

## An Interview with Chris Koch

*Hena Maes-Jelinek (University of Liège) interviewed Chris Koch during his visit to Belgium in 1985*

*Mr Koch, we are extremely happy that you were able to come to the University of Liège because it is an exceptional event for us to receive an Australian novelist. You are going to talk about "The Novelist and the Australian Imagination". Could you comment on your subject and explain what you mean by it? In what way do you think the Australian imagination functions differently from, say, that of an Englishman or an American?*

This is a question that I begin by asking, that is, whether there is even such a thing as an Australian imagination, i.e., a distinct sense of the world that is different from that of the English, since we are, or have been until recently, a people largely of British origin. And my answer to that is that there wasn't really a great difference till the last two or three decades. I think that in that time we have begun to be a new, culturally distinct people. Of course, we are a European people essentially and, of course, the consciousness that comes to us from Europe is still there. But I think we've reached the point where living in a different landscape, a different hemisphere, has produced a different consciousness. This must affect Australian writers; and where once Australian literature was an offshoot of English literature in style and substance, now we have a generation of Australian writers who see themselves for what they are: people in the South Pacific on the brim of Asia, no longer with any strong connection with Britain or indeed with Western Europe, and who are confronting a new future. There are now Australian novels set in Asia, as I've done with two of mine; and this is a situation where an essentially Western imagination is confronted with a different culture, and is trying to actually work inside that culture. You know, we went there until recently as tourists. But now Australians are beginning to go and actually work in Asia - people connected with journalism, with public service, with business, or with ventures where we offer aid or assistance. We are involved in some way with the life there. And this is producing a different situation.

*You say that you now feel closer to Asia than Europe, that you feel this Eastern world on the edge of Australia. If I remember rightly, there was a time when Australians were rather afraid of that Asian presence so near*

*their own continent. Is there something of that feeling still in Australia? Or has it disappeared?*

No, I don't think it has disappeared, and I think that for people of my generation there was some justification. After all, we did have to fight the Japanese to prevent an invasion, or my father's generation did. That caused, I think, a long period of fear of Asia. This has largely disappeared. Certainly, there is very little fear or antipathy now towards Japan or the Japanese. But a more recent situation, I think, has affected Australians, and that is the period of confrontation in Indonesia, when the government of President Sukarno "confronted" us and the whole Western world. This was a situation where Indonesia said: "We reject all the Western countries; we're turning towards China; we reject all the people who used to be colonizers of our area." And Sukarno created a war situation over the formation of Malaysia. Now at that point we were on the verge of actual war with Indonesia. We had Australian troops in Malaya assisting the British to defend that state against Indonesian invasion. And there was some sort of rumour that perhaps Indonesia might consider invading Australia at some time. I think it was an exaggerated notion; but it was not a happy period, and that has left an after-taste. So rather unjustifiably - because we don't have any reason to fear this now - there is still suspicion of Indonesia, a suspicion that has got to disappear, I think, because Indonesia is our nearest neighbour along with Papua-New Guinea, and it is clearly in both our interests to have a truly close relationship. But in regard to other South-East Asian countries, I think our relations are good - and especially among younger people, there is a very warm interest in countries like Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand.

*You have just referred to Indonesia. In a country like Belgium, where the general public knows little about Australian literature, people might not know much about your early novels. But they would know about *The Year of Living Dangerously* (a title repeatedly used and "adapted" in the press for all sorts of purposes). Could you tell us about the novel and what attracted you to Indonesia?*

Well, I have to say, first of all, that I didn't set out initially to write about Indonesia. The story and the characters were what I was mostly interested in, and I wanted to write about a man who, like so many people today, is fascinated by a leader-figure; who identifies with him, and then turns against him. I then hit on the idea of using President Sukarno, and that was the reason why I set the book there. I had spent some time in Indonesia in the sixties and I was always fascinated by that period when the abortive communist coup took place. And I remembered that in just twenty-four hours from 30 September to 1 October, 1965, the whole country was turned around, because until then, under Sukarno, it had been moving steadily towards entering the communist block. The P.K.I., the Indonesian communist party, was one of the biggest in the world. And then, in twenty-four hours, when they attempted the overthrow of the government, the whole thing was changed, the forces under General Suharto, who is now President, took over, and Sukarno was ruined. So that was an interesting background against which to set my story - which concerns mostly Australian news correspondents in Jakarta.

*The events which took place in Jakarta and which you describe in your book had very little impact in Europe. It's extraordinary when you think that these*

events led to the killing of over 500,000 people, yet this was hardly talked about here (the massacre is summed up in five words in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*). How did people react to these events in Australia? Were they more sensitive to them than we were?

I think it is true to say that the whole period of what was called *confrontation* in Indonesia, when President Sukarno opposed both Britain and the United States, caused enormous concern in Washington, London and Canberra - in other words, in the English-speaking world, because in those days Britain was still based in Singapore, and was helping to form the newly independent state of Malaysia. There was enormous reaction against Indonesian opposition to this, and there was a feeling that there could well be some sort of war in South-East Asia. So it had a huge effect. It did not directly affect people in continental Europe; so I assume there wouldn't have been as much interest. But I would say that the intensity of that period was as strong as that of the Vietnam war. As to the massacre that followed the *coup* - we were horrified by that in Australia; but one always has a sense of helplessness about other people's internal conflicts.

*To come back to The Year of Living Dangerously, what would you say is the specifically Australian element in that novel?*

What I'm trying to do in it is to portray two people who represent members of a society that is moving out of the old colonial period and into the new era which I have been talking to you about. The journalist Guy Hamilton is half-English, half-Australian, and the cameraman Billy Kwan is half-Chinese, half-Australian; and both these men feel that they have a foot in two worlds. Hamilton is not quite sure whether he is Australian or English. Kwan knows that he is Australian but because he is Chinese - and in those days the Chinese were far less accepted than they are now in Australia - he feels at odds with the world. And so, I suppose I am portraying the final end of the colonial era, and the dawn of a new, difficult and troubled era in the South Pacific and South Asia.

*And the assertion of Australians as Australians too? Would that be part of it?*

Well, yes. Australians, as I have already said, are in a half-way situation. It would be foolish and far too easy to say: "We are now a new people; we're totally brand-new, we know exactly where we are." That isn't true. We are in the slow process of becoming a new sort of people in the South Pacific. We are no longer people of the British Empire. And Australians are now an ethnically mixed population. Kwan, for instance is Chinese, yet very Australian. When he is dying, having fallen from a window of the Hotel Indonesia, an Indonesian officer says: "He is Chinese". But the grieving Hamilton says: "No - he's Australian." And that was done deliberately. Billy, for all his tragedy and confusion, is an Australian of the future - of the era just dawning, in our Asia-Pacific world. He and Hamilton are troubled by the same cultural conflicts, and by the death of the old world.

*The Doubleman is a very different novel from The Year of Living Dangerously. It conveys a strong sense of place, first in Tasmania through a powerful evocation of the "spirit of the place" in the former penal colony, then in King's Cross in Sydney. The real and the more dangerous enchantment, however, is that exerted by the "doubleman" of the title. Is he a further*

*development of Kwan? Do they both illustrate the temptation, so devastating in our century, to manipulate other people's lives?*

I would not want to draw too close a comparison between *The Doubleman* and *The Year of Living Dangerously*; the two novels are, as you say, very different. However, if you take Darcy Burr to be the Doubleman (since Darcy is an aspect of his master, Broderick, the true Doubleman of the book), a similarity can be seen, I suppose, between Burr and Billy Kwan. This is only one aspect - the aspect that you have very accurately pinpointed. Billy, since he is deprived by his dwarfism of normal life, has a tendency to live through other people, such as Hamilton, Jill, and even Sukarno - and wishes to manipulate their lives. But he wants to manipulate them for *good*, since goodness is his obsession. Broderick and Burr, however, wish to manipulate people for ill; for their own purposes, practical or otherwise. Spiritual manipulation is for Burr a source of pure power - which is, in its essence, a form of evil, and essentially trivial. And you are right; in this he is similar to those charismatic, spiritual confidence men of our time such as Charles Manson, Charles Sobraj, and the Reverend Jim Jones. The reason for the theme of duality is that Burr and Broderick are Gnostics - and, in my opinion, as our belief-systems in the West fragment, various new forms of Gnosticism are returning to dominate the spiritual landscape. I believe it's an important theme in this part of the century for a novelist to pursue - since it's part of the novelist's job to explore what is happening below the surface of his era.

*A major aspect of The Doubleman seems to be a concern for the spiritual confusion in the Western world and the decline of traditional Western values. Isn't there a contradiction between this regret, which could be interpreted as a lingering attachment to a bygone European order, and your conviction that Australia must now see itself as part of the Southern hemisphere?*

I've already answered part of this question, I believe, in what I've just said. However, I do see your point in regard to what you see as an apparent contradiction between my concern with the breakdown of traditional Western values, and the new era Australia is entering as an Asian-Pacific nation, severed from Europe in at least the geo-political sense. But I've never seen literature as a mere branch of national identity; literary works belong to the world, and are concerned primarily with the world as a whole and with permanent human dilemmas, if they have any lasting value. The paradox is that the more a work of literature reflects its place of origin, the more valuable it is, and the more *universal* is its appeal. So I don't think an Australian writer should limit himself to purely local preoccupations and themes - he should draw the large themes and conflicts that are abroad in the world into his Australian web. And believe me when I say that the fragmentation of beliefs and values in the West is affecting Australia very greatly; we are not immune; we are still basically a Western culture. My position is not one of simply regretting the collapse of former values; it is concern about the vacuum thus created, and the new forms emerging - not all of them good. And it is not my job as a writer to make judgements primarily; my job is to portray the situation. In *The Doubleman*, I made this a central theme; I'm unlikely to do so in my next novel. Each novel is different.

*Kwan too saw himself as a kind of opposite "double" to Hamilton. Do you*

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*feel that in this respect your work is part of the fairly long tradition of the double in European literature?*

Kwan is not so much a double of Hamilton as *his other aspect* - and vice versa. I'm interested in this theme, and in the incompleteness of personality; most of us feel incomplete, I think. The man of action wants to be a thinker; the thinker a man of action. But these are personal themes; I've not been influenced by European works on "The double", since I've read very few - except for Dostoevsky's novella of that name. My main influence was the Scottish legend of the Co-Walker : an archetypal image I find very haunting - perhaps because of the dualities within myself.

*This is an apt conclusion. Thank you!*

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# Matatu

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