

Susanne Braun-Bau:

Interview with Rodney Hall in Sydney (8.5.1992)

Rodney Hall was born in England in 1935 and came to Australia after the second world war. He graduated from the University of Queensland. He worked as a freelance script writer for television and radio, as actor, as film critic, as tutor, and lecturer in music and creative writing. He was poetry editor of a newspaper and adviser to publishers and worked as chairman of the Australia Council when this interview took place. Hall has travelled widely in Australia, Europe, Asia, and the USA. He has written about his travel experience in *Journey through Australia* (1988). Hall has been actively involved in Aboriginal Affairs for several years.

Hall has published eleven volumes of poetry and four novels as well as a trilogy. He received the Miles Franklin Award for *Just Relations* (1982). He has edited several collections of Australian verse and wrote a study on the artist Andrew Sibley and a biography on the writer John Manifold, who also influenced his own work.

■ *Why are you in Sydney right now? Is this because of the Australia Council?*

Yes, the Australia Council. I come up usually once a fortnight. I've just had a council meeting.

■ *What made you turn from poetry to writing novels?*

I didn't change, that's a common assumption. I've always done both, or at least I always did do both. I've stopped writing poetry for the last twelve years. I began my first novel when I was seventeen, and it took me three years to write, and it was never published. And then I started another one, the only one that is set in Europe is set in the Mediterranean, called *The Ship on the Coin*. But I also wrote all that time for radio so I was doing prose as well as the poetry, but I was getting the poems published, and I was not getting the novels published.

■ *Have you ever published the novel that you started writing when you were seventeen in some form or another?*

No, it's never been published. I have all the old manuscripts of it and I think I might one day be able to rescue something out of it but I'll wait till I'm old. I got too many new ideas. You may think I'm old now, but I don't think so (laughs). I'm bursting with new ideas and I want to get them down and when they stop coming then I'll go back to an old thing like that and see if there is something to rescue and if not it's best to put it in the fire, if it's got nothing to rescue.

■ *How do you see your task as a writer? - What kind of ideas do you want to convey?*

Well, I do see a very specific task. I am tremendously interested in the creative energy of the reader. It always interests me that every time a novel is read, fiction does a very

special thing with the reader: Every work of fiction is always made new by a new reader. And the best fiction sparks the most personal and energetic image in the reader's mind. So good novels in other words liberate the reader into the reader's own imagination. Now that interests me tremendously and to do that, you have to tap into that energy. You have to tap into a new energy in yourself every time you start a new book. Every new book is a completely new challenge for me. They're all very different. If I've done one, I don't want to do another like that. I've done that. And also because my reader will think: 'I know how to read this book, I know how to read this author. I've been through *Just Relations*, so I know how to read the *Second Bridegroom*.' But in fact the *Second Bridegroom* requires you as the reader to read in quite a different way. Each of my books is like that. There is obviously the style which is mine, which is in all of them but I want to do new territory each time. So, I'm always a beginner. I never plan any book. I never know what the story is or where it's going.

* *So you don't have a synopsis of the novel planned before?*

No, absolutely not. I have a knowledge of the themes. I knew with *Just Relations* that I wanted to write a book about - the land as a character, as a living moving character.

* *Yes, I see what you mean. Are you thinking of descriptions of 'the Mountain' for instance?*

Yes, the Mountain itself as a character. And I knew I wanted to do something that showed that it is possible for the 'invading people' - roughly speaking, that's the European people - that it is possible for the invading people to be deeply part of this country. I love the land. Australia as a land is something I've travelled in almost every part of and I very deeply love it and I want to find a way, as the Aborigines found a way over a great length of time, of seeing the land as a creature as another person in a sense. So, I knew that I wanted to do that, but I had absolutely no idea of what was going to happen and I never plan ahead. I handwrite in notebooks with a pencil and I only write on the right hand page; and on the left hand page if I have other ideas I make notes to myself. But I almost never read them. You might have done that yourself-

* *Yes, just the act of writing is enough to remember -*

Exactly - just making the note is enough, it helps to hold the idea. I'm very interested in what we forget rather than in what we remember, because if we remembered everything in our experience, we wouldn't know anything.

* *This sounds very cryptic -*

It would be too much, we would not make sense of it. We only make sense of it, because some things we forget. I can remember the embarrassment and shame as a three years old child of not being able to learn to tie my shoes. Now why in all the million of things that

happened in my life would I remember not being able to get the loops right, you see. But that is obviously important for me or I wouldn't remember it. I don't have to work at that, because my forgetting has done the work for me. And that's what I want to trigger in the work I'm doing. I want readers to be surprised into the familiar and *Just Relations* for instance is a book very much like that. I want the surprises for the reader to think: 'Oh yes, I know this, I haven't read it before, but I know it. Somewhere deep back in my experiences sort of know all this stuff.' That interests me very much.

* *Then you obviously are not writing for Australian readers primarily. This experience is possible for someone with a different background as well, isn't it?*

Oh, my goodness. I do very badly in Australia. There is my German edition of *Captivity* *Captive* which they call *Gefangen*, quite wrongly. I'd rather it's called *Freiheit*, because it's *Captivity* *Captive*, I mean the captivity is itself held captive; so 'Freiheit' is a much more accurate translation of the title. It's a very dark, grim, repressed book, and it would be terrific to have it called *Freedom*; instead of calling it *Captive*.

* *Well, there often occur lots of problems with translations.*

Yes, I know. But that book has sold five times as many copies in Germany as it has here. America is much bigger than Australia for me. Even in Britain, which is not good for Australian literature, because they still have a colonial attitude to us, I sell more than I do here. Even in Canada I do better than I do in Australia.

* *Do you have an explanation for that?*

No, I don't want to know. You see, David Malouf is an example of someone that is not true of. He does wonderfully well in Australia. And he does very well in England, not nearly so well in America; some of his translations do well, I think the Dutch one does quite well of *Harland's Half Acre*. It's a funny phenomenon.

* *Would you think that the presentation of consciousness is a major topic in your work? I find the imagination of your characters often quite outstanding, the depiction of their feelings and their flow of thought -*

Oh yes, absolutely. Some books, like *Just Relations* which is told in the third person, are full of that, because I can go into the minds of the characters. Whereas in a book like the *Second Bridegroom* it's impossible, because we are trapped inside the characters own consciousness, but of course I'm exploring that, because he's a fictional character.

* *That's what I just wanted to suggest, then you are presenting him, because he is presenting himself through your imagination -*

Yes, it's a very interesting device to be trapped inside your characters' experience and character's consciousness. It's very interesting. I've done it twice now; or three times - I've just finished a new book - and they are now a trilogy: *The Second Bridegroom* is the first novel of the trilogy; *The Grisly Wife*, which I just finished is the second one; and *Captivity*

Captive is the third in the set. And they're all different people speaking, but they are all in the first person. I will have the draft of this new novel ready in two weeks time and I'll send it to London, New York. I do simultaneous publication, so it goes to Melbourne, New York and London. If they like it in its form, and I don't change things much, I'm not a writer who works with editors very much. It's usually very much the way I have it that it gets published.

* *So you don't do much revising?*

Some books I do huge revises, but not much with the editor. It's partly my musical background, I suppose. I write the novels like I write poems. I make the shape of each sentence contrast with the next one. I listen to the music of the sentences. I spend a lot of time. When I present a novel, it's been polished and worked at - so I don't do much with editors. Especially American editors, who are very very good, do make very helpful and valuable comments. They have a much higher standard than in Australia. But then it's not little things in the word thing, it's usually a conceptional thing, which I then go back and work out.

* *Having discussed the presentation of mind and feelings in your work, do you think nature imagery is important to present the world of the imagination?*

Well, it is in *The Second Bridegroom* and *Just Relations*, the books I mentioned already. The biggest of my books and in many ways the most difficult, is the one that followed *Just Relations*, it's called *Kisses of the Enemy*. It's a heavy burden, but I'm very fond of it. That is a city book, it's a political book. The only piece of countryside is the desert at the beginning. It opens out in the desert, in Central Australia. Or it opens in Sydney and then it moves to the desert and there is no other country or natural imagery in all of it. It's all to do with politics and buildings and cities.

* *But there it's still landscape imagery that can be used to convey things of the psyche. Then it's the city that creates a certain atmosphere and -*

I see what you mean. That's very important, that's very important. But I don't use it like for example David Malouf does. He does it beautifully, and he uses precise pieces of furniture, little individual details of the brand name of a product or something. He's got a very good eye and ear for that. And he puts these little specific things in. I don't do that at all. I like it in his writing, but it would be quite out of place in mine. Whether it's the city or the country, it's the big part of the environment that interests me, how that shapes us. And David I think is interested in how the shape of the room shapes us. That doesn't interest me.

* *Well yes, when you describe a mountain for instance, or a certain house, I always have the feeling that you learn something new about a certain character as well, - about the character who is watching or thinking about the object.*

Oh yes, it's always like that. In that sense of the question it is always the case. Yes, I see now how this ties into your theory - all the things are perceived, none of the things are just objects. That's very good! Well indeed, 'cause it clarifies it for me. All David's objects are really actually objects. None of my objects are objects. They're all perceived objects. Yes, they're always how it impresses in the mind and is remade in the mind.

* *So would you agree that houses have symbolic value in your novel Just Relations for instance? There is this strange character, the knitting Bertha McAloon, actually it's a remarkable character portrait. What did you want to suggest with her obsession?*

I think it is what it gives you. Actually it's very hard to talk for me about *Just Relations*. I can talk about any of my other books better -

* *Why?*

It's because I absolutely love that book. I've never read it again. But it was the joy of my life - I spent five years writing it and I never had a day of trouble or anxiety with it. It was a sheer pleasure to write. Nothing that I've ever done was like that. I loved the character, I loved everything - all the details. I had terrific fun. And each day I'd get up and I'd think: 'Well, what will I do now. What will these whole people do next?' So I had a wonderful, wonderful time writing it and I'm not very good at talking about it for that reason. All the other books much as I got into them and enjoyed them in other ways - they weren't fun. So they are easier to talk about.

* *Are you consciously experimenting with narrative technique in your work in general?*

Slightly, yes. I have to say honestly - yes that's right. Why I was doubting is, because I spent a very long time dedicated to writing without being published. I mean, I was very disappointed, it wasn't that I didn't want it. I left school on my sixteenth birthday and I went out to work and I was already writing. By the time I was twenty I decided that's what I wanted to do. It was six years from then before I had even one poem published. I'd written about a thousand poems and I'd written two novels by then. And I had nothing published, nothing anywhere. So I had a very long period of failure in the publishing terms, in which I learnt a craft. I did not just write things. I set out to teach myself. I read every book I could get on the subject of prose, poetry, everything. I wrote, I'm sure, an enormous amount of rubbish, but it taught me a technique. I think that I have a very polished technique and I can do anything I want to do. I have a musical example, because I was trained as a musician. It's like a pianist: I can get all the notes. If you put a piece of music in front of

me and I know how to play. I may not know what the music means or how to communicate it but the technical thing of getting down all, I can do that. So in the writing terms, I know I can do that.

* *Actually, I was thinking of experiments with narrative techniques in order to create new ways to present reality - like Joyce did, for instance. I mention Joyce, because Salman Rushdie wrote that Just Relations is reminiscent of Joyce and even compared it to his Ulysses. Have you read this novel?*

Oh I love it. It's a wonderful, wonderful novel. I didn't read it till I was about forty actually.

* *Would you see some parallels to your work?*

Oh of course, I'm very much in the tradition. I don't think we ever do anything new unless we absorb as much as we can of the tradition. And we now with translation are able to absorb traditions from other countries which is a tremendous privilege. A hundred or fifty years ago it was impossible. We only had translations of classics. So we get modern novels from all over the world and I think that is tremendously important. And of course it's all very stimulating. So I see what they trigger in me. There is an example given by the *New York Times* critic looking at *Just Relations*. He did quite a big comparison with Gabriel Garcia Márquez, with *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Now, that is a wonderful, wonderful book. Their point was, when they are talking about magic realism in English as you in German we have hundreds of years of magic realism. This is not invented by Gabriel Garcia Márquez. In English for a start we have Peter Pan which is a nineteenth century children's fantasy in which the children fly. One of the great classics - it is not a very good book, I must admit - being Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*, which are all about people growing big and small and getting down rabbit burrows. It's all pure magic realism and it's what we were all given as children. European fairytales are full of magic realism. So what I'm trying to say is that the new things don't give you an idea: 'Oh I'll do something different.' What they do is they say, 'oh we've already got that in our own tradition, but we haven't made use of it.' I've had it since I was a child. But until we read it in somebody like Gracia Márquez, we don't realize what we've already got. So I'm interested in that. I read a lot of new things. I'm a very impatient reader. I read every word, I'm a slow reader, and if I'm not in the world of the book after about five pages, I don't bother about it.

* *Would you like to comment on the concept of reality and fantasy in your fiction. I find that reality is often undercut by fantastic elements. Do you think this is important for your work?*

No, I think it isn't undercut. I think it is an aspect of reality.

* *So both elements merge in your fiction.*

Yes, it is a way of showing reality. I mean Bertha is an example in *Just Relations*. Bertha has been swimming in useless circles in the dam. It's an expression of her profound frustration and her anger that she finally flies. It's an expression of her, it isn't in that sense to me a fantasy.

* *I found her really interesting, also her obsession with knitting -*

Yes, she just turned out to be a knitter. When I was writing, I discovered that she was knitting. I am interested in the concepts of art. I am very suspicious about books about writers. I have a real hatred of books about writers. Who wants to know about boring old writers. I am also not interested in books about artists, painters. We got one great funny book in English. It's called *The Horse's Mouth*, written about 1948 or something by Joyce Carey. Wonderful, wonderful book. An Irish Englishman, but that's an exception for me. I mean Patrick White's book *The Vivisector* about a painter, I can't stand it. I'm sceptical about the arts or artists as subjects.

But I'm terrible interested in the process of art itself. So in *Just Relations* for instance, Fido is an artist in a funny sort of way, painting on the window. He's doing what art does with the landscape beyond, because he's making a world out of the imagination through what he does in his painting. He makes a world of the imagination, because he is shut away from the real world. It's a substitute world. And it's also the same with Bertha McAloon: She has a substitute world through the art of knitting, she has created a substitute house and substitute people. So that there's a sort of joke about art, because the book is a work of art, I hope. So there is a joke against myself while I'm writing it; that art is always this kind of substitute life that nevertheless is a release.

* *To come back to landscape once again. I was surprised when you said that you love the landscape and have this positive relation towards it. Because in your novels it's rather desolation and man's loneliness and it's often - depressing?*

In *The Second Bridegroom*?

* *For instance.*

Oh yes, because he doesn't love the landscape, I love it.

* *Well, in The Second Bridegroom you give positive descriptions as well, I think, more than in Just Relations, where the mountain for instance is often threatening.*

That's an interesting question - the reason for that is that the mountain and the land in *Just Relations* is entirely a perceived land, it's entirely them. They can't love it in a way, because it's them. They can only experience it. There is no division. Whereas in *The Second Bridegroom* there's a complete division. The man in *The Second Bridegroom* has no way of absorbing this strange land into himself. So those two books are absolutely opposite in the way they treat the land. And interestingly it's almost exactly the same piece of land,

Susanne. These two books are set within my imagination about twenty kilometres of each other. The reader wouldn't know that, but this is the place I got in mind for each of the books. They're not absolutely real places, I've moved them - there's a real mountain that's the model in *Just Relations*:

* Which one is that?

It's called Mt. Dromedary. I've moved it a little bit inland and I've changed its shape and manner and I've done lots of other things with it of course, but it has roughly speaking a model. Where *The Second Bridegroom* takes place is an absolute place. It's an exact description of a real place just about half a kilometre away from where I live and it's completely and specifically a location. When they walk and come to the great valley, that's Kangaroo Valley in New South Wales. So he's walked about two hundred kilometres over the year. So that's another very specific location. It isn't something I've had imagined. I actually tried to look through his eyes at a place I know.

* I would be interested to know, if you have any childhood recollections as far as the Australian or English landscapes and nature are concerned? Does a special scene stick to your mind?

There are. My mother was an Australian who went to England to study to be an Opera singer. She then got married and had children and we were born in England. And we were there in the Second World War, before we came back to Australia. For example there is Vivian's memory in *Just Relations*. She's brought up in the war and she's been told that there's something going to happen that is called 'peace', and she doesn't know as a child what peace is and she wakes up in the middle of the night and there is this huge sheet of flame. It's reflected in the room and she wakes up and thinks 'Oh it's the peace'. That was a memory out of my childhood of being bombed in England. That's a straight memory. But I don't use real people for models, I only use an imagined world. In all my books, all the poetry, it's very rare that there is an actual memory.

* So you do not consciously use autobiographical material in your work?

No, almost none. And yet everything is almost autobiographical, because I've remade it in my imagined way. But I don't use memories, because I don't know what's interesting in them. Whereas when I invent things I know what's interesting in them. I'm not a reporter, I'm not interested in what really happened, or what I went through. I'd rather leave that to the unconscious, - the subconscious. I work out of the subconscious. I'm much more interested in the subconscious.

* Actually, that's a phenomenon about your characters. Is it correct to understand the way they talk rather as a means of presenting their thoughts?

Well yes, that's why I use that punctuation in *Just Relations*. Instead of using quotation marks it's just a dash. The idea of that is, because the dash begins the speech, it doesn't finish it. So it moves out of speech into thought without any break. Whereas in *The Second Bridegroom* of course it's all quotes, 'cause he's writing letters. But in other books like *Captivity Captive* for example, it's ordinary punctuation. That's a different way of doing it.

* But there's still real conversation in *Just Relations*.

Well, yes it's a mixture in *Just Relations*. Some of it is real conversation. The first conversation Felicia has with Sebastian is real conversation in the kitchen, where she is calling him in to tea. But the conversation she has with the shop that's all doing it -

* That's great, I really like these parts of the novel (laughs).

Yes that's fun (laughs).

* At the end of part V the people of Whitey's Fall and the government officials have their committee meeting and then suddenly the weather changes, the wind stops and they all die. Why did these people have to die, what did you want to convey there?

That's curious - it's interesting you ask that question. It's possibly the only thing I'd ever want to change in that book, which as I say I really love. It never occurred to me quite what it does to the reader until one of them - not often reviewers tell you anything about a book at all - but one reviewer expressed - disappointment, I think is the best way to put it. It was a very good, favourable review, but the reviewer had said that at that moment he felt disappointed that the people all suddenly finished. And that made me think of it a bit. I don't know why I had them all die, because I don't plan things and I don't challenge the ideas that come to me. If it feels right, I put it down. - Now I look back that's the only passage in the book I think I would probably change - It might be to do with the length of the passage. I could explain to you what I think is the weakness of it, is that it's too easy. The solution is too easy.

* But of course they all return.

Oh yes, of course they return, they never die. It's like the bones of the singing - It's just the way the technique is used, I got a funny feeling that I took a quick way out. And I hate taking short cuts, I hate doing things that are too easy and I should have been challenged to do something a little bit more interesting. The fact that they all come back, that's the rescuing thing, perhaps it's because it happens to all of them too suddenly, maybe they need to be individually doing it at different times. It's the only thing about the whole book that I think I could have done in another way and preferred it.

So it may be a disappointment factor, but in my view it picks up again, because you realize it is not absolutely the end of them. They are not the kind of people who're going to stop, just because they die. So that's rescuing the momentum of the book.

■ *Do you consciously make use of telling names? For instance the name of the new place they settle at, is called 'London'.*

Oh, it's an Australian joke. You know, they think they invented us and in fact we're going to invent them.

■ *Yes that's what I thought, that this might be read in a postcolonial context.*

Oh yes, that's *absolutely* right. The whole book is about the first generation of postcolonials. These people are no longer colonials. They're doing all the original creating. Yes, they go and discover a place called London. It's a useful reminder for the English-speaking reader that Australia wasn't invented by the English.

■ *I found Vivien a very interesting character in this postcolonial context. She's from England, the old world and in a way representative of this world. When she falls in love with young Billy, did you want to suggest something like a new possibility of a merging process of England and Australia, the Old and the New?*

Oh yes, it is. It is in a sort of way. But it is utterly unselfconsciously so, in that I only look back at it and think, like you can think that's what's happening. I really can't say too clearly. I never know what is happening in the books. And if I did know, I'd stop writing. I mean, whatever would be the point. If you don't have an energy source that is risky, if you don't have an energy source that's discovery, you have no reason to do it. It would just be like any other job. So, if I know something about something, I'm not going to work at it. I've got three complete, unpublished novels and the thing that's wrong with all of them is, I actually knew what it was that I was writing about. I had no discovery in myself, so there is none for the reader. I mean they're all technically perfectly satisfactory books. I would imagine that any one of them I could get published if I wanted to. It would just be a fatal mistake to publish them, because I'm perfectly well aware, that I knew too much. It's a terribly hard decision, because one took me four years to write when I was working at other things. It just had to be put where it now is on the shelf that will either be destroyed in the fullness of time, or I want a kind of ten or twenty year lapse to look back and see if I can suddenly surprise myself into seeing what it was really about. If that's the case I might be able to redo it.

■ *The protagonist in The Second Bridegroom is called Gabriel Dean, this sounds like another telling name, am I right?*

Oh yes, I mean another of my principles is that you always go with your first thoughts, second thoughts are critical caution, or some other thing that's an inferior thing. Names are terribly important to me. The first name that comes to mind has connotations for me, and I have no ideas what they are, but they are obviously right names, or I wouldn't think of them.

■ *So would you say that writing is an intuitive process rather than intellectual, rational?*

Well I don't want to separate all that. I think that it's also an intellectual activity. I get back to my definition before - I have to *surprise* myself. I would be absolutely unwilling to enter into a discussion that suggested that wasn't an intellectual activity, I'm sure it is. But it's got that element, we were talking about, of 'forgetting' in it. Gabriel has his name Gabriel for obvious reasons of many kinds, ones which I would leave to the critic to talk about, so I leave it to you. You'll do something wonderful.

But let me ask you a question. What do you think happened to Gabriel in the middle after the murder, what do you think happened with the murder?

■ *Well, I thought this was the concept of magic realism again, that -*

No, don't be a critic, don't tell me anything critically clever. Just tell me what you thought physically happened, not literary things. Real things. What did you think happened to him? Was he murdered?

■ *Well, I guess I have to believe in what you wrote and so therefore he was not murdered.*

Yes, right, But what do you think - don't mind me quizzing you, because I'm very interested to know what you think. What do you think in fact did happen if he wasn't murdered.

■ *Well, maybe he was in a state of coma, and just very nearly dead.*

Yes, wonderfully. You wouldn't believe how the critics in this country have managed to turn tripple somersaults to avoid just what you've said. That's exactly what it is. That's exactly what I had in mind. So he has such severe brain damage when he comes back. He's lost the power of speech.

■ *So what did other critics suggest.*

Well, they did what you were just about to do. They all consulted literary theories.

■ *Well, that's maybe because of the context of your other novels.*

Why? I don't consult them. I wasn't even educated into them.

■ *Let's return to Just Relations briefly: I think there are sinister undercurrents in the way you presented Whitey's Fall. For instance Billy repeats that he really hates this place and this only changes after he meets Vivian.*

There is the pun in English - Whitey's Fall: The fall of the white man. It's actually built on a wonderful place name in Australia, one of my very favourite colonial place names. It's a natural feature, it's a ridge and it's called 'Wilson's Downfall'. It's on the border of New South Wales and Queensland and I'm very very fond of the idea. One wonders who Wilson was and in what way it was his downfall. I like that kind of name and that was unashamedly a play on 'Wilson's Downfall' and I have my Whitey's Fall and the mistake that it's actually got wrong. I like things that are mistakes, that it's actually Water Fall and not what we

