

# Anne Donovan on Writing: ‘Buddha Da’, ‘Being Emily’, and the Importance of Language | Interview by Adrian Searle (2008)

**By Maggie Scott**

This interview came to my attention while researching Anne Donovan’s work for my article, ‘Melancholia and Conviviality in Modern Literary Scots: Sanghas, Sengas and Shairs’ for *C21st Literature*. Marie-Odile Pittin-Hedon referenced the interview in her monograph *The Space of Fiction: Voices from Scotland in a Post-Devolution Age* (2015) and on investigating the recordings, I found a fascinating passage where Donovan discusses her reasons for writing in Scots, which was directly relevant to my paper:

“When I started out I suppose I wrote the kind of stories that I thought I should write—you know, it’s that kind of third-person Standard English—a bit of dialogue, you know, maybe more ‘Glasgow’ because that’s what people are speaking, and I never felt happy with them, and it was not until I actually started to write in a Scots voice that there was anything that I was happy with or in fact that anybody wanted to publish and the way that I did it originally was purely, again, character-driven because I realised that the character I wanted to write about—that was not how she spoke—she did not speak in Standard English, so therefore I started to write in Scots and, immediately, it just made much more sense, it was much more alive, it was much more true, it was much more real and I was much more excited by it.”

There was no transcription available, so in order to work with this important interview, it was necessary to spend considerable time poring over the recordings, and it occurred to me that having the text available might bring it to wider attention. I contacted Adrian and he agreed, and I was equally delighted when *The Bottle Imp* team expressed an interest in publishing the transcript.

**Part 1**

**Adrian:** So—first question: At what point in your life did the urge to write first come upon you?

**Anne:** I don't really know but it was probably not that long after I'd learned tae write, cos I remember when I was wee, the things that I liked doing most would be reading, writing, drawing, so I used to read lots of books an write ma own wee stories and poems an draw pictures of them, so I don't really remember not doing it. I think what happens, probably like a lot of people, as you grow older it becomes something that's not—you're not like a child who just does things cos they like doing them—and it becomes something that ye don't do, or ye do, and ye don't show them to anybody. That was my experience anyway, I never showed things to people and I would not finish anything and I would stick it in a drawer somewhere. I never told anybody that I did it and it was not till much later that it was not so much that I got the urge to write but I got the urge more to try and complete things, to try and finish them off, to try and polish them, and eventually after a long, long process, to start to send off stories to be published, and send them to competitions and anthologies or something.

**Adrian:** What kind of stage in your life was—did that start, in terms of where you started to kind of take it seriously?

**Anne:** Probably just about over ten years ago, maybe about twelve years ago, I went on an Arvon writing course up in the north of Scotland and that was a big, big step for me because it was the first time that I'd—obviously it was like coming out, you know, as a writer, you know, I'm actually spending a week of my life going and doing this thing, and it's—these are very good courses, cos they always have good tutors and you spend a week with folk and there's nothing to do except write, and you're expected to write, and as you walk about, people are sitting in corners with notebooks, or, you know, using computers and talking about what they're writing and reading out what they're writing, and it's amazing. So that was a big, huge shift for me; I think that probably moved it on considerably.

**Adrian:** Had you been kind of writing in the dark, you know, and scribbling in corners before then?

**Anne:** Yeah, yeah—yup, that was it.

**Adrian:** Or had you always really done that, kind of?

**Anne:** Uh-huh, on and off, I mean, like's I say, I did it when I was wee, and like most teenagers, you know, kind of, you keep a diary and you would write some poetry and things like that, and then later on, I still did write.

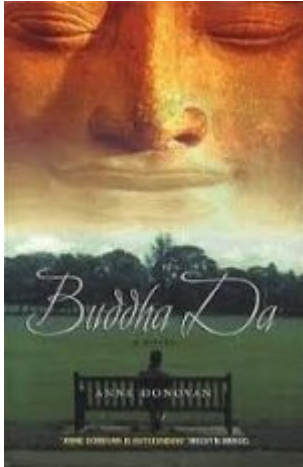
**Adrian:** And now you're a professional writer—what motivates you, and what sustains you, as a writer? What do you think you find most satisfying about being a professional writer?

**Anne:** I suppose, I don't really know, but I just do it, and it's a bit like a licence to play, almost, I think that's probably the best bit of it, cos for me the best times is not even really when you see your book on the shelf or anything like that, although that obviously is great, but it's actually when you're doing it. It's the doing, it's the process, it's just being in the middle of doing it, and it is—it's—I enjoy it. I suppose that's the nearest I can say, it's like playing, you know, it's that way that it is like being wee again and being completely lost in a world, and it's—that's what I enjoy, I suppose. I think that's the thing, it's got—that bit of it has got nothing to do with whether anybody wants to publish you or not—I would always do that, even if nobody ever wanted to publish me, even if your book collapses and nobody wants you again, I'd keep on doing it. Maybe I wouldn't polish things up to the extent that you do, you go through all the detail of it, but I would still write, I would still have fun with it.

**Adrian:** As a child, were you very creative, in terms of did you just have that compulsion to make things and to create things?

**Anne:** I think all children are, I think we all are. I think what happens is that at some point—and it's probably at different points for different people—at some points people seem to kind of get to a point where it's not okay to keep doing something unless you're brilliant at it, or unless it's sanctioned in some way for you, you know, it's okay to keep doing it. Like say for example you enjoy singing or something like that. All children love singing, but at a certain point people get this thing of 'wait a minute, well, I love singing but I'm not really a good singer—she's a good singer and he's a good singer, and they're going on to be in the choir, but, maybe...' you know, whereas actually, in a sense, at some point they get stopped being creative and expressing themselves in ways because that's how our culture works and nowadays there's a much greater emphasis I suppose on writing and so on, but there, there's still barriers—people still put barriers in their own, in their own way.

**Adrian:** Do you, just, I think that's a very interesting point. Do you think that Jimmy, in *Buddha Da*, is a bit like that, in terms that he's not a great Buddhist? Was that something that you had in your mind when creating that character in terms of the why shouldn't a working-class guy from Glasgow explore Buddhism in his own way?



**Anne:** Well, I think in the case of Jimmy, and in the case of my writing generally, I'm very character-led, so therefore my characters—and I know it sounds really weird—but my characters tend to take me where they want to go. I don't sit down and go 'I'm going to write a book about a—so and so', I mean. And really, when I started off with Jimmy, well, when I started off, I started off with the character of Anne-Marie, and Jimmy was the 'Da', and I was quite interested in that fairly typical Glasgow character who's really outgoing, and talks to everybody, and is very warm and friendly, but appears to have a, you know, no inner life, in a sense, because they've got no embarrassment and you feel as if they would tell you anything. And, of course, that's not true, because everybody has, everybody's got a serious side. In Glasgow, it's generally not something that's a very easy thing for people to talk about. Even now, even when we're all much more infected with the kind of, the more American ways of doing things, and you know, showing our feelings and emoting a lot and all that kind of stuff, you know, still in Glasgow it's much more difficult for people to be serious about anything, because as soon as you try to be serious about something somebody knocks you down and makes a joke of it, so, and Jimmy's a joker, and I think the thing is that, the Buddhist stuff just popped in somehow and then I wanted to explore it, and I thought, well, you know, this is what he wants to do. He's getting a bit older. He does have a serious side, we all do, and exactly why should Jimmy not explore that side of him and explore that part of him, and he's very, very attracted towards it. And I think the thing about Buddhism is that although there is—people see it as quite an intellectual kind of thing—actually the heart is very much engaged in it and Jimmy is very much a heart person, so therefore that part of it is, is to some extent not that difficult for him.

**Adrian:** You obviously, you know, as anybody who knows your writing knows that you write 'Glesgae', and write the vernacular, you know, both to a great extent in

*Hieroglyphics*, your book of short stories, and then first novel, *Buddha Da*. Have you always written in the vernacular, and is, the, speaking like, in a similar kind of voice?

**Anne:** When I started out I suppose I wrote the kind of stories that I thought I should write—you know, it's that kind of third-person Standard English—a bit of dialogue, you know, maybe more 'Glasgow' because that's what people are speaking, and I never felt happy with them, and it was not until I actually started to write in a Scots voice that there was anything that I was happy with or in fact that anybody wanted to publish and the way that I did it originally was purely, again, character-driven because I realised that the character I wanted to write about—that was not how she spoke—she did not speak in Standard English, so therefore I started to write in Scots and, immediately, it just made much more sense, it was much more alive, it was much more true, it was much more real and I was much more excited by it.

## Part 2



**Anne:** [...] I was much more excited by it. And that first story that was like that was *Hieroglyphics*, which is the story of a wee lassie that's dyslexic, and I wanted to write from the point of view of somebody who was dyslexic. And, the thing is, if you're dyslexic then—life is very difficult, and particularly school is very difficult, and we're also talking about—I mean, it's still very difficult—but there's a lot more technology now—but when I was writing that story technology was less available in schools, and so on, and it was harder. And I just felt, well, coming to school speaking in Scots, that makes it a lot harder for you because, for a start it's more difficult, the words are more difficult, but also people don't take it as seriously, you know? So, that was what I wanted to do, and as soon as—I sat and tried to imagine what it would be like to be looking at pages with the words all moving around and the first lines came out: they were birling and dancing, you know, like big black spiders, and that was the first line of 'Hieroglyphics', and that was what started it. And I think when you start doing that, because that was the first story that seemed to work for anybody else, and then showing it to someone on the Arvon course, and the beginning part of it, when tutors, they liked it, I thought, you know, I should carry on with it and finish it, and it was quite near completion. And

after that, I think maybe the year after, now, I sent it away and it was accepted for an anthology that was coming out. So, after that worked, the voices kept coming, the voices in Scots, the wee lassies and then the old ladies because I seem to have a, one or other seem to come in it very easily. And then after that a story came that had to be written in standard English, so I then came back and did that, but that gave me more confidence in the standard English thing as well. And what I found was that when I was doing the short stories, really, I was searching for the voice that was right for that story, and in 'Hieroglyphics' there are some standard English voices, some third person, there are some that are, slightly Scottish, softly Scottish, I suppose; there are others that are very broad and there are others that are degrees in between, and there's one which was one that I really really wanted to write, which is, has got two voices of the same person, but she's a child in one of them with a very broad Scots voice, and as an adult, she's speaking in standard English because she's, to some extent, been educated out of her original voice. And I wanted to parallel not just having two different voices but in a sense two incidents that happened to the wee lassie, and to the adult, and also the voices were really important in that. So I think I'm fairly obsessed with voice.

**Adrian:** Voice. Voice is the entry point for you.

**Anne:** It's key, uhuh, it's getting the voice right. And if the voice is right. And if it sounds wrong, then there's something wrong; maybe I know what it is, but there's something wrong for me. That's how—that's crucial for me.

**Adrian:** Would you say that—in terms of—kind of current tastes amongst readers that—finding a voice seems to be so important for readers these days, that that's also helped?

**Anne:** Possibly so. But I was gonny say that although—people may not be familiar with the Scots voice written down, even though they may well be very familiar with hearing it, it's still a—something of a perhaps a barrier on the page initially. But I also think that it, it takes a while to get into any writer's voice, and you usually need to give it a wee bit of time, no matter what that voice is; even if it's something in standard English. Sometimes it's the pace is very slow, sometimes it's very descriptive, sometimes it's the opposite, sometimes it's very in-your-face, and until you get into that voice and that style, you might not be sure if you're gonna read that book—so I think it's a question of maybe giving it a little bit of

time, and if people do that then you can decide whether you want to or not. Some folk have actually said that the slowing down process which they had to engage with in the initial part of the reading actually helped, because it gave them more time to get, kind of get into it.

**Adrian:** And, and, and, you've mentioned kind of beautifully there, that you've worked very hard on the readability, and I would agree in terms of how you—that your prose is fantastic—and having read a lot of work in Scots and vernacular, whatever words you use to describe, some is easier on the eye than others—certainly. Is that partly driven by a concern for the reader or is it partly driven by an enjoyment of the musicality of prose and style?

**Anne:** I do work a lot because, obviously I want it to sound really the best way it possibly can sound, and also because I'm quite fascinated by the possibilities of Scots and particularly the Glasgow Scots voice is often regarded as quite harsh or quite funny and I think that it has wonderful poetic possibilities as well and I think it's a kind of balancing everything out and to try to get as much as possible from the language and from the words. So I do, I mean, I read stuff out loud constantly, and, you know, change things around to try and make it sound better but also I want people to be able to read it, so I will look very carefully at the readability of words—about the balancing out of how many words you're—how you spell, for example, the orthography of it, because there's no standardised Scots spelling, which is very liberating. I know people might prefer that there was, but it's quite nice to be able to spell a word any way you want; but then you need to look at where it is in the sentence, and how it balances out with other words, and also how that sounds. And if you're doing a first person narrative, as both the novels are, quite a few of the stories as well, but the novels are, and remember you're taking people on quite a long journey with a novel. I mean, there are instances where I don't spell the same word the same way, necessarily, because maybe it looks wrong if you spell it the same way all the way through ...

**Adrian:** Absolutely, I couldn't agree more.

**Anne:** ... for the rhythm of it. And sometimes, it depends like, for example, to and tae, as in, you know, the word 'T-O', and in Scots there's 'T-A-E', now sometimes that rhythmically, I, you know, I've gone through things and changed it one way and changed it back—because sometimes, and also if you listen really carefully to how folk speak, sometimes it is that longer tae and sometimes it's tuh-, it's almost

like a t', really short.

**Adrian:** Depends on where it comes in a sentence, it depends on what word precedes it, and follows it, I couldn't agree more. Absolutely.

**Anne:** So, it's, it's actually, it is a lot of fun, in lots of ways, to do that, but at the end of the day, there's no point in—I want people to read it, I want it to be readable.

### **Part 3**

**Adrian:** Did winning the Macallan Scotland on Sunday short story competition change your outlook, as a writer?

**Anne:** It gave me a certain amount of confidence, I think—it jist was something that came completely almost out of the blue. I was just virtually unpublished and like everybody in any way that was interested in writing stories in Scotland at that point, whether they were already published writers, or people that just thought maybe I could send a story off, somewhere, I sent something in tae The Macallan. It was judged anonymously although at the time it made no difference because nobody had ever heard of me anyway and I wouldnae think to lose there—and, I can still remember getting a phonecall to say that I was in the top six and almost collapsing to the floor with utter shock, and, jist, you know, it was just ridiculous, you know, cos there was something like—I don't know how many entries, but just a phenomenal, ridiculous number of entries—and to be in the top six was just fantastic. And I also remember being at the ceremony, because what they used to do then was they did it on radio so you went along to the thing and it was all about the group as well because they used to put four of the stories on the radio, one each day, and then on the fifth day it was, the, you know, they did the ceremony, and ma story was not picked for one of the four, so, I just assumed, aw well, that's a—well, not that I would have thought I would have won anyway, but I would have been even more sure because it was not picked for one or the four that was on the radio, and—and I still remember going along to the thing, and I was totally relaxed, and sitting there and waiting for them to say who had won. And the person was saying this about the story, and I'm sitting thinking, I wonder which story that was, it's, it doesnae—you know, cos it didn't sound like any of the rest of them and it was, and then all of a sudden, it, you know, it was, he was announcing my name and that [gasp]—what was this!—and it was a totally



brilliant experience. It did not lead to—people assume, then, if you win that, that suddenly everybody's queuing up at your door, and your fame and fortune is yours, but of course it's a short story, and this is the thing, is that short stories are not the things that sell, they're not the things that are—I mean, they are popular, but it's it's—it's in a totally different kind of scale. Not to me, and not to most writers, and then readers, but just in the general plan of things. What it, what it did, for me, was it did mean that somebody somewhere, that, and I know that these things are flukey, cos, you know, with a different judge on a different day it could quite easily have been another story, but, it was some kind of marker that this particular story had been picked, so I could do something. And the other thing that was quite important was that actually other people then took it seriously because you had, you were not just somebody that scribbled away as a wee hobby and went off on these funny writing courses, when other people would prefer to go and lie on a beach. But there was some kind of marker, some kind of recognition there, and that did help. And bizarrely, in a completely different way, it was also my first contact with Canongate, because one of the judges, who I never met, at the time, was this young guy, again, that nobody had really heard of at the time, called Jamie Byng, who had just taken over Canongate, who was one of the judges of the competition. And he had read that story, so that, later on, after a few years, had led on to, not at the time, but because he had liked that story and later on liked some other things that I'd done, led to the link with the publishing with Canongate.

**Adrian:** *Buddha Da* was hugely successful, as a debut, obviously, with various awards including the Orange Prize listing that we've talked about. As you were writing it, did you have any sense of how good it was, and how successful it was going to be?

**Anne:** No, not at all. None whatsoever. I mean, it it, to me, it's still, almost quite, quite, bizarre—all these things, it's quite interesting looking back on them, because all these things that happened, you know, like the Macallan prize and the Orange Prize shortlisting—again, they were things that came completely and totally out of the blue—nobody could ever have thought of them. In fact, I think the people at Canongate really probably thought that this was totally mad, you know, I don't know why, cos I think the publisher's supposed to put in two books, or something, or whatever, for a prize, and I don't know why, particularly, even why, they put that one in. I was thinking that maybe they didn't have that many

female authors that year or something, but it, it's almost unbelievable, really, that that happened, and you don't, I mean, nobody thinks that when they're writing. You don't, you—how do you do the work if you start thinking about what was gonny happen? I mean, to me, that part of it is like, playing, really, in that sense, and then there's the second part, because, I always feel like I work in two halves: one is the very unconscious, trying to get it all down on the page and get it out, and write it, and I try not to be too conscious at that point, and really let it, let things happen, and then the other one is the crafting bit, once you've got the main story down, you're working on it, and you're trying to work on the language and the structure and this—and does this work, and does that work—really trying to hone it up and get it as best you can possibly get it. But at all those stages, you don't, you know, there's no way that you could really gauge anyone else's reaction. Every now and again you might think, oh, I'm quite pleased wi that bit, but you just don't know until other people see it, and the other thing is that there are millions and millions of brilliant books that get published, that never go anywhere near a prize. Just for some reason, they don't get picked up in that way, and you know, you often, I mean, I often find myself thinking, aw, that book was fantastic, but why is it not in this shortlist and why did the Booker Prize not pick it up, or why does nobody seem to like it, and it maybe has a very low-key existence, so some of it is very very lucky, and it certainly was very very luck for me.

#### **Part 4**

**Adrian:** We've talked a little bit about the process of writing *Buddha Da*, in terms of— you were saying, that, you kind of started with Anne-Marie's voice, and then Jimmy's, and kind of went from there. Can you talk a little bit more about that process of constructing *Buddha Da* in terms of how you work? Did you write different sections for different parts of the narrative or did you start at the beginning and work your way through?

**Anne:** I think that, basically I'm a short story writer, and the two novels that I've written, I've almost written, not quite by accident, but it's like, they were short stories that turned out they were not short stories and I had to do something else with them. With *Buddha Da*, I thought I was writing a short story, from a child's perspective, about her da. Exploring the idea of a funny character, you know, what was it like—the kinda guy that ye'd probably love to have as your da when you were younger, because he's such a laugh, they just like, come over like they're a kid themselves, but when you get to that transitional stage of about

twelve—you find that, maybe—you know, all parents are embarrassing—but that kind of da might be more embarrassing. But, after having written that section of it, and the bit about going for the lamas and all the rest of it, I realised that this was not the end and I wanted to know so much more about Jimmy and about the family and why did he do this, and what happened next, so I had to write a novel. So the first decision I really had to make was what voice I was gonny use, because I liked having these voices at the beginning and I didn't want tae change that, so that meant, really, Jimmy had to come in. And if Jimmy had to come in, Liz had to come in, otherwise it, it is was gonny be very one-sided, and I quite liked that idea of the three of them, that three-part narration, cos you've got the three characters. And Jimmy was the first major male character that I'd written, so again I had to think quite carefully about how I was going to get intae his character. Not because I particularly think that there is a male psyche or anything like that, cos I don't, I actually think that men and women are pretty similar really, but because the way in which people are brought up is different, and there is a physical reality with is different—even just how a big buy who is a painter and decorator lives in the world and perceived the world is treated by other people in the world and his own upbringing, and, and the way he is. So, I thought, how am I going to get intae Jimmy, cos I'm not really interested enough to do lots of football research, which would be an obvious way of getting into a west-of-Scotland male. So, I thought, well, music is a big thing, in how people—you feel somebody's energy almost, by what kinda music they're into, so I went, moved back, worked out what age Jimmy would have been as a teenager and thought, ah, he was a punk rocker, so, what I did was I listened to lots of old punk rock tapes and that was how I got into Jimmy basically, cos I could feel that punk rock energy. And then I just started to write from Jimmy's point of view, and I really go into that, that voice. And I think what I did was I, I—somebody referred to this afterwards when I was telling them about it as the 'method' school of writing, cos it was like I was, I would have to be Jimmy to write him almost, and that's also why he's a painter and decorator, because I thought initially I wanted to make him a—an electrician, cos I could get lots of enlightenment jokes in.

**Adrian:** [laughs]

**Anne:** But I decided, that—short of learning how to rewire the house, that it was, you know, I'd never really get that—I could learn, I could look at things from the outside, but it's almost feeling it in your hands—and I thought, if he was a painter

and decorator—not that I’m a professional decorator, but I’ve done lots of decorating—at least I know what it’s like to get up a ladder, do a paintbrush, put wallpaper up and stuff like that. So that was how he became a painter and decorator, which worked for me really really well—cos a got a good few little stories off some painters and decorators which went in, which was great, and also I got, in the end, a big—the big visual image of the Buddha, and, jist, I mean—people mibbe thought that was planned, but that only arose as a result of Jimmy being a decorator. So, that was good. But then what would happen is that I would be Jimmy for a while, and then I would have to become Liz, so then I would have to stop and think, okay Liz, right—how do I get intae Liz? And one of the other things that I did, which was conscious—I think it was a wee bit unconscious to begin with but then I made it more conscious—was that I gave each character a dominant sense, so Jimmy’s visual. Liz is much more sense of smell and feel and sensuality, and Anne-Marie is voice, and so when Jimmy sees things, he sees them—like when he describes Liz, he describes what she looks like. When Liz describes Jimmy, she describes what he smells like, so there’s [clears throat] what he feels like. So that I think helps as well, to kinda differentiate the voices, because I knew the voices would be very similar, so therefore they had to be different, and it’s easier to differentiate a younger voice, because, you know, maybe the wee kinda certain words, without going intae too much difference, there’d be certain words she would use without—the, the adults would not use—but, you know, also to make sure that Jimmy and Liz would be slightly different as well. And the way that I wrote the book was basically I followed the story through, and I knew I didn’t want to do the kind of, reflecting on different bits, that I wanted to keep the story moving, so Anne-Marie tells the first bit, Jimmy tells then next bit, then it goes on. And I knew there was going to be a central bit at the New Year, because it was the millennium, and the story goes from about July ’99 through to July 2000—and at the millennium there is a bit where they’re all doing different things at the same time, and that’s the only place in the story where they all talk, almost at the same time, and that bit’s quite a short section, because obviously with the first time the family had been separated at the New Year, so that was important. So that was really how it went on, and then I got to a point where, really, a decision had to be made about how things were gonny move on, and I knew this point was gonny come, but I did not know the characters well enough at that point, I had to follow them through until I got to that point, cos I couldnae make the decision in a vacuum. But when I got to that bit I kindae knew what was gonny happen, so I stopped there, and wrote the

end, and then worked my way back, again, and worked from maybe about two-thirds, three-quarter through the book, and wrote that bit. And then I took the whole thing. I wrote—I made a database—[laughs] I did all the stuff with the index cards and I made a database with every scene, everything that happened, whose point of view it was, and tried to work out how the structure was working; the pace was working; how it all fitted together; did it have too much of one person and not enough from another. And at that point I wrote in another section, because I felt that—Anne-Marie spoke first, then you got Jimmy, and Liz never came in until quite late on. And I was worried that she would come in as a very reactive person, not with a kind of, story of her own, so I decided to put a short section between Anne-Marie's beginning, and Jimmy's bit, where we see Liz, before it all goes haywire, and where we see Jimmy and Liz's relationship—where we also see what Liz is feeling about Anne-Marie beginning to grow up and the fact that Liz would like to have another baby because then that contextualises it, and it means then that Jimmy—what Jimmy does later on—becomes that much more hurtful; whereas otherwise, you've just got this moaning-faced woman coming in an going: "why are you going off tae the Buddhist centre?", you know, as if, instead of the pub [laughs] you know—you'd think she'd be glad—but anyway it was—you know, that was really how it kind of worked. So I would say it's quite a sort of—again, it's the process of the unconscious, to some extent, working, and then the conscious coming in, and doing other stuff.

**Adrian:** Excellent. The—somebody—somebody I'd read, a quite famous editor, said that for him the best novels always had a dominant character, even if there's multiple voices. Who do you feel is the dominant character in *Buddha Da*?

**Anne:** Jim.

**Adrian:** Jimmy?

**Anne:** Um-hm. I think he is, although—

**Adrian:** That's very interesting, cos, having read *Buddha Da* very recently, I'd have said, for me, Liz, was the dominant character—I don't know if other people have said that to you.

**Anne:** [nodding] Some people have said that, and some people have said that—that, they—and everybody's got a different character that, mibbe, that they like better or that they relate to more. But I mean, I suppose, I mean Anne-

Marie's a very appealing character as well and in some ways she's quite—she's important cos she kinda moves things on, and she's, the kind of, the future in a way, and you can see a lot of her parents in her. But I think Jimmy, really, has got to be, because he's the one that goes off and does the meditation and does the spiritual search, which is the thing that makes it all change for everybody then, cos everybody's thrown into this—is moved away from their comfort zone, in that sense, and that whole process of change, and that—that's crucial to it, cos, you know, Buddhism also teaches about the process of change and the wheel of change, and I think that was quite an underlying thing in it as well, the idea that we, we—I mean I think I remember hearing somebody saying once, what I think is just so brilliant is, is that we all want things to get better but we actually don't want anything to change. You know, we want to get a new thing, but we don't want—in order to get something new you have to, to some extent, destroy something else, because it's never—that's never gonny be the same—so you've got to lose something to gain something, and I think that's one of—the most difficult things for anybody to come to terms with in their life, or for most of us anyway, cos we just like to be sort of, to be quite cosy I suppose [laughs].

**Adrian:** Absolutely. [indistinct] Tell me about it.

## **Part 5**

**Adrian:** What's—what's the hardest thing, in writing your first novel, would you say?

**Anne:** I don't know, I mean, I did really enjoy the process a lot. I mean, I love writing short stories, and I still do, but there's a lot of fun in bringing the narrative on, and just keeping on going with it, and being able to know that you're going to play with those characters day by day, and they're kind of with you when you're not writing as well, you know, they're kind of in the back of your mind somewhere. So that was a lot of fun and also—the process of—I mean, probably my least favourite is when you're right down to—and a lot of writers love this—but when you're right down to the very last bit of polishing and polishing and I kind of like—I think it's because there's a good sense of achievement if you can say, "I sat there and I wrote X number of words today"—they might have been X number of words of complete and utter rubbish but I did it! Whereas if you spend, you know, maybe a few days actually just working and looking at what you've already got in terms of structure and—I tend to do it quite visually as well—I get big bits of

paper and I draw things in different colours of felties, and that kind of stuff—but I don't—after I've done that for a few days I know I have done work, but I just think, oh, it doesn't feel as if I've done anything. o I suppose that's kind of, harder, but—I don't think it was particularly hard, in that sense, it was good, it was fun.

**Adrian:** Excellent. You are a graduate of the University of Glasgow Masters in Creative Writing programme. How did you find, those—it was a two-year, part-time?

**Anne:** I did it part-time over two years. It was different, from what it is now—it's changed, quite a few times, I think in process—it was before the professors came on board, and—I think it was slightly different—it was between Strathclyde and Glasgow as well at that time. It happened at the right time for me, and it was exactly the right time and the right place to be, because I'd been doing the stories, and I felt, I didn't quite know what I needed but I wanted some kind of, something to, kind of—give me that focus, mibbe, every week, in that, in that way of having people that you could show your work to and talk to, and having that immersion in writing that is, is different. And it was just the right time, for me, to do it. I found it a very stimulating environment to be in. The tutors were very helpful and the other folk on the course, as well, I think that was really good, you know, cos with a course like that you're—you do a lot of stuff in bigger groups, but also there will be some folk on that course that you will feel that you would like and you feel trust—and that you will be able to show you work with them and vice versa, so there'll be a few folk you'll be in more close contact with as well as the kind of group as a whole. And also it gave opportunities for other things and I think at the time when I did the course there were quite a lot of people from different places, quite a few, you know, American, Canadian and so on, and that was good too because, again, I'd always thought of my work as being very very Scottish but also probably something that nobody Scot—that was not Scottish would be all that interested in. And that fact that Americans—and of course there was one that was wanting to do some kind of spoken word—and immediately liked what I did and that was good as well. So that was really really helpful. And it was interesting, know, that one of the things I thought I would do on the course I didn't do at all. The first year, when I was—I think it was the second year that I was more into it—I started to write the novel, and I thought it would be really good to be able to, in the, particularly in the second year, to have somebody that I

could show it, in progress [fade out]. And I thought that I would want to show bits of *Buddha Da* as it was in progress, but I discovered that that—I just never wanted to do it, and I really found it difficult to show anything to anyone until it was at quite a highly polished stage. However, the fact that I'd been on the course meant that there were then folk that I could trust and—to show it, and likes I say the tutors could not have been more helpful, and—there were also some other students that I felt that I could do that, because it's really quite difficult with a novel—it's easy enough, maybe to find somebody to show a short story to, because they're only spending a few minutes of their life reading it, but, you know, to ask someone to read a whole novel is a huge undertaking, but because people were on the course you knew that they felt that they could ask you to do the same thing, and so it's not as—as daunting.

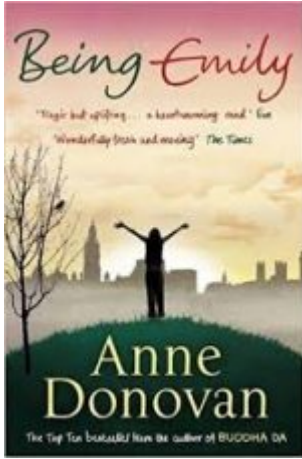
**Adrian:** You've written for the stage—you've written for the theatre, in terms of Òran Mór. How did you find that process of playwrighting versus fiction?

**Anne:** Well that was really fun—although it was an adaptation of a short story, so I already had the story in place—it was a story, again, it was 'Hieroglyphics'—it was a story that I'd always felt might work on stage, and when I was asked to do a play for Òran Mór it was quite at short notice—it was when Òran Mór was just starting off, in fact 'Hieroglyphics' was the first play made there because I got in quickly, and Dave McLennan who had asked me to do it, he was interested in getting people who were not, who were not playwrights—as well as some playwrights—to do plays—people who were writing in other genres. And when I showed him the story he liked it, and wanted me to do it. It is a completely different—I think writing in different forms is really interesting because radio again is different, and, you know, drama is different from the novel. I think a lot of the difference in how much is contributed by other people in that sense of, you're not just writing words for people to read in their heads, your writing for actors to say, and therefore you have to leave them space to put something into it, and also the director, and I was really lucky as well because David paired me up with Gerda Stevenson who is fantastic, phenomenal, I mean, she's an actress, she's a writer herself, and she's a director and she was wonderful because she was then able to look at the script I'd produced and make her suggestions, and then when we went along—I went along to a couple of the rehearsals, and to see it coming into shape with the actors, it was brilliant, it was really, really good fun—great—I couldn't have hoped for more.



## Part 6

**Adrian:** So *Being Emily* features the voice of a young girl, which is a very strong element in your previous two books. What attracts you to the voice of young narrators?



**Anne:** The more I think about it the more I think that—right, well, I don't actually decide or am drawn to things, it's that they seem to be drawn to me. It's just it always seems to be kinda how it happens. And I've always found the voice of a young—sometimes, you know, round about the age of twelve, is a good one. I think it's probably because it's quite a transitional age. People of that age are very aware, and knowing, but they are kind of on the verge of a new part of their life—but they're also still quite, they've still got the child-like part of themselves intact—so I think that that makes them very interesting to write about. *Being Emily* starts off with the voice of—in fact, she's not called 'Emily', I should say that first of all—she's not called 'Emily', the girl in the story is called Fiona [laughs], but there's reasons why she's—the story's called *Being Emily*—but at the beginning of the story—we have Fiona aged twelve and her family and so on, and there's a reasonably short set, a few chapters, set at that point, and then it moves on a few years till she's in her last year at secondary school—and we take her on from there, round about the sort of later teenage stage of her life and most of the book is written from that point of view in fact, but starting off there, and I think the thing is that when you start with a character, when they're wee, it's kind of—you know them—to start with a child character, even if they become older, or if you move on, because there's a gap, in which things have happened, but—most of the book deals with her slightly older but because we see her at the beginning I think that kinda roots you with her.

**Adrian:** Inter-racial relationships feature both in *Buddha Da* and in *Being Emily*. Is that—intentional, accidental—or is that people that you enjoy writing about?

**Anne:** Eh, to me, it's just, I mean if you're writing kind of contemporary novels, it's in—a—Glasgow and any city, and most places in Britain, I mean, it's just part of the, it's part of what things are, it's not a—a big deal or a—an issue, or anything like that as far as I would say, it's just, it's how things are, you know, that's, you know, people are different races, religions, nationalities, or whatever,

but usually they're Scottish, [laughs] you know, because so many people are Scottish, but have, have—family heritages—in fact I think probably most of us do, you know, if you go back far enough, it's just, you know, whether it be Irish or whether it be from Pakistan, or whether it be from Poland or whether it be from Africa, or whatever, and I think it's, it's great, and it's just part of the way things are. I think it would—to write a contemporary novel without having that in would probably just seem odd, to me, because it is just, it's just how, how life is, really.

**Adrian:** How has the process of writing *Being Emily* differed from that of *Buddha Da*? Has it, has it been the same, or has it been wildly different?

**Anne:** In some ways, kinda similar actually because I started off with what I thought might be a short story of her, and her family—and really again just the family being quite, you know, alive to me, and then it sort of stopped—and—at that point I was thinking that I was going to take it on at the age that she was, that she's round about twelve, but somehow there was nothing coming out of that, and, when I was just sitting writing, I suddenly had this bit from a much older stage, and I realised that that was where I needed to go into, and at that point I didn't know whether I was going to write that bit and then go back in between, but somehow or other the story just took me along, and I realised—again, another point, and people—it sounds really s-, daft, I mean, it does sound daft, it sounds like—what are you talking about, you didn't know you were gonna write this bit—it was, I'm writing this bit about when she's about six year at school, and this is happening and that's happening, and then all of a sudden I just massively think—I know what happened in between, I know what it was that happened—and it's there. I don't know where it comes from, it—but I just go with it. So to some extent it was similar in that way, and also similar in that then the conscious decisions have to be made. Now, for *Being Emily*, one of the conscious decisions I had to make early on was whether I would keep it all in Fiona's voice, because there was another character that I thought I would write from the perspective of. And part of me was wanting to not do the same thing again [laughs], so I thought, I think I would quite like to just keep going with it—cos that's what happened with *Buddha Da*, and I wrote from different voices. And then I also, but at certain points, I also had some other bits in which were kind of diaries and things like that from the other character. And in the end they all got cut out, just about, completely cut out—so it does end up really from her perspective. The other decision I had to make—again dealing with language—was I wanted to

change—this was to some extent conscious although it arises out of the character—the bit at the beginning when she’s about twelve is quite a very strong Glasgow Scots voice, very, sort of, coherent, and I could have just kept the same voice, for the rest of it, but I wanted to, again, to differentiate between that bit and the bit, the second bit, but still keeping it Scottish, because I wanted to show an older voice. I also wanted to show somebody who was quite, you know—the thing is, she’s quite bookish, she likes, you know—without giving, it won’t be giving any of it away to say the reason it’s called *Being Emily* is because at the beginning of the story she’s quite obsessed with the works of Emily Brontë, you know—and she’s quite interested in books, and, and in writing and so on, and art, and everything. So she’s read a lot, she’s read a lot of nineteenth century stuff, so that kind of affects it, but equally it still had to, still stay Glasgow. So I had to find a way of doing that, and I’ve used certain things different between the beginning and that one, to make it slightly different. But also I think there’s quite a lot of movement of the voice, the voice is not standardised or consistent in the second part, because at certain times she’ll become more broad because of the context of where she is, like with her family; at other times she becomes less so, and that was a big challenge, because that was actually quite hard to do, and you’re doing it thinking, “Is this going to be confusing?”, or “Will I spend all this time doing this and then nobody’ll even notice that I’ve done it?”, “Will it work?”, you know, so that was an interesting process.

**Adrian:** Do you share your work with other writers whilst you’re writing? We’ve talked about that a little.

**Anne:** No. [laughs] No. No, I don’t. I think—again, it’s, it’s, it’s—very much a, I dunno— unconscious processes. It’s, it’s, it’s happening. And there’s almost a part of me that thinks I don’t know myself what I’m doing here. I’ve no idea. And actually my first draft is phenomenally messy and not, you know, tidied up. I don’t sit and go back and check my spelling, even my own Scots spelling, as I’m doing it. I just do one day—I just read enough of the previous day’s just to make sure I know where I am, get going—do it, do it, do it. So, it would be kinda pointless I think to show anybody, that, but even when I get to the stage where I’m polishing and doing all the stuff, I still don’t, I don’t talk about it, I don’t say what it’s about, I don’t, you know, to anyone, you know, nobody—I just work on it, and then it’s only when it gets to—I think I know that somebody needs to see it when it gets to a point where I don’t think I can do any more, and I need to know, is

this—publish? Is this—okay, but it needs quite a lot of work, or is it getting to the point where you might be able to show it to the publisher, or whatever? And that would be the point where I would let somebody else see it—at a very advanced stage, really.

## **Part 7**

**Adrian:** What d'you get from your relationship with Canongate? How do you find them as a publisher?

**Anne:** Wonderful. Absolutely brilliant. When I went to Canongate of course I was, it was short stories, and it was a complete gamble, really, cos most publishers will not publish short stories, when, you know, the writer's unknown. But, like I say, Jamie had known some of my stories and decided because they had done it with Michel Faber and Laura Hird, and because he'd seen a bit of the beginning of the novel, and he wanted to put that—to see how that would work, that was what he did. So really, I mean, he published the short stories, and then he published *Buddha Da*, and again, it's—as I said, writing a play was very collaborative, but actually producing a book is very collaborative because you—the people who produce the book, who publish it, who—put it out there, who try and get it reviewed, who try and get, you know, all these things done, who—you know, they're really passionate about what they do and they do it really well and it, it makes a huge, huge difference, you know. So I've found them really great. I think the thing about Canongate is that—there's a real vision about what they publish. You don't necessarily always like—I don't necessarily like every book that they publish, but I think that there's a reason for it, and every book that they publish has got some kind of interest to it, and it's got some kind of integrity is probably the word I'm searching for. So I'm really proud to be published by Canongate, indeed.

**Adrian:** And, what next for Anne Donovan, now that *Being Emily* is off the stocks and ready to be launched? What have you got planned?

**Anne:** Well, I mean, u—I don't know what it will be like this year, but I mean, usually at the time when the book comes out, obviously, there's readings and things like that, so, I mean, that—that's something that will take some time, because—and then one of the things that I always feel that I can do, to help the book along, is to read it, because it is in Scots, and if I read out loud and do

readings I think it's easier for folk to kind of get into the book. So, obviously I'll be doing quite a bit of that. But I think the thing I most want to do in terms of writing just now is to, to do some more short stories. I've got a few things that are sort of floating about on the back burner, and I think that I would like to settle into doing that without thinking about, you know, another novel. And actually, from my previous experience with them, that's how it's been anyway, so, something might just move—I don't know. There's also been some talk about *Buddha Da* getting made into a play, which might be quite nice too, so—you know, there's always these things that you're not consciously aware of but it's there, and you leave them to the people that are away sorting these things out, but—it would be nice if that happened as well. It gives me, you know, it gives it another lease of life, but I suppose I'll be looking forward to having the new one out, and seeing how, how things go.

**Adrian:** The—I think, in the past, there's been—talk about *Buddha Da* making it either to the small screen or the large screen. [Anne nods.] Is that in abeyance at the moment, as these things are [indistinct].

**Anne:** No, on the back burner, I think. I think it's still going on, I mean there is still proj-, there's still plans afoot. And—I think a different company has now taken it up and—but that, you know, there are promising sounds happening, so—and good people are involved in it, so I'm hoping that that, eventually, might happen, but I think you've got to be very philosophical about all these things. The world of film is a very, you know—lots of things that almost make it and don't, and lots of things that people think, oh wouldn't that make a great film or a great TV programme, or something, and—for various reasons, they don't happen, so I think in a way that's what's quite nice about novels—you do have that level of control that, you know, if it's gonna be published it'll get published, and, and, and that's it, so—which is quite nice.

**Adrian:** Fantastic. Thank you so much for your time—it's been absolutely brilliant; it's been fascinating—for me, and hopefully for—anybody that watches the final video as well. Thanks so much.

You can watch the entire [interview with Anne Donovan and Adrian Searle](#) on the Glasgow Writers website.

Adrian Searle is a former editor at Gutter Magazine, and former publisher at Freight.

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