

Ali. Smith

INTERVIEWED
BY
CAROLINE
SMITH

Inverness-born Ali Smith's first collection, *Free Love and Other Stories* (1995) was awarded Saltire Society Scottish First Book Of The Year Award. Her short stories and novels including the Man Booker Prize nominated *Hotel World* (2001) and 2005 winner of the Whitbread *The Accidental* (2004) are known for their visceral language play and dynamic shifts in view point and time scale delivered in a tightly constructed form. She often treats universal themes – love, death, guilt and illness – with a fleshy, fresh touch that surveys the commonplace and idiosyncratic alongside the monumental. She is currently working on a rewrite of a myth for Canongate's myth series.

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How have you developed as a writer since *Free Love* was published?

I can't think about it. It's stupid. If I had on a critical hat, I would be able to say: these themes are the same, but I can't even read my work after it's published: all I would see are the mechanisms. I've only read *Hotel World* because I had to do something with an audience and I had to read it over in case I got it wrong.

That's surprising because when I've heard you read, I'm struck by how your writing fits your spoken voice. You seem at ease.

Really? I distrust strong voices. I don't distrust proper strong voices in literature but I naturally distrust the link between the person who has the voice and the reading of it as being the only connection. As a writer, I would rather not exist as a person, not have a voice as a person. The worst thing is when something about you gets in the way which is why I avoid reading my work because it makes me think: what am I supposed to do next?

That's hard with the demands of an industry hell-bent on authors' promotional tours.

I do them with good grace until three days in and then I get depressed. It has nothing to do with what you make on the page. It only gets in the way. It's a problem for writers now because the pressure is on. People expect you to be something which is something to do with celebrity which is anathema to writing anything at all because it means some other self is in the way. I prefer the idea of merging into what

you are writing. You have to have no self. One of the interesting dichotomies or dualisms that turn up in life is that opposites are always linked by some kind of equilibrium, so that no self means very loud voice. No self means merging with a voice that can really be heard because so much of writing is about finding voices, finding things which have no voice or finding things which previously haven't had a voice.

The character of Else in *Hotel World* is interesting. You use a number of interfaces to present life for a woman living on the streets: shifting from limited third person to her being seen and described through the eyes of a bored journalist. Did you research?

I had a clear structure in mind for *Hotel World*. Outside the building was someone who couldn't afford or had no right to be in the building. Inside was someone who worked there and also someone who couldn't afford to stay there as a guest. Else was always an outsider but with that structure, you immediately have all the interfaces. There's a view from here, there, views from people outside. She came about in two ways. Firstly, she really loves words. She was a clever girl who was an outsider. I wonder if clever girls are often outsiders. Secondly, she's truly homeless. For the first and maybe last time I did some research into someone who wasn't me. I asked a girl I saw on the street some facts about what it was like and in return, I gave her money and books. She talked to me about the police, how they move you on, the kind of places you would stay. The rest I made up.

Which point of view are you most comfortable with?

Third person. It's a gift to the writer as you can do more things. You can tell the reader five different things by saying one thing. First person is really difficult because everything is questionable but you also have to have trust with the reader.

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How did the stream of consciousness evolve as a strategy for the sister's section in *Hotel World*? You use this with another young girl, Astrid, in *The Accidental*.

All third person is really stream of consciousness. Even when it is structured. All of those characters in *The Accidental* are written in stream of consciousness, in that they are sorting out their unconsciousness with an enhanced consciousness. Astrid's off the hook – nothing's made her sort anything out yet and Michael has lost the word 'and', so the continuum has gone for him. I think characters announce themselves by their sentence structures. When I was working on the sister's section in *Hotel World*, I kept looking at it and it wasn't working so I put it on the ground and drew lines where I thought things stopped, then cut and arranged the lines so I could see the links. I wanted to allow the chapter's own consciousness to work on me which I hadn't seen clearly through its structure.

Do you often use that physical strategy?

Never.

Are you a writer of routine and discipline?

No. I get up in the morning, mope about and make excuses. But if I'm working on something I start working on it really fast. I'll be at my table straight after breakfast. If not, I have to make myself. The impetus is always the piece of work. Once you are in it, you can't come out of it.

That's the process of novel-writing. It's relentless.

A novel won't go away. Everything you do is a wrong decision. Everything is a negotiation; it's a conversation that never goes away. At least with a short story, it's over faster. With a novel you have to tell yourself not to mind. I think there's a proper relationship between instinct and editing. You have to let your instinct go but you also have to know when to edit your craft.

How do you achieve that balance?

It's a working question. The uncertainty never goes away. When you look back - having crossed the tide- and you ask yourself how you did that. In a way, it wasn't me, it was the book, because books are made by books. That stream of consciousness in *Hotel World* is straight out of other books. I don't mean that I'm copying things, I mean we write to pay homage to everything we have read.

Do you prefer the short, sharp energy of the short story?

It's a relief.

In *Free Love*, the first story is bold and sets the pace. It's not known initially that the narrator is a woman.

The publishers didn't want me to call it *Free Love*, but something else. They were also uneasy about that being the first story. But that story is fundamental to the book.

Yes, and interestingly their relationship is ambiguous but not closeted.

Yes because everything means lots of things. The culture we live in now wants us to see meaning on the surface which doesn't allow for any shadow let alone ambiguity. We can't live like that. It's like being dead with a mobile phone in our hands.

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What drives the short story form?

The form is exciting because you can do anything with it. In a finite space, you can do the infinite. It's a bit like listening to something on the radio where you can be anywhere in the world, it can take any shape, any voice. With a novel you are much more constrained because it has to be chronological to some extent. It has to be about time. Short stories are about time, but they are about spatiality, something moving out or away from us as a still point. A novel has to be about sequence because it has to move at length from one thing to another. Short stories do that too but within the form you can go any direction and the form will hold it. It's like a mythical beast that can change at any time but you know it will always hold the shape.

Would you just write short stories?

No, the novel is too seductive. It's a social form. Writing in English, living in Britain, it's impossible to escape class and the British novel is always about class and levels of hierarchy. If there's ever a self that gets in the way of what I am doing, it is that political self and the political consequences of how stories work. And the notions of how you tell a story and it can never not be political. Everything belongs in time and place and history - and we are in it. If we can't see where we are, then more fool us. The self that I was worrying about at the beginning of this is the social, is the person who realises those things - and I always treat those as my particular quandary. That's the self that comes between me and the work.

If you merge into your characters, I'd hazard a guess that Amber in *The Accidental* is closest to you.

It's interesting that you think she's me because she is complete artifice! She has no self at all. As well as being the most earth-stampingly bodily character, she is also in dreams and cinemas. She is a trick of light. Each one of her sections is first person and sets up an immediate distrust and immediate self entry. You can place anything or read anything onto this character: she might punch you for it, you know, but you can still carry on doing the reading. I had a number of things from the Alhambra that I wanted to bleed into the section and, using the cinema motif, one of them was the palace. Compare notions of grandeur: the Alhambra is a palace, it's also a six-seater car and it's a person (Amber). Everything we believe resides in a car, cinema and a palace. It resides in all of history: the empire buildings and shiftings that are happening now and happening through that book.

You reference the photos showing the humiliation and torture of Iraqi prisoners at the hands of the US army. It's again signposting an interface; and suggesting our complex and yet ambivalent relationship with the media.

The interface notion is interesting because all of those characters have something between them and the world and questioning if that's a good thing or whether you should see, whether you actually see anything. When we look at a TV screen, do we actually see anything any more?

Have you always been interested in language play?

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I can't remember a time when I wasn't. There's nothing else to do in Inverness. I love the many meanings that words can have and the whole structure we can make when we just simply suggest. I love the imagination and what the imagination can do. Growing up in a small town being gay and knowing that the world I was in wasn't really going to allow for me - well, not easily - meant that you could believe in positive notions like there were worlds beyond, there were other things you could do and that there were always other words, and that love doesn't have to be sequestered. Just unpack a word and see what comes from it. Words are versatile if we let them be and if they become versatile then we become versatile.

And being gay arguably equips you with needing to construct meanings on multiple-levels.

Yes, imagine the selves that we are supposed to have and the selves we are given. The imagination and reality have always been closely linked. Someone said that the novel gives us our imagined worlds, but actually it gives us our *real* world. Language and fiction give us how we could be, how we can be, if there's a realisation of other words, voices, structures. You just have to keep yourself open: all our selves. Beyond the closed nature which is what society suggests we ought to have - to close off all the time - or is more comfortable as a way for us to be, but it's like a denial of everything that matters.

Who do you enjoy reading now?

That's difficult. There's the new novel by Nicola Barker. She's an original writer and I don't think there are many in English fiction at the moment because in a way publishing works against originality in a way it hasn't before because the weight on writers to produce the next thing is heinous. Barker manages to have a voice and a

style which is arguably beyond time, it's absolutely of now and yet when you read it you can't quite keep up with it. It's gone as soon as you have read. She's found an instamatic, traditional form that nobody else has found. She comes straight out of writers like Chaucer and Carter.

In the UK, is the short story more popular now?

Not really. There's noise that's being made with the national short story prize with the money attached to it now. You can live for a year on £15,000. But publishers are still denying that short stories can sell. Imagine the difference if a collection of short stories could be on the Booker Prize. In bookshops it's hard to find short story collections. Book sellers don't think they can sell because publishers don't put any money into selling them. It's the notion that readers don't like short stories because they take too much investment into a tiny little space. But this is a false supposition – everyone I know who loves books, loves short stories.

In *the Guardian*, (*To Cut A Long Story Short*, March 24, 2007) writers including yourself were asked to construct a story in six words. Some really worked as they evoked depth and had a clear structure.

In a tiny space, you can make everything happen. If you just simply attend to words, they'll do the work for us. And they'll tell us everything we need to know and we'll be able to use them with much more skill. But what's happened in the last ten years is that words come to mean their opposites or mean nothing. For example: 'weapons of mass destruction'. Nobody trusts what words do. This first meant a politician's tool and then a politician's lie. We have to find a way to re-enfranchise words.