# the Colverstone Review

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# Contributors

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**Angela Cobbinah** is an experienced journalist who worked for many years in Nigeria as a reporter-at-large for one of the country's largest magazines.Since then she has operated mostly as a freelancer, working for a wide range of organisations, including the BBC World Service, where she specialised in Africa, Black Britain and the arts. She lives in London.

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**M.J. Hyland** is a multi-award-winning author and senior lecturer in Creative Writing at the University of Manchester. Her first novel, *How The Light Gets* In, was short-listed for the 2004 Commonwealth Writers' Prize. Her follow up, *Carry Me Down*, was short-listed for the Commonwealth Writers' Prize (2006), the Man Booker Prize (2006) and was winner of both the Hawthornden Prize and The Encore Prize (2007). Her third novel, *This Is How*, was long-listed for both the Orange Prize and the IMPAC award (2009). She has twice been short-listed for the BBC National Short Story Competition.

**Ryan Licata** is writer of flash-fiction, short stories and other forms of prose. He has published a series of hundred-word stories in collaboration with the Italian illustrator, Hannes Pasqualini, and is currently working towards an MFA in Creative Writing at Kingston University.

**James Miller** was educated at Oxford University, University College London and King's College London, where his took his Ph.D. He currently teaches Creative Writing and English literature at Kingston University and is an expert in critical theory and 20th-century American literature. His highly acclaimed début novel, *Lost Boys* (Little, Brown) was one of Time Out magazine's Books of the Year in 2008. His second novel, *Sunshine State* (Little, Brown) was published in 2010. He is currently working on his third novel, which explores the present financial crisis and anti-cuts protest. His stories have appeared in numerous anthologies and he has written reviews for *The New York Observer* and the *London Review of Books*, amongst others. He lives in London.

**Courttia Newland's** first novel, *The Scholar*, was published in 1997. Further critically acclaimed work includes *Society Within* (1999), *Snakeskin* (2002), *The Dying Wish* (2006), *Music For The Off-Key* (2006) and *A Book Of Blues* (2011). He is co-editor of IC3: *The Penguin Book Of New Black Writing In Britain* (2000). His latest novel, *The Gospel According To Cane*, has recently been published by Akashic Books (US) and by Telegram (UK).

**Graeme K. Talboys** has worked variously as a factory floor sweeper, a gardener and a school teacher. To date he has published twelve books (eight non-fiction works and four novels) and has a short story collection on its way. Originally from London, he now lives in Ballantrae, Scotland.

**James W. Wood** was educated at Cambridge University. After graduating, he won a scholarship to study in America under Derek Walcott and Professor Sir Geoffrey Hill. Since then he has become a distinguished poet and critic, his poetry reviews regularly appearing in Scotland On Sunday and other notable publications. In 2011, he published the novel, *Stealing Fire* (Leamington Books), which was short-listed in the "book to film" category at the Rome Film Festival. His latest collection of poems, *The Anvil's Prayer*, will be published in Spring 2013. He lives in Edinburgh.

# A word from the editor...

In a 2008 interview with the *New York Times*, Peter Matthiessen, one of the founders of the *Paris Review*, confessed to using the magazine as a front for his undercover CIA activities in the years immediately after World-War II. For the avoidance of doubt and to forestall any future rumours, I want to make it clear that I am not, nor have I ever been, affiliated to any government agencies, covert or otherwise, and that my motives for launching the *Colverstone Review* consist of nothing more sinister than a desire to publish quality writing.

Especially, I wanted to create a space for those hard-to-categorise, so-called 'occasional' pieces that are every bit as important to a writer's output as books. Forgive me for sounding so evangelical a note, but I believe that literary reviews play a vital, often under-valued role in the world of publishing. Without them, many of the world's best-known essays, poems and short stories might never have seen the light of day.

I've chosen to publish in e-form because it's cost-effective and time-saving, but going digital doesn't guarantee the one thing that all publications need: readers. Whilst planning this first issue of the review I thought I should check out the competition, the masochist in me demanded it. After only a few minutes of surfing the web it soon became depressingly obvious that there are as many online reviews out there as there are trees in the Amazon. But the question is: are they being read? I have to believe so.

I guess in the end it comes down to quality of content. The subjective nature of such considerations notwithstanding, I'm of the opinion that good writing will always attract readers and that bad writing will repel them. Standards have to be high and on that basis I'm happy to say that the contributors have done me proud. I cannot thank them enough for all the hard work they've put into their pieces, all the care they've taken, and without being paid. To each and every one of you, I extend a heartfelt gratitude. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank the editorial team – Daphne, Cecile, Tiphaine, Miriam and George. Literally, I couldn't have done this without you. And finally, a word to the reader. For taking the time to stop by, may your days be long and your nights longer still.

*Stephen Thompson*

# I Wish I'd Written...

## by Nick Barlay

It began with a funny story about torture. The story led, circuitously, to Yevgeny Zamyatin's great dystopian novel, *We*. The funny story about torture was told by George Pálóczi-Horváth, the Hungarian dissident who, like my parents, had escaped Hungary in 1956. Unlike them, he had been arrested in 1949 and tortured by the Hungarian secret police.

I remember him sitting in my father's study in the mid 1970s, white-haired, statesmanlike, surrounded by books, some written by my father, and *The Undefeated*, Pálóczi-Horváth's autobiographical account of his experiences through the war and up to the late 1950s. Aged twelve, I found it funny when he said that, faced with torture, his innocence had been a disadvantage. How could it have been? 'Because,' he said, 'the guilty at least had something to confess.' By contrast, he had nothing to tell his torturers, no names to betray. So it was even funnier when he finally did give them the names of his British imperialist contacts. They were stations on the London Underground: Mr. John Wood, Mr. Baker, and so on.

And I remember another book being mentioned, one that stood close on the bookshelf to *The Undefeated*. It was a novel, *Darkness At Noon*, written in 1940 by another Hungarian, Arthur Koestler. The books were close not because of the Hungarian connection nor because of an accidental mismatching of fact and fiction. It was that the territory of the books, as I discovered when I read them soon after, was so similar. It was a territory in which fact and fiction could coexist. Martha Gellhorn once described *The Undefeated* as 'Kafka in action'. It could just as easily be described as Koestler in action.

*Darkness At Noon* is only thinly fictional. Koestler looked at the world around him, and partly based the story on his own prison experience.More impotantly, its central character, Rubashov, a prisoner undergoing interrogation, wrestles with the logic of confessing to crimes he has not committed. In his case, his principal interrogator thinks that torture would be pointless because Rubashov will eventually respond to the overwhelming force of reason, of revolutionary logic that emphasises ends over means, the collective over the individual, and historical tendency over circumstantial eccentricity.

Once on this territory, it was a short step from Koestler to Orwell. Already in my teens I'd heard of 'a boot stamping on a human face'. This was my family history, through Nazism and Communism. And, despite being born in London, I didn't need to look far to find the wearer of such a boot. Tommy was the local National Front representative, a skinhead with a swastika and a fishmonger's assistant with an array of long knives. In his very Orwellian Doc Marten boots, he and his associates made life hell for two Hungarian-Jewish kids, me and my brother. Dystopia has a way of popping up out of nowhere.

In fact, the problem for most readers coming to *1984* at the tail end of the 20th century and beyond, is that it's impossible not to have first heard the famous neologisms. They precede the reading. They are so familiar as to be inescapable. So it's entirely possible these days to talk about a 'Big Brother' state without having read the novel from which the totalitarian entity sprung, and even to use the adjective 'Orwellian' without ever having read Orwell. Worse, there is the misguided or perverse use, such as Margaret Thatcher's 1980 reference to 'Labour's Orwellian nightmare of the Left'. In fact, the adjective should long ago have taken on a new meaning: 'literary object too big to displace'. And what cannot be displaced feels monolithic, timeless, totalitarian, a terrible irony given the territory. A terrible irony, too, given the multiplicity of totalitarianisms, and the subtle ways in which dystopia can and does manifest in life and literature. So, to me, it came as something of a relief to discover Zamyatin's *We*, and to realise that Orwell had at least a direct literary influence.

Zamyatin wrote *We* in 1920, and it was first published

in English in 1924. Many translations followed in many countries, except in the Soviet Union. Russian readers had to wait until 1988 for their version. By then Zamyatin had established his place as the first of the big three dystopian novelists of the 20th century, followed by Huxley and Orwell. But it's not that simple. Experiential influences aside, Zamyatin himself was influenced by H.G. Wells, having translated him. And Orwell was influenced not just by Zamyatin but also by Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and by Jack London's now hardly mentioned *The Iron Heel*. And Huxley, who many, including Orwell, assumed had also been influenced by Zamyatin, always said that in fact he hadn't read Zamyatin but had been inspired by H.G. Wells.


Literary genealogies are complex. Once one starts to piece together such a family tree of ideas, how far back does one go? Thomas More invented 'Utopia' in 1516, a good place that is nowhere. John Stuart Mill was the first to use the term 'dystopia' in 1868. But how to describe Plato's *Republic*, which precedes More by nearly two thousand years and was intended to be the ideal state? As Kurt Vonnegut, who acknowledged his dystopian debt to Huxley, might have put it, 'And so it goes...'

Whether Orwell's 'Oceania', Huxley's 'World State' or Zamyatin's 'OneState', whether there's a Big Brother, World Controllers, or a Benefactor, whether a plot involves a Winston Smith, an Alpha-Plus or a D-503, whether there is totalitarianism, Fordism or Taylorism at work, and despite plots involving indoctrinated or subservient protagonists, love interest and potential awakening, there is one difference that makes *We* unusually memorable; it's the kind of difference that has inspired me to undertake a dystopian novel of my own. The difference is Zamyatin's use of the first person. Characterisation isn't top of the dystopian author's agenda, and characters can appear anorexic while simultaneously weighed down with intellectual baggage. Things are done to these characters, and the reader is told about the things that are done. D-503, Zamyatin's narrator, tells his own story in the form of his 'Records'. The authorial conceit has the effect of giving a voice to an objectified individual. It forces a perspective, constrains the angle of view. Zamyatin puts us within the walls of his dystopia and, as D-503 points out, 'walls are the basis of everything human'. The architecture of dystopia starts with walls, with enclosure. There is necessarily within and without. Beyond the 'everlasting glass' of the 'Green Wall' are the 'wild plains out of sight in the distance'. Within D-503's psychological walls, his walls of logic, there is a clear emphasis on the human condition.

D-503 is a model 'Number', a mathematician and builder of OneState's spacecraft. The 'fire-breathing INTEGRAL' will soon lift off through a 'sterile and immaculate' sky to journey to other planets to fulfill its great purpose. As D-503 reads in the State Gazette, if those who inhabit these other planets do not understand that 'we are bringing them a mathematically infallible happiness, we shall be obliged to force them to be happy'. The philosophy that will be exported to the furthest reaches of the universe is one that D-503 wholly embraces: 'Like all of us, or nearly all of us, I am ready.'

He truly is ready, cheered no end by being part of 'an immense, powerful, single thing. And such a precise beauty it is: not a wasted gesture, bend, turn'. This is 'Taylorized happiness' – Frederick Winslow Taylor being the father of 'scientific management'. OneState is almost fully 'Taylorized' through 'The Tables of Hourly Commandments'. All is seen, all conversations are recorded and all activities accounted for. 'Guardians' watch over everyone, likened to guardian angels 'kindly protecting you from making the slightest mistake'. If that fails, there's always the

perfect terminating logic of the Benefactor and his Machine.

But love intrudes on logic in the form of E-330, a member of the subversive Mephis who intend to destroy the glass wall enclosing OneState. Romance can unravel the best laid dystopia, and fissures soon appear in the narrative voice. D-503 becomes breathless, elliptical, self-conscious and self-censoring: 'I am like a machine being run over its RPM limit.' He needs the cold water of logic but 'the logic hisses on the hot bearings and dissipates in the air as a fleeting white mist'. D-503 is both gasping and grasping, at once agent and victim, with each ellipsis leaving a void for the reader to fill.

The emotional register might irritate some but it's an artistic risk worth taking. It suggests the possibility of poetry in the face of the 'happiness fraction'. And this is where the systole-diastole of the novel can be felt most acutely. It comes in the form of a choice: freedom without happiness or happiness without freedom. D-503's friend, the poet R-13, recognises that this was also the fundamental problem in 'the old legend about Paradise' but that 'Those idiots chose freedom'.

Ultimately, there is a funny kind of terror in *We*, with its exquisitely farcical 'dark aeros of the Guardians, dangling the black elephant snouts of their spy-tubes'. Some of its technological trappings are inevitably time-bound but the threat of 'Fantasiectomy', the removal of the imagination, is surely a timeless one. And so, too, is punishment.

In the case of George Pálóczi-Horváth, his torturers apologised. With insidious totalitarian logic, they then offered to return his Communist Party card, which he declined. Most dystopian protagonists are not so lucky. Dystopia is a killer, carried in us and passed on like DNA. Occasionally, it is handed down like a family heirloom. It can, as mentioned earlier, turn up anywhere. There is no end to the threat. As the disbelieving D-503 is told: 'The number of revolutions is infinite.' Fact and fiction merge into a literary OneState in which all dystopian writing is always true: it has happened or it is happening or it will happen. 'Hiding in all this,' as D-503 says, 'is some kind of tomorrow – unknown and therefore terrifying.' Indeed, and I wish I'd written it.

# Where Others Fear To Tread

## by Angela Cobbinah

Black playwriting in Britain has gone through many evolutions since Errol John's *Moon On A Rainbow Shawl* was staged at the Royal Court in 1958. While he had one of his characters dreaming of escape from the Caribbean to Britain as if it were some El Dorado, a new generation of dramatists in the 1970s concerned themselves with the struggles of those that eventually made it to these shores.

Those of us of a certain age will remember with excitement what followed as playwrights began articulating the anger of the sons and daughters in a great flurry of creativity at a time of riots and rumours of riots. After that, as the mainstream beckoned, there was quite a lull in terms of new writing until a fresh crop of talent began to tackle the state of black Britain itself, warts and all.

Of these it is only Roy Williams who has managed to maintain a consistent presence over the past decade and more, with a steady output of plays judged to have their finger on the pulse of modern Britain. This is partly due to his prolific output and partly to his restless spirit that compels him to go where others fear to tread. His best known play, *Fallout,* written in 2003 at a time of escalating youth violence, opens disturbingly with a group of youngsters kicking a boy's head in for his trainers and mobile phone. One reviewer described it as like "eating broken glass".

Above all, he has distinguished himself by stepping outside the boundaries of what is deemed to be black playwriting as he examines wider issues of contemporary British society. *The Daily Mail* labelled his 2007 play *Days Of Significance "treason"* for its depiction of British soldiers involved in committing atrocities during the Iraq war.

With some twenty five plays behind him, his main stock in trade, though, has been his scrutiny of British

youth. By the time he penned *Sucker Punch* in 2010, a sharply observed tale of two young boxers that opens on the eve of the Broadwater Farm riots, he was beginning to seek a change of direction. But for once his roving antennae let him down and the 2011 riots took him, like everyone else, by surprise. "I thought I had said all there was to say about youth culture but then all that happened and I realised there was so much more to be said." Intriguingly, his vehicle for his response to the riots is an adaptation of *The Loneliness Of The Long Distance Runner,* Alan Sillitoe's 1959 short story about a petty criminal who, whilst serving time in a young offenders institution, is encouraged to take up running as part of his rehabilitation. In the dramatic denouement, fed up with being the governor's prize athlete, he deliberately loses an important race.

Williams' version tranports Sillitoe's bleak slice of Nottinghamshire life to modern day London and has a black youth, Colin, as the main character. Colin gets sent down for his part in the riots. *"Loneliness…* shows how little has changed in all these years, and that is why it still resonates," Williams enthuses. "It is such an uplifting story. I found Colin's act of defiance amazing, something that can say so much to young people today."

Later this year, the BBC will broadcast Williams' specially-commissioned drama about the events leading up to the 1981 Brixton riots. The story is told from the perspective of two families, one black, one white. "This is an important moment in black history but I am always surprised by how many people don't know about it, so it is a story that needs to be told."

For Williams, who was only thirteen at the time of the riots, that weekend is firmly etched in his memory, even though he was far away from the action. "I lived in west London and my mum would never have let me out while they were going on," he laughs. "But I was well aware of the sort of country we were living in, young black people felt they were living under siege and I, naively perhaps, was cheering the rioters on. Me and my mates were really glad the police were getting a good kicking."

The difference between the disturbances of 2011 and 1981 are telling, he feels. "There was more genuine anger and outrage in 1981. Youngsters were angry about being treated like second-class citizens in their own country and they wanted it to stop."

We are talking in a sun-filled café near Williams' home in south-east London and until now he has been full of easy smiles. But as he touches on August 2011 the passion that clearly drives his writing suddenly bubbles up. "The riots upset me in so many ways, they showed that our generation has failed our kids by making them obsessed with material things, with the latest trainers, with gangsta rap, with knives and guns. Today's youngsters are prepared to step over someone else to get what they want. We made them think like that."The draconian prison sentences given to rioters also angered him: "MPs get a slap on the wrists for fiddling their expenses but a youngster gets nine months for stealing a pair of trainers. It's not right." As for absent fathers being fingered as a key cause of the riots, "That's bollocks! At the end of the day, it was a defiant cry from those who have nothing to those who have it all, it was about poverty, and if this is not dealt with the riots will happen again."

The materialism and dog-eat-dog culture unleashed by Thatcherism is a theme that runs through much of Williams' work, alongside issues of belonging and identity, most forcefully so in the bleak *Fallout,* which he rewrote for Channel 4 in 2008. The victim of the gang violence is an African teenager planning to go to university. "The play was inspired by both the Damilola Taylor and Stephen Lawrence murders and I felt a strong emotional connection with the subject-

matter. I was so angry. I wanted to get into the minds of these youngsters to explore what kind of Britain they were growing up in to make them do such a thing." Although the perpetrators are every mother's worst nightmare, Williams doesn't present them as carboard cut out villains but as complex characters who need our understanding and even our compassion. This is equally true of the racists that inhabit *Sing Yer Heart Out For The Lads,* his 2002 play about England fooball fans. With Williams it is never a black and white issue as he strives to get to the heart of how we are products of the society we live in, however uncomfortable the journey is for the audience.

According to director Indhu Rubasingham, artistic director of the Tricycle Theatre, one of Williams' main strengths is his "fantastic ear" for urban language and rhythms. His plays are characterised by raw and punchy dialogue, helping to capture a world that is immediately recognisable but rarely seen on stage. Some of his characters are foul mouthed and unpleasant but they can be funny, too, while the women are sparky and always give as good as they get. How does he manage to get it just right? "You've got to be a good listener," he explains. "As far as the women are concerned, I am inspired by my mother and my older sister, the two strongest people in my life." It was Rubasingham who staged Williams' début *No Boys Cricket Club* for the Theatre Royal Stratford East in 1996, a play which took inspiration from the experiences of his mother's generation rather than his own. "I think the shock to most people, including myself, was that this play, which focussed so sensitively on the lives of two middle-aged women, was written by a young man," she recalls.

After that there was no looking back. Williams proved to be as hard-working as he was gifted, with an average production rate of two plays a year and a clutch of early awards culminating in the Evening Standard Charles Wintour Award for Most Promising Playwright for *Clubland,* his 2000 comedy about sexual politics. His last major stage drama, *Sucker Punch,* won the prize for Best Theatre Play at the 2011 Writers Guild of Great Britain Awards, cementing his reputation as one of the country's finest dramatists. Not bad for someone who left school at sixteen with only a CSE grade one in English to his name.

As we now know from education secretary Michael Gove, the Certificate of Secondary Education exam was reserved for pupils deemed not clever enough to take the old-style O-Levels. So what happened? Williams smiles again. "I always knew I wanted to be a writer, I just didn't know how to channel it and, being fairly self-possessed, tended to be selective in what lessons I took in. I always loved reading books and being told stories , I got that from my mum, and one of my favourite books was John Steinbeck's *Of Mice And Men*. I loved it and I knew then that I wanted to write like that."

Williams grew up on an estate in Notting Hill, then a down-at-heel inner-London area a million miles away from its present incarnation as a haunt for moneyed hipsters and influential Tories. The youngest of three much older siblings born to Jamaican migrants, he was raised by his mother after his father left the family home when he was toddler and moved to the US. Williams never saw him again until a few years ago. "My mum was a nurse and had to work very hard to keep it all together. She often worked nights and at one time had two jobs, so she was knackered a lot of the time. I always remember having to be looked after by a series of baby sitters."

When he began to fall behind at school his sister, Karen, asked one of her friends to give him extra lessons. This proved to be a turning point. His tutor was Don Kinch, father of the saxophonist Soweto Kinch, who ran a theatre company, Staunch Poets and Players. Every so often Williams would have a break from his lessons and get the chance to watch them rehearse. "To experience live theatre at that age was great. This was my first experience of it and I was hooked. Apart from this, Don also made me aware of what was going on in the world, it was like the university of life."

After leaving school, Williams decided to apply himself more academically at a further education college in order to get some O-levels. He then took a course in the performing arts and joined the Cockpit

Youth Theatre in Marylebone. After working casually for fast food joints and supermarkets, he made the decision to take up acting as a career, something his mother did not mind. "She just wanted me to find my own path in life and left me to it," he remembers. But after working with the Theatre Centre, a company specialising in drama for young people, he came to realise that he was more interested in writing the words for actors than acting them out.

"During my time at the Theatre Centre, I worked with great writers such as Noel Greig and Lin Coghlan and this ignited my love for writing." He also remembers Barry Keeffe, one of the leading English dramatist of the 1970s whose Barbarians trilogy was the *This Is England* of its day. "Barry Keeffe also had a tremendous influence on me. He was doing what I am doing today, writing about being young and working class regardless of whether you are black or white. His dialogue jumped off the page for me. His characters spoke like me and my mates spoke. I felt very flattered."

He decided to join Noel Greig's writers' workshop and one of the first pieces of advice was to pick an idea that you know about and start writing. That's how Williams came to pen his first play, banged out on a battered old typewriter his mother had lent him.

Titled *Luke For Gary* it examines masculinity through the story of two school friends who are accused of being gay. Although it was never staged, it deepened his determination to become a playwright. At the age of twenty five, working as an usher at the Royalty Theatre in the West End and fed up with his somewhat precarious existence as an on-off actor, he applied to take the country's only degree course in the subject, run by the Rose Bruford College in London.

"Although you don't necessarily need a degree to be able to write plays I needed the discipline of a structured course and to work with other students." He found he was in his element and he emerged three years later with a First. Part of the course was to write a full-length play. This was *No Boys…*, which he decided to send out to repertory companies on spec. Just six months later it was programmed by the Theatre Royal in Stratford.

"I left Rose Bruford knowing I wanted to write for a living but I had no idea how long it would take to establish myself. To have my first play staged within six months of leaving college was unheard of," he says as if he still can't believe it happened.

*No Boys…*, about a middle-aged Jamaican woman whose hopes and dreams of a better life in England appear all but crushed, won a Writers Guild nomination. His next play *Starstruck*, 1998, which focussed on the lives of those Jamaicans who were unable to join the exodus to Britain, proved he was no one-hit-wonder and was similarly well received. In *The Gift*, the last of his 'Jamaican' plays, he touched on the generation of children who were brought up in the Caribbean by their grandparents and made the difficult journey to England in the '60s and '70s to join mothers they never knew, an issue that rarely gets a mention in print let alone on stage.

Set in the now familiar Williams territory of the inner-city, *Lift Off picks* up on a phenomenon later parodied by the Ali G character. "After writing about my mother's generation I though it was time to concentrate on my own. *Lift Off* came out in 1998 and is very dated now but I wrote it after becoming aware of how much black culture was influencing white kids. I'd walk down the streets where I lived and all around me you had white kids acting and talking like black kids. I wanted to write a play that captured this."

Ultimately though, the play is about friendship and identity as it follows two friends, Mal, who lives up to the image of being black and hard, and Tone, who merely 'acts black'. When Tone calls Mal the 'n' word during a row, their friendship is tested but we get the impression that it will resume on a more realistic level.

On a similar theme, *Sucker Punch* tells the story of two black friends, both of them amateur boxers, whose response to the pervasive racism of Thatcher's Britain, from police harassment in the streets to racial slurs in the gym, is very different. "Leon is more submissive and adopts the dominant white culture while Troy is very angry and goes the other way.

This partly reflects elements of myself, at times I found it easier to buy into white culture, " explains Williams. The two friends bitterly fall out . Troy calls Leon "the white man's bitch", but at the end of the day both find they are losers in the less-than-noble world of boxing.

Clearly a keen observer of people but seemingly mild mannered and unassuming, you can imagine Wiliams slipping quietly into a room, sitting on the top deck of a bus or waiting patiently at the supermarket checkout and taking it all in. Something happens and before you know it, he's got an idea for his next play.

Take *Sing Yer Heart Out For The Lads.* A football enthusiast himself, he was relaxing in a Birmingham pub one day watching an England versus Germany match alongside some rowdy fans. "I became aware of a lot of tribal chants that made me feel uncomfortable. I knew what would come next once a black player got the ball. It was a powerful image that I wanted to depict and as soon as I got home I started to write."

The action takes place in a south London pub, where the regulars take advantage of an England football match to sound off their racist views. "I wanted to show the many shades of racism, the intellectual racist, the hard core nutter and the one who says 'I'm not racist but...' It was not a play about racism as such but about nationalism and patriotism and the lengths people go to to express them."

Among a variety of other things, Williams' stories are concerned with what it means to be British and, perhaps more overtly, what it means to be black and British. Given the messy society we live in that is rigged to confuse rather than enlighten, answering these questions is never straightforward.

In *Joe Guy*, 2007, a star footballer jettisons his African identity in order to fit in with the local British born black youths. "I had always wanted to write about the tensions that exist between Africans and African-Caribbeans. It wasn't my intention to give the play a football setting but I read about a black footballer who had got into trouble. He was Nigerian but spoke as if he came from the Caribbean."

It was his opposition to the Iraq war that inspired *Days Of Significance*. But he had no intention of writing a piece of agitprop. "I was angry and upset by Iraq, I am against any kind of war, but a play talking about Blair being a liar, for example, is not interesting for me dramatically. I wanted to look at the war from the point of view of people who are powerless."

They are the sort of characters that Jeremy Kyle loves to parade before us on TV for our horrified entertainment, young men with little in their heads who get regularly bladdered with their girlfriends on a weekend. Barely prepared for the demands of adult life, they are overwhelmed by the anarchy that awaits them in Iraq, with dreadful consequences, both for the local "sand niggers" and for themselves: "We make a section of society feel worthless, then we send them to war to be killed," is Williams' curt comment.

Williams has also written for radio, with a trilogy of plays broadcast on BBC Radio 4 early last year based in a police interrogation room. "It is the most liberating of dramatic forms, you can do anything with radio," he says. Later in the year he got the chance to become involved in the screenplay of *Fast Girls* when the two original writers had to pull out.

"The first draft of the film was written by Noel Clarke and Jay Basu. But they were unable to carry on, so the script was passed to me. The story had to remain the same, more or less, but how I would tell it was up to me."

The story of four female athletes preparing for the Olympics in all but name was billed as the "ultimate summer feel good movie", so very different from what we can usually expect from Williams.

"It is a real departure," he concedes, "but a welcome one. I have always wanted to write for film and it is a different story from the ones I usually tell in theatre, which is why I was drawn to it. *Fast Girls* has characters you don't get to see much in drama and it's a great insight into contemporary life seen through the eyes of athletics."

Williams lives with his girlfriend not far from the Cutty Sark in Greenwich and when he is not writing

he is busy feeding his imagination, with cinema, thetre, art exhibitions and, of course, books. “I love anyone who writes from the heart so of course that must include Shakespeare. But I also admire writers like August Wilson, Ibsen and Chekhov. Dickens is also an amazing writer…” he says trailing off. The list must be endless. The J.B. Priestly classic *An Inspector Calls* and *Friday Night Lights*, H.G. Bissinger’s Pulitzer Prize-winning portrait of a small town football team in the US, were currently on his bedside table.

As one of the hardest working people in British theatre, his writing day can be a long one.“I like to get up very early in the morning and start off with a nice cup of steaming coffee. I’ll surf the internet, reply to my emails and then work solidly until my head starts turning into clay.”

Sometimes he might take a break by watching a DVD. The cult Baltimore-based crime drama *The Wire* is among his favourites and he’s viewed the box set many times over. “*The Wire* is a genius TV show and I could spend all my day quoting lines from it,” he laughs.“It’s something that I wish I’d written. It is not about envy, good writing just inspires me.” He’s also a fan of Scandinavian noir like *The Bridge* with its emotionally detached female detective Saga Noren.

He believes too much of British TV drama is “homogenised”. “These days there are thankfully a lot more roles for black actors but they often lack depth and complexity,” he remarks, using *Top Boy,* Channel Four’s hit drama series about life on the edge in darkest Hackney, as a case in point. “What depresses me is drama that doesn’t have anything to say. Drama must take risks, it must tell stories about people we don’t normally see on TV.”

What’s his advice to budding playwrights? “I always tell people, don’t get it right, get it written, don’t write what’s in your head but what you feel in your heart.” And with that, he finishes his juice and politely takes his leave to resume work on his latest project.

# Furious Protest

## by Courttia Newland

I first came across his writing in 1996. I had been working on my first novel for eight months and, knowing that I was interested in books by West Indians, the step-father of a friend of mine told me about an author I had never heard of. He gave me two dog-eared paperbacks, a novel and a book of poetry. The novel was published before I was born, the poetry collection when I was a toddler. I discovered that the author of these books was a former doctor who, at that time, ran an alternative medical practice in Shepherds Bush. The books were set in that part of London, with places I knew and street names I recognised. I took my gifts home and read them straight away, with great interest. As an aspiring novelist I felt it was my business. I had been introduced to the work of Rudolph Kizerman.

Like most authors of his generation, Kizerman’s writing spoke of injustice, of revolution, of police brutality and oppression: but what marked him out from his contemporaries was his fiery, unapologetic stance, his refusal to curb his rhetoric. For this reason his poetry collection, *I’m Here*, took four years to be picked up, and then only by an independent press. It seems he had the mainstream publishing houses running scared. One of his poems, entitled *You Killed Them, might explain why...*

*Tell me about Karl Marx,*
*Lenin and Shakespeare,*
*and I’ll tell you about,*
*Chaka, Toussaint and Christophe;*
*But you killed them.*

*Tell me about Columbus,*
*Raleigh and Nelson,*
*and I’ll tell you about*
*Carver, Hannibal and Abraha,*
*an Emperor of old Ethiopia:*
*but you killed them;*
*not always with the sword,*
*but you killed them.*

Kizerman’s novel, *Stand Up In The World*, described

by his publisher as filled with, 'fiery passion, overwhelming anger, piercing anguish, frustration and furious protest', is equally charged. It charts the rise and eventual demise of Milton Homer, an intelligent and driven young man who opens the book with an inflammatory speech before members of his family and the Coloured People's Association, damning the British establishment for crimes against humanity. Milton seems to be cast as the paradoxical leader typified by men like Michael X (a one-time acquaintance of Kizerman's); young, charming, attractive to women, thrusting himself into the front-line of race politics. Milton becomes involved in a relationship with a rich white English woman who views him more as a curiosity than a real human being. His political ideologies bring him into intense conflict with his family, who only want him to lower his head and get on. His fall at the climax of the novel resembles that of Michael X and other Black political leaders of the time and is a warning to future generations of the dangers faced by the black political mind.

I once had the pleasure of meeting Kizerman, at the Hilton Hotel in Holland Park, but tracking him down wasn't easy. No-one seemed to know where he was. Linton Kwesi Johnson had told me that he remembered Kizerman from the old days when he performed on the poetry circuit but that they had since lost contact. In the end it was Margaret Busby, formerly of the publishing company Allison and Busby, who put me in touch with him. I was very nervous to speak with him. I had admired him for so long and didn't want to make a fool of myself, but as it turned out our conversation was lively and interesing. Like his creation, Milton Homer, Kizerman is a man who likes to talk. As we sat with our civilised cups of tea before us, we easily reconnected the past with the present and found that there was very little difference between the two.

Rudolph Kizerman was born Winfield Rudolph Braithwaite in Bridgetown, Barbados, in 1942. His parents, Leslie Winston Braithwaite and Josephine Wilemina Braithwaite, owned a restaurant. Kizerman has fond memories of being served various Bajan treats, such as flying fish and Cuckoo, although he was too young to remember the name of the restarant. When he was eight, his sister and only sibling, Vivian, succumbed to an undetermined illness at the age of twenty-three. It seems the only blight on an isolated, but otherwise happy childhood. Kizerman grew up 'seeking friends all the time' and made them easily, but as he was not often allowed to leave the family home, his friends would have to come and see him, usually on Sundays, when his father would make ice cream for everyone.

During the week, with his parents busy running the family business, he was placed under the supervision of a nineteen-year-old child-minder, Louise, who would often shirk her duties to spend time with her boyfriend, leaving her charge alone and hungry in the house. Little Rudolph spent the time pursuing his primary interests, animals and flowers, which could be found in abundance. He also read anything he could lay his hands on, but his favourite was Tolstoy and later Zola. He acquired an interest in swordplay from reading Tolstoy and would imagine himself as a swashbuckling hero. He even had two swords made so he and his friends could spar. His parents, particularly his mother, had ambitious plans for him from an early age, and it was she who made the decision to send him abroad to study medicine. Aged just sixteen, and having made the long boat journey alone, Kizerman arrived in Dover.

In London, he experienced a now familiar story of racism: reaching Paddington station with only ten pounds in his pocket, he was due to be met by a university reception party, but instead he was left waiting on the platform for the entire night. A waitress from a nearby café took pity on him. Noticing how he shivered against the cold, she gave him free toast and tea. As an introduction to his new country, the augurs were not promising and indeed only a few short months later he was having run-ins with skinheads and getting beaten up by the police. It was all a far cry from the comparatively peaceful world he had left behind in Barbados. He was saved from further punishment when he fell in with a group of older West Indians, some of whom had been living in England for a time. He ended up moving to Manchester, where he stayed in the house of a fellow Bajan until he felt able to return to London to complete his studies.

After graduating as a Bachelor of Science, Kizerman became disillusioned with the world of medicine. One day, while in the company of an actor friend, he found himself visiting the office of the infamous theatrical agent, Denton Gray. Only there to keep his friend company, Kizerman, to his surprise, was offered an acting job at the BBC. The very next day he peformed in the opera, *The Dark Pilgrimage*, and his new career began. He changed his name from Braithwaite to Kizerman, studied and obtained an acting diploma and then worked as a professional actor for over two years, appearing alongside such established names as Roger Moore and Honor Blackman. And then he began to write. He had always felt the urge, even growing up in Barbados, but he had stifled it as a way of honouring his parents' wish for him to become a doctor. Now, having taken care of his responsibilities to them, he could finally chase his dreams.

His first project was a play, *A Tear For The Strangers*, which chronicles the life of a singer who gives her child up for adoption to pursue her career. When she meets another child that reminds her of her son, years after her star has waned, she regrets the harsh choices she made. Kizerman later rewrote the play as a novel. It was published in 1980 in the US by Crown, and later in the UK by Blackbird, who also put out his poetry.

Kizerman's reputation as a firebrand rests on his novel *Stand Up In The World*, arguably his best-known work. With its Malcolm X figure, no nonsense politics and deep-set family values, the book, like *A Tear For The Strangers* before it, was originally written for the stage but was far more successful as a novel. It sold over five thousand copies and Kizerman soon became well-known on the literary scene. Andrew Salkey, the renowned Jamaican novelist and essayist, introduced him to the Caribbean Artists Movement and also wrote the forward to *I'm Here*; yet by Kizerman's own admission he was not very active as a writer at this time. But he was not idle. During this period, he directed a documentary, *The Awakening Begins*, which includes interviews with many of the post-colonial writers of the day, and his company was now being sought by figures of international standing. He met with Muhammad Ali, James Baldwin, Sam Greenlee, Quincy Jones and many other celebrities who became household names later in their careers. When he did get back to writing, it was not to the novel, but to verse and non-fiction. He completed his second poetry collection, *I Cried*, along with a book of conversations and politics, *Views From James Baldwin*, and retained strong ties with Baldwin for many years afterwards. His work took him all over the world, from Europe to Africa to the US, and made him many long-standing friends in the world of literature and politics.

Strange, then, that today he is rarely mentioned in the field of post-colonial studies. It might be because, whilst he himself is a product of West Indian migration, his writings were focused on the growing Black population in Britain, no matter where they were from, as opposed to the 'Final Passage', which was the fashion at the time. His stories are firmly rooted in the concrete pavements, grey skies and cold atmosphere to be found in England. It was a brave stance to take then, and it is now.

Along with many other writers of the past and more recent times, Rudolf Kizerman has been erased from the literary history books: but he hasn't been forgotten. His fire has not died, and we must not ignore it. When we met he was eager to inform me that he was painting and writing a new book, *Random Killings*, a response to the teenage murders all over the country. I was pleased to see that the no-nonsense, passionate voice I read as a fledgling writer all those years ago had not dissipated. It was both a reminder, and a lesson.

# Tossing Green Bananas

## by James W. Wood

I waited nervously outside the room in which Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath had taught in the early six-ties, the room that had housed some of America's greatest poets - from Robert Lowell to Allan Ginsberg to later figures like Robert Hass and Robert Pinsky.

I'd come for my first one-on-one tutorial. It was 1992 and I was a scholarship boy fresh off the plane from Britain with a couple of letters of recommendation in my pocket.Fumbling with nerves, I was about to meet the man who, according to The Guardian two weeks before, was a shoo-in for the soon-to-be-announced Nobel Prize in Literature. I knocked once, maybe too firmly.

"Come!"

I pushed the door open to find a tall, thin figure with a salt-and-pepper moustache leaning back in his chair, feet on the desk, smoking a cigarette with one hand and holding a few sheets of paper with the other. Weak September sunlight cut through the smoke, wreathing his tough, weathered face. He wore a tweed jacket and his trousers fell back from his socks to reveal skin peeling from Caribbean sunburn. Still seated, and with his cigarette now perched precariously on his lower lip, he leaned forward to shake hands.

"It's James, right?"

I nodded.

"So tell me, James, how come you English are all getting so political in your writing? I mean look at this", he held up one of my poems, Colossus, about TV evangelism, "I was speaking to Martin about this only a few weeks ago."
Martin. He must mean Martin Amis…

"I was speaking to Martin about this and he couldn't give me a decent answer. I mean, why are you people so political? You're all so damn tight-arsed all the time, right? Now, let me look at these poems of yours…"

Such was my introduction to Derek Walcott, grand old man of Caribbean letters. Actually, I'd met him already, in my mind, having spent the previous two months reading everything he'd written. Over the course of the next year, the two of us would have more than one stand-up argument and I would be, quite rightly, publicly embarrassed for my youthful arrogance and presumption.

Derek Walcott is, in the most literal sense, a phenomenon, that is to say, an "extraordinary occurrence" in Caribbean literature. His writing stands outside what casual observers might consider "Caribbean", yet acts as an emblem of that culture to the rest of the world. He neither rejects the European tradition wholly nor slavishly embraces it, and this cosmopolitan, heterogeneous attitude to his influ-ences informs his work, especially his later poetry.

Many commentators have lauded the era of Caribbean writers fighting against a colonial inheritance, loosely dubbed "the Empire writes back", so fiercely that the rebel label has stuck like left-over rum punch. But, as with so many reputations accorded from afar, the image of the 'angry' Caribbean writer is a thin pastiche, almost a cliché, and, like most clichés, it harbours an irritating grain of truth.

Much of Caribbean literature rests in the enormous cultural shadow cast by the region's music, a hurricane that's been blowing from the West Indies around the world since the fifties. Our love of first ca-lypso, then ska, reggae and, most recently, dancehall and ragga, has defined the modern perception of the Caribbean for outsiders. Many of the best-known Caribbean poets have drawn their inspiration from

the rhythms of dub and reggae, most famously Linton Kwesi Johnson, Benjamin Zephaniah and of course John Agard:

*"But listen Mr Oxford don/*
*I'm a man on the run/*
*And a man on the run/*
*Is a dangerous one/*

*I ent have no gun/*
*I ent have no knife/*
*But mugging the Queen's English/*
*Is the story of my life."*

Caribbean poetry celebrates the fantastic inventivness found everywhere in the islands; a spirit of invention that finds its way into language as easily as it does music, art, food and drink, from Peter Tosh coining terms like "the shitstem" and "politricks", through to the rhythmical assault of dub poets. Thematically, emancipation and the search for identity are prevalent, unsurprising given the islands' histories of colonialism and slavery - but more subtle, and arguably more important, are the themes of defiance and morality in Caribbean verse.

Seventy-plus years ago, Claude Mackay's "If we must die" helped inspire the English-speaking world when it was quoted by Winston Churchill during a WWII radio broadcast. Yet how many of those listening knew the words came from the first man to publish poetry in Jamaican patois, a man who was an internationalist socialist and leading figure of the Harlem renaissance?

*"Like men we'll face the cowardly, murderous pack*
*Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!"*

This poem's appeal to Churchill's fighting spirit is obvious; less so is the fact that it summed up a current of rage and frustration in Caribbean writing of the 1920s and 30s that has continued unabated to the present day. And that rage is not confined to the repressive political situation engendered by Colonialism; it's a rage that also finds its target in the injustices of time or circumstance taking us away from the people and places we love:

*You are a traveller to them.*
*A 'West Indian working in England'...*
*Sponging off the state. Our languages*
*Remain pidgin like our dark, third,*
*Underdeveloped world...*
*Once in a blue moon, when guilt's*
*A private monsoon, posted to a remote*
*Part of the planet they can't pronounce.*
*They'd like to keep us there.*

Fred D'Aguiar, "Letter from Mama Dot"

Creativity and resistance, creativity as resistance, a rage against the immoral, the use of humour to confound the oppressor, and a love of the paradisical landscapes of home. So much could be said to be essential to the fabric of Caribbean verse, and they're all elements that can be found in Walcott's work:

*"I'm just a red nigger who loves the sea*
*I have a sound Colonial education.*
*I have Dutch, English and Nigger in me*
*And either I'm nobody, or I'm a nation!"*

*"The Schooner Flight"*

*"The blades of the oleander were rattling like green knives,*
*The palms of the breadfruit shrugged, and a hissing ghost*
*Recoiled in the casuarinas."*

*"Homecoming"*

Walcott, then, presents himself as identifiably "Caribbean" in the sense that an American or European might conceive it. But the binds that connect Walcott to his homeland go deeper than his surface identity as a writer and a man. Walcott's concept of history is analogous to E.M.Forster's concept of fiction; that is to say, just as Forster could imagine all writers working together in a giant room, Walcott is conscious of all history being present in a moment:

"Poetry, which is perfection's sweat but which must seem as fresh as the raindrops on a statue's brow, combines the natural and the marmoreal; it conjugates

both tenses simultaneously: the past and the present, if the past is the sculpture and the present the beads of dew or rain on the forehead of the past." (1992 Nobel Lecture). This consciousness of the interconnectedness of peoples and cultures is at the heart of Walcott's work. He has never shied away from acknowledging his debts to the European masters, most obviously in *Omeros*, where he takes Dante's metre and Homer's subject-matter and transmogrifies them into a Caribbean epic. Critics have noted the poems' unevenness both of tone and quality. And yet, there's no doubt about Walcott's ambition or, in the end, his success in bringing European models to bear on the Caribbean experience:

*"I said Omeros And O was the conch-shell's invocation, mer was Both mother and sea in our Antillean patois, os, a grey bone, and the white surf as it crashes*

*And spreads its sibilant collar on a lace shore."*

In *Tiepolo's Hound*, Walcott merges Europe and the Caribbean more overtly with an imaginative interpretation of the life of Camille Pissarro set in both the West Indies and France. Like Omeros, *Tiepolo's Hound* is a book-length epic, vast in its scope and ambition. As with his concept of history, it's Walcott's ability to merge two very different landscapes, two different cultures, in one perception of the world that makes this work unique, quite apart from the strength of the writing, shamelessly deploying the out-of-fashion disciplines of metre and rhyme:

*"...then turn to a sepia page*

*From the canals of Guardi, from a formal battle with banners,*
*The carnival lances of Uccello's pawing horses,*

*To the chivalric panoply of tossing green bananas*
*And the prongs of the ginger lilly. No metamorphosis..."*

Walcott writes like a European about the Caribbean, but with a native's love for the land, a poet's ear for music and a painter's eye for detail. An accomplished watercolourist who has painted since childhood, Walcott's poetry is suffused with the lush hues of oil on canvas, as well as references to the works of Europe's visual masters.

Readers can now look back more than sixty years since Walcott's first, self-financed collection of poetry appeared in 1948. His massive oeuvre encompasses both the visual and dramatic arts as well as poetry. At the broadest sweep, he has succeeded in adopting and adapting Europe's master poets to the Caribbean experience and in doing so he has single-handedly created the notion of the Caribbean epic and heightened the islands' consciousness of their own history, culture and identity as a thing independent of the European experience.

Part of the same generation as V.S. Naipaul and others, Walcott has managed to find a place on the global stage for Caribbean writers, and for this alone he deserves his place in the canon. That he has managed to do so at the same time as founding a theatre company, an artist's colony (The Rat Island Foundation in Trinidad) and a career in journalism and teaching that span fifty years, merely serves to underline the scale of his accomplishments.

If it's possible to measure a man by his enemies, then Walcott's reputation is assured for centuries to come. Never mind his notorious and long-running feud with Naipaul, the recent scandal over the Oxford Professorship of Poetry shows just how much animosity remains towards him over his behaviour during the early part of his career. There is no point in air-brushing away his undoubted vanity; at the same

time we should never understate the achievements which brought him to public recognition in the first place, achievements like the poem *Night Fishing:*

*Line, trawl for each word*
*With the home-sick toss*
*Of a black pirogue anchored*
*In stuttering phosphorus.*

*The crab-fishers torches*
*Keep to the surf's crooked line,*
*And a cloud's page scorches*
*With a smell of kerosene.*

*Thorny stars halo*
*The sybil's black cry:*
*"Apothenein thelo*
*I am longing to die."*

*But, line, live in the sounds*
*That ignorant shallows use;*
*Then throw the silvery nouns To open-mouthed canoes.*

*Experientia docet stultos.* Experience teaches fools. I cringe now to think how I once inwardly called an internationally famous Irish poet an idiot for saying, "You never really know what anyone is thinking, James," only to realise the truth of what he'd said many years later.

If twenty years have given me some perspective on my own too-modest gifts as a poet and writer, then memories, at least, persist: memories not just of happy, hungry, impoverished times, but also of the writers I'd spent time with, including Walcott himself. By turns brilliant and taciturn, swinging between vastly generous gestures and petulant arrogance, an hour with Derek Walcott was always entertaining and instructive, never dull.

After a staged reading of one of my plays, he asked the rest of the theatre students to identify the source I'd worked from to inspire my piece. Wracked with nerves as usual, I blurted out the answer, Buechner's Woyzeck, before anyone else could speak. Walcott made everyone in the class stand up except me. "Now," he said, "everyone applaud except James." The class applauded, hesitantly at first, then finally in thunderous chorus.

"There you go, James,' said Walcott, shouting to be heard over the din. "Congratulations. See how fockin' clever you think you are, young man?"

I could offer numerous examples of Walcott's brilliance as a teacher, from his interpretation of the first page of di Lampedusa's Il Gattopardo to his demonstration of how prose is elevated to the status of poetry in the hands of a master such as Hemingway. Above all, though, it's his voice when reading verse that has stayed with me - grizzled and hacked at like an old rope, but still as rich and intoxicating as sea grapes.

# In Search Of A Subject

## by James Miller

I began writing *Lost Boys* at the same time as I started a PhD at King's College London. I was researching James Baldwin and the relationship of his work to Civil Rights, Black Power and post-colonialism. I'd already written two novels, neither of which were very good and both had been rightly and roundly rejected by everyone, in fact, the rejections were coming in just as I started the PhD. I was depressed about this and, as I immersed myself in the work of Baldwin and other authors from the Civil Rights era, I felt a strange sort of envy. These writers had something truly urgent and important to write about.

The struggle for social justice and the fight against racism, the emergence of the 1960s counter-culture and the birth of identity politics, these were real subjects - matter for substantial and important work. I found myself with Kerouac's infamous line in *On The Road* when he wrote about his desire to be "anything but what I was so drearily, a 'white man' disillusioned", even if I didn't share his questionable idealisation of impoverished African-American life. As a middle class, heterosexual, relatively privileged white guy I felt as though I had no real subject: I didn't want to write straight genre fiction and nor was I interested in churning out 'lad-lit,' the tedious drama of males grappling with adult responsibility, and I've always despised what I call 'risotto fiction,' the sort of smug, bourgeois comedy of manners that masquerades as so much 'literary fiction' these days; novels filled with the minor crises, epiphanies and infidelities of the professional classes that always involve at least one gushing description of all the posh food served at a dinner party.

But there was, I felt, something more to this sense of disillusionment. At the time I was also working as a private tutor, coaching the pampered and hot-housed off-spring of the one percent to get into exclusive secondary schools or top universities. The overwhelming majority of my students lived in places like Knightsbridge and Kensington. They already went to the best schools money could buy, but that was rarely enough for their pushy (or entirely absent) parents, determined to micro-manage every second of their children's day. Almost without exception these kids shared two things: in terms of material wealth they had everything anyone could possibly want but they were all lonely and unhappy, seething with frustration and desperate to be left alone to play violent computer games (this was as true for the girls as it was for the boys). Of course, none of these kids had anything approacing a political consciousness, how could they? They were too sheltered and too young, oblivious to the structures of power and privilege that shaped their lives; nonetheless, I could sense something within them, a burning resentment as if - despite having everything - they already knew that none of it had real value. What if, I asked myself, these kids, the ones conditioned to rule our society, were to turn against it and instigate a violent rejection of all the values we hold dear? At the same time something much more important was happening. It was 2003 and the Bush/Blair regime was preparing to invade Iraq. I've always had a keen interest in American politics and the Middle East so I was both unsurprised and appalled by what was happening. I'd read the Project for the New American Century, in which the Neo-Conservatives stated their strategic goals in the Middle East long before 911 and

like any reasonably well informed person I knew that Saddam had nothing to do with Al Qaeda and that Bin Laden was ideologically opposed to the secular Ba'athist regime. I was also sure Saddam had no WMD (I remember shouting at the television when Blair made his infamous forty-five-minute speech, 'this is a lie, he's lying, he knows this is not true') and so reality acquired a nightmarish quality as the imperial war machine kicked into action; the press began to reiterate this distorted vision of the situation, manufacturing a crisis and spreading fear, circulating wild fantasies about American power, the Iraq people and the supposed threat posed by Saddam's broken regime. This, I realised, was something that had to be written about. But how? There was no way I could go to Iraq and I had no interest in writing polemic, there were others much better placed than me to do that.

All the elements behind *Lost Boys* were falling into place: I had the frustrated and isolated children of the wealthy trapped in the beautiful stucco houses of West London and obsessed with violent, virtual worlds coupled with a monstrous and illegal war where the innocent children of Iraq were being slaughtered for the sake of 'western values'. The two worlds seemed a thousand miles apart, I wanted to bring them crashing together.

Something was missing, though. I'm a bit of an urban flaneur, given to long walks across the city and one day, strolling through Kensington Gardens, I came across the Peter Pan statue. At that moment I had the answer. Why not use Peter Pan? I would take the core of the story; its quintessential Englishness coupled with the Empire-inspired exoticism of Neverland and the sadness of lost childhood innocence. Re-reading Barrie's original, I was struck by the melancholy and perversity of the story, something I wanted my novel to share (elements removed from the kitsch Disney version). In earlier drafts, the parallels were even more explicit: I called my protagonists' family the Darlings and I found counterparts for almost every character. Hook became a mutilated police commander and Tinkerbell a prostitute specialising in sadomasochism.

It took about four years to write *Lost Boys* while I completed my PhD. Towards the end I started to lose faith in the project, I thought the book too experimental, too unusual and outlandish for mainstream publishers. I finished my PhD and felt mentally shattered. For about nine months I didn't even look at my work. I figured I would never be a published author and focused on trying to turn parts of my PhD into academic articles. However, as my energies returned I went back to the novel. I realised I was very close to the end and decided to press on. I always knew the climax of the novel would be traumatic for the main character, a nightmare of sexual violence leading to self-transformation, a Deleuzian de-territorialisation manifest on mind and body. As I was writing everything I had feared about the invasion of Iraq came true: the rhetoric of liberation replaced by insurgency, civil war, the atrocities of Falluja and Abu Graib. I wanted the end of *Lost Boys* to reflect this on some level.

I adopted a particular method to finish the book. I got up early and wrote for an hour or so before doing anything else. It was a strange experience, I felt as though some sort of demonic energy was being channelled through me, as if I was less the author and more a medium or vehicle through which something was expressing itself. I listened to weird electronica by Muslimgauze, an avant-garde composer who constructed songs from samples and loops of Middle East instruments, strange drones and dancehall beats and I tried to let the horror of everything that had happened pass through me. The climax of the book wrote itself; not a logical end, but an intuitive one as I brought Baghdad to Notting Hill and turned the privileged children of West London into the insurgents and victims of Iraq.

As I expected, most publishers had no idea what to make of the book and rejected it. The editor of one prestigious literary imprint even said that 'they would never publish a book about terrorism.' However, Little, Brown expressed an interest: I was fortunate to find an editor with a passion for ideas and an understanding of what I was trying to do. A deal was made and the book published a year later (after further re-writes) to largely positive reviews in more than forty newspapers.

# Rag Love

## by M. J. Hyland

We stood in the shade of the Orient Line ticket-booth at Circular Quay and watched the passengers leave the Oriana. It wasn't yet eight o'clock but the sun was burning hot and bright. Trudy wore a tight red dress that morning. It wasn't an evening gown, but it was long and low-cut and it showed the good and the bad of her – the roundness of her hips, the plumpness of her rear, and the growing band of her belly. I wore my best clothes, a pale blue linen suit, and a lemon shirt to go with the jacket. I suppose we looked just the part for our plan.

Although we were skint, Trudy was certain things would soon change; that one day we'd take a luxury liner from Sydney to Southampton, the ship lit up like a private city, a thousand happy people, including us, asleep in their beds.

"It's so hot," she said, and she took a handkerchief from her handbag and wiped her neck.

"It'll be air-conditioned on the ship," I said.

She smiled and she was happy. "Maybe they'll give us something to drink."

"Yeah," I said. "They'll probably give us some cold lemonade."

"Made with real lemons," she said.

When the last passenger had left the ship, and the deckhand came with the chain to close the gangway, Trudy asked the woman at the ticket-booth if she could speak to the captain.

"We have an appointment for a private tour," she said.

"May I have your name?"

"Mr and Mrs James Brailey."

The woman found our booking, asked to see some identification, and told us to wait. She also told us that the captain was busy and wouldn't be able to meet us 'in person'.

"A purser will come," she said, without looking at our faces.

Our plan was going to need a fair whack of luck. We needed to convince the purser that we were going to book a penthouse cabin on the Oriana's next voyage and that we were the right class of people. Once we found out where the penthouses were, we'd give our bribe to the purser so we could be left alone for awhile and, when the door was locked, and we had it all to ourselves, it'd be just like we were rich passengers, and we'd make love on our luxurious bed, just the way she'd always talked about.

The night before, when we'd sat up late, Trudy told me she'd love me for all eternity and she said, "I want to go on a big ship with you more than anything in the world." And I told her I wanted exactly what she wanted. But the money we'd saved to pay the purser could have paid our rent and most of our bills, and I suppose I knew it was all a stupid pipe-dream. And yet, I went along for her. I wanted to go on the private tour of the liner, and pretend to be rich, because I wanted to do it all with her. I didn't tell her that I was certain she'd want the money and the ocean cruise no matter what bloke she was with. I wanted it because she wanted it, so we could have it together. But I felt sick with the certainty that she just wanted it, and would want it even if her husband was a different husband.

We didn't have to wait long for a purser to fetch us. "I'm sorry for the delay," he said. Even though he had acne, some of it swollen and red near his mouth, his English accent made him seem handsome and better than me. "It's been no nuisance at all," said Trudy, in a posh voice, an accent more like the purser's.

We walked up the gangway, and Trudy held my hand as we passed the sign that said, "NOTICE TO PASSENGERS – THE SHIP STOPS AT SYDNEY HARBOUR FOR FOUR HOURS. ARRANGEMENTS SHOULD BE MADE TO RETURN TO THE SHIP BY NOON." The purser stopped walking and turned round. Was there anything special you wanted to see?" Trudy told him she 'especially' wanted to see the swimming pool and the grand ballroom. "Then we'll start with the swimming pool," he said. Trudy smiled and let go of

my hand, but gently; she passed my hand back to me so it wasn't left to fall or drop, as though my hand was something being safely returned. She was happy and, for a moment, I was happy too.

We shared our street with the MORNFLAKE factory and some of the men who worked on the shop floor lived nearby. On the corner there was a half-way house for ex-prisoners and the homeless, with blokes that sat outside on deck-chairs, with no shirts on, smoking roll-ups and staring at us with their hurt faces.

We weren't as well-off as our next-door neighbour who had just bought a flashy new American car, but we weren't as badly off as the woman who lived in the weatherboard on the corner who used an old rope for walking her dog. And we weren't as strapped for cash as the skinny red-headed man who lived in a two bedroom flat above ours with his four children. He'd put his fist through the screen door a week before we went to see the Oriana, and the flies were getting into our flat.

We were waiting for L.J. Hooker to come and fit a new screen. Our one-bedroom flat was on the ground floor and the foyer wasn't much to speak of; a side table where the mail was kept, and an umbrella stand at the base of the dirty carpeted staircase which led to the upper floors. The paint needed a fresh coat and the plants needed watering. Most summer mornings we heard the two little boys next door splashing about in their swimming pool, a sound that made us both feel tired and sad.

On a very hot day, the sight of the boys' wet fooprints on the footpath made me yearn for the relief of that backyard swimming pool, and sometimes I wanted what they had so much it made me angry. At night, if our back door was open, we could hear the neighbour's little black dog drinking out of the cool water. We once went out to look over the fence and saw the dog drinking. Just the dog, and the stars in the sky, and Trudy said, 'I'm jealous of that dog' and I said, 'Yeah, me too. But we'll get our own swimming pool one day.' I said it too often. It was a promise I couldn't keep.

The first passageway on the middle deck was like a street and there were signs – made to look like road signs – with arrows pointing to 'THE DECKS' 'THE POOL' and 'THE BOATS'.

"Would you like to go up to the swimming pool via the dining room?" asked the purser.

"Yes," I said. "That sounds very good."

The purser took us through the dining room, and stopped to let us look round.

"It's so very lovely in here," said Trudy.

The circular dining tables were being set for lunch and a waiter, crouched on his haunches, used a small black brush to clean the upholstered seats. He brushed just the way a shoe-shine man does, with quick, strong strokes towards his body.

"Which is the captain's table?" asked Trudy.

"That depends," said the purser. "Sometimes he likes to be near the kitchen and sometimes he likes to be near the portholes so he can keep an eye on the weather."

On the way to the upper deck, there were more signs, pointing to 'HAIRDRESSER' and 'CASINO' and 'FASHION BOUTIQUES' and every new sign made me feel hungry. As we walked along a passageway, with doors on both sides leading to cabins, an Indian boy with a feather duster on a long pole walked ahead of us and he wiped the tops of the doors, and the door handles. Trudy smiled at me, a delighted smile; happy to be in a place where luxury afforded a boy whose one and only job was to keep the doors dust-free.

At the top of the grand staircase, the purser opened a door to the upper deck, and we were in a different world: fierce daylight and a piercing rush of heat, and the swimming pool, a perfect rectangle of sparkling blue, and on the decking, neat rows of yellow and red deckchairs and banana lounges, and two enormous red and yellow sun umbrellas.

At the far end of the pool, a young man was bouncing on the end of the diving board, but he stopped when he saw the purser and the two young women watching him, both with their backs to us, laughed. One of them wasn't wearing her bikini top and her bare back had been burnt by the sun. "Go on," said the topless girl to the young man. "I want to see you jump up and down." The young man looked at us and shook his head. "Not now," he said. Without looking over her shoulder, the girl sensed she was being watched and reached down for the towel at her feet. The purser coughed. "Sometimes not all the passengers get off the ship," he said, and turned away.

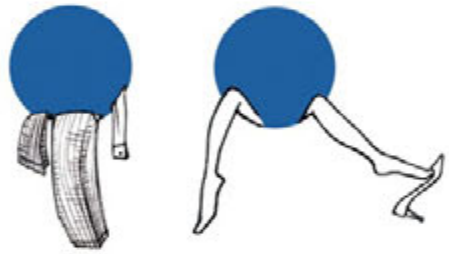
The ballroom was being prepared for a party. There was a piano on the stage and the curtains matched the upholstery on the chairs. There were three men on stepladders arranging streamers and balloons.
"Is it a special occasion?" asked Trudy, her voice gentle, and her accent like the man who reads the ABC news.
"It's a twenty-first birthday party for one of our guests."
"It looks absolutely lovely," said Trudy. "And the food smells divine."
I couldn't smell any food, but I nodded. She looked so beautiful and she'd done such a good job at sounding the part, but now she was overdoing it a bit. I wished she'd calm down.
"All the food served on the Oriana is of the highest quality," said the purser, "and the first class menu was designed by the head chef at the London Ritz."
"How wonderful," said Trudy.
The purser looked over my shoulder, probably at a clock.
"Was there anything else you needed to see?"
Trudy told him that we'd be paying our deposit on a penthouse suite next week, and that we'd board the ship in England, after we'd taken a train through Europe with stops in Paris and Rome. The purser nodded politely all through the far-fetched things she said.
"We'll be celebrating our first wedding anniversary on board," I said. "And we want to cross the seas in style."
Trudy took hold of my hand and squeezed my fingers, nervous and excited.
"But before we make the final arrangements," she said, "we'd like to look inside one of the penthouses."
She said just what we'd planned she should say, but the purser didn't respond as we'd hoped, and our dumb plan seemed at an end.
"I'm afraid that's not possible," he said. "I can only show you a penthouse if you've already booked your passage."
"We thought it would be wise to see a cabin first," I said. "We'd like to be sure."
"We're comparing," said Trudy. "We're also considering one of the new Cunard liners."
The purser looked at Trudy and closed his mouth, as though to stop himself. He didn't believe we could afford to travel first-class and I was embarrassed by this, but even more embarrassed that I didn't realise he'd probably thought it from the moment he clapped eyes on us. I let go of Trudy's hand.
"We have four penthouses," he said. "But I'm afraid I can't show you through. I'd be happy to show you some brochures though."
"Would it be awfully inconvenient if we had a quick peek?" asked Trudy.
"We have a very strict privacy policy," said the purser.

Trudy looked down at the carpet, then back up.
"But there's nobody on board,' she said. 'Maybe we could just see a first-class cabin on the same deck as the penthouses? Maybe one that has nobody in it?"
And again, the purser opened then closed his mouth.
"OK,' he said. "I think there's an unoccupied cabin on A Deck. But we'll need to be quick."
He took a bunch of keys from his pocket and walked on.

The passageway on A Deck was the nicest yet; wider than the others, with wood-panelled walls, and flowers in vases on sideboards, and bowls of fruit, and platters with chocolates wrapped in silver and gold foil, and magazines, and mirrors all along the

way, and the carpet was soft and thick. There were Oriental rugs too. Two of the first-class cabin doors had been left open by the maids who were inside cleaning and changing sheets on the beds.
"Is that one of the penthouses?" asked Trudy.
"No," said the purser, "that's a standard first-class cabin. The penthouses are quite a bit larger and they afford very many more luxuries." He stopped outside cabin 18 and knocked.
"Just a precaution," he said. He went in and we followed.

There was a four-poster bed, a dressing table, two red leather wing chairs, a desk, and a small leather couch.
"In first-class cabins and the penthouses," said the purser, "there's a button just above the headboard and you can ring it any time for the steward." Trudy stood close to the bed and looked for the button. "I've found it!" she said. I wanted to take Trudy aside, hold her tight, and tell her the plan wasn't working, but that I still loved her and we should get off the ship. But I couldn't do that. So long as she didn't know he was laughing at us, maybe it didn't do any harm.



"There's 24-hour room service for first-class passengers," said the purser. "That sounds just the ticket," I said. Trudy went on looking at the room service button like an excited child and the purser and I stood behind her. I hoped he'd at least notice how lovely she was, her long blonde hair, her lovely waist, her skinny ankles. "I'd like one of these buzzers at home," she said. "It'd make life a lot easier for our maid and I wouldn't have to holler all the time."

The purser looked at the back of Trudy's dress and pulled his chin in. He was only a purser and he thought he was my superior.
"What other facilities do you offer first-class passengers?" I said, as I ran my hand across one of the bed's corner posts, as though checking to see that the wood was solid oak, or some such.
The purser moved towards the door, making it clear he wanted us to follow.
"Well, there's dinner at the captain's table every night, of course, and a cocktail lounge, and there's a hospital, with a three-bed private ward." He looked at his watch.
"Is there an en-suite bathroom in all the rooms?" asked Trudy. Her posh accent had slipped a little.
"Of course, madam," the purser replied. "All the rooms on A Deck have en-suite bathrooms."
Trudy sighed. "It would be so very nice to see a penthouse," she said. "We were really hoping that we could see one today. Before we make our minds up."
"I'd like to oblige," said the purser, "but I'm not at liberty to do that." "I understand," I said. "Your hands are tied without the permission of your superiors."
The purser looked at me. It was, I think, the first time he'd made proper eye-contact.
"We have brochures," he said, "with plenty of photographs in them. I'll get you one on the way out. And once you've paid your deposit, then we'd be more than happy to give you a guided tour."
Trudy walked to the door and stood close to the purser, opened her handbag, and took out the cash. Even at a glance he'd have seen it was worth about a week's salary. But he stepped away.
"That won't be necessary," he said.
He was looking at me now, suddenly curious, and something had changed.
Trudy held out the cash: three months of scrounging, some lies, and a loan from my father to cover our bills. But the purser didn't take the money.
I stepped forward. "Look," I said, "there must be an empty penthouse. All four of them can't be booked. And we're giving you a good lot of money here." I took the cash from Trudy and held it out for him to inspect.
"Take it," I said. "We'll only be ten minutes." "And we won't do anything bad," said Trudy. "And if we did, you could call the police. You have our names and address and everything."
And then, just when I was sure he wouldn't, he took

the money, shoved it straight into the top pocket of his jacket and said, in an unnaturally loud and angry voice, “Please disembark immediately!” We watched him walk to the end of the corridor, pause a moment, then turn right.
“We did it!” said Trudy. “He took it!”
I wanted her to keep her voice down, but I said nothing and we went into the cabin. Once we’d locked the door, we stood side by side in silence and were amazed.

The penthouse foyer was like the entrance to a grand house and there were three more doors, to three more rooms; two on the left and one on the right and, straight ahead of us, beyond the opened French doors, a living room with two white leather settees, a desk, two armchairs and a round glass coffee table, and two large port-holes with views of the magnificent sky. The penthouse suite was at least twice the size of our flat.
“This is all ours now,” said Trudy. “Isn’t it wonderful?”
I told her I agreed, but I was nervous, and I wanted to promise her I’d get the money back and that we should leave.
“Which way first?” she said.
But it was too late. I went along with our mistake.
“The bedroom,” I said.

The room was immaculate and modern and so clean – the white quilt, the white pillows, the drapes, the carpet, the rugs – it was as though none of it had been used before, everything new and in perfect order. It seemed as though we were the first and only people to have ever set foot inside. Trudy opened the door to the en-suite bathroom.
“Oh, it’s true,” she called out. “There are heated towel rails and a claw-foot bath tub.”
She came back to me holding a bar of soap shaped like the head of a rose.
“You should put that back,” I said. She said she would, but when she came back to me, smiling, I knew she’d put it in her handbag.
“We should start,” I said. “How will we do it?”
“Let me think,” she said.

Trudy lay on the bed and acted as though we had all the time in the world.
I wanted to get it over with, but I knew she wouldn’t want it that way.
“Remember that idea we once had?” she said. “Remember the idea that we would pretend to be a famous couple having an affair?”
“Yeah, I think so.”
She was waiting for me to get undressed, I thought, and get on the bed with her, but I wasn’t sure. My heart was in my throat with panic.
“Do you remember?”
I didn’t answer. I didn’t remember. I looked round behind me at nothing.
“Stop worrying,” she said. “Don’t be nervous. It’s not even ten o’clock yet. And we’ve locked the door.”
“What do you want to do?” I asked.
She closed her eyes and lifted her dress. “I’m alone in the room and my husband’s still in the restaurant a few tables away from your wife, so that’s why we’ve got to be quick.”
“OK.”
“You go outside and wait a few moments and then come back in, like an intruder.”
I didn’t see why it couldn’t just be me and Trudy this time, without the fantasy, without the other parts.
“Can’t we just be us?” I said. She kept her eyes closed and shook her head.
“But it’s better this way,” she said. “Please.” So I went outside to the foyer, waited a few moments then went back in. Trudy had drawn the curtains and, in the half-light, she looked incredibly beautiful. But we rushed. And it wasn’t just me. It was the both of us. Nothing was right about it. Nothing. Nothing about it was as good as it was meant to be. And not just because we rushed, and not just because we had to move to the floor half-way; there was something else. Trudy didn’t talk us through it, like she usually did. She was stony quiet and she kept her eyes closed, tight, not relaxed. When we finished, she told me how good it felt, and she sounded like an actress when she said, “It was just perfect.”

I knew it had gone wrong because it had all been made real, all the hoping and dreaming and fantasy had been made real and it was nothing, and I knew neither of us would admit it.
I stood, and she stood, and I took a towel from the bathroom to clean up, and she straightened the pillows. We didn’t speak. On the way to the door,

she looked back inside and I looked back too and the things in the penthouse - the opened French doors, the beautiful white leather furniture, the cushions, and carpet, and coffee table and curtains - looked like junk.

We went outside and walked back through the ship the way we'd come. We walked in silence along the boulevard with the grand shops and past the lovely patisserie that hadn't been open before, with its smell of cakes and baking bread and a little café table outside, and along the landing which looked down over the grand staircase, and out onto the upper deck where the red and yellow deckchairs waited in clean queues, and then down the gangway, with its glorious view of Circular Quay and, as we walked, we didn't look at each other. Not once. And over the next few days, as things fell apart- and things fell apart fast- I don't remember if we looked at each other again, and we hardly said a word.

## A Quickening

### by Myfanwy Fox

What is poetry? As a child it never occurred to me that nursery rhymes, advertising jingles and pop lyrics were poetry. Poetry was the strange, grown-up, delicious word play my father recited. *Macavity's a mystery cat/Macavity's not there/Dirty British coaster with a salt-caked smoke stack/The mountain sheep were sweeter but the valley sheep were fatter/Do you remember an Inn, Miranda?*

I was scared of poetry: fabulous scenes, rhyming stories, dancing words but no context, no before and after; snippets that didn't satisfy. How could poetry fit with my childhood life above a shop in a small rural town? I preferred stories: novels I could sink into and lose myself, stories that took me to other worlds. Poems were too fleeting, tantalizing, leaving a sense of something missing, an anxious feeling I knew all too well from the playground. Poems did not offer a refuge; they heightened awareness of things I'd rather forget. Sometimes I lay on the grassy bank of the buried air-raid shelter willing something to sweep me away from the inevitability of school, bullying, Sunday school, boredom eating, and guilt.

My background might have appeared to be solidly middle class - my parents owned and ran a small television and electrical store with a repair workshop round the back - but on closer inspection that middle class normality was shaky. Sometimes my father could be wearing nothing more than home-made swimming briefs as he repaired a TV in the garden. Sometimes he forgot to get dressed before going into the shop. Once, after loading a TV into a car with the shop lad, Bill, two women, strangers, walked past, goggling at a nearly naked man on the high street.

Yes, my father was eccentric. When I was a painfully shy teenager, he sometimes made me feel sick from embarrassment. Yet I was also proud of him. When racist vitriol was spouted in a council meeting about gypsies he stood up for them: *"Jesus were an Arab/ Jesus were a Jew/ Thank God he weren't a gypsy/ Or us wouldn't know what to do."*

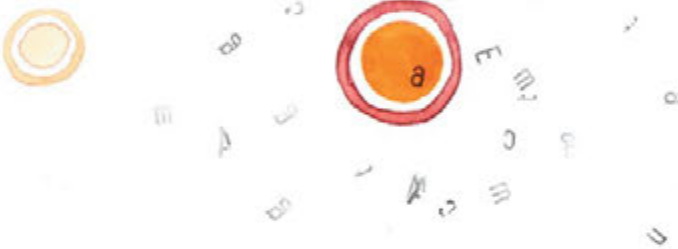
His mother, the eldest girl in a family of thirteen, had left school at twelve to go into service as a parlour maid. Looking after her younger siblings, coping with her father's gambling, living in two rooms crammed with other children, she dreamed of escape.

Whether dad was an accident or not, I don't know. Gran had been married for more than ten years when he arrived. Either way, she doted on him, supported him and encouraged his enthusiasms. He scraped in to grammar school, which was remarkable for someone who grew up in a house with no books, whose only reading matter was the occasional copy of *The Sun*. He was soon working in radio and hi-fi repairs, developing along the way a passionate interest in Quakerism, classical music and poetry. Anyone with a liking for those things is axiomatically middle class, right? He had his poetry printed into pamphlets to raise funds for charities, approaching complete strangers to persuade them to buy copies ofhis verse.

And what of my mother? Gentle, quiet, self-effacing, and stoic, she encouraged quieter reading, was something to cling to in the face of Dad's exuberance. She died when I was nineteen. I wish I'd known her as an adult, not when I was a self-absorbed, traumatic teenager.

Our shop was next door to a butchers, which was run by a big, in every way, family of stalwart young men who made dragging a dozen terrified, shrieking pigs from trailer to slaughterhouse look easy, if enticingly brutal. We local children would watch and marvel; a bullock rising from the floor, throat cut, staggering as blood gushed out of it; a dead white pig scrubbed in a vast galvanized trough of steaming water to remove its bristles. Once a week the skin lorry collected reeking, stiff, fly-covered hides, trailing bloodied slime across the yard as they were dragged to the flatbed.

Most teenagers are miserable at some stage. It's part of the job description. I hated secondary school but, after being bullied in my first year, I perfected the art of fitting in, being invisible, impervious, swotty. I sought the perceived cetainties of science. After school I escaped to read biology at Leicester University -Hall life, youth theatre (great for overcoming shyness), boys, study, labs,the biggest library imaginable. And Dave, my husband-to-be. His mother adopted me warmly.When he went skiing she suggested that she and I take a trip together. I assumed she meant to London but she had tickets for a long weekend in Istanbul: 'Prague's a bit too expensive.'



She had quit her career as a social worker and gone back to college to learn how to make theatrical costumes, tutus, corsets, merkins and all manner of wonders. I modelled her first firebird ballet costume. My legs are too short, I look ridiculous in her photos. She once appeared on the Clothes Show mothering a sheepish Christian Lacroix. She made my wedding dress. My step-mother made the cake. My father made something too- a speech with a poem about his “beautiful, dutiful daughter” who could do “whatever she oughter”.

Fast forward a decade or more and Dave and I are living in Silicon Valley,California.He's programming mass spectrometers in Redwood City and I'm a psychiatry research assistant at Stanford. My unit is moving from a decaying portacabin behind Rodin's Gates of Hell to a gleaming, soulless concrete block. I'll miss our skunks, the family of raccoons that live under our floor, and the bare-foot, cigar-smoking professor who is retiring.

I am also pregnant. Morning sickness leaves me exhausted for a few weeks but then it lifts. I am luscious, ravenous and glowing until I start bleeding. For three months I lie still, willing my womb to behave, to hold and protect my firstborn. The doctor tells my mother-in-law that I have an irritable uterus. 'Irritable?' she says, 'Bloody belligerent, more like.' She's visiting in between chemotherapy for breast cancer: she can only stay two weeks. Poor Dave. He should be with her but he can't leave me. Poor her. She's unable to stay with us permanently and help out.

In hospital, drugged so that my vision tunnels, making reading impossible, moments pass slowly. I listen to a lot of music. After a week, Dave decides we should celebrate with cake in my windowless, queen-bee cell. Can my pregnancy last another week? It does. On the wall is a round white plastic painter's palette with various holes of various sizes, as if for measuing spaghetti portions; each measures a stage of cervical dilation. I am on six centimetres for a month.

The baby finally arrives. It's a tiny, skinny scrap of barely-breathing fur-eared life. We nickname him Yoda as they whisk him down to the Neo-natal Intensive Care Unit, covered in wires and tubes. I attempt to walk for the first time in three months and manage to make it to the ICU to see how he's getting on. I pump breast milk into him, having been told that he needs colostrum to build his immune system. By the time he learns to suckle I am producing enough to feed a dozen babies. We all go home at last. Yoda's going to be ok.

So is Dave's mother. With her cancer in remission, she races to our rescue when we are mad enough to have a second go at parenthood and my preterm labour strikes again. I avoid hospital internment but it's a long four months of “rest” before our daughter arrives, full term. Somewhere in that four months I teach myself to crochet. And I write very bad, self-absorbed, depressing poetry, my first efforts since leaving school and the first I have ever written for myself. Later, I burn them. My daughter wears the crocheted dresses and sleeps under my hand-crafted cot blankets.

It turned out that my mother-in-law's cancer hadn't really gone; it was only hiding. Now it's in her bones. Years before, in Cambridge, we had joked about buying a big house to share: her in the basement with her Guide Dogs For The Blind puppies-in-training; me and Dave in the main part with an entire cricket team of children.

It doesn't happen like that. Childbirth isn't my forte and my mother-in-law is actually dying. We make a traumatic, hasty move from California to Worcestershire to care for her. The day we all move in she collapses. I have two jet-lagged children under the age of four, an alcoholic aunty and a terminally sick cancer patient in the house. We don't have time to panic. We cope. Three months later Nana is dead. But at least she spent her final moments with us, not with strangers in a stark hospital ward.

Her passing leaves a huge void in our lives, physically and emotionally. One eerily empty afternoon while my children are napping I sit at the computer and write. Nine months later I have a 120,000-word novel. It's rubbish. I begin another, discover a writers' circle, am given homework. “Write a thousand-word short story.” “Write a poem.” My first attempts are appalling but I persevere. My second short story surprises me. I have the gut feeling that it's “got” something. It's picked by Helen Cross and Sybil Ruth for Short Cuts. Poems begin to wake me from my dreams, come to me as I walk the dog, visit me a in the shower. I join online critique groups and learn about form, history, how to write to prompts, the importance of practice, etc. Phrases chase each other like fields full of excitable puppies, running, romping and rolling. Sometimes there’s just a paw print and it's enough. At first I battle my rational science-trained brain, then I realise it's part of me, part of my poetry. Science and art are two ways in which we can make sense of life without resorting to superstitions. I am lucky to dip into both, to see, however dimly, two possibilities in my mind's eye. Each has its own way of interpreting, its own way of thinking. They are not mutually exclusive. It's just our education that separates them. Science needs creative brains. Flights of artistic fancy need scientific foundations. Poets celebrate our universe, even those that dwell on its darkest aspects.

After a couple of visits to Ledbury Poetry Festival I find myself exploring the immediacy of readings and even performance. I like poetry's subversiveness. As Basil Bunting says in What the Chairman Told Tom, poetry is best not mentioned in “normal” society:

*Nasty little words, nasty long words, it's unhealthy. I want to wash when I meet a poet. They're Reds, addicts, all delinquents.*

For years I avoided poetry because it was my father's thing. It was only when I dared to try that I found my own voice. Perhaps not writing for so long makes me more aware of how lucky I am now. And I can be grateful for his grounding in Masefield, Belloc and others, perfect for parody:

*I don't remember a thing, Rebekah.*

For me, now, poetry spotlights something always known but never fully recognised. It's a re-awakeing, a quickening. Poetry is a way of bearing witness, of sharing other people's lives, of holding things to account. It's a way of offering hope. Ask another poet and they'll suggest something different. Ask me tomorrow and I may, too.

# Q&A

## ...with Ellah Allfrey

Ellah Allfrey's job as Deputy Editor of *Granta* is as enviable as it is challenging. She joined the distinguished magazine in 2009 after making her name as an editorial assistant at Penguin and later as an editor at Jonathon Cape. Her passion for world literature has earned her a well-deserved reputation in the industry for an off-piste approach to commissioning and publishing new writing.

Born in Zimbabwe, where she lived until the age of five, Ellah moved with her family to America speaking only Shona. Her mother used books to teach her English. "I guess I'm lucky that the connection between books and the potential for new worlds was made for me at a very early age." By the time she could speak English she had developed a stutter. As part of her treatment, her speech therapist prescribed reading aloud good old children's classics such as *The Lion, The Witch And The Wardrobe.* The book helped to cure her stutter and sparked her lifelong love affair with fantasy fiction and later science fiction.

As a child, Ellah's home was wall to wall with books. "My father was a novelist and journalist. Literature was all around me. It seemed to be in the very air I breathed." It's surprising, then, that she didn't enter publishing until her thirties. Before that she had a variety of jobs, all of which she hated. The nadir was working as an administrator for a firm of lease brokers in the City. "Very nice money, but I was so unhappy that my husband made me quit and pointed out that since I spent all my time and quite a bit of money on books I should find a way to make that pay me."

Turning her back on the City, she landed a temp job at Penguin and forged a new vocation in her beloved world of books.
Shanthi Govender asked Ellah Allfrey some burning questions about equality and justice, literary tastes and publishing leg-ups.

Shanthi Govender (*SG*): Were you inspired by your education?

Ellah Allfrey (EA): I have fond memories of all my schools, from the nursery at Wheaton College, Illinois, where they thought it would be a good idea to teach us how to touch type (an invaluable skill, as it turned out), to Bishops-lea Prep school in Harare, with its complete collection of *Nancy Drew And The Hardy Boys*, to Arundel Girls' School in Harare, where I was head librarian. I went to university at an incredibly nurturing liberal arts college in Goshen, Indiana, which was run by the Mennonite Church. They had questioning, intelligent, wise professors who were indulgent of my bolshy young self when I insisted on an English curriculum that didn't depend on me solely reading dead white males. I was a communications major and have two degrees in the subject. I don't regret not reading English, but if I ever went back to full time education, it would be so I could spend my days reading novels.

*SG*: It seems you've always been interested in writers at the edges of the mainstream. Does this come from a sense of equality and justice or a desire to see something of yourself and your experience in the work?

EA: I publish books that I want to read. It's really as simple as that. And my interests are wide-ranging, perhaps even undisciplined: history, science fiction, science, geography, crime, and as much literary fiction as I can ingest. Reading is about pleasure, and that pleasure includes learning and escape. So I wouldn't say it was about equality and justice at all, at least not in any conscious way I can lay claim to. Anyone interested in the world will want stories from all over the world, written by different kinds of people. To my mind the writers I like and publish are certainly not at the edges of the mainstream - in fact they don't see themselves as at the edges of anything. Their stories are at the centre of human experience.

*SG*: Which new writers excite you the most?

EA: I've recently published a young American

woman called Clare Vaye Watkins. She's a short story writer (at least for now) whose collection *Battle-born*, all set in Nevada - came out last summer. Her stories are dark, perceptive and memorable, giving a view of an American life that feels authentic. I'm also very keen on NoViolet Bulawayo, whose novel, *We Need New Names*, was recently taken on by Chatto. At *Granta*, I'm tasked with finding new writers all the time. So while I'm naming just two here, there are at least several dozen I've read recently who have made me feel very lucky indeed to have my job.

*SG: When editing a book, what kind of relationship do you form with the writer?*

EA: It's intimate. You have to be that writer's best reader and be very clear that editing is not about imposing your opinion or will, but about asking questions and making suggestions that push the writer to make the work their best.

*SG: Are there any differences between being an editor at a publishing house and being the editor of a magazine like Granta?*

EA: There are a lot of similarities. The calibre of writers is the same and because *Granta* is published in book format, the pace is similar too. The public engagement is greater at *Granta*. We have a growing commitment to get out and meet our readers and to introduce them to the writers they're following in our pages. As much as I love the long silence of working on a text, I like this aspect of editing, too.

*SG: Gut feeling on the rise of the e-book and cyber self-publishing?*

EA: I am keen on e-books, anything that gets people reading. Reading more and reading widely is a good thing. I don't have a Kindle yet, but that's only because it still feels a little low-tech to me. I look forward to budget devices being available at an affordable price so that they become as widespread as mobile phones, this would be particularly useful in developing countries.

*SG: What's your view on accusations of elitism in publishing - any signs of change?*

EA: It's definitely elitist, but there is an awareness of this and a willingness to put things right. The only problem is that the change isn't fast enough. Paid internships would solve a lot of the imbalance I feel, and committed efforts to encourage and support graduates from ethnic minorities would be most welcome. There have been generations of the same folk giving each other a leg up in publishing and perhaps a little affirmative action would not be a bad thing. Not necessarily in law, just an awareness (a vocalised awareness) that we all need to try a bit harder to have the makeup of publishing more accurately reflect the world we live in and sell books to.

*SG: Do you write yourself?*

EA: I'm not a writer. I'm a publisher and editor.

# REVIEWS

**On Cigarette Papers**
**Pam Zinnemann-Hope**
**(Ward-Wood)**

*On Cigarette Papers* is a collection of poems based on the contents of an archive of material left to the author by her mother. There were letters, photo-graphs, various objects and the eponymous cigarette papers on which were written recipes in Russian. As with any family collection of memorabilia, there is a story to be told. In this case, as the Foreword makes clear, it is a story worth sharing with others.

'*In 1935 my parents eloped from Hitler's Germany to Kharkov, Ukraine, in the USSR. My mother was German, my father German-Jewish. In 1937 they were imprisoned during the Stalin purges. They were released in 1938 and came to England...*'

The poems are constructed with an eye to narrative often lacking in most poetry collections. Indeed, the whole thing reads like a condensed novel and is all the richer for being so. Presented in this way, it allows underlying themes and ideas to be developed at length and from differing perspectives. Poems refer

back and forth to one another, ideas echo through the situations, there are layers of complexity, fragments of memory are teased out with care and presented with an economical use of language that puts us on the borderline between the chillingly real and the surreal.

*Someone comes up to me rattling a tin*
*collecting for the Nazis.*

*I tell her, You should be ashamed of yourself,*
*collecting for such a cause.*

*From out of my words, around a corner,*
*four SS appear to arrest me.*

Few of us can possibly understand the atrocities experienced by those who lived through the Second World-War. It left a space in their lives into which they could no longer venture. And the darker the experience, the emptier and more haunted the space. Something fundamental was broken in humanity and we are presented in these poems with a selection of horrifying yet glittering fragments. It is a work of archaeology that digs, layer by layer, into the human psyche and assembles and interprets the finds. What we get is not just a picture of ordinary lives, but of the extraordinarily brutal times that caused them to be shattered.

These verses have a modernist sensibility. If we relate to them it's because they derive from everyday situations. Bound together as people in a family are bound together, Zinnemann-Hope offers them up without sentimentality or any desire to manipulate our emotions.

*And yet here I stand with you*
*inside the window with the net curtain*
*looking out, the way we've always done,*
*at me standing out there.*

The above stanza is a good example of Zinnemann- Hope's formidable skills of composition. It looks simple but there is a great deal going on. Rhythm and assonance are in perfect accord, but they never obscure what's being conveyed. Like a good filmscore, you barely notice it's there, but it does so much to enhance the foreground action.

*Every night we lie awake*
*sweating in the August heat.*
*One night: 4.00am,*
*Kurt says,*
*'Listen!'*
*A muffled engine sound;*
*the quiet click:*
*the van doors shutting*
*before it comes, the dreaded,*
*half-expected knock.*

Set against a background of 20th-century European history, this is a collection about how world events are carved deeply into the souls of those affected. Tying together these ideas and themes, echoes and dreams, memories and voices, is the poignant narrative of the author's too-late search for 'answers' to the questions that have been put so many times and will go one being put.It is also about finding the soil in which one is rooted and understanding one's own cultural life. Most of all, though, it is about coming to an understanding that we must learn the lessons of the past and use that knowledge to avoid making the same mistakes.

*You know that Russian proverb?*
*It's in Solzhenitsyn:*
*'No. Don't dig up the past.*
*Dwell on the past and you lose an eye.'*
*It goes on:*
*'Forget the past*
*and you'll lose two eyes.'*
*Graeme K. Talboys*

**Catalysts: Confrontations With The Muse**
**Catherine Owen.**
**(Wolsak and Wynn)**

Catherine Owen is many things. She's a pilgrim, a mindful walker, an ecologist, a phenomenologist, but above all she's a poet, one who reaches into her heart and writes about poetry as a poet rather than as an

academic (although she is always erudite) and thus makes it live.

As an ecologist of the poem, she moves with acute self-awareness through many environments, of place and time and relationship, knowing that the poem, the poet, and the place that the poet inhabits are in fact aspects of a single reality, facets of a jewel, sometimes worked, sometimes simply displayed to its best advantage.

This book, a beautifully designed volume, is presented in two sections: Origins and Theories. Between the two there is, perhaps not surprisingly, considerable overlap. Poetry is an organic subject. In the first section Owen explores the meaning of 'muse', largely through her own experience of it. She talks about her childhood, about the journeys she made through France and Canada, about the people, places, objects, and ideas that set her on the path to becoming a poet and shaped the way she began to engage with the world.

In the second part of the book, Owen puts the focus on the theory of poetry. Written at different periods in her life, the essays might at first seem disjointed, yet presented it in this way it allows us to see how the ideas developed and changed over time and also, more crucially, it means that there's no hint of a thesis. This is not, mercifully, an academic work.

If there is a fault with the book, it is that in some cases the essays are too brief, not claiming the space to explore the subject to its full. For example, Owen rightly asserts that poetry has the power to heal, but then fails to explain exactly what she means or to give specific examples of where this has taken place. It would have been enlightening to see ideas like these developed more fully and one way this could have been achieved is by canvassing the views of some other poets, especially those who are as fully engaged with their art as Catherine Owen clearly is. The omission of these other perspectives was noticeable.

*'Dark Ecologies'*, the last and arguably the best essay in the collection, is an impassioned plea for a new kind of nature poetry, one that reflects and highlights the reality of our relationship with the natural world. Eloquent, passionate and scholarly, Owen makes a convincing case for "lyrical jeremiads ... who reach beyond nature as anthropocentric metaphor and mirror to its unassuaging ecologies of night" .

Unassuaging ecologies of night. This could only have been written by someone who's deeply aware of the power of poetry and equally aware of its failure to engage with the world, to draw attention to it. Anyone who cares about poetry and how the poet works would do well to read this excellent collection.
*GKT*

**Happiness Comes From Nowhere**
**Shauna Gilligan**
**(Ward-Wood)**

Shauna Gilligan's writing has something of the sensitivity and resonant sadness of William Trevor at his best. This may be her first novel, but hers are skills that have clearly been honed over many years. In *Happiness Comes From Nowhere* she uses those skills to great effect to lay bare the lives of the Dublin-based Horn family.

At first glance the Horns are not remarkable people, yet Gilligan is such a capable writer that she makes you care about them, and she does this not by means of the grand gesture, not by resorting to melodrama, but by concentrating on the minutae of their lives. Thus we get intimate portraits of all the principals: Sepp Horn, a German finding his way in an unfamiliar country; his wife Mary, continually harking back to her former life of travel and adventure; and their son, Dirk, an artist at odds with life because of his pre-occupation with death.

The satisfaction we take from getting to know these characters is directly proportionate to the amount of effort we're prepared to put in. The story is by no means straightforward. It jumps backwards and forwards in time and between a multitude of characters, but for the patient reader the rewards are tremendous.

Take the character of Dirk, for example. In literature, the self-indulgent, tortured artist is probably the least likely to elicit our sympathy, but that's only because few writers have the ability to make them sympathetic. Gilligan is one of those writers. If Dirk's troubled relationships and attempted suicides ring true it's because the author has a clear-sighted understanding of human psychology and is able to draw on that to create convincing, three-dimensional characters.

Dirk is a real person, with real problems, and we want to know how he's going to overcome them. And the same is true, although to a slightly lesser extent, of the other main characters.

Sepp's nostalgia for his native Germany becomes ours because most of us have experienced, at one time or another, the yearning to return to a time and place when things seemed simpler, purer, more innocent.

Mary's lament for her previous life of freedom and travel moves us because, like her, many of us have resisted the call of the road and lived to regret it. Indentification is one of the basic rules of characterisation and this novel has it in spades.

All the big themes are here: the unreliability of memory, the nature of art, the aging process, death, religion and its role in society. Not many novels can bear the weight of so heavy a cargo, and if Gilligan's does it's because she wisely operates by the old adage that the universal is contained within the particular.

Like a good novelist should, Gilligan presents her characters and her story and trusts that the reader will fill in the spaces. It goes almost without saying that she makes the occasional slip. 'You have to look at your reflection in the sober light of day and realise that there is no going back. There is only going forward.' The line is attributed to Dirk, who spends much of the novel wrestling with his own mortality, but it sounds, if only vaguely, like the author making a point. If so she can be forgiven, for on the whole she has produced a work of unusual power.

*Ryan Licata*

**The Madman of Freedom Square**
**Hassan Blasim**
**(Comma Press)**

The Iran–Iraq conflict, Saddam Hussein's rise and fall, the 'war on terror', the invasion and occupation of Iraq by the US and its allies, the plight of Iraqi asylum seekers fleeing persecution – viewed through the prism of the western media, our perception of Iraq is largely a negative one. We tend to see the Iraqi people as either victims of state oppression or warmongering mad mullahs bent on destroying western values. But what is the truth behind the headlines?

Hassan Blasim's excellent collection of stories provides a stark, horrific, often surreal look at Iraq from the 'inside'. Spanning over twenty years of recent history, the author explores his country in all its beauty and ugliness, drawing on the experiences of ordinary men and women for whom Iraq is both beloved motherland and a nightmare they wish to escape.

These stories reflect the state of modern Iraq and as such are liberally and casually sprinkled with references to hostage-taking, beheadings, sectarian killings, refugees, suicide bombings, UN inspectors, economic sanctions, human trafficking and war. It's a chilling portrait, but Blasim is such an intelligent writer that he never lapses into exploitation or shock tactics.

What we take from these stories is a sense of a nation trying to heal itself, told with warmth and sensitivity by someone who clearly understands and loves his country.

Blasim makes a distinction between the 'purposefully obscure and experimental' stories written during Saddam's reign and the more 'realistic and factual' ones that were written after his fall. As a metaphor for the changes that have occurred in Iraq in recent times, the distinction is both apposite and revealing of Blasim's objective in writing these stories, namely, to lament the substitution of something beautiful for something monstrous.

As if to underscore this theme, his style embraces both elements of realism and the fantastical, where historical time and place become the backdrop to a world of dream and nightmare, of hope and madness, where, in one story, blonde angels walk the streets and where, in another, a madman loses his mother's head from his bag of bones.

Blasim is at his strongest when mixing the macabre and the playful, the horrific and the humorous. The best expression of this can be found in the story *The Nightmares Of Carlos Fuentes.* As a street cleaner for the municipal department, Salim Husain's duties include searching for body parts after explosions.On one occasion he finds a beautiful ring, which he removes from a severed finger. Normally he would cash in on such a find, but he decides not to sell the ring because he feels an almost spiritual attachment to it. Not long after this, sickened by the daily, escalating violence going on all around him, he flees Iraq and is given asylum in Holland. Determined to escape his past, he assumes the name of Carlos Fuentes on the recommendation of his cousin who comes across the name in a foreign newspaper.

With his new identity, Salim gets down to the business of integrating himself into Dutch society, learning the language and attending courses on Dutch culture and history. When he marries a local woman, he completely disassociates himself from his heritage – he refuses to speak Arabic or mix with Arabs or Iraqis. He even goes so far as to disclaim his own people, denouncing them to his wife and others as ingrates and savages. A number of years go by and he achieves his aim of becoming a Dutch citizen. He's happy, but when he starts having nightmares connected to his old life in Iraq, he begins to realise that, unlike a ring taken from a severed finger, one's past is not so easily removed.

Though often disturbing, there is a thread of optimism that runs throughout this collection, the suggestion being that the worst is finally over in Iraq. Taken together, these eleven stories seem to ask a vital question of the people of Iraq and of us: what would happen 'if we were to lose control over the inherited communal gestures which unite us in fear and happiness?' The answer scarcely bears thinking about.
*RL*

*A final image inspired by Nick Barlay's essay on 'We'...*