This interview took place in the air, in cyberspace and across the ocean floor between Cape Town and New York City, where Rob Nixon was living at the time. Almost certainly, this kind of fluid location breathes new meaning into what it is we say to one another. In any case, it seems a suggestive form of dislocation, feeding well into the concerns of Nixon’s writing. Nixon grew up in South Africa and has lived for long periods in England and the United States. He has been fascinated in his work by themes of exile, migrancy, displacement and the effects of these on writing and the making of identities. What it is to be here and what it is to be there, what it is to be both here and there, are personal and intellectual preoccupations that shape his work. His first book, London Calling: V. S. Naipaul, Postcolonial Mandarin (1992), tackles the controversial reputation of the West Indian novelist and essayist Naipaul, who won the Nobel Prize in literature in 2001, and who shares with Salman Rushdie, as Peter Hughes has remarked, a “power to strike outside the text—and to provoke its targets to strike back.” In his study of Naipaul’s nonfiction, Nixon reflects on the writer’s presentation of himself as an exile, a position he uses to claim a certain objectivity in his (largely damning) observations on third-world countries. Is Naipaul really rootless, or does he participate in one or more traditions? Nixon wonders. After forty years’ residence in England, can he really be thought of as an exile? The book examines Naipaul’s role as a public intellectual and third-world commentator. Nixon is particularly interested in his triangulated identity (a link to Nixon’s own 1999...
memoir *Dreambirds*) and the politics of displacement as they play themselves out in Naipaul’s writing.

In Nixon’s next book, a collection of academic essays called *Homelands, Harlem, and Hollywood: South African Culture and the World Beyond* (1994), one can see a developing interest in similar themes, albeit in different form. This time Nixon turns his attention to the diverse ties between South Africa and the United States, from apartheid’s implementation in 1948 to South Africa’s first democratic election in 1994. Not only has no other post–World War II struggle for decolonization been so fully globalized and magnetized so many people across such various national divides, Nixon maintains, but the mutual fascination between America and South Africa has expressed itself in a myriad of cultural transfigurations. Nixon is interested in what he sees as a vexed sense of half-shared histories and a sometimes illusory sense of mutual intelligibility, as well as idioms of cosmopolitanism, transculturation, hybridity, and internationalism. In a particularly powerful essay on South African writer Bessie Head, he writes about the invented authority of national traditions—whose ancestries and boundaries, he avers, are based less on organic pasts than on repeated bureaucratic interventions—and of regenerative traditions of cultural syncretism which enable the writer and individual the freedom to elect one’s own affinities and provenance.

*Dreambirds*, a memoir based on his childhood in South Africa and his life in America as an émigré adult, is perhaps Nixon’s best work yet. It returns to the themes explored in his academic writing in a new register and with a particularly powerful use of language. In a text that trusts the “nerve-ends of image and memory” instead of “academic floor plans,” as Nixon says, he is interested in the hidden histories and mobile geographies that characterize his own story as well as the stories that he embeds, as minibiographies, in his memoir. While feeling magnetized by the personal energy of memoirs, Nixon resists a narcissistic tendency within certain contemporary American memoirs, as he explains in the interview below. He is interested in unpredictable, even unimaginable stories, that take one “beyond the narrow, formulaic cast of parents, siblings, and a personal trauma.” He reflects in this book on his South African childhood, which had him searching for entée into the
possibility of other worlds, and on his own immigrant family that for three generations moved to a new continent and started afresh.

_Dreambirds_ is a text that makes some important departures, at least in relation to South African writing. The writing of South African history, whether conservative or revisionist, has tended to rigid classificatory categories, conventionally of race and class. The dominance of realism in South African literature is perhaps not unrelated to these rigid narratives. Nixon joins such writers as Ann Harries (Manly Pursuits, 1999) and Ivan Vladislavic (The Restless Supermarket, 2001) in offering new ways of imagining South African history by exploring the “extraordinary in the ordinary,” a way forward for South African writing pointed to by one of the country’s foremost cultural critics, Njabulo Ndebele, in Rediscovery of the Ordinary (1994). That _Dreambirds_ tracks diasporic identities and histories also represents an important departure in local writing. South African culture has often perceived itself as closed off from the rest of the world, locked into a battle with its history of race and violence. But Nixon shows that even the local “one-mistake” towns of his childhood were seamed through with connectivity: in this case, the Karoo town of Oudtshoorn was the center of the international ostrich industry. Moreover, by writing about the complex ethnicities of his own family, Nixon goes a long way toward “unpacking” the blanket term “white South African.” Nixon, in all of his work, draws on the trope of mobility to breathe air and space into the words and worlds he sees and creates.

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Q. Let’s begin by talking about your book _Dreambirds_ as memoir—which is how you have described it. Why this choice of form? What for you are the distinctions between memoir and autobiography?

A. The book is a more-or-less memoir. In bookshops, I have seen it shelved under biology, biography, history, memoir, and travel.
I view it as an experimental hybrid. But clearly there is a strong memoir component. The distinction between memoir and autobiography is mainly one of degree: the latter ordinarily attempts to be comprehensive, whereas a memoir tends to focus on a shorter period, a single strand of one's life, or a particular trauma. It's the difference between writing "My Life" and writing "Me and Ostriches."

One consequence of the memoir boom has been a major shift in the generational distribution of nonfictional writing about the self. Autobiographies have tended to be (although there are exceptions) end-of-life affairs. Often, like Doris Lessing's recent autobiographies, they are written by an aging author expressly to exert control over her life story—as a kind of preemptive strike against future biographers. But the recent spate of memoirs has largely been written by younger people in their thirties and forties, even in their twenties. I'd add a further distinction. Conventionally, autobiographies provided overviews of a life of distinction; they were preceded by fame, or at least public visibility. While there have been some celebrity memoirs, the memoirs that have received the most attention—at least in America and Britain—have been written by people who were previously obscure. I'm thinking of writers like Mary Karr, Kathryn Harrison, and James McBride.

Q. Presumably the histories and meanings attached to "memoir" differ considerably in the North American and South African contexts out of which you write. How, if at all, did you see yourself responding in the context of these different traditions?

A. Yes, there are definite differences. In the United States, the nineties memoir boom derived much of its buzz from the extraordinary rise of confessional talk shows: Geraldo Rivera, Ricki Lake, Jerry Springer, Jenny Jones—more scandal-oriented versions of Oprah. I know South Africa has its own versions of this phenomenon. However, in the U.S. this TV culture of self-exposure, self-aggrandizement, and self-abasement helped fuel a literary boom in memoir and unduly influenced (in my view) what kinds of stories got told. If your agent or editor said, on reading your manuscript, that the memoir was "quiet," you knew she meant it would
be hard to sell. Not enough serial killings, not enough interspecies sex.

In South Africa, I suspect the situation is rather different, not least because book culture itself is so precarious, for all sorts of reasons: poverty, the outrageous cost of imported books relative to the cost of living, the challenge of publishing in a ten-language society, and the declining status of liberal arts degrees, nonprofessional degrees, and nonprofessional knowledge in general. And, of course, the primacy of a visual/oral, TV/video/cell-phone/talk-radio culture. That primacy is manifest in the U.S. as well. But compared to the South African context, American book culture looks relatively sturdy.

Recent South African memoirs have emerged in a very different context from their U.S. counterparts, in a situation closer to the situation described by the Croatian writer Slavenka Drakulic, in her essay collection Café Europa. Drakulic talks about the challenge and novelty for many East European and Balkan writers of giving voice to "I," of writing from a more personal space, rather than through the collective conventions of "us" and "we." Of course, parallels between Eastern Europe and South Africa are always very approximate, yet I think there is some genuine overlap—especially in comparison to the U.S., where "I" can seem genetically implanted as the only admissible pronoun. I have heard that when the American publishers of Nelson Mandela's autobiography saw an early draft, they were panicked by his insistent use of "we" ("we in the struggle," "we in the ANC") and hired an American ghostwriter both to speed up the writing and to Americanize the pronouns—to nudge him out of his collective mindset and into an American-style "I." Disturbing, that, the power of the dollar to dictate the voice of history.

On the other hand, I do think that since South Africa's democratic turn a space has opened up for writing that probes the tensions between collective and personal commitments—the kind of tensions that Nadine Gordimer's My Son's Story anticipated in fictional form. During the apex of the struggle, understandably, a more Manichean vision tended to prevail. Politically and imaginatively, one saw (to adapt Gayatri Spivak's phrase) a kind of "strategic essentialism" in operation.
You asked to what extent I was responding to these different traditions. Subliminally, I was aware of potential South African, American, and British audiences. I felt the tug of these audiences, as if I were living somewhere in the middle—in St. Helena, say. But that’s really less a question of audience pressure than of who I am. I have lived for long periods in all three societies, and they’ve all left their mark on me.

Mostly, one tries not to write too deliberately. That’s where writing this book felt very different from my academic ones. I had to lose my academic habit of laying down an analytical floor plan, trusting to the nerve-ends of image and memory instead. I came to understand more viscerally a comment Nadine Gordimer once made that she tried to write posthumously—as if she were already dead. Especially in writing something as personal as a memoir, it’s imperative to write from a creative space where none of the people you care about (or loathe) exist. Parents, siblings, colleagues, friends, enemies, tenure committees, imaginary American, British, South African readers—you have to forget them, spirit them away.

Where the issue of audience came up most directly was in diction. My diction is pretty hybrid, pretty mid-Atlantic. I use some American words (for example, “roadkill”) that I like and are imitable. On the other hand, I wanted to stick to South African diction in the childhood sections. For instance, Americans don’t know what a “wonky” watch is. Sometimes I would try to cut it both ways, using both “bonnet” and “hood” with reference to our car. One editor wanted me to explain who Verwoerd was. But I declined: the South African in me balked at that. It would simply have been too estranging, too much of a capitulation to an overseas vantage point.

Q. A particularly interesting feature of the book is that although it is presented as memoir or autobiography, it includes a number of biographical profiles, in which people tell their stories in the first person. Why have you chosen to include these stories within a genre that conventionally explores selfhood? Would the metaphor of “ghostwriting” (a phrase you yourself use at one point in the text) be useful here? Do you see one part of what you are doing as writing lost stories, forgotten stories, untold stories?
A. That’s a good question. I believe there is a continuing need in South African writing for more angular memoirs, memoirs that deal with hidden histories, mobile geographies, familial peculiarities. Perhaps Dreambirds can be read in this context. South Africa is such a diverse society. A town like Oudtshoorn, with its historic colored majority, its verkrampt history, its possession of South Africa’s largest rural Jewish population, its obsession with ostriches—then turning into a town with a black mayor. A place like that is so specific, as different from Soweto and Johannesburg as Straight Fork, West Virginia is from Seattle. Yet if you look at South Africa from the U.S., it’s like looking through the wrong end of a telescope. A place like Oudtshoorn, with all its fascinating peculiarities, is utterly invisible, vanishes beneath the generalities.

Yes, the book does involve ghostwriting. At the most intimate level, I came to feel that my father (as a journalist and an amateur botanist) had ghostwritten me. Or at least the version of me who loves to write and is moved by natural history—above all, the natural history of the desert. This indebtedness was a fairly recent revelation for me. For most of my long period abroad, I shut down that side of me; I looked back at places like Port Elizabeth and Oudtshoorn and shuddered. Those places were my father’s worlds. In writing them off, I didn’t recognize some crucial ways in which, through my father’s example, he and they had shaped me. So although our relationship was complex, sometimes painful, I hope the book serves as something of an homage to my father.

While the emotional heart of Dreambirds is my painful, grateful, ostrich-mediated relationship to my father, I was adamant that I didn’t want to write a conventional memoir circumscribed by family. In retrospect, I recognize that this probably had to do with my own reading tastes. I am a gluttonous reader of both newspapers and nonfiction: I simply can’t get enough. What I’m drawn to in both are stories about the unexpected (courage, humor, inventiveness, despair) hidden amidst the everyday. The marginal or forgotten stories that you refer to in your question. Especially in America, but even in South Africa, celebrity takes up more and more of the storytelling space that’s available. Maybe I wasn’t born with the part of the brain that is supposed to be in thrall to celebrity. My mind fuzzes over when I come to those stories—airbrushed and
endlessly recycled. I feel quite strongly that our zeitgeist narrows our responsiveness to the full spectrum of the extraordinary in the ordinary that colors all our lives. There are remarkable, remarkable stories that just never get told.

There is another context in which to read my decision to embed minibiographies and mini-autobiographies in Dreambirds. Sometime during the nineties memoir boom, I began, as a reader, to suffer from narcissism fatigue. I found myself recoiling from memoirs whose sole premise seemed to be, “if-it’s-me-it’s-interesting.” Too many of these books were fueled by little more than the broader cultural boom in self-absorption. Of course, suffering-recovery memoirs (on, say, incest, alcoholism, or bulimia) can play a genuine therapeutic role, creating community through stories that ease shame, rage, and the solitude of trauma. However, I felt in America, at any rate, the lucrative market for melodramatic self-revelation was creating waves of literary soap opera in a culture already drowning in shock schlock.

What about the improbable stories, the untold, offbeat ones, that don’t center on an addiction or a violation? I can see now that in writing Dreambirds my approach (whether successful or not) was consistent with the stories I seek out as a reader. I feel magnetized by the personal energy of memoirs. Yet the ones that move me most tend to transport me to other times and other worlds. They leave me with unpredictable, even unimaginable stories and take me beyond the narrow, formulaic cast of parents, siblings, and a personal trauma.

Q. The potential of people and places to generate stories—old, new, and hybrid—appears compelling to you. J. M. Coetzee’s Boyhood, by contrast, is heavy with a sense of the possibility of stories being futile—of a proliferation of stories for which there is no room, of the stifling atmosphere of stories unread or untold. What does the idea of story mean to you?

A. Children are imaginative. They dream. And in their dreaming they remake the stories they find around them, even the dreary ones. Some adults, especially artists, writers, filmmakers, nurture that childhood capacity. That’s part of what I was trying to commu-
nicate in the Owl House chapter. I have always had great faith in the transforming power of the right story told at the right time. It can take root and you never know what may come from it. Stories do hybridize. Some of the stories that have affected me most powerfully are stories I’ve misremembered, have remade emotionally. I think this a common experience.

I’m fascinated by the way children, through stories, develop a historical capacity. What are the stories that first allow a child to imagine, to dream historically? To put on the clothing of the past? Ostrich stories did that for me. Obviously not just ostrich stories, but they were the kind of stories that allowed me to cross-dress across history. I feel almost sentimentally attached to the value of historical imaginings, and the value of seeding them in children early on. We live in an age in which the market value of history has fallen, in part because we live in an American age. America has become the superpower of memory, and America has always tended to side with amnesia. This impatience with the past isn’t all bad: I think some good things have emerged from Americans’ restless optimism, their faith in the future, in the remake, the chance to start again. Yet I simply cannot identify with the tendency to write off the past in the dismissive sense of the phrase, “That’s history.” Here I would circle back to your previous question. The small stories, the lost stories, the ones that have been written out and written off—those are the ones that continue to charm me. I’m convinced of their value.

Q. The book is subtitled The Natural History of a Fantasy. This is intriguing in the light of its evasion and questioning of generic categories like autobiography, biography, and memoir. Could you comment on the choice of subtitle in relation to questions of genre?

A. Clearly, memory is an imaginative, not a mechanical, process. Dreambirds spirits together a congregation of people from three continents and two centuries, people who are imaginatively bonded to the ostrich as their obscure object of desire. The ostrich is both a natural historical and a fantastical creature, not much more probable than the unicorn. I would add that although I see Dreambirds as essentially nonfictional, the borderlines between
nonfiction and fiction are always permeable. Some of the recent books I most admire—like Amitav Ghosh’s *In an Antique Land* and W. G. Sebald’s *The Emigrants* and *The Rings of Saturn*—are works of historical redress, works of alternative memory, that explore this fictional-nonfictional borderland. Interestingly, for the U.S. edition, the subtitle was changed to *The Strange History of the Ostrich in Fashion, Food, and Fortune*, a more deliberate title than the one I had chosen for the South African–British edition. The American marketing people wanted *ostrich* in the title. And they wanted something concrete to signal that the book wasn’t, say, a novel. There are probably good practical grounds for the switch, but I still feel attached to the elusive mix of the original. It feels closer to how the book developed generically and emotionally.

Q. In *Dreambirds*, you luxuriate in the evocativeness of words. You speak of “bookwords” and indulge in wordplay and make reference, too, to the size of words in relation to the worlds they conjure. What makes words special to you, as distinct from stories?

A. Your point is well-taken. I do believe the distinction is important. I’m drawn to writers whose turns of phrase surprise me, who keep the language lively. We live in an age so dominated by TV, video, film, and computer graphics that visual plot tends to be given primacy. With much contemporary writing I feel that a lot of what is written is seen (and, in the mind, sold) as story before it’s felt as words. I can only write as I read. Narrative is important, but a book wilts in my hands if there’s nothing special going on linguistically, if there’s nothing to it but narrative drive. I’m not one to derogate visual creativity, but I do think there are some things books will continue to do differently. I can’t just see them as dummy-runs for films. My attitude, I’m sure, has something to do with growing up in South Africa without TV and with very little film. Books did most of my imaginative work for me. Compared to my American students, who are third-generation TV-viewers, I’m a visual illiterate. My attachment to words probably also has something to do with growing up in a South Africa that felt very cut off. Books came from far away and most of what they described was equally distant. There was a gap between the world I inhabited.
and the things that books evoked. That gap was alienating, yet it also opened up a space for fantasy.

Q. A great deal of the pleasure of reading *Dreambirds* lies in your reveling in fantasy—in the giddy world of haute couture and in tempting flights of fancy; in the sensuality of things and in sexual memory. You have spoken of fantasy as redemptive. South African prose fiction has tended to be dominated all too often by a dour realism. How would you relate your work as a writer to this tradition?

A. I’m not sure how I would position it except to say that fantasy can be redemptive. I’m not, of course, some transcendentalist nutter who believes that fantasy can substitute for bread, shelter, and water. But fantasy can make a difference in some unbearable situations. I was talking to David Schalkwyk recently about his fascinating recent research into how often, in South African prison writing, the authors mention the indispensable role books played during incarceration. Books served as places to disappear, as temporary respites from intolerable realities. In the shut-down, censorious world that was sixties and seventies South Africa, ostrich feathers served me as a strange but emotionally important entrée into the possibility of other worlds. They were an odd, illicit, but suggestive starting point for fantasy. Fantasy is deviant. And I’m all for deviation.

Q. *Dreambirds* is a book seamed through with other books and writing—classics, adventure and travel narratives, poetry, natural history. There are also references to unwritten books, burned books. You have spoken of the value of books in turning “the ordinary things in life” into something “wild and strange.” It is interesting that in Lessing’s writing, say, or Gordimer’s autobiographical essays, European literature is often seen as obscuring the African context. In your book, though, books are not confined to distinct cultures and locations: Albert Jackson’s book—a book about Africa—offers you a different take on African reality; and in Ozymandias you “recognize” the Karoo. Would you like to comment in
any way on your relationship as reader and as writer to books of all kinds?

A. Your comments would seem to pick up on your earlier question about my attachment to words. I think here of a poignant V. S. Naipaul essay called "Jasmine." In it, Naipaul recalls standing as a young man on a verandah in Guyana and being overwhelmed by the fragrance pouring off a vine. He asks the woman who lives in the house what the flower is. "Jasmine," she replies. Naipaul knows the word, he has read it in books that come from England. But he can't integrate the foreign word and the local fragrance—they have spent too long apart. I think many South Africans, and others who live far from the media powerhouses like Hollywood, New York, and London, can identify with that kind of disconnection.

I am fascinated by misrecognitions. I remember reading Kafka for the first time and being certain he was writing in code about South Africa. When I first arrived in America, in Iowa, I was so mistrustful of everybody's niceness that, to redress the Iowa paranoia deficit, I hid beneath the blankets and reimmersed myself in Kafka. That for me was an act of nostalgia, a way of returning, imaginatively, to South Africa, in the face of my inability to decode Iowa.

My interest in cross-readings probably also relates to the fact that I come from a family of immigrants. For three generations, each generation has moved to a new continent and started afresh. There's very little by way of continuity. You're constantly living across codes, remaking what you read or see into what you need.

Of course, this cross-reading doesn't only apply to books. My trips across the Arizona desert were emotionally and imaginatively transforming because they allowed me to return and face certain passions, certain fears, that had suffused my early life in South Africa. I don't think I could have done that in the same way head-on in the Karoo. The powerful echoes I encountered in the Arizona landscape, ecology, and ostrich world enabled me to open myself to places in my Karoo past that I'd shut down, sealed off. At the same time, that wasn't enough. I had to go back and reread my childhood world politically as well. The epochal elections of 1994
gave me the perfect opportunity for that. They let me integrate the collective euphoria I felt with the more personal emotional momentum I had gathered through my Arizona travels.

Q. You appear to find inspiration for ways of living, for considering the complexities of identity, in the natural world. Your finding fellowship with migratory birds whose “loyalties are not so much divided as rhythmically redoubled,” and your sense of being able to begin to mourn your father’s death through finding “common ground” in contemplating convergent evolution, is striking in this regard. You appear to hold up the natural world as a space of irreproachable authority—if it exists in the natural world, then my adopting this mode of being is justified. Or at least, your invocation of it seems to be at times an attempt to “naturalize” your own sense of “strangeness.” Is this not perhaps a little too neat, too dangerous an invitation to closure rather than to an opening of the dilemmas of ways of being?

A. That’s a legitimate question. “Irreproachable authority”? Definitely not. This is, after all, the natural history of a fantasy. One of the things that so enthralled me about the display of Karoo and Arizona plants I encountered in the Sonoran Desert was the imperfection of convergent evolution. The resemblances were genuine, but that was all they were, resemblances. There is no mirror world. That moment of recognition—indeed, the whole journey that the book inscribes—involved reopening myself to the natural world which was indissociable for me from childhood and my father. It was a way of acknowledging him in me, a route to love through grief. It took some emotional and imaginative work for me to reconnect with the natural world, having mistrusted it for most of my adulthood. For so long I’d cast nature, rather crudely, as a betrayal of politics.

Clearly, I wasn’t attempting to set up nature in the book as a blueprint for human behavior or as a way of simplifying the complexities of immigrant life. There is no prior, no higher order. Nor was I trying to vindicate the immigrant’s hybrid existence: it doesn’t need vindication. What I was reaching for was an imaginative node that made emotional sense. Something to ease the pain,
something to express my experiential embrace of both the Karoo and Arizona, of childhood and adulthood.

This imaginative need is deeply felt and pervasive in creative works of any kind. One thinks, for instance, of the symbolic role that music plays in Nick Hornby’s *High Fidelity*, Sartre’s *Nausea*, or the closing scene of Isaac Julien’s film *Young Soul Rebels*. In all of them, there is a reaching through music for some still point, for some temporary, imperfect closure. That doesn’t make music a blueprint for anything. Even a theoretical work like Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* has been taken to task for its reliance on images of music and ships to evoke fluid, transnational identities. From a purely analytical perspective, such imaginative evocations are inherently limited. But perhaps those limits are outweighed by the emotional charge they release, the felt sense of possibility.

Q. Is there a mistrust of the image in *Dreambirds*? You refer to the deceptive appearance of things, of camouflage as a metaphor for life in South Africa. Sometimes, reading the text, it is as if the force of images lies beyond reach. Were you aware of working a lot in registers outside of the visual—in sound, smell, the tactile? Might such explorations have been a part of your search for “a deeper word than memory”—when memory is so often tied to the visual?

A. That’s perceptive. I wasn’t aware of doing anything like that deliberately. But then there was a lot that was, that had to be, written unawares. There is something to that mistrust of the image, though. From having been partly deaf as a child, sound has always seemed for me some kind of recovery. It’s as deep as the senses get. I think my mistrust of the surface image goes back to my early discovery of natural camouflage in the Karoo—that appearances deceived. Even more radical, though, was the disjunction I experienced between growing up in South Africa with almost no understanding of what apartheid was and plunging into what Nadine Gordimer has described as “falling, falling through the South African way of life”—that one could live so self-deceived. My experience as an immigrant was then superimposed on that earlier mistrust of surfaces. Eva Hoffman has a poignant description of her Polish immigrant father shouting at everyone in Vancouver.
Whether he is trying to sell a vacuum cleaner or embracing a friend, he has only one tone because he lives outside the local repertoire of cultural registers. Often what (in the airbrushed account of American history) is depicted as immigrant energy is little more than immigrant fear. I experienced some of that myself. Of having my codes, my sense of normality, scrambled, and of struggling to decode the surfaces around me.

Q. The genres of memoir and autobiography apparently focus on the past, yet are also explorations of the writer's present. In many ways, the writing of the book itself seems a way of "finding the present." You describe your childhood as a state of being locked into the past and projecting onto the future ("It was the present that seemed remote," you say of your life in South Africa). Perhaps this suspension between the past and the future is also the state in which the migrant often finds himself. By the end of the book, you find a way of existing in the "deep present." Is it the present that is the site of the traumatic as well as the place that can offer rejuvenation in this story?

A. It's always useful to ask what occasions a memoir. Very often, as in my case, that catalyst is the death of a parent. Inevitably, the loss leaves you feeling exposed, unless you've already been totally estranged. A parent's death changes the shape of your future and your relationships to the past. The present that you're stranded in begins to feel like a much more mortal space. What ritual forms of grief and acknowledgment are there to help you give meaning to that derelict present? We don't have many such rituals left, at least in a secular middle-class culture. Writing was the ritual that helped ease me from one present into the other, from abandonment to embrace. Perhaps there is an immigrant component to this too. If you move a lot, the past is always elsewhere. And, as an outsider, your claim on the future seems precarious. You're driven back into the present and have to find ways of turning it into something expansive rather than confining.

Q. Yet, on another reading, you seem to refuse boundaries of past, present, and future. You describe your return to South Africa
to vote as a "trip suspended as if in a tense yet undescribed by grammarians." Why is time and tense of such importance in Dreambirds? Moreover, there is also a sense, isn’t there, that the autobiographical act itself is or can be about retrospective consolation—the making of connections one never could have at the time—and the relationship to time that this implies?

A. My biggest challenge in writing Dreambirds was how to find a voice that was personal yet historically encompassing. This challenge was intimately related to the question of tense. I kept casting and recasting different sections in the present and in the past. In childhood, the present is such an enveloping tense. Later we lose that: we fret about the future, regret past acts. But that shift is not all loss, for we gain historical perspective. I wanted Dreambirds to draw energy from the huge, present-tense passions of childhood. The child’s angle of vision can open up memoir to so many possibilities: for humor, fantasy, innocent honesty, and the kind of incomprehension that unwittingly penetrates. However, the child’s perspective is also limiting. It cannot reach easily into history, politics, biology, or foreign lands—all places I wished the book to go. So I had to experiment with splicing personal and impersonal story lines in a way that would allow me to move between a boyhood memory of an ostrich eating my watch and the Russian pogroms, belle-époque fashion, nineteenth-century racial politics, and Aristotle’s crackpot theories of bird migration. This challenge of voice, of point of view, was intimately connected to the question of tense that you raise.

Q. Finding the present, and “knowing how to be known,” also seems to relate to writing your way out of certain versions of masculinity. If the desert, which so captured your childhood (and adult) imagination, was full of “hidden, deceptive” things, then the metaphor of keeping things hidden is also one you use to characterize the men in your family, and in the story generally: you refer to “the way men . . . hide.” You describe your father as having “gone public to stay hidden.” Some men—in this case you and your father—are characterized as having no words, as inhabiting a “dead-silent turbulence.” How explicitly is your own story writ-
ten in relation to these registers of masculinity you articulate? Is your memoir or autobiography in general a way of “going public to stay hidden”?

A. Yes, *Dreambirds* involves an exploration of masculinity. Growing up in South Africa, I never felt comfortable with the codes available to me. Not just racially, but sexually as well. I think the butch-femme thing about ostriches subliminally appealed to me—these cancan dancers of the veld that, with a single kick, could eviscerate a man. That crossover thing, that element of ambiguity, is something I’m drawn to in women and men. It’s less brittle, makes for better company.

From adolescence onwards, I recoiled from what I saw around me of what it meant to be a man. My father had a capacity for happiness. But he was in many ways emotionally inarticulate. His response to fear was to work harder. I could sense in him some of the loneliness of that unvoiced, pent-up fear. I craved some version of manliness that could embrace emotional vulnerability and give voice to it. I don’t say this accusingly. By South African standards, we could scarcely call ourselves underprivileged, but my father was, on a very modest salary, the sole breadwinner for nine mouths. From where I stood, his over-the-top work ethic, his emotional unavailability, was intimately connected to that daunting responsibility.

In *Dreambirds* I tried to be self-revealing, self-exploratory. But because the book doesn’t attempt to be a comprehensive personal memoir, there are obviously some personal things that I don’t address directly. Let me mention one. Between the lines, the book was my effort to understand my decision—something I’ve felt since an early age—not to have children. I have always recoiled from the thought of being a father, far less a patriarch. I wanted to get to the root of that and could only do so by working back through my father’s fears, my Karoo childhood, and my immigrant uncertainties.

Q. *Dreambirds* tracks diasporic identities and histories, and this is an important departure in relation to South African writing at least. It is interesting that the local “one-mistake” towns of your child-
hood, as you characterize them, are nevertheless seamed through with connectivity. Places, including South African places, are diasporic spaces where diverse stories are always imminent, even though they may be silenced. You also begin to unpack the many strands—partly through the complex ethnicities of your own family—which exist within the blanket term “white South African.” Did you explicitly see yourself as exploring the official silence surrounding whitenesses at odds with the everyday inventions and amplifications of these ethnicities?

A. Yes, breaking down the uniformity of whiteness is essential—following the fractures and seeing where they lead, historically, politically. I do think these are potentially interesting times for South African writers, not least memoir writers. I’d love to see more writing about these fractures, these cover-ups, and obviously not just in the so-called white communities.