

An Interview with John Kinsella: Concerning Space & Place within Landscape Poetry

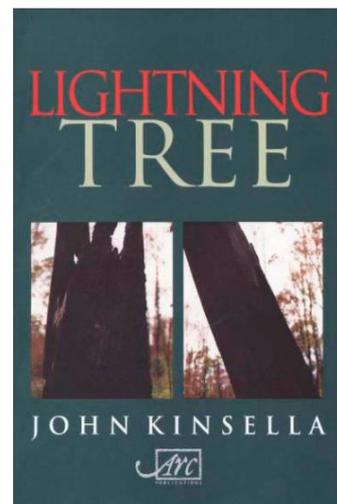
The following interview took place in November 2015 in response to *Lightning Tree*. Conducted by Dr James Byrne, with questions provided by: Rebecca Brown, Isabelle Lamb, Victoria Loftus, Karen Lunt, Charlotte McKenzie & Jessica Tillings.



John Kinsella is an Australian poet, novelist, essayist, and critic. He is the Editor of the international literary journal *Salt* and serves as International Editor at the *Kenyon Review*. He has received many awards for his poetry, in 2007 he received the Fellowship of Australian Writers Christopher Brennan Award for lifetime achievement in poetry. Since 1998, Kinsella has been a fellow of Churchill College, Cambridge University. He has published over thirty books, including *Shades of the Sublime and Beautiful* and *Sack* (Picador), *Marine*, a collaborative work with Alan Jenkins (Enitharmon) and most recently a selected works: *Drowning in Wheat* (Picador). His interviews with other writers, selections of his poetry and further writings can be found on his [website](#).

How do you build awareness into a poem?

That is a really tough thing. I think what makes a poem effectively activist, whilst still true to its local self, is a morphing of those two factors. It can come about by paratactic slips of language. The poem doesn't say all, or it only says a little bit about something, then moves into a register where the reader has some work to do. The text, in a sense, challenges us. It is challenging the terms of its own creation, it is a play in the cultural space. I don't think you can write activist landscape poetry that isn't specific, but if you don't have the generics in there as well you're going to run into all sorts of problems with interpretation. I don't want to be prescriptive in any way, I want to be



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sensitive to alternative readings. What will make you the writers you will be is how you solve that problem.

Does the form/structure of your poems influence your perception of their poetics?

Always. When I write a poem I see it in my head. I often 'write' (or compose) when walking, I find the rhythm very conducive. I don't just hear the words, I physically see them, as if on a typewriter sheet. I often use a manual typewriter to type up my poems, so I visually see the page before putting them into a Word document. Perceptions are very physical for me. When a poem is apparently 'finished' it remains filed in my head, I can pull it out at any time, it becomes part of the general clutter inside my head. They have a visceral effect on me, they become cumulative inside and that affects how the next poem is seen or imagined.

Looking at 'Heading South through the Long Paddock', would you say that it represents your writing process? For instance, could you say that the image of the Noongar woman is the 'idea' that sings out the echidna?

It *is* a poem about the writing process. It's a poem that was seen in my head whilst driving along those roads, going to see my brother who was in a relationship with a local Noongar woman, who was an elder of her community. Through him and her I heard these stories of echidna, granite and so on, in the great Dryandra Forest. As I was driving along, seeing the poem in my head, I was processing the ethics of telling these stories, and how I could without causing offence.

Unusually for me, the poem *does* actually reach some kind of reconciliation by the end. A way in which I felt it could be told, taken out of my head and put on the page. Therefore it is a poem about many processes, but particularly the process of writing, and the process of listening and telling, and what you can and can't tell. Lots of things aren't said in that poem. Things I can't tell and don't have the right to, and I would never repeat. For example, women's business that I had overheard.

When I was teaching at Kenyon College, in the early 2000s, their library had this anthropological book from the early 20th century, which contained reproductions of

women's ceremonies. It was seriously women's business, not for men to see. I thought, 'my god, I cannot believe this stuff is here'. I closed it up, took it to the counter and said, 'I can't tell you to get rid of the book because that's not the right thing to do, but I can tell you to close it and not let anyone read it, except for people who have permission from the 'indigenous' elders of Australia, from the communities that are being discussed, and certainly no male. It's not for a male to look at.'

Now, I consider myself a very gender-liberated human being. I believe there are no two genders, but are many genders. But, when it comes to cultural respect and cultural rights and traditional societies, I don't for a moment suppose I have a right to say what's what. But I do know that within those communities, gender *is* important and my responsibility was to close that out, and I did. You might see that, for an anarchist, as a kind of censorship, and I don't believe in censorship. But in that particular case it wasn't a matter of censorship, it was a matter of deep respect. I think that ties back to my poem. It's a poem about how you write with respect.

Due to witnessing and contributing to the Cocos' everyday life did you feel less of a tourist, did you have more respect within the community? Especially in West Island, where people act drunk and disorderly, and seem to lack respect for the land and the non-Western people?

I have a big problem with the notion of what a tourist is, I have certainly never felt like a tourist in my life. I have travelled the world many times and never felt like a tourist. I think tourism is about motive. If you are going to collect baubles and acquire snapshots, purely and utterly to do with collecting, then maybe that is tourism. But if you are going into a different space to spread awareness, not only of your experiences, but to collect it as well, there is spatial negotiation. I tend to stay in places for a long period of time, so I can get to know them the best that I can. With the Cocos, I lived there. I had no intention on coming home for a while.

The drunk and disorderly was probably me more than anything else, I went to the Cocos to get away from the scene. I had severe addiction problems for around fifteen years and when I was about thirty-two I had reached rock bottom. I thought if I didn't

get out of the scene, out of all these connections I'm a part of, I'm not going to live much longer. So I looked on the map, found the most isolated place in the world and went there. I originally went there because it was an Islamic community, I thought there would be no substance problems. But West Island is different. They drink a lot of alcohol and a majority of Westerners go there to escape and hide out from other parts of the world. They live a very below the horizon kind of life. So my problems sort of went with me. I would spend time on Home Island, which is Islamic and animist and a very culturally interesting place, where things were sober and intense and spiritual, then I'd go back to West Island, where I lived, and chaos would consume me, so there was a very big split. But I should say that not all West Islanders behave that way — of course, many if not most don't.

The Cocos are a small coral atoll in the middle of the Indian Ocean, most of it only two metres above the water. When I was there we were hit by a cyclone, we had to go into a community building set up a bit like a bunker and water went over the islands, it was really intense. I got a bifurcated interaction with the place, I had interactions with people I was familiar with and people I wasn't familiar with. I felt a very close relationship with a number of people from Home Island and I told their stories in poems. It was a liberating experience for me. So I wasn't just going as a tourist, I was going as a dropout with problems, to try and fix myself, and at the same time to write something culturally. It was an eye-opener for me, it kind of saved my life.

I ended up, in essence, deported from the island. I got back to Australia and within two months, I was completely sober and never looked back. It was a really important part of my life for all sorts of reasons. Culturally, in terms of landscaping issues, and personal ones, in terms of survival.

Witnessing becomes an interesting factor in this because one is witnessing deep cultural stress and change in a very isolated place, where people are having to leave because it's so small. Witnessing is always what you do, if you are an activist, and especially a landscape writer. You witness change in every way, cultural change and,

in a small place like the Cocos, the pressure they are put under. The first section of *Lightning Tree* deals with how I tried to cope with all that.

You play around with grammar throughout *Lightning Tree*. For instance, ‘Scandal’ opens in lowercase, and you vary between writing ‘and’ and using an ampersand in many of the poems?

For me, punctuation is very specific. If I use an ampersand it is for tightening the line and making it read quicker, both visually and orally. ‘And’ will stretch the line out. It is all for timing reasons. How it looks and feels on the page is very important. I will often use a colon in an expression, or a clause, or a statement. Any kind of mark on the page: diacritics, umlaut, commas, hyphens, they’re all part of language. They represent something, and so I use them. If I *don’t* use them, it’s for a reason.

Often these poems go through many versions over the years, and punctuation is often the thing you discuss at the editing stage. Some publishers will try and iron things out, never let that happen. See what happened to Emily Dickinson's dash. I mean, for god’s sake, they put commas in instead. Thank goodness the dashes were restored. It makes you read them in a totally different way. The timing is all different, the visual experience is different, thus the poem is different.

A lot of contemporary landscape poets use projective verse, but it’s rarely deployed in *Lightning Tree*. The poems are more traditional in form, is there a specific reason for this?

In my critical works *Disclosed Poetics* and the two volumes of *Spatial Relations*, I challenge the whole projective verse project. Not in terms of the visual aspects, but in terms of the politics of text. *Lightning Tree*, in some ways, is a transitional book for me. As the years have gone by it’s starting to strike me as more important to me than I had realised, in terms of what I’d been trying to do. It moves away from very experimental work that came in a couple of books before it.

When I got to *Lightning Tree* I was transitioning in myself, from being off my face to being very sober, and also in my way of life. I had lived a very chaotic life and lost a long-term relationship, and in consequence, the relationship I had with my first son. I had entered another relationship, married and had more children (and I am still in that relationship). I started to think about how to talk about these things; I had not done this before. I had not been in any way confessional, and I ironise that in *Lightning Tree*. There is a whole set of poems called 'Confessional', where I deal with the relationship with my first son. I'd never written like that before; I've rarely written like it since. But I wanted to deal with how I negotiate those deeply personal things, whilst still being concerned with political-ethical landscape issues. Personal issues are every bit as political, every bit as ethical.

With regard to personal in the confessional space, surrounded as you are by the elements of nature in the book, it's interesting to see how, for instance, in the title poem, you put the word 'crucifix', and suddenly, the poem has a whole different set of implications.

As soon as you use the word 'God' it immediately frets the whole thing. My use of the word 'God' is very specifically non-specific. Non-specific in the sense that I'm not claiming a universal, single figure of power. I'm an anarchist in all things. I believe in a kind of spiritual anarchy, more than I do organised religions. Organised religions, for me, are in many ways a constraint that removes liberty. On the other hand, I am a great believer in spiritual liberty and people believing as they choose to believe. So when I use 'God', especially if I capitalise it, there is a reason. There are a number of poems in *Lightning Tree* that play with religious imagery, but that doesn't mean they are religious poems. What they're trying to do is find a way to talk about spiritual issues that go outside the framework of organised religions. They believe and they don't believe. You have got to always be careful of these very phrased words, because people are immediately going to read them a certain way. So the poem has to pull that reading to bits.

The earlier question about why I don't use the field of the page in *Lightning Tree*, and why it's written in a relatively conventional stanzaic form, although there are some

experimental stanzas in there, some I would argue radically experimental, is because I was trying to approach things in many kinds of ways. Before, I had done more expressive experimentation on the page, but this book is different. It's kind of experimental, as in there's experimentation in form, the poem 'Premise' is an example of that. Conventional, one way, very unconventional the other, and when it was written, extremely unconventional all the same. The issue of how something takes a form, because it has to, is very pertinent in this book. This is a book where I was looking for stability in myself, not stability in the poem. So the poems are often seem to be in 'stable', closed forms, but they're actually very open forms and experimental in what they're trying to express. Sometimes the most experimental you can be is by using more traditional forms, playing with them and pulling them to bits. Picasso couldn't have been the innovative painter he was if he wasn't such a great craftsman, or a great drawer.

What do you feel are the strengths of using loco-specific as opposed to loco-generic language?

They are both necessary of course. I can give a little anecdote here: when I first started publishing books in America the editors wanted to get rid of specific local names for birds, specific names for localities, 'indigenous' Australian words that mark place, that are part of general discourse. They felt that American readers wouldn't understand them. This was a long time ago, things have changed since then. I stood my ground and I feel part of that change. I said, 'no, the readers can come, not only to me and to the poem, but to the place'. They can think outside, say, Midwest Ohio, and think Southwest Australia. The best tool they can take with them is their specificity, their local knowledge. So knowing how a Groundhog functions in Midwest Ohio, through observation, you could bring those tools to understanding difference and similarity in another place.

The generic is the base language of self, the language we use, in this case English. We might have in our poems a very specific detail about a type of insect. Imagine if someone picks that poem up in Greenland, for example, reads it and says, 'I have no idea what this is, I've never come across it before, or even the concept of such an

insect', they will know what an insect is, insects are pretty universal, it is part of most language and discourse. So you go from a general idea of what something is and work to the specific. In setting up a poem that deals with specificity, I don't think you should ever compromise. You should say exactly what you want to say and not worry about how it's read in terms of its understanding. You shouldn't worry about how a text changes in every place it is read, and with every person that reads it. No text is stable. There is no such thing as the 'written in stone/solid text' that can give the same answer to every reader, that's an absurdity. A reader in a different place will read it in a different way.

Different cultural backgrounds will mean a different kind of reading. Something which might seem to me, very liberating and generative about a Racehorse Goanna may not be interpreted by some guy living in central Australia—whose community has been shut down by the government, because of the military intrusions that happened a few years ago in Central and Northern Australia, where lots of their rights have been taken from them—this is the apartheid in Australia, that people don't hear about outside of the country. He is going to read the poem, in a very different way. I will write about it as a vegan, as an animal rights person, he may look at the Goanna as his source of food, as someone who lives off it. He is going to have a very different view of the poem. When I write the poems I need to be aware that they can have a different impact on different readers for different reasons.

In the poem 'Will-o-the Wisp', it was interesting how you meld the mythology of the Will-o-the Wisp with the 'indigenous' folkloric Min Min light. I read it's an increasing phenomena seen in the Outback, more so since European settlers came. Does that reflect your own beliefs, and reflect your activist poetics? That the land/place is in protest of this disposition itself?

These things work in poems in two ways, nothing ever works in one way. Firstly they work as a symbol, you can't employ any real thing or even imagined thing in a poem that doesn't have some kind of symbolic resonance. As soon as you place it in the framework of a poem it lives beyond its quotidian, it becomes something rarefied and full of extra meaning. So my use of the Will-o-the Wisp is going to fall into the

category of tapping into a long history of literature, Western and otherwise, that deals with unusual phenomena, with mystical overtones alongside a base in science.

Secondly, there's personal experience. You'll notice within the 'Lightning/Tremors' section, there is the poem 'Ball Lightning as Medium', whereby my brother was driving in a car with a bunch of other shearers down south and ball lightning passed through the front windscreen, between all of them and out the back window. People say, 'what a load of garbage', but I know it happened, I know my brother. I also know a woman who was in her house when ball lightning went through the front door, passed down the corridor and went out the back door. So I'm interested in these kind of real, if amazingly weird, phenomena.

In terms of 'indigenous', I'll qualify my use of that word. My friend and collaborator in poetry Charmaine Papertalk Green, a Yamaji Bardi woman from the Geraldton region of Western Australia, objects the word 'indigenous'. She states that as soon as you say that word you take away the specificity of a peoples' belonging. She will point out that she's a Yamaji woman, she will then state her parents and where they came from and so on.

I've not met them, but there actually Noongar Kinsellas down in the Southwest and Western Australia. My paternal ancestors left during the 'Great Famine' in Ireland, driven out due to starvation and English oppression. They went to the Southwest and Western Australia and became, in turn, settlers, pioneers, or conquerors, basically just people who ripped someone else's land off, which is what they were, like so many others who arrived from Europe, Ireland and Britain. But if you have a long history, and colonial history in Australia can only be up to 200 hundred years, you will inevitably have connections with the 'indigenous' peoples because of the whole intrusion and colonisation process. The rape and pillage, to put it bluntly, and if not that, the manipulation. So there's this issue of how you connect with so called 'indigeneity' or how you deny it. 'Indigenous' becomes a useful word in talking generically. But it shouldn't be a matter of 'useful'. It should be felt and understood and respected in every instance. There is a debt in the usage of the word. We are

talking about stolen land. There has never been just compensation. I use the word because I don't only talk about one people I talk about many peoples, two hundred and seventy peoples in fact. Charmaine, when she talks of being Yamaji, talks of *her* people. So I try and talk respectfully with both kinds of awareness.

Going back to the 'Will-o-the Wisp', it's a poem about indigenous knowledge of place, about phenomena that belongs to a very ancient land, to very ancient humans, whose great knowledge and witness is passed on verbally and now through writing. The poem taps into that knowledge. It *juxtaposes* it to/against old European tales of the visions of the 'drunk' (maybe even, distantly, the 'remittance man' figure in colonial parlance), of the wanderer, of the 'fool' — the outsider who seems to 'not quite being there in the head', seeing the world in a different way, maybe even with 'second sight'. So it's a poem in which these difficult things converge. I don't think a poem can do this because it's such a complex and fraught territory. You have to consider how do you do it without appropriating and how do you do it with respect.

Lastly, what advice would you give to a poet who is new to landscape? Either as a writer or a reader?

First of all I think you have to deal with definitions of landscape. Landscape suggests some kind of alteration or at least some kind of human interaction with a particular space. It comes from a late eighteenth-early nineteenth century German philosophy of how humans relate to the land. I am interested in two things. Firstly, in so called 'natural space' that operates in certain terms, has its own agency, and is outside of human experience. Then in landscape, and how we negotiate human interaction within that space.

I would say that in one way or another we have all been enacting 'landscape', if not poetry, but a landscape kind of thinking, since we were able to walk around and crawl outside. You are interacting and negotiating with a mediated human space. So landscape is an integral part of everything we do. Every human interaction with natural space is a kind of landscape or landscaping.

The degree in which we interact with that space is the question I pursue personally within my work. I would suggest to someone coming to landscape writing for the first time to think about what degree they wish to interact with space, and in doing so, how they wish to change it. Every time you write a place: every time write a forest, or each time you write a bog, or a signet of sea, in some way you are, even if very indirectly, altering that space, or at least the perceptions of that place. So from my point of view you have an ethical and political responsibility in how you write about place/space. You cannot just write about the lovely tree, and think, 'well, that's hunky-dory, we are fine with that', writing about the lovely tree has a consequence. For instance if I say, 'that tree is 25 yards away from me, it's 80ft tall and it is an Elm', you are likely to believe it. Now, I might in fact be telling you an untruth. It may be a Jarrah tree that's 200ft high, and in Southwest Australia, but you will believe what I say. That immediately makes you question what text is, especially poetry texts. Is it imparting a truth or not? Landscape is not just this 'thing' that exists. Landscape is a mediated human interaction with space, in which truth is a very big variable.

As an activist poet, when I try and write about the Southwest of Cork, about Mizen Head of Ireland, I feel I have to be what I call in my critical writing 'in-situ'. I have to write whilst in the place I am writing about. You can also write at a distance, and that gives you a different perspective. So I try to do both to gain a mixed perspective. In writing about this place the issue of truth becomes extremely important to me. I want to know the names of the different species of plants and animals, but not only do I want to know them in English, I want to know them in Irish. That brings into negotiation of so called colonised space. This was a Celtic land that was colonised by the Normans, then later by the English—especially under Queen Elizabeth I, which brought the plantation philosophy and the occupying of space. That's something I feel strongly about, always. So landscape and knowing the names of things comes into relationship with history, colonisation and the truths, mistruths or untruths of that.

Landscape is not just writing about that tree and telling someone what it looks like. It is about the politics of that tree being discussed in the first place, and how you're discussing it. So anyone writing landscape, the first thing into my mind that they

should be doing is critiquing their own position. Who am I, or who are we to make this observation? How does the fact that we observe it, as opposed to someone else or another group/set of people, alter how we write about it?