DEATH OF THE TRAGIC FEMALE WRITER: A CONVERSATION WITH KAREN CONNELLY

SCL/ÉLC Interview by Clare Goulet

Karen Connelly was born in 1969 and raised in Calgary, Alberta. At 17 she lived in Thailand for a year, an experience which resulted in Touch the Dragon: A Thai Journal, *winner of the 1993 Governor-General's Award for non-fiction. She is also the author of two books of poetry:* The Small Words in My Body *(Kalamalka, 1990; winner of the 1990 Pat Lowther prize) and* This Brighter Prison *(Brick, 1994). Connelly has lived in France, Spain, and Greece, and these journeys—weighed against frequent returns to Canada—are caught in the lush, startling imagery and keenly-layered narrative of her poetry and prose. She is currently living in a small hut on the island of Lesbos, Greece.* One Room in a Castle: Letters from Spain, France & Greece *(Turnstone) is her latest work, published in the fall of 1995.*

What follows is taken from conversations with Connelly in the spring of 1994, during and immediately following her term as writer-in-residence at UNB. Here, along with some focus on her own work, she speaks candidly on the place of writers in Canada—in our universities and in our culture—and on what she sees her role as poet to be.

CG Only a few years ago you were having a dilemma—a huge crisis, in fact—trying to decide whether or not to go to university. Now here you are, as writer-in-residence. Having seen things from the inside, are you glad of that decision not to go?

KC Yes, I am. I was living in Spain in 1988-89, so I had the opportunity to do one or possibly two degrees on scholarship. And, as a young woman without any money and little prospect of regular work, the idea of getting six thousand dollars a year just to go to university was amazing. But I was writing, I was working on *Touch the Dragon,* I was working on my *life.* . . . it was so exciting to be in this foreign country and living this kind of existence. In the end, after a lot of angst—and really *serious* angst, I was very depressed

about it, and very confused—I wrote to Margaret Atwood and Timothy Findley and various other writers. I asked them what they thought I should do, and got a variety of responses. And then, like I knew I would have to at the very beginning, I made my own decision about what I was going to do. And that was to stay in Spain and not take the scholarship.

CG What was the advice?

KC Margaret Atwood sent a very cordial, but short, response, which I very much appreciated. The line that sticks with me is: "Very little is irrevocable." Basically, her advice was that university is very good because it gives you a community of like-minded people who are doing the same thing and who will support you, which is absolutely and utterly true, and very, very important for many people. And Timothy Findley said: "Well, it sounds from your letter, Karen Connelly, that you don't want to go to university, so I suggest you don't" [she laughs]. Timothy Findley was great, because he told me to quit whining about all my problems and just get down to my work, which is exactly what I needed to do. And that's what I did.

CG At what age did you start writing?

KC I started to consciously write when I was fourteen or fifteen years old, but I did a lot of writing before that. I started keeping a journal when I was ten or eleven, a *serious* journal. I kept sort of funny journals when I was eight, nine.

CG Have you saved any of these?

KC Oh yes. I think women, and writers, and maybe women writers even more so, are very pack-ratty. Which is a terrible thing for me to be, of course, because I travel so much, and so it's very difficult for me to be a packrat, and everything lives in a basement—two basements, actually—in Calgary.

CG When you were in your early teens and starting to write seriously, who were you reading? What has influenced you?

KC There have been lots of influential writers for me: Pablo Neruda, F. Garcia Lorca, Isak Dinesen, Walt Whitman, T. S. Eliot, Laurence Durrell, Virginia Woolf . . . . But my early influences were Canadian. When I was thirteen, fourteen, I read every book of poetry in my junior high library. Layton, Cohen, Atwood, P.K. Page,

Musgrave, Borson, Newlove, Ondaatje, Di Cicco, anything I could get my hungry hands on.

CG You're now coming to the end of your term as writer-in-residence at UNB. This was the first time you've done something like this. Would you do it again?

KC I would, of course I would do it again. I'd do it happily again, in fact I'm *trying* to do it again.

CG Is it something you would like to do continually?

KC No. No, I don't think it's really a good place for a writer to be. Which of course is a rather complicated paradox, because universities so often are the places that feed and clothe and even give a great deal of support, in one way or another, to writers. But for some writers—for many writers I think—it's not really a . . . it's not a place for their soul, you know? It's not a place you can put your soul with a lot of *trust*. And certainly, even though I've enjoyed my time at UNB, that's the way I feel about it. I wouldn't be able to stay here forever. But it's been a very good experience for me because I didn't know universities, and I do feel like I've learned quite a bit about them in the last few months. . . .

CG You've had a close brush with a more academic view of literature. I'm curious about what you, as a writer, think of some of the more recent approaches to contemporary writing. Post-modern critical theory, for example. The deconstructionists . . . .

KC I know very little about it. The deconstruction of language has never been something that has interested me terribly, because I don't think languages are made to be deconstructed. I have spent *years* learning other languages. Languages are about construction, about evolution, and I don't think, for me at least, that I could discover (or perhaps I'm just not interested in discovering) whatever truths or surprises or interesting tidbits are to be found in deconstructing my language. I'm interested in creating worlds with my language, and I'm interested in creating paintings with my language, in creating sensual scenes and stories and moments. I'm not interested in going backwards and taking it apart.

CG How was your relationship with the English Department, with the other professors?

KC Well, when I was fourteen or fifteen years old and had already started to write, I went to visit a writer-in-residence at the University of Calgary. In talking to him I found out, to my astonishment, that there was animosity between the Creative Writing department and the English deptartment. And, amusingly enough, *there still is*. Not that anybody at UNB was impolite to me, absolutely not, but a number of the professors just didn't seem to notice me. It wasn't a question of being polite or impolite, it was just a question of me feeling invisible.

CG You're not the first to notice a tension between the creative writing and academic elements in English departments. Do you have any suggestions as to how it can be resolved?

KC I don't know, I haven't really thought about it, about *why* this animosity exists, or why older—is this obvious? This is probably really obvious—why many older professors who teach Dead White Writers—writers who are dead, who are very dead and who have been dead for a long time—don't really have a vested interest in Canadian writing, in current writing. They simply don't. They don't read literary magazines and they don't buy new Canadian books, and I think this is a tragedy, considering the *quality* and the *power* of Canadian writers.

Some just don't consider contemporary writers to be . . . worthwhile. Or maybe not only that, maybe contemporary writers who are *in their midst*, which of course is just in some ways completely ridiculous, because if you love writing, and there is a writer there—or an artist or a filmmaker or someone whom you admire who makes something that you love—my natural reaction to that person is to get to *know* them, and to be interested in what they do, to try and understand them, and to be closer to them. But that's definitely not the reaction of everybody. And I don't know why, but that's the way it is.

CG Did this change when, mid-way through your time here, you won the *Governor-General's Award*?

KC Well, of course. It's terrible, but I think probably all of us are like that: we don't notice people until they make some kind of noise about something. You wouldn't be interested in your next-door neighbour until he robbed a bank, or [she laughs]—or won the *Governor-General's Award*. For whatever it's worth, it makes you

credible. Two weeks before winning the GG award, I wasn't *really* credible, but two weeks *after* winning it, I suddenly was.

So it was a little bit disheartening. But in another sense it's completely to be expected. That's one of the things the GG award *does* for writers, it makes them—and I don't know if this is a good thing or a bad thing actually—but it makes them become more of a public figure.

CG Yes, Matt Cohen once said in an interview that "one of the facts of writing is that it's part of the entertainment business," where writers "are made into starlets." Do you feel that has happened to you?

KC Oh, that's *totally* happened to me! And I have to be honest, I'm not innocent in this process. I'll admit this. I know that if I give these interviews and if I am an engaging interviewee, then a couple of people in an audience somewhere in northern Canada or the middle of Alberta who've never heard of me might go out and buy the book. And I think that that's very important. I'm trying [she laughs], I'm *trying* to be as honest as I can in presenting what I am and who I am. Just being in this relatively small spotlight, I can understand the desire that we all have to manipulate the truth. And certainly as a writer, and a person who's really struggling and exploring fiction right now—the act, the artistic *act* of lying, of creating something that's not really true—I can understand the desire to change the truth simply by using the word. I keep trying to remember that the truth is necessary, that in the way that we present ourselves we must try to be truthful. And that's a huge struggle. You can manipulate things so easily.

CG Dealing with the hype, even such as it is, must be frustrating at times; I've noticed more attention has been given to your age and nose ring than to your words, your work.

KC Oh yeah. And in the end the writer is not the important one, the writing is the important thing. The culture has an idea that certain people have to be elevated above other people, and that's why we *have* contests. But to speak of *Governor General's Awards* is ridiculous. Alistair McLeod has never won a *Governor General's Award*. That's just crazy! It's crazy that he has not won for his books, as if he wasn't one of our highly, highly esteemed writers, and so I think *all* contests in that sense are flawed. You can't say that somebody is better than somebody else, because we're not better than

each other, we're different, as writers. I think that there are good books and worse books and better books and great books—

CG You won't say "bad . . ."

KC No, I will say bad, and I think you're absolutely right, there are a great many bad books around, and that's fine too. They go where they're destined to go. But my concern as a writer is not to write the best book. That's not what art is about. When you sit down to paint something, you're not interested in painting the most beautiful rose, you're interested in painting *your* rose.

CG That's the second time you've used painting to speak about writing—

KC —I would *love* to paint.

CG Certainly there's a lavish, painterly quality to your work: the stark black and white and bloodied imagery in *The Small Words in My Body*, the exotic gold and green tapestries of Thailand, the lush Mediterranean scenes in *This Brighter Prison*: "Here are the pastel hues (skylight, sea, warm green eyes, pearled skin). And here are the dark oils. And here is your life. This is the only canvas they'll sell you. Do not paint what there is. (You'll be dust before you've done that work). Paint what you want to see."

KC From "A Bowl of Yellow Flowers Stains the Canvas." The ending. A favourite poem, actually.

CG Colour, or the lack of it, is so significant, particularly the colour green. There's a line in the first poem of your first book: "his eyes are no longer green, because green is the one colour that dies." In these earlier poems green is noted by its absence until you hit "the green country," Thailand. The book's final section—the arrival of spring in Spain—is flooded with this colour, which is also prominent throughout the second book of poetry. And it seems to continue in your more recent short stories: the green-eyed woman in "Esmerelda," for example. How did this particular colour come to have such significance?

KC Actually, it has a really firm link to reality. When I was younger I became very good friends with a woman who is now a mask-maker in Calgary. It was quite a passionate friendship; we spent lots of time together and traded poetry and read each other's journals. And she has bright blue-green eyes, that sort of turquoise

colour that is quite rare. She, in my memory, is one of the most *alive* people in my life. In fact, there's a poem about her in *This Brighter Prison* ["The Attic of Paper Dragons"]. She's very symbolic in my mind, even now, of energy and strength and the force of life; she once said, "sometimes I think the extravagance of life will kill me." And when I was seventeen and living in Thailand I often thought that I was going to be blown to smithereens by the *beauty* and the *strangeness* of the world. And so this person is connected to how I use the colour green. But green is also, of course, the colour of life in general. . . .

CG Canada is *not* a green place, in your poetry. It tends to be depicted as stark and cold, a place to run from, or return to warily, marked by recurring images of dirt, bones, blood, the colours black, white, red. Not only the return journeys in *This Brighter Prison,* but even the earliest poems in *Small Words* are linked in this way. Was that conscious?

KC No, no. That's what—even though some of those things are fairly common in other poetry as well—that's what's so interesting, that the first book was so unconscious. Most of the poems were written out of raw feelings, as one tends to write when one is sixteen or seventeen or eighteen or nineteen years old.

CG And that's—

KC —that's basically when the poems were written, over that period of time. I'm a much more conscious writer now, because I have been writing for a longer time. And some of that rawness and absolute passionate feeling can be lost, the older one gets.

CG Susan Musgrave once said that writers should be slightly afraid, should not have too much control, or that will come across, and that ideally the combination is of fear *and* control.

KC Well, I think that the whole creative act, so much of it, is about *risk,* so much of it is about doing things that you haven't done before, or doing things in a way that you believe is new or different, or that feels new to you. Jim Harrison, in his book *Just Before Dark* says . . . [she pauses to ransack her bag, pulling out the green journal she carries everywhere] . . . he says that "one must write as if things had to be said all over again." And I think that's true. You do have to write as if nothing has ever been said, and if you don't then it comes off as being overcontrolled, or as being used up before it even gets to the reader.

CG Sounds like you don't count yourself in the Generation X 'there's-no-point-it's-all-been-done-before' malaise.

KC *What* generation? Oh, X, oh of course, it's all been done, oh I *forgot*. That's so *stupid*, that's such *bullshit*. Stewart Copeland, idiot.

CG I think you mean Douglas Copeland. Stewart Copeland was the drummer for *The Police*.

KC Oh God, the crowning irony.

CG One last thing on visuals: from the very first book of poetry, there is already not only a strong voice but a distinctive *form*, a certain pattern, reflecting a great deal of attention to the poem arranged on the page. This pattern is more or less continued in *This Brighter Prison*, I think of "Isadora" or "Living Nowhere." There may be more layers later, it may be more fleshed out, but still it was there early on—the leaning pear-shaped stanzas with their steadily indented margins, a kind of phrasing carried not only down but *across* the page. How did this develop?

KC I don't really remember if it was gradual or if I just decided that that was the way I would write. I'm not really sure. I remember thinking about how poems looked on the page, and that I wanted them to look a certain way, and I didn't want them to look like squares. I didn't want them to look like *blocks* of writing, because it probably occurred to me that poems that looked like that I didn't want to *read*. You know, those big *chunks* of writing that jump out at you from the page like bricks in the face. I didn't want my poetry to look like that, I wanted it to look more like a forest, more like a landscape.

CG You've moved through many landscapes yourself: Asia, France, Spain, Greece . . . but there is always a return to Canada, a difficult return, and to a place where you now have a slightly more public role to juggle with the very private act of writing.

KC What is interesting, of course, when you have some kind of popular success with a book, is that it's strange to contemplate the idea of an audience. Isn't that awful? Writers so often have so few readers that we don't have to think about readers much, especially young writers in Canada. This is one of the terrible things in Canada—we're *used* to feeling that our work matters to no one anyway, we *grow up* as writers in that belief, we grow up thinking that

we are not connected to a larger public. But then suddenly when you are, you have no coping mechanism.

Never, before the *GG* award, did I wonder what any substantial amount of people thought of my work, because [she laughs] there *was* no substantial amount of people to think of my work. There were my friends, and a couple hundred people here and there who love Canadian literature, or who, for one reason or another, were interested in my writing. But I've never had to think, OK, will anybody *else* buy this, and if they do, what are they expecting?

CG Does this ever creep into your head while you're writing?

KC No, it doesn't come into my head while I'm writing. You *do* begin to worry more about how other people perceive the work you do, but *not* in the act of writing. In the act of writing you're just inside the work. And, good God, if I start writing things or not writing things because of what somebody's going to *think*, then I'm completely and utterly useless. If you care how other people are going to perceive the work that you're writing *in the moment* of the act, it's very perverse. It's like watching TV during sex. The act becomes absolutely worthless and even obscene.

CG You were speaking about how poets in Canada are valued or not valued, have an audience or the lack of one. You've lived and travelled in other countries, places where the poet has a different standing or role in the culture, or where there is a different value *attached* to that role. How do you see your place as a poet in any given culture? In this one?

KC That's a very difficult question. It's a difficult question, I think, because it's so *depressing*. Canadian poets don't want to assess themselves within their own culture because their own culture barely values them—as artists, as commentators on society, on culture, on personal human relations. We live in a country that, in general, believes that artists are not very worthwhile, that basically we're just navel-gazers. And just where do you begin to fight such an attitude? It's such an enormous and overwhelming problem, where do you begin? Where do you begin to tell your politicians and your media and the people who walk down the street that what you do is worthwhile?

If our culture can ask us 'Why are you a poet?' and 'Why do we need you?' it's like asking a child why he or she is breathing. It's a question that makes me so angry that I can hardly address it

properly. Which is bad, I should be able to address it, I should have long and passionate speeches about that issue, and I do, but it just pisses me off to have to recite them at all. I have travelled and met, in trains and bus stations, people who are able to quote their poets. I have listened to Norwegian people quote their poets at length, I have listened to Yugoslavian people do that, I have listened to Greek people do that, I have listened to Spanish people and Chilean people do that.

And I don't know what the answer is; I don't know what we can do ourselves as artists to ensure that our culture understands why we are necessary, that we can show people how and why we are living, and that we are the keepers of history and the keepers of emotion, that we observe them, that we remember them. I don't know how to begin to tell people about that.

CG People are turning more to visual media for that; you're a writer in a culture increasingly less concerned with the written word.

KC Yeah. Reading has become a very strange thing. For many people, reading is connected to their hobby and they'll read 'How-to' books, or they'll read books purely for escape, or they'll read books because they have to for their class, or to get information. But reading for knowledge, and reading for pleasure, and reading for a deeper understanding is becoming increasingly rare. It's almost disappearing. And I don't know how to address that, I have no idea.

CG You continue, of course, to write poetry, and are now also exploring fiction and working at a screenplay, pushing your writing in new directions. How do you view, from this perspective, the earlier work? For example, do you look at *Small Words* differently now than you did when it first came out?

KC I think I respect it much more than I used to. I think that, for what it was—which was a book written out of such absolute feeling and such ignorance, really, of technique—I think for that kind of book it's exactly what it should be, although some of it could have been edited to benefit the book as a whole. But I'm very, very fond of *Small Words*, it probably will always be the favourite book. It has where I came from and what I fought with. After that it's very interesting especially to read *Touch the Dragon* because I think that *Touch* is a book of light. Which is a good thing, I totally believe that

we need books of light. But we also need books of darkness to understand what's *in* the darkness—

CG And to understand the light—

KC Yes, and *The Small Words in my Body* is that kind of a book. Of darkness. In the reviews it had, it was accused [she rolls her eyes] of being claustrophobic, and this, and that. . . . But the whole *idea* of the book was that it *be*, in the beginning, claustrophobic, and that it *reveal* the fact—the wonderful truth—that people can and do emerge from that. Successfully.

CG Does this have anything to do with your being a female writer?

KC Of course! Because as a young woman writer I read a great deal of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. And Katherine Mansfield, and Jean Rhys. And so I was very fascinated by, what can we say, Tragic Female Writers. The whole mythology, the whole *power* of these women who had been artists early in our century, in the 19th century, in the 18th century, was very important for me—the fact that they *existed* was very important for me. But many of them did have tragic and sad lives that often ended in, if not suicide, then in some other form of despair.

It's very important now to realize that we don't have to have lives like that any more, that we *fight* against lives like that, that we do not—unlike in *Thelma and Louise*—drive over the cliff. And I think that it's very important to debunk the myth of the writer, especially of the woman writer, as this Elizabeth Smart figure. So many of our brilliant writers, women writers in North America, have ended miserably. . . . I think it's absolutely crucial that those women are given their due, but are also held up beside the women who have *not* committed suicide, who have *not* caved in, who have *not* had miserable lives. And there are a great many women like that, who are brilliant and alive and cheerful and—

CG —and there you are?

KC And here I am in the flesh! No, seriously, I think of a writer I've read over and over again in the last little while, Tilly Olson, who wrote *Tell Me a Riddle*. There is someone who is so *alive*. And to praise what is alive is one of the things I do in my work and that I hope more people will do. Or, at least, I hope—I should phrase that better—I just hope that *critics* will seek to do that, or that the

audiences will seek to do that, to praise what is alive and what exists and what can happen to us as human beings. You know, when you read Sylvia Plath that's not what you're thinking. You're thinking 'Oh, this woman was so miserable.' She didn't escape her misery, and I think we should try to escape our misery, we should try to *help* each other escape our misery.

CG As you have?

KC Because I have. It's funny, because, I suppose, with all of that said, the dark truth will come out, that, among other things, I had a sister who committed suicide. And I suppose I made a very conscious choice to learn from what happened to her, and not to do the same thing, not to give in to the very dark poems in *The Small Words in My Body*. When you're writing—and I think this is what's interesting about all necessary art—when you are doing it, it really is a struggle for life or death. It really is incomparably important; there is nothing more important than making the poem or making the novel or making the painting or making whatever it is you're making. I don't care if it's a *doily*, if it's absolutely necessary to you then it really does have so much to do with your life, and therefore with the possibility that you might not *have* your life. And so in some way I feel—I hope, anyway—that that's what all of my work is about. Or *could* be. That's maybe what I *wish* my work could be about. I *wish* that it could be so necessary and so powerful. But certainly in the act of creation, that's how it feels. Sometimes it falls short of the mark, but there you go [she laughs, throws up her hands]—ta-da!