

*A conversation between
Karin Slaughter and Mo Hayder*

Several months ago, I had the great pleasure of e-mailing back and forth with my pal Mo Hayder, who is just about one of the best crime fiction writers around. Her latest book, *Tokyo* (which in the United States goes by the title *The Devil in Nanking*), was so good that it made my teeth hurt. Since Mo and I are both women writing about graphic violence, we often get compared to each other. This is one time I don't mind the association— talk about keeping great company.

Warning: This interview contains mild spoilers about Indelible and Mo Hayder's Treatment.

MH: Why did you decide to go back to the past with Indelible, your fourth book?

K The moment I finished *Blindsighted*, I knew that I'd want to go back and explore how Jeffrey and Sara got together and what made their relationship tick. I had pretty much planned out the first four books in my head, and I hid little clues in the first three novels so that readers who paid attention from the beginning would be rewarded when they got to *Indelible*. I like how we start to see different layers of Sara in the fourth book, because that's what's so great about getting to know someone over a period of time. There are always secrets about characters that only the author knows, and this story was a great way for me to reveal some of them. It's sort of like the way you talk about Grey in the first part of *Tokyo*. On the surface, she seems like this very weak, changeable being, but underneath, she's a very strong woman. Even if your plots weren't as driven as they are, I think the tension you create with the mystery of character would keep me reading.

M Your planning shows. And you deal with series characters so successfully – they never seem stale. This is something I was sure I couldn't do because I was afraid I'd find it restricting, so I planned two books for my detective

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Jack Caffery, then moved on to a stand alone with Tokyo. You clearly don't feel the same restriction?

K I wish I could take credit for the planning, but it's one of those times when your brain manages to pull off something really tricky without you really being aware of it happening. I just feel like I really know Lena, Jeffrey and Sara, so it's a very natural thing for me to write about them. That being said, my next book after *Faithless* is a stand-alone called *Triptych*, and it's been good for me to have a break out of Grant County. The setting is urban and gritty—downtown Atlanta—and I'm having a lot of fun being in a new place with new characters, some of whom will eventually end up in the Grant County series.

I have to say, though, that I think you're selling yourself short with Jack. There's no way that the last chapter of *The Treatment* ends his story. There are scenes from that book that have stuck with me even after all these years. Don't you get a lot of letters and e-mails from fans asking when you'll go back to him?

M Um – yes. Alarmingly so. Some people get quite angry that I've left Caffery on what they think is meant to be a cliff-hanger. No Misery scenarios yet, but a lot of readers find it hard to accept that the ending wasn't designed to usher in a sequel. However, I left him exactly where I wanted to leave him - - maybe I'm crazy but I thought it was much a more poignant and telling point in his life. And like you with Triptych (great title BTW), I found moving to a new setting in Tokyo very liberating. I knew I wanted to do something different, so it wasn't just the setting I changed, but the structure: particularly the switch to two first-person narratives, which was a huge challenge. I remember saying to you after reading Indelible that we'd both written novels with very similar structures in that there were two narratives in two time scales, the earlier one not seeming initially to have much to do with the latter, until the two come together in the closing scenes. As I was reading Indelible it didn't even dawn on me that what was happening to Jeffery and Sara in Sylacauga would have any impact on the hostage situation, so you obviously did the juggling act to perfection. How did you pull it off?

K Okay, first, I wouldn't characterize all those letters I wrote to you as "angry." I was just curious about Jack. That kind of talk makes me understand why Kathy Bates' character snapped.

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Anyway...thanks for saying I pulled it off in *Indelible*. This was another case of my brain being smart without me knowing how. Originally, I assumed I'd write the Sylacauga part first then go back and do the present-day narration, then blend them together afterward. It didn't work out that way—I ended up writing the book in a very straight-forward manner, juggling both plots in my head as I moved from chapter to chapter. That I could manage to juggle all of this in my head at the same time is surprising considering I often forget the punch-lines to jokes as I'm telling them.

Do you find that you have better focus where your books are concerned than you do in your real life? Because I have to say that the thing you pulled off best in Tokyo is what I like to think of as a writer's contract with the reader: you have the ability to make me trust you implicitly. I know when I read one of your books that no matter which direction the story takes, it's for a reason that will be made clear by the end. And I know that you got lost in Atlanta traffic the one time you came here, so your ability to suspend my disbelief about direction says a lot.

M Yeah, and thanks for the gallant offer to come out and help. Actually, far from being lost I was simply bogged down in your APPALLING beltway system. I knew where I was going. But as I had time (lots of it) to sit and admire your beautiful city from the parking lot -- aka I-285 -- it crossed my mind that there's a tendency to set crime novels in big, very cosmopolitan cities: it's certainly the backdrop I've used in the past (South London, Tokyo). But you've chosen a very small-town setting. I wonder if that's what makes the series so powerful, what makes the menace really hit you between the eyes, the juxtaposition of the horror with sleepy little Heartsdale? Is it like the world you grew up in, or where you live now? Because if the answer is yes, then statistically it's all over for you. If not now then next week, next month, next year...

K Oh, right—there's never traffic in London. Still, my hat is off to you for not abandoning your car on the interstate (which some folks have been known to do).

I grew up in a small town, but I did what most folks do as soon as I was old enough—moved to the big city. In my case, that was Atlanta. It seems to me

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that in America, all the “interesting” crimes happen in towns of 30,000 people or less. Atlanta, which is statistically one of the most violent cities in America, has its share of shootings, but usually it’s for your average stupid reasons: drugs, gangs, robberies gone wrong.

Kids killing parents, pedophiles hiding in the woodshed, pregnant women hacked to death in their sleep -- this sort of thing is happening in small-town America. If I were a serial killer, I’d certainly look for a place to hide where people don’t lock their doors. And you’re right about a small-town setting being an unexpected place for violence. It makes what happens that more horrifying. Walking through Atlanta, I’m much more alert to my surroundings than I am when I’m taking a stroll in downtown Blue Ridge, which is a very small community in the North Georgia mountains. That feeling of safety is something we all want—unfortunately, it *is* just a feeling. Bad things happen everywhere. For instance, you’ll see about six churches per person up in Blue Ridge, and folks have signs with the ten commandments posted in their yards, but then you read the local paper and find out that just on the outskirts of town, one of the largest methamphetamine labs in the state was busted that weekend and Hazmat was called in and sixteen people were arrested. I love that dichotomy.

On the other hand, what I’ve found with *Triptych* is that it’s very freeing to have Atlanta as a backdrop and all the resources that entails. The book opens with a dead prostitute. You don’t see many hookers in Grant County. I’m sure there are some, but they certainly don’t feel free to walk the streets.

Was it conscious on your part to write about crime in an urban setting? I made up Grant County in my head, so I’m the only person who knows where everything is. Are you ever worried you’ll have Jack take a left on a one-way street and bring down the wrath of all of London? I’ve been very nervous about writing about Atlanta, even though I’ve lived here for almost fifteen years. I *know* I’m going to make a mistake, it’s just a matter of how many people notice.

M I know what you mean: I’d lived in Tokyo for two years and made copious notes before I wrote a book about it, but I was still insecure enough to put in the acknowledgements an apology to the city for the liberties I’d taken with its geography. For Birdman and The Treatment I knew that corner of London pretty well so I wasn’t too worried – although I did get one very

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miffed reader complaining the plot in Birdman was completely implausible because there were no houses big enough in that part of Greenwich to accommodate Hartveld's unseemly behaviour with corpses. The fact that said reader went on to enumerate six points in the narrative where I was sending him coded love messages did nothing to assuage my mortification at getting a detail wrong. So I can identify with your caution around the residents of Atlanta, especially with their predilection for shooting (and BTW never let it be said we don't try and follow in your footsteps, US of A. Like our Atlanta-style traffic, we're working hard on the gun front: gun crime is now the fastest rising crime in the UK. So ner ner.)

M *But I think the larger point you're making is that in this genre details have to be really authentic – so you surprise me when you say you made it all up. I'd always had you down as someone who did exhaustive research. What about all the police procedural passages – you didn't make those up, did you?*

Well done you on the gun crime! I do a ton of research, but I'm sure you've found that for every book or article you read, maybe .01% actually ends up in your finished story. I do make up a great deal of things, mostly because following every rule in the book is pretty boring. For instance, in any police-involved shooting, the officer is immediately taken off duty until there is a full investigation, but *A Faint Cold Fear* would've been pretty boring if Jeffrey's story showed him sitting around in his underwear all week watching the History Channel. I will say that I think it's very important to know the rules, because then you can break them in such a way that keeps it realistic for the reader. A good case in point is Sara's medical knowledge. I have a lovely doctor who helps me with those things, but if I followed every step for, say, intubating someone, that would take about three pages to show properly and it would seriously slow down the story.

I don't know if you've found this, but thriller readers tend to be a very savvy bunch, and if you try to trick them too much, they'll just close the book (or load their guns, as the case may be). I understand getting upset when a detail is wrong. I love Eric Garcia's books—he writes about dinosaurs living among us, only they wear human disguises. His main character is a crime-solving Raptor name Vincent. So, in one of the books, Vincent was talking about how he passed out from a basil overdose (don't ask) on the Emory University football field in Atlanta. Emory is an egghead school (Sara's alma mater) and does not

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have a football team. So, this really stopped me in the book until I thought, “wait, you’ll buy that he’s a dinosaur in a human suit, going around solving crimes and standing up to the dino mafia, but not the football field thing?” I guess it’s all a matter of suspension of disbelief. No author can get everything right, but I understand when something in your own back yard is misrepresented. What puzzles me is why folks get so angry. As Harlan Coben says, “It’s fiction!” We are not writing textbooks or how-to’s.

When you lived in Tokyo, was it specifically to research the book? Or did you just take notes because you knew one day this was a story you’d have to write? I think the whole idea of escorts is fascinating and very foreign to Americans. The whole idea of “renting” someone for non-sexual companionship is not a part of our culture. Maybe it goes to our growing sense of entitlement. I have a friend who used to be a stripper as well as a prostitute, and she hates men because of the ones she came into contact with during that part of her life. I write a little bit about that in *Faithless* when Lena and Jeffrey go to a strip club looking for information. Did you find yourself feeling that sort of hate, or did taking the sex out of it make a difference?

M *Well first off I’m not saying there aren’t places in Japan where sex is for sale: at one end of the spectrum of hostess clubs in Tokyo are the “Snack Bars,” down-at-heel places that employ yakuza-trafficked Thai and Filipina girls, and in these places the customers really can get a hand-job under the table. (Then there are ‘Soaplands’ -- but let’s not get into that.) But sex most definitely was not on the menu in the club I worked and I certainly didn’t leave my experience in Japan hating men. Nor did I feel degraded or abused because all I was doing was being paid unfeasible amounts for sitting around drinking and smoking. The only hardship was talking to people whom I wouldn’t normally have talked to (though there were some I definitely wanted to talk to – I dated one of the customers for two months). I don’t believe there’s a soul in the world who can say that in their job they don’t sometimes have to make small talk with people they don’t like.*

M *So really, it was nowhere near as seedy as the words “hostess club” imply. The girls I worked with tended to be part of that traveller community Alex Garland portrayed so well in *The Beach*. That community is a movable entity because they gravitate to the same places in whatever city, so you very often meet someone in Bangkok, say, and run into them months later*

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in Kathmandu. In a strange way – considering it extended across several countries – it was quite a cosy group.

- M *On the subject of men hating (!) it sometimes occurs to me that for those sex workers who, like your friend, hate men it is often the cause as much as the effect of being in the industry. Which came first, the hatred or the behaviour?*
- M *It's the Aileen Wuornos syndrome, isn't it? [for info on Wuornos, check out: <http://www.carpenoctem.tv/killers/wournos.html>] When I think about Aileen I'm amazed what she did doesn't happen more often -- hatred stepping over into violence. A lot of the questions I'm asked by readers and the press circle around these issues -- women and violence -- and particularly about what it means to be a woman who writes about violent crime (often inflicted on women). When I think about some of your toe curlers (especially the crime in *Blindsighted* – I mean, ahem) I feel sure it's something you've been asked about over and over again. How do you answer this question? Is it a male prerogative to write about violence? And do we write differently from men?*

I do wonder sometimes if it's the chicken or the egg with sex workers. You don't tend to find girls who come from stable, loving homes getting into that sort of life. Not that it hasn't happened (and been the subject of many made-for-TV movies) but more often than not if you look on the streets you find women who've been victims of abuse or who place little value on their bodies or selves. Runaways. Addicts. Self-abusers. Taking this to the obvious conclusion, you would assume that they had been victimized by fathers or other men in their lives, so when they get into the trade, they're already well equipped to hate men. I think one thing prostitutes see that other women do not is that more base side of men. Whether it's something internal on the woman's part or some sense of women as property on the man's part, I don't know, but I do know that the very nature of the transaction shifts all the power, and no one likes to lose their sense of control, especially over their own bodies.

As for women writing about violence, every interview I've ever done has had some variation on that question—usually with an accusation behind it. Not that interviewers have been aggressive, but the way the question is phrased generally implies that what I'm doing is taboo and that perhaps I'd be better off in the more lady-like territory of knitting mysteries or stories where cats narrate

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half the book. I actually had a man come up to me after a signing and ask, "What's a pretty little thing like you doing writing about such nasty subjects?"

I've talked about this issue with some of my male friends who are crime fiction writers, and they very seldom get the same questions about violence in their novels put to them. It's much more acceptable for a man to write about nasty things than it is for a woman to do the same. For years, this was boys-only territory, and especially in the late eighties and nineties you had this myth of the broken woman emerge, where a female character who had been raped or abused had two choices: either be a catatonic or be a martyr, and always, always some brave, sensitive man would rescue her from herself in the end. I understand that this response had a lot to do with what was going on in society at large (writers could no longer rape and pillage in a vacuum) but I found it irksome -- if not slightly insulting -- that these women could not save themselves. Obviously, a lot of men did as well because you have great stories like *In A Dry Season* from Peter Robinson, where he narrates from a woman's point of view in an incredibly believable way, and Mark Billingham is making an enviable career out of having equal-opportunity murderers.

My own feeling is that it's about damn time women started talking and writing about violence against women. We are generally the victims of these crimes. We are the ones who have to live through it--if we're lucky. I think women authors look at sex crimes in a different way, and with Lena, the character in my series who was brutally raped, you see a different side of recovery than what is normally in fiction. Statistically, her reaction is more common than the martyr/catatonic one. Like many women, she subverts her anger and turns it on herself. She looks for situations and relationships where the abuse is repeated. She self-medicates. These are all self-destructive things that women can do in response to violence, and I want to talk about that because it's not something I've seen in many books. This is why I love Denis Mina's Maureen O'Donnell trilogy. My God, what a character. She's so raw and out there, and as a reader I keyed into her in a very emotional way that I'd never experienced before.

It's the same way with your stuff. *The Treatment*, for example, is a story that has a definite female perspective, just not the sort of female perspective we're used to hearing. It cuts straight through to the heart of violence--visceral, gut-wrenching. The people who said that Aileen Wuornos was the first female serial killer, and who sort of dismissed her as not "really" a woman because she

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was a lesbian, aren't comfortable with the thought of women committing violence, let alone understanding writing about it. Yet, if you look at really horrible crimes against children, you see that women are much more sadistic than men. I also wonder if you get a different reaction to your work because you're British and not held to the standards dictated by America's Puritanical roots. When you wrote about child abuse, for instance, were you trying to make a statement, or were you just telling a story?

- M *I'm always, primarily, writing a story. I agree with everything you say (a special groan of recognition for the cat-narrated novel) however it has taken me years to be confident enough to say out loud: I'm just telling a story... It's the sort of comment that guarantees you'll end up mired in Tolstoyist debates about what defines art, about responsibilities and the writerly remit to educate, elucidate, illuminate. Of course if I feel moved by a subject (as I did by child abuse for *The Treatment* and the Nanking massacre for *Tokyo*) obviously I'm going to write more passionately about it, but I never, ever set off to write a book with an agenda. I'd be stymied if I asked myself what I was trying to say before I put pen to paper, even if I might look back on a novel in retrospect and recognise my themes and passions.*
- M *As an extension of this, I think that writers are too often encouraged to become pundits for every issue under the sun. For example would you ask, in a professional capacity, a dentist/check out clerk/decorator for his/her opinion on the war in Iraq, and take the answers more seriously than your own opinions? Yet, it's the sort of question I've been asked countless times, and I'm fairly sure people took what I felt more seriously because I'm a writer. Just because I've got some knowledge of how to arrange words in a relatively pleasing order doesn't make my moral compass any more finely tuned than anyone else's. In fact, probably less so, since most of my job is about lying convincingly.*
- M *Or maybe I'm just subverting my anger.....*

K: I think that any writer who sets out with an agenda is going to have a very forced narrative, and the reader will know it. Like you, it's only after I've written something that I see what issues I've raised, and generally it's about a problem that I've seen happening in the world that has troubled me. If that's subverting your anger, then I'm guilty of it as well. If I get to the point where I'm being didactic or preaching to the choir, I hope someone

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shoots me. At the end of the day, I'm writing for entertainment, not education. I don't think there's anything to be ashamed of in being a good storyteller. I also don't think being in print makes my beliefs more valid than the next person's.

What I like when I'm writing is that sometimes my characters have different opinions than I do about certain topics. Lena would no doubt have a very different take on the whole Bill Clinton/Monica Lewinsky scandal than I did. I think it's much more challenging to write from a different perspective than the one you're comfortable with. It brings out all kinds of things about yourself that maybe you didn't know.

M What you said about The Treatment having a female perspective is interesting, because I was very definitely shying away from writing from a woman's perspective.

What steps did you take to shy away from writing as a woman? I'm curious because I don't think any woman can ever get away from giving the female perspective, because it colors every part of our lives. Maybe you don't agree with me on that, but I think from the time we're born, girls are taught to see the world differently. Even so-called tomboys, which I most certainly am, were taught limits. I think you'd be hard-pressed to find a woman who isn't on high alert when she walks through a dark parking lot, and doesn't think the same thing all of us do when she hears a strange noise in the middle of the night: rape.

M I agree we see the world entirely differently, but I feel (rather unfashionably) that our behaviour and perspective are just as much a result of our biology as of our conditioning. But you're right – no female writer can get away from giving the feminine perspective, although in The Treatment and Birdman I did my damndest: I wrote in the 3rd person and made the lead characters male. It was a huge effort to shift into female 1st person with Tokyo, I was terrified – because it was so revealing. You've always written both male and female characters with equal believability – for example Jeffery and Sara really come alive in equal measure. Do you find it difficult to get into Jeffrey's head?

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Genetics certainly plays a part in women being more cautious than men. It's both nature and nurture that makes us so different from our male counterparts. When I write from Jeffrey's point of view, I have to turn off that alarm—the one that says to always be on the look-out, to know my surroundings and who is occupying my space. The last thing a man is thinking about when he walks into a strange situation is that he could possibly be assaulted. To remove that threat is incredibly freeing, and that's the place where I can really get into Jeffrey's head. I know it's extremely reductive to talk about such a complex issue in terms of gender, but for me when I see things through Jeffrey's eyes, I feel all the freedoms he has from being a man. He went to college right out of high school while his pregnant ex-girlfriend stayed at home to raise their child. He was a prolific womanizer prior to Sara and was celebrated rather than denigrated for this fact. His mother thinks he's perfect and no woman is good enough for him. You don't often find women enjoying these same freedoms.

For instance, I sometimes get letters from folks taking me to task for Lena's cursing, but no one ever says anything about Jeffrey's potty mouth. No one cares when he's violent or insensitive, or when Sara puts aside her own emotional needs to take care of him. These sacrifices are completely acceptable because that's the way it's always been. To bring it all back to sex, I think it really makes some people uncomfortable that Jeffrey and Sara have such a good sex life. Sara is not the kind of woman who sees sex as a chore. She enjoys it and she loves Jeffrey and they are moving toward a somewhat stable relationship. The reader knows that they love each other, and with their history you should also know that they're not going to end their relationship because of a fight over who was supposed to take out the trash. Like you, I often have my head in a book, and I can't think of many novels I've read lately where you see two adults in a stable, healthy relationship. Not to say I'm breaking new ground here. Lindsey Davis's Falco series does the same thing—only in ancient Rome.

But sex is still a tricky thing to write about in detail. I think you really pulled this off well in *Birdman*. Jack actually gets laid and you read about it. It seems like we crime writers are more than happy to talk about bludgeoning, child abuse and sexual assault, but when it comes to sex between two "good" characters, it freaks us out.

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M *This is EXACTLY the point I've been making for years – except not so eloquently, so nobody understood what the hell I was talking about. There's no doubt about it – writing about sex from the perspective of two characters who 'want it' is extremely difficult for a woman – probably for some of the issues you identify earlier – it can be so easily confused and feel like a surrender, a loss of power – so how do you keep a strong female character 'on top' while still letting her have sex. (Or have I answered the question: keep her on top?)*

I think sex is often about control, and that's not a bad thing. Ideally the balance of power switches back and forth. Even more ideally, this goes on for several hours if not days.

M *Hey, I like that. Spike what I said about Atlanta. If that's how you lot behave, I'm moving there tomorrow.*

There's a reason we call them long, hot summers...

M *Fnarr, fnarr*

As for more graphic sex in novels, a friend of mine has said the test about whether or not to show the sex is if you can take out the scene and the story still works. If that's the case, then you probably don't need it there. The first time I showed what I would call explicit sex between Jeffrey and Sara was in *Indelible*. I was nervous as a whore in church. This will probably freak out Sarah Waters, but she really encouraged me to go all the way and show it for what it was. I think the scene in *Indelible* tells the reader something new about Jeffrey and Sara's relationship, so it enhances the story and works in the book. It's like when you had Jack making the beast with two backs in the stairwell with Rebecca. I think it said so much about both of them as characters. Here were two emotionally unsettled, needy people making an incredibly irresponsible decision and having unprotected sex in a semi-private place. To me, that says a lot more than the usual stand-bys for character development of telling the reader what kind of alcohol some guy drinks or music he listens to.

M *The big problem in writing about sex is choosing the words for all those horrible gristly bits that get used during the skilful execution of the bad thang. The best advice I ever got is to call it/them what the character*

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would call it/them. That advice was one of those lightning strike moments, when the huge lightbulb on top of my head lit up like a bad Christmas display, because although I'd understood when writing how to get 'into character,' to use a Stanislavskian metaphor, I had a yawning gap when it came to sex scenes (oh, the innuendos are out in their hundreds today, aren't they?) I just couldn't take that step – it all felt too personal. Maybe that's because a character is easy to portray if they're just eating breakfast, having an argument, selling an ice cream, whatever, because we can be witness to these things: but we don't on the whole (and speak for yourself on this) witness other people having sex, so we have nothing to mimic. It could be the reason death scenes are so difficult – because as a society we avoid looking at death. Of course, all of these problems go up a notch on the difficult gauge when you're trying to write in the first person – then you become utterly exposed, utterly out on display. I've been very squeamish about sex and the first person, but maybe I'm getting over it now, because my next book is all about sex and all in first person.

When's the book out?

M April 2006. I'm introducing a new character – Oakesy, a British journalist who works for a magazine that specialises in exposing paranormal hoaxes, faith healers etc. A bit like James Randi. In Pig Island, a hazy, poor quality video arrives at the magazine showing a naked half beast/half human being walking along a beach on a remote Scottish island. Also living on the island is a cult rumoured to be involved in Satanism. The theory goes that this creature is the devil, and that the cult has somehow conjured him down to the earth. It's Oakesy's job to disprove the claim that this is the devil.

M How about you? Any feelings on which is easier. First or third?

I've only had one published story written in first person. I don't know that I'll ever do a novel in first, because I find it too revealing for the many reasons you mentioned above. There are also a lot of writers who don't do it very well—you being my favorite exception—and to me their tone tends to sound too self-involved and/or self-satisfied. What you did brilliantly in *Tokyo* was bridge two first-person narratives by giving them distinctive voices. That's always a

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big worry of mine. I don't want all my characters to sound alike. With *Triptych*, that's my challenge: create something totally new. You did it wonderfully.

You're right about naming the different parts, though, because I swear to God the words "throbbing member" kept coming to my mind as I wrote.

In *Indelible* and later in *Faithless*, I think the sexual intercourse (double entendre intended) adds a lot to the story. I see Sara as multi-faceted. There's the trusted pediatrician, upstanding citizen of Grant County -- and then there's the other side of her, the side that really enjoys sex and wants to be with Jeffrey. I've alluded several times to her gutter mouth during intercourse, but people seem to gloss that over when they're thinking about Sara because of course good girls don't say "*fuck me.*"

There's this really (I think) great scene between Sara and Jeffrey in *Faithless* that I worked on for quite a while—sex scenes always take much longer than the other stuff—and I really like how it turned out because it tells you everything you need to know about their relationship at that point. Sara is always going to surprise Jeffrey. I, for one, find that very sexy about her, but then I spend *way* too much time thinking about my characters.

But, come on—you've never watched porn? How many years have you been married? You can't tell me your copy of *The Thorn Birds* didn't have all the good pages turned down...?

M My boyfriend got suspended from school at age 8. He'd found a pile of porn mags: he didn't know what they were, but he knew the older boys liked them, so was making pocket money selling them. Larry Flynt's Mini-Me: he'd made fifty quid by the time they stopped him. But I hardly ever watch porn because I know how humdrum it is for the actors, so I discount almost everything I see in porn as exactly not how people behave. Plus I've heard some of the frankly unrepeatable tricks of the trade. (But maybe I'm digressing.....)

Since when did you pull punches?

The thing that bothers me about porn is that with some famous exceptions, men still can make more money than women in this profession. I saw an interesting

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documentary on gay porn, where “straight” guys could make thousands of dollars a day by doing gay porn, or gay-for-pay. Women don’t have that same option because of course the lesbian narrative is as common to porn as satin sheets and a wah-wah chicka-boom soundtrack. I doubt very seriously anyone is going to fight for equality in this arena, but especially with the advent of Viagra, it’s not like one person is doing more work than the other. I suppose the implication is that the women are interchangeable. That’s what bothers me about pornography.

- M *As a child, some very soft porn literature found its way into my house. Henry Miller, plus my favourite – Portnoy’s Complaint (although I wish Roth would drop the sex thing now – it’s all getting far too Woody Allen). I don’t know what was going on in my mother’s mind, because although my memory is of a constant Jane Austen/Charlotte Bronte diet, some cool things did creep onto my bedside cabinet. Probably the most memorable was Metamorphosis. That blew me away – age 12. What did it for me was that much-analysed opening sentence: “As Gregor Samsa woke one morning from uneasy dreams...”.. I think I can trace a lot of my literary tastes back to the moment I read that sentence.*
- M *But how about you – do you ever sit and unpick your influences? What were you reading as a mini KS?*

God, I had forgotten about *Metamorphosis*. I must have been around the same age as you when I read it. (Hm...some secret international plot to spawn thriller writers...?) I’d never read anything like it and that book is probably one of the few stories that I started reading again as soon as I finished. Like all children, I guess I keyed into Gregor’s isolation. He’s such a tragic hero, and despite the plus of having more arms, who wouldn’t be sad to be a cockroach?

Another book that I feel marked me was *The Painted Bird*. There has been a lot of scandal about whether or not it’s a true account, but I was a kid when I read it and all I knew was that it was a shocking and amazing story. *Bird* is the first book I remember reading that had graphic violence, but in the context where it actually said something about the characters and moved the story. Up until that point, it’d been John Jakes (soft porn!) and V.C Andrews (incest!) that occupied my mind, but after the reading Kosinski, I think I turned into a more serious reader, which leads me to...Flannery O’Connor.

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Growing up in the deep South, I had never been exposed to a woman writing about violence in such a matter-of-fact way. I didn't think it was allowed. O'Connor was so masterful at blending everyday characters with horrific events, and she had a wicked sense of humor. I loved the way she used humor to balance the violence. There's this great line at the end of *A Good Man is Hard to Find* where the Misfit, who has just killed an entire family, says about a nagging grandmother lying dead at his feet, "*She would have been a good woman if...somebody had been there to shoot her every minute of her life.*"

How can that not inspire you?

M Well, exactly.....

Pig Island by Mo Hayder will be out April 2006. You can see Mo's website at <http://www.mohayder.net/>. Find copies of Mo's books [*Birdman*, *The Treatment* and *The Devil in Nanking* (or *Tokyo*)] from one of the fine booksellers on [my BookLinks page](#). I assume you already have all of mine. You do, right? Right? *Triptych* by Karin Slaughter will be out in summer 2006.