SHARON RIIS:
"THE REALITY IS THE PRESENT TENSE"

SCL/ÉLC interview by Jack Robinson

Sharon Riis was born in 1947 in Longview in southwestern Alberta, and lived in Paris and London (England) before returning to reside in Lac La Biche in northern Alberta. Her first novel, The True Story of Ida Johnson, *was published by the Women's Press (Toronto) in 1976. In the late seventies and early eighties Riis contributed half a dozen short stories to literary journals and in 1980 composed her first screenplay; the resulting film,* Latitude 55, *was released in 1982. Her television scripts,* Change of Heart *and* The Wake, *were produced respectively by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in 1983 and by the National Film Board in 1985. Riis' second feature film,* Loyalties, *directed by Anne Wheeler, appeared in 1986. In 1989 Douglas & McIntyre presented two books by Sharon Riis: a quality paperback version of* Ida Johnson *and a hardcover edition of her second novel,* Midnight Twilight Tourist Zone. *Riis and her family moved to Saskatoon in 1987; the fall 1990 issue of* Grain, *devoted to Saskatoon writers, contains her most recent story. The script for her third feature film, to be jointly produced by the British Broadcasting Corporation and Primedia, and entitled* The Devil's Punch Bowl, *is now well underway. Riis has made her living by writing since 1980.*

Riis' fiction is concerned with how journeys of the imagination and the spirit, with their existential and metaphysical implications, redefine literary conventions and cultural myths of truth and reality.

JR: When *The True Story of Ida Johnson* was published in 1976, writers like Margaret Atwood and Marion Engel recognized its fine style—and also its eerie tone, especially in the uneasy alliance between Ida and her native mentor, Lucy George.

SR: There is that otherworldly element to the relationship of Ida and Lucy. It has to do with balance: Ida's on one end of the

scale and Lucy's on the other, and neither is thriving. Lucy sees things so clearly that she stands right outside of life. She can do anything—that's her message to Ida always: anything is possible, you make up who you are. So she's standing outside, whereas Ida is this low-rent white trash kind of *lumpenproletariat* woman, who clouds over at puberty and responds to life as though all you can do is react to it. She gets knocked up, she gets married, she lives in a trailer . . . she feels as though she has no choices at all, and she can't shape her own life. Meanwhile Lucy is out dancin' around Europe but is in such absolute isolation and misery, and that's no way to go either. When Lucy comes back to Ida at the end it's not a Hollywood union. There's no happy ending. You don't know how the balance is gonna tip now.

JR: Some reviewers called *Ida Johnson* a feminist fable. Did you see it that way?

SR: It got called a feminist fable and labelled as this wonderful new lesbian book, and for a while I had women's magazines and newspapers and feminist conferences and female Ph.D. students comin' out my yin-yang. I am a feminist of course, because I'm a female and haven't got my head kicked in, but I didn't think of it that way when I wrote it. I had read books all my life that were major influences on me as a person, and I would read them not as men's books but as my books too. Then with *Ida Johnson* I wanted to take the things I was interested in exploring and push them further with a female character. I was naive enough to think that the world would embrace that in the same way that I had embraced all these male characters in my lifetime's reading, but of course that's not what happens. So I've been politicized more as a feminist by the public reaction to the novel than I was when I wrote it.

JR: In this version of "Love circa 1965" Ida is "subdued" by her husband Derek. Is there any kind of social statement there?

SR: I very deliberately did not want to make Derek "a *bad* person," and I didn't want people to see Ida as a victim. When she kills him and her children, there is no reason for that except in her cockeyed notion of her entrapment, so that only by destroying her present life can she create a new persona. And of course that only

works for a little while and then she slips back into the same old patterns.

JR: In regard to entrapment, her mother seems to carry the message that you've got to be tight-lipped and self-controlled.

SR: Yeah, she is more a purveyor of the social norms, whereas Ida is able to confide in her Dad, Ole, when she goes fishing with him, and that moment is a stepping outside the values that constrict her. I believe that "Imagination cramped inside the mind explodes," in the book's words, and breeds incredible violence.

JR: Is that the book's thematic direction?

SR: Yes, toward more of a *lebensraum* and, in the relationship between Ida and Lucy, toward more of an integration. It doesn't help to throw out all convention and believe in nothing but the will. What's needed in order to get by with any kind of vitality is really an integration between the mundane: going to the dentist, earning a living and gettin' along with people, plus knowing when you can recreate yourself and your circumstances, give shape to your life.

JR: *Ida Johnson* became something of a cult book, and I know that some of the cultists read that exhilarating Nietzschean freedom of the will in a naive way, so it's interesting to hear you criticize it.

SR: Yes, it exhilarates and excites me too, but it only goes so far.

JR: On the positive side, were you aware, in having Lucy return disguised as a man named Luke, of the Biblical connotations of the name—Luke the physician and healer, who emphasized that Christ's redemption is for everyone, including women and social outsiders?

SR: No I wasn't, but now that you point it out, it does fit with the rejuvenating quality of Lucy's missives. At the same time, you have to remember that Nietzsche went mad. It doesn't matter how terrific your ideas are. If you isolate yourself you go mad, and madness is just a tragedy: worthless. There was a romanti-

cism surrounding madness in the sixties, and it was said that all the crazy people were healthy, etc., but that's horseshit.

JR: *Ida Johnson* begins with the epigraph "The truth of the matter is: there is none." In what mood is that to be taken?

SR: Well, it's said with a light heart. It's a reminder that there is no final truth, and for me that's extremely positive. At the same time, I recognize that for some people that statement might be like falling into a black hole.

JR: Do you believe in evil as an entity or force?

SR: No, how could I believe in evil when I don't believe in truth? They're too absolute. Evil carries too many connotations of something out-of-bounds, outside of your control. I don't believe in evil, just as I don't believe in good. This is mentioned in *Midnight Twilight Tourist Zone* when Rosalie talks about her "good" husband, and points out that "goodness" can be a weapon; that "'goodness' isn't all it's cracked up to be."

JR: Do you see evil and good as ways of not acknowledging the real complexity of character?

SR: Yep, and I know that "the true story" of Ida Johnson is dead accurate for millions and millions of people at certain moments in their lives. There are plenty of women who undergo Ida's feelings that she was never really happy, never really felt love, that life is not all it's cracked up to be. She admits that even the births of her kids were a royal pain. There's a holiness attached to motherhood, and yet for all of us there are moments . . . when your six-week old baby who has had colic for five weeks almost gets thrown out the window . . . the urge is enormous. Ida gives voice to those impulses, and allows all of us to acknowledge them. I like Ida because she is *so* stupid, but she's not really stupid at all.

JR: Your novels seem to be philosophical meditations upon the banal or mundane.

RS: Yep, well in *Ida Johnson* for example, I wanted to write a novel about ideas, but I wanted it to be my voice and experience.

Which is not to say that I'm Ida Johnson, but lots of her is me, and lots of Lucy is me. It's set in the foothills of Alberta, and I wanted to show that you don't have to be Jean-Paul Sartre to have a metaphysical idea. You can be the *schlep* workin' at the truck stop. I wish that every truck-stop waitress would read *The True Story of Ida Johnson*; they won't, of course, but they think her thoughts, and, more to the point, they think Lucy's thoughts too! When I was on a reading tour in northern Saskatchewan, talking to all these people living in the bush and trying to do adult upgrading to grade four and that sort of thing, they all knew what I was talking about. They had that recognition: "You're dead right, honey, you're dead right. I think about all that."

JR: Do you think that the prairies are an especially good locale for paring down everyday life to its existential realities? I'm thinking, for example, of your use of the town named Longview in *Ida Johnson*, and your description of it: "It alters the minds of passers through like an empty but unforgettable dream of nothing in particular."

SR: Yep, you don't get the same feel in a rain forest! But Longview is a real place, you know. I grew up there. It's always wonderful when something real fits into what you're trying to say. With *Midnight Twilight Tourist Zone*, I took the title from a bonafide Alberta highway sign about twenty miles west of Lac La Biche. An enchanting name for a provincial tourist zone, don't you think? After being given a title like that, who wouldn't write a novel?

JR: Yeah. For me, when I picked up the original Women's Press edition of *Ida Johnson*, and the cover blurb said that Sharon Riis has lived in England, Paris, and Lac La Biche, it was a sort of clue to what I might find inside: that there would be a worldliness in the local and regional.

SR: Yes, I take ideas that I've experienced out in the world and put them back into where I've come from and what I really am. I mean, I'm solid yuppie material now, Mrs. Middle Class. But essentially I'm small-town working-class. There's that inarticulate level where I come from, and only in that voice can I make my ideas sing.

JR: Do you ever get the criticism that your characters are maybe ideas on legs?

SR: While people felt that Ida was authentic, they thought that Lucy was an idea on legs. On the other hand, I got a wonderful letter from an Indian woman named Flying Cloud in Oklahoma, who loved the character of Lucy, and who identified with her one hundred percent. That made me feel very good, because when people said that Lucy was a little thin as a character I believed them. I mean, writers are extremely insecure: they have huge inflated egos one minute and then the next minute they fear that people will point their fingers and scream "Fraud! Fraud!" At the same time, that thinness is precisely the intended weakness of Lucy's character: she lives entirely in her head. She is always making pronouncements.

JR: Yeah. For Ida's thirteenth birthday, she sends a box filled with cotton and a note saying "Everyone decides once. A few choose to choose. The rest choose not to." She's a message bearer.

SR: Yes, and irritatingly so, in that way that message bearers get on your nerves.

JR: In regard to pronouncements, I want to ask you about the image of the coyote. Lucy says "Coyotes lie. If you believe in lies you're dead." Ida responds "You got to lie sometimes just to stay out of trouble."

SR: I grew up with coyotes; that is, I wasn't succoured by them, but there were a lot of coyotes around Longview. The sound and the sight of them were always fascinating. Around the age of thirteen, I went through a growth spurt, and with my big nose and fair hair I felt that I looked like a coyote. Also, the coyote is mangy and shifty-eyed, always sneaking around with its head down tryin' to stay alive. It doesn't have the glory of the wolf or lion, but it does have the magic quality of the trickster, the survivor. So the coyote is always with me as an image of gettin' by.

JR: And when you talk about seeing yourself as coyote-like, that image recurs in your second novel, *Midnight Twilight Tourist Zone*, doesn't it?

SR: Yes, Rosalie looks in the window and sees herself reflected as a coyote. Rosalie is me in many ways.

JR: Okay, *Ida* appeared in 1976 and *Midnight Twilight* in 1989; meanwhile, a lot had happened to you. How do we see those changes in the new narrator, Rosalie?

SR: Well, I became a mother and got older, and Rosalie's a mother and she's far more mature, and she is able to control and shape her life far more than Ida. Yet she is still full of longing, so that when Josef says to her "Then, you want for nothing?" she replies "Oh no, I want for everything." Because when you shape your life, and you try to take care of the people around you whom you love, and you try to get by and you try to get ahead, it still doesn't bring all the answers.

JR: And, like Lucy, Josef (another Biblical echo here?) . . .

SR: You can't find a Biblical echo in "Wanda"!

JR: . . . anyway, Josef voices that Nietzschean sense of infinite possibilities, and parodies Rosalie's somewhat stiff insistence that her life is pat and fixed. . . . But one basic question posed by the form of this novel is "What is the reality here?" I mean, what is really going on in the story?

SR: The reality is the present tense . . . that shack in that storm and Rosalie and Josef together. And then Wanda comes in. Then these other forays into shared dreams are like bleed-throughs into other realities, and all of these people are related in different constellations in ways good and not so good. Also, you get the glimpse ahead in time to when Rosalie is an old woman and she is taking care of her granddaughter, and she looks at the granddaughter and sees that she is Wanda. And so it's about how we are all tied together. I believe that, as in Plato, reality isn't real: this isn't any more real than something else; however, we are here and we have to deal with this, like Ida. We can't walk around treating the world as unreal, and yet we do make it up as we go. We have no idea of how many other realities are going on at the same time using our same selves, it's incomprehensible; but Rosalie gets a glimpse of the complex fabric that is life, the life force.

JR: Isn't the act of reading a paradigm for that sort of experience of other worlds? Without getting jargon-ridden, could one say that the book is "metafictional"?

SR: When a good book does that to you, pulls you inside another world, the characters become parts of you forever. It's also like real life. Those occasions when you are taken into a situation and people are not responding to you according to type, but they just take you in whole, are like gifts. They change you forever. Wanda and Josef open up a vista into something else for Rosalie, so, yes, it is like reading. Good reading.

JR: But there's a big challenge in *Midnight Twilight* for the reader with conventional realistic assumptions. How is it that Rosalie, an ordinary forty-year-old woman, a mother and district health nurse, can transcend those mundane barriers so readily and receive that gift?

SR: In terms of the story, she goes in and sits on the bed. She is a nurse and he is weeping and looks ill. She makes him some tea and something to eat, and then she looks at him and laughs at what an inordinately sexy man he is. But it's in his glance. For women, someone paying attention to who you are is what pulls you in. Really, it's meta-sexual! Surely, in the end, what everybody wants is to be with somebody who knows them so deeply that there is nothing to hide. Nobody ever gets there, and Rosalie doesn't. Now, I admit that Josef is a fantasy of mine. I could have called it *Nurse Rosalie Goes to the Bush*, you know, kind of a metaphysical harlequin romance.

JR: Even in conventional terms, the novel gives us some warnings of what will be demanded of the reader, doesn't it?

SR: Sure, we're told that she is a post-hippie type, a champion of all lost causes, so she has that bent. She has to drop her professional persona, and then continues to try to let go of her defenses, her voice. She's got to contend with her self filling up the room, her paranoia and feeling of exclusion, and all those commonplace things.

JR: Is a major step establishing an empathy with Wanda?

SR: Initially, Wanda gives Rosalie the creeps, because she thinks Wanda is this bimbo with superficial notions of culture and fashion and femininity, and it reminds Rosalie of her own superficiality. It's only when she sees the relativity of what people have to work with in terms of personalities and what they're working against, and once Wanda starts to let go of some of her vanity, that they come to care about one another. You know, if we could only get that empathy for each other . . . and of course it's a cliché . . . to walk in somebody else's shoes.

JR: If that truth were portrayed on television in the Hallmark hour, it would be sentimental and squeaky clean, but in order to get to that point in this book the characters have to plumb the "not nice" realities about themselves and the world, so when that idea recurs almost as a refrain, it seems like a last-ditch hope in a very scuffed and sordid reality.

SR: But all of those ugly other realities they enter—from the Jesuit with his "handmaiden" to the soldier in the Fourth Reich to the whore house in Argentina to the murder of the Lutheran pastor—are all credible and appropriate at the moment. For example, Rosalie becomes Auguste, the turn-of-the-century Norwegian pastor, who is murdered by his wife, Magnehilde, who is having an affair with her photographer. She sees a photograph of Magnehilde with her pumpkin, and has never seen such an erotic picture; it's Josef who is Magnehilde and Wanda who is the photographer because at this moment Josef is intensely erotic in how he feels about himself and in how Rosalie feels about him, and because at this moment Rosalie feels excluded by the affection between Josef and Wanda. So she enters this other reality. All I'm saying is that we could have many realities where we play many things out, but I don't see it as a hierarchy where we live so many lives and if we're good and we get to live in the ozone, or some other mumbo-jumbo.

JR: It seems to me an effective means of taking the reader profoundly into what a character is going through at a moment, of putting the reader in the moment, shed of preconceptions.

SR: Well, as you say, the reader has to let go of a lot in order to enter this book, and it happens early on when Rosalie witnesses

Josef bringing Wanda in from the car and suddenly she is in Wanda's body, and then just as suddenly she's out of it with this feeling that she and Josef have been friends forever. When the reader gets to that point, s/he has to let go of trying to understand the relationships in linear terms, and then s/he can fall into the rest of the book, and it will all make impeccable sense.

JR: You've said before that you really admire writers who take great risks, like Dostoevsky, Camus, and D.H. Lawrence—and that reminds me of the one place in your fiction where influences might be suggested. On the back seat of Wanda's car, Rosalie finds Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*, and Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood*, and *The Fanny Farmer Cookbook* . . .

SR: Yes, just to bring it down a little. And, as you were saying, these are clues. All ye who enter here, beware that this is not social realism: not Alice Munro, not Dickens. I thought . . . well, I hate pretension, and that's why I put the cookbook in, because that's Rosalie, and there's that whole visceral business of living in the shack—of cooking, cleaning, washing dishes. There's an inevitability to just gettin' through a day, even if it's a really unusual day in an unusual place. Everybody participates in the mundane; I mean, even if you have maid service, you still have to put your dirty underwear in the hamper. And our most important decisions are thrust upon us when we least expect them. So when Wanda's washing dishes and she's angry enough at Josef to want to kill him, he just hands her the knife. It's all very naturalistic: he's been cutting up a rabbit, he puts the knife in the water. Wanda holds it and washes it; he has given her the means to stick him, and in that moment there's the opportunity for Rosalie to have her memory of her psychopathic boyfriend. She hated him but decided not to shoot him, and the next instant Wanda decides not to kill Josef and Rosalie feels closer to her. It's a matter of choosing in the circumstances; I mean, if you weigh four hundred pounds and you have a disfiguring disease and you don't commit adultery, it doesn't say what a swell honourable person you are. Coming back to Lucy's message, very few choose to choose, but that's what gives vitality to life. It ain't money.

JR: So it's a matter of being in the moment . . . but to speak a little more of clichés, you do have Rosalie holding onto those

absolutely clichéd experiences of motherhood (in contrast to Ida): she has those overwhelming feelings at the birth of her first son, and she answers the question "Where would you be on your last evening on earth?" with the answer "With my family." So that's the mundane again, and in those moments Sharon Riis sounds like Margaret Laurence.

SR: I use clichés a lot because they are beautifully authentic and they resonate: they say so much more than the character may have intended.

JR: Another thing you use a lot is humour. And, like the mundanity and the clichés, the humour is there always. It's interwoven in the consciousness of the book, never really absent.

SR: There again, I'm going back to my real self and voice. It's like . . . the lower down in the social order you are, the funnier you are. People with just nothing use humour all the time. Jews have had a tough time since the beginning of time pretty well, and the humour is there constantly in the way they live. Native people are just killingly funny; their wonky sense of humour is embedded in everything they do. So yes, humour is always there for me. It's not that you save it for the good times; you're in the middle of something that's horrible and you just turn it by a funny line. It's humour as a way of surviving.

JR: Both of your novels are quite filmic. Reviewers remarked upon the fluidity of the movement from Ida and Lucy talking in the café, then back to the past, then from Ida's story to Lucy's recollections to the passages from the objective narator.

SR: Yeah, and I agree it works well as a filmic novel, but when it came to translating that into an actual film script, I took out the convention of them in the café, because it was just too stagey. To bring the action always back to a sedentary point in a film can be too theatrical and waste away the energy.

JR: What has happened with that film script?

SR: Nothing. I wrote the script in '87-88. I was paid and then it all ran out of steam. The producer was Canadian and the director English, and the producer tried to get some production

money out of England, but it didn't fly, and the rights to the book reverted to me, so maybe something else will come of it.

JR: You also did the script for *Loyalties*, which did come off very well. What was it like working with Anne Wheeler?

SR: Wonderful. It was terrific to work with someone I liked and respected, although the writing was difficult, as always. The script started out as an idea for a very dark story about an English doctor and his snobby wife who come to Lac La Biche and hire a low-rent-white-trash housekeeper. But then Anne wanted to do a film about women from different cultures, different classes, different ends of the earth, who become friends because they are mothers, and it went from there and the mood changed. The end result was very close to what I had imagined as a script-writer.

JR: And then, of course, *Midnight Twilight* developed out of a film, *Latitude 55*, which I haven't been able to see. What are the differences between film and novel?

SR: Yes, it's too bad that the film isn't widely available, and hasn't been picked up for video distribution. But the film and the novel are very different. The film had the same setting—a cabin in a storm—but there were only two characters: Josef the Polish hermit and Wanda the culture-vulture, whereas the novel brings in Rosalie as the central character, and she brings a whole new dimension, as we've discussed.

JR: Have you been able to make a living as a script-writer?

SR: Yes, I've made a good living out of it for about ten years now.

JR: What are the differences between writing fiction and writing for film?

SR: First, for film you have to think visually, to imagine the story unfolding visually, and to avoid those deadly voice-overs, etc. Films of Joyce's novels and stories generally don't work well, for example, because it's difficult to translate the literary quality of his prose to the screen. John Huston's version of "The Dead" was good, but the best part of it was Joyce's prose. Second, you

have to keep the story very simple. You have to remember that it's a public medium: people watch in groups, it's a social occasion. A film can be complex in the sense of containing subtexts and subplots, but the main story line must be absolutely clear throughout. Films are simple but not simplistic, and that sort of simplicity is often the hardest thing to achieve.

JR: Are you working on a script now?

SR: Yes, I'm just starting work on a feature film for the BBC and Primedia called *The Devil's Punch Bowl*, and I'm excited and nervous about it. I will be in England in December for a few weeks to get a feel for the landscape. Then I'll be back with my family in Saskatoon for Christmas, and then I'll write the script from January '91 until September, while everybody waits.

JR: Do you feel the pressure of everybody waiting?

SR: Sure. At the beginning of the project everyone is warm and mushy, but you still feel an edge. The pressure is helpful though. Working for someone else confines the narrative and helps you to get on with it. When I did *Change of Heart* for TV they just said they wanted a story about an older couple who've been together a long time whose marriage breaks up, so the limits were clear. But inside those strictures the possibilities of how to go with it are limitless. The important thing is to work with people you trust and like because writing for film is definitely a collaborative process.