

Interview: Esther Freud

on 'Untitled' [novel extract]

The novel extract is extremely tantalising and it would be lovely to have a bit of background detail. Could you place it in context a bit for us, such as does it have a title yet, which part of the novel is it from, and what gave you the idea for it in the first place?

This extract is actually the start of a novel I'm just in the process of finishing. I wrote it quickly and easily a couple of years ago, and then stopped, unsure if it was the novel I wanted to write. I tried out another idea and then my computer got stolen. I lost both beginnings but when I thought about them, this was the one I missed. Both books had a 17-year-old girl as their narrator, but it was the relationship with the father in this one that drew me back to it. From very early on the working title has been *The Sexy Path*, with a note beside it – 'This is NOT the title'. But recently it seems to have become the title. It's the only title that seems to suit the book. However, I do go off it sometimes, and I like the idea of a title with summer in it. It reminded me of the drama of being 17, falling in love, finding a place to fit in.

The extract almost stands alone but you are most known as a novelist. What draws you to the form of the novel?

Writers' ideas do come to them in forms. In fully formed, three-act plays sometimes, in poems, or scripts, and my ideas have always come as novels. I like the lack of rules, the meandering, the pointers and red herrings you can plant for yourself and the time it takes to write. It's like a secret world simmering away and it seems to take me longer and longer to finish one, partly because I'm so busy, but always because I'm reluctant to let it go. I love reading novels too – would always choose one over anything else. There's nothing more wonderful – healing, calming, stimulating, than being lost in the pages of a novel.

There is a tone of understated longing in the extract. How do you feel about the relationship between the father and the daughter?

It's often assumed that people, especially family members, want to get to know each other better, but in Lara's case she's terrified of embarking on an intimate relationship with her distant father. What does she have to offer him? And what if, when she finally gets to know him, he's not as fascinating as she's always been led to believe? But every little sign that she's important to him thrills and hurts her and makes us realise how much she's managed without.

Both this, and much of your previous work, has concentrated on relationships between parents and children. Can you talk about what particularly intrigues you about this?

The other day I saw a young woman having tea with her parents. She was chatting, animatedly and they were watching her, expectant, critical, searching. It struck me how self-conscious the young woman was and that she was actually performing for her parents. Letting them know she was all right, doing well, a credit to them. Better than them even. It interested me so much, maybe because it felt familiar. People judge themselves to such an extent against their parents, and their children. I've always been interested in the shapes of families. How people fit in, or don't. The pleasures, and the miseries.

The language in this piece is both tender and atmospheric. Which writers do you admire and draw from?

I never know how to answer questions about other writers. I admire so many. Often whoever I'm reading at that moment. I've just finished an extraordinary memoir by Elizabeth Gilbert – *Eat, Pray, Love* – which managed to draw me into the story with such force that I was nodding over her words of wisdom, and laughing out loud with her when it all went wrong. The writing in itself wasn't flashy or even always elegant, but the rawness and urgency of what she had to say was just as powerful as say, Alice Munro, who I'm reading now. With Munro's short stories everything is in the writing – the stories themselves – however brilliant – coming second place to the perfection of the way they are told.

You mention Alice Munro's prose being more significant than the story that she is telling. Could you explain a bit about how you balance the demands of the quality of the writing with the telling of a good story?

When I read Alice Munro it is the translucent beauty of the writing that lingers in my mind more than the story. The stories are always good, she seems able to pack a novel into a short story, but maybe it's just because the writing is so unobtrusive, so light and fresh, that you remember it after the actual story has faded.

In this extract, as well as in some of your previous novels, such as *Hideous Kinky*, you have written about journeys and travel. Can you explain a bit about your interest in writing on this subject?

It's always a gift to write about something that is new for your character, so if someone goes on a journey you can see what they see with wide open eyes. I don't purposefully set out to write about travel or distant places, but if it comes into the story I feel lucky because it's a chance to write something fresh and new. Although I have to say, writing about Italy, as so many people have done before me, especially Tuscany where this novel is set, was a challenge.

How did you manage to make a place both as well known and as well written about as Tuscany seem fresh and interesting?

I looked at Tuscany through the eyes of my narrator, a 17-year-old girl, who had never visited Italy before. I only put down what she would have noticed, and the way she saw it was affected entirely by how she was feeling about her life. This helped me steer clear of clichés.

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