



ISSN 1754-1514

The Bottle Imp

Issue 14, November 2013
An Interview with James Kelman
J. P. O'Malley

Born in Glasgow in 1946, James Kelman left school at fifteen to begin an apprenticeship as a compositor. His first collection of short stories *An Old Pub Near the Angel* was published in the United States in 1973. It was another nine years before his first novel *The Busconductor Hines* appeared. Kelman has received several prizes for his fiction including: the Cheltenham Prize for *Greyhound for Breakfast* and the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for *A Disaffection*. His fourth novel, *How Late it Was, How Late*, landed him the Booker Prize in 1994, amid a storm of controversy. To date he has published eight collections of short stories, eight novels, and two books of essays.

His latest novel, *Mo Said She Was Quirky*, is a stream of consciousness monologue, told between third and first person, depicting the life of Helen: a mother of one, who lives in a one-bedroom flat in South London with her boyfriend and young daughter. Kelman's minimalist style, with its strict adherence to repetition and rhythm, enables the reader to seamlessly enter into the anxious mind of his main protagonist, who describes her deepest fears and alienation from the society she is part of.

Kelman's writing is famous for its depiction of working-class life in Scotland, as well as his use of the vernacular, which subsequently inspired other Scottish writers – such as Irvine Welsh – to write in a phonetic-based Scottish dialect. While Kelman can certainly take credit for being an original, his work is also heavily influenced by the European and modernist tradition, sharing similarities with Kafka, Joyce and Hamsun.

Kelman spoke to *The Bottle Imp* about writing from the inner psyche of his characters,

why he believes we live in a corrupt society, and how his subject matter always returns to existential dilemma.

When you started out as a writer, was it always your intention to constantly challenge the conventions of the canon of English literature?

Well I hadn't been through a higher education: I left school at fifteen, so I wasn't in a challenging position to begin with. I figured if I was going to write, I would write as strongly as I could. That meant writing from my own experience to begin with, which was in an ordinary, working class, and urban context. But being as true as I could to my own community put me at loggerheads with the English literary mainstream.

Did you feel that your writing was truly original in that sense?

Absolutely. I go back to the example of how can I write a story about four guys playing a game of pool, in an ordinary urban context, if I'm not allowed to use the word *fuck*? That notion that it's fine to be a writer, but you can only write about things that we – the establishment – say you can write about. This turns into the business of the author suppressing their own culture. Which is really a part of the history of mainstream English literature: whether it's Irish writers, Scottish, or even working-class English writers. Part of your duty as a writer is always to suppress voices from your own community.

That got me thinking about an Orwell quote: "the great enemy of all language is insincerity". Is that something you agree with?

I don't see it in these terms. Orwell is not a mentor or anything like that. It's more straightforward: all human beings have a faculty to speak a language, and understand a language, and all the other stuff is simply value systems put in place, usually by groups put in power, whether that is religious formations or whatever. Human beings use language, and that's that.

In your new book, *Mo Said She Was Quirky*, was finding a consistency in the voice of the central character something that you really tried to perfect?

That has to be the case or otherwise it falls apart. To get that consistency in the writing is very demanding. What you assume will happen

sooner or later, is that the rhythm will exist in such a way that you know the voice of the human being is there. From then on, it's to do with literary skills, technique, or the need to be painstaking. Where there is any inconsistency or ambiguity it must be cut out. It's just a case of being true to it.

Does that same criteria apply for keeping the dialogue of your characters consistent?

One of the dangers in writing is that you often switch between the language that the critics use, and the way you know things to happen. When you talk about prose, the simple fact is that you are in that rhythm, that being of your character. It's really about staying within the pulse or the breath of your character. Anything else is just extraneous.

Could you talk about the narrative technique with this current book?

Well it is a third-party narrative, although there is an occasional first-party narrative also, which is a technique that I have used quite often. This technique is using the third-person narrative that walks between a seamless recognition of the being of the central character. You end up getting philosophically absurd when you talk in these terms, but it's a thing I have been engaged in formally as a writer, almost from the beginning really. It happened in my first published novel – that transition from third party into first party – but it doesn't mean using an "I" voice necessarily, but what it does mean is that you are operating from within the psyche of the central character.

I found the character of Helen to be very anti-male, would you agree with that?

I don't see her as being anti male, it's to do with acts of love or socialization, that certain level of intimacy, where you have to trust other individuals. Women, generally speaking have to trust males that are going to offer trust. Helen, for example has to offer her six-year-old daughter, and trust that her partner will be a proper surrogate father and not be an abuser. It's not to do with hating males, she is just in that situation, where women often are, where they have to put themselves – as well as their children – in vulnerable positions.

Would you describe yourself as having a very existential view of humanity?

No, I don't see it in these universal terms. However, I do see it in terms of the horrendous

aspects of our society here in the West: giving everything, or taking everything, or allowing everything to be stolen really. People having to constantly survive in horrendous situations. We live in a society where footballers earn twenty times someone's annual wages in one week. Meanwhile people's children or grandchildren are waiting six months to get a hospital bed to get an operation done. I just find the whole thing degenerate and shocking.

Is this why so much of your characters are often uneducated, or not politically astute?

Well they may not be politically sophisticated, or aware of things within society, because these things aren't broadcasted. People have to learn that the society they live in is a corrupt society. We are brought up to revere and respect this society. People learn these things eventually, but it's not what gets taught within their education system.

Do you see yourself as nihilist?

It's not to do with nihilism, it's to do with learning the history, or the reality of the lives of your community, and your own people, and then after that, you ask questions: how do we try and correct things? How can we improve the lives of our children or our community, is it possible? It's like discovering what it is to foment revolution or something. But I don't think it's nihilistic at all. I'm 66, so when you continue to write, you don't do it out of negation, it's only positive.

Do you ever put in subtle polemics into your own stories to try and promote a political point of view?

No. You would get found out too easily in the writing. As much as you would like to put in a slogan like 'this machine kills fascists' or whatever, you really can't be polemical in story writing. You are creating characters, so you cannot have your own thoughts in there; otherwise it becomes an intrusion if you do.

Why is it that so many of your characters seem to be in a constant state of anxiety?

When you do manage to operate within the being of the individual in this way, there is nowhere else to go other than what you might label as existential dilemma, which is the fundamental aspect of what it is to be human really. The sixteen hours of the day that we are awake, we are faced with situations and problems to resolve.

J. P. O'Malley is a freelance journalist living in South London. His work has appeared in many publications including: The New Statesman, The Economist, The Spectator, Quietus.com, The Asia Literary Review, The Sunday Times, and The Irish Examiner. Follow JP on Twitter: **@johnpaulomallez**



ASLS is a registered charity no. SC006535
ASLS is supported by Creative Scotland



ALBA | CHRUTHACHAIL



www.thebottleimp.org.uk

The Bottle Imp is the ezine of the Scottish Writing Exhibition www.scottishwriting.org.uk
and is published by the Association for Scottish Literary Studies www.asls.org.uk