

## **Bharati Mukherjee: an interview**

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**with Runar Vignisson** Runar Vignisson I was wondering if we could just start by your telling us a little bit about yourself, however you want to start.

**Bharati Mukherjee** I was born in Calcutta, in the Eastern part of India, in 1940 into a wealthy traditional family. When I was growing up I lived in an extended family so that there were 40, 45 people living in the house at the same time. There was absolutely no sense of privacy, every room felt crowded. In fact in the traditional Bengali Hindu family of my kind to want privacy was to be selfish. That was why I was so entranced by the idea of Iceland having little population and lots of space.

**RV** Yes, its very hard, coming from Iceland, to imagine that situation because, you know, there are two people per square kilometre in Iceland. So that's very interesting.

**BM** So in a sense what I did was, in order to make privacy for myself, make a little emotional, physical space for myself, I had to read. I had to drop inside books as a way of escaping crowds. As a result I became a very bookish child, I read and read and read all day. And I learnt to read and write and go into first grade school, in fact, when I was three years old. So that it's a very accelerated "education literacy". I used to read European novels, these massive books by Russian authors like Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky, in Bengali translation as a very small child - under a bed, behind chairs, and so on, find a little dark corner for myself where I could read. The country being described in the books, the people being described in the books, they sometimes seemed more real to me than the real people around me. So that there I was, visualizing and translating into upper middle class Bengali terms the Russian families that I was reading about. I knew from when I was very young, long before I was ten, that I was going to be a writer.

**RV** Oh really?

**BM** Yes. In India there isn't that much room to make mistakes, choose careers and then change your mind about careers.

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**BM** It's not like the West?

**RV** Right. The competition for places in schools, universities and then competition for jobs is so great that really you have to be very focussed very early on. Quite often the parents tell you what you should be, especially to boys - you must be an engineer or you must be a doctor. I think I was lucky being born a woman, though my India was a very genderist country, genderist society, because being a woman meant that it was alright for me to want to be a writer. If I had been a boy child...

**RV** You would have been a engineer or something.

**BM** Yes. I would have been forced to have a useful occupation. I started to write stories from when I was very young, and published some stories in school magazines. They were from the point of view of European historical characters very often. The school that I went to was, even though India was independent when I was growing up, run by Irish nuns, in Calcutta, and run as though it was still a corner of England. And so we learnt British and Irish songs and we read only European history and European and British literature.

**RV** So you learnt English quite early on?

**BM** From age three I was introduced to English, to simple words like cat, mat, bat. But up to age eight I went to a Bengali medium school where there was an English class. So one class only was in the English language. At age eight I went with my family to Britain, and then we spent one year in Switzerland also. But for about three and half years I was away in Europe with my family, and it was in schools in England and having to buy candy or shop and deal with my fellow school children that I really learnt to think in English. At home in England I spoke Bengali, in school I spoke English. So I was perfectly bi-cultural and bi-lingual at that time.

Then I came back to Calcutta and during my whole teenage years, through the fifties, I was in a school in Calcutta that was far more British than any school I'd gone to in England. We had to learn Christian Scriptures, so that even though I was a Hindu, as were the majority of girls at this very elite girls school, the girls from the best families had to go to this school - it was prestige school - and very often we Hindu girls ended up doing much better in the courses on Scripture than the Christian girls. So that gave me both a grounding in English language and literature, and the traditions of the British novel. It also gave me a kind of grounding in Western thought, the Greek and Roman plus Christian references that are the classical and mythological references and scriptural references that work their way so well into English literature. That

helped me as a scholar when I came to Iowa to get my PhD and it also formed me in some ways as a writer.

But I realise now that what the school in India, the very Englishy post-colonial school in India, forced me to do was to devalue my own Indian or Bengali literature, language, ways of thinking. In Indian epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, surrealism, where animals can become gods and monsters or humans, that kind of changing of forms, and time being elastic, that kind of surrealism or magic realism is a natural part of the literary tradition of the Hindu mind. But in this very British school for upper class Indian children of a certain generation, we were told to look down on that kind of magic realism, that kind of literature and instead think highly of, and therefore mimic, the British tradition of logic, satire, irony and realism.

**RV** How do you feel about that now?

**BM** I didn't know that this was going on at the time, as a teenager. It was only when I came to Iowa, to the writers workshop, that I realised the damage of colonialism. I wasn't aware of it growing up in independent India where I was part of the mainstream - but coming here and being part of a minority, and then realising what I had been robbed of in a way.

But my first novel *The Tiger's Daughter*, which came out in 1972, was written while I was still very much inside that British ironic tradition and so while I am making fun of or playing with the limits of E.M. Forster and Jane Austen, following the traditions of E.M. Forster and Jane Austen, for a writer like me, I worked in those ironies into the novel, I was still writing the way that the modern British novel was written - omniscient point of view where you look on it as a whole, look on the world that you're describing as a whole. Into that, though, there are already subversions of that tradition which had begun to occur, or I was already finding my own voice and own material. So that into that world of British satire and novel of manners I was able to work in, quite unconsciously, or I added on, because this was part of my own world, gods and monsters who had a very literal, physical presence. So that my world was not just what is within a village boundary, or the commons as the rural Brits would say, but included a cosmology that included angels and devils and gods and so on, in a physical way.

**RV** I was just wondering why you came to Iowa, why did you come to the US in the first place, and then why to Iowa. I am always asking myself, "Why did you come to Iowa of all places"?

**BM** Some of it is an accident and some of it is not. I am the first generation of Indians who even thought of going to the United States rather than automatically to England. For me it was especially exciting to go to America because England to me connoted colonialism. It was associated with all that I had left behind. Because I had gone to school in England as a child I was aware of what it felt like to be a minority, and I knew I didn't want that. And I didn't think of that racial experience being part of coming to America - rightly or wrongly at the time. Secondly it was an accident. There were two Americans who "intercepted" my family's life in 1960 and it turned out to be a very happy accident. A UCLA drama professor, whose name I don't remember and who I wish I could track down again, was passing through our city with his group of students on a "project India", taking a group of students through India for the summer vacation. He was invited to our house for dinner because all Americans, or foreigners anyway, came to our house for dinner. My father said to him I want this daughter to be a writer where do I send her, and the guy, out of the blue, said, to Professor Paul Engel in Iowa.

**RV** That's quite a compliment.

**BM** My father had never been to the United States. He had spent a lot of time as a student, and as a business man, and as a tourist in Europe but he didn't know America. So he said, OK Iowa's where she will go. And I had an Iowa born American woman who was the wife of a visiting Fulbright professor in that town where we were living. She said, "I used to live close to Paul Engel". She was a neighbour and her brother was a close friend of Paul Engel. "I'll write a letter to the PEO group and recommend you for a scholarship". So that they'll know that your English is good enough for you to do studies in the United States. So through the combination of the two, I was able to get a scholarship because this PEO woman happened to have been there, and that quite accidentally this American drama professor had passed through our town around the same time, I ended up in Iowa.

**RV** So did you start in the writers workshop?

**BM** Yes, to get an MFA. My father's plan was that I would go back at the end of the two years. While I was studying here, one year into my studies, he wrote and said that he'd found the perfect Bengali groom and I was to go back and marry him. He wasn't at all interested in my working or having a profession in that way. It was alright to write stories or novels as a hobby but to be a professor or get into a heavy duty career he didn't approve of. But, again lucky accident that I met Clark in the workshop and

we had a very brief, whirlwind courtship and I got married during a lunch break and stayed on.

**RV** He is a Canadian citizen?

**BM** He is technically now an American. He was born with a complicated series of citizenships. He was born of Canadian parents in North Dakota so that he could have American citizenship, because his parents in that year, in 1940, thought that it was a big advantage. He grew up mainly in the deep south, north and central Florida, Georgia and so on, but he spent summers in Canada and so his writing is about crossing borders. And he always felt emotionally at home in Canada, and Canada was order for him, and his mothers family was respectable and affectionate. His writing and his life was, therefore, sort of divided between North and South, hot/cold, father/mother and the ability to cross borders or not wanting to cross borders is what fuels his work.

**RV** So you have something in common haven't you?

**BM** Yes. And then when we went to live in Canada in 1966, as soon as was legally possible we took out Canadian citizenships. And then after fourteen years, in 1980, because I found that as a dark skinned Canadian, as a non-European immigrant to Canada, life was really impossible, not that it was impossible, but that it was very hard to be...

**RV** Yes, you wrote about that in the introduction to the Darkness stories. I wanted to ask you, because of that, what Canadians think...

**BM** When we came to the United States we changed our citizenships back to US but Clark feels very much a Canadian writer.

**RV** But after you wrote that introduction to the Darkness stories what did the Canadians think of you?

**BM** Well even before that you see, in 1981, as my goodbye to Canada, I wrote what is now thought of as a seminal article on Canadian racism. That was the first time that anyone with any kind of credibility was saying racism exists in this country, lets take it out in the open and then we can deal with it. And that was very harshly received, at first, by the majority and then slowly it apparently affected official policy in Canada. But it was received in a very hostile way in the beginning.

**RV** I am particularly interested in this issue because I fear that Icelanders would have a similar...

**BM** What is your other group there? Who are the non-Europeans coming in? Are Icelanders going to have the same kind of trouble?

**RV** I fear that they would if we have immigrants coming in.

**BM** What kind of immigrants are interested in coming to Iceland?

**RV** There aren't any, hardly any. I fear, because of that, we always say we are not racist, but I always fear that in case we got someone, we will have the same purist attitude that you said the Canadians have.

**BM** Well I feel, I don't know about Iceland because I haven't been there except to change planes a long time ago. Western Europe, Canada and England treat their non-European immigrants, even if they have been there for two and three generations, as though they are guest workers. They never really accept them as real citizens. The other thing is that people who come and work in Europe, or even settle in Europe, are encouraged to retain their cultures so that it would not occur to the immigrants, the Turks for instance, to think of themselves as Danes and so on. Whereas America, because of its mythology, allows me to think of myself - how long have I been here, you know, since 1961 minus fourteen years in Canada - that if I want to think of myself as American I am an American and I have my American citizenship. Whereas in England I would not dare assume that I can be an Englishman unless I was born with a certain kind of name, certain kind of look, certain kind of accent.

**RV** That might be the problem. Although there is a lot of discussion going on in Denmark about that very issue, that people are setting themselves apart and not making the effort to function as Danes.

**BM** The proliferation of ethnic ghettos, I think can be very very dangerous, especially in the nineteen nineties. The more alienated the new non-European immigrants feel the more they become the seething hot bed of terrorism, trouble or potential violence.

**RV** Tell me if you went back again, how will your family react to your decision to stay in the US?

**BM** Because I married an American there was simply no question of my going back. It would have been harder for me to have lived in Calcutta with a white American professor than for me, an Indian wife, to live in a multicultural society here. It was a great loss to them. The immediate reaction was of great loss. But they didn't have any time to prevent my marriage because I sent them a cable simply saying by the time you get this I'll already have been married. My father's reaction in a cable was, what kind of family does he come from, have you checked out his family because genetic and socio-economic screening is so important in Indian traditional, Hindu traditional, marriages. I think that they would, of course, ideally have liked me to have married the right caste, right economic background. But they were very sporting people and once they saw Clark, which they did, well my father did, in 1964 when he came to Iowa city, the day that our older boy was born in June 1964, and he fell in love with both the grand child and son-in-law.

**RV** Did you ever expect the reception that The Middleman collection got?

**BM** I felt both Darkness and The Middleman were important books because I was writing about a group that hadn't been really written about in American fiction. Darkness, which was the series of stories about South Asian immigrants and degrees of acculturation, got a very good NewYorkTimes review. But it was published originally in Canada and only a few copies were imported here. I felt very good, though, about that book and whatever other reviews it got. Because I felt that this was an area that mattered to me, a subject that deeply, deeply concerned me. With The Middleman I felt that I had made another sort of breakthrough where I was talking not just about South Asian immigrants, trying on their new American identities, but that I had grown as a writer or grown in confidence as a writer where I could just as comfortably, automatically, take on a male voice, a female voice, a white redneck Southerner voice, a very elegant expatriate Bengali woman's voice - with remarkable fluidity. I felt again that I was doing what isn't done very often, or I am not aware of it being done very often, in immigrant American fiction in that I was saying through some of the stories, and I am saying it even more through a character like Jasmine of the novel, that letting go of the old culture is in some ways very healthy. The traditional attitude of white American sociologists as well as immigrants, European or non-European, is to say to lose one's original culture is sad, its a loss, net loss. And I am saying No! In the case of Jasmine and in the case of me its, again, we sometimes want to change. I'll always know who I am, the Indian is what shaped me as a child and as a very basic person. But there are many aspects of it that I want to throw out, many aspects of it that have fallen away whether I wanted them to crumble or not and

that I think of myself as very much a new world citizen and that that's exhilarating. That energy that comes from being a pioneer is enormously invigorating.

**RV** A pioneer. So you are following in the footsteps of the pioneers of the old...

**BM** Yes and we are having to invent new footsteps for ourselves because in some basic ways we are so different and the times are so much less hospitable to newcomers like me with dark skin or different exotic religions. I think that to some extent my characters, including Jasmine, are very often tough and they are survivors and they are hustlers, "wheelers and dealers" like the title story in *The Middleman*, and that's part of being a pioneer. I think a lot of people have forgotten that the first white settlers must have had to be tough in order to wrest the country from someone else, stake out territory.

**RV** You are also saying in order to become assimilated and become a successful American you have to sort of be dissatisfied with where you come from originally.

**BM** Yes. I think that in some way whether its dissatisfaction over poverty or over gender harassment or just hope verses despair, romanticism verses cynicism, I think sometimes of Jasmine's imaginary village, that Jasmine is predictable and closed off. Once her husband Prakash dies in that terrorist incident she is faced with the choice of either going back to her village and regressing in some ways, becoming like her mother, since there is a safe place for her, she'll not want for food, the brothers will protect her, but that's a closed off little circumscribed life. Or she has the choice of going out and risking extra-ordinary dangers and maybe death and humiliation, all of which happens. She is mistreated her first night in Florida and the journey, the odyssey to the new world is so zig-zaggy and so perilous and she makes a lot of mistakes in the United States. But that risk taking, the freedom to take risks and to reverse yourself is both painful - I have a sentence there that you have to murder your old self in order to be reborn every time. And murder is a very violent word. Some of it automatically withers away and falls off. Some of it really you are deliberately discarding and that's where I think the disappointment, the unhappiness with what life has allotted her, what destiny has planned for her comes, and that is why we have that early scene where she wants to change the stars, the astrology.

**RV** But you are now satisfied with your life in America. Just another day I was interviewing an Icelandic lady who has been in the US twenty-three years but she has never really given up the Icelandic part of her. But you have no problems with that - as you said you are satisfied with the life you've made in the US. You are not a woman without a country as she said about herself.



**BM** No. I am woman with a series of countries. It is necessary for me to put down roots wherever I land and wherever I choose to stay. I wanted very much to be Canadian when my marriage took me to Canada. I would have never gone to Canada on my own, I went because my husband loved Canada and I was ready to be a good Canadian. But it didn't work out. I am very aware of the dark side of America as well as the romanticism that America offers people like me, and I think that both the dark side and the hope comes through. I want to think that it comes out in my writings like *The Middleman*, but as an individual, yes, this is where I want to be. And because this country is centred around a constitution that promises democracy, promises equal rights, when things don't work out right I want to be able to work to make it right.

**RV** And you feel you have that opportunity here more than in Canada?

**BM** Absolutely, or in India.

**RV** You lived in Toronto for a while didn't you?

**BM** Yes. Mainly in Montreal and then in Toronto. Racism in the late seventies was very much worse in Toronto, for an Anglo-phone South Asian, than for me in Montreal. In Montreal it was Franco-phone racism so that it was mainly between the Quebecois and the Haitians. We were a peripheral part, we non-European, English speaking immigrants.

**RV** Did you ever get to know Margaret Atwood?

**BM** She is a very close friend. My husband and she taught at Saint George Williams University, 1966. She would bake gingerbread cookies for our older boy. We had just one son then. She is wonderful, articulate, dauntingly intelligent.

**RV** Margaret Atwood is one of the most, well better known, feminists. I don't know whether she would call herself feminist but at least she is known for the feminist message that she, for example writes a lot about women. Do you call yourself a feminist?

**BM** I don't call myself any 'ist' and I don't follow any 'isms'. I think that my women characters are strong, they're durable, things don't always work out for them but the ones that I like, the ones that do alright, like Jasmine, are doers and they shy away from too much self-analysis, too much verbalising about the state of being. They dislike rhetoric, indulging in feminist rhetoric quite often, but they end up really changing their lives. So in a way one can contrast let's say a traditionally recognisable,

conventionally recognisable, feminist in the novel, as someone who has all the politically correct feminist rhetoric and she is a character towards whom Jasmine feels a lot of affection. But Jasmine, who doesn't have that rhetoric at all, ends up changing continents, changing cultures, coming from a feudal village world in Northern India, handling global terrorism and hurtling into a twenty first century which more or less has forced her into violent acts such as murder, mayhem, blackmail, forgery and in the end she even sacrifices or abandons the crippled lover in Iowa. So what I am saying is people like me have no ready made role models to follow. The white American women of my age or younger have the tradition of feminism which is appropriate for them. We are having, or Jasmine is having to make the rules up as events occur - what is right for her, what is wrong for her. There isn't a book of etiquette, no oral etiquette, already written down. To me that is a very exciting position. Its frightening...

**RV** Is that a position beyond feminism? You've past the stage of rhetoric and now you're doing. Or did you just skip one stage or you maybe don't want to talk about that at all.

**BM** I want to think that Jasmine is a very real feminist. Like the feminists that my mother was, who didn't know the word feminist but who managed to give me, at great physical expense, she really had to put her body on the line in order to get me into English medium schools, guarantee me the best education so that I would not end up, she said, as chattel to a traditional Bengali husband. So to me those are very real feminists. I don't care about theorising, I don't care about people who theorise. It's simply not right, its not appropriate for a Jasmine. So I don't want to make value judgements about who is more feminist than either Jasmine or the self-proclaimed feminist, but I hope I am showing, through Jasmine, that she feels deeply, she's intelligent, she knows exactly what she has suffered and she is able to change her life, the stakes are not as great for the strong feminist in my work.

**RV** Am I to understand your words then as somewhat of a criticism of feminism?

**BM** Of rhetoric. People who stay locked inside rhetoric and are unable to not only act sufficiently themselves but fail to understand the enormity of action, enormity of consequences for the Jasmynes'. The tendency for the conventional white feminist might be to see my character in the novel *Wife, Dimple Dasgupta*, as passive and I am saying that is a failure to understand a new kind of feminism in a new kind of America. To rebel maybe simply to withhold eating which is what Dimple does...

**RV** You said before that in The Middleman stories you had no problems with using male protagonists and writing the stories through a first person account through a male person. Now how did you get to that point? Its not very common that a woman feels comfortable writing in that manner. Critics tend to note that.

**BM** When I first sent the title story "The Middleman" to Playboy and they accepted it and said please tell Mr Mukherjee we love his story.

**RV** Why did you send it to Playboy?

**BM** My agent did.

**RV** I thought you were deliberately challenging them or something.

**BM** No. The agent wrote back and said Miss Mukherjee will be so pleased. They didn't bat an eyelid. Give them credit for that. The New Yorker, also, in the beginning thought I was a male writer. I think there are two reasons, perhaps, for my ability to take on other genders, other races. One is that I am a sort of mimic, an unconscious mimic. If I hear an Irish man in a room for fifteen minutes I am very likely, whether I want to or not, end up talking like an Irishman. I have that ability. I have a very acute ear I guess. I'm nose-y, as a writer. If I have decided to write about a person from a particular region or class then I will make sure I have every detail of speech, mannerisms, clothing, of trivia, sociology at my finger tips in order that just the right detail comes out at the right time. Even if the story may be only six pages long I have to have an entire mass of her or his life in my head in order to get the right detail at the right time. The more philosophical, political reason for that fluidity is that growing up just after independence - we were still, in my very English school in Calcutta, having to use old English text books that were written for British children which may sometimes have had references to India. And so here we were, little Indian children reading books written for the English which said we trashed the natives. The "we" we had to decode in complicated ways even though we were little kids and the "natives" we had to decode, and I had to, therefore, exercise sympathy for both the "we", the British, who were doing the trashing and the natives, and identify with the natives who were being trashed and that I think destroyed the majority of people in my generation, class that they saw themselves as broken in two. Whereas for me, as artist, it became a strength instead. That when I started to write it meant the ability to enter each side and give each side of the conflict a kind of fullness that art demands.

**RV** Do you ever collaborate with your husband? You've written one book together?

**BM** Two books. And then we've done a screen play, and now we are going to England to do an article on Rushdie, the one year follow up so to speak. Very different kinds of collaboration.

**RV** That is what came to my mind when I started reading about those male protagonists. She must be collaborating with her husband. I guess that is the explanation you gave just now. Your characters come from all over the world and you say you feel you have to have all the information, all the details at hand. That means either you met a lot of people and you have a vast experience or you do a lot of research or both.

**BM** Both, but I have many different kinds, rings, circles of friends. In a way the most realistic stories, the one that you would least suspect as realistic is *The Middleman*. Once a character comes to me the story writes itself. I can enter that character, learn up what I don't know about her background.

**RV** So it is the character that's important to you and not the philosophical message...you are not clothing the message in a character?

**BM** No, and if a message comes through, because I have certain obsessions, that's well and good but I feel that good writing is dramatic and emotionally charged. I find primarily message written fiction to be dead and deadening, sterile. Maybe one sentence will come to me, just the first line of a sentence or a great title and so I will write a story in order to use that title.

**RV** I guess I couldn't ask you then, since many of your characters come from the third world to the first, if we may call them third and first, if there is a political message underlying all of that, or the ideas that lie beneath them.

**BM** Writers like me, because of where we have come from, can't help but have, as novelists and fiction writers, the social, political vision - that fiction is not divorced from social, political considerations. And so *Jasmine* is a meditation on whole peoples on the move and how America is or is not responding to this fact of de-Europeanisation. But I don't start out by saying I got to write me a novel about such and such. *Jasmine* came to me as the character. Initially she was in *The Middleman*, she was a very carefree girl, a young woman from Trinidad of Indian origin. And I had thought of it as the area where I was living in... actually that story was started in New Jersey and finished in Iowa. In New Jersey I would see on the bus as I was going to my college a lot of aupair girls or housekeepers, from Trinidad, Trinidad Indians going to their jobs and I wanted that kind of fluid society of the

Americas, where your heritage has been so changed and distorted that being Indian doesn't mean what it means to me. That she is a middle class girl in Trinidad who comes to North America and finds herself having to sneak in through the border, which are scams that are very often practiced in real life, in the back of a mattress van, but she is able to handle it all alright, this is what the situation demands.

**RV** She is the one who ends up...

**BM** Yes. She is an aupair girl in a professor's home and who is making love at the end of the story on the rug in front of the fireplace in the room that she cleans during the day, everyday. And suddenly she realises, as she is making love to this boss, that my god I am making it, not sexually simply, but that she is a bright girl with no papers who is hurtling head long into the future. Very often I will even forget the names of my characters. Stories are written quite often at one sitting or two sittings, it is very intense, it's as though I am being seized by something, by an urge and I'll often forget the names of the characters once the story's done and I've moved on to something else. But this woman didn't die and when I came to realise that after writing a novel about her she's so gutsy, she has so much spirit, she's the kind of person I'd have wanted to be if I hadn't been as educated, as polite, as hesitant as I am. So once I started to work on it as a novel I realised that I needed to relocate Jasmine in a very traditional, poor village. Just in terms of metaphor, being in a new world society is totally incorrect.

Going back for a second to the feminist thing, the feminists loved the story and interpreted the ending as, isn't the professor a horrible pig, male chauvinist who takes advantage of this poor innocent Trinidad girl. Whereas my intention was a very political one, where I am saying she has had many affairs before in Trinidad but she is enjoying the sexuality, she is discovering her own power as a sexual creature and that really she is in control of that lovemaking situation. And if there is any villain in that ending at all it's the wife, Lara, who needs the non-white cheap help in order that she can have her career.

**RV** I noticed that some critics talking about the *The Middleman* stories especially have referred to them as being sexy stories. And quite a few of those stories have some kind of a sexual conquest in them. Is there some vision behind that or is it the realism coming through?

**BM** I don't always know paragraph by paragraph in the first draft how the characters are going to work out their problems. So the characters invent the situations and the solutions for themselves. I think for a number of the Asian women characters they are discovering for the first time their sexual power. Remember I am coming out of a very

traditional, very over protective background where, until I came to Iowa, I had never been in a room with male guests, so that for many of these characters sexuality is a way of rebelling or the revolution expresses itself. I should add at this time autobiographically that Clark and I got married after a two week courtship and I have been married to the same man for twenty six years, so I am a good writer who can imagine herself into all situations.

**RV** What did it mean for you as a writer to get that award that The Middleman got last year? It is a prestigious award and it is known to be a literary award with a capital 'L'.

**BM** It really changed my life as a writer. It meant that there was an immediate recognition even though there is no money involved in this prize. It was particularly rewarding that this