

## FIVE QUESTIONS ABOUT DAUGHTERS OF HEAVEN

By

Michelanne Forster

Question 1: I heard you wrote a film script. Is this true? What were the similarities and differences between this film script and *Daughters of Heaven*?

A.I wrote a television script which I adapted from the original stage play. The producer was my friend Janice Finn, with whom I had trained at Television New Zealand. She was the producer of *Gloss* and had good connections in high places, so we were both excited about the prospect of making a first- rate drama. I had written hundreds of children's television scripts but this was my first go at adult television. The script began with the murder. This was the producer's idea – to start with a bang. The girls, Pauline and Juliet, run down a dirt track in Victoria Park, their coats and faces spattered with blood. They are on the edge of hysteria, straining to stay calm in the face of the nightmarish murder they have just committed. They run towards the tea kiosk. We cut to an ambulance winding its way up the Port Hills to Victoria Park. We then cut to Mr. Parker and his daughter Wendy, serving customers in their fish shop on Ferry Road as two policemen enter the shop. Another cut takes us to the Parkers lounge, where Pauline's father sits stoically; his eyes wet with tears as the police detectives search Pauline's room and find her diary. This is followed by the titles. The film then goes to Port Levy where the girls are ecstatic about finding the key to the fourth world. In a voiceover Pauline explains, "Today Juliet and I realized we are not the geni as we thought. Instead we have an extra part of our brain..." The story of the murder then unfolds in retrospect.

Incidentally, the writer Fiona Samuels was also working on a script about the murder at this time. However, Peter Jackson pipped us both at the post, and her film and my television drama were never made.

Question 2: What drove you to write about the murder? Was it a project you had in the back of your mind for a while?

There was a full page article about the Parker Hulme murder in the Christchurch Press (1989?) which was the first time I even knew about the incident. As soon as I read the article and looked at those two famous photographs of Pauline and Juliet I knew their story would make a great play. I took the idea to Elric Hooper, the artistic director of The Court Theatre and his eyes lit up. He, of course, was a young man at the time of the murder and remembered it distinctly. He commissioned me to write the play and I took each draft to him for comment and revision. The first drafts I wrote were called *A Mortal Encounter with Love*. Elizabeth O'Connor, now the literary manager of The Court, and then a freelance writer director and producer, offered up the name *Daughters of Heaven*. She gets all the credit for that title, which I think has served the play well.

Why I chose this particular story, I don't really know. I had only written work for children, a glitzy goofy musical called *A Dream Romance*, and a one-act play. I had some kind of a

track record, albeit a small slippery one, but it was *Daughters of Heaven* that catapulted me into the national eye and gave me credibility as a playwright. It was a completely unexpected. The narrative structure was relatively easy to sort out and there was so much material to work with – all I needed to do was immerse myself in what already existed and imaginatively re-create it. Looking back, I think the play was a lucky break that coincided with me finding my voice as a writer.

Question 3: The character of Bridget provides the voice of the conservative people of Christchurch. Is this the function you intended her to have? Why is she Irish?

A. There is a very simple reason that Bridget is Irish. My dear friend, Geraldine Brophy, was my inspiration in writing this part. I had seen her in many roles at The Court and loved her work. However, she fell pregnant and was unable to take on the role so another actor was cast-Yvonne Martin – who did a marvellous job. Bridget can say disapproving things about what she is seeing at a domestic level, giving her a privileged point of view within the Hulme household. But I didn't deliberately set out to thinking I must create a character who represents the conservative viewpoint of Christchurch citizens. Not at all! Bridget simply emerged from the keyboard and her function in the play then became apparent over time. I think Bridget reflects my own shocked and prudish take on the story. One part of me could exult in the girls' intense imaginary world but another part remained horrified by their lack of morality. I needed Bridget to voice my own disquiet.

Question 4: Peter Jackson and Fran Walsh said that they sympathised with Juliet and Pauline and that is the reason they are normalised and the other adult characters in positions of authority, are "demonised". Would you say the same thing about your development of your characters?

A. I remember meeting with Peter Jackson and Fran Walsh before they made their film. Peter rang me and asked if I would meet him and Fran in the lobby of a hotel in downtown Christchurch. This is well before he was famous. I was quite upset to hear he was going to make a feature film because I had hopes for a television drama, and I had already written my script. Peter was charming and assured me that he had been working on the film for some time and, that although he had seen my play in Wellington, he was already well into his own version of the story when he viewed it. He gave me his card and told me to ring him if I had any concerns. Fran was at pains to say they wanted to find the joy in the girls' situation which I found quite weird. Focus on their joy? Well, okay but their take on the story was obviously quite different from mine. Our artistic intentions were miles apart. I think Sir Peter is a great filmmaker- but I still like my version of the story better.

Question 5: Do you think Pauline and Juliet were lesbians?

A. My answer to that often asked question is, what does it matter what I think? It's clear they were obsessed with one another and they probably fooled around in bed together and maybe made love to one another but I don't know whether that means they were lesbians. Sexuality is a fluid thing, a deeply personal thing and one's sexual orientation and reactions can change over the years. I never liked the way some lesbians claimed the story as their own,

as if they had exclusive rights to the girls' souls. Their sub-text seemed to be that I had a lot of cheek to work this territory because I was married with two little boys. I don't think you have to be a murderer to write about murder, or a man to write about a man, or a lesbian to write about lesbians so found this attitude absurd and small minded. I purposely left the question open in the text. I'd been around actors long enough to know how insulted they would be to be told how to play an action or emotion or a sexual inclination. I've seen all kinds of interpretations Pauline and Juliet's relationship; from school girl crush to intensely erotic. Every production has its own convictions and conclusions.

### In Summary

I'm amused now and slightly baffled by students wanting my thoughts about what the play really means, or why I wrote it and what I was thinking at the time I wrote it and so forth. Honestly, I wrote "Daughters of Heaven" in a white heat. I didn't analyze it or put it together like some sort of puzzle with a secret code. After all, the whole pleasure and terror of being a writer lies in letting your unconscious mind roam freely to tell the story it wants to tell. Then it is up to the reader/viewer /actor/director to interpret that story to give it the relevance and urgency it needs.

I wrote the play a long time ago and a lot of water has passed under the bridge since then. It's like the story our Rabbi told us. You can never stand in the same river twice. Why? Because the water flowing past you is always changing and even more importantly, you are always changing. That's how it is.

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