

An Interview with A. L. Kennedy

By Sylvia Mieszkowski

This interview complements research conducted within the context of an international project on *'Women's Tales': The Short Fiction of Contemporary British Writers, 1974-2013*, which is coordinated by Jorge Sacido Romero and being funded by the Spanish government's Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness (Reference number: FEM2013-41977-P)

I. Gender and Genre

1) What makes you write short stories? Is there anything you can express differently and/or more effectively through the short story than through longer narrative forms like the novel? At which point in the creative process do you know that the text you are working on, or are going to work on, should be a short story?

There's no specific motivation for short stories that wouldn't be covered by the fact that I am a writer and someone who has a general impulse to write. I have always read short stories and been aware of the form. Some ideas have an appropriate expression in the short form, others are longer - that's something that's clear in the planning process. I wouldn't set out to write something without knowing what form it was - that would be like beginning to build a boat and not knowing if it was a dinghy or a liner. Everything is expressed in a manner that's appropriate to the ideas within and the extent of the form and those interact with each other and with the characters involved. You can express anything through anything, but the relationships between all the variables you have in a specific set of inspirations that will form one story will govern form.

2) Tales, fables, parables, short narratives and the like have been present in every culture since ancient times. However, one of its most recent developments, the modern short story, never seems to have achieved a status similar to that accorded to the novel. What, in your opinion, might be the reasons for this?

The monumental stupidity of the modern publishing industry.

3) In the modern period — say, from the late nineteenth century onwards— women writing in English have excelled as practitioners of the short story form. From Ella D'Arcy or Katherine Mansfield through Elizabeth Bowen, Muriel Spark or Angela Carter to Jeanette Winterson, Janice Galloway, Michele Roberts, or yourself the list of big names is already quite long without even having to cross the Atlantic. What is there in the short story that so appeals to women writers? Does the type of readership that the author may have in mind have anything to do with it?

I don't think the genre does especially appeal to women - there are also thousands of male writers who use short form. And there are thousands of female novelists who have been forgotten. Female writers will be airbrushed out of history as soon as they die or go out of print whatever they write. The usual critical analysis would look at male writers as mainly producing novels with short stories as some kind of hobby - female writers (because they are weak and can't do heavy lifting) are examined through the lens of the short story. There's no gender colour to either form, or its practice.

4) In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf claimed that women's writing should be shorter and more concentrated than men's for reasons both material (women have and will always have less available time to write than men) and psychological (briefness is best adapted to the feminine creative mind). Do you agree with any aspects of Woolf's statement? Which and why? If not, why not?

This is the only gender difference that may be true. Women's time has traditionally been much more truncated. Then again, the women writing novels hadn't generally been people without servants, right up until Woolf's period. It's probably been more of an issue since her time.

5) Do you consider the association women-short fiction a disabling one for women's aspirations, a way of confining women to the realm of the small and peripheral? Have you ever been confronted with the attitude that one is not a full-grown fiction writer till one publishes a novel? If so, from what position was this opinion voiced?

There is a misunderstanding of the short form. It's the hardest form of prose. It's the hardest form of writing - it combines all the disciplines of

poetry with all those of the novel. Anyone who doesn't understand that is a moron. Many, many morons write reviews and critical analyses. The idea that women are somehow 'little' and short stories suit them because short stories are 'little' - does recur. Many 'male' short stories are simply reflective autobiography - because the male ego should never be set aside - this has a toxic effect on some male fiction.

6) Would you say that to be labelled a 'feminist' writer works against the chances of achieving full recognition as a literary artist, or, simply, as a professional writer?

None of the available labels really help anyone. To be labelled 'feminist' would most likely help sales - it would identify a possible audience which is known to buy a great many books. Most books in the UK are bought by women.

7) What is your position in relation to feminism both as a political agenda and an ideology that pervades everyday life? Do you consider yourself a feminist? Has your position changed? If so, did this change affect your writing? If so, how?

I am a humanist. I believe in the potential of my species. Beyond that any political standpoint will be too doctrinaire to help me make individual characters. I write fiction, not essays. If I'm writing an essay my viewpoint will be humanist.

II. Short Story collections: *Night Geometry and the Garscadden Trains* (1990); *Now that You're Back* (1994); *Original Bliss* (1997); *Indelible Acts* (2001); *What Becomes* (2009); *All the Rage* (2014)

1) Do you think of any of your short story collections as 'cycles'? What, in your opinion, is the merit of organising short stories into a larger semantic (rather than merely material) unit? If not, what is the strength of a collection that does not have/refuses to offer this added layer of organisation?

Two of those collections have vaguely related themes, all the others don't - collections will reflect what stories I have that are on a condition to be published. If the works naturally fall together thematically then the last 2 or 3 stories will be added with a view to something like a musical album. If there is no overall theme then the final few stories will still have to be

just viewing them through a gendered prism will mean you're writing a stereotype. Most of the workshop was designed to show people that they knew more than they thought and contained more shades of gender than they thought. There are no techniques beyond finding out about your character, building them up to the point where they appear real to you and then writing about them.

5) In some of your short stories you de-gender the narrative voice. 'A Perfect Possession' from *Now That You're Back* springs to mind, which is narrated by a first person plural-narrator (or possibly two alternating narrators?) the father or/and (?) mother of a small boy, whom s/he/they (?) abuse. At which point in the creative process does the ambiguity you can produce by de-gendering a voice become an issue/a vehicle/a necessity/?

If I want the reader to be able to enter in completely then I will remove gender because gender would be a barrier to the reader if it was in conflict with their identity - that's the only reason I keep it at bay. And that will only work (if it does work) when the subject matter isn't 'gendered'. Some of the pieces will also be slightly about the lack of gender relevance in some areas of life, which can be quiet liberating or disturbing as an effect for the reader.

6) If I'm correctly informed, you have had vocal training for years. Has paying professional attention to your own voice changed how you think about written voices? If so, how? If not, what has it changed?

Any work to improve and strengthen your voice in one area will improve and strengthen your voice in all areas - any writer should work on voice. It has the side effect of helping with basic technique for readings - and we all have to give readings. If we aren't devoting our lives to making our voices more deeply themselves, deeply hear and deeply comprehensible then I'm not quite sure what we should be doing. That area is both wonderful and challenging, so it is the work of a lifetime.

7) 'An Immaculate Man' from

an author who works across a broad spectrum, which are the most promising forms of literary cross-fertilisation?

It's not a dramatic technique - it's part of prose and has been since its beginnings. Various writers have used various punctuations or typefaces to imply thought, speech and narrative. That's all you'll ever have: baseline narrative, close third narrative, quoted speech and interior speech. Everyone solves the problems of how to clarify those in their own ways, but they've always been there, because human beings have access to all of them. We have to go everywhere that human beings go.

8) In *On Writing* you mention that for a novel you tend to spend about three years, on and off, in preparation, before you even start writing. You've also called radio

Independence or a short story about torture practiced by British army, and the topic continues to haunt you, do you tend to return to the same form or do you go in search of other forms of expression? Under what circumstances does the short story, specifically, tend to suggest itself to you as a political instrument?

There's a limit to how overtly political a piece of fiction can be, because a character may not be overtly political and the arrangement with the reader is at its most intimate and political discussions don't take place at an intimate level, or they take place in a different way. Fiction is also designed to be read (ideally) forever, so details have to be dealt with in a way that will last. Essays can be more topical, journalism will be commissioned and designed to be very topical. Overall, I know which idea suits which form - that's one of the most fundamental parts of the job I've been doing for more than 30 years. So asking about it is slightly like asking someone how they know whether they're going to sing, shout, speak or whisper - it's not generally something one wouldn't know.

10) In *On Writing* you castigate the risk-averse publishing industry, lament the collapse of the Net Book Agreement, deplore the disappearance of independent bookshops and literary magazines, and expose the effect 'the UK's Closing Down Sale' (177) has had on tertiary education. Do you see direct/indirect connections between these cultural 'techniques' to produce a less well-educated electorate and the outcome of the Brexit vote?

All of this has produced a very weakened cultural base, a lack of confidence and humanity, diversity, empathy, understanding and joy. It is right at the root of Brexit and our current pre-genocide culture.

11) The Brexit-vote has left Europeans reeling. A week after the vote, you published an article¹ in *The Guardian* on the topic. Arguing from the cheery perspective of a dye-in-the-wool pessimist whose worst fears have come true, you make a jokingly-serious announcement: that you were 'leaving this relationship' with Britain, looking forward to taking your dignity and joining like-minded compatriots (and other world citizens) to 'integrate and collaborate as a global entity' in order to leave all the bullshit of elitist politics and distorting media coverage behind. Three months later, the political and economic situation has deteriorated. What are your current thoughts, given what was said during the

Tory party convention², the tone of the discussion, Theresa May's decision to deny parliament a vote before triggering Article 50, and the complete collapse of the opposition?

It's a kind of coup. It's an engineered piece of disaster capitalism coming from individuals who have had a long-term affection for Pinochet and the kind of dire dictatorships run in South America during the 70's and 80's. If you add in the fact that the British army will soon be based primarily on home soil for the first time in living memory then you have a very bad situation. The madmen and women are still vastly in the minority but the rest of the population may not wake up quickly enough. It's a horrible situation. Immensely predictable and avoidable. But no one really stood up and pushed back.

13) In July 2017 German TV³ broadcast a feature on you with interview snippets. You are quoted to have said you considered "political activism the rent you pay for peace" (my translation). Will you continue to pay this 'rent' or are you toying with the idea of 'moving out' and actually leaving Britain?

I have to keep paying the rent. I've only just got my new home in order, so I would be sad to move away. I would keep going until it got physically dangerous to continue. I hope it doesn't come to that. I would hope that Scotland would be able to break free and re-join Europe and then I would get my passport as soon as I could. It's redefinition of nationalism as international self-definition with anyone welcome who wants to get aboard is hugely heartening. This interview complements research conducted within the context of an international project on *'Women's Tales': The Short Fiction of Contemporary British Writers, 1974-2013*, which is coordinated by Jorge Sacido Romero and being funded by the Spanish government's Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness (Reference number: FEM2013-41977-P)

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2) As you state on your website, you started writing about emotions a long time ago. One could argue that intense, mixed emotions are particularly prominent in your last short story collection *All the Rage*. When you describe/show emotions in order to evoke them in readers, how do they relate to thinking (both your own and your prospective readers')? Are they a subset of thinking? An alternative to it? A bypass of it? An enhancement? Something else altogether?

I write fiction - it's fictional. I make things up.

2) In 2006 you addressed students of creative writing at Edge Hill University. The talk's title - 'Small in a way that a bullet is small' - describes how you thought of the short story then: powerful, not despite the fact it's short, but because of it. A decade later

on how a short story can achieve what it needs to achieve, given that, as a writer, 'you don't have long' to engage the reader?

Any writer can make any choices they want, but I would generally say you have to be there as something better than the thoughts the reader could be having anyway. I think your presentation of character has to be in some way really engaging with humanity and the reality of human psychology. You need commitment, truth, passion, intelligence, probably humour - you need to use all possible skill to serve the idea that came to you to be expressed for the benefit of your reader. And with a short story all those rules apply but you will have to make every word absolutely do all the work it can because you don't have long.

4) In March 2016 you gave a workshop at London's Word Factory, dedicated to 'He, she and me: writing in and out of gender'. What are your favourite/the most efficient narrative techniques of constructing a character's/a narrator's gender?

Stripping out gender is a false way of thinking. You're writing about individuals, all individuals will have gendered characteristics that vary - just viewing them through a gendered prism will mean you're writing a stereotype. Most of the workshop was designed to show people that they knew more than they thought and contained more shades of gender than they thought. There are no techniques beyond finding out about your character, building them up to the point where they appear real to you and then writing about them.

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7) 'An Immaculate Man' from *Indelible Acts* uses different types of print (italics; bold print; capital letters; italics and bold print) to make audible (by making visible) different 'voices' in the perfectly sane, if conflicted, protagonist's head. In this case, importing an essentially dramatic technique enriches a short story. As an author who works across a broad spectrum, which are the most promising forms of literary cross-fertilisation?

It's not a dramatic technique - it's part of prose and has been since its beginnings. Various writers have used various punctuations or typefaces to imply thought, speech and narrative. That's all you'll ever have: baseline narrative, close third narrative, quoted speech and interior speech. Everyone solves the problems of how to clarify those in their own ways, but they've always been there, because human beings have access to all of them. We have to go everywhere that human beings go.

8) In *On Writing* you mention that for a novel you tend to spend about three years, on and off, in preparation, before you even start writing. You've also called radio plays 'very high maintenance' (89). What about the 'fine, exacting and beautiful form' (62), that 'endangered thing' (49), the short story? How much time - as the calendar tells it; as the soul measures it; and both in proportion to longer texts - is involved in 'pondering and picking at worries', 'reworking, taking apart, breaking down, questioning, exploring, forgetting, and losing and finding and remembering' (32; 71)? Are there any specific problems you spend noticeably

more time with when writing a short story?

Not really. I've been writing short stories longest, so I have internalised more of their process by now. It takes about a month to write a story. Most of them brew in the background for a very long time without me, while I write things that pay me money.

8) *Original Bliss* has just been turned into a film by Sven Taddicken (*Gleissendes Glück*, 2016). What was your reaction when you learnt that - of all your texts - the one picked for filmic adaptation was neither a typical short story nor a typical novel?

I didn't have a reaction along those lines at all. The novella form is the ideal length for a screenplay and various people have been trying to turn that novella into a screenplay since I wrote it. The final version we have and the choice of cast is very satisfying.

9) How do you decide whether a journalistic article, a joke in stand-up comedy or a short story is the right form of narration to digest/comment on what moves you politically? Once you have written, say, a piece on the Referendum on Scottish Independence or a short story about torture practiced by British army, and the topic continues to haunt you, do you tend to return to the same form or do you go in search of other forms of expression? Under what circumstances does the short story, specifically, tend to suggest itself to you as a political instrument?

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(c) The Bottle Imp