

# Caledonia Goes to Gotham

## Two Scottish Writers Discuss Teaching & Touring in NYC

IN WITH THE LIONS  
SUHAYL SAADI

In the Rest Room of a café in New York's Chelsea neighborhood, I was about to leave when there was a loud knock on the door, accompanied by a rattling of the door-handle. When I emerged, at first no one seemed to be there, but when I glanced to my right, an NYPD officer in full uniform was pressed, almost level, against the wall. He was clutching a bottle of vanilla essence.

"I thought you had the bottle," he said.

I shook my head and replied, "No, I didn't."

He repeated my "No, no," and then promptly entered the Rest Room. It's the sort of incomprehensible thing that happens when you're in a foreign country. Indeed, it was my very first morning in the Big Apple, and it was raining galoshes.

From time to time over the next week or so, I pondered on what this incident had meant. Was it a stakeout? Was it some arcane Masonic ritual upon which I had intruded? Or had I inadvertently stumbled onto a film-set? Could "the bottle" have been Third Man-speak for some bizarre, hermeneutic happening? And in my response, had I passed, or failed, the initiation test?

Such dilemmas were pushed firmly to the back of my mind by the urgent necessity to pursue the work that I had come to NYC to do. Teachers & Writers had invited me over from Glasgow, Scotland, to run some workshops in a school in Manhattan. It was my second time in NYC, but really this was my first true stay. (Ten years earlier, my visit had consisted of a day-long stop-over, during which I had taken the obligatory round-Manhattan boat trip).

During my time in NYC, I roamed. I visited a bookshop in Greenwich Village which was shaped like a pyramid turned on its side. The shelves were high-rises and in one corner, behind an elevated, wooden counter, a man with a vaguely Eastern European accent perched on a stool and smoked a long cigar. It was like Alasdair Gray via Franz Kafka via Lewis Carroll. In the spirit of Caffeine City, I had the urge to ask the bookseller, "How long is a sentence?" To which, he might have replied, "A sentence is as long as a sentence is, long."

The classes I facilitated were located close to the Manhattan side of the Brooklyn Bridge, and the students seemed to hail from a broad compass of ethno-cultural origins, including, probably, South and Central American, African-American, South and East European, and North American as well. I ran my "Dreams and Nightmares" and "Love, Death and Music" workshops, and in each of the four classes, the level of creativity was very high indeed.

The first workshop involves asking the class to list their dreams and nightmares, their hopes and fears, and then to pick out one of these and write a story or poem based around it. In general, the nightmares tend to be the more exciting—the students came up with stories concerning fear of falling, of being confined in closed spaces, of being attacked, of losing one's memory, of being stalked. The workshop evinced the varied yet consistent gamut of human nightmare.

In the "Love, Death, and Music" workshop, I ask the class to list all the different kinds of death they can think of. Next we do the same for love. Then I ask them to create a fictional obituary, i.e., to create and frame the story of a life. The obituaries were not wholly sad; some celebrated the life of a much-loved fictional individual, or an eccentric; and then there were the gangsters, the very, very old, immigrants, the lonely people.

Because these were large classes, their dynamic was quite different than the small classes I'm used to. While the more diminutive workshop allows for personability and even (occasionally!) for a degree of quietude, big classes have the potential for excitement; it becomes possible to build a greater sense of mood and occasion and then to tap into the emotions generated thereby. I was glad to have the T&W liaison-writer, the classroom teacher, and an intern on hand to help the students engage with the process, particularly during the active writing phases of the sessions. In a sense, the role of a writer is to scatter seeds and to watch as they take root. In this agrarian analogy, the organizational collaboration of teachers and writers provides the field, the plough, and considerable amounts of light and laughter. Everyone wrote something, and some of the students' pieces were intensely moving. Some had to do with bereavement, or with making mistakes that lead to peculiar consequences, or being lost with no money. Others were gratuitously violent, or were seamed through with complex humour. Still others concerned the vicissitudes of teenage relationships, and one or two dealt with lucid candour with the subject of personal bereavement. In several, the poetry seemed about to break into song or chant.

The students' questions were also interesting and varied. Most questions, naturally, had to do with the craft of creative writing, but one of the students seemed to have the hilarious idea that I made a lot of money from being a writer. "But you've got money, right?" I soon cleared that one up!

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After this series of workshops, my T&W liaison Gia Rae took me on a leisurely stroll through the dense, organic conurbations of Little Italy, Chinatown, and SoHo. We ended up at a pizza parlour, where, because I couldn't understand what the guys behind the counter were saying, I ended up eating one of the largest pizzas known to man! We then ventured to the Revolution Bookshop on West 19th Street—an unashamedly left-wing establishment. As well as classic Marxist texts, there were lots of titles by writers of Central and Southern American origin and also by African-American authors—not to mention those by various kinds of political/ecological dissidents and alternative thinkers. It struck me that places such as this begin to contribute a necessary, thoughtful, and vigorous counterbalance to the reductive, monolithic image of "America" all too often presented to itself and to the world.

Books! Books! Books!

Stacks of 'em, veritable skyscrapers of 'em. I was carrying around with me not only the 400-odd loose A4 pages of my own evolving manuscript, but also increasing numbers of books. At St Mark's Bookshop in the East Village, I got hold of a compilation of essays by that genius, Walter Benjamin; in the overweening shelves of the aircraft-hangar-sized store The Strand, I picked up an anthology of *New Yorker* anecdotes and a slim Paul Auster novel. In short time, the shelves of my hostel room were stacked high with stories, essays, monographs, photographs...the crazy, magpie-stash of an unashamed word addict.

In the elaborate meta-geography of NYC, the New York Public Library, surely, has to be the cerebral epicentre. There is that clean, hallowed sense of gnosis, an elision, surely, from those ancient metropolitan *bibliothèques* of Alexandria, Baghdad, and Salerno, a Borgesian sense of the immanence of infinitude. There is enough reading material, within the shelves and the stacks, to keep you in words for 1,001 years. And this spirit must be infectious. When I asked my three-year-old daughter, over the (*thank you for using a...*) payphone, what she would like me to bring back for her from the Big Apple, without hesitation she replied, "You get me a book." Ahh, that's my girl. So I did. I went down to West 18th Street's Books of Wonder, the sort of place which, when you visit, you really wish you were a kid again. Believe me, I had a hard choice, but eventually I got her several multi-ethnic picture-books.

In Glasgow, it's the sad, soccer-headed drunks who seem still to reel from the weight of the Industrial Revolution. In London, it's the eccentric lunatics who wander about the dank platforms in absolute solitude, having not touched a living soul for 40 years or more. But in NYC, the subway dissidents are articulate dancers; raging, singing psychos. Perhaps on some deep, poetic level, cities come to be defined by the legions of their insane. And by their writers (assuming that these two groups are not identical!).

At the Museum of Jewish Heritage, which lies on the Battery City waterfront, down beyond the hyper-ironically-named Wagner Park, I bought (again, too many!) books, on subjects ranging from Sephardic culture and history (a particular interest of mine) to a feminist critique of Testamental prophethood. I discovered that one of the assistants working in the bookshop was a poet, something to which she freely admitted. In Scotland, where the old dragons of class resentment and neg-

ative Utilitarianism remain culturally powerful, it's far less likely for anyone to admit to being an artist of any kind, and even less for them to admit to pursuing that (supposedly) most effete, pretentious, and irredeemably bourgeois pastime of being a poet.

On the day of my departure, I had to rush out and buy another suitcase, just to carry all the tomes I had bought or been given. That day, I was also disappointed to learn the secret behind the cop-in-the-bottle incident in the café: the Men's Room key had been attached to the cork of an empty vanilla essence bottle. We tend to exoticise the foreign, to dramatise the unknown. And how can we know blue cops in crenellated caps, when we barely know ourselves? Reprise: "I thought you had the bottle."

Same question, okay. But nine days, twenty thousand-plus words, thirty-or-so books, four workshops, several dinner parties, and one reading later, my answer would have changed to "Yes! I have! I have the bottle." And then I would promptly order a bagel with everything. To stay.

## SPEAKING FUNNY, SEEING AFRESH

### LINDA CRACKNELL

"You speak funny," a first grader in PS 140M in Lower Manhattan observed, when I visited her class during a Teachers & Writers residency last spring. I could equally have been told this at home, in Scotland, on one of the school visits I make as part of my two-year residency at Brownsbank Cottage (just south of Edinburgh), the last home to the poet Hugh MacDiarmid. Although I have now lived in Scotland for 13 years, I was born in Holland and raised in England and consequently still "speak funny."

I'm constantly alert to the different syntaxes of our shared language across the England-Scotland border. The geology of the depopulated Northwest, which seems to leach into human character and erupt in the bars of that area around midnight, still astonishes me. Only this year I've discovered the delight of the Scots words *bahookie* (backside), *bubblyjock* (turkey), and *perjink* (prim). I think it no coincidence that my development as a writer has all happened whilst living in Scotland, where I confront my own strangeness every day, and notice, as if in a foreign country, customs and faces which provoke curiosity rather than recognition.

New York City was like that for me, too. I walked and walked, north and south. Twice, gob-smacked, I spanned Brooklyn Bridge. I made instant friends in bookshops and bars. I heard a man, in public, not even whispering, say to his cellphone "I love you, baby." In Britain, we have certain fears: of being angry, crying in public, falling in love. We prefer not to embarrass ourselves.

Perhaps it was this wide-eyed, open-eared outlook on my first trip to North America that encouraged me to try a particular writing activity with the first and second graders of PS140M. Instead of playing down my difference, I thought I should lay it on the line and see if my writing exercise could help them explore foreignness. And what could be more foreign than trying to imagine they were animals? Could they capture that strangeness of awaking as a different being? We exchanged our papers, asking and answering questions, animal-writer to animal-writer. A zebra was asked what he dreamt of, and answered "a field of tasty grass." There was a cat who played on the roof of Dana's house in Pennsylvania. My earthworm was asked where it lived and why, by a Dominican parrot, who punctuated his questions with his sharp cry of "boak!" Now who was speaking funny?

My expectations about what could reasonably be accomplished in a single-day residency with this age-group were somewhat unrealistic. So, at the end of the day, I wrote down a list of "lessons" for myself. These included not to expect too much in a single 45-minute session, and to remember the benefits of class-teacher's presence. I find in my work in Scottish schools as well that an interested and engaged classroom teacher engenders a climate in which students are eager to write and use their imaginations.

"I like your earrings," a girl grinned up at me from her page in the Manhattan classroom. I laughed when last month a six-year-old Scottish student did exactly the same. Was it a transatlantic ruse to avoid writing, or a natural curiosity in their visitor? Working with this age-group again, back home, gave me the opportunity to compare children's responses across the Atlantic. There were some differences in the degree of reserve towards me as a stranger, which I would have expected—more open curiosity on your side of the Pond. However, the only major difference I noted was the fear of writing in some Scottish school children—"Oh no we don't have to write, do we?", "I'm terrible at writing," or even "I hate writing." Although this is certainly not a widespread attitude at home, I experienced none of it in my one day visit in the U.S., and I suspect this has much to do with the strategy of extended writer residencies, something which is very unusual in Scottish schools, where the "one-off" visit is still the norm.

Recently, I was in Hamilton, Scotland, as part of a week of visits to schools in South Lanarkshire designed to give five to eight year olds the opportunity to respond through discussion, drawing, and writing to original works of art. I worked alongside the Access Officer at Low Parks Museum with 250 students in one week, using four paintings. The English language curriculum in Scotland for this age group includes Imaginative Writing and I set out—with ideas from *Writing Workshop 2*, *Old Faithful*, and *Poetry Everywhere*, with which I'd been equipped back at the T&W office—to get the children actively entering the world of the painting. Given the emergent writing skills at this age, I intended the imaginative experience of looking at the world afresh to be as important as articulating this in a piece of writing. This was also pragmatic—in the time available, they didn't all complete and revise their pieces.

Once again, and unsurprisingly for this age group, animals came to the fore. The still life by Mary Armour, with its vases of sweet william, fruit bowl, and purple tablecloth, could have been a dry subject. In order to ener-

gize their outlook, I got the children to imagine themselves as spiders. We brainstormed verbs of spider-like movement, and words for landscape. The children then invented a journey for themselves across the open flowers, up and down the slippery vase, as if it was an epic adventure in a desert, mountain range, or back yard.

John from Neilsland Primary School made it into a true expedition, entitled "Mission Impossible."

I have been swinging for two years and I have landed in a flower jungle.  
I have swung again onto the deathly field of purple grass, then I have  
jumped onto the grand canyon. I am just hanging on. What will I do  
now I have no web left?

I believe he had really seen the subject afresh, the still life had become something extraordinary.

Some children got under the skin of a duck in response to the painting *The Little Ducks* by Henry Stuart (in which the ducks appear as tiny L shapes in the far right corner beside coloured lines and the suggestion of apartment blocks). But some of the more interesting responses came from those who imagined the painting from the perspective of an inanimate object. Kayleigh Higgins became a window.

At lunchtime I eat clouds. If I close my eyes I dream about  
getting free. When it gets dark I close my blinds.

In response to this painting, I kept it simple and asked the children to complete sentence prompts rather than answer questions from their peers, which had been somewhat confusing for the Manhattan class. Solid parameters seemed to liberate the Scottish children's creativity rather than constrain it.

As classes numbered approximately thirty, we dealt with students in groups of ten. This meant the class teachers remained with the other twenty, and were unable to work with their students. This is probably my greatest regret about the process, not only because it sometimes affected the attitude of the students, but also because the teachers missed out on the creative process themselves, and were unable to support the task once I had left, or indeed replicate it for themselves. That lesson again!

I'm still learning. I'm still intrigued by foreignness. In my own writing I try to gain fresh insights and to recreate that other state of mind through play, revising a tired scene in a short story or novel by trying to see it as if I am the cat coiled on top of the boiler as the domestic argument rages, or the banana mouldering in a teenager's bedroom, or as someone just arrived from a different place who has not yet slipped into the blindness of familiarity.