

# 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?

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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?

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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?

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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?

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**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)

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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?

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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, you have helped scores of young writers do battle with the short form and added two more collections to your name. What are your thoughts today 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?

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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 *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

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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?

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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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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 article<sup>1</sup> 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

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*(c) The Bottle Imp*