

## Sarah Waters interviewed by Sarah Broughton

### *Can you talk about why you started writing?*

I started writing fiction after I did a PhD thesis which was about lesbian and gay history - the idea of lesbian and gay history in lesbian and gay writing, I came up with the idea of writing *Tipping the Velvet*, never having written any fiction before. And so thought 'give it a go' – luckily it all worked out and I got an agent and then a publisher. And, in the sense that it had grown out of a PhD thesis, I did feel for a really long time that I wasn't a proper writer and I still feel that a little bit, although not as much as I did. Now my writing's become my life, or at least my career. Because it (*T the V*) felt like a continuation of an academic project, but then organically, because having written 'Tipping', I had more ideas - so then I did 'Affinity', the second book. So in a sense it's been very much like that – each novel has grown out of the last and I haven't been able to foresee at the start of the process where its going and how I'm going to feel about it all when I've got there. So, like I say, I do feel like a writer now because that's how I make my living and that's how I spend my days. But I still feel, I mean this whole Orange business is quite scary because the thought that people are taking me seriously as a writer – I mean it's great in lots of ways of course – but it's also terrifying because you have to live up to it. And just for me personally it's kind of scary to be labelled like that, it's all very well if you're just feeling your way into some sort of career, but to have the label put on you is something a bit different.

### *Does the Orange prize feel, because it's a bigger literary prize, feel like that in a way that being nominated for the Sunday Times Young Writer of the Year and Welsh Book of the Year didn't, did that still feel like it was a bit like starting out?*

You're right, I haven't really thought this through, it does feel qualitatively different in that way - yes precisely for that reason. All the other ones have been new writer, young writer blah blah blah, and you kind of think 'that's okay; if I was to stop writing now then it doesn't matter!' But this does feel a little bit different – it's more about the literary establishment, although I know it's not. ***But I suppose it feels more like you're tiptoeing to the Booker?*** Which is odd! And not something that I ever anticipated when I started writing and not even something I was aiming for, the whole thing has been like a series of hurdles – or a series of entering different rooms, you just can't see what's coming up. But once you're there everything slightly changes and you can't go back. ***Does it help – in any way?*** It helps financially. For a few years now I've been making enough money to live off which is really, really nice. And it helps because it encourages your publishers to take you even more seriously. It helps in terms of what you've got already, for giving it an extra push towards people's attention. But in terms of the anxiety it produces, for me anyway; it's not necessarily help. ***Do you have any feelings about the fact it's the Orange prize for 'women', because it's another label – you've already been labelled out of existence... uh huh. with lesbian classic etc.*** That doesn't really bother me – it's a prestigious award, that's the thing.

### *Going back to the actual process of the writing and the first book - when you say it came out of the academic stuff – was that because you found, within the research, lots and lots of stories like the one you eventually fictionalised?*

It was more about ideas, actually. It was more that I came up with that story as a way of exploring ideas because I was really interested in how we think of the lesbian and gay past and how the lesbian and gay past has been constructed completely differently at different times depending on current ideas about homosexuality. That's what the whole thesis was about and I just began to think there was room for some sort of novel exploring, not just what might be the lesbian past, but also playing around with ideas, playing around with it in a way – the book's quite playful, it takes on a 19<sup>th</sup> C form but it's also got lots of allusions to other sorts of literature - so it was lots of fun to write. It was very much I had to do my own work in terms of finding actual lesbian history to put in this book it was more idea based. *Did you feel conscious of writing in a lesbian tradition? When I read it, I was thinking of years ago reading things like Naid press, some of them better than others – but lots of them were historical....?* Yes, very much so, because those were the kind of books I was looking at in the last part of the thesis. I was looking at contemporary lesbian and gay fiction and one of the things that really struck me was that there's lots more ambitious gay men's fiction, historical fiction. I don't know if you've read 'Patience and Sarah'? Yes. Which was a really lovely book, but there's been historical fiction since then that's tended to be the same – quite small scale, non urban and I just thought there's room here for a very different kind of book. *It feels like a 19<sup>th</sup> C 'Queer as Folk' - same sort of sharpness. It still feels like it's still not being done. I remember reading 'Rubyfruit jungle' and not thinking there was any connection but feeling there wasn't anything else like that here – I'm not even sure if there is now.* No, maybe not, there's been a lot of lesbian crime fiction around which I guess has captured a gritty urban experience, but if you don't like crime fiction, which I don't particularly, there's not been anything at all really. I think there's been American stuff, like Sarah Schulman, really good stuff, really edgy and contemporary.

*You're writing something that's set in the 20<sup>th</sup> C at the moment?*

Yes, set in the forties, so I've made this whole leap which has been quite interesting. It's been great because it's been quite liberating for me, a completely new period and a completely new idiom and new artefacts – like cars - but it still has an enough of a historical edge – the women still wear gloves, all my favourite things. Still in London, still urban - but yes it has been a challenge too because I didn't know anything about the forties, so I've had to read a lot about it and read, more excitingly for me in a way, a lot of forties fiction which I really never have before and which I really enjoyed reading. But it's very early days; I've only just started writing about 2 weeks ago, proper writing. With this book, and it might be something about the period, because up till now I've been very consciously taking on 19<sup>th</sup> C formulas in a way and writing, especially with Fingersmith and Tipping, long stories with twists and revelations and secrets and 40's fiction just isn't like that, I knew I couldn't really do that with the period, so it's become a slightly more impressionistic experience for me, a process, it's more about a mood. What I'm getting from the fiction I'm reading is more about a mood, it's a rather cynical mood and I'm sure the war plays into that. It's very much more domestic and about relationships between people so, for the first time, I think I'm trying to write about proper grown up relationships – although everyone's in a relationship with somebody, but I haven't really done that before, I've written about desire but I haven't written about people working it out - so it may all go horribly wrong, but I've been enjoying it so far.

*How do you actually do it – this will be your fourth one – do you always plan them?*

I have done, very much so, even with Tipping which is why this one is a bit of a jolt. I've started this book without having that very detailed plan. I really do know exactly, since the books have become increasingly complex – I've had to know where I'm going and really I've done it to the extent where I have to know what needs to be in each chapter. ***So you start with a rough outline -which is an ideas outline – or do you start with a character?*** No, I tend to start with, it's interesting isn't it – it's been different each time. With Tipping I knew I wanted to tell a story about somebody moving through different lesbian worlds, so I knew it was going to be a picaresque story and she was going to move from innocence to experience and in a sense that gives you a shape and then it was just a question of finding the right kind of locale that would reach each experience. But with Affinity I was interested in spiritualism, I was interested in prisons and it was really something about the mood or the texture of those worlds and then wanting to bring them together and so trying to find a story that would do that and then coming up with characters, the whole thing about prison visiting interestingly and it just bubbled away and then eventually you get this skeleton. And then with Fingersmith I came up with the first twist – which I borrowed from 'The Woman in White' and I really liked that and I thought about the characters it would need and then built from there. ***And then are you thinking almost in script terms – not quite I need to have a twist on page 24 but?*** Yes it is really and then of course what are intriguing and exciting are the characters. I think characterisation comes last, but it's the most exciting part because you come up with this cast of characters that you need to do these physical things and it's only when you start really fleshing them out that you realise why they're doing them and you think about their motivations and often then they begin to get complex and it becomes a creative writing process – motivation, conflict – and once you begin to get that happening, that's really exciting. ***Lots of stuff says you have to start with character. Character begets action. I'm not so sure. Maybe it's 50/50. I think you have to have some idea of what they're going to do during the story...*** I know writers work in different ways and it depends very much on the kind of thing you're writing, I suppose. But I think in the world, when we read the world, character is the thing we don't have access to, we don't have an insight into people's motivation - all we can see is their actions, you have to extrapolate or interpret from that, so in a sense maybe it's partly to do with that, it feels a natural way to go about it. ***So you go chapter by chapter and then you literally sit down, like you sat down two weeks ago and you just start... chapter one.*** With the last two books I did that. ***Linear?*** Well, with Tipping I started in the middle. I started with Part Two. ***As in London, or with the Diana bit?*** Good question! I think I started with Nancy having run off from Kitty and going to the boarding house. I started at the lowest point! Because that was the section I needed to do the least research for because I'd read a bit about Oscar Wilde and that sort of gay men's world and that's really the world that Nancy ends up in. So while I was writing that I think I then went back and read about oysters and went back to Part 1. But I knew exactly what was going to happen so I could dip in and out – it changed a bit, but I could do that. With Affinity, because I had the two narratives, it was slightly different, it was a much more complex book to write – but I think I did write Margaret from start to finish. ***Without writing Selina's at all?*** No. I jotted down ideas for Selina and then I did Selina's and then I had to find ways of interweaving them. But with Fingersmith I did it as it's written, I wrote Sue's bit, Maud's bit and then Sue's last bit. Then I end up with a draft – and it's a fairly polished draft, but it's a draft that clearly needs a significant amount of work doing to it. So then I'll go back. But, as I say, with this book this has been very different because all I've got in my head at the moment really

is scenes. Because I wanted to get writing I just picked on a scene which just caught my imagination and I've been writing. This book is different too, because it's written in the third person and I've never done that before and again it's fascinating and challenging at the same time and the thing I was saying just now about people being in the world and what's interested me increasingly, with the other books, is that people have this very partial view of things and you can do interesting things in the writing like bringing these partial views into collision or overlapping, juxtaposing them. But if you're writing in the third person theoretically you, the narrator, knows more than anybody... ***what kind of narrator have you got? A knowing narrator?*** Well it's turned out to be quite close to a first person narrator – very much inhabiting one particular character and they're the main focalising character. But potentially it's scary because you can roam all over the place, but it hasn't felt particularly natural for me... ***and it doesn't feel liberating? Because there's a lot more scope and you can go into all sorts of other people.*** Yes, you can – although I'm finding I'm not doing that! I think what's interesting for me is that you get a distance from your main characters which, when you've got a first person narrator you're very much involved in their perspective but I think it generates a slightly more disaffected sort of tone which I quite like for a forties novel, so it feels right.

***To go back to the process - you have a polished draft that's pretty detailed and the right length and all those sorts of things and do you then show that to your editor or agent?***

At that point I'd almost certainly give it to my agent and possibly my editor if I feel comfortable enough with it. Certainly what will have happened before then is that once I've got a significant big chunk of writing I'll have shown that to my agent and actually I've got a good friend who reads my stuff before anyone and her feedback is as useful as anyone else's. So she probably will get first look at it and then I'll have discussed with my agent - in quite a lot of detail - the structure of the book, although I haven't actually so far with this one. But I like to have something fairly polished to give to an editor and after that I'll get her feedback. At that point it's great to get as much reliable feedback because if three people are saying the same thing – you think I need to look at that... ***How many drafts did you do for Tipping?*** It's hard to say because my process of writing is a continual process of revising – I think what tends to happen is I'll write a chunk and each day I'll slightly revise the bit I did the day before, and then I'll get a big chunk and read that and either tinker about with it then or just make very detailed notes about what needs to be done to it. So it happens like that – but that probably happened less with Tipping because it was my first book. I think with Tipping there's probably about 3 drafts – but with Affinity I played around a lot more trying to get the narratives to work and trying out slightly different things and there must have been about five drafts of that, not starting from scratch – whole chunks of it probably remained largely unchanged - but there were key areas which I returned to. And with Fingersmith I still feel like there are one or two fairly troublesome chapters and those chapters I might have tried things in a different order or tried different scenes – so in that sense there's a lot of drafts. ***Do you write quickly?*** I think I write painfully slowly! ***But you appear incredibly prolific – from Tipping coming out in '98?*** It appears slightly speedier than it was because I'd already finished Tipping when I got a publisher and I'd already started Affinity when Tipping came out. I started writing in 1995 so – I suppose it isn't bad – 3 novels, quite long novels... ***Especially the last one...*** Yes and so much of that writing process was just covering ground. I aim to write a thousand words a day, which is only 2 pages;

it's not very much. Often I'll write more – but sometimes I won't and sometimes an amount of it will be rubbish. I started writing last week and I guess I've got about ten thousand words. So I'll get to the point where there's a complete scene and I'll look at the whole thing and tidy it up or at least make notes. So, say with Fingersmith that took about two and a half years to write and I think Affinity was the same but Tipping was much, much quicker. ***Was that because it was a first book – no pressure?*** Yes, and the fact it's a much more straightforward structure, so all sorts of things made that an easier book to write. ***Are you very disciplined, sit at your desk at nine – knock off for an hour at lunchtime?*** Theoretically! These days I'm usually at my computer about 9.30 answering emails and then I usually start writing at 10. But, I was thinking the other day, if you had one of those time-lapse cameras on me I'd look like I was doing hardly anything. These days I finish about 4, but with my stuff there's always other sorts of work I can be doing like research or reading, I like to be reading, so it feels right to stop - usually after about a thousand words and if I feel like I've written one really good sentence I'll be quite content. There were times with Affinity for instance where I was writing for days and days and it all felt rubbish, it felt terrible – so I'd much rather do one day and have something useful than two weeks worth of dross.

***When you started with 'Tipping' you were lecturing still? Yes. And you sent it out to publishers?*** I sent it to loads. ***And you did the first three chapters/synopsis/what do you think of this?*** Yes. ***How did you select those publishers?*** Randomly – just choosing ones that sounded fairly respectable to me and 'Writers and Artists' and Emma Donahue had just come out at that time and so I'm sure I tried her publisher and her agent. ***Did you try for an agent and a publisher at the same time?*** Yes, I did. I didn't get anywhere with publishers, but I did get more encouragement from agents and then finally got my agent, Judith Murray. And then she tried lots of publishers, she had an idea she could place it with a very mainstream publisher and she couldn't – not that Virago's not fairly mainstream – but we got Virago in the end which was great actually and I'm very happy there.

***How does your relationship with your agent work?***

She more or less leaves me alone, although I'll occasionally bounce an idea for a new book. I think there was a point where I had three ideas and she was very clear that she preferred one over the other two. But ultimately it's me and it only can be what I can write. ***With Virago – did you just sell that book or was it a two book deal?*** No it was just that book, for £5,000. Once I've paid back that advance then I get royalties. My advances have stepped up with each book, but I've never fancied a two book deal. Virago have offered to buy this book and they offered to buy Fingersmith but the idea of selling it before I'd written it was horrific. I'm quite happy to sell the next book once I've got confidence in it. But even if they offered me £200,000 I'd say no!

***Did you get to the end of Affinity and then try and sell it? I'm interested in whether you wrote that without the pressure of deadlines from publishers?*** I'm not sure how much I'd written when I sold it, but then it came together quite quickly or at least I got a draft and got feedback from my editor at Virago and at that point I probably sold it. I suppose in that sense I must have ended up with a deadline and that wasn't a problem – but Affinity was a much harder book to write than Tipping and a big part of it was this sense of expectation. ***And that thing of legitimising yourself – now you were a writer as opposed to an academic who had played around with a book. Exactly, it was all sorts of things. And how did they go about selling you, was that***

*difficult? Did you feel that you were pigeonholed?* No, not at all – I don't think they had any great agenda in marketing me. They had a list at the time which was called Virago V which was supposed to be hot, new, young fiction writers and they slightly played up the rompy, racy lesbian which was fine by me. But they didn't market it as a lesbian book which I was quite happy about because I felt with lesbian writing it tends to find its own readership so in a sense I was happy to have it nudged more to a mainstream audience to get both audiences. But then the book did alright, with both audiences and certainly then the way it then became taken up as a lesbian classic I don't think Virago had expected or aimed at that.

*Was it a conscious decision to put less sex in the 2<sup>nd</sup> & 3<sup>rd</sup> book?*

I think the sex thing is part of something else which is that I think it seems to me that what a lot of lesbian readers have liked about all the books is that they treat lesbianism as fairly incidental so that, in a funny sort of way, lesbian desire is very central to the plot - but also very incidental. It's just taken for granted and I know that lesbian readers that talk to me really like that because that's how most lesbians live their lives and maybe that's meant it's been easier for a straight audience to enjoy the books as well, I don't know. The reason there was more sex in Tipping is that was very much a story about someone discovering their own lesbian identity and it was basic to the plot really. I wanted to put sex in the other books too – there is none in Affinity and I liked that a lot in the end because it's all underneath. And in Fingersmith it just didn't feel right, partly because the main characters are very young and it was so much about them entering a world rather than going through different bits of it. With this book I'm writing now, it will have more sex in it because it's about adult lesbians in adult relationships - so it serves a function. But it does cross my mind, even as I'm writing it, will this book be too lesbian for a mainstream audience? Somebody said to me the other day she'd noticed there was increasingly less sex in the books and was it something my publishers had pressured me into and I was horrified by the idea that I might want to do that, that I might want to tone it down. It's not something I've ever wanted to do at all except because, as I say with this next book, it's more because I've got this - I clearly appeal to lesbian readers and I've somehow got this mainstream appeal too and it's a bit of a juggling act to get it right and in a way I just shouldn't think about it. ***I think it would be almost impossible where you're writing scenes that feel right for those characters to also then have one eye, a year, two years down the line, on what somebody might think of it...*** Yeah, I mean I couldn't really, but it does cross your mind. On the whole I like to think that we're at a time when the explicitly lesbian fiction can be also be taken seriously as fiction that can address bigger issues too. I mean a writer like Ali Smith is very good at that in the sense that her novels are about big ideas. ***You don't see on her stuff 'lesbian classic' which with your books – even in Affinity because they quote reviews from Tipping so it sets that that up for that book as well. I wonder if Fingersmith had been your first book whether it would have gone the Ali Smith route because it is interesting that they don't put her in that box.*** Although, to be fair although 'Hotel World' has a lesbian element but it's more about relationships between all sorts of different women isn't it? I mean 'Like' is a much more lesbian book.

***Do you feel you are part of a group of contemporary women writers or contemporary historical writers, do you think of me and Phillipa Gregory or me and Jeanette Winterson and Ali Smith or...***

I don't know, I think different things at different times – like Venn diagrams. I feel slightly baffled when I try and get a grip on contemporary writing. I find it more interesting when other people say to me... It really is like a Venn diagram sometimes the books can put it in a different context and it can make sense in each of those contexts and that's quite exciting in a way.

***You've got Tipping being filmed for TV. Was it bought immediately?***

It was bought really quickly – well you know the way it happens, that a production company buys an option on the rights – and it was bought fairly quickly by Sally Head and that was terribly exciting. And they got Andrew Davies on board almost immediately, which was obviously also very exciting. And he has a production company of his own and he bought an option on Affinity, so that all happened very quickly and then it all languished because they were trying to get the funding with the BBC and then they did. For a few months last year it was like 'is it going to happen? it's not going to happen?' And then suddenly it did and then since then it's all moved incredibly quickly - as I suppose it does and they bought the rights and they're filming at the moment. ***How involved have you been in the process?*** Not in terms of having any real creative input into it, but they've been very nice about including me in the process, all of them have and I think if I'd pushed for it I could have got more inclusion. I mean obviously once you sell it, you hand over all control and that was fine by me. ***You never wanted to adapt it?*** No, it's a completely different form of art and Andrew's terribly good at it, obviously, and maybe more importantly - right from the very beginning it was clear that they wanted to do a very faithful adaptation and something that was very much in the spirit of the book. So I was happy to hand it over and to me it's just been a source of interest, it's been fascinating to see it happening, I've been down on set once and I'm going again next week. In fact, they've got me a part as an extra, in the music hall bit. ***Were you involved in casting?*** Not at all. ***So who's playing the leads?*** Rachel Stirling, who is Diana Rigg's daughter, a young actress, is playing Nancy – she's done some TV stuff, she's actually fab but fairly unknown. ***And did you look at her and think 'that's her'?*** No, not at all! They've cast Anna Chancellor as Diana who actually is somebody that I had thought 'Anna Chancellor would be perfect' so I'm delighted about that – she is exactly how I pictured Diana. So that's great and Keeley Hawes as Kitty and Jodhi May as Florence, which is interesting and I have to say is far too beautiful to be Florence who is more of a Lesley Sharp kind of actress. But it is weird when they don't match my, somehow it's like a process of translation, yes it's not my world, but it's a different world ***Do you feel the script is true to it?*** Very much so, where Andrew's made changes they've obviously been just the changes when they're turning a novel into a film and there's one more significant change at the end where - you know there's a rally at the end in Victoria Park - and I guess that would have been expensive to film and Andrew has that in a music hall and not all the ex girlfriends turn up, which is a shame – I quite liked that, ***because that's always what it's like – your worst nightmare...*** at Gay Pride! Which is exactly what happens. But anyway – that's gone, but that's okay – it's just a slightly different ending. ***And that goes out in the autumn?*** Yes. ***And has Fingersmith been bought?*** Sally Head has bought an option on Fingersmith too and the BBC seems keen, but it's early days. ***It must be fascinating to think that something has this whole other life that you never dreamed of when you were writing it?*** Yes, it was weird to go to the actors read through, with all the crew as well, that I went to and that was the first time it began to seem real - because I thought

all these people have got work because of my book, that was really weird! And the screenplay is half my dialogue and half Andrew's and the bits that are mine, I mean I remember writing them in my bedroom in Dalston and suddenly here they were being spoken by Anna Chancellor and even the phrase 'tipping the velvet' – suddenly this phrase will be propelled into people's living rooms. ***Does that make you feel that actually you're a political writer, because that's a political statement in a way?*** Well, I suppose it is. Somebody else who was interviewing me asked me about something like that the other day and I suppose so. I suppose I'm so used to that sort of fellowship, I'm so used to the idea of sexual identity being a political issue that in a sense I don't think about it so much anymore, but I guess you're right and I like that idea, but at the same time that's all tempered by 'here's two gorgeous women'. I mean it's a great advert for lesbianism but at the same time you think, yeah that's great up to a point but ultimately the politics... ***it's a lipsticking of them?*** Yeah exactly! But I'm not going to complain about that!

***In terms of your background, I was thinking that, particularly in Fingersmith, you've got really strong, really vivid characters – were there people in your family that you drew on for that? Did you have any wild relatives? No, no – the opposite! Have they always been in Wales?*** My dad's English, but in fact I've never had any contact with his side – he's lost contact. His parents died, he had a sister with whom he's since lost contact – which seems amazing, but I guess maybe that's part of a generation thing. So my background was very Welsh. ***Not Welsh language?*** No, we did a bit of Welsh at school but and it was probably just before the time when there was much more effort being made, it's a shame really. But a small town, very small town – Neyland which is about 5 miles from Milford Haven, which in itself is not huge, but Neyland's tiny. ***So one cinema, village hall?*** In Neyland? Not even a cinema – pubs and chapels.

***Is being Welsh an identity that's important to you, I'm struck by the fact that you say 'born in Wales' in your books – and not everyone does?*** It comes and goes in the sense that it feels more important in different contexts and so I do like to make the point. I mean I live in London and like lots of people in London you tend to think London's the centre of the universe, but I still get really cross when people say England when they mean Britain and things like that. But I think it's more about a small town thing – often I'll go to places all over Britain and there'll be a small town that's like Neyland and I'll think I know exactly what it's like to grow up here and the Welshness is sort of incidental to that in a way. But having said that, the Welshness is just an extra layer of foreignness from the metropolitan centre and it has its eccentricities too – growing up in a small town that had a kind of Welsh flavour to it – 'Under Milkwood' kind of... My ex girlfriend who'd always lived in London said it sounded like the Deep South when I used to tell her about things and that, in that sense, has gone into the writing. I like the experience of living in London but having grown up in a radically different place. ***Do you think that's particularly Fingersmith, that idea of the 'Borough' – it's like an enclave isn't it, tightly knit?*** Yes, now you mention it, and I think what's fed into things like that has been things that my mum's talked about from when she was growing up in the 40's and 50's. Very much so and I'll take incidents and it seems weird to be using stuff from the 40's and 50's in a Victorian context but it works very easily and I'm sure it's the thing about small towns. So in that sense there is something about the Borough that's a bit like Neyland – but I hadn't thought of that before! I've used one name, William Inker, was a boy I

went to school with – that’s the first time I’ve ever done that, but anyway – I think that is symptomatic of something like that. ***And you only ever lived in Neyland – until you went to university?*** No, we went to Middlesbrough – my dad got a job, because it’s all oil refineries down there – so it was quite a disruptive period – from when I was 8 to 12. We moved but kept our house in Neyland so we spent all the school holidays in Neyland, me and my mum. Then we came back when I was 12 and I went to school in Milford Haven – so it is weird, it’s complicated – so I tend to say I just lived in Neyland. ***Did you feel like you lived a double life – or was Neyland always home?*** Neyland was always home, but it made the time in Middlesbrough odd, because my home was elsewhere and I’d rather have been back in Neyland because I was a bit of a foreigner and made aware of being Welsh for the first time, in that sense, being a bit different and it was weird moving backwards and forwards, so it was disruptive. ***Were you then conscious of there’s a whole world out there and life was bigger than Wales?*** Yes, well actually it was just a question of going to university and I went to Canterbury which isn’t that big and I lived in Whitstable! ***I didn’t realise – that’s where the oysters come from (in Tipping)?*** Yeah, I lived there for two years and that’s where I had my first relationship with a woman, so it all went into the book in a way... So in a sense it wasn’t that different a world, particularly Whitstable because Whitstable at that point – it’s got trendy lately – but at that point it was a bit seedy. So was it that I wanted to leave Wales? Actually, if I’m honest, it probably was a bit – but probably that teenage thing of just being desperate to get away from where you grew up – and London – did exert a bit of a pull. ***But you didn’t want to go to University there?*** I did apply, but I got rejected – I applied to the UCL and they didn’t want me. ***So you did English at Canterbury and then?*** Then I did an MA in Lancaster for a year and then I moved to London and then after another couple of years did a PhD in London so I’ve been here ever since. ***And this feels like home?*** Yeah, it does, partly because London is full of people who weren’t born here, people who’ve moved here for a reason and I like that and in that sense I feel like a Londoner now. But then it feels odd to have a homeland elsewhere. ***Is there a heritage that you feel part of - do you feel an affinity with Dylan Thomas or RS Thomas or....?*** No I can’t say I do to be honest. I mean we were aware of it at school, but my contact with books was mainly through studying English at school and of course the syllabus was English, really solidly English and I liked it. My English teacher at Milford Haven was Robert Nisbit, who does some writing, so he was a bit of a way in to other sorts of Welsh writing, but on the whole I have to say it didn’t figure that significantly. ***Do you think of yourself as a Welsh writer – one of the reasons for doing this article is that it feels like you’re not really known in Wales – do you have a Welsh fan base?*** I’ve got a following in Neyland now I can tell you! My parents and my sister are always ringing me up saying ‘Jenny the Bread’s read your book’. But then again I feel like a fraud calling myself a Welsh writer for all the reasons I’ve said, I don’t feel part of the Welsh literary scene – I don’t even know much about the Welsh literary scene and it’s not that I want to distance myself from it and the lesbian and gay thing as well – for me anyway is very London based. ***So you haven’t got plans to set anything in Wales?*** No, but I wouldn’t rule it out.

***Coming from an academic background – how would you feel if your work were analysed in that way?*** I do get that. ***Are you on a course?*** I am! I’m certainly on some English modules in America. I’ve got a friend who was teaching at one of the New York State universities and I went over and spoke to the students and I loved it. It is odd, having spent so many years analysing books – I feel slightly bemused about

it in a way – but it’s kind of interesting. *Do you think when you read some of the stuff about it, ‘that’s how I would have done me’ or does it open another door?* Sometimes it does. A writer called Carla Jay sent me a review she’d written for a Lesbian Review of Books – that was interesting because we had an overlapping literary and academic background and she was reading it in that kind of way – which was interesting. But it’s more interesting to get feedback from people who have a very different background to me and who bring a different sense to it. What seems to me a bit redundant about the academic process is that maybe, because I’ve come from an academic background, I’m conscious that I’m writing a book and what I’m putting in and if somebody’s just going to come along and deconstruct it and expose all the things – that seems odd in a way now. The one thing that really inspires me is that I used to feel very passionately about books being representative so you would get angry about a film like ‘Basic Instinct’ because of the portrayal of lesbians as axe murderers but now, as a writer, I feel that you deal with generalities – but on the whole you’re much more interested in specifics and if I wanted to write a story about a lesbian who was an axe murderer it would be because I was very interested in that one particular incident and I wouldn’t necessarily be thinking that what I was writing was something that was representative...*and that idea that you carry the responsibility for how lesbians are depicted, in Affinity – the lesbian is awful she double crosses her and cheats her and drives her over the next bridge..* I know! I did think when I was writing it ‘oh my God they’re going to hate me for this’ – it’s just like an old fashioned gloomy lesbian story where the main character kills herself at the end and everyone’s double-crossing everyone else. I think there is this potential clash between me wanting to pursue certain things within my writing career and meeting the demands or the desires of the lesbian reading community. I know that, for example, over the years I’ve heard lesbian readers express disappointment that Jeanette Winterson, having written ‘Oranges are not the only Fruit’ a very forthright lesbian book then seems to have got increasingly arcane and maybe I shared that once – but now of course I think she’s not going to want to write ‘Oranges’ for ever and she wants to pursue what’s in her head and I’d be personally very sad if because I wanted to push my writing in the direction that felt right for me I was going to disappoint anybody – that would be a real shame. And, like I say, it did shock me when that woman suggested to me that maybe my publishers had put pressure on me to tone it down. I think with this next book it will be more lesbian than the previous two and it will be interesting for me to see how that works given that I’ve got a slightly wider readership now - I don’t know how it will work. *And does that feel very much that those are all the stories you want to tell, because that’s your world - in the widest sense – that all your main characters are lesbian and in the next book so you’ll then have written 4 books which all centre around that – does that bother you or does that feel that’s great because these are the stories that I want to tell?* Yes, obviously I’m interested in lesbian stories and lesbian lives and I don’t see that interest being exhausted just yet but I might want to change – I don’t know. But I’d like to think it would be possible to spend an entire writing career writing lesbian stories and that they’ll be different enough and that each one will be a larger narrative – it would be sad if that wasn’t the case. And after all I’m sure lots of gay men writers – I mean nobody would expect Alan Hollinghurst, for example, not to write...*or straight people to suddenly – God forbid! But that comes back to the pigeon-holing thing...* Yes it does, and people often say ‘do you think you’ll always write lesbian stories?’ and of course I understand the question but, as you say, nobody would ever say to a straight writer ‘will you always write straight stories?’ and people, funnily

enough, I don't think would necessarily say to a black writer 'will you always write black stories?' I think there'd be more of an assumption they would or that they can do what they want...*or that they shouldn't ask*... Exactly. But inevitably you do think about these issues, *Do you feel that once you're in the middle of the narrative that the narrative takes over – they do start to go down their own path and narratively I have to make them do that?* I suppose so – although when that happens I've always been slightly suspicious because when things feel right it's often because they're familiar and when they're familiar it's often because they're a bit of a cliché and in a way you should always be working against those sort of impulses. So far when I've had surprises it's been more about my characters and their relationship with the things that my plot requires them to do and the plots always been quite clear. But sometimes a minor character I'll get rather taken with – I used to think it was terribly precious when writers used to say characters took on a life of their own, and I still do really – but I do know that feeling of sometimes a character nudges their way into it a bit more than you thought they were going to and demands a bigger part, but so much of it is just an intuitive process it's odd to try and break it down. *So you went from writing academically to writing fiction – and it came easily – construction, narrative voice?* Yes, it did, although I haven't re-read Tipping since I wrote it and occasionally I'll dip into it and I can see things where I think 'God, I wish I'd done that differently' and I'm sure if I read it as a whole – I think it's very much 'a first novel'. Nobody had ever said the word 'motivation' to me and it's so crucial - I can't believe I wrote that whole book without really thinking about things like that. *Do you think that's because it was instinctive, It must have been I suppose?* I suppose I'd read a lot and in that sense I had a sense of how novels work. I realise now that it's very different thinking about novels as a writer than thinking about them as a reader, but even so I must have enough of a schooling in novels through reading and analysing them, critiquing them. *I did think Affinity felt very different – not in terms of standard - as if you'd peeled another layer of emotion in it, does that make sense?* I feel that too, but writing Tipping was just a series of hurdles really, a bit like I was saying earlier – you knew there was a hurdle coming but you didn't know what the next one would be. It was really a case of can I write a paragraph? Can I write a page? Can I write a scene? Even though I hadn't spelt it out to myself before, it became clear that writing was going to be a process of speeding up and slowing down and that's one of the first things I remember really consciously thinking – moving in and moving out. So then it was could I write a scene? Can I string scenes together, oh here's a chapter, and can I write a book? But it was very much a steep learning curve.

*Fingermith is daunting, in terms of the complexity of it and the length, was it a book you felt you could have written as your first book or did you need the experience of two books under your belt?* I'm sure I did really. It's hard for me to get a sense of my own development as a writer – because it seems to me, my experience of writing is that I've been doing it in exactly the same way for seven years but my relationship with the page, that's the thing, and that doesn't seem to have changed. But I suppose of course it must have changed and of course I must have got more confidence and more of a sense of how to do certain things. – but it doesn't feel like that. I suppose it's like any sort of learning process – you don't really feel the process, it just happens. But I'm sure it must be true, given as you say that Fingersmith was a fairly daunting thing to take on, it must have helped that I'd already done the first two. Because in a way I feel that Fingersmith is like a combination of the first two novels, it's a bit rompy and it's got that narrative complexity as well.

***What's your favourite out of your books and what's your favourite bit of your favourite.*** The process of writing *Affinity* was so horrible that wasn't my favourite, although I like it now. ***Why was it hard – because of the pressure of expectation?*** It was partly that, it was partly because it was a grim world. I don't know – I'm terribly fond of *Tipping the Velvet* because it was my first one and because lesbians love that book, not all of them do obviously – but the people that like it *really* like it and that's been a really nice experience. I'm very fond of it in that sense. I'm fond of *Affinity* because I think it's a more profound book – it's got more levels to it, but I'm fond of *Fingersmith* because it was quite ambitious and I can't believe I did it really. It is hard – I like them all in different ways. In terms of which bits – I actually like the mad house in *Fingersmith*, I enjoyed writing those. I quite like the worlds of *Fingersmith* – it's got these very distinct, enclosed worlds – I quite liked that and moving in and out of them. ***What about a character, do you have a favourite character?*** I like Nancy and she feels very close to me in terms of her voice. I like Gentleman (*Fingersmith*) a lot because he's such a villain and he's just so amoral – I like that, it's kind of liberating. I'd never really done a male character before, to that extent, and I was surprised at how much I enjoyed it, how much I enjoyed his freedom – this idea that he goes off wandering and can do anything, be anything. And it's funny because Nancy had all that freedom in a sense in parts of *Tipping* and it's funny that given that she had a lot of freedom, on the streets and stuff and it's a very open book, the books since then have been very closed and a few of the characters have been very disempowered. I don't really know why I've gone down that path. ***I feel like there's this theme that runs through them where the main characters – Nancy, and Margaret in Affinity and Sue and Maud are passive – they begin as passive and then they're empowered or driven to action by falling in love and then, in Margaret's case, she's totally disempowered by that love. But for the most part there is that journey...*** There is... I've had a lot of passive characters because I'm very passive. I'm sure it's that my experience of life is just reacting in a way. Also I think that I've been fairly lucky that I haven't had any, touch wood, great obstacles – even writing feels like that, it's not something I .... I mean I did make that decision it's true... ***I think you're being – sitting and actually writing for seven years...*** but it's a peculiarly passive kind of activity in a way... ***but you have to be incredibly motivated to do it...*** I suppose so, it is funny though – people are always saying to me 'oh these characters are incredibly passive' and I kind of think 'well isn't that how life is for you?' so it's obviously something peculiar to me. But I think in the next book my female characters are far less passive, they're grown-up, they've been through things. ***Are they older?*** They're my age... ***Still writing yourself – when you're fifty you'll be writing books about fifty-year-olds!*** Exactly! That's seems fine to me. It was funny writing *Fingersmith* because they were very young, too young, they were implausibly young considering what they were going through and the way they talked about it. But that was odd because I kept thinking - why have I ended up writing about seventeen year olds? It's weird – but it was because they had to be that age. But with this book I really deliberately wanted to make them my age.

***Do you have writers that have influenced you?*** I have writers that I've admired; I think it's hard to say about influence. If I was being really specific about influence, funnily enough it would be writers like Phillipa Gregory – I don't know if you've read her trilogy 'Wideacre', her first three books – they're absolutely brilliant, so lurid but so compelling and she does such interesting things with the idea of women and

history and with the women's genre, I mean it's very much a women's genre but she does fantastic things with such a feminist analysis. Her background's academic actually. I read 'Wideacre' just before I started my PhD and I'm sure it was partly that that made me think about the genre. So that was a big influence on me. And there's a writer called Chris Hunt who writes gay men's historical novels, published by the Gay Men's Press, and actually it's really interesting because she's a woman but the GMP market her implicitly as a man. She's written a lot, I haven't read the latest one but she's written a lot of historical novels – I mean quite cheesy, if I may say, but very, very thoughtful. But again just doing really interesting things with the genre and she was another writer who just got me thinking about what you can do with the genre, how you could make it accountable to actually quite political issues. So they probably had more influence on me than anyone, but in larger terms – I don't know. I remember in the 80's being passionate about individual novels but that doesn't seem to be something that's happened to me for a long time. I don't know whether it's my age or what's around. But I remember 'Possession', Angela Carter's novels – I remember being bowled over by them, Toni Morrison. So in that sense there was all that ferment of writing then that obviously I admired. ***That was as much for the technical telling of the story as for the content?*** Yes, exactly – certainly that was something that Angela Carter had, that marvellous lushness. Iris Murdoch, I'm a big Iris Murdoch fan – that complexity of narrative. Now, paradoxically, I don't read much historical fiction because I find I get too squeamish about it – people are always saying 'oh you must read this, you'll love it, it's right up your street', but I can't do it. ***Because it feel too close to what you've written or because you're sick of it?*** A bit of both in a way, especially anything that's set in the 19<sup>th</sup> C – I think – 'oh God no, not another one!' So 'Ulverton' is one I loved - it's a masterpiece – I haven't read a good, big, modern novel like that for ages. ***Do you read contemporary novels – stuff that's just come out?*** I like Ali Smith. I just read odd things that come my way. I've got a couple of writer friends – Matt Thorne, I read his stuff and I'm in a book group and we're just about to read Rachel Sieffert book. Something will just come along, often if it's slightly gothic, it occurred to me the other day. But on the whole I tend to get slightly overwhelmed by contemporary fiction, although the one good thing about most modern novels is they're quite short – but it's very hit or miss with me.

***Presumably by now you must be completely steeped in the 'business' of being a writer – festivals etc – do you often find yourself on panels with other writers?*** I do, from time to time; it often makes me uneasy – if it's just a reading that's fine. But sometimes I'm asked to speak and I think that's odd. I've got two things coming up with Matthew Sweeting, 2 festivals have put us together, which I was worried about because although I've been reading stuff about the Victorians and Victorian fiction for 7 years, my knowledge of the period is so partial – I go in and get what I want and come out again. So that is odd – to be put alongside an authority on the 19<sup>th</sup> C – in fact I've insisted that I mainly read because I don't feel I've necessarily got anything intelligent to say outside the sphere of my book – why should I have? So I tend not to do those sort of things – or even, like recently I've had requests to be like an after dinner speaker! which is so strange because writers are the most unfit people to do stuff like that – so I tend not to do those things, unless there are huge fees! But it is odd that there's been this change this year, I mean up till this year I had not so many requests – it's not been a problem to do them all, but now – not that I get loads – but if I did them all there'd be too many. I don't know what it must be like for well-known

writers – they must just get bombarded and I suppose they must just have to be good at saying no.

***Have you been conscious that you've ever had any sort of writer's block?*** Not that I would call writers block. This has been a weird time between finishing the last book and starting this one. Always, up till now, the next book has started bubbling away in my head even while I'm still writing the one before, and I've had like a month or two's break and then I've started writing really – started researching and writing and then I've come up with an entire plot and with this book that just didn't happen and I was having sort of related ideas but too many and they weren't coalescing at all. ***And when did you actually stop writing Fingersmith?*** I think last July or August was when I finally handed the manuscript in and it came out in February. So, yes, it's only very recently that I've had a vision of the whole book – but I've just had to surrender myself to the idea of it being a different sort of process. ***It must be quite difficult having to talk in detail about your previous books when you're trying to immerse yourself in a new book?*** Yes, it is odd – it's been very odd talking about Tipping again and especially as I've really left the 19<sup>th</sup> C. I've been doing these Readers Days recently and Affinity has been a book they've given to their Readers Groups and I find myself forgetting – the people I'm speaking to have read it last week – and yet I don't really want to re-read it. ***Have you got a thing about not wanting to re-read them?*** I haven't re-read any of them – the thought seems horrifying really. ***Because you're worried that you'll see mistakes?*** Yeah. ***You'd think you'd read them and say 'this is amazing!'*** No! ***Maybe in time?*** Maybe!

***Are you thinking, when you've got the book you're writing at the moment out of the way, you'll stick around in the 40's?*** I might do because inevitably I've had more ideas than I'll ever be able to put in one book. I do think it's an interesting time. ***Is it post-war?*** Both, at the moment I'm writing the post-war bit. I'm hoping to do one of those books that moves backwards so I start after the war and then go back to the middle of the war and maybe even go back again. But what really interested me, what got me into the book was the idea of post-war London. I was very taken with that sense of exhaustion and bomb damage and all that sort of thing. I've been becoming really aware of how recent it all is, considering I don't really think we feel the impact of what really happened in London, obviously other cities as well – I keep boring my friends with details of what happened here, how many people were killed here. It's funny I first really started researching it in September and on September 11<sup>th</sup> I'd been reading about the blitz and I was shocked in a way that it took September 11<sup>th</sup> to make me fully take on board what that felt like. Imagine if our city was being bombed around our ears? I can't believe that our parents and grandparents generation lived through that trauma and just to watch London disappearing bit by bit. So I'd like to write something that does justice to that in a way.

***Do you read your reviews? Yes. And are you affected by them?*** Well it's never very nice to get a bad review. ***Have you had many?*** I haven't had that many actually, which has been great but the problem is I think they have a disproportionate impact – you always dwell more on a bad review than a good one. With the good ones I always think – I've got away with it! And with a bad one you think they've seen right through me. Sometimes I think what would it be like to get all bad reviews – such a horrifying thing. I do like to read the reviews – it's always nice to get good reviews, but it's particularly nice to get good reviews that you feel have really understood what

you were trying to do and even if you get a bad review – if you feel that it's justified, it's stuff to take on board...*the thing I've been struck by is how widely you're reviewed...* And what was more noticeable this time was that all the reviews came at once which obviously I was very excited about because people were taking notice. *Do you feel exposed by becoming a more public person?* A bit. Like when the Guardian reviewed me, they had my picture on the front of the arts section and I was sitting on a train the next day and this guy took his paper out and there was my picture – and he noticed and we had a thing about it and someone else had it as well and that was very weird, that was very weird. That hadn't happened before. I have begun to feel more recognised, at literary events and things like that. *And your photo wasn't on Tipping or Affinity but it is on Fingersmith?* Yes. It's a bit of fun, actually I don't mind it. Although it's weird, it's weird for my partner – at the Lesbian and Gay film Festival, we were there a lot and it was kind of noticeable. Although it's not like that when I walk down the street! *It's an odd business though, because the writing is such a private, intimate, quiet world and suddenly...* Yes, but I guess if you really hated it as a writer you would avoid it as much as you could, although obviously there would be some pressure from the publisher to do it. But if I really hated it... I mean I do as much as I want to do really. *The thing that seems awful is when there's a build up to a book coming out and there's a rash of articles about something in their private life – which must be awful – because it's nothing to do with the book....* But then I do think that you can resist that to a certain extent... *You control what you say?* Exactly. *But it is amazing that so many writers seem to give very explicit details about their personal lives...* Yes it is, but I do understand – I mean no one's been interested enough in my private life, but I can understand with other writers there's something quite beguiling about those interviews where you're just talking. I did an interview where I mentioned my ex girlfriend and she was really unhappy and I hadn't said anything really. But it was almost as if I was making capital out of her. But it's obviously an issue to think about.

*This is obviously the year – with Fingersmith & the Orange Prize and Tipping the Velvet that everything steps up a gear?* Yes, it has felt like that and of course I kind of think – it's all downhill from now on. *I'm interested in whether that's had any connection with the adjustment into writing the new novel.* Yes it has, it has played a part. But I think, I think all sorts of things, I think after 3 novels I was just so tired of the novel writing process I maybe just needed a bit longer to get back into it all again and yes there is that sense of the expectation being slightly wider – which is terrifying.

*What do you do for pleasure...?* Films, although I haven't seen a really good film for ages.... What else do I do? I watch TV. I tend to watch 'Bad Girls', 'Eastenders' and I tend to be out a lot – I don't really know why... I can't really commit to long running things – it's the same with sport. I started fencing last year and loved it, but again I couldn't commit to one night a week – it's ridiculous, it sounds like I'm some sort of party girl, I'm not really. I do go to the gym though – because that's something I can fit in. *Is that part of a routine thing?* Yeah. After writing I find it's a good thing to do – that kind of brain thing.... *So it's a full time writer's life now?* Yes, although I feel like I've been writing full time since I started. When I first started I went on the dole basically, so I wasn't working. And when I was teaching, it was very part-time and with things like the PhD as well – I've just been working at home for years and years and years with a very similar working day. And if anything I was much more

disciplined then than I am now. So that doesn't seem to have changed that much, what's changed more are things like having to balance writing with admin. I have to schedule in short days to feel that I'm on top of it – not that I get tons of letters... But that's been a gradual thing. ***And you've never wanted to get an office?*** Can't afford it. I don't if I would.... I mean ideally – I work in my bedroom – so ideally I'd just like an extra room, some sort of study. I used to when I was living with my ex girlfriend – I had my own study, but I lost that room so since then I've been in my bedroom. ***People would be amazed – 'Orange Prize nominee writes in bedroom' – but I suppose it proves the point you can write anywhere... anywhere – that's quiet and that you feel comfortable.*** Yeah, as long as it's quiet and I can close the door. I've got a flatmate but she works out of the house so I've got the flat to myself – that's all I need really. It is hard in the bedroom, because everything gets muddled up and you find your knickers end up on the keyboard! One day I will have a study – and then my writing career will collapse!

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