Janice Galloway (1955)

Briefly on the author

- Born in Ayrshire but lived mostly in Glasgow
- Teacher for 10 years

"Talking to teenagers has to be one of the most interesting things an adult can do: assessing them by narrow criteria is not"

- Writer in residence for four Scottish prisons
- Times Literary Supplement Research Fellow to the British Library in 1999
- Many literary prizes and awards
- Radio work for the BBC

Main works

- *The Trick is to Keep Breathing* (1989): adapted to the stage and performed at the Tron Theatre (Glasgow), the Du Maurier Theatre (Toronto) and the Royal Court (London)
- *Blood* (1991) – short-story collection
- *Foreign Parts* (1994)
- *Where You Find It* (1996) – short-story collection

- *Fall* (1998) – play
- *Monster* (2002) – opera exploring Mary Shelley's life
- *Clara* (2002)
- *Boy Book See* (2002) – small book of "pieces and poems"
- *This Is Not About Me* (new novel to be published)
- Sculptural collaborations and music reviews

General points to reflect on

- Gender: “I want to write as though having a female perspective is *normal* which is a damn sight harder than it sounds” (1)
- What is fiction for?: “Readers ought to encounter the characters as people, have opinions about them; be forced to address what they're bringing to the process. That pushing readers to acknowledge that they come with an agenda too, with a history, their own construct of what the world is, is part of the process. That to me is principally what fiction's for.” (2)

- An outsider in the 80s and 90s: “Now that Scottish writing has a profile, it's a bloke's profile, and one I find I wish to distance myself from. The most visible of it doesn't say a great deal to me about what I consider to be the wider priorities, the things I take for granted as my adult priorities.” (3)
- A great read: “A book that not only invites you in, but then tells you something you didn’t know before, or gives you an insight you didn’t have before” (4)

- Focus of writing : “Putting a character on like a skin. It's akin to acting in that I imagine being different characters, trying out their mindsets.” (5)
- Critique of popular media culture: “The rise of idiot pastimes on tv and magazine culture, the commonplace rubbernecking on human misery and pointless wealth and greed, the likes of Big Brother and Hello! I guess, where loss of human dignity passes gleefully as entertainment, is something that makes my skin crawl.” (6)

- Novels meant as “reconstructive fictions”
  - Envisaging new gender relations and identities based on human interaction
  - Illustrating the decline of patriarchal authority and oppressive discursive regimes through symbolic male death and abnormal typography

The Trick is to Keep Breathing

“The miracle of the I is this: wherever it speaks, it lives; it can’t die – no matter how battered, or doubtful, amputated and no longer credible, this unreliable I! And even if nobody trusts it, even if it doesn’t believe in itself, we must believe it” **(Ingeborg Bachmann)**

The speaking / writing “I”

- Amputated, unsure of its own identity, expressing itself in broken sentences, in a wounded typography and in the collision of registers (vs her obsession with lists)
- Joy Stone – Scotland (nationalistic agenda?): split “I” as a symptom of a “*Scottish malaise*”, of a “*damaged Scottish identity*” (Wallace & Stevenson 1993) and the “*dramatization of a society no longer capable of articulating itself*” (Craig 1999)

- Performing “I” / reader-voyeur: tradition of Scottish oral storytelling combined with postmodernist devices (mixed registers, dislocation of typographical styles, and revision of old Scottish motifs like the double)
- “I” experiencing personality split, disembodiment, virtual invisibility, a form of non-existence
- Joy’s breakdown as exemplar of women pushed to the margins by capitalist society, or victims of imposed feminine icons (ex: “The Bathing Ritual”)

- (7.1) I watch myself from the corner of the room sitting in the armchair, at the foot of the stairwell. (p. 7)
- (7.2) The nice thing is that I need not be present when I am working. I can be outside myself, watching from the corner of the room. (p. 12)

(7.3) Tell me from the beginning what you think is making you feel bad, he said. […] It was perfectly logical he should start like this yet I hadn't seen it coming. The devils whispered *What did you expect? A course of shock therapy the minute you walked in the door?* The angels whispered *Try. Dr Stead went to a lot of trouble to get you this appointment*. […] My mouth knew more than the rest of me put together. I had to trust my mouth. I closed my eyes and the mouth said

My mother walked into the sea.

[…] I let the story come out in this disembodied glass voice and listened, out of harm's way in the corner of the room. (pp. 103-104)

- (7.4) Half-way into the silence for Norma Fisher, my arms were weightless. […]

  1. The Rev Dogsbody had chosen this service to perform a miracle.

  2. He’s run time backwards, cleansed, absolved and got rid of the ground-in stain.

  3. And the stain was me.

  I didn’t exist. The miracle had wiped me out.

  The first symptom of non-existence is weightlessness. (p. 79)

- (7.5) I took it facing the mirror because I couldn’t work the self-timer. The camera bludgeons off half my face and the flash whites out the rest. My arms are looped over my head to reach the shutter and hold the thing in place. It looks like a spider devouring a light bulb. The only visible eye is shut from the glare. It doesn’t look like anybody. It doesn’t look like […] There’s no way of telling if it’s really (pp. 155-156)

- Disrupted vs aware “I”
- Awareness of the ridiculousness of her interviews with social workers, headmasters and doctors – satire on the inefficiency of male-dominated systems like education, health and social services (playscripts of the theatre of the absurd: she is to play the “good girl”)
- Awareness that ordinary people are exploited by a ruthless consumer society through the banality and clichés of advertising
- Increasing awareness that much of her trauma comes from guilt

- Complex female voice

a) Apparently telling a story of self-destruction, of Joy who has lost her grip on reality

- Her breakdown is expressed through typographical devices (“ooo”; diversified fonts and forms; text written into the margins; blank spaces …)
- Increasing fragmentation of her consciousness: she’s reduced to a set of discourses that speak through her

- Discourses about a sad personal story slowly surfacing in fragments
- 27-year old drama schoolteacher Joy Stone in Kilmarnock, not to far from Glasgow
- Unloving mother
- Antagonistic sister
- Failed marriage (or partnership)
- Strained work relationships
- Clandestine affair with a married colleague at school
- Anorexia and bulimia (emptying usual rituals and habits)
- Alcohol addiction

b) In fact telling a tale of slow regeneration and fighting back

- Joy desperately tries to control her life through recording every single act
- Control on the reader: manipulative voice (e.g. depicting others as cartoon characters)
- Suicide act as if intended for the stage, almost like a rehearsal or a simulation game: mockery and self-mockery

- Defying of normal conventions of typography (alias social normalisation and coercion) by invading those spaces of the page that do not normally belong to the author/character (she is “beyond” and much more than the text)
- Defying normalising discourses
  - Language of women’s magazines (p. 221)
  - Language of psychotherapy (p. 171)
  - Language of funeral sermons (just for legitimised family members) and Calvinist work ethic (“goodness” = work and submissiveness)

"*The use of the upper-case consists above all in expressing forces in the text: it is a kind of vectoring, lines of variable intensity: where* current *passes … In such a way that putting an upper- or lower-case letter on a word gives it a different resistance*" (Hélène Cixous)

A novel on how to cope, on how to take control back

“[…] Joy's largely emotionally wrecked during this book. Nothing is there for her - or what is, she can't grasp. That was part of the point - strip everything from her. I wanted to have somebody for whom the ordinary sustenance no longer existed. Then. What on earth would keep this woman getting out of bed? Because she *does* keep getting out of bed, even though she perceives the option not to. I was astonished by her keeping going, by the fact that people do. That something that drives us. Towards the end there's a kind of glimmer of insight as to what it is. If all you're doing is getting out of bed to see if the stars are still there, it's something. Stars, Christmas lights, a piece of music - that's all right. It's something. You take what there is, no matter how small, and you build on that simply because you have to - the alternative is nothing. She hasn't come to terms with that in the beginning. I guess the whole book is about that choice.” (8.1)

- Rehabilitation … perhaps, after attempted suicide?

(8.2) I find the Walkman and riffle tapes. Wee bit of Debussy. […] Tree lights throw colours on the wall and the whisky washes wide in my chest as the music comes through.

The lights and this sound.

Maybe

Maybe I could learn to swim.

Another mouthful, picturing the sea. Casting out long arms into the still water. I am naked, hair long as a fin down the pale spine ridge, flexible as a fish, the white profile against the black waves, rising for air. […]

Shadows in the corner of the room give me away. I’m gawky, not a natural swimmer. But I can read up a little, take advice. I read somewhere the trick is to keep breathing, make out it’s not unnatural at all. They say it comes with practice.

I take another mouthful of whisky, slide my finger on the volume control. Waves rippling through the headphones. And something else.

The human voice. […] I forgive you. I hear it quite distinctly, my own voice in the empty house.

I forgive you. (pp. 234-35).

- Joy finds her voice again = self-reflexive voice of the author who has opened her mouth, taken hold of the pen and refused to accept that it is the prerogative of men
- She expresses the desire “to bring out something new”, to recreate (Hélène Cixous, *The Laugh of the Medusa*)
- Something = a work of art or herself (who defied boundaries – social and textual)

Text: closure vs expansion

- Joy Stone's diary recording everything after the death of her lover in Spain
- Sequence of short sections separated by a triple 'o' (three zeros?) symbolising death, closure, emptiness, absence (like the blank spaces)
- Two main scripts: 1) italicised script (past); 2) standard script (present with analepsis)
- Beckett-like effort to translate failure into language (fragmented, non-communicative)

- Dates are not provided
- Text expanding from within: palimpsest
- Shifting registers and styles (lists, phone-calls, marginalia, recipes, horoscopes, conversation snatches, speech bubbles…)
- Paratextual material (cfr. p. 82)
- Chinese-box narratives
- Writing spilling over into the margins and disappearing off the page
- Isolated words in blank space (cfr. p. 90, p. 202)
- Unfinished words and sentences (ex. 7.5)

“*A textual materialism which comes across not as arid experiment but as a necessary emotional device*” (Pat Kane)

“Submit to chaos for once” (JG)