

**Neo-Victorian Goblin Fruit:
Maggie Power on the Gothic Fascinations
of Demon Lovers and Re-Imagining the Victorians**

Marie-Luise Kohlke
(Swansea University, Wales, UK)

Abstract:

Despite authoring three consecutive neo-Victorian novels coinciding with the upsurge of the genre to literary prominence from the 1980s onwards, Maggie Power remains a critically neglected writer. Mirroring important themes explored by her much better known contemporaries in the genre, such as Margaret Atwood, A.S. Byatt and Sarah Waters, Power's work lends itself particularly well to exploring neo-Victorian gender issues and sexual politics, as well as intertextuality and literary re-vision. In this interview, Power discusses the abiding Victorian influence on present-day culture and literature, recurrent tropes of demon lovers, gothic obsession and entrapment in her work, her fascination with the Pre-Raphaelites, and the current market for gothic romance.

Keywords: demon lovers, desire, the gothic, intertextuality, Maggie Power, mental health, poverty, the Pre-Raphaelites, romance, the Rossettis.

In spite of producing three strikingly original, neo-Victorian novels, Maggie Power remains virtually unknown both among the general reading public and neo-Victorian specialists. Although Power employed and significantly developed many of the themes that dominate neo-Victorian literature and criticism, particularly female sexuality, spiritualism, prostitution, and madness, her novels *Goblin Fruit* (1987),¹ *Lily* (1994), and *Porphyria's Lover* (1995) are all currently out of print. Richly allusive of Victorian cultural contexts ranging from Pre-Raphaelite art to venereal disease, her writing is elegantly decadent and seductive, evoking the erotically charged gothic mode of much nineteenth-century sensation fiction. At times approaching the lyrical intensity of Jean Rhys' seminal *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), at others a dense palimpsestic intertextuality, reminiscent of better known neo-Victorian texts such as Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1990) and A.S. Byatt's *Possession* (1990), or the gothic claustrophobia that also characterises Sarah Waters' *Affinity* (1999) and *Fingersmith* (2002), Power's work deserves further critical attention, not

least in its exploration of gender and sexual politics, obsessive psychologies, and multi-layered literary re-vision. While her work, as Aurea Carpenter notes of Power's first novel, does not quite "fit [...] a conventional feminist canon", its sometime malevolent edge and dramatic twists play complex games with readers' understanding of Victorian gender roles, while simultaneously "play[ing] with our contemporary stereotype[s] of what a novel talking about women in that era ought to be like" (Carpenter 1987: 1348).

Born in 1950 to an Irish postman father and a London shop worker mother in what Power has described as "the seedy end" of the Maida Vale district of London (Power 2011), she was brought up in an intensely Irish Catholic environment that she found deeply repressive. Her childhood and adolescence were further complicated by her mother's mental health issues and their detrimental impact on Power's developing psychology and school attendance. Increasingly she sought escape in books and eventually became a library assistant at Charing Cross Library after leaving school at the age of sixteen. Encouraged by colleagues to continue with her education, Power supported herself through an accelerated A-Level course at Walbrook College, Blackfriars, before going on to obtain a Joint Honours degree in English and History at Portsmouth Polytechnic (now the University of Portsmouth), followed by a PGCE course at Garnett College, London. Thereafter she worked in the Further Education sector, teaching English as well as some Creative Writing at Kilburn Polytechnic, London, until the mid 1990s. Power began writing her first novel *Goblin Fruit* at the age of thirty-one, while pregnant with her daughter.

The following interview was conducted via email, followed up at a face to face meeting in June 2011 in London, where Power lives with her daughter. Power talks about the cultural prominence and popularity of neo-Victorianism and its relation to aesthetic and socio-cultural trends, as well as the variety of nineteenth-century and contemporary influences on her writing and the eternal fascinations of demon lovers past and present.

KOHLKE: While many well-known novelists, including Peter Ackroyd and A.S. Byatt, repeatedly return to the nineteenth-century in their fiction, only Sarah Waters springs immediately to mind as having written three neo-

Victorian novels in a row as you have done. What constitutes the compulsive attractions of the period for you?

POWER: Any kind of compulsion has its source in a very murky well, but I think my own obsession with the Victorians is to do with the model of desire configured in the art and literature of that period. There's an intensity that goes with a sexuality which is withheld – and yet trembles on the edge of transgression.

KOHLKE: More generally, how do you account for the current prominence of the neo-Victorian phenomenon, not just in literature but also art and cinema? To what do you attribute our culture's perennial fascination with the Victorians?

POWER: I think Baudrillard is apt in suggesting that our current dismantling of the mystique of sexuality – the need to make everything visible – means we've lost the art of seduction. The Victorians seduce us. They knew that sensuality was everywhere and sexuality nowhere.

KOHLKE: The publication of your first three novels, *Goblin Fruit* (1987), *Lily* (1994), and *Porphyria's Lover* (1995), corresponded with a rapid rise in the output of 'second wave' neo-Victorian fictions and the genre's popularity during the final decades of the twentieth century. Indeed, your main themes of female sexuality and gender politics, prostitution, spiritualism, and hysteria/madness, all coincide with the prominent concerns of neo-Victorian bestsellers like Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1990), A.S. Byatt's *Possession* (1990), Sarah Waters' *Affinity* (1999) and Sheri Holman's *The Dress Lodger* (2000). So the critical disregard suffered by your novels – in spite of positive reviewers' comments in national newspapers and magazines, including the *Times Literary Supplement*, *The Sunday Times* and *Cosmopolitan* – strikes me as curious, since it cannot be linked to public apathy or dislike of historical fiction *per se*. In contrast, other lesser-known writers of neo-Victorian fiction, such as Faye L. Booth and Linda Holeman, seem to have benefitted from the neo-Victorian vogue. How do you account for your novels' comparative obscurity?

POWER: It's difficult to know. When *Porphyria's Lover* was commissioned on the back of *Lily*, my agent told me the publisher had me lined-up to produce 'blockbuster' historical fiction. Well, it didn't quite turn out that way; and for some reason *Porphyria's Lover* actively dismayed the editorial team. In the event, distribution seemed poor. Perhaps more money in the publicity pot would have helped matters. Or maybe it's just that the emotional tempo of my fiction was out of joint with the times.... But I don't really see my writing as historical fiction.

KOHLKE: What do you see it as, then?

POWER: Definitely romance! I don't see my novels as historical fiction and I tend not to be keen on novels which are over-freighted with historical detail or explication. I think, looking back at the beginnings of the romance form, that it tended to take real-life historical events and characters and weave myth, poetry and romance around them. And that's the way in which I think I use the past.

KOHLKE: On one of your blogs, you specifically identify Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) as a crucial source of inspiration, writing that the novel "spoke to [you] like Keats' Belle Dame, in language strange and true" (Power 2008b). Did you consciously try to emulate Rhys' lyricism and the sensuous quality of her prose, especially in *Goblin Fruit*, which mimics her novella both in brevity and intensity? What other stylistic elements of Rhys' writing did you find particularly useful for your own work?

POWER: I hugely admire Jean Rhys as a writer. More than anybody else except Shakespeare. She has such a powerful narrative voice aligned to an exquisite sense of form. And I very much envy the clarity of her subtly cadenced sentences. Each word matters. The stylistic economy is remarkable. But I think it's the emotional register of her voice that compels, with its Byronic resonance. I have consciously deployed some of her novelist's bag of tricks, such as investing certain words or phrases with the timbre of a Greek chorus, through the use of echo and repetition.

KOHLKE: The goblin fruit motif of your first novel recurs in both *Lily* and *Porphyria's Lover*, almost taking on the quality of your signature reference.

Goblin Fruit, of course, borrows extensively from both Christina Rossetti's 'Goblin Market' (1862; comp. 1859) and her other poetry, especially 'In an Artist's Studio' (n.d.). What attracted you to her poems in particular and made you employ them as such prominent intertexts?

POWER: The whole sixties Victoriana revival thing was going on during my teens and that was an influence on my choice of reading material. I was particularly drawn to Rossetti's mortuary verse – the speaking corpse poems – in which the uncanny legitimises female desire and empowers the poetic voice. Poems which make the scalp prickle with their erotic tension. When I went back to reading Rossetti again in my twenties, it was through the prism of feminist criticism. Madwoman in the Attic time! So I read the addictive fruit of 'Goblin Market' as being debilitating and fatal to female agency, and yet saturated with a sensuality that undercuts the conventional pieties of redemption which conclude the poem.

KOHLKE: Goblin fruit seems to become equated in your fiction with fateful and excessive desire, which finally rebounds on and consumes the desirer. Yet rather than goblin men, you tend to create demon lovers, whose fatal physical and emotional attraction you present as strangely appealing. Could you be accused of masochistic writing? Or do you see this trope of fatal attraction as a more general, trans-historical trend in literature and popular culture? (I'm thinking of the recent resurgence of the gorgeous vampire in fiction and film, for instance.)

POWER: Hmm! That murky well again. I think Bellow's account of the knuckles of cognition rapping on the door of mysteries might best express my feelings when it comes to interrogating how far authorial pathologies are inscribed in the text. I'm aware of deploying the discourse of masochism to evoke certain registers, whether registers of longing or denial, desire or rage. As far as the competing attractions of demon lovers versus goblins go, well goblins are by tradition devilish; but you're right, I do tend to portray demon lovers as objects of desire, addictive desire. There's a long literary tradition behind that. You find it in the old ballads where a woman elopes with a handsome stranger who turns out to be the devil. And of course it all ends in her being snatched down to hell.

KOHLKE: Would you describe neo-Victorian fiction itself as a kind of goblin fruit? Is there something obsessive about our desire to consume – and produce – ever more neo-Victoriana?

POWER: We seem to have a cultural fix on the laudanum dream of the Victorians, don't we? And as with all addicts, never find the draught enough. For all our penchant for demystification, we must still be in denial about something. Perhaps when we find the language to configure our own satisfactorily seductive models of desire, the Victorian moment will pass.

KOHLKE: In *Porphyria's Lover* ... you have the strong element of fake supernaturalism via the spiritualist trope, although [the protagonist Kathleen] actually also seems to have some genuine psychic thing. And that of course is a really dominant trope in the neo-Victorian genre. How did you find your way to that as a writer and what attracted you about the spiritualist trope?

POWER: I think I've always been a bit attracted by that, and when I was a teenager, around the time of the 60s ... I had various friends who were interested in – I don't know what you call it now – it wasn't quite witchcraft, but it's the idea of herbs and power ... slightly new-agey. But also I think ... because I come from an Irish family, so there were these wonderful great aunts who were superb storytellers, particularly of ghost stories, and, you know, a couple of experiences I'd had. I actually once stayed in a haunted house in Ireland. So I've always been intrigued by the uncanny and ... these sort of gaps between reason and emotion. And I think, again ... the whole Catholic thing. You're brought up to have the emotions of a believer, although you don't believe. It leaves you with ... a residue I suppose you'd call it ... what I call kissing crucifixes ... It's the fervour of it all, but at the same time, you know, you can't intellectually take it on board.

KOHLKE: Coming back briefly to the kind of gothic or otherworldly/supernatural trope ... when it's been theorised, for example with regards to Waters' *Affinity*, where she uses it very prominently ... social historians who've written about spiritualism have argued that it provided a space for feminine empowerment. So was that kind of the background as well?

POWER: Absolutely, yes, because I read the *Darkened Room* [by Alex Owen] ... it's a marvellous book and that sparked off so much. ... I was really overwhelmed... and I read it at the same time or roughly the same time, I think, I read Joyce Carol Oates' *A Bloodsmoor Romance* (1982), which has a similar theme. It has mesmerism and a woman, who... allows these other voices to come in. So, I think it's ... not an original idea of mine, it was something I picked up from other sources and then used in a specific sense.

KOHLKE: Dante Gabriel Rossetti likewise constitutes a significant presence on your work, both in the sense of your partial re-working of his relationship with Lizzie Siddall (including the exhumation of his poems from her grave) in *Goblin Fruit* – albeit re-enacted with fictional characters – and in terms of Pre-Raphaelite painting. Similar images reappear in *Lily*, where the Byronic hero is once again cast as a painter, this time as the penniless drawing master and reluctant suitor of the rich industrialist's daughter he is employed to teach. Could you speak a little about the importance of Pre-Raphaelite art in your life and work? It seems to infuse much neo-Victorian fiction, including classics like *Possession* and John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969). Why should this be the case?

POWER: I was working at a library in Charing Cross Road when the Pre-Raphaelite revival of the sixties hit. The library had a healthy budget for art books and I was lucky enough to have access to wonderfully illustrated books on Rossetti, Millais and Burne-Jones. Then living in London, I was able to go and have my regular fix of *Ophelia* and *Beata Beatrix* at the Tate, a short bus ride from where I worked. And Pre-Raphaelite style was heavily referenced in the clothes I bought from the first Biba shop in Abingdon road. In fact, the Pre-Raphaelite template of femininity – pale, wraith-like – has been a cultural obsession that has had us in its grip for more than fifty years, for all that we're savvy about the pathologies involved. But it's also the literariness of the Pre-Raphs that resonated with me. Certainly, their citational or intertextual praxis in adapting or re-envisioning Shakespearian, Arthurian and other writings to evoke a sense of alterity has been a powerful influence on my writing. There's an intensity to the finest PRB paintings, arising from the imbrication of the densely-textured with the dreamlike. The

effect is vertiginous. They suck in the viewer. I think this may account for the sensation of claustrophobia which some complain of about Rossetti's works in particular. But it's also the source of our culture's continued fascination with the brotherhood.

KOHLKE: Do you feel that in part your writing style ... [is] also trying to somehow transmute or translate these kind of Pre-Raphaelite effects ... into textual form?

POWER: Definitely. I think definitely.

KOHLKE: 'Biofiction', of course, may involve the generalised adaptation of biographical elements, as in the case of *Goblin Fruit*, or the 'filling in' of life stories of actual historical individuals, as in the case of David Lodge's *Author, Author: A Novel* (2004) and Colm Tóibín's *The Master* (2004), both resurrecting Henry James, or Gaynor Arnold's *Girl in a Blue Dress* (2008), modelled on Catherine Dickens. Could you comment on the attractions of biofiction for the historical fiction writer?

POWER: It certainly helps when you're stuck for a storyline! Really, as [Angela] Carter suggested, literature, including biography, is the West's folklore. I'd perhaps use the term, resource bank. Biography is also implicated in the myth-making business, which is right at the heart of fiction. So I think ... it's the romance that's been woven around real people that makes it compelling.

KOHLKE: Although your most recent novel *Lady Macbeth's Tale* (2008) is not a neo-Victorian fiction but rather a Shakespearean re-vision, I wonder whether it too is mediated in part through the Victorians' fascination with the Bard's plays, especially as subjects for historical paintings, for instance by the Pre-Raphaelites. Likewise, as you're currently also going further back to Arthurian romance and the Lancelot figure, how do you approach that, then? Do you ... go back to the kind of medieval/Arthurian sources or do you go back to, say, the Victorian interpretations of those sources?

POWER: Well, I think, a bit of both.... Probably the idea was really from a lot of the Burne-Jones paintings, you know, the Pre-Raphaelite, Medieval,

I'd say, and a mixture of that, and so I went back to Malory and then started researching the medieval romance as a form ... I wanted to see why the gothic and the romance gelled together, really, and was there anything in the marvellous and the early romance proses which might have led up to this.

KOHLKE: On one of your blogs, you describe a painting in the foyer of Tralee's Grand Hotel of some unidentified "temptress", possibly the biblical Delilah, which provided the inspiration for the novel as well as its cover image: "with her golden Pre-Raphaelite tresses and rouged cheeks, she's what the Victorians would instantly recognise as the fallen woman incarnate. Not least because of her smile with its unashamedly wanton invitation. A leer that buttonholes the viewer as impudently as any 19th century Haymarket harlot. [...] Certainly no Victorian angel of the hearth" (Power 2008a). To what extent do you feel such Victorian frames of reference continue to inform our present-day reading of literature, art, and the past more generally? Also, do you regard them as persisting in current gender constructions?

POWER: Yes, it's interesting that, despite, or maybe because of modernism, we persist in our dialogue with the Victorians. Possibly we're looping back along the path not taken by the modernists. And I think that for all that it's become a cliché, the angel /whore dichotomy persists, although the weight of cultural validation has shifted somewhat to the latter. I'm no cultural commentator, but it seems to me the residues of stereotypes drift and adhere to particular discourses within certain given situations, even when no longer strictly being hegemonic.

KOHLKE: All of your novels focus on obsessive and mutually destructive – though sometimes also enabling – heterosexual relationships, in which women develop from positions of victimhood to ones of empowerment, sometimes also of victimisers. What role, if any, do you accord feminism and feminist theory in your writing?

POWER: I loved studying literature and was fortunate in that my English degree course eschewed the linear and chronological. We were actively encouraged to yoke together disparate texts regardless of genre or the diachronic. It was a good foundation for my later writing practice of

adapting a variety of texts and images; and in a way my writing is a kind of literary criticism. Most of the ideas for my books have been generated from readings of both feminist criticism and literary theory. *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) was important for *Goblin Fruit*; and *Porphyria's Lover*, in part, developed from readings of Lacan and Derrida. I couldn't have put pen to paper if it hadn't been for feminism. Feminist literary criticism gave me a way into adapting and re-envisioning Victorian literary and artistic source material. Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* was for me a seminal text, which helped me voice a discourse of desire within a Victorian *mis en scène*.

KOHLKE: So, when did you as a reader first encounter *Jane Eyre* (1847) and/or *Wuthering Heights* (1847)? Was *Wuthering Heights* as important as *Jane Eyre*?

POWER: No, I don't think it was, although I actually think it's a much better book. But there was something, probably ... I mean it's so banal, but because Jane is bullied or feels she's bullied and I was terrorised by my mother. Threatened. So I read it when I was about ten. ... And then Mr Rochester as the seemingly strong man, I found very seductive, because my father couldn't stand up to my mother, so I was always looking for somebody who would, you know, fight my corner. Hmm, so that's probably the psychological roots of it. ... Again I think it comes back to the emphasis on voice. I was always surrounded by very strong female voices ... my great-aunts ... my mother whose voice was ... extremely forceful and continuous ... she never stopped talking: constant threats and admonitions and prophecies of dire warnings to come. So I was always being subjected to a voice but not allowed to have a voice. So I think I respond to books figuring a strong narrative voice.

KOHLKE: Much of your writing carries a definite erotic charge, both in terms of seductive plotting, character relationships, and style. Why do you think sexuality remains such an all-pervasive concern in neo-Victorian fiction?

POWER: Perhaps one of the ways in which neo-Victorianism approaches its subject is through acts of uncovering, which generally have a sexual

resonance. Uncovering secrets, scandals, or the nakedness beneath crinolines. Possibly because so much has been made relentlessly visible in our culture, we've become hooked on disinterring a past that refuses to expose its treasures.

KOHLKE: When Michel Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White* was published in 2002, it garnered praise for its unvarnished portrayal of the Victorian sex trade and child abuse. Yet it seems to me that your fiction pre-empted his much starker treatment of the period's sexual relations and exploitation in significant ways, for instance in the depiction of primitive contraception in *Goblin Fruit*, of syphilis in *Lily*, and of Mrs Bell's brothel, the Resurrectionist Club, in *Porphyria's Lover*. You never appear to have been tempted to romanticise prostitution as some sort of sexual self-liberation and 'easy money', risk-free capitalist enterprise as, to some extent, Carter did in *Nights at the Circus* (1984) and Waters in *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), neither of which makes any real mention of venereal disease. Could you perhaps speak to these narrative choices on your part? To what extent do you strive for realism, in spite of your evident preference for gothic and sensation modes?

POWER: I couldn't have written *Porphyria's Lover* if I hadn't first read Carter's *Black Venus* (1985) and *Nights at The Circus*. But you're right, risk-free capitalist enterprise, the Protestant ethic is alien to me, with all that Catholic guilt breathing down my neck. My Catholic upbringing also probably made me more temperamentally inclined to the gothic rather than social realism, as a mode of writing. The world view that was handed to me in the 1950s was that there's always a price to be paid. In other words, fatalism. It's hard to shake off, even when the rational mind rejects specific doctrines. In any case, when you grow up with a mother who's not altogether unlike the first Mrs. Rochester, you experience your life story as gothic. Yet there is something in me which holds back from full-on fantasy. I don't do vampires. And I set my fiction within the recognisable *mis en scene* of a past world.

KOHLKE: *Lily* is an interesting neo-Victorian exemplar in terms of its approach to intertextuality. Rather than re-visioning individual nineteenth-century texts, you seem to prefer a palimpsestic re-working of multiple

sources simultaneously. *Lily*'s evident intertexts include Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White* (1859), Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper' (1892), and arguably Edgar Allen Poe's 'The Fall of the House of Usher' (1839) also. To what extent is this is deliberate strategy on your part? How do you negotiate concerns about influence and derivativeness, which are sometimes associated with intertextuality?

POWER: You bet I have concerns about derivativeness. Often, after my books were published, I'd wake up in a sweat, wondering if a phrase I'd thought mine was an unwitting act of plagiarism whose source I'd erased from my consciousness. Art can be so promiscuous! All the texts you mention were influences on *Lily*. And the name, Jonathan Hopgate, obviously referenced Jonathan Harker... when I read *Lily* now it seems like a vampire novel without a vampire. But it was *Wide Sargasso Sea* that was the aspirational influence on the book. Interestingly, it suddenly struck me from your comment about my re-working of texts simultaneously, that I was surfing before the internet!

KOHLKE: Is there any sense in which you regard yourself as a postmodern writer? I'm thinking in particular of the emphasis on self-conscious performativity in your work, which calls to mind Judith Butler's postmodern concept of gender as performative, consisting of a series of continually renegotiated, changing roles.

POWER: I intended a ludic quality to *Porphyria's Lover*, playing with notions of gender roles as kinds of charlatan selves. Postmodern is a difficult catch-all sort of term. I think I would probably see my works as being constituted within a decadent phase of the gothic romance form.

KOHLKE: You describe yourself as coming from a working class background, but the area of Maida Vale in which you lived until the age of ten was incorporated into the slum clearances of the 1960s; so I imagine you will have witnessed poverty close at hand. Many of your protagonists are socially marginalised characters, attracting both reader sympathy and admiration for their resourcefulness in extricating themselves from their

impoverished circumstances. Has your childhood background influenced your choice of narrative focalisers?

POWER: Absolutely in the case of Kathleen Mangan and Gabriel Feaver [in *Porphyria's Lover*]. A fifties working class background was materially bleak, even deprived by today's standards. Linoleum and coal fires. Zinc baths and gaslight even. Few books other than what the public library offered. I have to say, as both my parents worked and I was an only child, there was always enough money for food, cinema, clothes and holidays. But I vividly recall certain streets abutting Little Venice, or those close to my school in North Kensington, where families lived in condemned houses, in entropic squalor. It wasn't unusual to see a child playing on the street, shoeless, feet wrapped in rags. But poverty and feistiness often go hand in hand in my experience. It was a Victorian topography really, the houses were Victorian. ... It was, I suppose, the equivalent of what the Seven Dials was in the Victorian period ... I mean my mother was friends with a woman who had eleven children and who lived in a condemned house. And I recall going there and the stench was overpowering, the children were in rags, it was bare floorboards – it was Dickensian.

KOHLKE: Going back briefly also to your strong sense of Irishness, *Porphyria's Lover*, I think, is the first novel where you have an actual Irish character. Quite a few other neo-Victorian writers, of course, have specifically focused on Irish historical trauma, particularly the Great Famine. I'm thinking, for example, of Peter Behrens' *The Law of Dreams* (2006), which is an amazing book. I'm just wondering whether the kind of traumatic intensity of Irish history has perhaps impacted on you in the sense of turning to the past to write.

POWER: I had a very close relationship with my maternal grandmother, whose own father I was lucky enough to still see, my great-grandfather. ... The troubles were very much part of the family ... because my great-grandfather was very pro-British. He was in the constabulary; he was a small shopkeeper; he'd worked for the Knight of Kerry. He was very, very pro-British. But his son was IRA and [he] threw him out. And his son, my grandmother's brother, was her closest sibling, and while he was on the run in the 1920s, my grandmother had to escort him through the town safely to

get him back up into the hills where he was hiding, and as she was escorting him, she said ‘Oh, the way’s clear’, and suddenly some soldiers came out and arrested him. So she always kind of blamed herself for him being caught, which affected him, because ... I think he was very badly beaten and then eventually became mentally unstable because of the beatings and eventually died. ... And my mother was absolutely very, *very* anti-British and very Fenian. So from when I was very very small, she would say, ‘The English are this’, ‘The English are that’. So that was another voice going on. I didn’t actually know any English people, because I went to a school full of London Irish or a few continental Catholics. ... There was an English lady next door, an older lady called Hilda, and I remember her and a shopkeeper and that was it. Everybody else I met was [of] Irish descent. So I wasn’t actually aware of there being any kind of racial tensions or whatever, other than what my mother was telling me.

KOHLKE: I’m aware that you lost your husband to cancer several years ago, but it is noticeable that already long before this, illness and disease constituted significant themes in your writing. How useful do you find ill health as a metaphor to explore wider social malaise both in the past and present?

POWER: Again, sickness links up with notions of contamination, serving as a trope for the misprisions of desire – desires which are often constituted within confining/deforming social frameworks.

KOHLKE: One type of illness your fiction explores repeatedly is that of mental health issues, which your mother, of course, suffered from. Many of your characters display hysteria or compulsive behaviour traits, or else they experience some sort of derangement linked to physical infection. What attracts you to writing about the fragility of the mind and its liability to breakdown? To what extent do you consciously capitalise on these motifs’ dramatic aspects, as did the Victorian sensation novelists, and employ illness as the outward effect of or metaphor for unnaturally repressed passions, perhaps somewhat in line with Susan Sontag’s argument in *Illness as Metaphor* (1978)?

POWER: I did read Sontag when researching *Lily*, and obviously sickness as metaphor is a long established tradition in the romance genre, where the hero is always swooning, falling into fugue states and growing pale and wan because of lovesickness. So this notion of love/sickness has been significant in the dynamics of my fiction as a sign of, as you say, repressed or thwarted passions. Lily's illness is literally a lovesickness. I do consciously deploy the motifs of disease to set in play moments of melodrama or sensation, which are in themselves symptoms of psychic distress. Sometimes, in real life it's hard to accommodate the fragility of the mind, particularly when it's a force of destruction. But for all its resonance, perhaps I've exhausted psychic distress as a plot device.

KOHLKE: Not only are all your neo-Victorian novels currently out of print, but I'm aware that due to difficulties with securing another publishing contract, following the retirement of your previous literary agent, you ended up resorting to self-publishing *Lady Macbeth's Tale*. I gather that with digital printing facilities and an increasingly competitive publishing environment, this is becoming a more frequent option for writers – so too 'straight-to-Kindle' publication. How do you perceive the current opportunities for both emergent and previously published writers of historical fiction of breaking (back) into the mainstream market? And how important do you consider the role of publishers' and agents' advertising campaigns, as well as academic teaching and criticism of contemporary writers' works, in this context?

POWER: You're right, I've been unable to get either agent or publisher. I self-published *Lady Macbeth's Tale* through Amazon and it was quite an amazing experience, especially choosing text and cover design. Because I believed in the novel so much, it was good to know it was out there, in the ether as it were. The internet is liberating but crowded. A self-publisher needs to be an expert in marketing. Publicity is quite a hurdle. As far as traditional, mainstream publishing is concerned, I don't see things changing overnight. Most writers still need effective advertising campaigns for their books to begin to earn back their advances. And though models of publishing are beginning to change in response to digitalisation, it's hard to see how this will affect the chances of the individual author reaching the mass of readers. I do think universities and academic journals have a

significant role to play in providing an arena for the study and discussion of writing in general, particularly in interrogating how the market shapes, advances or impedes the ways in which writing is distributed and received.

KOHLKE: In which directions do you foresee neo-Victorian fiction developing in the coming decades? Is there a ‘third wave’ future for the re-imagined Victorians?

POWER: I suspect the Victorians will be with us until we cease to be in thrall to nineteenth-century models of desire: a desire which privileges the state of longing for that which is always one step beyond, a beyond beckoning from an elusive spectrality we call the past.

Notes

1. Her first novel was published under the name of Margaret Power.

Bibliography

- Carpenter, Aurea. ‘Undervalued Victorians’ [Review of Maggie Power, *Goblin Fruit*], *Times Literary Supplement*, Issue 4418, 4 Dec. 1987, 1348.
- Power, Maggie. ‘Lady Macbeth’s Tale’, 18 Oct. 2008a (viewed 15 May 2011), http://maggiepower.blogspot.com/2008/10/grand-inspiration_18.html.
- . ‘Looking for Mr. Rochester’, 14 Dec. 2008b (viewed 15 May 2011), <http://maggiepower.blogspot.com/search?q=mr.+rochester>.
- . Private email correspondence with Marie-Luise Kohlke, 2 Jun. 2011.