



Giving “people like that” a Voice

A Conversation with Agnes Owens

Jane Gray



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/etudesecossaises/89>
DOI: 10.4000/etudesecossaises.89
ISSN: 1969-6337

Publisher

UGA Éditions/Université Grenoble Alpes

Printed version

Date of publication: 30 January 2008
Number of pages: 207-223
ISBN: 978-2-84310-110-6
ISSN: 1240-1439

Electronic reference

Jane Gray, « Giving “people like that” a Voice », *Études écosais* [Online], 11 | 2008, Online since 30 January 2009, connection on 08 September 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/etudesecossaises/89> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/etudesecossaises.89>

This text was automatically generated on 8 September 2020.

© Études écosais

Giving “people like that” a Voice

A Conversation with Agnes Owens

Jane Gray

- 1 Agnes Owens was born in Milngavie, near Glasgow, in 1926. After a couple of years of gruelling travel, “marching” around the Highlands of Scotland with husband and baby looking for work¹, pitching tents in strangers’ gardens and squatting condemned buildings, followed by intermittent jobs as typist, factory worker or cleaner, Agnes Owens began writing fiction in around 1973 when she joined her local creative writing class at the Vale, Alexandria. It was at this writing class – which she says she only attended at first “for a night out of the house” – that Owens’s talent for storytelling was first recognized by writer Liz Lochhead, then tutor at the Vale writing group.
- 2 Liz Lochhead had been impressed enough by Owens’s short story, “Arabella”² to show it to James Kelman and Alasdair Gray, writers with whom Owens has been associated ever since (as the following interview will clearly show), and with whom she collaborated in the collection of short stories, *Lean Tales*, published in 1984.
- 3 By the time Agnes Owens had published her first novel, *Gentlemen of the West* (1984), she was already in her late fifties. Since then, her publications have included two collections of short stories, *Lean Tales* (1984) and *People Like That* (1997); three further novels, *Like Birds in the Wilderness* (1987), *A Working Mother* (1994) and *For the Love of Willie* (1998) and more recently two novellas under the collective title *Bad Attitudes* (2003).
- 4 The characters of Owens’s fiction are drawn, as Douglas Gifford points out, from the margins of working-class life: “outsiders, down-and-outs, alcoholics and no-hopers”³. To this gallery of rather sombre and seedy portraits we can further add mental patients, sexually frustrated wives, callous mothers, child molesters, violent teenagers and dirty old men. The list of what Owens herself has collectively labelled “people like that” appears endless, and although her artistic agenda involves a preoccupation with exposing the dark and often tragic side of human nature – the “treacheries of attitude”⁴ as she has defined it – this plethora of sad cases is often portrayed with such searing wit and acute irony as to render, at times, even the most tragic of situations highly comical and the most treacherous of sinners sympathetic.

- 5 Consequently, it can be said that Owens's subject matter – individuals on the edge – can be fitted into the social and artistic preoccupations of writers such as James Kelman or Alasdair Gray, whose writing, according to critic Lynne Stark, "went well beyond the confines of conventional social realism, redefining the model of 'working class' writing, the alienated social subject replacing the community as centre of attention", and thus "bring[ing] to fiction the unimagined: voices, people and places denied cultural existence". In order to better illustrate this point, my introduction will focus on but a few of those characters "denied cultural existence" to whom Agnes Owens has given a voice. Her first novel, *Gentlemen of the West*, is narrated through a male voice (a thematic space predominantly occupied by *male* working class writers at that time), and tells the story of a bricklayer called Mac, described by Douglas Gifford as representative of "the archetypal, unreliable, drink-orientated Scot"⁶. The straightforward, deceptively transparent narrative style, as well as his deadpan dialogue highlight the sheer monotony of Mac's existence, which will ultimately lead him to his final cry for "anything, just anything to give [him] a hint of something beyond":

I carried the hod, laid common brick, facing brick and coping stones. I laid brick down manholes, and laid brick up ten storeys, but I never had a pound in my pocket beyond a Monday unless I won it at cards. I was twenty-two. My arms were knotted like a man of forty-two, and sometimes my back ached like a man of fifty-two. And it all added up to being paid off once again. (GOTW, pp. 77-78)

- 6 This dull, repetitive routine depicted through Mac's job (when he *has* one), as well as the other equally mundane episodes in his life which include fighting in pubs, arguing with his mother and being given the sack, are somewhat reminiscent of the existences of some of the protagonists in James Kelman's fiction, such as Tammis in *A Chancer* and more specifically Hines in *The Busconductor Hines*. Such characters constitute, according to Gavin Wallace – and within the realm of what Kelman has termed "social realism"⁸ – "narrators and protagonists, rarely, if ever, fully in control of their existences, and morbidly aware of the fact"⁹.
- 7 Some of the protagonists in Owens's fiction, however, though rarely "in control of their existences" are, on the contrary, alarmingly *unaware* of the fact. One such character is Arabella – in the short story of the same name – a woman who spends her time pushing her dogs – her "children" as she refers to them – around in a pram, visiting her cold-hearted mother and impassive, bedridden father and applying her special home-made ointments, potions and treatments to her "regular clientele of wealthy men" in order to relieve them of their highly ambiguous "spasmodic seizures" and afflictions.
- 8 The reader may find some aspects of this protagonist grotesque to say the least, since Arabella, amongst other equally gruesome activities, dines on "cold porridge kept handy in a drawer", prepares massage ointments from "cow's manure and mashed snails" and allows her dogs to "squat in corners to relieve themselves". The narrative voice is nonetheless highly ironic as it moves between third person narrative and free indirect speech, thus insisting on the disparity between what Arabella takes herself to be and how other characters (as well as the reader) see her. The following passage – whereby Arabella's squalid living conditions result in her being paid a visit by the Sanitary Inspector who is threatening to put her out of her house – illustrates this point. She ventures to change his mind by using her "witchlike" powers of feminine seduction:

"My good man", said Arabella, genuinely concerned when she saw his head lurching round and round. "I can see you are not well and it so happens that lucky

for you I am a woman of great powers." She was aware that she had no time for finesse and had to seize the opportunity given to her. Quickly she divested her clothing and stood before him as guileless as a June bride. The chalk-faced man before her felt his senses reeling. The grotesque pallid flesh sagging hideously wherever possible was far worse than anything he had viewed in the weirdest of horror films.

"Now just take off your clothes sir, and you will soon feel better," said Arabella in her winsome tones. [...] It was all too much for him. His heart gave a dreadful lurch. He hiccupped loudly. Then his head sagged down on his chest.

Arabella was very much taken aback. Nothing like this had ever happened to her before. Though it had been obvious to her when she first saw him that he was an inferior type. (A, p. 25)

- 9 The sheer irony inherent in the narrative creates a comical effect as Arabella's reactions, within the sphere of her own "normality" contrast starkly with the voice of institutional "authority" embodied in the Sanitary Inspector (even though, ironically, the sight of Arabella has rendered him literally "speechless"). Of course, the adjective "sanitary" shares the same etymology as "sane" (derived from the Latin *sanitas*, meaning "healthy"). Consequently, by the norms and standards of "mainstream" society, while the Inspector is representative of all that is by definition "sanitary" and "sane", Arabella is, by contrast, an "outcast", being both "insanitary" and "insane". "Insanity" is a trait which Arabella shares with other (predominantly female) protagonists of Owens's "people like that" such as Peggy, in the novel *For the Love of Willie*, who tells her story from an asylum; Betty, in *A Working Mother*, whose mendacious behaviour towards family and friends results in her too being placed in an asylum; or Mary in the short story "People Like That" who has managed to temporarily escape from one. Mary waits anxiously at the railway station for her son Brian, due on the train from Manchester. She suffers from memory blanks and cannot understand why her son does not arrive. Little by little, the reader becomes aware that her amnesia is far from being her only "problem": a woman sitting on the same bench "keep[s] to the farther end of it" (PLT, p. 77), and she makes Mary uneasy when she begins inadvertently stroking her "grey kid gloves" (p. 78):

"Do you mind not doing that," said Mary.

"What do you mean?" said the woman, her eyes bulging with indignation as she stared hard at Mary.

"Well, you see it reminds me of the time Brian had his gerbils. He used to stroke them like the way you're doing. Then one day he squashed them, accidentally, mind you. He wouldn't do it deliberately. My Brian was always good with animals - "

(PLT, p. 78)

- 10 Once again, the narrative voice insists on the split between what the protagonist takes herself to be and what she actually is. Ironically, it is Mary who thinks that this woman is mad, while the reader strongly suspects her of doing too much thinking out loud:

Perplexed, Mary watched her go, wondering what she'd said to annoy this woman with a face like a pig and legs as thick as tree trunks. Likely she was off her head.

(PLT, p. 79)

- 11 Even more significantly, Mary is the first to remark that "you were bound to meet *people like that* in a railway station" (my italics). The comic effect produced by this situation takes a tragic turn however, when she mistakes a drunk hanging about outside the station for her long-lost husband and allows herself to be sordidly raped by him down a close, expecting "a blow on the mouth" once he had finished with her simply because "her husband had always done that". (PLT, p. 86)

- 12 Even though her punctual references to the "staff" have already aroused the reader's suspicions, they are finally confirmed when we come to understand that she has escaped from an asylum where she had been placed ever since the death of her son from an overdose two years previously. The tacit link between madness and maternity is interesting in these characters. Whereas Arabella's own mother seems to have no maternal feelings for her daughter, Arabella – having no children herself – transfers her own desire for motherhood onto her pet dogs. The description given of Arabella, as "the filthy woman with the *wild tangled hair* and great staring eyes" (my italics) is redolent – albeit in a less "poetic" way – of the young woman portrayed in Hugh MacDiarmid's poem "The Empty Vessel"¹⁰:

I met ayont the cairney
A lass wi' tousie hair
Singin' till a bairnie
That was nae longer there...

- 13 Just like Mary who talks of her son as though he was still alive, the young woman in this poem is in denial over the death of her child. Her madness is clearly suggested by the fact that she too behaves as if her baby were still alive, and is also implicit in the description of her "tousie" ("wild tangled") hair. As far as Arabella is concerned, although it is more likely – given her circumstances and living conditions – that she retrieved her pram from the local tip, the mere fact that she is in possession of one leaves the possibility open to the reader that she did perhaps once have a child. Betty, in *A Working Mother* loses contact with her children through her scheming and betrayals, though she refuses to admit it: "You'd think he'd come and visit me now and again and bring the kids. It would be nice for us to be together again. After all, I am their mother". (AWM, p. 187)
- 14 The comic tone of Owens's fiction, as we have seen with these brief examples, unveils her characters' flaws, and in this way reveals to the reader the tragic side to their lives. As a result, the stories can be read as *satires* of the way society views such people on the margins. This idea can be linked to Henri Bergson's discussion of things "comical" in *Le rire: essai sur la signification du comique*, and his assertion that laughter is incompatible with emotion:
- Peignez-moi un défaut aussi léger que vous voudrez: si vous me le présentez de manière à émouvoir ma sympathie, ou ma crainte, ou ma pitié, c'est fini, je ne puis plus en rire¹¹.
- 15 The humour in Owens's fiction serves to *expose* the "pathetic" nature of her characters' wretched lives. It strips them bare, until, as Bergson suggests, the laughter gives way to emotion: compassion, sympathy and pity. However, it might also be contended that the humour perhaps lets some light into the darkness of her characters' lives, "undercut[ting] the potential terror¹²" of their situations, in the same way as Flannery O'Connor's use of humour – in her short stories, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" or "The Life You Save May Be Your Own¹³" for example – exposes a folly "so pitiless, that the revelation of emptiness and self-deception is as appalling as it is comic¹⁴".
- 16 For want of space, this very brief introduction to Agnes Owens's work illustrates only some of the artistic preoccupations of this self-taught writer. It remains to be stressed here that Owens, in lending a voice to those "denied cultural existence", has made a crucial contribution to contemporary Scottish literature, and in doing so, deserves far more critical attention than she receives.

- 17 The following interview took place at Agnes Owens’s home on November 9, 2006, in the spare bedroom of her council “prefab” in Balloch, Dumbartonshire where she is currently writing – on her obsolete electric typewriter – a collection of short stories which she says, may – or may not – be published within the next couple of years. I hope this interview will show that this “natural writer¹⁵”, as Alasdair Gray has been tempted to call her, is as unaffected, witty, entertaining and honest as her fiction.
-

NOTES

Interview

Could you talk a little bit about your background?

Well I come from a place called Milngavie near Glasgow, and I’m 80 (I was going to say I was 90 but I forgot I’m only 80! You know you’re so ashamed of it you make it even worse!). My father, I’m very interested in what he did because he was at the Somme. He was a young man of 17 at that time. After the war he was unemployed, and I was ten when he got his first job. Before that he did get jobs every so often as a night watchman. That wasn’t his trade though. He’d had a trade, I think it was something to do with newspapers, but that was all finished after the war. He came back with one leg, which was a common thing for people that had been in the Somme. He got his first job in the Milngavie paper mill. Then the war came – the second World war – and he died in 1942. I think, you know, maybe fathers are not appreciated as much as mothers but I really loved my father. His life was ruined, but so were a lot of people’s lives ruined.

But my parents were determined to educate me, and I was quite determined to get a job in the paper mill! I didn’t want to be educated. I wanted to come out of that paper mill with all these other young women with their hair up in turbans and going out for a good time on a Friday! I wanted to work in the paper mill. But I was to be educated, which only meant that my mother acquired enough money to send me to learn shorthand and typing. That was a good thing, because I got office jobs – not that offices are any great places to work in. But it helped me many many years later when I was trying to write. I don’t think I had a great career. I was married before to another man who went through warfare. When he came back... he had all his limbs and he looked alright, but he was affected. He died after 16 years of marriage and then I married my present husband, who wasn’t in any wars.

But it seemed that fate followed us and has not been very kind because my youngest son, Patrick, was murdered twenty years ago. It was a murder where his own kind killed him with a knife, and I thought, you know, my father and my husband went through terrible battles and survived, and my son just ran out, and got killed. It seems worse than the war somehow. I had seven children. My youngest three were just on the point of leaving school when Thatcher came into power. My first four

children, when they left school things weren't just so bad. But a lot of kids just went to the wall. It was a lost generation. And, well, my own son got murdered. But I don't know if all this has influenced my writing in any way.

How did you become a writer?

Somebody called me "the accidental writer" because I had no intention of being a writer. I never even thought I could write! I could maybe write a wee stupid poem! I went to a writing group for the sake of a night out, and then, because I was encouraged by a tutor that came down, called Liz Lochhead, and then Alasdair Gray who I thought was really crazy, but he seemed to be quite keen on what I was doing, and Jimmy Kelman, who really was keen on what I was doing. He really liked *Gentlemen of the West*. Jim has got this thing, I think, where he likes writing about poor people. I'm not saying that's exactly true, but he doesn't admire the rich, Jim. With his help, *Gentlemen of the West* got published, and then after long, difficult struggles and stops and starts, I published another five books and a shared book with Alasdair and Jim.

You dedicated your latest book, *Bad Attitudes*, to Jim Kelman and Alasdair Gray identifying them as being the "true *Gentlemen of the West*". What is your relationship with these writers?

We met through writing. They came down to the Vale, the writing group I joined, and they were the tutors. But they only stayed for a month. It wasn't a permanent thing. The Vale writing group was in the leisure centre in the centre of the Vale, Alexandria. That was their base, and we just got one of the rooms. I think people can start up writing groups quite easily, provided they get the accommodation. What I mean to say is there was nothing *significant* about it. You just went down. I went down originally for a night out. I had written a little poem. You used to just sit in the house and write poetry to pass the time. And so I went down with my wee poem – it was about a forget-me-not! But that didn't matter, because the people that ran it were just wanting to start a writing group whether you were good, bad or indifferent. Jim Kelman once said to me, months and months later when he got to see my writing, "Look Agnes", he said, "I would advise you to forget your poetry... and concentrate on the brick-layers!" I thought my poetry was quite good, but it wasn't, and so I did concentrate on the brick-layers and carried on.

So you were inspired by brick-layers!

You see, my husband was just a labourer, but he worked on the building sites. My son John, he didn't want to be a brick-layer when he left school. He wanted to be a joiner. And when he came back and said he'd refused this brick-layer job, I said, "You get back up that road and take that job!" and he got it back, just because his mother had said that to him! Brick-laying is not a good occupation, you know, it can cripple you when you're fairly young. But John managed to leave it in the nick of time. Anyway, he was my inspiration for the first story, *Gentlemen of the West*.

You mentioned earlier on that it was Liz Lochhead who discovered your writing...

I don't see Liz very often but I know her. We wrote a play together. It was called *Them Through the Wall*. It wasn't very good... she did one family – the snobbish family – and I did the neighbours – the poorer family – and it was badly reviewed, because it wasn't good. I didn't really care though, I got £700 for it! I don't think Liz was too thrilled about it though. And then it went away over to various small towns in Scotland and the cast, they began to alter it to suit themselves. It was quite successful

with working class people. The last time I saw her, I was up in her house about a couple of years ago. Alasdair and Jim had decided we were all to meet in Glasgow, maybe once a month, just to keep in touch. Tom Leonard was there as well as Archie Hind. And Bernard MacLaverty came once or twice. We weren't there for any particular reason except to keep in touch. But it fell away. It's like everthing.

Do you think you have been influenced by Jim Kelman and Alasdair Gray?

No I don't think so. Well, Jim in the beginning wrote a lot about ordinary people, and very, very funny he was. We're a wee bit alike but I wouldn't say I resembled in any way Alasdair's writing! I don't *want* to resemble people's writing. I can't remember what they wrote anyway! I thought to myself, I hope Jim doesn't start talking about his latest book because he sent it to me. It's about people getting interrogated that have committed terrible atrocities in Bosnia. But they talked in such a fashion I just couldn't be bothered with it! He's moving away from the way he used to write, although he says he's not. But he'll get published, and he'll get paid. We always need the money. Well I don't really need the money any more. What I mean to say is, I always seemed to be waking up through the night wondering how I was going to pay things, you know. That was my life. And now I know I can pay things... at the moment anyway, until I use it up. That's what the money from my writing has given me: a sense of *boredom*, not a sense of *freedom*!

Do you live off your work?

Sometimes I would get Art Council grants, so I've always managed to have some money in the bank, you know, for a rainy day, and every day it rains but I don't take it out! But I don't live as though I'm a writer, I don't have a writer's lifestyle. I don't have the money to have a writer's lifestyle!

What, or who, inspires you to write?

What inspires me? Well, I can only say, the person who inspired me and still does, although I actually can't copy her or I would, is the American writer Flannery O'Connor. It was Alasdair Gray that sent me the book of Flannery O'Connor's short stories. She wrote about the Bible Belt. That would be a real inspiration, writing about people in the Bible Belt. Not because you liked them – I don't write about people that are nice people. They've got to be sinners, with a wee touch of goodness here and there, you know.

It's awful hard to say what inspires you. Sometimes it's just a sentence that comes into my head. For instance, I wrote a short story that was published called "We Don't Shoot Prisoners on a Sunday". I don't know where I got that from, but I said, "I'll write a story about a Mexican bandit" and I said to Alasdair, "Do you think this is, kinda... ham?" and he said, "No, but it's very good cheese!" Love stories don't inspire me, not unless there's a kind of *bitterness* about it. Success doesn't inspire me, but I don't think it inspires a lot of writers, being successful, or writing about successful characters. The poor people – not necessarily because they haven't got enough to eat – but the way people can be poor in their minds, and not try for things, and become alcoholics or something like that. These kind of people, I would say, inspire me.

What inspired you to create a character like Arabella?

My first husband and I, when we got married, there was a terrible housing shortage, because of the war, and we lived with his brother. It was terrible. When you live with people it's entirely different from knowing them! There was an advertisement

looking for people to cultivate the Highlands, so we decided to go up there. Scoraig, that's where we went. To cut a long story short, we eventually got to live in an old, condemned building, with my daughter of so many months, and Sam and I. (Years later a councillor said, when I was applying for a council house, that you're not responsible if you did that, especially with a baby, and I began to cry, and that's how I got my house!) But anyway, we lived next door to an old, bent couple. We lived in terrible conditions, I mean, we had just one room. I don't know what *they* had, but I'm quite sure it would've been pretty filthy! They kept a pail of urine, or maybe shit outside their door! And you had to run by this to go to another terrible toilet.

But they had a daughter. I don't know what her name was, and she hurled dogs about in a pram. Well, you know people can really love animals, but in this story I've made her quite cruel to the dogs, but she's not aware of it – she's not aware that she's anything to be looked down upon. She thinks she's really *it*, and she's full of lice and filth and everything! So *she* inspired me, this woman, and then somebody said, "I think a lawyer goes up and *visits* her", you know. She never had any sanitary inspectors that she put in a barrel of sludge, no, that wasn't true! But, you know, she *did* exist. Country people away up in remote places I think are liable to be very peculiar!

Do you have any specific intention when you write?

I think when you write stories you want every one of them to convey something. Maybe I try to cut across people's idea of what's good, by substituting what's bad. I don't consider myself a great writer, by the way! When I read other people's stuff, I think, "I could *never* write like that!" I mean, I'm very simplistic. And I said to Jim Kelman, I said, "I think I'm good until I read somebody else's stuff!" And he says, "Look, *don't* think that way. Just think that what you do is what you do. You can't do what *they* do, but *they* can't do what you do." My writing has been described as being "good", "charitable". I mean, the characters portrayed deserve sympathy. I'm portrayed as a writer who champions the underdogs, in a way. But I don't do it in an *obvious* way. And the underdog can turn round and bite you just the same as any other dog! I would say I want to convey people that are condemned in a better light than what people would think, you know, or maybe to make people think, well, these people are human. Something like that.

You told a critic once in an interview that you look for the "treacheries of attitude" in people...

Yes, that's the word I've been searching for: treachery. Not on a Hitler-type scale! Treachery, people are treacherous, you're treacherous yourself sometimes. That just sums it up: that I like to expose the treacheries. But people that are treacherous are not necessarily monsters. They're not necessarily even evil or wicked. But we're all treacherous. There's always somebody we're letting down. I discover that I'm talking about somebody and then I say, "I hope she *disnae* find out what I've been saying about her!" You know, *that* kind of treachery. You think you like this person, and yet you're quite willing to join in and run them down. Send them to the guillotine!

What do you think about your own work?

I haven't been thinking much about it lately – it was a thing that I used to do! That's why I'm trying to get myself out of this attitude. I have joined a writing group again. Quite often I stick it because I want another night out, just the same as I did at the

beginning. But I'm always surprised that I get good reviews. I really do get good reviews and I'm not just saying that. Bloomsbury likes what I write, they've told me. But I don't sell like some big glamorous authoress. They take on very famous writers, I mean, they've even done the Harry Potter thing! I'm just small-fry! They like what I write, but I'm not going to earn them a lot of money. Alasdair Gray said to me once that he never understood why I didn't get more publicity, and then he realized it was because I lived in a poor district and I was elderly! It put an awful stamp on me, you know! The idea that people would say, "Oh, *we're* no gonnae read *her*!"

Do you see yourself as being a specifically Scottish writer, or would you rather be seen as a woman writer?

Well, maybe I'd rather be seen as a Scottish writer rather than a female writer. I have that kind of attitude – because I'm far from a good person! – that sometimes I would rather read what men write. And I'm supposed to be all for women's rights, if I'm decent at all. But as far as writing's concerned, I think that men are getting shoved out of the road now, and it's the women that are taking over, and you see, I don't think men are up to much, but I like a male character, if you know what I mean. I think they have to be there these male characters. A lot of writing was brought out about women getting raped by their fathers, which can happen, I suppose, and does happen quite a lot. But I got a bit kind of *disbelieving* about these women writers who write for women and for women's causes. They seem to make a meal of it. I can't explain why I feel this, because I do think women are abused terribly by men, but they've got to maybe make it *believable*. I mean, most men can't help being abusive to women, and they might be good husbands, they might be good fathers, but they might also feel, "I'm the boss", you know. And you get that. I have to live with that attitude as well, or else it's "clear off!"

I would rather just be seen as Scottish, though. I know Scotland. I was born in Scotland. I think the character is entirely different from the English. I don't know in what way. I think Scottish people are also very treacherous, and they also don't like you being a success. It's okay for wealthy people, and people that are already established to be a success. That's okay because they're the untouchables anyway, but for the likes of me, I mean, people were totally amazed when I got *Gentlemen of the West* published because I was just an ordinary person. I even cleaned schools. I did a lot of different jobs apart from being a shorthand typist which was, oh, that was really something! But it's like: "Who does she think she is? Because I knew her faither." You know, that kind of attitude? "I knew her faither!" I don't know if the English are like that. Maybe they're actually a bit more sophisticated than what we are. Having a wee bit clue what like Scots people are, I would say they're generous and treacherous and vicious and kindly, as I said in *Gentlemen of the West*.

Do you ever have your readers in mind when you write?

Well no, because, although I'm a female writer, I don't write what people like female writers to write about. They don't write about brick-layers for a start, or alcoholics, or even people that are in asylums. I mean, women like romances, and maybe a man would like what I write, but they are few and far between. I think I'm kind of old-fashioned... I know I'm not popular in England.

Do you have any idea who reads your books?

Jim Kelman! Jim Kelman and Alasdair Gray!

You mentioned Flannery O'Connor as an author you enjoy. What other authors do you read?

If you limit it to Scottish writers, that might be easier. I don't necessarily like Scottish writers, but there's a woman that I really liked – not as much as Flannery O'Connor – and that was the Scottish writer, Jessie Kesson. She was a kind of Flannery O'Connor in a way, only a Scottish one, that wrote about the farmers. She held you. She gripped you. She spoke in an accent that was perfectly understandable but it was particularly Scottish, you know, the East coast. With her you felt like... I wouldn't say *crying*, but she struck you as being sympathetic but truthful, and there was a *harshness*. Alasdair Gray says, "Oh I think you're better than Jessie Kesson", but I don't think so at all! I met Jessie Kesson once. She was typical North-East type, you know, and very regal. She thought she was something and so she was! I remember we were both doing a reading in Stirling and she came in the door with Alasdair, you know, holding on to his arm. I read out "Arabella" and then I read out a chapter from *Gentlemen of the West* and she said to me, "Ah *dinnae* like that story about that woman! But I like your story about the boy!" She didn't like "Arabella". Maybe it reminded her of herself! But I accepted that. I thought that Arabella was okay, but if Jessie doesn't like it, that doesn't mean to say that she's right.

Do you read Alasdair Gray's novels?

Yes. Although I never read *Lanark*, because I couldn't understand it! I could understand the ordinary parts, but when it came to these... monsters, I just said, "I don't get this" you know? But I know it was a very good book. And quite honestly, Jim's getting more and more non-understandable!

Have you told him that?

No! He gives me books I haven't read! I would say he's like Picasso. He used to paint things that people understood. Now it's all this strange stuff! But Jim's got a big following. But he did say, "I know people don't like what I write. But I don't care. I do it my way, and if they don't like it..." But I mean he won the Booker! And Alasdair Gray doesn't understand it either! You know, he doesn't really like Jim's writing, but that doesn't mean to say it's not good. It must be good. I mean, the publisher's are not going to waste their money. They would publish Jim before they would publish me! I know Alasdair likes what I write, but I don't know why he likes it. I think it's maybe because the characters are... something that he can support.

Up until your latest book, Alasdair Gray had always designed your covers. Why didn't he design the cover for *Bad Attitudes*?

Bloomsbury were getting fed up with Alasdair Gray designing the covers. Well, I wouldn't say getting fed up – they wanted a change. And I know what they meant. Alasdair... you can't mistake Alasdair's bright colours. And I liked the cover that was used for *For the Love of Willie* – it was a grey, kind of bleak couple at a window. It was bleak, and I like that. And the cover for *Bad Attitudes* was just a picture of a close, with a lot of debris in it, and I liked that. Maybe it all boils down to the fact that I like bleak situations. But always with humour, you know, bleak and humorous. You see Alasdair, he's great, but he does think that people are going to do what he tells them! And he would say, "Let me know and I'll design the cover." And I thought, well, "that's great!", you know?

At the end of your collection of short stories, *People Like That*, you include a short autobiography, "Marching into the Highlands and into the Unknown". Was there a particular reason for this? Do you consider yourself to be one of those you call "People Like That"?

That was Alasdair Gray! He got on to Bloomsbury. The editor – who was under Alasdair – said she didn't think I should include that story. And I didn't think I should include it either. It's a bit "look at me, look at what I've done" and I didn't think it was anything great. "Marching through!" – it wasn't like going to Africa or going through the jungle! And I was a wee bit sheepish about it myself, but Alasdair said, "No, no, that's a good story", so it was included. Maybe Alasdair thought I was one of those "people like that"! Yes, well, I suppose I am one of these strange people, the kind of characters in my stories. Yes, maybe I did include it for that reason!

Your first book, *Gentlemen of the West*, is narrated through a male-voice...

I find that the male voice has sometimes got more depth and more humour in it. The females... we talk a lot of rubbish at times, you know, the females are more talkative. They're quite comfortable being talkative, and they don't think they're boring but maybe they are, where males are inclined – I'm not saying they are *all* the time – to talk with a certain *authority*. Maybe that's why I wrote through a male. And then I did a follow-up to that one, it was *Like Birds in the Wilderness*. That was the one book that never got mentioned or talked about at all. It was like a child that I had that was never successful. I never feel inclined to read it or anything. I just *shun* that book! I thought it might have the same interest as *Gentlemen of the West*, only it was in a different setting. And I remember I wasn't well this day – I'd had the flu or something. But I was getting reviewed on the radio, so I got up and sat waiting for this review. And then the woman said, "And I don't understand. What does she mean? A brick-layer? Who ever heard of a brick-layer going out with somebody that works in an office?" That was the review! And then they laughed. And so I just said, "I hate that book!" And I'm always saying I'll read it again just to see how bad I thought it was, but I can't be bothered. I had thought it was quite humorous though.

Your characters are quite often on the margins of society: the homeless, tinkers, people suffering from nervous breakdowns, the mentally ill, alcoholics...

For me these people are interesting. The failures are always more interesting than the successful people. If somebody said to me, "Write about so and so. He's made a great career, and he's worked hard and he's done well and he deserves it," I would say, "He sounds a right bore to me!" I prefer to write about people that are just condemned, maybe, from the start. You know, maybe their environment, or their parents or they don't have a chance and they end up being despised. I prefer to give people like that a voice. But it's because they're *funny* as well, you know. Even people that are in an asylum. I thought there was a lot – when Peggy [*For the Love of Willie*] was in an asylum – that was very funny. It was nasty, but funny.

Humour is very present in your portrayal of such characters...

Well, I think readers would be more interested. You have to have a wee bit of humour in dark stories. Some people say to me, "Your characters are awful dreary at times." I say, "Well that's the way I want them!" But I feel like saying, "But do you no think they're *funny*?" I always like to temper my stories with humour. I would love to write a story like Flannery O'Connor's, "A Good Man is Hard to Find". It was so horrific, but funny. And then Alasdair Gray said, "Yes, but you wrote "The Lighthouse", didn't you?" That was rather a chilling story. I don't think it was even funny. Then I got

kind of all superstitious about it, in case something happened to my... You know, when you write about kids getting murdered, you're asking for trouble! But no... I mean my son was dead long before that. That story was based more on my brother and me. Of course nothing happened like *that*, but I always had to watch my brother because I was seven years older than him and well, my mother and father went away playing bowls, especially on holiday, and I would have to be dragging along with him! It was a shame for him more than it was a shame for me!

Do you see yourself in any of your other characters?

I saw myself in *A Working Mother*. This woman, she deserves sympathy but she was quite hard, and although I didn't really think I was *quite* as hard, I thought there was something... *cheeky* about her. And maybe that's what I try to be at times. Maybe I succeed, I don't know. Maybe I say cheeky things but really I'm quite soft! Betty ends up getting her kids taken off her, and she says at the end of it, "After all they are mine. They'll be back because they're mine." But she didn't really realise that was her getting left for good. Because she wasn't a good mother, but she wasn't such a bad mother either. She wasn't a cruel mother, just a neglectful mother, I think... if I can remember it!

What does your family think of your writing?

Sometimes you suspect that they don't think anything at all and then they say something once in a blue moon. They say, "Yeah, we're proud of you." But they're not a family that's inclined to say things like that, you know... being Scottish!

What are you writing at the moment?

Well, it's short stories. I don't know if they'll appeal. I'll send them to Alasdair Gray first. He always tells the truth! I'm writing about strange people, people on the edge, people that society doesn't like very much. At the moment I'm writing a story about a boy who hates his stepfather and his stepfather's a drunk but he kids on he's not and everybody thinks he's wonderful. And then a lot of women are getting raped in the district, especially a lot of elderly women and spinsters! And so this boy that's telling the story, he just all of a sudden thinks that it's his stepfather that's the rapist, because he hates him that much and he wants him to be! He starts following him about. And he waits outside pubs for him to see what he does when he comes out. And it ends up just his stepfather going home and falling asleep on the chair! He says, "Oh damn it!" He wants him to be the rapist, because he's going about all black and blue with the beatings he gets from this man! But it's not completely serious, you know. But I'm trying to bring in the fact that this rapist probably doesn't even exist! In these people's minds, you know, they're elderly, they would like a wee bit of *glamour* in their lives, you know what I mean? Maybe not all people that get raped hate it. But *they* don't even *get* raped! But something comes out of the boy's spying on his stepfather. I don't know whether to make the stepfather be a gay, or wear women's clothes, something like that.

1. An account of this period in Owens's life is given in her short autobiography, "Marching to the Highlands and Into the Unknown", in Owens, A., *People Like That*, London, Bloomsbury, 1997 (1996), pp. 169-176.
2. First published in *Cencrastus*, no. 4, 1980-81, pp. 24-25.
3. Gifford D. & McMillan D., *A History of Scottish Women's Writing*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1997, p. 626.
4. Hendry Joy, "Finding Truth in Hard Times", *The Scotsman*, 11-05-96, p. 16.

5. Stark L., “Agnes Owens’s Fiction: Untold Stories”, in Christianson, A. & Lumsden, A. (eds.), *Contemporary Scottish Women Writers*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2000, p. 111.
 6. Gifford D., *op. cit.* p. 625.
 7. Owens A., *Gentlemen of the West*, Edinburgh, Polygon, 1984, p. 116.
 8. Term used by James Kelman in *New Edinburgh Review*, no. 108, 2001, p. 59.
 9. Wallace G., & Stevenson, R. (eds.), *The Scottish Novel Since the Seventies*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1994, p. 218.
 10. MacDiarmid H., “Empty Vessel” in Riach, A. & Grieve, M. (eds.), *Hugh MacDiarmid: Selected Poems*, London, Penguin Books, 1994, p. 19. This poem was inspired by the anonymous ballad, “Jennie Nettles”.
 11. Bergson H., *Le rire: essai sur la signification du comique*, Paris, PUF, 2006 (1940), p. 106.
 12. Stark, L. in *Contemporary Scottish Women Writers*, p. 112.
 13. Both short stories are published in O’Connor, Flannery, *The Complete Stories*, London, Faber and Faber, 1990.
 14. Asals F., *Flannery O’Connor: The Imagination of Extremity*, Georgia, University of Georgia Press, 1982, p. 89. I refer you to the interview published here. Agnes Owens is particularly interested in – and inspired by – the works of Flannery O’Connor. She also explains that Alasdair Gray sees common traits in their writing.
 15. Owens A., Kelman, J., Gray, A., *Lean Tales*, Edinburgh, Polygon, 1985, p. 284.
-

AUTHOR

JANE GRAY

Institut d’études politique de Bordeaux