"There is nothing quite so terrifying," my mother once said to me, "as a mad sheep."

This was probably the most influential remark she made during my childhood. It gave me a healthy respect for the unknown, a glimpse into the strange private world of the insane, a dislike of paradoxes, a distaste for mutton, and the beginnings of cynicism. But above all it introduced me to the wonders of language. My mother's precise wording still left room for my personal ultimate fear: a nest of lobsters in my bed. A mad sheep was the worst, with a unique terror all of its own, and for years I gave those woolly, deceptive horrors a wide berth; but lobsters were almost as bad.

My mother was an extremely clever and able woman and my late father was no slouch either. It is due to their influence, genetic and otherwise, that I can do the things I do, including writing. But I have not been kind to them. As a child I saw them through perceptive and critical eyes, so I saw the worst. As an adult I wrote about them in a thinly-disguised autobiographical novel called *Hello Summer, Goodbye*. This is what I wrote about my mother.

My mother is short and I am tall for my age, so that it is impossible for us to keep in step as we walk. She trots along beside me, legs going like pistons, and insists that she puts her arm through mine, so the pair of us reel along the street like drunks. Added to which she talks incessantly, looking up at me all the time and smiling fondly, and generally giving the impression that a very peculiar relationship obtains between us. I find myself praying that people think she is an old prostitute I have picked up; and to emphasize this effect I try to assume a shamefaced look – which is not difficult, under the circumstances.
And about my father, with whom I'd had many a bitter quarrel during that period when I was challenging him for leadership of the herd:

Father's intelligence was waning, he was older and set in his ways, he was used to leaning on the dignity of his position; in short, he had lost the power of reasoned argument.

Ten years have passed since Hello Summer, Goodbye and it is time to look at the other side of the coin. These two bright and complex people gave me their genes and their ideas, which is a far more important contribution than any learning and travelling I have done since. I am them, and my stories are their doing, and my interests spring from their influence; and if I sometimes opposed this influence instead of accepting it—well, that must be credited to them too, because they taught me to make up my own mind, to resist pressure, and to fight. And even though I didn't believe all their pronouncements, they had the knack of opening interesting avenues of thought.

"French Canadians, as everyone knows," said my mother one day, "are very unreliable people." A bigot would have nodded assent to such a remark, and a knee-jerk liberal would have turned blue with rage. But to me the truth or otherwise of such a remark was immaterial. It was the possibilities that mattered. I like to think that my interest in anthropology and genetics was born from such speculation, and has flowered in practically every story I've written.

And once again, her wording was elegant and persuasive, much more so than my father's somewhat crude "All Welshmen are bloody thieves." All credit to my father, though, for being the more expert at developing his theme, as when he followed this remark with, "All Cornish are bloody thieves too. They come of the same stock." My mother was Cornish, incidentally.

The French Canadian in question was living with a close relative of ours. He got her with child and then left her, demonstrating the depth of my mother's insight. My mother wrote to me, cataloguing the misfortunes of this relative, whose baby was sick, who was having problems at work, who was heavily into debt and God knows what else. "And to cap it all," wrote my mother, "her horse died of a heart attack while undergoing castration." My wife read the letter and wept with laughter, which reassured me that there