

**Kate Evans talked to Sally Morrison
on ABC Radio National Books+
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Kate Evans: Before she was a novelist Sally Morrison was a molecular biologist. She also knows the art world and has written a biography of Clifton Pugh. Her latest novel, *Window Gods*, uses that knowledge. It follows on in part from her earlier title *Mad Meg*, the story of two sisters and an art gallery. I spoke to Sally Morrison recently about this complex, beautifully written book. Sally Morrison your character Isobel is a woman pulled in many directions. How would you describe her?

Sally Morrison: She is in late middle age and she's never been able to find herself time to actually concentrate on what is her talent. She is a painter and she's a good painter. She is a painter with intellectual thoughts and with artistic thoughts. She's very accomplished in what she does, but the pull of her family, because she has all these family responsibilities, and she really does have them, they're not responsibility she can dodge because there is nobody there apart from herself to do the things that are required to be done. She's a mother, she's a stepmother to her niece, she's a daughter to her ancient mother and she also has this interaction with her nieces' father who is a tremendously difficult human being, but who wants a relationship with his daughter and in order to have it . . . it's pandemonium: her mother's pandemonium, her brother-in-law's pandemonium as well, and so she is really a woman who is caught very much inter-generationally and also by the fact that she can't get any help.

Kate Evans: And this sense about the chaos in her life is built up in lots of different ways. How would you describe your writing style and the methods that you use to bring us that chaos?

Sally Morrison: Well I always think we're always living on the verge of the future. You're living in the present on the verge of the future and the past is trailing it behind you something like an anchor. Certain things have come to be realised in the past but not everything that could have been. But you have no control over what is going to happen. The present lines itself up in a set of propensities. One of them is realised and the rest of them all fall over and you never know which one it's going to be an so life itself is quite chaotic. So Isobel's life I don't think is an exception, I think it's part of how we live. Women in particular find themselves in chaotic situations because life isn't plotted.

Kate Evans: Now Sally, when Isobel describes her art there are women figures squashed against glass, contained and constrained. So what else is squashing her, is it the art world itself?

Sally Morrison: Yes, the art world has favoured men very much. She and her sister have run a

feminist art gallery in the past. Her sister's now dead. They've tried to give women a go. They've tried to create a space for women's art so that it can be on show. They've been mocked to a certain degree. The gallery failed ultimately; it failed because history bowled it over. Feminism went out the window really when young women started to wear high heels and the money vamp, as I say, came back to town after that in the 1980s. Well Isobel and Allegra never made money at their gallery. What their aim was, was to get by and to push women's art as something valid, as a valid expression of art. In that way too they've been mocked by the richer galleries and by the galleries that have made money and made people's names, big names. If you notice in actual fact most of the big names in art in Australia are men, there's hardly any women. Why is that? It's not because there haven't been some pretty good women artists, it's because they haven't been pushed, they haven't been supported and perhaps they haven't been able to put in the sort of effort that men have put in.

Kate Evans: But I wonder how much fun you're having though with some of the characters of the art world because some of the most dreadful characters in the novel are artists or people intimately connected with the art world.

Sally Morrison: Well you find all sorts of people in the art world. It's not surprising I suppose, but you find a lot of eccentric people in the art world. Eccentrics can be incredibly self-centred and wish to have the limelight on themselves all the time. So that Isobel's name has partly been made through an attack that was carried out on her work in an art gallery, and OK they left it hanging on the walls as a comment about feminist art. Well Isobel's not comfortable with that. The rest of the feminists said oh yes well this is really why we exist exactly to show the way in which we were attacked by men. But Isobel's not happy with that, she's a practitioner, she wants to show that she is an artist, not a victim but an artist.

Kate Evans: And she says that more than once in the novel I think. She says I never wanted to be a feminist test case but I want to be an artist.

Sally Morrison: I want to be an artist, I want to be valid, I want my identity to be the identity of an artist.

Kate Evans: And so her voice, Isobel's voice, is intimate and complicated, it's contradictory and funny because we are also getting her creativity, her art, but we're also getting her frustration and her anger and the everyday things that she's having to deal with. How did you imagine her, how did you channel her?

Sally Morrison: I didn't really have to channel Isobel terribly much. Isobel is an alter ego of mine because I've had similar circumstances to deal with. I've had to try and prove myself in a world where, you know, I was a sort of an odd-bods woman. I worked in a laboratory so I had to prove myself there that, yes I was actually capable of thinking and of good scientific thoughts

when I was working in the laboratory. I've had to prove myself as a writer. I've had to brook interference and criticism in my writing career.

Kate Evans: So Isobel is a scientist and an artist and you are too, and I guess I was wondering whether we should swerve away from an autobiographical reading of this novel or embrace it.

Sally Morrison: It's part autobiography and part not. What I do is, I take situations that I know in life and I'll shift the frame and I will bundle up all sorts of different characteristics into a particular character, so that my characters are sort of abridgements of a broader set of characters I see in life. When you're writing you've got to condense what you know and one way of condensing is to put several characteristics into one character. The two characters there that are autobiographical are Isobel and Isobel's mother Stella who was very like my mother, I have to say.

Kate Evans: Goodness me.

(chuckles/laughter)

Sally Morrison: My dear old mum. She was dominating in my life not because she wanted to be dominating but because she just simply was, her circumstances made her so and her personality made her so, it was just how it was.

Kate Evans: Well let's talk about Stella then because she's an extraordinarily vivid and occasionally overbearing character in the book and she charms you and she maddens you. So we'll talk about her. She's a scream, she's a character and it seems like she'll live for ever. So who's Stella?

Sally Morrison: Stella is a kind of earth mother. She has a very Australian history, a White Australian history, I have to say, as my mother did. My mother had a terrible time in the Second World War. Stella likewise has had a terrible time. She's lost family members, she had three brothers and none of them came home from the war, she had a fiancée and he was killed. My mother had similar, a similar situation happened to her. My mother like Stella married somebody on the rebound from all this grief. Stella marries an Italian and my father wasn't an Italian my father was Australian. So Stella is this character who's married this chap and then she kind of she never really incorporates him in her life. He is an oddity who's come into her life because of the need for her to replace dead people, and she does do that but she replaces fallen men with daughters and, uhm, the daughters have got ideas of their own and she's got no control over those ideas and she is angry, bitter but excruciatingly funny and endearing.

Kate Evans: and with sort of invented prejudices and histories as well

Sally Morrison: Oh wonderful how she's invented her history. My mum used to do that. . . She's dreamed up a grand history for herself. My mother's family dreamt up a grand history for

itself and Stella likewise dreams of this wonderful history for herself. Yes she's descended from Lord's and all this kind of thing. Whereas, in actual fact, if you look at the information, that's not where they came from at all, but we won't be too worried about that. Stella has the idea that she is gentry and nobody is going to shift her from that idea of herself.

Kate Evans: And meanwhile she is essentially homeless and has to be moved around from one old person's home to another. So there again the pressure on Isobel is extraordinary.

Sally Morrison: Well this happened to me, my mum was in a nursing home, I thought: Oh yes I've got her settled, fantastic, safe. And that nursing home closed and I had to find a second one. Well I tell you it was just - it's the worst thing in the world have to put your mother in a home. My mother was getting old, old, old. My mother died when she was touching 99 and you think to yourself you don't want this person to suffer, they're your mother and you want to keep them in the active part of old age care for as long as you possibly can. My mother was bright, she was nuts but bright. You want to keep them in the section of old-age care where they can communicate, they can benefit and they can be of benefit to other people. You don't want them shifted off to the nursing home simply because they're frail and so I had that dilemma with poor old mum and we dealt with it as best we could but, you know, all of a sudden at that end of life the opportunities narrowed down to "you take this or you've got nothing".

Kate Evans: So that screaming frustration, that internal just wanting to lash out that poor Isobel is dealing with as she's trying to negotiate these places and her mother and what her mother was saying. You didn't have to stretch too far to imagine that frustration.

Sally Morrison: The frustration was fresh on the page, allow me to say, and I wrote the frustration out in this book. I wrote it because I knew a lot of women my age were coping with exactly the problems that I had. I wanted to put it down on a piece of paper and say now this is how it is. I am not saying this is how it should be but this is how it is.

Kate Evans: Sally Morrison's novel *Window Gods* is published by Hardie Grant. There was so much to talk about that we didn't quite make it to Afghanistan which is also a significant part of the book.