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# The Bottle Imp

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Introduction to *Bandanna*

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I wrote the first draft of *Bandanna* during the summer of 1997 and it represents the first real attempt on my part to meld a realist urban youth aesthetic with a sense of spiritual immanence. I had long been experimenting with drawing on themes derived from South Asia and the Middle East and trying to infuse these into a contemporary Scottish diorama, with limited success. Until *Bandanna*, I hadn't really found the right tonal structure.

I had been attending a writers' group in Paisley for some six years and was very fortunate because the group was packed with talented writers. Agnes Owens and then Gerrie Fellowes were the writers-in-residence when I attended and they had been preceded (before my sojourn there) by Tom Leonard and Jim Kelman. And so the members of the group included people like Graham Fulton, Marion Arnott, Margaret Fulton-Cook, Brian Whittingham and Raymond Soltyssek – all of whom went on to become published and highly-regarded creative writers. The dominant voice of the group was contemporary urban realist and so for several years I was steeped in this powerful and self-consciously political idiom at a time when, as a style, it remained exciting and ebullient. But I also became conscious of the potential limitations of a single type of voice.

For several years, I had been trying to write novels and in the January of that year, had had my first acceptance, by the London-based Creation Books, for the literary erotic fiction, *The Snake* (published in November 1997 under the pseudonym, Melanie Desmoulins). In March of the same year, I visited Pakistan and bought (literally) a case-load of books, which I proceeded voraciously to read. In South Asia, it is possible to obtain many books which are long out-of-print in the UK, tomes penned by ghostly colonial nutters and fat volumes from the hands of contemporary students undertaking PhDs on the subject of jinns. I returned to the short story genre, partly to

re-charge my creative batteries, drawing on some of this illuminatory and sometimes near-psychotic material, and partly to allow myself complete freedom to experiment with a variety of styles, voices, themes and settings. I deliberately read Kelman's short stories and related works by other Scottish writers in order to imbibe – almost in the manner of a method actor – the appropriate sensibility. As a consequence, over a period of around eight to nine months, I penned the majority of the stories which later went to make up my anthology, *The Burning Mirror* (Polygon, Edinburgh, 2001). One of the stories, *Rabia*, later that year (1997) won 3<sup>rd</sup> Prize in the Bridport Competition. Of course, I was still working full-time in inner-city Glasgow, so I had daily access to proletarian voices, not to mention the voices of the people amongst whom I had grown up. But I adapted the 'Glasgow working-class' voices I'd heard or read to approximate more closely the 'South Asian Glasgow working-class voice', a construct into which I wanted to breathe life.

*Bandanna* is about the redemptive, illuminatory power of music as entheogen for the altered consciousness of history.

When I first read *Bandanna* out loud in front of a public audience in November of 1997 at the large theatre in the Tramway, Glasgow, and a year later to a packed house in Waterstone's bookshop (the story having been accepted for publication by the ASLS in *The Glory Signs*, the 16<sup>th</sup> in the series of their excellent annual 'New Writing Scotland' volumes), there was complete silence as though everyone had been rocked back on their heels. Nothing remotely like this had ever been written – or spoken – before. During those fifteen minutes, I sensed that I was passing through an epochal, and perhaps almost shamanic, moment in Scottish literature. Not that it was anything to do with me. I am merely a plumber of words. The moment, and the story behind it, were conjured up by a fruitful conjunction of lunacies set in Middle C.

Peace,

Suhayl Saadi

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