed over the years, but... ah that's true in Europe as well.

R: Yeah..., you are part of Australian literature you are one of the representatives of Australian literature, ... I was speaking to my friend Alba, and since she arrived here

she was fascinated with your work, and she told me “there’s somebody here that will be so interesting to know her work” and that’s how, little by little I started to know about you being here in Australia, and I said to myself “If once I go to Perth I would like to speak with her, but issues more related to your work because you are one of those persons that I would like back there (Venezuela) people to know. So the interview is more about how you started writing... it doesn’t necessarily have to deal with the history of Australia, because that’s one of the things... I mean that’s one of the things that have been ...

E: Been explored

R: Been explored... that’s right, but I, I’m just more interested in your opinion, your perspective as a writer.

E: Well I... I as a writer I don’t... I didn’t really look back on my own work, but if I do look back on it, I do see that I’m already very regional, here as I would have been in England, of course, ah regional writing in England means away from London, and eh in the North Midlands, I would have been if I’d got to it there, I would have been a regional writer in England and of course we are regional here, especially with the settings and... and um trouble with drought and flooding, that kind of thing, eh, the rather fierce Outback and the terrible deserts which are very beautiful really and things like cane toads escaping and poisoning people, but I’ve noticed, I’ve looked back and my books are set in definite small, you could help me with this, small areas in which I have put my story or something which I recognize are both here in Western Australia. People who are reading here will know some of the background to the book because at that when I’m writing right what’s right near me

you see. I don’t know whether that’s good or bad, I didn’t realize I was doing it really.

R: And how do you feel being here have, have changed, how have your writing changed since you arrived here and how your perspective have changed now?

E: You. You mean in writing?

R: yeah

E: Well when I first came out I hadn’t written very much, I hadn’t been published or... I had I think I had one story on children’s radio, didn’t or something like that. I think it... there were difficulties that I didn’t understand when I first came here. I didn’t realize that we had come to the lesser part of Australia from the Eastern seaboard in Melbourne for example, this was really not on the map, and one of the troubles about writing, people just didn’t get their work published themselves, had their books printed without any editing and that gave a sort of poor name to the writing, I couldn’t have said that straight away, that was something that I discovered as years went by, when I looked at people’s books and so on, and um it hadn’t ever occurred to me that the other side of Australia didn’t think much of this side you know, it didn’t bother very much because my husband for a very specific work, librarian at the university of WA (Western Australia), and I in a beautiful way came with him, now I’m here by myself, I’ve got no reason to be here really... and the children grew up and they grew up rather differently from the way they would have done in England, because we lived between the river and the sea to start off with we’re on a kind of big playground... I know... I know they’ve ruined Perth with big buildings, but if you’d seen Perth when it was when we saw it, it was charming

R: And you like those first writings that you had, I mean when you arrived here, ... you arrived in fifty nine if I'm not mistaken, so how have you changed I mean from those first years to

E: It's not

R: now

E: It just is exploring different relationships really that interest me and people in their marriages in their lives I like to stare at people and imagine something about them and write it down, I don't write the truth down

R: ha, ha, ha... so what happened in the book Love song?

E: What happened...?

R: In the book...

E: Well I don't think anything much happened

R: ha, ha, ha

E: only in people's minds I suppose

B: No, she's asking was that factual or historical I think.

E: No it was fiction, very much fiction, but fiction on general knowledge of the human predicament really, the different illnesses and things or things that happened to people come to put into a novel in a fiction, but still maintain a kind of truth, but with Love song I think it was very bad luck that ped... pedophilia was on the news all the time just at the time which... and people you'd be surprised... intelligent people writing reviews and so on just fell with this idea. There isn't a, a scene of pedophilia in the book, but it isn't even suggested, it's only that my character has been having a treatment and is now free you know, but it doesn't really give... people built into it enormously, I've been surprised. They're very creative people you know

R: Ha, ha very creative readers, and as far as I know, I mean it's what I've perceived as an outsider in Australia. Ok. There are people from the West I have met, some of them and they say they are different from the East, what happened in Sydney, Melbourne, it's different, they say we are a different country.

E: Now that they're doing their best to be the same... you know there are buildings and all the different things that are going on, I don't think it matters

R: Establishing as a writer, I mean... establishing as a writer from the West is it still very hard, very difficult compared to the emerging writers from the East?

E: I think that... I think that Western Australia on a point of view of writing are on an equal thing, I mean I haven't studied it in figures to see how many people aren't being published who are writing you know I'm sure there'll always be a lot of people who won't get published because what they're writing is too dull, but you can't say that, you know I mean that's one of the sad things... and equally in Sydney there will be people who don't get published or if they do the book sinks at once, ah and especially the one book that people have, unless like you go on in a place like Australia and I think it would be the same in England and in Europe in the cities ah, if you want to stay in print you then have to have another books coming out, you can't, you can't be kept in print with just with just one book unless it's something rather spectacular.

R: Ok.

E: One of the nice things about Penguin books being that they no longer, you no longer have to go to another publisher first, but you can go directly to Penguin that makes an enormous difference to someone like

me, you see, going to another publisher... that wasn't interested in what I was writing I might now have the good fortune of publication that I've had.

R: Was it very hard for you when you started?

E: Oh yes it... people didn't even want to know about you ranking from Perth, in fact I sent three radio stories to England to my sister, they'd been turned down by the radio in Sydney and I sent them to my sister and I said "Just submit these to a radio will you" and she did and they were taken, because they'd come from England, you see that kind of attitude

R: So we're talking in the sixties?

E: Talking... talking in the early sixties yeah, the odd story and so on and I'd written a novel then, but it was a dreadful novel I've still got it, I might bequeath to Bryan.

R: Ha, ha, ha

E: I did write some longer things, but I've rewritten them since, ah when I began to understand more about black comedy and some sort of humor to lift human endurance rather... ah, but I don't know what else I can tell you.

R: But well, we can talk about history, would you believe that in the sixties it was difficult to publish because you were not Australian or that you were in Perth, or it was a woman writer. What do you think?

E: I don't know because I didn't understand the background of writing and publishing, I knew what it was like in London, and I knew that I didn't have any chance from the North Midlands or Scotland in London you know what I mean? So I didn't really I hadn't gotten enough written anyway to submit... and because I wanted to write I did go on writing and when I did submit I of course did have a number of manuscripts which

was a great help. I discovered that publishers like to see more than one theme you know I had no head for the business side of it, I didn't know about that.

R: When you started working in your novels... how do you think it would have been different your stories if writing, being in this setting or being in another setting for example. Perth or Bini, Sydney?

E: If I'm using a background, I like to use something that I have some feeling for, even if I'm going to change it, and ah... I suppose I'm... I'm kind of quite loyal to Western Australia, but I don't really think about it much ah until somebody asks me.

R: In Australian literature you, you are one standing point, and how do you feel about that?

E: Oh, what do you mean?

R: You are one important writer in the Australian literature...

E: Oh!

R: How do you feel about that?

E: Well I quite like to be a writer, yes...

R: How do you feel being identified as an Australian writer?

E: I don't mind that at all, in fact I was at a festival or something where I was described as an English writer in Toronto, that gave me a shock, but I hadn't thought about whether, I don't think of myself as Australian at all, ah I'm not a bit interested in tennis and cricket so I'm right out from being...

R: Ha, ha, ha

E: I was having morning coffee with a doctor friend of mine, who puts his alarm on in the middle of the night so he can watch some hideous match somewhere, I can't understand anybody doing anything like that. Ah... I don't really, what were we talking about, I lost the thread.

R: We were talking about how do you feel about when people ...

E: Oh yes, well... well at the same... at the same time in Canada I was introduced as an Australian writer, and I was quite upset at not being said a West Australian writer you see which gave me a shock, because really I hadn't bothered about the rest of Australia. It's such a large place, you can't think about it all the time, you know. And if there are lots of problems everywhere, and ah terrible plane journeys if you got to get anywhere you know, can't get anywhere easily.

R: Oh yes, but it's interesting that, that sense of identity and what people as well, how they look at us and what I mean you represent and obviously if you read or if you speak with somebody, they will say oh yes she's a famous Australian writer, mean just last week I was speaking with somebody that works with literature and said, oh if you have the chance to speak with her that would be great. Mean she's such a prolific writer and a very good writer yeah. So that's the way people perceive you I mean, that's what I asked if you would have written differently if you were in Perth or in Darwin or in Sydney.

E: I don't know if I can answer a question like that, people ask me if I had stayed in England how would I have written or would I have written, how do I know? Put it in this way I've always wanted to write and when I was a little girl I got slapped for writing in my writing books at school before the teacher had said what we had to do. He slapped my wrist you know, haven't ever forgotten that... it was only gentle you know, but the... I you see, how can tell how you might react in another place. One of the beauties of coming to the university in Western Australia

was this, a housing, a whole road of little houses and we had one of them to come in to, all were people from at the university with their children all the children hardly disturbed at being uprooted and removed across the world and uh, but you met an awful lot of very nice people, good friends and people we knew having lived in Australia. One of a few couple married people were from Melbourne and they one of them wives, the math professor's wife insisted on buying my meat for me, oh she was Jewish you see and she had this Jewish butcher, well we had meat that we had never eaten before. Every week we got frankfurters and topside mince, boiled beef; the red boiled beef. Do you know that? A pink beef that you had to boil it, oh I ruined it, I couldn't cook it and take it out at the right minute and then it'd get cold and then you'd slice it, it's a sort of... we don't have it now... I buy our meat and then we don't have money. I was quite pleased to have somebody buy my meat, it was much more than we would spend on it that...

R: Do you read other Australian writers?

E: I read like Kate Granvillee and Ellen Garner, we're all very good friends.

R: Ok

E: And Frank Moorehouse I mean we're quite fond of him, though I think he's been a bit offhand about me, sometime I don't know...

R: Would you ever write about how you feel I mean that... that kind of experience that you were telling me like being identified as an Australian writer or Western Australian writer. Would you write about that?

E: Well I have written, haven't I... ah about in a book of sort of little... chatty little essays called Central mischief...

R: Oh ok.

E: I've written my reactions and things in there, I think that would be... and I think that because ... a lot of people know me and so they recognize things in the writing that other people who don't know me or don't know where I live or how I live wouldn't recognize, but then you don't need to recognize the author in a story, in fact it's it better not to...

R: Well...

E: Unless you were writing and reading a biography or something...

R: That's right, that's right and I mean, sometimes you use the literature like in our case we use for teaching for teaching English as a foreign language, so sometimes I mean the... the students are curious and they want to know about the writer, how can we know more about this writer, it all depends how what approaches are we working with.

E: Yeah, well I... of course you see I haven't studied literature after leaving school, except that I did study it, but in a different way and of course my husband was a wonderful teacher really, though he wasn't actually teaching me, but it so happened because of his work and his interest, but ah... sorry I'm getting lost again... I can't say that anything that I, I think what I read at school might have led me into more reading, cause we did read at my boarding school we did read, we did read a lot we had a lot of time for reading, we had a good library there... ah I think very much that you can't write unless you read, and a lot of people don't read... I mean when you take credit writing classes for mature age students, they get to like it to find out how nice it is to read.

R: So in your classes now. Do you make them read or do they write as well?

E: They write their assignments... written assignments there are written pieces from one week to the next, on a subject that I have chosen for them, the whole lot writing this from the same beginning, but then listening to how each person has used them, we read them at the table you know... but... then we were reading Euripides this morning so... I mean we started on the *Medea*, well for the structure of the Greek grammar and they got quite carried away, and one very pale girl was reading and she was quite flushed and looked very well after the class.

R: Ha, ha, ha

R: She really gave herself up to it she enjoyed it, very pale sulky girl I made her *Medea*, ah... just to see if I could cheer her up a bit.

R: Ha, ha, ha now when do you review what the students are writing...

E: When do... when do I read the...

R: Do you read what they're writing?

E: I have to go home and read them, I have to give them marks too, I gave them all the same marks last week and I said I was just trying an experiment and then the same mark to all of them and they weren't to go like school children and look at each others marks, they all got the same. Later on I would reassess my marking from my notes and things and sort it out. I get irritated when they rush for an assignment and all they want to see is a mark, so sometimes I don't put a mark and they have to wait a bit longer.

R: How.. it's very curious like in the sense... I mean creative writing and now to work with that in the sense that the world has a long history and there are many things that we don't know and... what I might be writing or doing, in some place in the world, maybe somebody else is doing at the same time.

E: That doesn't matter because all through

the years have been the same story rewritten and rewritten

R: Ok, so that creative thing come from the personal touch and style that each one...

E: Yeah it's the ehm, writing fiction is a personal imagination.... I think I've finished really I...

R: No we were talking about, that, is that personal touch and each individual's experience...

E: Well you see when you listen to a table full of students all reading their half page or three quarters of a page, on something that was given to them the week before to think about, it's amazing how interesting it is to get... eh all the different approaches, and this is what I think helps students to... to go on writing, They can collect fragments and start, perhaps a story or novel even if they don't finish it.

R: Eh, sometimes I find it's hard for some people, they have wonderful experience, but they don't want to write, I mean they are afraid of writing.

E: Well not everybody should write...

R: Ok

E: I mean they can have a try at writing and if it isn't their way, see I could never do needlework and I'd be absolutely bored, I'd be bored, I'd be bored stiff to be baking cakes and putting pretty decorations on them. Whereas there are women who can do such things that they like doing, but it's amazing how people think that they're going to just knock off a novel you know...

R: Yeah

E: And then they're disappointed they don't realize that it has to be written about three times or four time before it's finished you know.

R: How hard has it been for you?

E: Oh, very hard, it nearly kills me, and the editorial have do many... they have a proof reader who's about... you know, sixteen or seventeen years old who want to change my prose style you know... it, it's even harder it's a very difficult time I think.

R: But, I guess, like... I mean at this moment, do you still, you're not facing that same situation, now I mean there is a sense of respect for what you are writing, I guess that situation you experienced earlier in your career.

E: Oh, I've just had trouble with a proof reader just now.

R: Oh yeah?

E: Yeah, and... and it shocked me really that anybody should want to alter what was a figure of speech from the North of England. I've got a character who's exasperated and she's saying something like "It's just like the thing that this happened" You see it's just like the thing, well that's a figure of speech when we're fed up because something has gone wrong isn't it? Well this girl wanted to take that out, and I had to fight for it.

R: Has the girl ever been there? Ha, ha, ha... that's the interesting situation. I was... I was reading that book, and I was enjoying the... sometimes phrases in other languages. I mean I like that, but there are peoples that they don't. Yeah and I just wonder, I mean it can be very hard sometimes.

E: And you can get very tired re...redoing something, on the other hand I can also take the hint when the ending of the novel isn't good enough, I rewrote it about six times, really you're worn out because you feel you are just going over ground with a steamroller or something and nothing getting anywhere you know, it can be very wearing.

R: Umm, well I mean it has been really

good, I mean... you said you cannot help, of course you can help, I mean.

E: Yeah.

R: I think your experiences are... are really, are really good, yeah.

E: the thing is it made an enormous impression being on the ship for example.

Ah, but you don't actually write the same... the same thing that it was at the time, you alter it making it into a fiction and use bit as bit of background and that kind of thing and I feel very grateful really to have had the traveling experience, but I don't sit down and write word for word a travel story or article or something, I did do one little article on traveling and that was for the Qantas magazine and I'm not all that proud of it, but I was surprised that I could do anything.

R: Ha, ha, ha

E: People can read on the plane.

R: Ha, ha, ha, well, it has been my pleasure and thank you very much for sharing

E: Well I feel I've been completely inadequate, but ah...

R: No, not at all because I mean... it's sometimes we study writer, we read the novels, but we don't know, what else or what can we speak with them? What can they say? And I mean, they are normal people, they also have faced rejection and all kind of experiences.

E: Yes this is where you're lecturing is it?

R: Yeah, and back in Venezuela working with literature, but I want to start working with Australian literature, back there, I mean it won't be a subject, but I think at least the students could have one writer to start working with and could be one book, let's read this book...

E: Yeah.

E: They're doing something like this in

Oviedo in Spain, some women there were very interested in...in...in attaching studio... a student to an Australian writer in a way and.

R: That could be really, very interesting, and if they're doing that. Our programs have been very much based on... North American and British Literature. I am referring basically in English departments.

E: Umm

R: Maybe in Spain they are doing that at the moment, but I can't remember that three four years ago it was, there was nothing, and I remember even going to the United... in ninety seven going to the United States trying to find information and bring some books with me to Venezuela because we wanted to start to start like, an elective course with writers from different places of the world, not though the other two countries and I mean... I just found one book about Australia that had short stories. The rest, I mean, I couldn't find any, but then being here I think that there are, there is that idea of right... reading meaningful text. For example: a student in Venezuela in a tropical weather, maybe reads the snow and the snow makes no sense to him.

E: Yeah. That's true in Australia as well.

R: I'll try to gather the more data I can and then once I go back, they have to work with that.

E: And, do...do you have radio lessons and things like that?

R: We have very few of that, there are some universities that they do, but really not Ah... let's... we are a developing country and as... most developing countries we have problems with technology.

E: But I get very bad writing that's been done on computer

R: Ha, ha, ha...

E: Hurried, hurried little squashed up lines, you know, and then big blank sheet of paper.

R: Yeah.

E: Not an idea in the piece.

R: Yeah, and I mean this is more or less the situation, and for example; most of what we get from readings is what comes from The United States and Canada, that's the other side... part of the story, so.

E: Well I think we're very lucky in having an, an American person as Head of department, umm, for example... Bryan gave me a class. Was it in 1976? When I had my first...

B: Eight.

E: I'd, I'd already got *Pray like a virgin* published, hadn't I?

B: That was twenty six.

E: I had one, one... one book published and Bryan had... gave me a class and I've been here ever since.

R: that's good, yeah, rather... but I mean... think it's great, I mean... working in the communication area and to have people from different tendency, from different areas of the world, that is part of what it is, I mean... and this is also what this country is about as well.

E: Yeah.

R: Having different culture, mean... not just background, it's not just the...

E: Yeah.

R: Background or coming from different cultures, also coming from different areas of knowledge.

E: Yeah.

R: That is also making... makes a huge difference in a department in a school if you...

E: Yes, because certain problems occurring in one place don't occur in another, do they?

So.

R: Oh, definitely... yeah.

E: Well it's been very nice talking to you.

R: Yeah thank you very much, I'm very pleased.

E: Hope, hope I've offered something useful, and... and when you mentioned it, I thought at once that it ought to be something else.

R: Ha, ha, ha... like, when ah, see, you're working basically with creative... creative...

B: Writing...

E: Well... well we've got...

B: No, but you should say you are!

E: Oh, I am, yes I'm, I'm. Yes I'm, but I use literature a great deal. I mean I would say even the course is more literary than writing, but, but the two do go together you see, I think, I like to think of creative writing approach to which literature, something like that. Cause when people start to write something, they need something better to read that, than they have been reading in the past.

R: Now, what are your plans, what plans do you have for now, on more books?

E: I might just get my, passing order ready for when I die.

R: Ha, ha, no, but I mean there's more for you to write.

E: I don't know, I have to say something I like having a book bothering me, ah you know, but, it's a bit... bit too close to the one I've just finished.

R: Well, thank you very much, yeah.

E: Well thanks for coming.

R: For your time and it was a pleasure.

¹I appreciate the support of Alba González who was instrumental to get this interview with Elizabeth Jolley

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"Interview conducted during my Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Sidney-Australia".