

TLC Showcase
Angela Young



<i>A Note on Speaking of Love</i>	2
Red Head	4
Ostriches, or The Birds Nobody Noticed	9
Biography	13

A Note on *Speaking of Love*

I doubt that SPEAKING of LOVE, my first novel, would have found a publisher if I hadn't sent what I fondly thought of as a fabulously-executed final draft to TLC.

In common with many first-time novelists, I suspect, I fantasised about TLC's report. It would say: 'This is a well-written, heartfelt, compassionate, brilliant, potentially prize-winning (do add more adjectives) manuscript. An excited agent/publisher will be in touch this afternoon.'

Oddly enough Julia Bell didn't say it was a work of genius nor that Faber were begging for my telephone number. And of course, in my heart, I knew she wouldn't: I'd already had several rejection letters from publishers. But it's so hard to admit you haven't got the book you love so much, the book you've spent so long writing, right.

Everyone who reads novels has opinions about those they love and those they hate but that doesn't qualify them to tell you why your book has/hasn't worked. Experienced editors (I and many others think of them as book doctors) can suggest the questions to ask yourself about structure, voice, point of view, characterisation, plot (my huge weakness), style of writing and so much more, including what the market is looking for. You may not want to hear that last part, but I've discovered that it's perfectly possible to write stories from your heart that a publisher can also position in the market.

One of the things I discovered in the rewriting process (and someone well-known once said that all good writing is rewriting) is that there are myriad ways to tell the same story. You're not in danger of losing your story if you rewrite it, even if you radically rewrite it, as long as you stay true to your heart's purpose, the core, of that story. But the best way to communicate the core is not necessarily what you consider to be your final draft. You need another pair of eyes, another heart, another brain. Experienced ones.

Julia's eyes, heart, brain and hands wrote a down-to-earth, practical, useful and thought-provoking report. It was full of insight and questions, comments and suggestions for revisions, cuts and additions which proved life-changing. Writing-life changing, I mean. As I read her trenchant, honest and detailed comments I smarted and argued against her in my mind and scribbled angrily in the margins, but when I read her report for, perhaps, the seventh time I managed to banish my pride and my preciousness and, for the first time in the process of writing the novel, I saw the book through the eyes of another person and found I could be objective about it myself. As soon as that happened, as soon as I realised that it was not me, not my very self that was at stake, but a novel I had written, I realised I could take up Julia's suggestions and turn my manuscript from an unpublishable novel into one that might find a publisher.

I began to redraft.

But to begin at the beginning. Following good editorial tradition, Julia's report began positively: she said the piece was lyrical and original, that parts of it were convincing and tense. But then came a seven-page but! But Julia's buts were invaluable. The single most important thing she said was that the character of the daughter was very thin and undramatic and, 'In the end this reader didn't really care if they [the mother and the daughter] were reconciled or not'.

I was horrified. If she, an experienced editor, reader and writer of novels didn't care, then why would anyone else? The whole point of the novel is that the tension between the mother and daughter urges the reader on, and so their characters must convince, and evince compassion in the reader so that she cares desperately about the outcome. Julia suggested changing the voice of the daughter from the first to the third person so that there was more room to show the daughter's character/situation, things which, in the first person, she was too confused to do.

It worked.

I only ignored one of Julia's suggestions (she thought the book should be a two-hander between mother and daughter; I thought it should remain a three-hander) but otherwise I followed her recommendations to the letter, including giving the book a better title.

In 2005 I redrafted SPEAKING of LOVE.

In 2007 Beautiful Books published it.

Since then it has been shortlisted for a prize, sold very respectably for a first novel (4,000 copies) and, in 2010, it was optioned for a feature film.

So find a book doctor to read your work. Then find your objectivity.

Because it's worth it.

Red Head

By **Angela Young**

Extract from the novel, *Speaking of Love*, published in paperback by Beautiful Books in February 2008, and shortlisted for Spread the Word's **Books to Talk About** in the same month.

Long ago, in a cold, grey, northern kingdom, there lived a King who wore his crown all the time, even in bed. In that kingdom the right to rule was proclaimed by a crown. Without a crown a man could not become king, nor a woman, queen.

But in that kingdom red was considered the source of all evil. Fires and red stuffs were outlawed, a mixture of water and chalk was applied to red lips and red cheeks, and for those born with red hair, these were bad times indeed. They shaved their heads and their faces daily, while the hill-women, who had long fingernails and the disposition for such things, plucked out stubborn red eyelashes.

Anyone discovered in possession of anything red, whether human or mineral, animal or vegetable, was immediately sentenced to death by live burial.

At the first sign of a hint of red on the leaves of the kingdom's many trees, great grey blankets were carried up long thin ladders and spread over the trees until every red leaf had fallen to the ground and dried to a harmless brown. The people were ordered to turn their faces from sunrises and sunsets and the hill-women were kept busy making potions that disguised the colour of the blood that occasionally leaked from the people's wounds.

The King of that kingdom had a jealous wife, a good son and a terrible secret. Every morning the King's barber shaved and oiled the King's head and face, and one of the hill-women plucked stubborn eyelashes from the royal eyelids. For both the King and his son had abundant fiery red hair which, if left to grow, would have sprouted in red tufts and spikes and tangled itself in red curls all over their royal heads and bodies. In a kingdom that punished, by live burial, those discovered in possession of anything red, this was indeed a terrible secret.

And, as if that wasn't enough, the King had another difficulty. It is not easy to keep a crown upon a smooth, well-oiled scalp, so the King sent for the royal goldsmith who suggested that the kingdom's only crown be melted down. The royal goldsmith explained that with one third of the gold he would make a particularly light crown for the King with two attachments to fix the crown to the sides of the well-oiled royal scalp. 'And with the other two thirds,' said the royal goldsmith, with a deep bow, 'his Majesty the King will find himself a little richer.'

The King was delighted, the plan was executed and the King divided the remaining gold equally among the hill-women and his barber, in gratitude for their tireless service and their faithful silence.

But one morning, when the King hurried to attend to the affairs of his kingdom, he failed to unfold the attachments of his new, light crown and did not notice when it slipped backwards, down the train of his silk robe and away along the carpeted corridor through the open door to his wife's apartments.

The King's jealous wife, whose hair had a greenish tinge, was always on the watch for an opportunity to expose her husband's redness for she longed to be

crowned Queen. And so, on that morning, she could not believe her luck. She snatched up the crown and tried it on. But crowns with particular attachments for well-oiled scalps never fit heads covered with hair and so, in a fury, she flung the King's crown into her closet and locked the door.

That evening the King remarked that his courtiers had shown him an extraordinary lack of respect all day. The King's wife merely stared at her husband's head and so the King discovered, as his hands flew upwards, that he wore no crown.

'Why did no one tell me?' said the King, mortified.

His jealous wife made no answer, but the King ordered that no one should sleep until the crown was found. He woke the court, who woke the kingdom, with orders to begin a Great Crown Hunt. For in that kingdom the right to rule was proclaimed by a crown. Without a crown upon his head a man could not be a king nor a woman, queen. By the next evening, when the crown had not been found, the King was in a very agitated state. And by the following morning, when the King's barber asked him, politely, several times, to keep still, the King could not and so the King's barber, accidentally, drew blood from the King's head and the King, who until then had known his blood to be blue, saw that his blood was red.

The King stared, horrified, into the mirror. He saw the red blood on his face. He called a halt to the Great Crown Hunt, refused all the hill-women's bandages, medicines and advice and died, filled with the terrible knowledge that his own blood was the colour of the source of all evil.

The King's good son and heir, the king-in-waiting, thought the thing to do first, in such dreadful circumstances, was to ask the people of the cold, grey, northern kingdom to resume the Great Crown Hunt. He would think about the redness of his blood later. The good people agreed and were about to set off, when the jealous widow persuaded her son that it would be for the best if he joined the Great Crown Hunt himself.

'After all', she said, 'you know exactly what the lost crown looks like.'

And so it was that the king-in-waiting and the people of the cold, grey, northern kingdom resumed the Great Crown Hunt. They travelled to every part of the kingdom on foot; they travelled beyond the kingdom by boat, and they vowed that they would not cease the Great Crown Hunt until the crown, without which the king-in-waiting could not become king, was found.

The only people who did not join the Great Crown Hunt were those whom the jealous widow ordered to stay behind: the hill-women, the barber, the royal goldsmith and the one lady-in-waiting at whom the king-in-waiting had begun to gaze far too often and far too long.

'There are tasks I desire you to undertake,' said the jealous widow. 'In return for which you shall have unlimited access to the castle pantries.'

Tempted by food for which they would not have to forage, those who remained behind agreed to the tasks before they knew what they were. The jealous widow smiled behind her hand.

'The first task,' she said, 'is to return to the crown what belongs to the crown.' She stared at the hill-women and at the barber.

'The second task is to receive and deliver what belongs to the crown.' She glared at the lady-in-waiting at whom the king-in-waiting had begun to gaze far too often and far too long.

‘And the third and final task is to combine,’ here she stared at the royal goldsmith, ‘what belongs to the crown with the crown, and deliver it to me.’

With a flourish the jealous widow unlocked her closet and brought out the King’s lost crown.

‘You will not breathe a word,’ she said to the assembled, gasping company, ‘unless you relish the thought of live burial.’

Because they had no desire to die, and certainly not by live burial, the hill-women gathered up their share of the molten gold – the golden nuggets with which they had weighted the hems of their skirts – and handed them to the lady-in-waiting; the barber handed the lady-in-waiting a large pair of golden scissors, and the lady-in-waiting handed all this gold, and the dead King’s lost crown, to the royal goldsmith.

The royal goldsmith spent more than a year in attempts to mould the precious metal as the jealous widow had requested and eventually, to his great relief, he succeeded. He set his creation on a purple cushion and took it to her, but she shouted, ‘Have you lost your MIND? I cannot wear this! It is RED!’

The royal goldsmith had struggled for so long with the precious but resistant metal that he had not noticed its growing redness. But now he could not deny that a crown of reddened gold sat on the purple cushion.

‘I need a crown that will proclaim me Queen!’ snarled the jealous widow.

‘I can only think, your majesty,’ said the royal goldsmith in a state of terrible confusion, ‘that, by some process that I cannot fathom, the gold has acquired redness.’

‘I can see THAT!’ retorted the jealous widow and she summoned the lady-in-waiting at whom the king-in-waiting had begun to gaze far too often and far too long. She ordered her to throw the kingdom’s only crown into the river that ran beneath the castle. Immediately.

The young lady-in-waiting obeyed the jealous widow, but with a heavy heart for it seemed to her that even if this crown *was* red, it remained the young king-in-waiting’s birthright and she did not wish to throw his birthright into the river from which nothing ever surfaced. So, as she stood on the riverbank with the red-gold crown in her hands, she hesitated and in her hesitation in that dank and muddy darkness, she slipped. The red-gold crown fell from her hands as she reached out to save herself from the river, and so it was that the young lady-in-waiting heard the splash and knew that the red-gold crown had fallen into the dank dark river from which nothing ever surfaced.

And so the seasons turned, the jealous widow sickened and died of the green bile that ate away at her heart, but still the Great Crown Hunt continued and there were not enough people left in the kingdom to cover the trees with great grey blankets when autumn came. The leaves on the trees turned red for all to see and the lady-in-waiting noticed that nothing evil occurred. She noticed that when the hill-women gathered their herbs they hitched up their skirts and a brilliant red silk showed underneath. She noticed that the barber’s beard grew full and red and that the royal goldsmith wore red-gold rings on his once ringless fingers and when, for the first time in her life, the lady-in-waiting plucked up her courage and watched the red sun set, nothing evil occurred.

And then came the day, yet another year later, when word reached the cold grey northern kingdom that the Great Crown Hunters were on their way home.

The young lady-in-waiting stood on the drawbridge to greet the king-in-

waiting and his band of Crown Hunters. But it was a sad, sorry, kingless, crownless, cold grey band of hunters who trudged across the drawbridge draped in the hooded grey cloaks that kept out the cold winds of the kingdom. And it was an even sadder, sorrier young lady-in-waiting who informed the king-in-waiting of the jealous widow's death. She was about to tell him the sorriest news of all, the news of the loss of the red-gold crown, when her attention was caught by something the Great Crown Hunters were too exhausted to see for themselves.

The lady-in-waiting saw patches of red all about them. As they trudged past her, beneath the grey portcullis, she saw their red lips and cheeks; their red hands and noses. Some of them had red eyebrows, red eyelashes and red beards, and wisps of something distinctly red curled out from beneath the grey hoods of several of their cloaks.

The young lady-in-waiting also saw, as she stared about her, that the leaves on the trees had once more turned red. But what she noticed above all was that, despite all these patches of red, despite their deeply-held belief that red was the source of all evil, despite the fact that there was no crown for the king-in-waiting, nothing evil occurred. Absolutely nothing at all.

The lady-in-waiting ran after the king-in-waiting and as she ran her cheeks reddened, but she did not apply the chalk and water mixture she kept in her pocket. When she caught up with him she whispered into his ear and he threw back his head and laughed. Exactly what the lady-in-waiting whispered no one has ever known, but as the king-in-waiting laughed the hood of his grey cloak fell back, a shaft of sunlight broke through the grey clouds and the hair that covered his head was seen by all to be a glorious red red-gold.

The lady-in-waiting and the Crown Hunters gasped. They stared at the king-in-waiting's head, at his gloriously abundant, thick, spiky, curly, shiny red-gold hair and slowly, one by one, they began to smile. The king-in-waiting's hair looked exactly like a crown. A rather unruly crown, but a crown nonetheless.

Gradually, timidly to begin with, the Great Crown Hunters pulled back their own grey hoods and those with red hair stared at each other and then at their young king-in-waiting who simply smiled back at them.

A mirror set in a red-gold frame was brought for the young king-in-waiting and, as he looked at his red-gold hair, he wondered how it had ever come to pass that such a head of hair, such a colour, such a crowning glory, could possibly have been thought the source of all evil.

And so it was that the king-in-waiting's Great Crown Hunters declared, with one voice, that they had found what they had been looking for, at last. They had found a crown for the king-in-waiting's head, a crown which, by its very nature, could not be lost, at least not until such time as a natural successor was old enough to succeed him. They proclaimed the king-in-waiting, King.

At the coronation celebrations fires were lit and red wine was drunk, lips remained red and red hair was admired for its rarity and royal connection. The red leaves were not covered with grey blankets and nothing evil happened as a result. Absolutely nothing at all.

While the kingdom celebrated, the newly crowned King of the newly reddened kingdom gazed at the lady-in-waiting who had made him laugh, and at whom he had often gazed for far too long, according to his jealous mother. And he

saw, as she untied the large white scarf with which she had always, until that day, bound her hair so carefully, a torrent of royally red-gold hair cascade over her shoulders and down her back. The King threw back his own royally red head and together they laughed. And then they sang and then they danced until, at last, they turned together to watch the magnificent red sun rise.

Ostriches, or The Birds Nobody Noticed

By Angela Young

There was a time, a long time ago, when ostriches could fly. They lived in the heart of the heart of Africa and they flew faster, farther and higher than any other bird in the land. But they were small, unremarkable birds. When they were in the sky no one could see them, and when they were on the ground everyone ignored them.

The one thing in the world the ostriches wanted was to be noticed. So they flew as fast and as far as only they could to find Zushkaali, who was the wise man of those times.

Zushkaali the Wise wore his striped turban with its sash that hung down, and his striped tunic, and he wasn't surprised to see the ostriches. He'd been expecting them.

The ostriches all talked at the same time. They always did.

'We want to be spectacularly shaped –'

'– definitely different –'

'– remarkable, noticeable –'

'We want to be seen.'

'We thought we could ask the camels –'

'– and the giraffes –'

'– for legs, and necks –'

'– and eyes and eyelashes –'

'Like theirs.'

'But you are remarkable,' said Zushkaali the Wise when, at last, he managed to get a word in. 'You are spectacular. You are different. You can fly faster and farther and higher than any other bird in the land.'

'What's the use of that?' said the ostriches. 'No one can see us when we're high in the sky.'

'And when we're on the ground,' said another, 'everyone ignores us.'

'We want to be seen.'

Zushkaali smiled. 'All right,' he said, 'you may ask the camels and the giraffes for the things that you want –'

The ostriches were so excited that they all talked at once, as usual, and Zushkaali the Wise had to raise his voice. 'But you must ask your questions between sunrise and sunset on the *same* day. I cannot grant you more than one day. And I suggest you talk to the eagle –'

But the ostriches were gone.

They flew as fast and as far and as high as only they could, looking for the camels and when they found the camels, who were resting in a shady oasis in the middle of the red desert, they swooped down and skidded to a halt, sending flurries of sand up the camels' noses.

'We've come to ask –'

'Could we have –'

'Legs like yours –'

'Please?'

The head camel snorted, opened one eye, and moved his jaw slowly from side

to side, the way camels do.

‘We never,’ he said in his deep slow low voice, ‘ever ... discuss anything ... until the sun is low in the sky. Far too hot.’ The head camel closed his eye.

The ostriches chattered and skittered around the sleeping camels trying to persuade them to wake up and to talk, but they would not.

After a very long time the head camel stood up, back legs first the way camels do, and stretched and began to talk, very softly, to the other camels who all stood up, back legs first, and stretched, and answered the head camel, very softly.

The ostriches looked longingly at the camels’ legs and strained to hear what the camels said. But they could not hear a word.

At last the head camel turned to the ostriches and said, in his deep slow, low voice, ‘We have agreed. You may all have legs like ours ... but only two. Four would look silly on a bird.’

The ostriches soared into the sky screeching their thanks so loudly that they didn’t hear the head camel say, ‘And we suggest you ask the eagle for wings like his.’

The ostriches found the giraffes grazing from the tops of the trees in the green valley and they swooped down and landed on their backs.

The sun was red and round and low in the sky.

‘We’ve come to ask – ’

‘Could we have – ’

‘ – necks – ’

‘ – and eyes and eyelashes – ’

‘ – like yours – ’

‘Please?’

For a moment the giraffes didn’t answer.

‘The camels have said we can have legs like theirs,’ said one ostrich, ‘so could we, please, have necks, and eyes and eyelashes, like yours?’

The giraffes looked at each other, put their heads together and lowered them just a little, murmured for a while and then one of them spoke.

‘Yes,’ she said, ‘you may have what you have asked for. But you may not have our markings. We worked hard for them and they belong only to us.’

The ostriches soared into the sky screeching their thanks and, at that moment, the red sun set.

And so, even if the ostriches had stayed to hear the giraffes say, ‘But we think it would be a good idea if you asked the eagle for wings like his,’ it would have done them no good.

The sun had set.

The day was over.

The time for asking had passed.

And so it was that the ostriches fell from the sky, exhausted, at the foot of a dead tree, and slept exactly where they landed.

In the middle of that same night Zushkaali the Wise came and stood beneath the dead tree and the eagle, whose tree it was, spread his mighty wings and floated down onto a branch just above Zushkaali’s shoulder.

The pale moon glowed and the eagle’s eyes were filled with tears.

‘Couldn’t I just *give* them wings like mine while they’re asleep?’ said the eagle.

‘No,’ said Zushkaali the Wise, ‘you know you cannot. The ostriches must ask before you can give, and the time for asking is past.’

‘But they’ll never be able to fly,’ said the eagle, and his tears splashed down.

‘I know,’ said Zushkaali, ‘I know.’

In the morning, as the sun rose, the ostriches woke in a tangle of long long legs and long long necks. They looked at each other through large, beautiful eyes from whose eyelids grew the longest eyelashes they’d ever seen.

They stared and they stared and they stared at each other.

And then they began to talk, all at once, as usual.

‘How spectacularly shaped – ’

‘How definitely different – ’

‘How remarkable – ’

‘How very noticeable we are – ’

The ostriches wobbled on their legs and struggled to hold up their necks, and soon they were striding about, delighted with themselves. And then they flapped their wings. But no matter how hard they flapped their wings they could not take off. They ran from side to side to catch the wind. They hopped and they jumped. But whatever they did, they remained earthbound.

They could not fly.

‘We need large, wide, strong wings to carry these remarkable new bodies,’ said one ostrich. ‘Don’t we?’

‘The eagle has large, wide, strong wings,’ said another ostrich inspecting his hopelessly small ones.

‘We should have asked the eagle – ’

‘ – for wings like his.’

The ostriches hung their long necks and dragged their feet across the valley back towards the red desert where they lived. Not one of them spoke, but each knew in his or her heart that the time for asking was past. The sun had risen and set on the day Zushkaali the Wise had granted them for their questions, and now that day had passed. It was too late to ask the eagle for wings like his.

But as they walked, their legs grew stronger and their strides grew longer and a noise spread out across the land. Every single creature who saw the ostriches stride by stared and called out. They said the ostriches were spectacularly shaped and definitely different. They said they were remarkable, noticeable, tall striding birds.

By the time the ostriches reached the edge of the red desert where they lived their heads were high and their eyes were shining. They knew now beyond a shadow of a doubt that they were remarkable because every single creature they had passed had called out, had remarked upon them, had noticed them, had seen them.

And so it was that the ostriches came upon the eagle, who was waiting for them on the edge of the red desert where they lived. The eagle was standing in a pool of his own tears.

‘I wish I could help,’ he said sadly, and his tears splashed down, ‘but it’s too late.’

‘It’s quite all right,’ said one ostrich. ‘We’re spectacularly shaped and definitely different. And that’s exactly what we always wanted.’

‘I can see that,’ said the eagle staring up at the ostrich, ‘but you can’t fly, and that is a terrible thing for a bird.’

‘When we could fly no one could see us,’ said another ostrich.

‘And when we were on the ground everyone ignored us,’ said a third.

‘But now,’ said a particularly remarkable ostrich, ‘we’re remarkable, we’re noticeable and in fact,’ she said, twirling round and round in the sand on her long long legs, ‘we’re so noticeable, now, that no one can take their eyes off us, and that’s exactly what we’ve always wanted.’

The particularly remarkable ostrich danced and pranced on her long long legs in the red red sand.

‘Besides,’ she said, bending her long long neck down to the eagle (who had begun to smile despite himself), ‘a bird who *can’t* fly must surely be the most definitely different, the most truly remarkable and the most inescapably noticeable bird in the whole wide world. ‘Don’t you think?’

Biography

Angela Young has had stories for children published in the American short story magazines *Cricket* and *Spider*, in the Australian short story magazine, *The School Magazine* and in *The Just When? Stories 2010*. A short story for adults was published in *MsLexia* and BBC Books published Young's 30,000-word ending to Edith Wharton's last, unfinished, novel *The Buccaneers*, in 1995. Young graduated from Middlesex University's MA in Creative Writing in 2001. *Speaking of Love*, Young's first novel, is about what happens when people who love each other don't say so, and it was published by Beautiful Books in 2007. Young's second novel, *Written in Water*, is inspired by the life of her great-grandmother – a passenger on *Titanic*. Her agent is Heather Holden-Brown, at hhb agency limited www.hhbagency.com, London.

