Caitlin Moran: “You Just Can’t Argue with Cool” [1]

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TW Interview by Lorraine Berry

A Feminist Who’s Optimistic About the Future

Caitlin Moran is a wonder. Born in 1975 into a large working-class family in Wolverhampton, England, Moran was home-schooled. She spent hours each week in the local public library, reading incessantly. At fifteen, she earned the *Observer*’s young reporter award. By seventeen, she was writing for the *Guardian* and about to become the music critic she’d always wanted to be. She currently writes three weekly columns for the *Times*, including the highly satirical "Celebrity Watch."



Moran’s breakout book—*How to Be a Woman* (2011)—was both a memoir and a feminist manifesto. *Moranthology,* which followed in 2012, anthologized some of her best columns. Both books were nonfiction bestsellers. In 2014, the BBC named Moran one of the top ten female "Game Changers” in the U.K. Her novel *How to Build a Girl* was also published this year by HarperCollins.

I first encountered Moran in 2012, when I interviewed her for *Bitch* magazine. We had a raucous good time on the phone, not only talking about women's politics and literature but also telling jokes about our shared working-class backgrounds. (My parents emigrated with me as a child from Manchester in the 1960s; I still think of myself as a Mancunian.) Then, just before that interview was scheduled to publish, Moran tweeted something in defense of Lena Dunham, who’d been criticized for her very white portrayal of Brooklyn in the TV show *Girls.* A Twitter storm broke out,

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and *Bitch* killed my piece.

Moran weathered that feminist media storm, and when I heard she’d be in the United States promoting *How to Build a Girl*, I decided to check back in. This September, we had an hour-long phone conversation from which we both had to be dragged by her publicist. I asked her about the issues affecting women now, especially female writers who are the targets of social-media abuse.

We talked about many serious things—and talked and talked—but we couldn't have the conversation without one or the other of us gasping for breath, laughing. And that's the way Moran is. Emma Goldman once (apocryphally) declared, "If I can't dance, I don't want to be part of your revolution." Moran's more modern motto might be: "If I can't laugh, dance, and have a wank during the revolution, then fuck off."

This TW interview has been condensed and edited.

Don't miss TW’s [“‘Women and Power’ in the NYT Book Review”] [5] by Lorraine Berry and Martha Nichols to hear more from Caitlin Moran.

***TW:* What was the transition like, moving from writing nonfiction to fiction?**

CM: The only thing I found difficult was structure, because if you write a memoir, then you know what the structure of the story is—because it was your fucking life. This book certainly starts off echoing my life, but as I went on, it was enormously freeing to be able to make stuff up.

One of the reasons I was quite a poor journalist as a young girl was that I did just make stuff up. When I interviewed Marilyn Manson, he talked about what his favorite film was. I kind of expected him to say *121 Days of Sodom*. No, his favorite film is *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. Why is that? Well, Wonka is Satan, and Charlie is Jesus, and Wonka is tempting him all this time, and when he resists the temptation, he’s given the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven—the chocolate factory. And I was like, “Oh! That’s brilliant.” So I went back, transcribed it. And I sat there for a minute, smoking a fag and looking at that sentence and thinking, “God, it would be so funny if Marilyn Manson had ended it with “and I like the bit where Augustus Gloop gets stuck in the tube.” I became so overwhelmed with my own amusement that I made him say it! It got printed. He read it. He got really angry. [laughter]

When I was writing a memoir, there were so many times when I thought, “God, this truth would be so much funnier if I could just make it up and exaggerate it twenty percent.” And that’s the great thing about fiction. You start off with something that’s a bit real, with a tiny little grit of reality, and then gradually you build your pearl of made-up bullshit around it, and it becomes more illustrious and amusing to you.

The actual writing was easy, writing characters and dialogue, coming up with ideas. But learning how to structure a story emotionally and how to pace it, I find very difficult. I learned so much in writing this book that I intend the next two to be leagues better. [*How to Build a Girl* is one volume in a trilogy she's planning.]

***TW:* Well, that sounds fantastic.**

CM: And then there’s always that brilliant bit when the characters take over and start saying things, and you’re basically sitting there transcribing things.

There's a great documentary in the U.K. about people who hear voices in their heads. It starts off talking about it as a medieval thing—when people heard voices, they thought it was God talking to them or other things talking to them. And then it goes on to talk about schizophrenics, who also hear voices in their heads, and then how novelists hear the characters doing their own thing. Your subconscious can create a Golem of a character in your mind, in the same way you might say, “What would my mum be saying there if she was hearing this conversation?” You immediately hear your mum in your head talking, and you know how she would react in the situation.

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As an author, when you've created a character, once you've spent a bit of time with her, your subconscious starts running her constantly as a program—which is why, when you sit down to start writing something, she's been in your subconscious for awhile and actually progressed, and now she's doing things you didn't know.

TW: **Have you read *The Midnight Disease* by Alice Flaherty?**

CM: No, no. What's that?

TW: **It's about a neurologist who gave birth to stillborn twins, and the grief caused something called hypergraphia, which meant that she couldn't stop writing. And she wrote hundreds and hundreds of pages.**

CM: The main thing that breaks your heart when you have a miscarriage or a stillbirth—I've had that—is not so much the fact of a dead child; it's the fact that the imagined creature you had dies. You've built up this whole future, and it's almost like you've written a book in your head. At the point when that first bit of blood appears and you start realizing things have gone wrong, the book you've written is just thrown in the fire. Burnt. So, it completely makes sense that, having lost two children, having lost all the imagined conversations and this whole future, she had to write it down.

TW: **The thing about miscarriage is that people don't acknowledge it. We don't have a ceremony or a ritual to mark it, and we're afraid to talk about it**.

CM: Joseph Campbell says that ancient Greek mythology is what most of Western stories and culture are based on. It's based on physical power, mainly male physical power—war, dominance, finding a woman, getting her pregnant, continuing the family line, and the consummation of power—and the majority of Hollywood films are based on that stuff. I think we need a new mythology now, because culture has changed so much. We need to start acknowledging the things that happen to women, to gay men, to transgender people, to people of a different color living as an ethnic minority in a country. We don't have any stories about these, really.

We have to start building a new mythology and a new archetype. Miscarriage is something many women will experience, but there's nothing in popular culture you can refer to. You couldn't say to your friend who's had a miscarriage, "Here are the films you need to watch or the books you need to read and the poems about this, the songs about this." I can think of a couple, but it's certainly not as huge as it would be if your friend was bitten by a radioactive spider and turned into Spiderman—in which case you'd be, "Hey! You're in luck. There's much in popular culture that can help you through your difficult next year."

For a female writer or a minority, basically everything that's taboo is all the great, amazing material. It's your major project. Here is what you will spend the next twenty years doing. You can make a fucking list about everything you're not supposed to talk about, and that's what you're going to do. Once you realize that, you're free. Suddenly, the work never ends. There literally aren't enough hours in the day to do all the stuff the world needs you to do.

TW: **I'm listening to you, and I'm thinking that exact thing. That it's liberating.**

CM: That's why it's such a great time to be a woman. I'm a straight, white woman—working class—who likes to talk about taboo things like sex and feminism and equality and pop music, and I see so many women around me who have just sprung up in the last couple of years doing that. You have Amy Schumer and the Broad City girls and Lena Dunham and Tina Fey and Amy Poehler. You've got Melissa McCarthy out there as an incredible performer. There have been women like us out there for millions of years, but suddenly we're having our moment now. There's a little chink in the wall, and we're all squeezing through, going, "Yes, yes! This is our time!"

TW: **At *Talking Writing*, one of the things we've been focusing on is the VIDA numbers showing the percentage of male bylines vs. female bylines. At least in the U.S., it's total bollocks, right? And when Roxane Gay broke it down to reflect the ethnicity of the women getting published, it was even worse. Do you see any differences in British publishing?**

CM: No, we did exactly the same thing. There was a piece in the *Guardian* where they added up the bylines for newspaper articles, and it was pathetic—it was something like 75 percent male. [From the 2011 *Guardian* piece: "In a

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typical month, 78% of newspaper articles are written by men, 72% of *Question Time* contributors are men and 84% of reporters and guests on Radio 4's *Today* show are men."]

Over the last few years, I've made sitcoms, written fiction and nonfiction; I'm writing two films, and I'm doing stand-up comedy. In all those worlds, I've met two people who have come from my background—brought up on welfare and working class—*two* out of pretty much the entire entertainment industry, when in the U.K. about 60 percent of families claim some sort of benefits. Just by being working class, I've been a minority in the industry, and then to be a woman on top of that is absolutely nuts. You get all the pressure of having to represent every woman and every working-class person in the country. That's bullshit.

As long as you're the outlier and the only one, after awhile, the pressure will get to you, and you will crack. Men just don't have any comparison. Any man in the room, they would never understand what it was like to never feel normal. *Normal* is the big thing that we need in culture at the moment. What we see as normal, so it's not that when a man writes, he's writing about the human condition, and when women write, they're writing about women.

If there's a book about a teenage girl and she masturbates a lot, I would be astonished if a man read it and said, "Nope! Didn't find anything there at all! No, no, no, literally didn't have anything to do with me as a human being."

TW: **[laughing] I tried to have this conversation last week with my students. I explained to them that when women go into a bookstore, they'll read books by women and men—no problem. But if men go into a bookstore, they'll only buy books written by men. And one of the guys in the class said, "You know, I'm not really interested in what women are doing."**

CM: It seems extraordinary how we mentally segregate ourselves from each other. That's the beautiful thing about art. Something like *The Hunger Games*, that's a film men are going to see as well as women. *Gravity*—no one called that a chick flick. But the whole thing is Sandra Bullock's performance. It's pretty much her alone on-screen for that whole hour and a half. That's when culture gets it right. It's not by going, "You *must* read women's books. You *must* inform yourself."

That's why I spend less time worrying about constructing my arguments and more time trying to make what I believe to be the right thing, the coolest thing—because you just can't argue with cool. Cool makes you dance, cool makes you laugh, cool makes you turn those pages over and over and over again.

And that's the other reason I wanted to write fiction rather than nonfiction. You can do so much more with a character and a story than you can with a polemic. I learned that when *How to Be a Woman* got big. What am I going to do next? Well, who are my heroes? Orwell and Dickens. What did they do? They started out as polemical journalists. And then they wrote stories, and that's how they got their message across to a bigger audience. By describing how awful the world was and casting a mirror up to society, Dickens was a massive engine for change. Same with Orwell.

TW: **Do you think male editors and publishers are oblivious to who they're publishing? They really don't notice they've wound up hiring all these men? Or do they think men are inherently better writers?**

CM: When people say, "Men are inherently better writers," they mean that men appear to be more "normal" writers—because the people making that judgment are other men. So, when they read men writing these things, it's like, "Yes, yes, yes. That's generally my experience. That's how I feel." Whereas when a woman writes about what she feels or her experience, suddenly they're like, [imitating a male voice with a posh Oxbridge accent] "No! That's weird. She's gone a bit mad there." [laughter]

When they say "better," they just mean less startling or less weird. Any clever entity will realize that startling and weird are good.

In so many ways, the Internet is great, because now women can blog. They don't have to wait to be approved by a man to get their voices out there. But long term, the only people who can continue to be writers come from money backgrounds. If you're working class, there are only so many free blogs you can write before you have to pay rent, and then you have to go off and get a full-time job. And demographically, ethnic minorities are far more likely not to come

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from a well-off background. So again, you're just shutting out a huge proportion of the voices you need to hear.

TW: **It's a tough thing to do, to work a full-time job and be writing.**

CM: Oh, God, yeah. If you have to work in a supermarket for six hours and then you sit down to write, exhausted, when a middle-class person is just clocking on for the day, of course you're going to be at a massive disadvantage. It's this weight you're dragging around behind you. You've made much more of an effort than someone who comes from a privileged background, before you even start. This also applies to people of color. The effort it takes just to turn up at that place, given where you might've come from, you're already exhausted before you start the task.

TW: **I want to talk about social media. There's been a lot of publicity around this issue, and I always feel like the first day somebody put up a comment section next to an article was the first day the trolls came crawling out of the basement. Do you have a specific philosophy about the care and feeding of trolls?**

CM: I never read any comments under anything I've written. You're just walking into a room full of bullies. They're not going to turn around and go, "Hey! Great job! That first paragraph? That was beautiful! And I've got a feeling you're a really special person inside." That's never happened.

A friend of mine who's a writer made the suggestion recently that a great way to fund newspapers in this world is if people had to pay to leave below-the-line comments. I suspect you'd find the people who sit around all day talking shit about the writers would just go away. They aren't kind, literary professors pointing out how you might improve your syntax. These are people who are crying and wanking.

TW: **It's even worse than that. It's incredibly disturbing, the levels of abuse that women and people of color and LGBT people get. You know, these nut-jobs on Twitter who are threatening to rape you or kill you over something you've written. At what you point do you think the Internet community is going to have to start policing itself?**

CM: The problem with the Internet is that people think the Internet is different from real life. There's this presumption that because it's the Internet, there are different rules. It's all just people—and algorithms and coding created by people—so whatever the rules are in the real world, just apply them to the Internet.

If someone came into the pub and said they were going to ram a sword up my cunt because of something they've read, I would alert the person who owned the pub, who would throw them out. And if that person resisted being thrown out of the pub, then the person who owned the pub would be able to call the police, and that person would be arrested and cautioned. This is what works in the real world, so this will have to be the way we run the cyber world.

TW: **I'm imagining that our granddaughters are young women. Do you think they'll be continuing to fight these same battles?**

CM: Well, I'm an optimist, and if you talk to a drunk person, you're not going to get the best reply—but I am drunk on optimism. There's never been a faster or better time for change. For instance, I was talking about transgender issues with a friend yesterday. Think about how long other equality movements took, like the fight for female suffrage—which was a good, chunky hundred years of bullshit—or the civil rights movement or gay rights or how long it took to get to equal marriage. Transgender issues were nowhere on the radar two years ago. Now, it's an issue that's being addressed everywhere. It happened so fucking fast. Things like that give me encouragement that life will be better for our children.

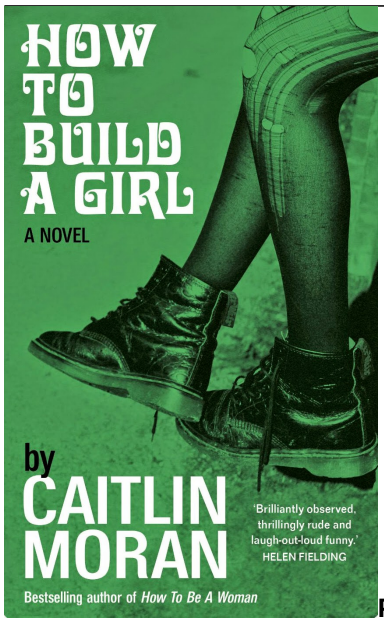
We always have to remember that society never marches in a complete straight line. It goes round and round in little interlocking circles like a chain, like you'll be up-up-up-up for a bit, and then it seems to go down for a bit, but then it will go up-up-up again. You've made another link, forming that chain climbing up toward progress. I'm hugely optimistic about the future.

TW: **I've heard one more explanation for why women don't get published as often as men. The editor of a very left-leaning magazine said the problem is that women don't write about serious issues**

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CM: Often, women are too scared to put themselves forward to write about those serious things. A couple of other female columnists and I admitted that when we were much younger. We thought we should just write about women's issues because that's something we know about—and we wouldn't write about war and diplomacy because we didn't know that much about it. But when I got old enough and talked to male columnists of equal stature, they said, "You know, we write about politics and war, but we don't know that much about it, either." Men just have that confidence to say, "Well! I'm not an expert on it, but I'll give it a go. I'll just bring my common sense to it, do a bit of research, and I'll do it." Women think they have to be experts and the best in their fields before they take it upon themselves to write about politics or war.

I now write about these big subjects because—you know what?—it's me having a bit of a thought about this, and it's equal to what anybody else is going to write, I reckon. You just need to have that swaggering confidence to do it.



Publishing Information

- [6]"*Woman's Hour* Power List 2014 Game Changers—Top Ten Revealed," [7] BBC, April 9, 2014.
- "Caitlin Moran: Women Have Won Nothing" [8] by Lorraine Berry, *Salon*, October 16, 2012.
- "The Brains Behind Writer's Block" [9] by William J. Cromie, *Harvard University Gazette*, January 29, 2004.
- "Why Is British Public Life Dominated by Men?" [10] by Kira Cochrane, *Guardian*, December 4, 2011.

Art Information

- Press image of Caitlin Moran by Mark Harrison @ Lucid Representation; used by permission.

See Caitlin Moran's website [6] *and HarperCollins* [11] *for more about her books.*

I am lying in bed next to my brother, Lupin.

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> He is six years old. He is asleep.
>
> I am fourteen. I am not asleep. I am masturbating.
>
> I look at my brother and think, nobly, ‘This is what he would want. He would want me to be happy.’
>
> After all, he loves me. He wouldn’t want me to be stressed. And I love him—although I must stop thinking about him while I’m masturbating. It feels wrong. I am trying to get my freak on. I can’t have siblings wandering into my sexual hinterland. We may share a bed tonight—he left his bunk at midnight, crying, and got in next to me—but we cannot share a sexual hinterland. He needs to leave my consciousness.
>
> —from *How to Build a Girl* by Caitlin Moran

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