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Angers 26th November 2005

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An interview with Sandi Russell

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- 1 **Laurent Lepaludier:** I would like to make a short presentation of Sandi Russell, for those who weren't at the concert last night. This time I will focus perhaps more on Sandi Russell's achievements in fiction.
- 2 She is a native New Yorker who grew up in Harlem, studied music at Syracuse University, Hunter College, and New York University. She now lives in Durham, in the United Kingdom. She has performed throughout the US and the UK as a professional jazz singer and she has written about it in *Glancing Fires: An Investigation into Women's Creativity* (ed. Leslie Saunders, Virago Book, 1987). She has worked with jazz luminaries, such as Lionel Hampton, Roy Eldridge, Ellis Larkin, Beaver Harris, and Jean Toussaint. She has been interviewed on various talk shows in the US as well as for BBC Radio and television. She has performed at the most prestigious clubs in New York and London. She sings classic jazz and blues as well as popular standards. She performed in two shows, 'The American Songbook and Beyond', and 'Render Me My Song', a one-woman show inspired from a book on African American women writers, from slavery to the present.
- 3 For Sandi Russell is not only a singer, she is also a critic and a writer. Besides writing *Render Me My Song: African-American Women Writers from Slavery to the Present* (Pandora Press, 1991, updated in 2004), Sandi Russell coedited the *Virago Book of Love Poetry* in 1990. She has contributed to magazines with essays and interviews, with Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, Betty Carter, Rosa Guy, Paul Marshall, Ntozake Shange and Paule Marshall. Sandi Russell's poetry has been anthologised several times. She has received the Society of Authors' K.Blundell Trust Award and the Northern Arts Writers' Award.
- 4 Our research center was particularly interested in her short-story "Sister", anthologised in *IronWomen, New Stories by Women*, edited by Kitty Fitzgerald, and in *Daughters of Africa*, edited by Margaret Busby, because of its overall quality, and we held a seminar on it. The oral dimension of Sandi Russell's writing is the reason why we decided to invite her as a guest of honour for this conference on orality in short fiction.

Her scholarly achievements, her ear for music and sounds, and her writing style offer a perfect combination for a topic such as ours. So it is a great pleasure and honour for us to be in Sandi Russell's company.

- 5 Traditionally, and it is a tradition established more than twenty years ago in this research center, we invite short-story writers to read from their works, and answer questions from us and from the floor. We are grateful that Sandi Russell has accepted this tradition, after other writers such as Mavis Gallant, Graham Greene, V.S. Pritchett, Benedict Kiely, Muriel Spark, Antonia Byatt, Amit Chaudhuri, Romesh Gunesekera, Merle Collins, Olive Senior, David Madden, Louis de Bernières, John McGahern, Alistair McLeod, Peter Taylor, Elisabeth Spencer, Grace Paley and Tobias Woolf. The interviews are available in a special issue of our *Journal of the Short-Story in English*. (JSSE n° 41-Autumn 2003)
- 6 [To Sandi Russell] In fact, rather than reading from "Sister", you've decided to read from *Tidewater*, which is a novel in progress.
- 7 **Sandi Russell.** -No, it's completed.
- 8 **Laurent Lepaludier.** -It's not published yet.
- 9 **Sandi Russell.** -No, I've literally just completed it.

- 10 **Sandi Russell:** I would like to thank Laurent Lepaludier and the entire committee for choosing me for this very, very special honour. The short-story that was chosen, 'Sister', is really the kernel of my newly completed novel, *Tidewater*. This novel is a multi-voiced narrative concerning issues of colour and sexuality in the twentieth century. It also explores the Native-American/African-American exchange.
- 11 *Tidewater* takes place in an area of Virginia where the Atlantic Ocean meets the fresh waters that flow into the Chesapeake Bay. Jamestown was the first permanent English colony in North America, where Powhatan's daughter, Pocahontas, married John Rolfe in 1614, and the first slaves from Africa landed in 1619. The narrative follows Charlotte, a New York artist, in her quest for her roots in Virginia. As she, and the reader, encounters her relatives across three generations, truths about the place and its history, including 200 years of slavery, and the near obliteration of the original tribe, come to light.
- 12 The excerpt that I'm going to read takes place at the funeral wake of Rose, the mother of Franklin, who is married to Charlotte's mother's sister, Sadie. Here, she encounters 'Cousin Sister,' the character from my short-story now called 'Cousin Sister', as opposed to 'Sister'. After many years of not seeing her, Charlotte also later meets Henrietta, Cousin Sister's sister. She is supposedly insane, but she is also the linchpin of the novel. Through her crazed vision, we learn of the family history, and of the history of her people. In this section, she remembers the moment that changed her life forever.

13 (Reading of the excerpt)

Interview

- 14 **Michelle Ryan-Sautour:** I'm always very curious about what pushes a person to write, and we've been given some insight into your talent as a writer. Can you tell us what brought you to write fiction?
- 15 **Sandi Russell:** That's a very good question. I'm not really sure. I think music had a lot to do with it, interestingly. I've been singing off and on since the age of 4, and singing is a form of story telling. And so, I think that, when I wasn't literally making musical sounds, I still had some kind of impetus to tell stories. I was a voracious reader, so it just seemed the other thing that I could do, in a sense, was to continue to make music, because I try to write in a musical way.
- 16 **Laurent Lepaludier:** In "Sister" the narrator says she walked along the dirt road and "listened to her heart beat. It danced ahead of her footsteps." Other sounds are also mentioned: the wailing of a dog, a loud voice, "the throaty sound of a screen door", Sister's "incantation rising to a scream", the moaning of a rocking chair, etc. How important are natural sounds and rhythms in your writing?
- 17 **Sandi Russell:** I think they are very important. Maybe again, it has to do with my musicianship and the fact that my ears are, metaphorically, very large. [laughter] I'm always hearing things and sounds,– even in my head. So yes, it's very important in my writing that these sounds are evoked.
- 18 **Laurent Lepaludier:** The scene of the peanuts in the Cola in "Sister" also attracted my interest. The narrator says, "We'd open the peanuts and watch them slither into the soda, making a plopping, fizzy sound. There was no explanation for this. It just meant we were different, special somehow." Is this sound made by the peanuts in the soda related to a particular family or social identity?
- 19 **Sandi Russell:** In fact, it was something that was done in that area, in the South, by a lot of young people. I don't know why. We thought it was the tastiest, most magnificent thing in the world. [laughter] In retrospect, it really baffles me. [laughter] But I see somebody there recognising the story I tell! And it did, you know the sound was literally 'plopped' right into the bottle. And then of course, the fizz of the Cola was accentuated by the salt, I suppose, of the peanut.
- 20 **Laurent Lepaludier:** An old-timey song is quoted in "Sister" ('Come on Baby, Come on Back Home', and the hymn 'Precious Lord Take my Hand'. Can you tell us about the type of music they are and, perhaps, what they suggest to you?
- 21 **Sandi Russell:** The first one is a sort of blues tune that "yours truly" made up. And the blues, is where jazz comes from. I think the blues is always very evocative of African American culture, in its truest sense. So maybe, that's why I use the blues. And 'Precious Lord Take my Hand' is a Gospel hymn that I love and I just used it because it's one of my favorite songs.
- 22 **Laurent Lepaludier:** It's contrasted with Country and Western music in the story.
- 23 **Sandi Russell:** Yes, Country and Western music signified (except for Charlie Pride, who was an African American) white American singing. And it's not true now, but many

years ago, a lot of it was considered to be sung by people that weren't particularly amorous of African-American people or their culture. So, that's the juxtaposition there.

- 24 **Michelle Ryan Sautour :** You've talked a little bit about music. And, according to your book, and as many people have noted throughout the conference, it's a trend in African-American fiction. You've talked about how Margaret Walker's experience with poetic forms based on black jazz and blues rhythms and how Gwendolyn Brooks uses the ballad and the Negro spiritual. Could you comment a little bit more on this idea?
- 25 **Sandi Russell:** Music is very important to Black Americans for many reasons. Not only because it is a lovely, relaxing thing, but because it holds a great deal of political significance and significance for survival, historically. In slavery days, slave chants and what we now call "Negro spirituals" were used not only to help ease the burden of the difficult work that slaves had to do but also to send coded messages to each other to enable them to escape on what was called the 'Underground Railroad'. So, music has always been an integral part of African-American existence and it has been a means of relief, release, joy, political significance, and as I said before, survival.
- 26 **Laurent Lepaludier:** In your works, orality can obviously be heard in the dialogues, especially in *Tidewater*, and, obviously too, the narrative has an oral quality. When you write, do you actually voice the narrative out loud, or is it a mental voice ?
- 27 **Sandi Russell:** No, it's mental. But sometimes, when I write, I do read out loud to make sure the rhythm is flowing in the manner that I want and it's giving the feeling I want to evoke. No, it's all in my head, usually.
- 28 **Michelle Ryan Sautour:** Based on your book, and also something that has come up a lot during the conference is the question of speech patterns and identity and the idea of using speech as a sort of mask, like even adopting a white mask for example in relation to identity. You are adopting an identity, you are using speech as a sort of mask. What are your thoughts on that subject ?
- 29 **Sandi Russell:** You're using speech as a mask, in other words, to mask what you really want to say? Is that what you mean?
- 30 **Michelle Ryan-Sautour:** No, I'm thinking more in terms of speaking in a certain way, in order to create a certain impression of yourself, or to create a certain relation to certain groups, or communities. For example, even yourself as a writer, when you create a character, how do you think in terms of characterization?
- 31 **Sandi Russell:** How do I arrive at these different personae? In black speech, there are many gradations of persona as such. In a great deal of black speech, it is used as a mask. I'm trying to think of Zora Neale Hurston's saying, something like 'He might know my name, but he doesn't know me.' ['Got one face for the world to see, 'nother for what I know is me. He don't know, he don't know my mind.'] Essentially, that is what she was saying. Black people, in America, have learned to speak in such a manner that they are answering your question, you think, but they really aren't answering your question at all. But I don't think that's really what you are talking about! [laughs]
- 32 **Michelle Ryan-Sautour:** No, but it's a very interesting answer.
- 33 **Audience:** The male 'Cousin', for instance goes fishing and he gives a whole thing on the ecology of the place, while he's actually taking himself off to the river. That is a very different speech from Henrietta, because it's an urban influence speech.

- 34 **Sandi Russell:** *Tidewater* is what Henry Louis Gates calls a very speakerly text. I use many monologues where characters speak directly to the reader, as Henrietta does here. Each person's speech, in a sense, defines the way they speak, the words they use. The sounds they make do define, at least I try to define who they are through the way they speak. Not necessarily all that they say, but through their speech patterns as well. Am I getting closer? [laughter]
- 35 **Michelle Ryan Sautour:** You are a writer, and you are also a literary critic. What led you to write your book *Render Me My Song: African-American Women Writers from Slavery to the Present*? How were you drawn to the writing of this book?
- 36 **Sandi Russell:** I realised, living in Great Britain, that very few people knew about any African-American writers at all. I felt that there was a necessity to let them know about all the great black American women writers that had published. Also, at the time that I had this idea, it was a very exciting time in America because a lot of writers that had not been heard of were being literally unearthed, that had written in the nineteenth century, and Henry Louis Gates Jr. did a great deal to make this come to fruition. It was also an impetus for writing the book. And then, I felt that there were a lot of ideas that were being tossed around in academia that the regular reader, the interested reader of African-American literature should know about. So I set this task for myself, to try to make these ideas that you discuss in such a very complex way just a little bit clearer and easier for a lay reader to fathom. I think it was all of those things together that inspired me to write the book.
- 37 **Michelle Ryan-Sautour:** Could you comment on the title you chose? The meaning, for example, of *Render Me My Song: African-American Women Writers from Slavery to the Present*?
- 38 **Sandi Russell:** It just means, 'give me my due', 'give to me what is owed me,' 'recognise me'. That is essentially what it means.
- 39 **Ben Leb Dai:** 'Not to know is bad. Not to ask is worse.' This African proverb, which you have chosen to accompany your book *Render me my Song*, strikes by its powerful suggestion: that people are responsible if they are ignorant of things. Do you imply that external influences to ignorance do not exist? [laughs]
- 40 **Sandi Russell:** No, I just meant that curiosity is a good thing. I didn't mean it as literally as that. In my mind, I was thinking that a lot of people knew or know about various writers in the world, and yet they don't think there is anything of interest in what they have to say; that there is not anything in these writings for them. And essentially, I was saying 'Yes, you should go beyond your little sphere if you can, and you might learn something new and exciting.'
- 41 **Ben Leb Dai:** So, exactly, going on on that same line, shall we talk about curriculum. In schools and faculties in the US? You have written that when you were young, you have been cheated, because black writers, men and women were ignored, using almost the same words as Ngugi wa Thiong'o, when he recalls his education in colonial Kenya, and his English literature courses where African writers were not on the program, and when the African environment was ignored in favour of daffodils and cottages. So, would you describe such a situation in the US as being colonial in spirit?
- 42 **Sandi Russell:** Well, sadly, yes. I went to school in the center of Harlem, but even most of my teachers who were black were not allowed, within the curriculum, to teach African-American literature. We did have one week though. There was a lot of talk

about Langston Hughes and Paul Lawrence Dunbar and George Washington Carver and the peanut. [laughter] That was sadly about it. So yes, I would say that, at that particular time when I was going to school, I learned very little about black American writing, or even black American culture for that matter.

43 **Ben Lebdai:** I have worked myself on Olaudah Equiano's autobiography which was published in 1789. And I was pleased to see in your book *Render Me My Song* that in fact, the first slave to have expressed her feelings about her situation as a slave is a woman. How do you explain this persistence, in maybe not ignoring, but certainly putting aside women's expressions, even if it concerns such a painful historical fact, slavery. How do you explain this, because I've read it nowhere else except in your book?

44 **Sandi Russell:** The reason you most likely hadn't read it before my book was because it hadn't come to light, literally. I really found a great deal of new information, new names and new writers while I was writing this book. It was a very exciting period.

45 **Ben Lebdai:** In your chapter 'Black Talk, Black Judgement', you ponder on the issue of the integration of Black people in America and you suggest that at one point in History, the nation must face the fact that it is not a question of integration, but it is a question of recognition. It is the question of respect also, as expressed in the novels and short-stories by Richard Wright for example. So, has this recognition been reached today in society, in literature, in the US?

46 **Sandi Russell:** I'm very pleased to say it has. Many African-American women writers, male writers as well, are almost household names now. We have come a long way since this book and I'm very pleased to say so.

47 **Michelle Ryan-Sautour:** We've talked a little bit during the conference about the pressures of the publishing industry, a publishing world dominated by white power, as you mention in your book. Could you talk a little bit about how this limited certain ways of writing? And do you think there would be any shifts or developments, any progress in this area?

48 **Sandi Russell:** The "white establishment" still has major power in publishing in the Western world. But there have been publishing houses, small, but quite good and quite powerful that are African-American based, Black British based, Caribbean. So that there are voices heard through these publishing houses that might not have been heard at all if it weren't for them. It's a difficult problem for any artist, be they black or white, to get into a reputable publishing house. Now, money is the engine that pushes it, rather than good literature. And if you do get in, very often there are restrictions: certain stereotypes are expected today from Black writers. There is a sort of stricture and you can't move outside of this little box people have envisioned for you. It makes it very hard. They want a very clear-cut narrative – heaven forbid you say anything like 'modernist', believe me, it's not a good word. [laughs] The problems now are not only the problem of coming from an ethnic group, being African-American, but also the restrictive way that we are told we must write in order to make a best-seller.

49 **Ben Lebdai:** A more general question. You have heard about what went on in France a few weeks ago in the suburbs. So, speaking about schools, we have been saying that pupils do not pay attention to writing, and so on. I know a little bit about your life now, so as a former teacher, what role do you think orality might play in today's education in certain schools, suburbs, parts of New York, or difficult areas, as we say today?

50 **Sandi Russell:** When you say orality, do you mean within the text ?

- 51 **Ben Lebdai:** Teaching through oral means, using orality to convey an education, a message.
- 52 **Sandi Russell:** I think it is very important. I think speech is highly valued now, and of course, there is the media where there is a lot of talking as opposed to, obviously, reading. And I also think that, certainly in African communities, as well as African-American communities, the oral tradition is very strong. I think that would be a means of breaking through or getting through to students. It ties in with their culture. I think that's essential.
- 53 **Ben Lebdai:** For the first time, in one of Angers' conferences, we have a writer, a critic, and a singer in one person. Can you tell us what are the benefits of mixing these genres?
- 54 **Sandi Russell:** I think that the music, for me, informs everything, in a sense. It certainly informs the writing, and the reading. Literary critic... as they say in the North of England, I'm really 'chuffed' to be called that. I don't know if the music informs my criticism, necessarily, I would say that the criticism stands a bit away from the music and the writing. Somebody said to me 'What's it like to be a singer and a writer?', and I said, 'The singing is an extroverted kind of exercise. The writing is very introverted, you're very much inside yourself.' I said 'Quite frankly, I get up some mornings and I feel quite schizophrenic.' It's very hard sometimes to do both, but at the same time, each informs the other.
- 55 **Audience:** Have you ever written a song?
- 56 **Sandi Russell:** That is really strange. No, I haven't except for the little 'ditties' that I write in my stories and in this novel. No, I never have written songs. But it seems that a student that I have wants to collaborate with me, so it will be a first. I don't know why, though. I could never explain it. It just didn't happen.
- 57 **Audience:** Thank you Sandi for the reading. It was very powerful, especially Henrietta, obviously, the voice of this woman, this young woman who is, as you say, in some ways, mad, other, different. We've been talking about, throughout the conference, other voices, different voices. Where does that come from? Because when you were reading that, it was like you were singing last night--it was like a voice that just came out of you, so beautifully and powerfully.
- 58 **Sandi Russell:** I don't know where Henrietta came from. It obviously is a part of me somewhere. But I was shocked when this voice came, such a powerful voice. Some of the history of Henrietta is based on some facts, not a lot of it, just a nugget of it. I wish I could be more precise, but writing is a very strange thing. You can sit down and think you're going to write in a certain way. And, half an hour later, you look at this page and it's not anything like you thought it was going to be at all. I think Henrietta is an amalgamation of, in a way, a silenced Southern voice that isn't heard very much anymore. That is the best I can do.
- 59 **Audience:** I'm just interested in how writers and all of us who work in that area talk about getting the voice. Margaret Lawrence, a Canadian writer, said that she had to get the voice of Hagar, in *The Stone Angel*, and then it just took her, where it was meant to go. As you say, it is a kind of possession.
- 60 **Sandi Russell:** Out of all the characters in *Tidewater*, Henrietta is definitely almost a possession. But she also carries a very important role that I didn't get a chance to read, in that she tells the history of this area in a very fresh way, because she is mad. But her

vision is very clear and very real, much more real than, let's say, an historian would be in recounting the events of that area.

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Laurent Lepaludier, agrégation and Doctorat d'Etat, is a professor of English at the University of Angers where he teaches British literature and critical theory. He has written a thesis on Joseph Conrad. Head of the CRILA research centre of Angers, and in charge of the research on the short story, he is also head of the English section of the CERPECA (the Canadian studies research centre of Angers). He has published articles on XIXth and XXth century British novels and short stories, on Canadian short stories, and a book entitled *L'Objet et le récit de fiction* (P.U. Rennes). A book entitled *L'image autrement: le visuel dans la nouvelle moderniste de langue anglaise* will soon be published. His research currently focuses on fiction and knowledge and on the poetics of narrative fiction.