

Five questions I wish an interviewer would ask me.

[For BooksLive]

1. We all know that writers are supposed to write about what they know. Why, then, are half your novels set in another country and another time?

That depends on what you mean by *know*. Obviously in one way I know contemporary South Africa better than I know, say, Edwardian England -- I know what it actually feels like to live here and now. But even this is partial -- I don't know what it's like to live here and now for the vast majority of my fellow-citizens, and I have to use my imagination to supplement my ignorance. And the imagination, then, aided by research, can also span the gap between my country and another country, between my time and another time -- and span it, I hope, for my readers as well as for me. From that point of view, there's little difference between, say, a novel about British suffragettes and a novel about slavery at the Cape. The past, as L.P. Hartley said, is a foreign country. The novelist tries to inhabit that country and make it habitable to the reader.

2. If you could change places with Dan Brown, would you do so?

Only for long enough to take the money and run.

3. Okay then, which author would you like to change places with on a more permanent basis?

If you mean which author's books I wish I could have written, that would have to be, amongst others, Julian Barnes. If, as I believe, fiction at its best transfigures the ordinary without recourse to magic or fantasy, then Barnes' fiction is a wonderful exemplar of that kind of alchemy: he remains utterly faithful to the surface of things, and yet finds there an endless source of delight and enlightenment, comedy and tragedy, big issues and trivial pursuits -- all of these seamlessly combined, so as to dissolve all those artificial categories.

4. 'Artificial categories'? Surely as a has-been English lecturer, you should know that literature must be categorised in order to be understood, that no work of fiction exists in a vacuum of its own making?

Perhaps so, if you mean that in order to be academically studied, literature must at some stage be identified in terms of genre, period, philosophical system, pre- or post-colonial persuasion, whatever. The rage to order demands that we sort things into blue balls and red balls, or balls and squares, or squares and circles – in other words, according to whatever system of classification we have ordained. But the writer writing doesn't, I think, set out to write a comedy or a tragedy, or to write in one style rather than another. The material dictates the medium. One reader complained of my *The Children's Day* that she didn't know whether it was 'supposed to be funny or sad'. I took that as a compliment, though it wasn't intended as such. As form, I think, the novel avoids absolutes, leaving such things to sermons, political speeches and Ayn Rand.

5. Can I buy you a drink?

Absolutely.