

# FACTS, FAIRYTALES AND THE POLITICS OF STORYTELLING

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New Zealand director Gaylene Preston has been acclaimed as one of the country's finest filmmakers since her first film, the fantasy/comedy/thriller, *Mr. Wrong*, in 1984. Since then she has made the feature film *Ruby and Rata* (1990), the miniseries *Bread and Roses* (1994), and the feature documentary *War Stories Our Mothers Never Told Us* (1995), as well as directing and producing a substantial number of other documentaries. She was appointed New Zealand's first Filmmaker Laureate in 2001 and she is also an Officer of the New Zealand Order of Merit for filmmaking. Preston has a reputation for being an unorthodox feminist and individualist, a strong woman who was raised on the dark, stormy West Coast of New Zealand, the setting for her latest film, *Perfect Strangers*, which is her second filmic foray into the world of the macabre. The film is distinctively New Zealand in its setting and characters while drawing on universally recognizable motifs and themes of fairy tale, horror, fantasy, and insights about human psychology.

The story is played out between two main characters. Melanie (Rachael Blake), a woman unlucky in love, who works in a fish 'n' chips shop, is enticed away one night to an island by a 'perfect stranger,' the Man (Sam Neill), who remains unnamed. With his Italian shoes and 'cultured' background, the dark, mysterious stranger is a romantic, tempting opposite for her, far from her experience of life and the rough blokes of the coast who hunt, shoot, fish, and fart in bed. Bill (Joel Tobeck), a local hunter whom Melanie once dated and rejected, later becomes the third character in an entrapping triangle.

In a hut on the island the tall, dark stranger treats Melanie to a candlelit bath. To the accompaniment of 'One Fine Day' from *Madame Butterfly* (one of several musical commentaries on the action), he chops chicken and burns her clothes. She is thus prepared for her debut as female lead in one of his versions of reality. Preston has worked in the field of art therapy and her background is evident in this film. The dynamics of the characters exemplify the effect of unconscious internal material (the film we run inside our heads) on external relationships. From this point of view the activities of the characters at times resemble a dance of shadow boxers. Victim, rescuer, persecutor—idealized and despised images of male and female roles zigzag, dance, and turn across the screen beneath the eye of a full West Coast moon.

Rachael Blake gives a nuanced performance as the apparently tough West Coast gal, who nevertheless shows she has the softer qualities expected in a female along with other less socially acceptable facets. She prepares to give the obsessive stranger what she thinks he

wants, although her expectations, along with those of viewers, are turned on their head through the course of the film.

Plot and character twists maintain tension and pace, while the shots of a dark, brooding setting, lit with the occasional smile of light, create an uneasy atmosphere in which cast and coast mirror each other. The smiles of the Man, in fact, played with disturbing ambiguousness by Sam Neill, and his prey, Melanie, become more sinister as the plot deepens, while Bill, the uncouth bushman, reveals an unexpected capacity for reflection and compassion (laced perhaps with cunning?) as the film progresses. *Perfect Strangers* requires tolerance for ambiguity.

Preston challenges stereotyped notions of gender, fairy-tale romance, and characterization. She uses the kind of gritty realism and grotesque, outsized imagery often found in dream and fairy tale. The effect is comic, macabre, and, at times, confusing. But this is often the nature of madness. Candle-lit baths, knives, flimsy feminine clothing, a wheelbarrow, a freezer, and a tattooed cheek appear in situations that both disturb and at times amuse.

Rich in references and nuances, *Perfect Strangers* also throws light into a rather isolated region of the country and into a corner of the New Zealand psyche, eliciting further exploration and reflection about ideas of wholeness, psychological and social awareness, and the roles that internal images of masculinity and femininity play in relationships.

*Perfect Strangers* plays around with the boundaries of inner and outer realities and the tensions between different ways of seeing—between interior (subjective, imagined) reality and exterior (concrete, factual data) reality. This does not work for all viewers, although many moviegoers worldwide have responded to the film's strangely haunting qualities.

*Perfect Strangers* has screened at numerous international film festivals, including the London Film Festival, the Montreal World Film Festival, and the Chicago International Film Festival, as well as special screenings earlier this year at the New York and Los Angeles chapters of Women in Film and Television. Australian actress Rachael Blake won the Best Actress Award at both the Oporto International Film Festival in Portugal and the Vladivostok Film Festival. In June 2005, *Perfect Strangers* won the Best Film Award at The Female Eye Film Festival in Toronto. As so often happens nowadays with offbeat foreign films, *Perfect Strangers* went straight to DVD in the United States without so much as a limited theatrical release. If you have not seen the film, we would advise you to stop reading here, and rent the DVD first, since the following interview contains numerous 'plot spoilers.'

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## **Cineaste spoke to Gaylene Preston in April 2005 at her home in Mt. Victoria, Wellington.**

**Perfect Strangers is something of a departure from the more recent documentary films you have made, and yet there is a strong psychological as well as social interest in all your films.**

My documentaries document the drama of people's lives and I let them speak, reveal themselves. Their stories reveal their own view of experience. My skill as a filmmaker is to not get in the way and to find a good structure to amplify the telling. Perfect Strangers is more of a drama from the inside. It is my largest budget movie and also my most personal film. It's the first film I both wrote and directed. I have had a hand in the writing of other films I have made, but this is one I wanted to pull out of my unconscious mind—that part of the brain that keeps working away whether you are awake or asleep. I wanted the story to come from that place. This means that Perfect Strangers has continued to reveal deeper meaning to me, even after it was finished. For example, I was standing on the stage of the London Film Festival at the Odeon Theatre in Leicester Square with the festival programmer and Rachael Blake. There were roughly 1,000 people present, most of whom had stayed for the Q and A, and I realized as the questions came that I was born to make this film because I grew up in a marriage that had a third person in the metaphorical freezer. I was thinking, 'Yes, my mother was in love with another man before my father came back from the war.' I was the little golden-haired girl who was born to bring the marriage back together again. My father was a kind, generous man, a milkman who owned a fish and chips shop. He was always thoughtful, but plainspoken and never appeared debonair or romantic, and my mother was in love with a handsome stranger she had rejected to save the marriage. I hadn't realized until then that in the film I had unconsciously painted this portrait of the world I lived in as a three-year-old. Quite a moment to be realizing this, I must say.

**Perfect Strangers has been acclaimed at several film festivals overseas and has had a mixed reception in New Zealand. What do you make of such polarized responses?**

The main thing for me is that I have got it off my chest. I said what I meant to say and if some people didn't get it I can only speculate on why. It is full of stuff I think about all the time. Fortunately most people get the jokes. The home crowd is usually the hardest to please. The problem lies with the cultural cringe around our home-grown storytelling. That's one of the reasons we need to be making more NZ films—so the audience gets used to it and stops looking for the next big thing. Making work that explores the edges is always going to polarize. We must feel free to do it, particularly in a place with such a new film culture.

What is some of the 'stuff' you think about?

Perfect Strangers is a monster genre bender. You have a predator and a victim and through exploiting the romanticism of the audience—the belief in romantic love—the predator becomes the victim and the victim the predator. This psychological journey is linked to an exploration of aspects of maleness and femaleness.

**In thriller and horror films the female is often cast as victim or even something monstrous.**

Yes. So, on one hand you have the femme fatale, who is the sexy one, who is going to consume the male lover because she is like a big black spider. If he has sex with her he dies, either psychologically or actually. Or there is the usually blonde female victim who screams all the time and must be protected. It is a very successful formula and no doubt it will carry on being a successful formula for some time to come. But I am a filmmaker working on the edges, so philosophically and physically (geographically) I have creative freedom. We don't make many films in New Zealand but, when we do, we have a lot of freedom. So I was able to explore these knotty problems that confront us when telling modern stories in a new century. Perfect Strangers is an exploration. It's not a treatise or a sermon from the mountain. I have spent my life thinking about what stories are for and what social purpose they serve.

**Why do we have stories?**

We are the only species on the planet who have them. I can only speculate. Stories are a communal thing. Since time began humankind has gathered round campfires in the dark to listen to stories. They remind us of who we are, where we have come from, and where we want to go. They keep us from being consumed by the dark and the unseen forces that lurk just outside the light. Fairy tales are a mixture of all of those things. I think today the cinema is the modern campfire and audiences go to the dark space of the cinema and sit in the light of the screen to get their stories. I am privileged to be one of the storytellers, or to be the midwife of other people's stories in my documentary work, to shape and send tales to shine out into that darkness.

**And you like to cross the boundaries of genres?**

I think we are at a point in the new century now where storytellers can exploit existing genres. Genre is so well understood now. The audience is sophisticated. They know the formula, so it can be bent to have greater meaning. I'm also sick of going to pictures where everyone can guess the end before it's even a quarter of the way through. One reason we have genres is that they are good marketing tools. As a storyteller, and a perverse and contrary creature, I can

choose how much I want to ignore the marketing tool or not. I have a strong intuition that 'goodie versus baddie' stories, where the goodies always win, are becoming damaging for us as a species. I like films where goodies are baddies. My film changes tone about five times so it is hard to categorize rigidly, but I guess I would call Perfect Strangers a psyched-out psycho fantasy. [laughs] A genre film about love. There are so many love stories but not a lot that explore their psychology. When you fall in love there is a super transference—the 'Other' colonizes your brain. For example, I carry my lover with me in my head and sometimes when we meet I'm not sure what I have told him and what I have discussed with him in my imagination—it's a wonderful, annoying, and frightening thing. People say to me, 'What does Melanie want?' But what does anyone want? What does any child born ever want? They want to be loved. And women have a need to 'look after' and men have a need to protect—it could be genetic. Perfect Strangers exploits that shamelessly. So Melanie, even though she has been freaked out and is in this spooky place with this out-of-control stranger who is 'in love' with her, even though he doesn't know her, when he needs her help, she responds and gradually begins to love him too. He is also her only way out of the situation she is trapped in, and once you are in love what can you do—fall in even deeper? Be kind and compassionate? Save your own life?

**How much of the film works on an external reality and how much on an inner fantasy level, because the stranger dies and yet seems to live on for Melanie, either as a ghost, an insane fantasy, or as some kind of psychological function.**

I actually saw that happen when my father died. He didn't die as far as my mother was concerned, he was perhaps even more with her than when he was alive. That is very human. We have this capacity to bring people with us. Maybe ninety-five percent of the marriages in the world have three people in them, maybe more! Perfect Strangers exploits the spookiness of that ability. Human imagination is a very powerful force—dark and light. There has been a feeling around Perfect Strangers that it is 'not cricket' to make a film about a genuinely dangerous female victim turned predator. Somehow women can't be predators and that is rubbish! Melanie is not a 'femme fatale,' she is a real female predator. They can be found in lots of bars downtown on any weekend in any city in the Western world—sexual and psychological predators. There is also a lot uncertainty and disorientation among adults and kids who are neglected or forgotten, as Melanie is by her parents. The things I show in Perfect Strangers are very common. All I have done is to take a psychological journey from predator to victim both ways, and to explore romantic love on the way, but the psychology is acted out and made external by the plot. So it is an internal journey that is externalized and that is why it is a fantasy film. Maybe that makes it a feminine one rather than a masculine one. In most fantasy films there is an external journey that is internalized.

**Melanie gets married but she remains dangerous. We see her dancing with the dead stranger on her wedding day and know what she could be capable of.**

Yes, she could shove that onion knife between Bill's ribs if he isn't nice to her, so he had better be nice to her. [laughs] The ending is quite tough. I could have chosen others. Melanie is pregnant, but is that baby another figment, another ghost in her imagination? Has she puffed herself up to get Bill's sympathy? Has she lied, then quickly got pregnant? I have always thought that myself. But basically she is unconscious from the time that she flipped out. She could be up to anything. You could read this film in lots of ways. Unconscious love is incredibly dangerous. Melanie at the beginning of the film is a woman with autonomy but she doesn't know what it's for. She hasn't fought for it, she just has it. She doesn't know what to do with it. She just floats along bored stiff, looking for love. I think that is what it is like for a lot of young women. They hit their thirties and the parties aren't working quite as well as they used to. The new lovers are just more of the same.

**What is your answer? You have done something with your life, you are a successful film director.**

Well, I am just going to stick to my knitting. [laughs] I don't know the answer, I just ponder the questions. I'm a storyteller, not a scientist. But as far as running successful relationships goes and not putting old relationships into the metaphorical freezer (as Melanie did with the Man), that is quite a challenge for modern women. In fact there are examples of this happening quite literally. When we were making *Perfect Strangers*, I kept receiving news clippings about people who had put other people into freezers. It happens more than you think. For example, a woman living in California had been running a motel. She had a husband and children who were estranged from her. He had been the handyman round the place and then one day took off to New York where he was supposedly hit by a bus and killed. Thirty years later, in the lock up where the woman had things stored, a freezer was found, and he was in it. She had killed him and put him into storage, so to speak. There was also a French couple in some little village who had their parents in glass freezers in the front room so they could see them. All this must have something to do with our brain stem. It is very old, irrational stuff, a tribute to the wild human imagination. Whatever I think of as a storyteller in the new century, I can be sure that if I pick up a simple book of fairy tales written two or three hundred years ago, they will be far wilder than anything I could dream up. Those old stories have got us through so far, but we need new fairy tales now in order to evolve.

**Which fairy tales are in the background of *Perfect Strangers*?**

Well, there is obviously Cinderella. I think the Disney version of Cinderella has quite a lot to answer for in terms of my difficult development as an integrated human woman [laughs], because there is always some little bit of your brain ticking away, wanting a handsome prince to come along on his white horse and wrap you up in cotton wool. The shoe will fit and you will all live happily ever after. But then I look at the happily-ever-after ending, and it is a completely different scenario for the Prince than the Princess. He continues charging around on his

rampant horse, running the country and probably having his way with serving wenches who throw themselves in his way with baskets of flowers, fruit, and nuts. Meanwhile, what is Queen Cinderella doing at the castle? She is running the household. It has always felt like a hell of a lot of washing of dishes for Cindy to me, so I wanted Melanie to live happily ever after while still being dangerous—or whatever the feminine term for virile is. She is dangerous and Bill could cop it. Poor old Bill, he comes in as a bit of a predator but he is actually really kind. Every time he has to make a decision he is thoughtful and does the right thing. And the audience says, 'What a shame she had to marry him.' Then the stranger out of the fridge turns up and everyone says, 'Well, maybe it will be all right.' Irrational. We are so wedded to that particular 'happy ending' that we want things that are not going to be 'happy' at all. Perfect Strangers is complex and doesn't follow the expected pattern. It isn't the sort of movie you can pop into on a Friday night and walk out saying, 'Oh that was good,' and immediately forget it.

**So we are left with ambiguity, and a certain sense of unease. Nothing is clear. Tell us about the role of the setting—the dark, stormy West Coast—and how it relates to the role Sam Neill plays as the stranger.**

I couldn't imagine anyone else playing the role. Sam was central to the documentary, Cinema of Unease, about New Zealand film, which I think it also relates to our writing, painting, and music. What is the unease we are talking about? I think it has something to do with pakeha New Zealanders[settlers of European origins-H.F.] being stranded in paradise. We are in this beautiful place—a heaven on earth—but do we really deserve it? There is also a darkness, a treacherous beauty, in the land in New Zealand. I don't feel it in many other places. I have just come back from Canada where the vibes are completely different. But then I went to a Mayan ruin at Polenque in Mexico and you can feel it there. That ground has been soaked in blood. There are parts of New Zealand where a dark force seems to come out of the ground itself. It affects the psychology of the isolated individual living upon it. The mythological island in Perfect Strangers is actually a character in the story because it has such a strong effect on the characters, isolated in this beautiful place. It moans, it gleams, it imposes itself on every scene. Some of Melanie's conflict comes from being stuck in a threatening and alien environment from which she cannot escape. You have to be psychologically very strong to withstand solitary confinement. Melanie can't get off that island once the boat is gone and the man is dead. I was very lucky to have Alun Bollinger as cinematographer because he knows the place even better than I do. We were filming over the road from his home. It's a psychological and spiritual place. Our turangawaewae, so to speak. I believe the film captures the spirit of things along with the more obvious things like light and dark.

**The vegetation, the rocks, the colors and textures of the landscape seep into the being of the people who live there. You grew up there, how has this affected the making of the film and choice of cast?**

Personally for myself, I stayed inside. [laughs] But in the old days they had something called the 'West Coast disease'—death by drowning. The rivers can be ferocious there, but some of those deaths weren't accidental, they were people committing suicide. It was interesting screening the film down there. I grew up on the West Coast and left when I was nearly eleven. I grew up with those pounding seas, black mountains, and the people living on a thin, narrow strip of coast in between. There is a lot of black in the landscape and bright luminous light.

### **Like a place on the edge of sanity, or insanity?**

Yes. New Zealanders have this thing about being taciturn and not talking much, and we say we don't do bullshit, but West Coasters are wild ravers. Like the Irish. They love telling you stories that are complete lies. For example, if a city slicker stranger walks into the Punakaiki pub after a rugby match and asks something innocent—like the rugby score—that person will become the pub entertainment for the next little while. The locals will play with them, push them around for fun. The last thing anyone is going to tell them is what they want to know—but later they'll give the visitor the top brick off the chimney. Hospitable. There's 'insiders' and 'outsiders' and a strong understanding of the difference. That's the culture I come from. It promotes a crazy kind of tolerance of completely mad behavior among 'insiders.' There's a certain promotion of the idea to live out our dreams, so you could say the man in *Perfect Strangers* is following his dream. He has gone to town, he's brought her home, he has prepared it all ready for her. He is making his dream reality, but it involves another person he doesn't really know. Is that delusional? Is he really Prince Charming? Or a stalker? How do you tell the difference? There are a lot of questions.

### **How do you live out your dreams and values as a filmmaker?**

The first film I had anything to do with came out of drama therapy I was involved with as an art therapist at a hospital in Cambridge, U.K. The Royal College of Psychiatrists had their annual meeting at the hospital that year and we screened this terribly amateur film we had made for the Royal College of Psychiatrists. We were talking about drama therapy, and the first question from them was, 'Don't you think you are encouraging these people to regress into infantile fantasy?' We said, 'Yes, we are, that is exactly what we are doing, and why is every fantasy necessarily infantile by definition?' Maybe it is a very important part of being human to have these supposedly infantile fantasies. Could you call trolling down the M1 in your red Ferrari 'living out an infantile fantasy'? Who says people living in a psychiatric hospital aren't allowed to have them. One thing about being a filmmaker living in a small community is that I don't think I am as isolated as I could be living in a place like Los Angeles. L.A. is an industrial factory town that makes films. Everyone is clawing up the same ladders, it permeates every relationship. Here in New Zealand I'm a local filmmaker living in Mt. Victoria and people mostly appreciate what I have to offer in a generally supportive way. This is more in keeping with older, supposedly 'less civilized' human approaches to art and artists. In Maori communities, for example, the artists



were integrated. In that environment, storytelling was not just relegated to a job for artists who were the 'mad' ones because they were indulging in 'infantile fantasies' for pay. The modern construct around artists is very recent in terms of the species. These days if you indulge in these fantasies totally enough and monomaniacally enough, you can become really famous and successful and make a lot of money out of it. Society's value system is financial. Our community measures itself by how many cars you have in the garage and how many houses you own. I question all that. I question everything! [laughs] My values come from growing up in a small society squeezed between the black mountain and the big sea where the highly regarded people—the local priest and vicar and the teachers—rode around on bicycles and were quite poverty stricken.

**How do you situate yourself as a New Zealand filmmaker in relation to people like Peter Jackson and Andrew Adamson who make multimillion dollar productions?**

Andrew Adamson and Peter Jackson are doing what interests them. It isn't being done cynically, but rather with total commitment. The only thing I think that would undermine filmmaking in New Zealand is cynicism. I'm really glad that Peter and Fran chose to do what they are doing just over this ridge. [Miramar is a few kilometers from Mt. Victoria, which is an inner-city residential area—H.F.] If they had chosen to make Lord of the Rings elsewhere, I am not even sure I would still be here. Through the 1980's and '90's it was pretty slim pickings in the film industry in New Zealand. People would make a film, maybe even a second, and then they would have to go overseas. I was an expatriate returned and I came back here for a lot of personal reasons. Then I had a child so I chose to stay but had to make commercials. That is where I honed my craft and creative skills—through making commercials, not through television drama work. Through the Eighties fewer and fewer movies were being made and things were getting tough. Peter and Fran made Heavenly Creatures, their third film. It was really successful but they didn't export themselves. That made an enormous difference to me. I am glad they are still here—partly because that lifts my game, it makes me take myself seriously, and extend my ideas of what is possible. Considerably. Of course, anything is possible. When it came to doing freezer prosthetics and the storm at sea—some sophisticated pieces of digital technology for Perfect Strangers—I had people who are the best in the world to make them. Weta Workshop and Weta Digital helped me hugely. Just because the work was being done at 'mates' rates' did not mean it was treated like some cheap quick job. Perfect Strangers received state-of-the-art, top-quality attention. Actually it's quite demanding putting special effects into a realist fantasy style. They have to totally blend in. Because of the profile of Lord of the Rings, when I walk into company offices overseas to talk about my projects now, people have not only heard of New Zealand, but they have also heard of Wellington, and they have been impressed with the work.

### **Is Perfect Strangers at all cynical?**

No. It is deceptive and devious. There is an undercut. Every time you think you know where you are, it will undercut and then taunt the audience. There is a kind of contrariness. It isn't cynical about love but has some pretty realistic things to say about romanticism—the great, glorious love. I feel that if we don't interrogate this kind of thing in our storytelling we are not contributing to a better world.

### **What is the social role of a film like Perfect Strangers, a film that has different layers?**

In terms of storytelling through film, I think we have to do this consciously. We exploit people's fears by retelling the same stories, but we can do it in a conscious way so as to be part of the solution rather than part of a recurring problem.

### **How is Perfect Strangers part of the solution?**

Well, I hope it is. These days, stories are on the march. They are taking over. Ways of communicating ideas are constantly becoming storified. You used to go to the museum to look at exhibits, now the exhibitions are stories. The news has become stories. People used to report and analyze but now we have 'stories.' These stories need goodies and baddies and happily ever after, so those elements get applied to the tabloidization of major wars and complex situations. It's even got a genre. We are turning our world into a Western. So they say, 'Hitler was a monster.' Well, Hitler wasn't a monster, he was a man, and the story is far more complex than the three-act story structure might allow. So at this point in human history, with amazing delivery systems possible through electronic media, there are also huge restrictions caused by the simplification and storifying of content.

### **So there is storytelling and storification?**

Yes, when the storytelling is oversimplified and prescriptive. Certain politicians are dangerous, they manipulate perfectly those basic fears that have haunted humankind since the world began. Their kind of politics works on the primitive human belief in 'goodies' and 'baddies,' in angels and monsters. Add to that the dangerous simplification imposed by the prime-time sound bite and a very dangerous situation develops. We know less and less about more and more and our opinions are easily manipulated. Hence we need a new mythology that illuminates complexity—and I believe the only mass medium that can do it is the cinema.

### **Who has inspired you in the film world?**

I think Perfect Strangers is quite unconsciously a female answer to Roman Polanski's Cul de Sac, but to what degree I didn't realize until I had finished Perfect Strangers and thought I had

better watch *Cul de Sac* again. In that film the female is always pouting and painting her nails and flirting with everyone. She is a really just a sex object. They are all holed up on this isolated island and she is sitting there painting her nails. And the central male character is really this man who is living in his head, a complete intellectual. But it's still a terrific film. Also William Wyler's *The Collector*, and several British films of the Sixties and Seventies, such as *The Servant*, *Accident*, and *Performance*.

**Have you another film in mind?**

I am walking along the cliff. I can feel the cold wind blowing up my skirt. There is a point where I am going to have to jump.