Historicizing Shuggie Bain's Reception

By Robert Morace

The opening line of Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious* – 'Always historicize' – may seem an odd way to begin a paper on Douglas Stuart's *Shuggie Bain*. Unlike the works Jameson discusses, *Shuggie* is a contemporary novel and, while not historicized, it is historical, set in and around Glasgow, from 1981 to 1992. Stuart's novel has been received as a work of great literary merit and social and personal memory, but its reception has, with too few exceptions, depended on a kind of historical amnesia, and the aim of this paper is to begin identifying a few of those gaps.

Nearly three decades ago *Trainspotting* was famously nominated for the Booker Prize but then denied a place on the longlist. *Shuggie*, on the other hand, went from the thirteen-strong longlist (27 July 2020) to shortlist of six finalists (15 September) to bookmakers' favorite, adding up an impressive number of nominations and awards before winning the Booker on 19 November. Reviews were overwhelmingly positive. Of the thirty-two listed on Literary Hub's 'Book Marks' page, seventeen were tagged rave, ten positive, just four mixed, and only one pan (a latecomer). How did *Shuggie* become, in 2020, 'This Year's Break out Debut' (Alter)? In the US, where *Shuggie* was published first (by Grove on 2 February; Pan Macmillan's UK edition appeared six months later), reviews were positive but sparse. So were sales. US publisher Grove initially shipped seven thousand copies to bookstores; two months later, with the pandemic now well under way, only one thousand had been sold (Alter); it was a replay of what had happened to Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections*, published ten days before 9/11. Thanks to the Booker shortlisting, the US paperback edition was shifted forward from December to October, with print runs of thirty thousand and ten thousand, and another fifty thousand planned if *Shuggie* won (Alter). As James F. English argues in *The Economy of Prestige*, 'we need to take literary prizes seriously […] while also recognizing that […] [they] are themselves part of an overall system of competitive transaction and exchange which prizes serve and by means of which all cultural value is produced' (5). Once considered the Anglophone world's most

prestigious literary prize, the Booker has been much criticized the last decade or so for either being too literary or not literary enough, for either lacking diversity or emphasizing diversity over literary quality, and, since 2015, for allowing US authors to be nominated and dominate the field. Of 2020's thirteen longlisted novels, eight were debuts (including *Shuggie*) and nine were by American authors (including Stuart). Of the six shortlisted authors, four were making their literary debuts (Stuart again), four were women, four were poc, four were US residents (including Stuart) and only one was UK-born (yes, Stuart); of the four US residents, three wrote of places outside the US (Ethiopia, India and Scotland). Of the six only *Shuggie* was a bestseller.

'While we should celebrate the 2020 Booker Prize for its diversity in voice, representation and themes', Stevie Marsden points out, 'it has been borne of a specific moment in which we have been forced to examine societal inequities and structural inequalities.' This is a moment when, Charlotte Higgins adds, 'The Booker has grown more, rather than less, important as an emerging force in the publishing industry' as 'the novel's cultural force is wavering as other forms of entertainment loom ever larger'. Making the 'right' choice has never seemed so important, or so fraught. In 2019, for only the third time in the Booker's fifty-four-year history, the deadlocked judges selected two winners, Margaret Atwood and Bernardine Evaristo. By contrast, the 2020 decision was 'quick and unanimous' (Lawless) and came soon after honorary Booker Foundation vice president Emma Nicholson had been removed from her post for making homophobic remarks. One of that year's judges later described *Shuggie* as 'gay, but not too gay' (Higgins) – certainly not as gay as Adam Mars-Jones's *Box Hill* (2020) or Alan Hollinghurst's 2004 Booker-winning *The Line of Beauty*. So, to say, as a *Guardian* headline put it, that *Shuggie* 'tells us that the Booker has matured' (Clark) is a stretch. 'If the only other Scot to win the Booker, James Kelman, was', as Robin Robertson put it, 'a persistent thorn in the side of the English establishment' (Garcia), then Stuart, who has credited *How Late* for 'chang[ing] his life' (Clark), is just the opposite, the 2020 Booker's proverbial poster child. And if, as James Wood said, 'the overwrought response [to *How Late*] seemed to justify Kelman's extremity', dressing down for the ceremony and using his acceptance speech to castigate the English literary establishment and to proclaim 'my country and my language have a right to exist', the enthusiastic response afforded *Shuggie* begs the question, what does this all-but-universal acclaim – however well deserved – overlook, downplay or otherwise obscure?

Although described as the second Scottish author to win the Booker, it is more accurate to call Stuart the first Scottish-American or Scottish diaspora winner, having arrived in the US twenty years earlier and begun *Shuggie* ten years after that. Scottish Diaspora studies can help us understand both the novel, including its composition, and its author, a first-generation aspirational (economic) immigrant. (Immigration plays a small but important role in the novel: both of Shuggie's older half-siblings migrate to escape their miserable home life and for economic opportunities – the brother to London, the sister to South Africa. America plays a small role too in the form of the cowboy-themed club to which Eugene takes Agnes.) As expatriates 'renew their interest in their culture, their history and their homeland, it is precisely the "indistinct memory" of the homeland that is attractive' (Leith and Sim, 6) – a memory that is no less indistinct, in Stuart's case, for being drawn so vividly. It was a memory Stuart (14 April 2020) refreshed by studying Raymond Depardon's photographs of 1980s Glasgow, freezing it in time in order to better connect individual identity to place (Basu, 6–7, 222) through a form of time travel (not entirely unlike in the Americanized Scotland of *Brigadoon* and *Outlander*). Like other migrants, Stuart felt homesick, but he also felt that 'America gave me a belief, and it helped remove me from the British class system, which empowered me to talk about it' (Chilton). He differs from the stereotypical Scottish diaspora writer in several noteworthy ways: traveling frequently between New York and Glasgow (and globally for his work in textile design); not hailing from or writing about the Highlands and Islands; and not 'imagin[ing] Scotland as a charming rural country' (Varricchio, 196). Nor is Stuart representative of the Scottish-American diaspora which, as David McCrone explains, 'is altogether a stranger, more exotic phenomenon' being 'based on "ancestral" claims of a rather distant sort' (520). In this regard, Stuart seems marginally closer to the lead characters in Kelman's two American novels, *You Have to Be Careful in the Land of the Free* (2004) and *Dirt Road* (2016).

Written largely at his and his husband's Catskills retreat and during quiet time on work-related long-haul flights, *Shuggie Bain* is a dysfunctional childhood recollected in relative diasporic tranquility, with the writing serving the writer much the same therapeutic (or 'cathartic' – Stuart's word: see Anderson) purpose that Paul Basu explores in his 2007 book, *Highland Homecomings*. It is a purpose that the Scottish government began capitalizing on in 2009 with its Year of Homecoming and that Visit Scotland continued with its succession of themed

years, starting with the Year of Natural Scotland in 2013 and another Year of Homecoming in 2014 and continuing to 2022, the Year of Stories. Read in this context, *Shuggie*'s critical and commercial success as a Scottish diaspora novel has become for Scotland, or more specifically for the Scottish government, 'a significant potential resource' (Leith and Sim, 8). This resource yielded a second dividend when Stuart announced, in his first in-person interview, with First Minister Nicola Sturgeon at the 2021 Edinburgh Book Festival, that he was returning to Scotland to live: a highly successful and visible example of return migration.

The proof of the poet, Walt Whitman wrote, 'shall be sternly deferred till his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorb'd it'. By that standard, Stuart has been catapulted to unofficial national bard status in no time and across transatlantic space. This was especially clear when his interview with the First Minister was scheduled as the Edinburgh International Book Festival's featured closing event. During that interview, Stuart was characteristically generous in expressing his gratitude for all that Scotland had afforded him, particularly educational opportunities (his high school Art and English teachers, training in textile design at Heriot Watt). As he said in an earlier interview, 'I owe Scotland everything' (Allardice; see also Lichtig), which, in a quite literal way, he did: he owed it the material that became *Shuggie Bain*. Scotland can say something similar, for *Shuggie* is the most globally significant Scottish cultural phenomenon since the mid-1990s successes of *Trainspotting* and *Braveheart*.

Just as the Booker confirmed Stuart's place in the Economy of Prestige and World Republic of Letters, the interview with Sturgeon confirmed contemporary Scottish literature's place, yet again and, again, as if for the first time, with the added benefit, this time, of world recognition of a culturally independent and politically semi-independent Scotland. Stuart's appearance six months earlier at the 2021 Paisley Book Festival situated Douglas and his novel differently. The festival features writers with local connections and is 'inspired by the actions of the 1820 Paisley Radicals', with the 2021 events looking to celebrate Paisley 'as a place where people value their [...] history' of 'grassroots rebellion, revolution and activism'. For the 'Scottish Masculinities' event, Paisley Festival paired Stuart with two other writers who had recently published semi-autobiographical novels about young male characters set in the greater Glasgow areas in which their authors had been raised: Andrew O'Hagan's *Mayflies* (Ayrshire) and Graeme

Armstrong's debut *The Young Team* (Airdrie), a slang and dialect rich novel about gang culture. (The panel was hosted by Kirsten Innis, whose *Scabby Queen* was also published in 2020.) Seen together in this way, the three writers' novels create a small world of shared concerns about a particular place in Scotland and at a particular moment as well; a small world, to be sure, but by no means a disparagingly provincial one; rather, it is one which addresses local conditions and needs. With too few exceptions, elevating the prodigiously talented Stuart's novel often came at the expense of failing to acknowledge Scottish contemporaries and precursors such as Bill Douglas's grim *Childhood* trilogy (1972) and Lynne Ramsay's *Ratcatcher* (1999). Reviewers and others mentioned A. McCarthy Arthur and H. Kingsley Long's *No Mean City* (1935) but again, with hardly an exception, not the contemporary writer most associated with Glasgow, Alasdair Gray, who had died just the year before. Nor was there any mention of Kelman's novel *Kieron Smith Boy*, the Saltire Society's 2008 Scottish Book of the Year, 'the monologue of an unexceptional, inarticulate lad growing up in Glasgow's poorer neighborhoods [...] [whose] voice is utterly, mercilessly authentic' (Faber 2008) in ways Shuggie's more unusually mature voice could not, being based on the peculiar circumstances of Stuart's upbringing.

Of course, *Kieron Smith Boy* is not about growing up gay, let alone with a proud but alcoholic mother, or as the *New Yorker* memorably put it, 'growing up queer before the internet' (Leyshon), in a Scotland where homosexuality was criminalized until 1980, and where the gay writers who Stuart's English teachers recommended he read were the Americans Armistead Maupin and Tennessee Williams (Schneier), not Edwin Morgan, who did not come out publicly until 1990. What is odd is that Stuart's sensitive handling of Shuggie as a lone gay child in the homophobic Pithead wilderness did not lead reviewers and others to at least mention how rich contemporary Scottish gay literature is and has been. Leaving aside Iain Banks's gender-bending *Wasp Factory* (1984), there are anthologies: Toni Davidson's ground-breaking *And Thus Will I Freely Sing* (1989), Joanne Winning's *The Crazy Jig* (1992), Joseph Mills's wittily subtitled *Borderline: The Monstrous Book of Scottish Gay Writing* (2001), Zoe Strachan's *Out There* (2014), and many more since. Luke Sutherland, whose *Venus as a Boy* (2004) has recently been adapted for the Scottish stage, former Makar Jackie Kay, Louise Welsh, Ali Smith, Val McDermid, and Kirsty Logan are among the most high-profile LGBTQ writers from the 90s and after. Christopher Whyte's *Gendering the Nation* (1995), Winning's essay in *The Edinburgh Companion to Contemporary Scottish*

Literature (2007), and Carole Jones's 'From Subtext to Gaytext' in Scott Lyall's *Community of Modern Scottish Literature* (2016) have all helped bring academic attention to the field.

In being so closely drawn from and then associated with Stuart's youth, *Shuggie* is so autobiographical that in interviews, his comments on his novel and those on his life appear not only equally compelling, but even interchangeable (see especially Stuart's interview with John Wilson). Part *bildungsroman*, part *kuntslerroman*, Stuart's portrait of the artist as a young boy bears a certain resemblance to Alan Warner's *Morvern Callar* (1995) whose title character launches her career when she sends her dead boyfriend's novel off under her own name – the admittedly imprecise equivalent being Douglas's converting his mother's memoir, which she wanted her young son to ghost-write, but which never got beyond the dedication to Elizabeth Taylor, into his novel. Not surprisingly, the most acclaimed contemporary writer of autofiction, Karl Knausgaard, chose *Shuggie* as the sole novel in his list of six 'cultural highlights of the year,' and although Douglas has insisted that his novel is not a memoir, reviewers often drew the connection to Irish diasporic writer Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* (1996). However, in keeping with Scottish literature's 'always a bridesmaid, never a bride' status, reviewers and others not only failed to link *Shuggie* to other contemporary Scottish autobiographical novels (the Paisley panel mentioned earlier being a welcome exception), but, and more especially, and dismayingly, to Scottish literary memoirs of the past dozen years or so – beginning with John Burnside, Janice Galloway, Jackie Kay and Damian Barr and continuing with Amy Liptrot, Kerry Hudson, and the late Deborah Orr. In our post-Death of the Author age, interest in the author thrives, in biographies, autofiction, and memoirs, both of the unknown, such as Aidan Martin's *Euphoric Recall* (2020) of growing up badly in Ladywell, and of the very well-known, Alan Cumming's *Not My Father's Son* (2014) and, post-*Shuggie*, Cumming's *Baggage* (2021), Bobby Gillespie's *Tenement Kid* (2021) and Michael Pedersen's *Boy Friends* (2022).

Insofar as they often feature abuse, trauma and deprivation, memoirs such as these and autobiographical novels such as *Shuggie* risk being what so many reviewers felt obliged to say *Shuggie* was not: yet another example of Scottish miserabilism and poverty porn. Stuart has said he was 'acutely aware of writing "poverty safari" for a largely middle-class readership': 'People like to come

through for a tour and then they go back to worrying about oat milk. I thought, "Well if we are going to do that, then you are coming for a stay"' (Allardice). *Poverty Safari* is, of course, the title of the 2017 book by Darren McGarvey, the Scottish rapper better known as Loki. Not 'a cheap holiday in other people's misery', *Poverty Safari* is an attempt, as the subtitle puts it, at 'understanding the anger of the British underclass' – an overtly intertextual attempt: each of the thirty-two chapters are titled after books, one-quarter of them Scottish. What absolved *Shuggie* of the poverty-porn charge was the deeply affecting writing, but even more, I'd say, is the para- or extra-textual fact of Stuart's life beyond the novel's framing device, which has the fifteen-year-old fending for himself. Beyond that frame is Stuart completing his education despite enormous obstacles, emigrating to the US, becoming a successful textile designer, marrying his partner (on the same day he signed the contract for *Shuggie Bain*), and doing all this, in effect, on his own: without an MFA and despite his novel being rejected twenty, thirty-two, forty times, in the US and the UK, having it accepted by a major publisher, only to have sales falter as the pandemic took hold; then, months later, having it longlisted, then shortlisted for the Booker, and finally winning the prize itself. *Shuggie* is a novel set in an earlier time that is very much of its time, marked – in reading and reception – by the pandemic and the economic inequality that helped propel *Parasite* (2019) and *Squid Game* (2021), but different too in its resembling the northern England films *Brassed Off* (1996), *The Full Monty* (1997), and *Billy Elliot* (2000) with their hopeful twists on hopeless situations. So perhaps we should think of *Shuggie* not as poverty porn, but instead as inspiration porn: as proof that Thatcher was right: there is no such thing as society, only the individual and the family. That of course was not at all Stuart's intention, but it is this very paradox that readings of *Shuggie* as a political novel about the Thatcher years obscured and that is at the heart of Damian Barr's 2013 memoir, *Maggie and Me*, about growing up poor and gay in Carfin, just outside Glasgow, before achieving success as a journalist and author and learning, as Barr writes at memoir's end, that Thatcher would have liked him very much.

In writing a novel without any training in creative writing, without any expectation that his novel, if completed, would ever be published and if published read, let alone become a bestseller and just the first in a series of successes, we could be speaking just as easily of Irvine Welsh as of Douglas Stuart. 'Comparisons with *Trainspotting* are inevitable', as Chris Moss wrote, but so are differences. Welsh's earliest publications – mainly parts of *Trainspotting* –

appeared in *New Writing Scotland* and other small circulation publications of local importance and influence. Stuart's first publication was a story in the globally influential *New Yorker*, one month before *Shuggie*'s release, with a second story published in the same high-profile magazine just as the Booker shortlist was being announced. Welsh was championed by editor (and poet) Robin Robertson (Secker & Warburg, then Jonathan Cape) as part of his successful effort to promote new Scottish fiction. Stuart was championed by his US agent, Anna Klein (at Curtis Brown), whose clients included Hanya Yanagihara, whose bestselling, Booker-nominated *A Little Life* (2015) in effect help prepare the way for *Shuggie*. The Booker longlisting was crucial to *Shuggie*'s success, but those early US reviews, however few, set the stage for how *Shuggie* was received in terms of its universality ('a testament to the indomitable human spirit' [Bankhead]) and its style.[1] In her *New York Times* review, Leah Hager Cohen wrote: 'Douglas Stuart writes in a sense-drenched Glaswegian prose […] studded with slang and phonetically rendered dialogue.' Stuart displays enormous skill in creating memorable characters, weaving together so many interrelated family narratives over a decade of time and multiple generations and in creating richly synesthetic lines such as 'the stale smells of sweat and cum mixed with the static heat of black-and-white televisions and the sting of amber aftershave'. But Shuggie is also studded with passages that are, as John Self said, 'over-egged'. The overwriting, the striving for literariness, is especially evident, and distracting, in the overuse of similes as if they were *sine qua non* of literary *haute couture*: there are so many 'likes' that they give the four thousand fucks in Kelman's *How Late It Was, How Late* a run for the money. And just the way US interviewers felt compelled to mention Stuart's 'soft Scottish burr', reviewers like Cohen (and publisher Grove in the novel's online study guide) made far more of the novel's 'slang and phonetically rendered dialogue' than the novel does, suggesting just how insulated US audiences are from written or spoken Scots, the BritBox series *Shetland* being something of an exception.

Writing in *Bella Caledonia*, Henry Bell acknowledged *Shuggie* as 'a great achievement', yet felt that was there was something off about it: the novel presents a Glasgow 'frozen in time'. Something similar can be said of the two reviewers who strove hardest to put the novel in a Scottish context. Colm Toibin (US-based *Bookforum*) and James Walton (*New York Review of Books*) create a rather static, gloom-laden view of Scottish literature. (For an equally static but cheerful view of *Shuggie*'s Scottishness, see the *Guardian*'s Alex Preston calling

Shuggie 'resolutely, wonderfully Scottish at heart'.)[2] This is the reason Scott Hames's cleverly titled 'Letter from America' is so important, and refreshing, for Hames understands, more clearly than anyone else, that the novel, or rather the novel's reception, 'traces a shift in literary nationalism over the past few decades'. In 1993, the concern was that *Trainspotting* presented Scots the way the English like to see them. 'Today', Hames writes, 'nobody's afraid of a *Shuggie* effect that might detract from Scotland's good name, or spoil the lucrative touristic fantasies of Outlander'. 'Letter from America' ends with Hames quoting the first part of the opening sentence of a *Times* article (21 November 2020), a sentence I will quote here in full: 'Douglas Stuart's Booker Prize win is a shot in the arm for the Scottish novel, a genre that has been going through a fallow period.' Assuming 'a shot in the arm' alludes to *Trainspotting*, then that 'fallow period' would extend back a quarter century and fail to take into account works that do not rise to World Republic of Letters/Economy of Prestige status but that have considerable local impact, especially collectively for what they represent about the healthy and diverse state of contemporary Scottish literature, publishing and reviewing outlets such as Alistair Braidwood's *Scots Whay Hae*. In a year that saw the publication of *Shuggie* and Maggie O'Farrell's *Hamnet*, that state came under two threats: the pandemic and Creative Scotland's failing to fund the Saltire Society's Scottish Books of the Year awards (started in 1937). When the awards did return the following year, *Shuggie* was one of the six shortlisted titles, but the award for Scottish Fiction Book of the Year went to Ely Percy's *Duck Feet*, set in Renfrew and Paisley, written in assuming prose but rich in local dialect, and published by Edinburgh-based start-up Monstrous Regiment, 'independent and intersectional publishing since 2017.' *Shuggie* is one kind of Scottish literary success, *Duck Feet* another, on a different scale, but no less of one for a' that: a shot in the arm for a literature that has not been fallow for quite some time, reports to the contrary from the World Republic of Letters notwithstanding.

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'While we should celebrate the 2020 Booker Prize for its diversity in voice, representation and themes', Stevie Marsden points out, 'it has been borne of a specific moment in which we have been forced to examine societal inequities and structural inequalities.' This is a moment when, Charlotte Higgins adds, 'The Booker has grown more, rather than less, important as an emerging force in the publishing industry' as 'the novel's cultural force is wavering as other forms of entertainment loom ever larger'. Making the 'right' choice has never seemed so important, or so fraught. In 2019, for only the third time in the Booker's fifty-four-year history, the deadlocked judges selected two winners, Margaret Atwood and Bernardine Evaristo. By contrast, the 2020 decision was 'quick and unanimous' (Lawless) and came soon after honorary Booker Foundation vice president Emma Nicholson had been removed from her post for making homophobic remarks. One of that year's judges later described *Shuggie* as 'gay, but not too gay' (Higgins) – certainly not as gay as Adam Mars-Jones's *Box Hill* (2020) or Alan Hollinghurst's 2004 Booker-winning *The Line of Beauty*. So, to say, as a *Guardian* headline put it, that *Shuggie* 'tells us that the Booker has matured' (Clark) is a stretch. 'If the only other Scot to win the Booker, James Kelman, was', as Robin Robertson put it, 'a persistent thorn in the side of the English establishment' (Garcia), then Stuart, who has credited *How Late* for 'chang[ing] his life' (Clark), is just the opposite, the 2020 Booker's proverbial poster child. And if, as James Wood said, 'the overwrought response [to *How Late*] seemed to justify Kelman's extremity', dressing down for the ceremony and using his acceptance speech to castigate the English literary establishment and to proclaim 'my country and my language have

a right to exist', the enthusiastic response afforded *Shuggie* begs the question, what does this all-but-universal acclaim – however well deserved – overlook, downplay or otherwise obscure?

Although described as the second Scottish author to win the Booker, it is more accurate to call Stuart the first Scottish-American or Scottish diaspora winner, having arrived in the US twenty years earlier and begun *Shuggie* ten years after that. Scottish Diaspora studies can help us understand both the novel, including its composition, and its author, a first-generation aspirational (economic) immigrant. (Immigration plays a small but important role in the novel: both of Shuggie's older half-siblings migrate to escape their miserable home life and for economic opportunities – the brother to London, the sister to South Africa. America plays a small role too in the form of the cowboy-themed club to which Eugene takes Agnes.) As expatriates 'renew their interest in their culture, their history and their homeland, it is precisely the "indistinct memory" of the homeland that is attractive' (Leith and Sim, 6) – a memory that is no less indistinct, in Stuart's case, for being drawn so vividly. It was a memory Stuart (14 April 2020) refreshed by studying Raymond Depardon's photographs of 1980s Glasgow, freezing it in time in order to better connect individual identity to place (Basu, 6–7, 222) through a form of time travel (not entirely unlike in the Americanized Scotland of *Brigadoon* and *Outlander*). Like other migrants, Stuart felt homesick, but he also felt that 'America gave me a belief, and it helped remove me from the British class system, which empowered me to talk about it' (Chilton). He differs from the stereotypical Scottish diaspora writer in several noteworthy ways: traveling frequently between New York and Glasgow (and globally for his work in textile design); not hailing from or writing about the Highlands and Islands; and not 'imagin[ing] Scotland as a charming rural country' (Varricchio, 196). Nor is Stuart representative of the Scottish-American diaspora which, as David McCrone explains, 'is altogether a stranger, more exotic phenomenon' being 'based on "ancestral" claims of a rather distant sort' (520). In this regard, Stuart seems marginally closer to the lead characters in Kelman's two American novels, *You Have to Be Careful in the Land of the Free* (2004) and *Dirt Road* (2016).

Written largely at his and his husband's Catskills retreat and during quiet time on work-related long-haul flights, *Shuggie Bain* is a dysfunctional childhood recollected in relative diasporic tranquility, with the writing serving the writer

much the same therapeutic (or 'cathartic' – Stuart's word: see Anderson) purpose that Paul Basu explores in his 2007 book, *Highland Homecomings*. It is a purpose that the Scottish government began capitalizing on in 2009 with its Year of Homecoming and that Visit Scotland continued with its succession of themed years, starting with the Year of Natural Scotland in 2013 and another Year of Homecoming in 2014 and continuing to 2022, the Year of Stories. Read in this context, *Shuggie*'s critical and commercial success as a Scottish diaspora novel has become for Scotland, or more specifically for the Scottish government, 'a significant potential resource' (Leith and Sim, 8). This resource yielded a second dividend when Stuart announced, in his first in-person interview, with First Minister Nicola Sturgeon at the 2021 Edinburgh Book Festival, that he was returning to Scotland to live: a highly successful and visible example of return migration.

The proof of the poet, Walt Whitman wrote, 'shall be sternly deferred till his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorb'd it'. By that standard, Stuart has been catapulted to unofficial national bard status in no time and across transatlantic space. This was especially clear when his interview with the First Minister was scheduled as the Edinburgh International Book Festival's featured closing event. During that interview, Stuart was characteristically generous in expressing his gratitude for all that Scotland had afforded him, particularly educational opportunities (his high school Art and English teachers, training in textile design at Heriot Watt). As he said in an earlier interview, 'I owe Scotland everything' (Allardice; see also Lichtig), which, in a quite literal way, he did: he owed it the material that became *Shuggie Bain*. Scotland can say something similar, for *Shuggie* is the most globally significant Scottish cultural phenomenon since the mid-1990s successes of *Trainspotting* and *Braveheart*.

Just as the Booker confirmed Stuart's place in the Economy of Prestige and World Republic of Letters, the interview with Sturgeon confirmed contemporary Scottish literature's place, yet again and, again, as if for the first time, with the added benefit, this time, of world recognition of a culturally independent and politically semi-independent Scotland. Stuart's appearance six months earlier at the 2021 Paisley Book Festival situated Douglas and his novel differently. The festival features writers with local connections and is 'inspired by the actions of the 1820 Paisley Radicals', with the 2021 events looking to celebrate Paisley 'as a place where people value their […] history' of 'grassroots rebellion, revolution and

activism'. For the 'Scottish Masculinities' event, Paisley Festival paired Stuart with two other writers who had recently published semi-autobiographical novels about young male characters set in the greater Glasgow areas in which their authors had been raised: Andrew O'Hagan's *Mayflies* (Ayrshire) and Graeme Armstrong's debut *The Young Team* (Airdrie), a slang and dialect rich novel about gang culture. (The panel was hosted by Kirsten Innis, whose *Scabby Queen* was also published in 2020.) Seen together in this way, the three writers' novels create a small world of shared concerns about a particular place in Scotland and at a particular moment as well; a small world, to be sure, but by no means a disparagingly provincial one; rather, it is one which addresses local conditions and needs. With too few exceptions, elevating the prodigiously talented Stuart's novel often came at the expense of failing to acknowledge Scottish contemporaries and precursors such as Bill Douglas's grim *Childhood* trilogy (1972) and Lynne Ramsay's *Ratcatcher* (1999). Reviewers and others mentioned A. McCarthy Arthur and H. Kingsley Long's *No Mean City* (1935) but again, with hardly an exception, not the contemporary writer most associated with Glasgow, Alasdair Gray, who had died just the year before. Nor was there any mention of Kelman's novel *Kieron Smith Boy*, the Saltire Society's 2008 Scottish Book of the Year, 'the monologue of an unexceptional, inarticulate lad growing up in Glasgow's poorer neighborhoods […] [whose] voice is utterly, mercilessly authentic' (Faber 2008) in ways Shuggie's more unusually mature voice could not, being based on the peculiar circumstances of Stuart's upbringing.

Of course, *Kieron Smith Boy* is not about growing up gay, let alone with a proud but alcoholic mother, or as the *New Yorker* memorably put it, 'growing up queer before the internet' (Leyshon), in a Scotland where homosexuality was criminalized until 1980, and where the gay writers who Stuart's English teachers recommended he read were the Americans Armistead Maupin and Tennessee Williams (Schneier), not Edwin Morgan, who did not come out publicly until 1990. What is odd is that Stuart's sensitive handling of Shuggie as a lone gay child in the homophobic Pithead wilderness did not lead reviewers and others to at least mention how rich contemporary Scottish gay literature is and has been. Leaving aside Iain Banks's gender-bending *Wasp Factory* (1984), there are anthologies: Toni Davidson's ground-breaking *And Thus Will I Freely Sing* (1989), Joanne Winning's *The Crazy Jig* (1992), Joseph Mills's wittily subtitled *Borderline: The Monstrous Book of Scottish Gay Writing* (2001), Zoe Strachan's *Out There* (2014), and many more since. Luke Sutherland, whose *Venus as a Boy* (2004) has recently

been adapted for the Scottish stage, former Makar Jackie Kay, Louise Welsh, Ali Smith, Val McDermid, and Kirsty Logan are among the most high-profile LGBTQ writers from the 90s and after. Christopher Whyte's *Gendering the Nation* (1995), Winning's essay in *The Edinburgh Companion to Contemporary Scottish Literature* (2007), and Carole Jones's 'From Subtext to Gaytext' in Scott Lyall's *Community of Modern Scottish Literature* (2016) have all helped bring academic attention to the field.

In being so closely drawn from and then associated with Stuart's youth, *Shuggie* is so autobiographical that in interviews, his comments on his novel and those on his life appear not only equally compelling, but even interchangeable (see especially Stuart's interview with John Wilson). Part *bildungsroman*, part *kuntslerroman*, Stuart's portrait of the artist as a young boy bears a certain resemblance to Alan Warner's *Morvern Callar* (1995) whose title character launches her career when she sends her dead boyfriend's novel off under her own name – the admittedly imprecise equivalent being Douglas's converting his mother's memoir, which she wanted her young son to ghost-write, but which never got beyond the dedication to Elizabeth Taylor, into his novel. Not surprisingly, the most acclaimed contemporary writer of autofiction, Karl Knausgaard, chose *Shuggie* as the sole novel in his list of six 'cultural highlights of the year,' and although Douglas has insisted that his novel is not a memoir, reviewers often drew the connection to Irish diasporic writer Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* (1996). However, in keeping with Scottish literature's 'always a bridesmaid, never a bride' status, reviewers and others not only failed to link *Shuggie* to other contemporary Scottish autobiographical novels (the Paisley panel mentioned earlier being a welcome exception), but, and more especially, and dismayingly, to Scottish literary memoirs of the past dozen years or so – beginning with John Burnside, Janice Galloway, Jackie Kay and Damian Barr and continuing with Amy Liptrot, Kerry Hudson, and the late Deborah Orr. In our post-Death of the Author age, interest in the author thrives, in biographies, autofiction, and memoirs, both of the unknown, such as Aidan Martin's *Euphoric Recall* (2020) of growing up badly in Ladywell, and of the very well-known, Alan Cumming's *Not My Father's Son* (2014) and, post-*Shuggie*, Cumming's *Baggage* (2021), Bobby Gillespie's *Tenement Kid* (2021) and Michael Pedersen's *Boy Friends* (2022).

Insofar as they often feature abuse, trauma and deprivation, memoirs such as

these and autobiographical novels such as *Shuggie* risk being what so many reviewers felt obliged to say *Shuggie* was not: yet another example of Scottish miserabilism and poverty porn. Stuart has said he was 'acutely aware of writing "poverty safari" for a largely middle-class readership': 'People like to come through for a tour and then they go back to worrying about oat milk. I thought, "Well if we are going to do that, then you are coming for a stay"' (Allardice). *Poverty Safari* is, of course, the title of the 2017 book by Darren McGarvey, the Scottish rapper better known as Loki. Not 'a cheap holiday in other people's misery', *Poverty Safari* is an attempt, as the subtitle puts it, at 'understanding the anger of the British underclass' – an overtly intertextual attempt: each of the thirty-two chapters are titled after books, one-quarter of them Scottish. What absolved *Shuggie* of the poverty-porn charge was the deeply affecting writing, but even more, I'd say, is the para- or extra-textual fact of Stuart's life beyond the novel's framing device, which has the fifteen-year-old fending for himself. Beyond that frame is Stuart completing his education despite enormous obstacles, emigrating to the US, becoming a successful textile designer, marrying his partner (on the same day he signed the contract for *Shuggie Bain*), and doing all this, in effect, on his own: without an MFA and despite his novel being rejected twenty, thirty-two, forty times, in the US and the UK, having it accepted by a major publisher, only to have sales falter as the pandemic took hold; then, months later, having it longlisted, then shortlisted for the Booker, and finally winning the prize itself. *Shuggie* is a novel set in an earlier time that is very much of its time, marked – in reading and reception – by the pandemic and the economic inequality that helped propel *Parasite* (2019) and *Squid Game* (2021), but different too in its resembling the northern England films *Brassed Off* (1996), *The Full Monty* (1997), and *Billy Elliot* (2000) with their hopeful twists on hopeless situations. So perhaps we should think of *Shuggie* not as poverty porn, but instead as inspiration porn: as proof that Thatcher was right: there is no such thing as society, only the individual and the family. That of course was not at all Stuart's intention, but it is this very paradox that readings of *Shuggie* as a political novel about the Thatcher years obscured and that is at the heart of Damian Barr's 2013 memoir, *Maggie and Me*, about growing up poor and gay in Carfin, just outside Glasgow, before achieving success as a journalist and author and learning, as Barr writes at memoir's end, that Thatcher would have liked him very much.

In writing a novel without any training in creative writing, without any expectation that his novel, if completed, would ever be published and if published

read, let alone become a bestseller and just the first in a series of successes, we could be speaking just as easily of Irvine Welsh as of Douglas Stuart. 'Comparisons with *Trainspotting* are inevitable', as Chris Moss wrote, but so are differences. Welsh's earliest publications – mainly parts of *Trainspotting* – appeared in *New Writing Scotland* and other small circulation publications of local importance and influence. Stuart's first publication was a story in the globally influential *New Yorker*, one month before *Shuggie*'s release, with a second story published in the same high-profile magazine just as the Booker shortlist was being announced. Welsh was championed by editor (and poet) Robin Robertson (Secker & Warburg, then Jonathan Cape) as part of his successful effort to promote new Scottish fiction. Stuart was championed by his US agent, Anna Klein (at Curtis Brown), whose clients included Hanya Yanagihara, whose bestselling, Booker-nominated *A Little Life* (2015) in effect help prepare the way for *Shuggie*. The Booker longlisting was crucial to *Shuggie*'s success, but those early US reviews, however few, set the stage for how *Shuggie* was received in terms of its universality ('a testament to the indomitable human spirit' [Bankhead]) and its style.[3] In her *New York Times* review, Leah Hager Cohen wrote: 'Douglas Stuart writes in a sense-drenched Glaswegian prose […] studded with slang and phonetically rendered dialogue.' Stuart displays enormous skill in creating memorable characters, weaving together so many interrelated family narratives over a decade of time and multiple generations and in creating richly synesthetic lines such as 'the stale smells of sweat and cum mixed with the static heat of black-and-white televisions and the sting of amber aftershave'. But Shuggie is also studded with passages that are, as John Self said, 'over-egged'. The overwriting, the striving for literariness, is especially evident, and distracting, in the overuse of similes as if they were *sine qua non* of literary *haute couture*: there are so many 'likes' that they give the four thousand fucks in Kelman's *How Late It Was, How Late* a run for the money. And just the way US interviewers felt compelled to mention Stuart's 'soft Scottish burr', reviewers like Cohen (and publisher Grove in the novel's online study guide) made far more of the novel's 'slang and phonetically rendered dialogue' than the novel does, suggesting just how insulated US audiences are from written or spoken Scots, the BritBox series *Shetland* being something of an exception.

Writing in *Bella Caledonia*, Henry Bell acknowledged *Shuggie* as 'a great achievement', yet felt that was there was something off about it: the novel presents a Glasgow 'frozen in time'. Something similar can be said of the two

reviewers who strove hardest to put the novel in a Scottish context. Colm Toibin (US-based *Bookforum*) and James Walton (*New York Review of Books*) create a rather static, gloom-laden view of Scottish literature. (For an equally static but cheerful view of *Shuggie*'s Scottishness, see the *Guardian*'s Alex Preston calling *Shuggie* 'resolutely, wonderfully Scottish at heart'.)[4] This is the reason Scott Hames's cleverly titled 'Letter from America' is so important, and refreshing, for Hames understands, more clearly than anyone else, that the novel, or rather the novel's reception, 'traces a shift in literary nationalism over the past few decades'. In 1993, the concern was that *Trainspotting* presented Scots the way the English like to see them. 'Today', Hames writes, 'nobody's afraid of a *Shuggie* effect that might detract from Scotland's good name, or spoil the lucrative touristic fantasies of Outlander'. 'Letter from America' ends with Hames quoting the first part of the opening sentence of a *Times* article (21 November 2020), a sentence I will quote here in full: 'Douglas Stuart's Booker Prize win is a shot in the arm for the Scottish novel, a genre that has been going through a fallow period.' Assuming 'a shot in the arm' alludes to *Trainspotting*, then that 'fallow period' would extend back a quarter century and fail to take into account works that do not rise to World Republic of Letters/Economy of Prestige status but that have considerable local impact, especially collectively for what they represent about the healthy and diverse state of contemporary Scottish literature, publishing and reviewing outlets such as Alistair Braidwood's *Scots Whay Hae*. In a year that saw the publication of *Shuggie* and Maggie O'Farrell's *Hamnet*, that state came under two threats: the pandemic and Creative Scotland's failing to fund the Saltire Society's Scottish Books of the Year awards (started in 1937). When the awards did return the following year, *Shuggie* was one of the six shortlisted titles, but the award for Scottish Fiction Book of the Year went to Ely Percy's *Duck Feet*, set in Renfrew and Paisley, written in assuming prose but rich in local dialect, and published by Edinburgh-based start-up Monstrous Regiment, 'independent and intersectional publishing since 2017.' *Shuggie* is one kind of Scottish literary success, *Duck Feet* another, on a different scale, but no less of one for a' that: a shot in the arm for a literature that has not been fallow for quite some time, reports to the contrary from the World Republic of Letters notwithstanding.

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