

LOCH COMPUTER

In May 2015, the novelists Alice Thompson and Ruth Thomas were asked to discuss what 'remoteness' and 'connectedness' mean to them as writers in the digital age. They explored the benefits and the disadvantages of working with IT, in relation both to the process and the content of their writing. They posed themselves a number of questions, and here is a précis of their conversation.

QUESTION

As writers we all have to promote our work using social media such as Twitter, Facebook etc. Does this result in a conflict between your creative process and using technology to promote your work?

Ruth:

Yes, I'm afraid I have various hang-ups about social media, and I think it's because I'm someone who likes to observe rather than to be observed – a trait that a lot of writers share, of course. The advent of social media has made me aware that writing, for me, feels a lot closer to acting than self-confession – ie., it's a way of using reality and twisting it to create something new. Setting up a Twitter account and proclaiming what 'I' think about the world makes me nervous, and also makes me realise how much I consider my words before I am happy to put them on the page.

Alice:

Promotion is a very different scenario from writing – it's about subjective advertisement rather than the transformation of thoughts, and requires employing different linguistic skills. Technology is a highly useful tool for communicating one's profile to the general public but requires a specific perspective.

QUESTION

What is the difference between the language of fiction and the prose style of social media?

Alice:

Blogs consist of the writing of opinion and tends to the factual, while fiction-writing often involves metaphor and simile. There's also the matter of process, where writing is imagined and revised – the immediacy of writing on social media often creates transparent, highly accessible language that is unmediated by imagery.

Ruth:

In fiction, I often explore 'why' something happened, not what happened. I think social media tends towards the latter. So there is a kind of disconnect for me between these two types of writing. As a fiction writer I've always had a sense of there being an 'ideal reader' with whom I can communicate on an almost telepathic level – and in a way, the idea that you can now communicate with thousands - if not millions – of people can be somewhat terrifying. There is a real collision between writing as a kind of philosophy and writing inane commentary about bus journeys and breakfast cereals etc. (Insights into bus journeys and breakfast cereals form a crucial part of my work, but through the prism of a fictional character!)

QUESTION

How do you examine the themes of technology in your fiction?

Ruth:

I'm only just beginning to handle the idea of the 21st century in my work... it seems that I need a long period of reflection about social change and I do a lot of looking back, which doesn't lend itself to recent IT developments. Instant communication can also wreck suspense in a plot if you're not careful - while 21st-century characters being 'out of contact' can create implausibility. A lot of my plots are to do with mystery and unspoken things, so I have to work around new technology and a 24/7 news culture quite carefully...

Alice:

I tend not to use technology in my novels. I find the immediacy of communication it involves – mobile phones or emails – counterproductive to the slow-burning of narrative revelations. I'm also drawn to historical fiction – three of my novels are set in the past – where technology is obviously not an issue. I prefer a time where the present is processed more slowly, intuitively and deeply than our technological age allows, where news has become outdated almost before it has happened.

QUESTION

How does technology help or hinder the process of writing?

Alice:

I always write my first draft by hand. I find the immediacy of the connection between thought and hand helpful to the imaginative process. A kind of automatic writing can take place in that initial first writing of the novel. The following draft I type up on the computer. This change from hand-written to printed is extremely helpful in allowing an objective reading of the first draft. Technology is also hugely helpful in the restructuring of the plot and minute editing of sentences. Changing the font in later drafts also helps with a fresh reading of my writing.

Ruth:

I have always written on a word processor because when I began as a writer in the 90s my boyfriend was studying for an MSc in IT, and had early access to such clonky word processing programs as Wordstar and Wordperfect. So that's where I cut my teeth as a writer, and I have an emotional bond with the keyboard as a result. I do find, though, that using a word processor lends itself a lot more happily to short story writing than it does to novel writing – it's very easy to get lost in a lengthy draft which floats rather amorphously around the screen. I love the stage where I print out and work from the page – this general involves **sellotape and scissors** – partly, I think, because it makes the whole process of being a writer more **tactile**. Most of the time you're so much in your head, and working with pen and paper is very grounding. I think I will always write short stories on the screen but for my next novel I am seriously considering using a typewriter.

QUESTION 5

The paradox of using social media for communication is that it can actually isolate us. Do you agree?

Ruth:

I think the sheer volume of IT communication can create a kind of apathy and even rudeness that didn't previously exist in my life. There is a lack of filters – these days I delete emails that might actually be interesting or useful just because I get too many of them. There's also a conflict for me in revealing some personal story for the sake of promoting my work: I have to steel myself to respond to requests from publicity departments for 'a personal take' on a topic. Something I would happily share with a friend or even with a crowd in a room feels too much like self-promotion if it's arbitrarily splashed across the internet. So, yes – broadcasting something like that can feel isolating, mainly because of this conflict between the 'public' writer and the private individual.

Alice:

The constant demands for publicity often involve emails asking personal questions about one's life or writing. This allows time to think about what one wants to reveal but sometimes I do miss the one-to-one interviews about my writing which often generate more interesting and personal results.

QUESTION

How does being remote affect your writing?

Alice:

Technology is all about communication and the challenge of writing a novel is finding a place where we can allow our imagination and thoughts to blossom naturally. The daily invasion of emails with the demands they entail is counterproductive to the imaginative space needed to create. However I often write first drafts in noisy cafes as the hubbub of other people's voices allows me to drift off into my unconsciousness more easily. The murmur of strangers' voices is a very different distraction from the pertinence of an email that requires an immediate answer. There's an odd closeness to humanity sitting alone in a café that is far more real and comforting than receiving an anonymous-feeling email.

The remoteness of a natural landscape I find hugely inspiring to my writing. The Falconer was very influenced by the Scottish Highlands and both Pharos and Burnt Island were inspired by Shetland. Remote landscape also seems to replicate the state of mind required for creating – a sense of open space and limitless possibilities.

Ruth:

For me, physical remoteness is a lot less important than the luxury of time. Huge rural spaces also intimidate me somewhat – I prefer the intimacy and eccentricities of city life. I used to need a particular set-up to feel happy writing – a certain room, a certain time of day etc, but now I seem to have far less time to hide away and write, and because of that I find I can write pretty much anywhere. I enjoy the domesticity and noise of cafes, and the human life that goes on in them. Writing for me is always about the small scale and the world of the senses – the sights, smells, overheard bits of conversation, and it's really important (if not crucial for one's own sanity) to go out and engage with it!

When I was at the start of my novel, *The Home Corner*, I spent some time as a resident writer with the Hosking Houses Trust, near Stratford. This is a scheme that provides female writers over the age of 40 with a period of time and space in which to write. It was hugely valuable in allowing me to just sit and reflect and I don't think I could have written *The Home Corner* without it. The loneliness did take some getting used to, although by the end I relished the solitude.

QUESTION

What role does Google play in the research for your novels?

Ruth:

Google can be a fantastic help in finding out answers to bizarre questions. Once it would have taken a lot of detective work - phone calls, trips to the library etc – to discover some small fact salient to your work. Now you can just dip seamlessly in and out of your own text – eg, when did the miner's strike begin? What year was Vienna in the charts? When was Tchaikovsky born? Having said that, it's still crucial, as a writer, to experience the 'fact' of things for yourself. There is also the danger that there is so much information easily available that your own narrative could become side-tracked. There's a balancing act between maintaining a sense of your own story and allowing the serendipity of

life to find its way into your work. For instance, when I went out for a walk through the meadows the other day, I saw a man dressed up as a giraffe playing the vibraphone. That's something that probably wouldn't enter your head if you were just sitting in front of your computer screen.

Alice:

Google can be hugely advantageous in answering the little queries one might have while researching a novel – such as where the light switches are positioned on a train carriage in 1926. However, for a more general sense of place it is often valuable to actually visit, as there is a certain atmosphere one can soak up from reality that will also permeate the writing. Smells, vistas, atmosphere and mood can sometimes only be felt by actually being somewhere - and that is intangible on a computer screen. It is often a fine judgement call whether to Google or buy a train ticket.

QUESTION

What do you think of new types of reading formats, like Kindle?

Alice:

The pleasure of holding a book and the tactile pleasure this brings is just too great to be sacrificed for the convenience of a Kindle. Also, one has a sense of the arc of a story reading a book – where one actually is, in it – which is missing when reading a Kindle, one screen page at a time. One has only a very rough idea while reading, if one is at the beginning, middle or end of a story. The process of reading on Kindle – the bright screen that hurts the eyes, the sense of being in a structural vacuum, cannot compete with the earthy joys of reading on paper.

Ruth:

I still haven't succumbed to the idea of reading on Kindle, despite people telling me I should. It's often cited as being excellent if you want to travel with a lot of books – but I've never travelled with more than a couple of books anyway. How many books can one person cope with in a fortnight? I think quite a lot of my resistance stems from the fact that I grew up as a book illustrator's daughter and have always seen a book as a beautiful and tactile thing that should be cherished. I also feel that it's important, as a reader, to know where you are within a text – to have a sense of beginning, middle and end. Reading a Kindle seems an alien thing to me, like being an astronaut floating around the universe. The

tactile and aesthetic nature of a book is significant, not simply the abstract ideas within it.

This is a transcript of a conversation that took place between the novelists Alice Thompson and Ruth Thomas on 12th May, at the Farr Institute, Bioquarter, University of Edinburgh. They were speaking at a meeting of the Loch Computer project, set up by Professor Robert Crawford of the University of St Andrews.