See You?

By The Unreliable Narrator

We are often urged, by such disparate individuals as Robert Burns and Boris Johnson (for, we suspect, very different reasons) to ‘see oursels as ithers see us!’ And, thanks to a large diaspora, a global media, and a strong graphic stereotype, we Scots are quite used to spotting our reflection in a variety of distorting mirrors. But what can we learn from a backward glance at how Scottish writers portray other peoples and other places? What do our sympathies, our errors, our assumptions – written and unwritten – say about us?

Writing is a strange business, however you figure it, and to be a writer requires an ego of both enormous plasticity and presumption. First, an author must conjure characters – beings with thoughts, and hopes, and motivations all their own, with histories extending back beyond the smooth and ordered simplicities of Page 1. Characters who can live and breathe on the page, whose voices will become distinct and different from the author’s own, and who are prone to chip in their own ideas about where they think the plot might go.

Then the author slips these phantasms into stories, poking them straight into readers’ brains via the optic nerve, where they will think thoughts, and do deeds, and rapidly acquire at least the sketchy outlines of semblance. There they go, scurrying around inside other people’s heads, kicking things, having adventures and firing mirror neurons right and left, leaving muddy trails of memories, notions and opinions through potentially millions of minds – the more the merrier, says our author! And all without so much as a by-your-leave or GDPR certification.

It takes a fine conceit to perpetrate such things, and yet: if it’s to be done right, the author’s own ego must withdraw, step quietly behind the velvet curtains – to work the levers and pull the strings, of course, but lightly, deftly, running always with the grain of nature – and allow the fictional creations to stand foursquare and centre stage.

Herein lies a danger, though. The cleverer the author, the more convincing the verisimilitude, the greater chance there is that readers will assume that all this tinsel show must at least be near to reality – especially if the author leans on

distortions and caricatures which already exist within the culture. It is easy for airy art to harden into an all-too-solid substrate of popular assumption, and bind whole peoples up in chains of fancy. Putting words into the mouths of others is a serious business.

But still: to build a character, one must find points of similarity, of empathy. The finest writers can justify the greatest sinners, at least by their own lights. To hear and see and comprehend another point of view; to live, however briefly, within the imagined lives of others; this can be literature's greatest gift.

Mindful of these grave responsibilities, then, let us turn our attention to the contents of this issue of *The Bottle Imp*. Evan Gottlieb eyes the alien in **Facing the Other, Reflecting on Ourselves: Michel Faber's *The Book of Strange New Things***; Alistair Braidwood checks the contrasts between James Kelman's two visions of America – *You Have To Be Careful In The Land Of The Free* (2004) and Dirt Road (2016) – in **Go West: James Kelman's American Odyssey**; and Alan Spence considers the spirit of place in **My Japan**. Jenni Calder travels to Botswana, where Naomi Mitchison crossed boundaries (and swords), and did her damnedest, all inside-outside, in **Professional Boat-Rocker: Naomi Mitchison and Africa**; and Harry Josephine Giles unpacks some awkward baggage in **Scotland's Fantasies of Postcolonialism**. Manda Scott meanwhile, buckles in and fights to reach that far, foreign country of our own ramstabulous ancestors, in **See Oursels as Ithers See Us**; and Bashabi Fraser sees Scotland and India meet and mingle, flowing and ongoing still, in **The Mohona: A Confluence of Identity**.

Meanwhile, in our regular columns. Maggie Scott sups from the **Quaich** of her Scots Word of the Season, and a new batch of **reviews of new Scottish poetry and fiction** awaits too. And Upon Another Point, Jorge Sacido-Romero **interviews Janice Galloway**; Kevan Manwaring takes a night-journey with **Stevenson's Brownies and the Writing Process**; and we are delighted to publish the winner of **The John Gau of Malmö Prize: Superstition, Science, and Sin in Nineteenth-Century Scottish Literature**, by Sara Gaarn-Larsen.

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