

An Interview with Janice Galloway

By Jorge Sacido-Romero

This interview is part of the research conducted within the context of Project *'Women's Tales': The Short Fiction of Contemporary British Writers, 1974-2013*, coordinated by Jorge Sacido-Romero and 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?

I write short stories because I like reading them. You can express anything you like – including what happens or the resonances of a very long period of time – just in a more condensed form. I know when I start anything new is likely to be a short story: novels always begin with much sighing, a horror of the dawn, and a plan in mind. I guess that's another bliss about stories: you can just *begin*. 'Should' doesn't come into it – stories kind of pick their own length.

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?

They're shorter – this and this alone! 'Great Empires' have always been touted as 'Great' in Western Civilisation on account of their sprawl and willingness to invade other peoples in order to expand. *Bigness* is a thing in and of itself in Western History. Getting *more stuff* is too. The obsession with facilitating the stockpiling and compulsive acquisition of huge amounts of money in contemporary world politics is endemic – Trump stocking his cabinet with millionaires who are notionally intended

to work 'for the people' is beyond parody. Many other facets of Western Society have this size thing too. *The novel*, particularly the *fat novel* and preferably a *fat novel of ludicrous length*, preferably from a *life-threateningly prolific writer* like Balzac (himself a *big man*) as part of this obsession. At first I saw it as a male flaw, but it's wider than that. I guess being awed by *bigness* springs more from a kind of transferred blood-lust – a kind of gladiatorial stature. Wow that's huge! Awesome! *Mega!* are common enough appreciations in everyday language. And of course *wow* look all the *money* this makes/ spent on this! To value spareness, the beauty of small or infrequent things; the aesthetic of non-acquisition or controlled lusts, or rationality of kindness and the urge to give is much rarer.

3) In the modern period - say, from the late nineteenth century onwards – women writing in English 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, A. L. Kennedy, 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 think shortness has been the only thing saving some kinds of creativity – women and impoverished societies among them. Katherine Mansfield on the subject of housework and writing makes it more than obvious (“I am left with a mind full of ghosts of saucepans and primus stoves & will there be enough to go round ... and you calling (whatever I am doing) Tig – isn't there going to be tea?” is the mild end). Carver, looking after the children while his wife is at work, has a lot to say about the 'drag' of his kids on his own thinking: even while he loves them, they are inhibiting to the lovely thing that is the creating of books. Women and men with no 'home help' (I once had a call from someone who asked to speak to Miss Galloway since I was obviously the maid – Jeez) and kids who are trying to write find much the same thing. As a single parent, I know the same from experience. There is no contradiction: I knew that wishing to raise my son meant working help from friends and working through the night or not at all. And that was what I chose and what I did. As well as having to be both,

I wanted both. I gained an incalculable amount from mothering.

The other thing that comes to mind is that short works of art suggest subtlety by definition. Some of the world's finest writers, in my eyes, have been people who had little time to write otherwise create, and even less in the way of precedent to turn to for assurance. Being part of an underprivileged social class, having lack of opportunity or much in the way of education save self-education and *lack of time* still exist! Indeed, present-day capitalist logic is fond of telling us 'how things must be'. The US president is currently dropping Arts funding and wittering about 'winning wars' with an enhanced military instead. This is already a century given to chop-logic and redressing inconvenient truths as 'lies' when it comes to what individuals and the world itself need to thrive. Not to acknowledge the requirements of striving for meaning, aspiration to discover, the importance of art in the lives of 'ordinary' people — books that are not part of a 'business' drive — is a form of insanity.

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?

I see Woolf as a source of great observations. My trust in them as edicts is another matter — and 'women' are not all one 'woman'. People can only offer what they observe as for consideration, and the wisdom of that advice will come and go in one's life with that of others.

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?

That association is more a trope of those who analyse fiction more than it is of the reader or indeed, the maker of short fiction. Alone, nothing is confining: how categorisation affects how one's work might reach others does. Categorisation is almost never in the interests of the categorised.

With regard to the 'novel is king' thing, yes I have and do encounter it (though with less authority these days if you're careful who you talk to). It's come from historical idea that creation is a worth colonising as a means to prominence from a colonising time. Big meant victorious, powerful, fuck-off shorty. That's how deep – and shallow – its roots are.

Some writers write *long* and some do not. There is no automatic classification of these things with regard to merit. Women = all-round smaller and men = *large* is partly what is at its roots – again, Carver felt looked down on for his virtuosity in the short form. I have never been drawn to very long works or 'serial' books. Never. My favourite thing as a child were Greek legends and mythology, then Scottish folk ballads and stories. I like the intensity and airy space they both offer for the head to roam. Balzac's horror of leaving his desk and his heart-attack inducing rate of work seem seldom mentioned as 'limiting' in any way – crazy production seldom is. Now, in times when everything must make itself count as a business (that profit and/or saleability makes worth is a poisonous idea corrupting the whole earth, not just the arts) 'big' works for other reasons – box sets, novel series, spin offs. Again, a business dream. I do not know how much poetry suffers from this, save to notice poets are not much regarded as recorders of culture and ritual in the way they once were. When publishers believe the short story 'unsaleable', when they mean more of a risk in terms of sales being fast and *huge*, is part of the times we live in. Slow-burn is never profit-oriented, and belittling writing on the grounds of the social class (and time limitations) of its author are still very much alive. Size is an issue. Oh yes, size is an issue.

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?

If the word 'feminist' is used as a tool to define, of course it can. What's its opposite? I'm a feminist by self-definition, but I am acutely aware the term can be used to mean 'toxic' or 'partial' when I mean no such thing by it. Terms which are open to marginalisation are themselves potentially toxic. Or an academic's classification, as though writers were butterflies in need of pinning on green baize. Life's too short for that sort of tedious

argument repeating over and over. The writing is what counts, not what box it might fit into.

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?

Well, despite the fact I never heard anyone suggest they might be a 'feminist plumber' or a 'feminist dentist' — I never say 'feminist writer'. I'm a woman who writes and what I find most interesting is the minutiae of our hidden lives, our mythologies, our weaknesses. Politically, I support the rights of women to live free from harassment, physical abuse, the lousy justice system that fails with rape as control or an act of war; deliberate restriction of women's ability to work and think and be other than a vehicle to a religious or social policy; the corrosive effect on the confidence of women that is fashion and press reportage ... that's being humanist. Blokes are seldom asked if they're 'masculinist' in their approach. I have no idea what that would mean.

II. Short Stories Collections: *Blood* (1991), *Where You Find It* (1996) and *Jellyfish* (2015)

1) In the three collections you have published so far — *Blood* (1991), *Where You Find It* (1996) and *Jellyfish* (2015) — the first thing that strikes the eye is typography: decapitalized titles and decapitalized beginnings, italics, capitals, truncated sentences, syntactical periods scattered in different lines, etc. Do you want to create a particular effect? What is it you are after?

Minor dislocation. A prompt to read carefully, just as to make sense one needs to listen carefully and not jump to the expected. A hiccup in thinking. Why do painters and poets and musicians place things in specific ways? Same reason.

2) The visual is a recurrent aspect in your stories at the level of content, too. Open and closed eyes, characters staring, action that develops before an explicit collective spectator, stories that read like dumb-shows, etc. Characters' power, powerlessness, resistance, submission, relief, fear, frustration, desire find

expression more often than not in what we could call the motif of the gaze. What is there in a gaze?

Not much. I think the power of the gaze speaks for itself for most of us. It's how babies communicate some things, how animals do too. The gaze most often means something: words sometimes do not. When the eyes and the mouth conflict, it's interesting. I guess it is also a parallel for writing: I can only hope what is picked up is transmitted in more entirety — by suggestion, perhaps — than the words alone can do. I deal a lot in bodily sensation too. Gazing is what we need to do more of. Just looking, not pronouncing, is healthier!

3) Though, perhaps, less recurrent than the gaze, the voice is an equally intriguing motif in many of your stories. Some female characters suffer a sort of vocal paralysis, or feel detached from their own words, while others are assailed by voices, or have aural hallucinations. Sometimes the voice complements the gaze, sometimes it reaches beyond it. Do you see an interconnection between the visual and the acoustic in your stories? What is there in a voice?

So much and so little simultaneously. The weakness of the spoken voice is that someone has to be listening keenly or its power, its precision, its suggestion is lost anyway, no matter how carefully arranged. People talk far less — indeed can be trained to express far less — if they feel automatically open to misunderstanding or being ignored.

4) Music is a very important theme in your work, your stories contain many references to music, particularly classical, but not only. Music can be empowering, enlightening, and, most of the time amusing, comforting, soothing. Why does music always seem such a positive force in your stories?

Because it's music! It speaks without the words sometimes, speaks with a complement/contrast/embroidery upon the words in sung forms. Music, like maths, suggests a world of sense and rational thirst for communication. What could be more reassuring to a fearful yet willing need to talk? At a personal level, it was study of grammar and foreign language (the nuts and bolts of Latin) and of the logic and form behind music (and its ability to break those rules to maximum and always meaningful effect) that gave me a sense of belonging as a teenager. Some

things out there want us to hear each other, despite the difficulties!

5) Mozart in 'Blood', the first story of your first collection, resounds in 'distance', the last story of your last collection, where it is connected to the forty-six-year-old protagonist's reawakened maternal spirit not to a human being, but to an animal, an injured stag which she cannot help but to embrace. Though animals are not absent from the first two collections of stories (cats, in particular), they acquire a special prominence in the last one, *Jellyfish* (in the stories that open and close the collection, 'jellyfish' and 'distance', and in the magnificent piece 'fittest'). Does this in any way indicate an increasing degree of ecological, or, even, eco-feminist sensitivity on your part?

My concern for animal welfare and ecology has always been there, I guess it's finding its way into the work more now because things are getting uglier with regard to lack of human compassion and care for their fellow creatures. It's not rocket science. The physical and ecological mess we make of the world for material gain is the worst science fiction movie ever. From bees to bears to big blue whales, without beasts, we do not survive and do not deserve to. Without the connections – and care of those connections – and kindness, nothing of any stripe survives. Music is one of those things that makes you sensitive to that which is 'not you' – either as sound or a landscape of the mind created from sound. Or as messages in another medium. I don't really see music as a preoccupation with the human, but as an enthusiasm for vision/emotional or unspoken connection by other means. They go together in my head. How valid that belief is is another matter, but it's where my curiosity lies and therefore drives what I write.

6) In 'distance' and 'fittest' one can detect an intention to deconstruct Scottish Heritage icons such as the Loch Ness Monster and the *Stag at Bay* in Landseer prints. The occasional references to Scottish Heritage and its link to the tourist industry in your short fiction are, I would say, systematically sarcastic. Is it because Heritage and tourism falsify Scottish national identity, something you feel very strongly about? Once you asked 'who wants to write about nation all the bloody time'. However, in the story 'the bridge', you have Fiona, the female character, endorse the idea of belonging to the Scottish nation, an affiliation that Charlie, the painter for whom the only home is art, does not share. Why is not nation a more prominent theme in your work?

'Nation' is such a hijack-able concept. Sensation, the visceral, the weak, the unpalatably strong – the eventual absurdity of the world in general interest me. I regard Scotland as being part of the universal – like Spain or Bangladesh or Sweden are. Like everyone is. Out of the particular comes the universal – no? There's no need to play that up or address it head on to me. It's simply the case. Other people do wish to deal with the specifics of nation because it's how their heads work and how better they can say what they have to say. It's not so much a 'choice' as one way of working to me. I do have an acute interest in smallness, dispossession, being overlooked: it's one reason I like to write about children and animals too. What's small needs to be on its guard.

7) Much of your work is an exploration of gender roles and attitudes. In your short stories you give us examples of strong female characters that are quite successful in liberating themselves from patriarchal dominance. However, when love and sexual desire is involved, things get more complicated. Thus, women become sexual objects, or want to become sexual objects (as in 'peeping tom'), they give up their careers, (Helen's case in 'greek'), or, even, accept their nearly invisible role as housewives (Norma in 'valentine'). Are we to take these characters as, respectively, positive and negative feminine examples?

Ooh jings, I hope I don't make 'examples' of any kind. I'm not writing a treatise: I'm writing about the weirdness of human life; how we destroy ourselves if we do not pay attention. I think my characters are just people; perfectly run-of-the-mill (now there's a phrase!) people who want complex, irreconcilable things, like everybody else. I believe in these people while I am writing them: I don't 'make' them to score a point in an argument. They strike me as – I repeat myself – just people. If I'm looking for anything, it's to examine the gap between the intentions and results of our actions. Author as didact is a huge turnoff.

8) Men are often portrayed in a negative light: they are violent, or childish, or hypocritical narcissists, countercultural idiots (Gerry in 'and drugs and rock and roll'), or simply irresponsible beings (Ike in 'greek'). However, in a story such as 'hope' we come across a man trapped in a marriage; in 'he dreams of pleasing his mother' the main character seems to suffer from a disabling Oedipal attachment; in 'opera' men seem to be just playthings for Lola; and in 'that was then, this is now', a girl uses a boy as her sexual toy. So, again, things are not just black or

white in men's case either, are they?

Oh dear. The men are not 'negatively lit' to me: they are simply not the heart of the stories. It never occurs to me the men are 'playthings' to Lola (ha!), so I guess you'd need to say why you think that rather than me explain something I don't think I'm doing! Maybe they are part of her being financially independent as a 'trader'; maybe Gerry in 'sex and drugs and' is found, in a crisis, to be different than his partner thought he would be; maybe Riley in 'distance' (who acts hugely responsibly in the face of a wife he cannot understand) and David in *The Trick Is to Keep Breathing* helps save Joy's life and – yup. I think the question is why so many men focus on the men in the stories as not being important enough. Is a female narrator automatically unreliable? Once having had the experience of a very influential male writer explain to me I'd 'grow out of writing about women' is one I am still in recovery from. Maybe I should have asked him what was at the roots of that...

9) Some of the stories stress the fact that masculine toughness and violence partly derive from the way boys are brought up. Are violent masculine models the root cause of the problem so much so that, if you do away with them, you eradicate male violence, including bullying at school?

Masculinity is as much rooted in wiring as culture, just as 'femininity' is. I seem to be saying a lot that one writes what one sees. 'The task of a writer is not to solve the problem but to state the problem correctly' – Chekhov. Of course, how one is led to be as a child has a bearing on how one is in the world for us.

10) Fathers come off rather badly in your short stories, but it seems even worse in the case of uncles. The unnamed female character in the oneiric piece 'it was', your first story, remembers her Uncle George as both a fascinating and horrifying figure; Uncle Felix in the closing story in *Blood* is a pervert and a bit sadist; and Uncle Frank (though he is not truly an uncle) in 'someone had to' is unspeakably cruel and vicious. Why are uncles so evil?

I guess my perspective is different! It's only occurring to me now about 'uncles' being the men I had in my life when I was small – what a father did a great deal of was a mystery (my father died when I was five and he

was separated from my mother before then) so uncles were important. My mother had six brothers (only one of which, Uncle Tommy, I met regularly and loved because he could make my mother laugh like a girl) and my father had left me two which I met more than once, while one of my aunties married a George — a real Uncle George — who teamed up with me (and the relevant auntie) once a fortnight. The first uncle in the stories (an Uncle George among many) is a heroic and much-missed survivor of death in that story, even if it is in a dream — ever had that miracle happen of someone dead coming back to life in a dream and they don't seem aware of passing? I put it in the story as something touching, not something horrifying: you as the reader find something else. That is entirely a legitimate course for you as a reader, but what I thought I was doing does not coincide. It is not for an author to insist you coincide! No story has one meaning unless it's more didactic than literary. I conflate literature with readability, which means readability in many different ways, depending on what the reader brings.

Now Uncle Felix: I saw a man dealing with terrible loss and a girl too young and frightened to even begin to grasp that, never mind grasp he would see things she can't begin to imagine. They are both engaged with loss and an inability to rectify it or even recognise it very clearly. I saw him as sympathetic but not aware of his actions to others in the story.

Uncle Frank, however is indeed a sadist. A sadist, a coward and a piece of human wreckage. Why is not written into that story, but I feel sure it has to be there. For the record, I had no Uncle Frank.

11) Why is suicide so recurrent in your short stories? Less in your second collection, *Where You Find It*, but definitely in the other two, where many people kill themselves, or try to.

Because I understand the impulse as a ghostly human privation. The modern world is full of reasons to feel alienated from government, a sense of content, things to trust and things that count more than money. The world is full of unsolvable dilemma.

12) Finally, I would like to go back to the question of materiality. The scatological, visceral, carnal, fleshly is everywhere in your work: bleeding bodies ('Blood'),

meat dripping ('A Week with Uncle Felix'), corpses rotting ('The Meat', 'babysitting'), vampire-like kisses ('where you find it'), or huge worm-like monsters ('after the rains'). But apart from the body, you seem to probe into the materiality of things, artificial or natural: from the very first line you ever published ('it was') to the hallucination of the earth moving and the pulsating, palpitating life underground in the garden in 'turned' (*Jellyfish*). Why this interest in the materiality of bodies and things?

I guess because they're there! Life in all its forms is fragile. I have also been writing more obvious creatures into stories – butterflies, deer, stray beasts, endangered species – even mythical animals. Its very fleetingness and vulnerability makes living things – all kinds of living things – the biggest subject for me. What we experience is what we tend to pass on, and therefore needs careful evaluation again, again, again. The substance of literature can be no different. Politics in 2017 – and in the run-up to 2017 – seems colder than I have known in my lifetime. Why? What are we looking at to work out our response? I have never experienced so bewildered a time, at least politically, in my lifetime. The thing I feel driven to do, from habit and for safety, is watch. This interview is part of the research conducted within the context of Project '*Women's Tales: The Short Fiction of Contemporary British Writers, 1974-2013*', coordinated by Jorge Sacido-Romero and 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?

I write short stories because I like reading them. You can express anything you like – including what happens or the resonances of a very long period of time – just in a more condensed form. I know when I start anything new is likely to be a short story: novels always begin with much sighing, a horror of the dawn, and a plan in mind. I guess that's another bliss about stories: you can just *begin*. 'Should' doesn't come into it – stories kind of pick their own length.

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?

They're shorter — this and this alone! 'Great Empires' have always been touted as 'Great' in Western Civilisation on account of their sprawl and willingness to invade other peoples in order to expand. *Bigness* is a thing in and of itself in Western History. Getting *more stuff* is too. The obsession with facilitating the stockpiling and compulsive acquisition of huge amounts of money in contemporary world politics is endemic — Trump stocking his cabinet with millionaires who are notionally intended to work 'for the people' is beyond parody. Many other facets of Western Society have this size thing too. *The novel*, particularly the *fat novel* and preferably a *fat novel of ludicrous length*, preferably from a *life-threateningly prolific writer* like Balzac (himself a *big man*) as part of this obsession. At first I saw it as a male flaw, but it's wider than that. I guess being awed by *bigness* springs more from a kind of transferred blood-lust — a kind of gladiatorial stature. Wow that's huge! Awesome! *Mega!* are common enough appreciations in everyday language. And of course *wow* look all the *money* this makes/ spent on this! To value spareness, the beauty of small or infrequent things; the aesthetic of non-acquisition or controlled lusts, or rationality of kindness and the urge to give is much rarer.

3) In the modern period - say, from the late nineteenth century onwards — women writing in English 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, A. L. Kennedy, 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 think shortness has been the only thing saving some kinds of creativity — women and impoverished societies among them. Katherine Mansfield on the subject of housework and writing makes it more than obvious ("I am left with a mind full of ghosts of saucepans and primus stoves & will

there be enough to go round ... and you calling (whatever I am doing) Tig — isn't there going to be tea?" is the mild end). Carver, looking after the children while his wife is at work, has a lot to say about the 'drag' of his kids on his own thinking: even while he loves them, they are inhibiting to the lovely thing that is the creating of books. Women and men with no 'home help' (I once had a call from someone who asked to speak to Miss Galloway since I was obviously the maid — Jeez) and kids who are trying to write find much the same thing. As a single parent, I know the same from experience. There is no contradiction: I knew that wishing to raise my son meant working help from friends and working through the night or not at all. And that was what I chose and what I did. As well as having to be both, I wanted both. I gained an incalculable amount from mothering.

The other thing that comes to mind is that short works of art suggest subtlety by definition. Some of the world's finest writers, in my eyes, have been people who had little time to write otherwise create, and even less in the way of precedent to turn to for assurance. Being part of an underprivileged social class, having lack of opportunity or much in the way of education save self-education and *lack of time* still exist! Indeed, present-day capitalist logic is fond of telling us 'how things must be'. The US president is currently dropping Arts funding and wittering about 'winning wars' with an enhanced military instead. This is already a century given to chop-logic and redressing inconvenient truths as 'lies' when it comes to what individuals and the world itself need to thrive. Not to acknowledge the requirements of striving for meaning, aspiration to discover, the importance of art in the lives of 'ordinary' people — books that are not part of a 'business' drive — is a form of insanity.

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?

I see Woolf as a source of great observations. My trust in them as edicts is another matter — and 'women' are not all one 'woman'. People can only offer what they observe as for consideration, and the wisdom of that advice will come and go in one's life with that of others.

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?

That association is more a trope of those who analyse fiction more than it is of the reader or indeed, the maker of short fiction. Alone, nothing is confining: how categorisation affects how one's work might reach others does. Categorisation is almost never in the interests of the categorised. With regard to the 'novel is king' thing, yes I have and do encounter it (though with less authority these days if you're careful who you talk to). It's come from historical idea that creation is a worth colonising as a means to prominence from a colonising time. Big meant victorious, powerful, fuck-off shorty. That's how deep — and shallow — its roots are.

Some writers write *long* and some do not. There is no automatic classification of these things with regard to merit. Women = all-round smaller and men = *large* is partly what is at its roots — again, Carver felt looked down on for his virtuosity in the short form. I have never been drawn to very long works or 'serial' books. Never. My favourite thing as a child were Greek legends and mythology, then Scottish folk ballads and stories. I like the intensity and airy space they both offer for the head to roam. Balzac's horror of leaving his desk and his heart-attack inducing rate of work seem seldom mentioned as 'limiting' in any way — crazy production seldom is. Now, in times when everything must make itself count as a business (that profit and/or saleability makes worth is a poisonous idea corrupting the whole earth, not just the arts) 'big' works for other reasons — box sets, novel series, spin offs. Again, a business dream. I do not know how much poetry suffers from this, save to notice poets are not much regarded as recorders of culture and ritual in the way they once were. When publishers believe the short story 'unsaleable', when they mean more of a risk in terms of sales being fast and *huge*, is part of the times we live in. Slow-burn is never profit-oriented, and belittling writing on the grounds of the social class (and time limitations) of its author are still very much alive. Size is an issue. Oh yes, size is an issue.

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?

If the word 'feminist' is used as a tool to define, of course it can. What's its opposite? I'm a feminist by self-definition, but I am acutely aware the term can be used to mean 'toxic' or 'partial' when I mean no such thing by it. Terms which are open to marginalisation are themselves potentially toxic. Or an academic's classification, as though writers were butterflies in need of pinning on green baize. Life's too short for that sort of tedious argument repeating over and over. The writing is what counts, not what box it might fit into.

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?

Well, despite the fact I never heard anyone suggest they might be a 'feminist plumber' or a 'feminist dentist' — I never say 'feminist writer'. I'm a woman who writes and what I find most interesting is the minutiae of our hidden lives, our mythologies, our weaknesses. Politically, I support the rights of women to live free from harassment, physical abuse, the lousy justice system that fails with rape as control or an act of war; deliberate restriction of women's ability to work and think and be other than a vehicle to a religious or social policy; the corrosive effect on the confidence of women that is fashion and press reportage ... that's being humanist. Blokes are seldom asked if they're 'masculinist' in their approach. I have no idea what that would mean.

II. Short Stories Collections: *Blood* (1991), *Where You Find It* (1996) and *Jellyfish* (2015)

1) In the three collections you have published so far — *Blood* (1991), *Where You Find It* (1996) and *Jellyfish* (2015) — the first thing that strikes the eye is typography: decapitalized titles and decapitalized beginnings, italics, capitals, truncated sentences, syntactical periods scattered in different lines, etc. Do you want to create a particular effect? What is it you are after?

Minor dislocation. A prompt to read carefully, just as to make sense one needs to listen carefully and not jump to the expected. A hiccup in thinking. Why do painters and poets and musicians place things in specific ways? Same reason.

2) The visual is a recurrent aspect in your stories at the level of content, too. Open and closed eyes, characters staring, action that develops before an explicit collective spectator, stories that read like dumb-shows, etc. Characters' power, powerlessness, resistance, submission, relief, fear, frustration, desire find expression more often than not in what we could call the motif of the gaze. What is there in a gaze?

Not much. I think the power of the gaze speaks for itself for most of us. It's how babies communicate some things, how animals do too. The gaze most often means something: words sometimes do not. When the eyes and the mouth conflict, it's interesting. I guess it is also a parallel for writing: I can only hope what is picked up is transmitted in more entirety — by suggestion, perhaps — than the words alone can do. I deal a lot in bodily sensation too. Gazing is what we need to do more of. Just looking, not pronouncing, is healthier!

3) Though, perhaps, less recurrent than the gaze, the voice is an equally intriguing motif in many of your stories. Some female characters suffer a sort of vocal paralysis, or feel detached from their own words, while others are assailed by voices, or have aural hallucinations. Sometimes the voice complements the gaze, sometimes it reaches beyond it. Do you see an interconnection between the visual and the acoustic in your stories? What is there in a voice?

So much and so little simultaneously. The weakness of the spoken voice is that someone has to be listening keenly or its power, its precision, its suggestion is lost anyway, no matter how carefully arranged. People talk far less — indeed can be trained to express far less — if they feel automatically open to misunderstanding or being ignored.

4) Music is a very important theme in your work, your stories contain many references to music, particularly classical, but not only. Music can be empowering, enlightening, and, most of the time amusing, comforting, soothing. Why does music always seem such a positive force in your stories?

Because it's music! It speaks without the words sometimes, speaks with a complement/contrast/embroidery upon the words in sung forms. Music, like maths, suggests a world of sense and rational thirst for communication. What could be more reassuring to a fearful yet willing need to talk? At a personal level, it was study of grammar and foreign language (the nuts and bolts of Latin) and of the logic and form behind music (and its ability to break those rules to maximum and always meaningful effect) that gave me a sense of belonging as a teenager. Some things out there *want* us to hear each other, despite the difficulties!

5) Mozart in 'Blood', the first story of your first collection, resounds in 'distance', the last story of your last collection, where it is connected to the forty-six-year-old protagonist's reawakened maternal spirit not to a human being, but to an animal, an injured stag which she cannot help but to embrace. Though animals are not absent from the first two collections of stories (cats, in particular), they acquire a special prominence in the last one, *Jellyfish* (in the stories that open and close the collection, 'jellyfish' and 'distance', and in the magnificent piece 'fittest'). Does this in any way indicate an increasing degree of ecological, or, even, eco-feminist sensitivity on your part?

My concern for animal welfare and ecology has always been there, I guess it's finding its way into the work more now because things are getting uglier with regard to lack of human compassion and care for their fellow creatures. It's not rocket science. The physical and ecological mess we make of the world for material gain is the worst science fiction movie ever. From bees to bears to big blue whales, without beasts, we do not survive and do not deserve to. Without the connections — and care of those connections — and kindness, nothing of any stripe survives. Music is one of those things that makes you sensitive to that which is 'not you' — either as sound or a landscape of the mind created from sound. Or as messages in another medium. I don't really see music as a preoccupation with the human, but as an enthusiasm for vision/emotional or unspoken connection by other means. They go together in my head. How valid that belief is is another matter, but it's where my curiosity lies and therefore drives what I write.

6) In 'distance' and 'fittest' one can detect an intention to deconstruct Scottish Heritage icons such as the Loch Ness Monster and the *Stag at Bay* in Landseer

prints. The occasional references to Scottish Heritage and its link to the tourist industry in your short fiction are, I would say, systematically sarcastic. Is it because Heritage and tourism falsify Scottish national identity, something you feel very strongly about? Once you asked 'who wants to write about nation all the bloody time'. However, in the story 'the bridge', you have Fiona, the female character, endorse the idea of belonging to the Scottish nation, an affiliation that Charlie, the painter for whom the only home is art, does not share. Why is not nation a more prominent theme in your work?

'Nation' is such a hijack-able concept. Sensation, the visceral, the weak, the unpalatably strong – the eventual absurdity of the world in general interest me. I regard Scotland as being part of the universal – like Spain or Bangladesh or Sweden are. Like everyone is. Out of the particular comes the universal – no? There's no need to play that up or address it head on to me. It's simply the case. Other people do wish to deal with the specifics of nation because it's how their heads work and how better they can say what they have to say. It's not so much a 'choice' as one way of working to me. I do have an acute interest in smallness, dispossession, being overlooked: it's one reason I like to write about children and animals too. What's small needs to be on its guard.

7) Much of your work is an exploration of gender roles and attitudes. In your short stories you give us examples of strong female characters that are quite successful in liberating themselves from patriarchal dominance. However, when love and sexual desire is involved, things get more complicated. Thus, women become sexual objects, or want to become sexual objects (as in 'peeping tom'), they give up their careers, (Helen's case in 'greek'), or, even, accept their nearly invisible role as housewives (Norma in 'valentine'). Are we to take these characters as, respectively, positive and negative feminine examples?

Ooh jings, I hope I don't make 'examples' of any kind. I'm not writing a treatise: I'm writing about the weirdness of human life; how we destroy ourselves if we do not pay attention. I think my characters are just people; perfectly run-of-the-mill (now there's a phrase!) people who want complex, irreconcilable things, like everybody else. I believe in these people while I am writing them: I don't 'make' them to score a point in an argument. They strike me as – I repeat myself – just people. If I'm looking for anything, it's to examine the gap between the intentions and

results of our actions. Author as didact is a huge turnoff.

8) Men are often portrayed in a negative light: they are violent, or childish, or hypocritical narcissists, countercultural idiots (Gerry in 'and drugs and rock and roll'), or simply irresponsible beings (Ike in 'greek'). However, in a story such as 'hope' we come across a man trapped in a marriage; in 'he dreams of pleasing his mother' the main character seems to suffer from a disabling Oedipal attachment; in 'opera' men seem to be just playthings for Lola; and in 'that was then, this is now', a girl uses a boy as her sexual toy. So, again, things are not just black or white in men's case either, are they?

Oh dear. The men are not 'negatively lit' to me: they are simply not the heart of the stories. It never occurs to me the men are 'playthings' to Lola (ha!), so I guess you'd need to say why you think that rather than me explain something I don't think I'm doing! Maybe they are part of her being financially independent as a 'trader'; maybe Gerry in 'sex and drugs and' is found, in a crisis, to be different than his partner thought he would be; maybe Riley in 'distance' (who acts hugely responsibly in the face of a wife he cannot understand) and David in *The Trick Is to Keep Breathing* helps save Joy's life and — yup. I think the question is why so many men focus on the men in the stories as not being important enough. Is a female narrator automatically unreliable? Once having had the experience of a very influential male writer explain to me I'd 'grow out of writing about women' is one I am still in recovery from. Maybe I should have asked him what was at the roots of that...

9) Some of the stories stress the fact that masculine toughness and violence partly derive from the way boys are brought up. Are violent masculine models the root cause of the problem so much so that, if you do away with them, you eradicate male violence, including bullying at school?

Masculinity is as much rooted in wiring as culture, just as 'femininity' is. I seem to be saying a lot that one writes what one sees. 'The task of a writer is not to solve the problem but to state the problem correctly' — Chekhov. Of course, how one is led to be as a child has a bearing on how one is in the world for us.

10) Fathers come off rather badly in you short stories, but it seems even worse in

the case of uncles. The unnamed female character in the oneiric piece 'it was', your first story, remembers her Uncle George as both a fascinating and horrifying figure; Uncle Felix in the closing story in *Blood* is a pervert and a bit sadist; and Uncle Frank (though he is not truly an uncle) in 'someone had to' is unspeakably cruel and vicious. Why are uncles so evil?

I guess my perspective is different! It's only occurring to me now about 'uncles' being the men I had in my life when I was small – what a father did a great deal of was a mystery (my father died when I was five and he was separated from my mother before then) so uncles were important. My mother had six brothers (only one of which, Uncle Tommy, I met regularly and loved because he could make my mother laugh like a girl) and my father had left me two which I met more than once, while one of my aunties married a George – a real Uncle George – who teamed up with me (and the relevant auntie) once a fortnight. The first uncle in the stories (an Uncle George among many) is a heroic and much-missed survivor of death in that story, even if it is in a dream – ever had that miracle happen of someone dead coming back to life in a dream and they don't seem aware of passing? I put it in the story as something touching, not something horrifying: you as the reader find something else. That is entirely a legitimate course for you as a reader, but what I thought I was doing does not coincide. It is not for an author to insist you coincide! No story has one meaning unless it's more didactic than literary. I conflate literature with readability, which means readability in many different ways, depending on what the reader brings.

Now Uncle Felix: I saw a man dealing with terrible loss and a girl too young and frightened to even begin to grasp that, never mind grasp he would see things she can't begin to imagine. They are both engaged with loss and an inability to rectify it or even recognise it very clearly. I saw him as sympathetic but not aware of his actions to others in the story.

Uncle Frank, however is indeed a sadist. A sadist, a coward and a piece of human wreckage. Why is not written into that story, but I feel sure it has to be there. For the record, I had no Uncle Frank.

11) Why is suicide so recurrent in your short stories? Less in your second collection, *Where You Find It*, but definitely in the other two, where many people

kill themselves, or try to.

Because I understand the impulse as a ghostly human privation. The modern world is full of reasons to feel alienated from government, a sense of content, things to trust and things that count more than money. The world is full of unsolvable dilemma.

12) Finally, I would like to go back to the question of materiality. The scatological, visceral, carnal, fleshly is everywhere in your work: bleeding bodies ('Blood'), meat dripping ('A Week with Uncle Felix'), corpses rotting ('The Meat', 'babysitting'), vampire-like kisses ('where you find it'), or huge worm-like monsters ('after the rains'). But apart from the body, you seem to probe into the materiality of things, artificial or natural: from the very first line you ever published ('it was') to the hallucination of the earth moving and the pulsating, palpitating life underground in the garden in 'turned' (*Jellyfish*). Why this interest in the materiality of bodies and things?

I guess because they're there! Life in all its forms is fragile. I have also been writing more obvious creatures into stories – butterflies, deer, stray beasts, endangered species – even mythical animals. Its very fleetingness and vulnerability makes living things – all kinds of living things – the biggest subject for me. What we experience is what we tend to pass on, and therefore needs careful evaluation again, again, again. The substance of literature can be no different. Politics in 2017 – and in the run-up to 2017 – seems colder than I have known in my lifetime. Why? What are we looking at to work out our response? I have never experienced so bewildered a time, at least politically, in my lifetime. The thing I feel driven to do, from habit and for safety, is watch.

(c) The Bottle Imp