

INTERVIEW LUCY ELLMANN

Lucy Ellmann had published six slim volumes over a period of thirty years before *Ducks*, *Newburyport*, a thousand-page novel consisting mostly of one sentence, which follows the experiences of an unnamed mother of four working from home in Ohio. Spliced into this meandering, epic tapestry is the parallel story of a mountain lioness – her observations, passions, and an inevitable clash with the human world. A work of everyday beauty and vast horror, it took Ellmann seven years to write. Since it was shortlisted for the Booker Prize and won the Goldsmiths Prize in 2019, all her other novels are now being rediscovered and fresh runs being printed: among them are *Dot in the Universe* (2003), with its perfect shape and its seamless blend of empathy and satire; *Mimi* (2013), with a crackling New York veneer, which explodes in fireworks of hope; and *Doctors and Nurses* (2006), relentlessly propulsive, outrageous, grotesque and heartbreaking.

Ellmann has been compared to Elfriede Jelinek and Vedrana Rudan: equally economical with her words, but funnier, she clearly writes only when she has something to say. She is interested in types and clichés, and enjoys finding new ways of destabilising them. Staunchly feminist, Ellmann undoes patriarchy in her descriptions of the everyday. Her recurring tropes include sexual frustration and fulfilment, the mechanised cruelty of the world, and list-making as coping mechanism or ontological inventory jostle: just when you think her books don't take the world seriously, you realise that you've been laughing at things which are darker than you thought. She revels in switches in perspective which transform an image or theme from drama to melodrama to comedy. There are a few passages in each of her novels which found the breaks in my heart.

On a freezing January afternoon in Edinburgh, where Lucy Ellmann lives, we spent two hours in a pub discussing her work and some of our shared passions: Thomas Bernhard, feminism, and the importance of humour. I was keen to cover all her work, but the conversation kept coming back to *Ducks*, that cathedral of a book, which contains all her enduring themes, albeit written mostly in a minor key. A couple of months later, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, we exchanged some more words over email. RASTKO NOVAKOVIC

THE WHITE REVIEW Since your first novel *Sweet Desserts* (1988), you've incorporated snippets of recipes, songs and newspaper clippings into your work: once these are pinned down, will a character start to appear?

LUCY ELLMANN Words being the meat of fiction, it seems essential to consider how they're used outside the novel, and to herd them inside it. I borrow material from all over the place. This is modern life: we're sponges, soaking things up all the time. Neglecting to see what words are working their way into a character's consciousness would be like never letting the person eat or go to the loo. All this stuff is flapping around inside our heads. Novelists have to look at that. It's also a textural thing. It's a form of collage, a conglomeration of styles which I like to see juxtaposed against each other.

TWR In *Ducks, Newburyport* you hurtle right through various geological and historical strata, drawing a line past the beginnings of settler-colonialism and the Native American cultures, all the way back to an animal consciousness, before humans roamed and ruled the planet. Sometimes these lines are broken (Native American culture), or continuous (patriarchy and colonial violence), or seemingly hidden (animal instincts). Did you start from an interest in historical layers, or did you begin with the present moment and a desire to trace its craziness back through time?

LE I think I was more tracing it back. Though I think you're right that in using an animal, you've got prehistoric stuff going on anyway, because animals are prehistoric. But I did think more about the now and how unbearable the present is, and I guess I tried to trace it through. I made her a history teacher because I wanted to think about it, it's not that I know much about it. Since the previous novel [*Mimi* (2013)], I've been thinking a lot about prehistory and matriarchy and how we have to get back to that.

TWR *Ducks* reminded me of Thomas Bernhard's *Extinction* (1986) and Herman Broch's *The Death of Virgil* (1945) – expansive novels of conscience where a person's inner life expands out into the whole of society. Your character seems to try to take on the role of the conscience of the USA, in facing the horrors of the 1782 Gnadenhutten Massacre, or the aftermath of a chicken farm hit by a tornado, or all the many high school shootings.

LE In *Extinction*, doesn't he eventually say Austria should just be given to the Nazis, so that everyone else could simply be free of their nonsense? So he was saying they don't have a conscience – he was their conscience, and they didn't get along with him at all. Well, I think America should probably be given to the Nazis now. It's big enough to hold them, and they should be walled in there. No, walls are not a good idea, because it's very hard on the natural world, but they can be told to stay there and hate everybody and not let anyone in. But conscience – where is it, in Republicans? I don't understand how they live with themselves at all. I don't understand the morality of their thinking. So, how do you get through life without any morality? How do they justify this stuff to themselves? There used to be Republicans you could talk to, more or less. I'd try not to, but if you had to, they were approachable, somewhat. And now they blithely lock children up, invade sovereign countries whenever they feel like it. Well, that's just ownership. Rich people have no conscience; you get too rich to care, or too powerful. People easily drift into malevolent behaviour, that's for sure. I think we all are malevolent, but the powerful get away with it. They get their way and no one stops them. And then the people with conscience, like Bernie Sanders, are mocked and ostracised. All he's saying is that people have a right to health care and employment rights – it's not that radical, but they can't bear it.

TWR You are also not easy on the Democrats.

LE I hate them. They are just corporate monsters now.

TWR You have this wonderful undoing of Hillary Clinton in just a few lines, when you write about her laughing about Gaddafi being torn limb from limb. What was it she said: 'We came, we saw, he died.'

LE It's totally unforgivable. All this nonsense about her being the first woman president – but she didn't have the policies that would have helped women, so what the hell difference does her gender make? She shouldn't have got the nomination. She didn't have the support. If we had got Bernie, there could have been enough support to stop this Trump presidency, and the Democratic Party prevented that from happening. The whole system is so stupid, an independent doesn't have a chance, and the electoral college system is just ridiculous.

It should be one person/one vote, and everyone should vote. That should be a law. I don't know if it would help, but they often say: the blacks aren't voting, the women aren't voting, the young aren't voting, and those are all much more likely to vote for progressive ideas. Americans like talking about liberalism, but liberalism failed us. I don't particularly like the word 'progressive', either. Who wants progress? That sounds capitalistic, doesn't it? I'd like a little stasis, of a good kind. Go back to nature and just shut up. I mean, you can chat amongst yourselves, but stop building crap, stop wrecking everything, stop making war on innocents.

TWR What you were just saying reminded me of something you wrote in *Dot in the Universe* (2003): 'Seek wasteland. Seek wilderness. Cling to anything they haven't examined yet.'

LE It's true. It's been a long-lasting interest of mine: the undisturbed. I've been searching for it, though not very effectively, all my life. People who really know what they're doing go off into the wilderness and explore it. And I've just explored wherever I've happened to be. Never the wilderness. I've led mainly an urban life – not completely, but pretty urban. I've hardly ever been to a National Park. But I think that's sort of artificial anyway. What we see is what we've got to work with.

TWR In *Ducks*, we are very close to the central woman's experiences. And she has this expansive, historical understanding of the world, but a difficult relationship with her sexuality and with the animal, natural world. She also reaches the limits of her understanding with a Trump-supporting, gun-toting man who delivers her chicken feed, and with her own daughter. And then you also have this lioness who faces the limits to her understanding of humans and natural phenomena. Could you say more about the inability to understand, this gap?

LE I like the way you describe it. I don't know if I successfully did this, but I was trying to bridge gaps, mainly. I think the biggest gap is to get inside this woman's head – but I think you're right, there are gaps that remain, that can't be bridged. There are difficulties, there are unexplained things going on within the family – there always are. Families are impossible things to handle. You're stuck together in this endless way. It was probably never supposed to be like that. With the lion, the children grow up and they buzz off, they don't hang

around. The extended family is a good idea for humans. This nuclear family is very troublesome. There's very little real communion to be had in life. Nobody knows where you go in your dreams every night. Nobody really knows what you're thinking most of the day. And you try to have these connections with people. Yeah: 'Only connect!', but it's not that easy. You're right, she doesn't have much connection with nature, really. Very little. She notices the trees once in a while. She's too busy. She's busy with her machines, and money, trying to make a living, and the kids, who really should be leaving home pretty soon. You don't really need a 15-year-old girl around at all. This friend of ours thinks that people should all go to camp at puberty, and get it all out of their system there, and come home when they can be decent companions again. Parenthood is very difficult. We haven't figured out how to make it work. God, you feel so guilty about everything. And I conveyed this to my own daughter, my own guilt, just that the world wasn't perfect, and you can't control enough about it, and the whole thing is dissolving now. What's awful is that I think everyone's finally noticed, and just in the last year I feel like everybody's facing it – that we've completely wrecked nature. The planet will survive, but civilisation probably won't: human civilisation, and most of the animals that were doing fine for millions of years. So, talk about conscience, we really need a little rethink on how we behave.

TWR You've written a lot about losing your parents. I think that's a very important thing to write about, this open wound.

LE I wasn't really trying to persuade anyone or campaign for this to be noticed. I was trying to be honest about it. A lot of the time I think, How do people cope with all this death? They must have to forget about it, or how would they survive? But I don't know if people do forget about it, at all. Other people forget about it, that's understandable. And then you tell yourself: Well, they've forgotten about it, maybe I ought to forget about it. And that's stupid, because there's nothing you can do about it. Things do churn around, your attitude to the dead can change over time. People start hero-worshipping, and this weird stuff comes out: when the guy was alive, you didn't seem to like him at all, but all of a sudden, once he's dead, he's just this perfect guy. And then that can change too, and maybe you get more real about it. But

obviously this is a scar that doesn't go away. I was thinking the other day how hard a single death is to bear, and then the fact that people are still using bombs. It's the most primitive and ignorant way to behave, to kill anybody. You have no idea what harm you're causing, to how many people, and who has the right? So, I think people should stop having babies, but also stop killing each other.

TWR You've been writing for over thirty years about masculinity, capitalism, our control of nature. Do you feel that others are finally catching up?

LE I'm kind of impressed with where feminism is at the moment. Maybe I am too complacent about it, and I lead a sheltered life where I try to only talk to people who are feminists, so I may not have my finger on the pulse, but it does feel like a lot of men as well as women are fully convinced of the need for this now. I like that. I was thinking about Greta Thunberg the other day, the way she rightly says: How dare you? I love that. But I remember that in the Sixties we were protesting about everything, and I thought that was how life was going to be. And suddenly in the Seventies, it deteriorated into more violent movements, much more reactionary, and it just seemed to die. And I thought we were going to get somewhere with all that. And now people are saying: Guess what, you know what you do when you're trying to change the world, you march and you protest and you gather. Now I don't know why everyone isn't simply gathering at all times. I don't know why anyone is sitting around watching TV any more. We should all be organising, twenty-four hours a day, to stop these corporations and governments in their tracks. The French train strike is very effective. Just do it and keep doing it, you don't go home. That's serious protesting, but I don't know where that happens. Greta has managed to harness a lot of excitement, and that's great, but I am a little worried about it because we did all that before and it didn't do anything. And then we lost our way. And no doubt, every movement loses its way. Where will we be in five or ten years with the climate? For one thing, we'll over-reach the deadline, so at that point is everyone just going to disperse and start flying around and driving their cars, using plastic, because what the hell, we might as well live for today? I do think that it's hopeless not to try, that's really hopeless. But it may be hopeless anyway. Until we know it's definitely

hopeless though, it's like Pascal. Consider doing something.

TWR Do you see yourself as an entertainer? And do you think that this has led to your work not being taken seriously?

LE I think it's a crime to bore people. And it's also a crime to show off. Or, not a crime, it's an indulgence. I think you owe people humour. But it's not an extra, it's absolutely essential to any kind of honest and fully human approach. Well, animals have humour too. Maybe more than we will ever know. So if you're not being funny, I just think you're repressing something unnaturally. And people who have no sense of humour are very peculiar people. They can't really function. So, I don't find it surprising that books are funny, but I don't think that art is therapy, or entertainment. It's there to help you confront something. It's got to be challenging. I've challenged people as much as I think I can get away with, and to some extent I encourage them and compensate them by joking around. And I get some stuff said that people wouldn't swallow, I guess, if I couldn't make it entertaining. So it's part of the job. It's an interesting question, I don't think I really have the answer. I hope people enjoy reading it, I would hate it if it was a drag. I also need to make a living, and so somehow it has to be fun, because it's my job to write, but it's not anyone else's job to read. So I think in some ways I like shocking people when they find out that there will be some fun involved, even though the subject matter is disturbing or troubling. Usually not too disturbing – but you find some of it quite disturbing?

TWR A lot of it!

LE I think that's good. And with some of it the effect might be entertaining, but some of it is helpless self-expression and a willingness to burden other people with everything that depresses me, so it's not wholly kind-hearted, necessarily.

TWR The way you use humour is wonderful and very specific. You use satire, gargantuan imagery, dad jokes, jokes about jokes, and sometimes you work by overloading the reader, or you have these simple child-like alliterations and rhyme. And then you shift to something more subtle or serious or raw, and you pull the reader out of the humorous. How do you know when it's enough? Or is it a question of it never being enough?

LE It's never enough discombobulation of the

reader. Yeah, I like doing that. There's a lot of editing that goes into deciding how lively a passage is, how you knock it into shape or relieve it of some of its less pleasing aspects. I like paradoxes, I guess. I like to be disconcerting, and sometimes I think I probably disconcert people too much, so I might try to pull back. You don't want them in a state of incomprehension or resistance, you want them at your mercy. You don't want them thinking: She's doing this to me too much, I'm not going to let her do it to me any more. But it's all guesswork, and you follow your instinct and hope for the best. I really had no idea that anyone would like this book at all! I didn't know what it was when I finished it. I had no idea. It's still scary to me, in a way, that people do like it. I think it's out of my control now. You're working on a tiny little section, like a tapestry maker or something, of this enormous thing, and you can only work on a little bit at a time, hoping that all the other workers are doing their bit, so that your little section won't look out of place in the end. This novel took a lot of editing. Many major edits, with the help of my publishers and a good schedule, which really helped me. Usually, when I send it in, they say OK and then send proofs, and at that stage I completely go nuts and change everything and drive them crazy, and cost them money, and myself. This time, there were two completely distinct editing periods and drafts, and this was after I'd already spent seven years on it and done several drafts on my own, but this was with them reading it again and giving more notes on it. And that was such a help. I felt much more prepared for publication than I ever had before, though it's still a gargantuan book, and I'm still scared I missed stuff. I did feel that it was more done than any of my previous books, it's more finished, but it's so huge, it's hard to know. Hard to check.

TWR It feels like it's a history of the world: you go out into the cosmos and you go into the details of domestic life. I really enjoyed these little moments of ecstasy: 'the fact that there's nighttime in clothing too, like pockets of darkness up a sleeve, or in your pants, or under your jacket.'

LE I like you calling them moments of ecstasy, that's great.

TWR They feel like authentic thoughts. It's not like received knowledge; suddenly it's as if you see the world for the first time.

LE It's not engineered. That was one of the freedoms of this form, that I could throw in just about anything I felt like saying. And I didn't have to organise it, construct things in some artificial way. It's more organic. But when you said ecstasy, I thought of this other moment when she says: There are moments when you're just happy, and you can't get over the fact that you are alive and it all seems good. Briefly. There aren't that many moments like that.

TWR Do you wonder what our thinking would be like if it wasn't dominated by male, racist capitalism? There are glimpses of this in *Mimi*, which is also beautiful because it shows change – it's rare to see someone [the plastic surgeon protagonist, Harrison Hanafan] become an activist.

LE I just made him change, because I wanted him to.

TWR That was also generous, because you could have pushed him off a cliff.

LE I've done that before.

TWR I know. But do you ever wonder what our thinking would be if we lived in matriarchy, for example?

LE I think you need a very good imagination for that. I think I only get glimpses, and there are glimpses in this book, of that. Like when she imagines she could have been an Earth Mother type. There could be a world in which women are much more welcome, and everything they do is respected. I don't mean to be mean to men exactly – men can come along on this, but it will involve a lot of change in their attitudes. Women's attitudes too, because we can't get over thinking ill of ourselves. So it would take a long time, but I think it would be interesting to see how much happier people could be. Except that we have already wrecked nature, so I'm not sure that we'll ever be happy again. But maybe in prehistory people were happier than they are now, because there was respect, in my opinion, and there was peace. And I do not believe what Naomi Alderman seems to think. She wrote that novel called *The Power* (2017), in which women suddenly get this supernatural skill and they all just use it to kill people, they all just become violent imitators of men. That seems a really narrow prophecy of what women could be if they had freedom and were nurtured the way they could be. Patriarchy has only lasted maybe

8,000 years, not much more than that. Humans have been around for maybe 2 million, mountain lions have been around for a lot longer! They never had patriarchy. They're doing fine. It's so weird, our gender stuff. Animals just get on with living. They don't sit around worrying about gender all day long!

TWR I'm interested in the shape of your books on the page. You use italics, all-caps, quotes and hand-drawings, but *Ducks* feels more like a pre-Gutenberg manuscript, just this continuous texture.

LE I don't see why you wouldn't use everything at your disposal. If capital letters have some sort of effect, why wouldn't one want to use that? I think it became a bit of a habit which I tried to control, but I couldn't quite control it. I bet it's *Man or Mango* (1998) that has the most, or *Dot*? They seemed to work to me. I didn't know it was so irritating to people. And you're not even allowed to use them in emails or on Twitter. People are really overly sensitive about this. I did restrain it in *Ducks* though, for the sake of the character. I didn't think she would be elaborate in the way she expressed herself just to herself, so I think I only allowed her italics – quite a lot of italics, I admit. But not many capital letters. And it was interesting trying to break that habit, but I haven't broken it. I think capital letters are very good, I like them. They're funny and they're powerful, they mean something. And I think everything should have illustrations. I hated graduating into adult books with no pictures. I'm quite a reluctant reader in many ways, so I like lures. I didn't like the idea that my capital letters were putting people off, but I also didn't like being mocked for the capital letters. Just read it. If it makes no sense to you, tough luck. Read on. Pretend they aren't capitalised, if you can't understand why they are capitalised. A lot of the time the rhythm of the sentence is ruined if people don't read it right, and I got very controlling about that. A bit obsessive. But you can't tell everybody all the time how to read everything – that's a bit intrusive, I guess.

TWR They're great fun to read, they sound wonderful when they're read aloud.

LE If it was music, you'd have all the dynamics: crescendo, and so on. If it was drama, there would be indications of how it might be said, and what's happening while you're saying it. Lots of

composers are quite obsessive in that way, this one note has a point over it to show that it has to be very separate from the others. They're just as nutty as I am.

TWR Drawings have an interesting presence in your books. I thought it was very brave to end *Varying Degrees of Hopelessness* (1991) with an image you drew. It is not an illustration, but it takes us into a different register.

LE There should be more scope for visual stimuli in books. I don't mean gimmicky tricks with fonts, which are very tedious, but genuine visual elements within the text. I've always resented the way only children's books are allowed to have illustrations. And art books, I guess. Of course, illustrations make publishers nervous, as they can be expensive, so I try to control myself. Sebald used photos in an interesting way, though aesthetically his insertions aren't all that rewarding. But it's a way of showing that the novel is not hermetically sealed in a literary sphere, it's interacting with all sorts of things outside itself.

TWR I find it remarkable how you float between pathos and the pathetic, or between laughing at a character and laughing with them. This seems a central concern in *Dot in the Universe* (2003), and in *Doctors and Nurses* (2006) – this passage, for example: 'Beauty tips are always imminent for Jen. Nobody can quite BELIEVE anyone DARES look like Jen. That meandering flesh, the flesh of AGES, flesh of LEGEND, a SAHARA DESERT of flesh, were it all to be laid out in front of you end to end. A BROKEN landscape, a land of controversy and dispute, shaped by fire, flood, famine and feud (FOOD), its surface scarred, mottled, and punctured by CHASMS and suppurating sores. And yet, inside that blunt and bloated body is a mind that WORKS (sort of) – PLEASING to find in there something lithe and light that can leap and land on narrow ledges, a mind made wild by its own ideas! Was she BORN angry? Nobody knows. What FEEDS her anger? MARS BARS? Maybe just having to proceed across the earth on THOSE LIMBS, and pay for things with shaky dimpled hands, sneered at by generation after generation of little sneering BOY.'

LE Jen, poor duck – originally, I called her 'Loathe Self' but my editor vetoed it. I'll change it someday if I get the chance. Because she is the epitome of the torn self-hater, the helpless product

of the morale-pounding patriarchal system. Her self-destructiveness is a sign of obedience, while her wild desires and indelicacies are a kind of activism. Dot's different: she upholds a vaguely acceptable standard of womanly perfection. Not that it makes her happy or anything. Who deserves respect? I think we often award it to the wrong people. Loathe Self is a lot like the heroine of Fannie Hurst's *Lummox*, a novel that teeters between celebrating and castigating its main character, the 'lummox', for her flaws. I like the authorial jumpiness that results. You keep wondering where Hurst is going with all this. My characters usually fill me with pity and impatience in equal measure, but there's an energy, I hope, that arises from the paradox. As in life. Depending on one's mood, everything can seem touching or exhilarating or exasperating or disgusting. It truly pains me how difficult, how dangerous, circumstances can be for people – but then again, these scrapes we get into can also become kind of funny. The fun is in keeping readers on their toes. Let them confront their own pride and prejudices. Jane Austen can be very kind, and she has great, unshakeable moral principles, but sometimes she's just plain mean. She's pretty hard on people who are fat, for instance. But novelists don't have to be perfect, only human. Novels are not work, they're play.

TWR Do you see yourself as part of a literary tradition and if so, why does it matter?

LE I had no idea until my publisher said I am a modernist. And I suddenly began to think of myself as a modernist, quite happily, but I didn't really know that. I just like the innovative novel, and I like it from Sterne onwards: Dickens, Molly Keane, Joyce and Beckett and Bernhard. Those seem really important, but there are others along the way. I don't think Roth is a perfect novelist, but *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969) was important. At least the first half. And then there's *Lolita* (1955) – I guess Nabokov is a modernist, I don't know, I don't go for classifications or academic approaches. I think the theorists have tried to kill literature and I want nothing to do with that. So I don't know what they say about anything. I'm telling you, I lead a very sheltered life. Mainly I like originality, so I don't like cults and clubs and movements. Modernism, as most movements go, is one of the better ones. But I didn't know it was still going on. These things don't all arrive like trains.

TWR There has been a pandemic outbreak since we met, and it seems like your wish for stasis has been granted. Do you see any hope in this moment?

LE Hope? Hmmm. I think my only hope is that capitalism will now be recognised as a scourge. It is completely defunct. It doesn't work. Growth and money should never have been our aims. Talking about the economy now, rather than lives, is Hitlerian. So cruel. They actually hoped for a cull of the elderly!

I don't know about 'stasis'. A little stability, yes, based on harmony with nature, would certainly not go amiss. All this volatility of the stock market – it's so MALE, it exasperates me. Why don't they just calm down? We don't need their hysterics right now. My mother was always very suspicious of the stock exchange. It only exists to exploit the workers.

TWR I know you tried to put the whole world into *Ducks*, but there's a passage I'd like you to comment on: 'the fact that now Ben tells me bird flu only has to mutate a few more times to cause a global pandemic like Spanish flu and that, if that happens, civilisation will grind to a halt within a year, the fact that I know it's terrible of me but I can't help hoping the guy with the scary dog will be one of the first to go'.

LE I'm no prophet. The WHO has been expecting a pandemic for thirty years, and the idiotic level of travel most people indulge in has left us all vulnerable to the fast spread of disease. My book is concerned with climate change, which is the true cause of the pandemic. We fucked up. We messed with nature. That's patriarchy for you. But I don't agree with my narrator's glib fantasy about the dog-owner dying. This is another disaster of patriarchy: the way it corrupts us all and gives us violent thoughts like these, when in reality it's a tragedy that anyone has to die of Covid-19, and that our governments have let us down so badly.

TWR What are you reading now and what gives you joy in that reading?

LE Walt Whitman is the best reminder of happiness. He exults in everything, everything, he encompasses everything, with such compassion. What a guy. I love the explicitness, the detail, the list-making. He feels for animals too:

*'The sharp-hoof'd moose of the north, the cat on the
house-sill, the chickadie, the prairie-dog,
The litter of the grunting sow as they tug at her teats,
The brood of the turkey-hen, and she with her half-
spread wings;
I see in them and myself the same old law.'*
(Song of Myself, 14, in Leaves of Grass)

He reminds you that even if human civilisation's
now over, which it obviously is, it once did some
good: at the very least, it produced Walt Whitman
and his audience.

R. N.,
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