ATLANTIS
Journal of the Spanish Association of Anglo-American Studies
47.2 (December 2025): 85-102
e-ISSN 1989-6840
DOI: http://doi.org/10.28914/Atlantis-2025-47.2.10

Jenny Diski's Comic Spirit or the Courage to Confront the Demons of Her Past

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In her work, Jenny Diski has dealt with her personal issues with clarity and extraordinary realism. In *In Gratitude* (2016) Diski explores her past and especially her relationship with her parents. In spite of all the pain they inflicted on her, Diski has the courage to use humour to cope with these excruciating memories. Her comic view of life prevents her from falling into the clutches of melodrama or sentimentalism. Hers is the humour of humility and compassion, which allows her to laugh at her own limitations and failures and accept others in spite of their differences and defects. These hypotheses will be highlighted against the work of some of the most important scholars who have vindicated the positive, creative, liberating and subversive power of comedy and its capacity to deal with all aspects of the human condition.

Keywords: Jenny Diski; humour; incongruity; compassion; sentimentalism

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El espíritu cómico de Jenny Diski o el valor de confrontar los demonios del pasado

En su obra Jenny Diski ha abordado los temas personales con claridad y extraordinario realismo. En *In Gratitude* (2016) Diski explora su pasado y en especial la relación con sus padres. A pesar de todo el dolor que éstos le infligieron, Diski tiene el valor de usar el humor para enfrentarse a esos recuerdos tan terribles. Su visión cómica de la vida evita que caiga en las garras del melodrama o el sentimentalismo. El suyo es el humor de la humildad y la compasión, lo que le permite reírse de sus propias limitaciones y fallos y aceptar a los demás a pesar de sus diferencias y defectos. Estas hipótesis se apoyan en el trabajo de algunos de

los más relevantes estudiosos que han reivindicado el carácter positivo, creativo, liberador y subversivo de la comedia y el humor y su capacidad para tratar todos los aspectos de la condición humana.

Palabras clave: Jenny Diski; humor, incongruencia; compasión; sentimentalismo

Jenny Diski (1947-2016) is one of the best-known British-Jewish women writers. She is the author of eleven novels and two collections of short stories, along with various memoirs and travelogues. Much of her popularity derived from her regular contributions to the *London Review of Books*. Critics have praised her unique voice and style, as well as "her spectacular originality" (Harvey 2015, n.p.). She has been called "one of the most singular, if underappreciated personal essayists of our time" (Harvey 2015, n.p.); "an original, witty and cant-free thinker" (Merkin 2021, n.p.); and "her own woman on the page, incapable of sounding like anyone else" (Kellaway 2016, n.p.). One of the reasons Diski was able to create her own world as a writer is because her personal life was always the starting point of both her fiction and non-fiction: "I write fiction and non-fiction, but it's almost always personal. I start with me, and often enough end with me. I've never been apologetic about that, or had a sense that my writing was 'confessional'. What else am I going to write about but how I know and don't know the world? […] [I]t's always been me at the centre of the will to put descriptions out into the world" ([2016] 2017, 10-11). In fact, as David Brauner argues, "the demarcation between fiction and non-fiction, if we accept that there is one at all, is troubling" in the work of Jenny Diski and other British-Jewish women writers such as Linda Grant, Gillian Rose, Leila Berg, Rachel Liechtenstein, Louise Kehoe, Anne Karpf and Lisa Appignanesi (2001, 132). Diski herself recognized that she had problems maintaining a distinction between the two kinds of writing: "I think it's a pity that the fiction/non-fiction dichotomy exists. I think it exists almost entirely for booksellers, because people want to shelve things in the right place" (Neale 2020a, 60). She explained that in all her writings she dealt with memory and added: "I'm not sure that memory and imagination aren't so inextricably linked as to be much the same thing" (Neale 2020a, 61). Diski believed that every text tells a story because we can only make sense of memory by turning it into a story: "Memory is continually created, a story told and retold, using jigsaw pieces of experience. It's utterly unreliable in some ways, because who can say whether the feeling or emotion that seems to belong to the recollection actually belongs to it rather than being available from the general store of likely emotions we have learned?" ([1997] 2014, 147). She warned those who were looking for truth in her books that it lasts only for the time it takes to say it (Neale 2020a, 68).

In Gratitude (2016) is a non-fiction book published just before Diski died. In it Diski asks herself what her generation did in order to have it so easy: "My God, people like

me have been given lives and choices no other generation has ever had. I wonder why" ([2016] 2017, 210).[1] Diski's statement is rather puzzling because her life had been anything but a fairy tale: the grandchild of Jewish immigrants from Russia and Poland, she was sexually abused by her parents, spent part of her adolescence in foster care and was raped at the age of fourteen. Shortly after that assault, she became so desperate while having moved back to live with her mother that she tried to commit suicide—for the first time—by swallowing her mother's Nembutal, a barbiturate used to relieve anxiety and induce sleep. Following this, she spent most of her adolescence in and out of psychiatric hospitals and struggled all her life with mental illness and depression. In her work Diski dealt with all her personal issues with clarity, extraordinary realism and without any kind of embarrassment. Precisely because, as Kate Kellaway puts it, no subject was taboo for her (2016, n.p.), when she was diagnosed with inoperable lung cancer and told that she had at best another three years to live, she chose to write about her illness and impending death. She justified her decision by saying simply: "I'm a writer" (Harvey 2015, n.p.). Writing was, indeed, the essence of who she was: "For Jenny Diski, writing, like smoking or seeking solitude, was just how she spent the day. It was a form of thinking. She didn't seem to worry about the gap between her brain and the page" (Enright 2017, xi). It was obvious that she was not going to write just another cancer diary, and Blake Morrison put succinctly the reason why: "[S]he has learned that it isn't what you write but how you do it that's crucial" (2016, n.p.). In fact, she produced what Daphne Merkin has called "a kind of anticancer diary" (2021, n.p.), where she not only describes her illness and mental and physical response to it, but also explores her painful past, analysing her relationship with her parents and with Doris Lessing who took her in at the age of fifteen and with whom she lived for three years. What makes *In Gratitude* such a special book is her use of humour to approach the most devastating experiences of her life. As Nick Rennison has pointed out, Diski's voice is so unique because it is "drily ironic and funny even when confronting the most harrowing of material" (2005, 56). The aim of this article is to analyse how Diski's comic perception of life manifests itself in *In Gratitude*. I will explore how her capacity to step back and laugh at the incongruities of life helps her transcend suffering. As Mikhail Bakhtin asserts: "Seriousness burdens us with hopeless situations, but laughter lifts us above them and delivers us from them" (1994, 134). Diski does not flinch from the ghosts of her past but gives us an honest and realistic portrayal of them without falling into false melodrama or self-pity. Above all, her comic spirit has a characteristic that only very few people achieve: a generous and compassionate attitude towards others in spite of their differences and faults. These defining characteristics of Diski's comic view of life will be highlighted against the work of some of the most relevant scholars who, over the recent decades have vindicated the positive, creative, liberating

[1] Diski returns to the same idea in some of her interviews and articles. See, for instance, "A Long Forgotten War" ([2003] 2016e, 308).

and subversive power of comedy and its capacity to deal with all aspects of our lives, including the deeply tragic ones.[2]

In his essay on comedy, published less than ten years after the end of WWII, Wylie Sypher argued that the modern world with its wars, concentration camps and big lies had forced society/people to admit that the absurd, "that is, the irrational, the inexplicable, the surprising, the nonsensical – in other words, the comic" ([1956] 1980, 195) is inherent to human existence. He believed that we can only achieve a comic perception when we are capable of taking "a double view – that is, a human view – of ourselves, a perspective of incongruity" ([1956] 1980, 255). Because we (continue to) live in an age of "Un-reason" (Sypher [1956] 1980, 197) and the comic artist is less resistant than the tragic writer to representing whatever is incoherent and inexplicable in life, comedy has become more relevant than tragedy. Sypher considered that comedy, being the logic of the absurd, can deal with many aspects of experience that tragedy cannot.

Many scholars agree with Sypher that comedy deals with the contradictions of life. John Morreall, for example, asserts that comedy points out "incongruities, in language, in people's reasoning, and, more generally, in the established order of things" (1998, 342), while Randall Craig argues that humour "is both the means of perceiving and mode of expressing the contradictory nature of human experience" (1989, 146), something that the tragicomic novel in its acknowledgment of the irresolvable paradoxes of human experience tries to depict. Marcel Gutwirth also emphasizes that "we laugh at the world for being so palpably a place of senselessness and absurdity, a cruel enigma whose solution is from day to day deferred" (1993, 186). Bakhtin goes even further when he asserts that the parodic-travestying forms of Greece and Rome that prepared the ground for the impiety novel long before its actual appearance, introduced an element that proved to be of decisive importance: laughter. According to Bakhtin, laughter forced human beings to realize that reality is "always richer, more fundamental and most importantly *too contradictory and heteroglot* to be fit into a high and straightforward genre" (1992, 55; italics in the original).[3]

The comic vision has the power to appreciate the contradictory nature of human experience because it encourages what Morreall calls "reframing" (1998, 341): it allows us to see situations and people from an unexpected angle, from a new and different perspective. This does not mean that the comic spirit turns a blind eye to the reality

[2] It is impossible to offer in this article an exhaustive analysis of the work of all the scholars who have contributed to a better understanding of humour and comedy. Sigmund Freud, Northrop Frye and Harry Levin, among others, conducted very interesting research in this area, but I will focus on those authors I believe to be most relevant to our study.

[3] Interestingly, psychologists and psychiatrists have also emphasized the importance of humour in dealing with and accepting the contradictory nature of human life: "Confronted by the chaos surrounding us in the natural world, the paradoxes and puzzles of our living environment, throughout human history – baffled, bewildered, frustrated, humbled and chastened, we invented humor" (Fry 1992, 231). See Frankl 1995; O'Connell 1996; Mindess 1971, 1996; Vilaythong et al. 2003.

of pain and suffering: "Quite the contrary. Humor is not based on false hope – it is not even necessarily optimistic" (Morreall 1983, 128). The comic spirit tries to cope with the daily difficulty of being:

> The comic sense […] tries to deal with living, with the pressures of today, with the responsibilities of adulthood. Its (in so many ways) dual character presupposes in the comic artist a dual equipment: on the one hand, a "lust for life," an "evolutionary appetite," an eagerness and zest in sheer being, and on the other a keen and painful awareness of the obstacles in the path, the resistances and recalcitrancies, the trials by fire and water, the dragons, forests, and caves that menace us, and the thickets and swamps in which we flounder. (Bentley 1964, 298)

Eric Bentley vindicates how comedy helps us transcend despair, mental suffering, guilt, anxiety: "The comic dramatist's starting point is misery; the joy at his destination is a superb and thrilling transcendence. Given the misery of the human condition in general, what could be more welcome?" (1964, 302). Thus, Bentley continues, while tragedy tells us that "In the midst of life we are in death", comedy considers that "[i]n the midst of death we are in life" (1964, 303).

In his essay on Diski's novel *Then Again* (1990), Gerd Bayer asserts that "[w]hile clearly not celebrating trauma, Diski nevertheless insists on the necessity of engaging with topics such as the Holocaust, regardless of the pain this may cause: the implicit argument being that the silencing of trauma has even worse consequences in the long run" (2014, 90).[4] Giles Harvey goes even further, stating that what defines Diski's career as a writer is "its cerebral, anti-sensationalizing tone, the way it tacitly rejects the notion that early trauma retains an ineluctable hold on the self" (2015, n.p.). Diski herself often emphasized that when she looked back into her past she did not really see anything melodramatic or particularly traumatic in it, which is a shock for the reader who knows about her painful experiences. When she listens to Doris Lessing's friends, most of them artists and writers, who seem to know so much about everything, Diski declares that: "I felt that nothing of interest had happened to me, not understanding that every life is ordinary to its owner, that looking for interesting events was to search in the wrong direction for something that isn't absent because it isn't the point" ([2016] 2017, 69). We may ask ourselves: if sexual abuse, suicide attempts, life in foster care is not interesting enough, what is? Diski later expresses the same idea in *In Gratitude*: "There has been grief in my life, though very little compared to many" ([2016] 2017, 142). While acknowledging that she experienced great grief when her first husband died in 2011, when reflecting on her own impending death, she begs the reader: "Please, a real plea, not to speak to me, or anyone else, of 'bravery'. I need

[4] Diski's need to engage with trauma is also endorsed by Nicole Terrien, who in "So Many Silent Voices" (2009) analyses how Diski gives an articulate voice to madness in her novels.

to be told the story in which it doesn't matter, a story of the millions who've died already. Of the millions who are to die and live in terrible conditions [...] I want to die easily, not an agitated death. Imagine all those millions who have never been given that choice" ([2016] 2017, 209). In fact, being called "brave" annoys her because it is very sentimental (Schneider 2015, n.p.). She even admits that it is unreasonable to complain about her having cancer, since she is already sixty-eight and other people have died much younger (Diski 2015, n.p.).

Meghan Forbes has pointed out that there is no false altruism in Diski repeatedly saying that someone else had it worse than her, but by sharing her grief and personal experience she achieves "a sinister sort of comfort" (2016, n.p.). It is true that writing helped Diski understand and cope with her pain, but her humorous attitude also played a major role here, as her own daughter confirms in the afterword to *In Gratitude*: "She was so tough. She fought: Doris, her mother, me, Ian, her friends, her nurses, her readers, everyone, with all her might and, crucially, with considerable humour [...] Of course, the writing process did that too" (Diski 2017, 259).[5] As Kellaway has noted, there is really no self-pity in Diski's work, but there is a tendency to black comedy (2016, n.p.). Diski herself recognized that she was not a very "serious" person. When "accused" of not being serious by a group of what she calls with her characteristic iconoclastic sense of humour "veggie-for-life-selling lesbians" ([2002] 2014, 232), she admitted that this was indeed part of her personality. She also acknowledged that sometimes, as in the case of her terminal illness, humour can be a defence, a way to transcend the pain she is going through (Diski 2015, n.p.). In fact, Morrison has emphasized how in *In Gratitude* "[a]mong so much dust and ashes, humour keeps the reader going – perhaps Diski, too" (2016, n.p.).

The reason Diski is capable of using humour to transcend and cope with the suffering that has defined her life is because she is capable of seeing situations from a distance and thus from a different perspective: "She knew how to use her life as copy, and her self-commentary had a gallantry to it. It required her to take a step back, and write with a willed casualness about her past, as if on the brink of disowning it" (Kellaway 2016, n.p.). Diski's comic spirit allows her to recognize the contradictions, the incongruities of life and exploit them in her work. As she affirms in *Stranger on a Train* (2002): "Wanting to be *not* in America, not travelling to places in America, but travelling on an American train, I had nonetheless arranged for myself to spend time with Americans, in the places of their homes. A contradiction. So what isn't contradictory? Why not include contradiction in the contradiction of someone who wants most of all to keep still setting off to keep on the move for a month?" ([2002] 2014, 156; italics in the original). Even when talking about how she feels about the imminence of death she recognizes that the experience is far more complicated than it seems, that life is not always logical or sensible: "I'm perfectly capable of holding two, or more, contradictory

[5] Ian was Diski's second husband, whom she always referred to as the Poet.

things in my mind. If I say, on the one hand, 'Death is an awfully big adventure' […] and swig morphine and tell jokes with Ian, that doesn't also mean that I'm not terrified at the prospect of my own nonexistence" (Harvey 2014, n.p.). Diski hates endings in general and neat endings in particular because they falsify the paradoxical nature of reality: "But neat endings are the worst; the rounded closure that rings so true and false, the harmonious conclusion that makes sense of the beginning and of all that happened in-between, and makes a lie of what you know about the conduct of your life, a lie of you" ([2002] 2014, 2). Diski had difficulty in writing stories that had "a middle, an end and a beginning" ([2016] 2017), because she knew that life is never so logical, sensible or coherent as we would like it to be.

Diski's comic view of life reaches its zenith in *In Gratitude*. Although in the book she deals with some of her most painful experiences, humour not only allows her to transcend them, but also prevents her from falling into sentimentalism. Thus, for instance, she explains that she knows that she disappoints people when she tells them that living with Lessing, who rescued her from a bleak reality, was not exactly a fairy tale: "People usually didn't much like that answer, because it messed up the simplicity of the story, and reminded them that Doris was not a handsome princess, nor I the foundling whose innate nobility was recognised by a prince of the true blood" ([2016] 2017, 23). But perhaps, one of the most striking examples in the book is Diski's description of her rape at the age of fourteen: "I was neither dazzled nor drugged into sex when I was fourteen – I was embarrassed into it" ([2016] 2017, 58). She describes with objectivity what she thought and felt while she was being raped, sometimes even making us smile by sharing with us how absurd we can be when we find ourselves in unexpected situations. She remembers "even finding a space to worry about whether my knickers were clean" ([2016] 2017, 60) and "thinking in the recording studio [where the rape happened], aside from it hurts and it's taking such a long time […]: 'This'll show my father'" ([2016] 2017, 62). Most provocative, though, is Diski's assessment of the whole situation:

> I didn't think that it was the most terrible thing that had ever happened to me. It was a very unpleasant experience, it hurt and I was trapped. But I had no sense that I was especially violated by the rape itself, not more than I would have been by any attack on my person and freedom. In 1961 it didn't go without saying that to be penetrated against one's will was a kind of spiritual murder. I was more disgusted by him than I was ashamed or diminished. A different *zeitgeist*, luckily for me. ([2016] 2017, 62; italics in the original)

As Anne Enright has suggested, in Diski's refusal to make a fuss about the rape we can perceive "a flash of real madness in there – by which I mean complete irrationality" (2017, xiii). Diski is capable of talking about something so traumatic with "poised alienation" (Harvey 2015, n.p.), thus avoiding any kind of sentimentalism or melodrama. In fact, she often warned of the dangers of sentimentality. When in

Stranger on a Train Raymond, a hopeless alcoholic, asks her to come and live with him, for a moment she is tempted to transform this sentimental fantasy into a fact: "Here's the thing about sentimentality and fatally flawed wishful thinking: it's virulently contagious" ([2002] 2014, 123). She attacks sentimentalists and moralists because they "have concocted fantasies about what happiness might be like, but no one I've heard of has ever returned from that place to confirm or deny the speculations" ([2003] 2016c, 169). And when Harvey asked her if she had begun to see the world differently because of her cancer, she answered with great humour: "I kept waiting for the world to smell wonderful. But no, I just didn't have any cigarettes anymore" (2015, n.p.).

Diski's thoughts about sentimentality are very revealing, because, as Edward L. Galligan puts it, "[c]omedy is a mode for realistic, wishing but not wishful, imaginations" (1984, 35). In fact, this is how Diski describes herself: "As a general rule I try to maintain a balanced and realistic approach to life. I don't have wistful thoughts about pots of gold when I see a rainbow. It never crosses my mind to check stray bottles on the beach for genies" ([2003] 2016a, 3). Her rejection of sentimentalism is linked to her comic vision of life. George Meredith was one of the first authors to point out that if the comic idea prevailed "[t]he vapors of unreason and sentimentalism would be blown before they were productive" (1956, 37). Bakhtin similarly asserts that true and ambivalent laughter purifies and completes seriousness because it liberates from the single meaning and sentimentality (1984, 123), while Margaret Drabble states that humour is a way of coping and a means of avoiding sentimentality: "One cannot go on feeling deeply grieved about everything in the world. Comedy is one response. Sentimentality is another, the response of the press" (Wojcik-Andrews 1992, 104). But perhaps one of the writers who has best described the difference between the sentimentalist and the person with a comic outlook is Israel Knox: "In comedy the hero does not die; he also has caught a glimpse of illimitable value and reconciles himself, with sadness and with a smile, to his lot and portion; and in his reconciliation there is transcendence. The sentimentalists, too, lives to 'tell the story' but the story has become attenuated, has lost its authenticity, and is no longer recognizable" (1952, 212). Diski is capable of looking "unflinchingly at what has been" (Splendore 2002, 195) and it is precisely this realistic approach to life that allows her to escape from melodrama.

Diski's comic view of life becomes most obvious in *In Gratitude* when she remembers her relationship with her parents as a child and an adolescent. They did not contribute to making her life a happy one. Her father was a conman, a wooer of wealthy women and an adulterer who spent some time in prison, and her mother was an alcoholic and mentally disturbed. Both had incestuous relations with their daughter. And in spite of all the pain her parents inflicted on her, Diski has the courage to use humour to cope with these excruciating memories. She does not minimize how miserable her life was, but because of her comic outlook nor does she fall into the clutches of melodrama or

sentimentalism. Diski's desire to avoid transforming her past into a kind of soap opera and her urge to transcend it with the help of humour explains why in her account of her relationship with her parents, she always emphasizes the absurdity of many of the situations she found herself involved in. She claims with great humour that the reason she always wanted to be a writer was precisely because of her parents: "Why the hell had I had those greedy, self-absorbed, terrifying parents if it wasn't to have something to write about?" ([2016] 2017, 213). They lived in a small flat and her parents wandered around "in all stages of dress and undress, in and out of the bath, with no concern about being seen naked" ([2016] 2017, 38). Her father always dressed in front of her: "I was daily presented with a view of his balls and cock hanging" ([2016] 2017, 39). Diski eschews any kind of melodrama by pointing out the incongruity of the whole situation: "Odd that they [her father's balls and cock] were so present, but I'm unable to recall a single conversation between us about them and what they were for" ([2016] 2017, 39). Although in *Skating to Antarctica* (1997) there are very few instances of irony and humour when Diski describes her relationship with her father, there is nevertheless this same tendency to avoid sensationalism when reproducing the toughest moments: "I adored being held in his arms and feeling his big hands stroking me. Stroking me where? Everywhere, I think. I took in his physical affection like draughts of delicious drink. I don't ever recall feeling anything but safe and loved in the private midnight comforting" ([1997] 2014, 110). With her realistic approach to life, Diski does not make a fuss about her father sexually abusing her, but admits that as a child she was not aware of what her father was really doing in such encounters and deeply enjoyed the moments they were together. No wonder she is rather perplexed when as a teenager people ask her to become a normal person: "[H]ow was I going to manage to act normal – something I'd had no experience with at all? Not since I'd been born" ([2016] 2017, 183).

Diski is, unsurprisingly, a troublesome child and her father gets very angry when she is expelled from school: "I've done some bad things in my time, my girl, you only have to ask your mother, but I was never expelled from school" ([2016] 2017, 33). Diski cannot help pointing out how ridiculous, and therefore comic, her father's statement is. His own life does not encourage much admiration, as her summary of her father's "occupations" clearly shows: dealing with the black market, cooking one set of accounting books that had him in prison, making a living by taking advantage of divorced or widowed women. It is no surprise, then, when Diski wryly wonders why "getting expelled from school stood so high in his comparative catalogue of 'bad things' he and I had done" ([2016] 2017, 33).

In an interview Diski gave in 2005 she spoke about her relationship with her father and how she felt about him with her characteristic sense of humour: "I wanted Danny Kaye to be my father. […] I invented Danny Kaye as a sort of God of Abraham who would look after me, but he didn't. He was more in love with Laurence Olivier" (Diski 2005). In fact, this was one of the most vivid memories Diski had as a child. She was

only three years old when she met Danny Kaye and decided immediately that she wanted him to be her father. This meeting, however, made her very miserable, not only because she was aware of the fact that the actor could never be her father, but because she was filled with guilt for betraying her own father in wanting a different one ([1997] 2014, 198-89). But by emphasising in the interview how as an adult she was aware of how ludicrous her desire to have Danny Kaye as a father was, she is capable of transcending a situation that was terribly painful for her as a child.[6]

Diski also remembers how cross she became when, while still living with Doris, her father invited her for lunch and gave her an envelope, asking her not to open it until he had left. It was a suicide note. After a couple of days she phoned her father's home: "He answered the call as if nothing had happened. This must surely have been emotional blackmail. I hadn't spent three years at Doris's for nothing" ([2016] 2017, 100). We can imagine the agony Diski was in, waiting for the phone to ring to tell her that her father had died. But instead of making a melodrama out of it, she makes a joke, which itself is related to an incident with Lessing. Some time after Doris took her in, Diski started worrying about whether Lessing liked her or not. She decided to ask the writer directly and was accused by her of trying to blackmail her emotionally. Diski also referred to this particular episode with her father in an interview and what catches the listener's attention is how she laughs all the time, trying to see the incongruity of the whole situation. In spite of the fact that she suffered a lot because she had been blaming herself for not saving her father's life, she tries to see the comic side: "He had a capacity to upset a person. No question about that" (Diski 2005, n.p.). She goes so far as to joke about her parents and herself trying to commit suicide: "Sort of endemic in my family, committing suicide, multiple times, often [laughs]. It's exciting the first time, but it becomes very tedious after a while [laughs]. The truth is I'm joking about it but I have multiple times committed suicide" (Diski 2005, n.p.). Diski knows that humour cannot erase the pain that leads human beings to put an end to their lives, but it is the only weapon she has to cope with this sad reality.

But what is most revealing about Diski's attitude toward her father is how she tries not only to understand him, but also to sympathize with him.[7] She justifies what he did with the suicide note by pointing out that he was genuinely depressed, because he was desperately disappointed with what had become of him. He who had all these great

[6] Diski not only wanted to have her father replaced, but whenever she heard her parents argue she prayed to God that they would die or that her "real" parents would come and collect her (Diski 2005, n.p.; Diski ([1997] 2014, 86). In fact, in "The Family Way", in which she displays her characteristic irony and sense of humour, she makes the following statement: "How often at night did you fantasise about being a foundling, a maternity ward muddle, adopted, a fairy child, anything rather than accept the flesh and blood inextricable commitment to being one of the family?" ([2003] (2016d, 192).

[7] In *Skating to Antarctica* Diski is not so benevolent with her father. Throughout the book she emphasizes how much she loved him, but also how he manipulated her with his charms and disappointed her because he betrayed her: "I loved him, but I suspect that by then, even before then, I didn't quite trust him" ([1997] 2014, 198)

expectations, ended up living with an "adoring, tight-lipped, puritanical divorcee with a decent hairdressing business", according to Diski ([2016] 2017, 33) and "daydreaming about his lost opportunities and how easily they might have come off and brought him a life where daydreaming wasn't necessary" ([2016] 2017, 36). And although Diski laughs at the way her father compared his life with that of Errol Flynn, at the same time she acknowledges the sadness her father must have felt: "His words faded away as the reality of the patterned moquette he was sitting on reminded him of where he actually was and that patterned moquette was as good as he was going to get" ([2016] 2017, 37). Even when her father disappeared when she was eleven and did not return to her life for a long time, she tries to understand him: "When he came back he was a quite different person. Maybe it was that I was a different person. You never know" (Diski 2005, n.p.).

Diski's father is not the incarnation of the perfect guardian, but her mother is not either. Although Diski wrote in detail about her relationship with her mother in both *Like Mother* (1988) and *Skating to Antarctica*, what is interesting about *In Gratitude* is that she exploits the comic side of her mother's behaviour. Thus, when Diski's mother threatens to sue Doris for alienation of affection if she tries to adopt her daughter, Diski emphasizes the absurdity of her mother's statement and writes in brackets: "hilarity ensued" ([2016] 2017, 19). Also ridiculous is her mother's reaction when Diski tries to commit suicide with the Nembutal "'How can you do this to me? Why can't you be decent, like other children?' she screamed when she found me. The night before in the bed we shared she had reached around my back, which was turned to her, and begun to caress my vulva. When I protested, she said: 'What's the matter? There's nothing wrong. I'm your mother. You're still my little girl'" ([2016] 2017, 20). There is no melodrama in the way Diski describes what must have been one of the most terrible moments in her life. She just emphasizes the absurdity of the behaviour of her mother, who is incapable of realizing that it is she with her disgusting behaviour who has compelled her daughter to attempt suicide.

But, like she does with her father, Diski tries to understand and sympathize with her mother. She is aware of her mother's shortcomings and of how her life has determined the way she is. S She explains that the day her mother handed her over to Doris, the latter must have realized that she was opening the door "to an unmanageable waif and her mad mother who was much more in need of mothering" ([2016] 2017, 223). There is humour in this sentence with Diski laughing at herself and her mother, but at the same time there is a recognition of her mother's vulnerability. In fact, in an interview, she apologized for not having been fair with her mother, for not realizing that her past and present determined the person she became (Diski 2005, n.p.). As an adult looking back into her childhood Diski recognized that her mother did not have any choices at all. She received no education, was brought up in great poverty in the East End by a violent father and was the one in charge of her brothers and sisters. The only thing her mother wanted was a nice house and she actually married a man who made her dream come true, but unfortunately, she decided to leave him for Diski's father, who betrayed

her in every sense. Thus, her mother, who thought she had left poverty behind, found herself going back into it: she ended up living in a very small one-bed bedsitting room and witnessed how the bailiffs came in and took everything: "It must have been dreadful to her, although I did not see it like that. It thought it was dreadful for me. How selfish we all are" (Diski 2005, n.p.). Diski follows a similar thread when she remembers the day she and her mother went to get new shoes with the voucher from Social Services: "This was a matter of desperate shame for my mother, returning her to a poverty she had devoted her life to escaping. The idea of handing over – in public – vouchers from the state instead of crisp currency agonised her" ([2003] 2016b, 32). Diski refuses to accept the hideous shoes she is offered and, although she still believes that it would have been an "ignominy" to wear them, she confesses that: "I'm somewhat ashamed of having obdurate when times were bad" ([2003] 2016b, 34).

It is obvious that Diski's feelings about her mother changed throughout the years. In *Skating to Antarctica* Diski is not so sympathetic towards her mother as she is in *In Gratitude*. Diski recognizes in the first book that there was no deliberate malice in the way her mother treated her: "She was sad, rather than bad, and, I think, genuinely baffled by the way life was out of her control. She did not, for reasons of her own emotionally deprived upbringing, have enough insight to be considered responsible for the results of her behaviour. It leaves me little room for anger towards her personally" ([1997] 2014, 102-3). But although she is not angry with her, she makes clear that she feels no affection for her either: "I cannot recall a moment in my life when I have wished she was there" ([1997] 2014, 103). In this sense I agree with Brauner when he asserts that Diski does not soften her attitude towards her mother at the end of *Skating to Antarctica* (2014, 201), thus challenging Paola Splendore's thesis that not only is much forgiven at the end of the book, but also that the mother "appears rehabilitated, in spite of the severe shortcomings and failures towards their daughters" (2002, 196).

Diski admits that as a child she was belligerent and contrary-minded and although there were many times she refused to do what she was told, "there were also many times when no one told me what to do, and I had to make it up as I went along (nothing came with instructions)" ([2016] 2017, 31). Diski does not want the reader to judge her parents, but rather to understand why they behaved the way they did:

> Doing what I was told simply didn't have a place in my story of myself. It was perfectly clear that no one had any idea what to do, so they couldn't very well tell me. And that to do as I was told would have been to listen to people who were completely out of their depth, without a clue what to do except wait until catastrophe knocked at the door: bailiffs inquiring after unpaid bills; mother taken to mental hospital; the headmaster telling my parents I'd been expelled, and each of them telling him it wouldn't be convenient to have me back. No one very much did tell me what to do because they didn't know what they themselves ought to do for the best. ([2016] 2017, 31-2)

Her parents did not protect her and look after her as society expected not because they were evil people, but because they were at a loss as how to do it. In *Skating to Antarctica* Diski makes a similar statement. Her father was an educated man and cleverer than her mother: "But it was beginning to look as if they were more similar than I had imagined. That her hysteria was matched by his and that intellectual capacity and a decent education were no proof against emotional unreliability. Two infants for parents" ([1997] 2014, 106-7). She even jokes about it, saying that they were "[a] well-matched pair. Double bad luck" (107).

Diski's determination to avoid getting trapped in the clutches of despair or hate and to accept her parents as they are without judging them reaches a climax in *In Gratitude* when she describes the way they sexually abused her:

> my parents would play a game of "He", where "He" was naked me, twisting out of their reach and running away from one, whose fingers tickled their way between my legs to my vulva, to the other, just a few feet across the room, gesturing at me, waiting impatiently to do the same thing. I bounced between them like a beach ball, squealing as they "played" with me, all of us laughing at the huge joke of me being tickled and being unable to escape the grasp of one or other of my parents. ([2016] 2017, 39)

Diski admits that she enjoyed the game and all the laughing that came with it because while they were playing it the fiction of a happy family was sustained: "[N]o one shouted, there was no crying or slamming the door, no one pulled open the kitchen drawer to find a knife, no wailing at me about their ruined life, threatening to die" ([2016] 2017, 40). But instead of becoming infuriated as an adult at her parents' disgusting behaviour, Diski's comic view of life allows her to step back and watch the whole scene from a distance: "The adult me watches the three of us from a front-row seat, following the back and forth like a tennis game, listening to the high-pitched, breathless laughter. The adult me raises her eyebrows slightly, but makes no further comment" (2017, 40). As Enright accurately points out, the reader "reels back in incomprehension" when reading these lines: "What were they thinking?" ([2016] 2017, xii).

Diski's capacity to understand and accept people as they are has been beautifully summarized by Heidi Julavits: "For me, however, what most distinguishes Diski as a thinker and writer is that she is kind, and it is her abundant kindness that marks her as one of the bravest writers I've read […] She is not intimidated by or made to feel insecure by difference, and so does not respond to otherness with ruthlessness and obstinance" (2017, n.p.). In *In Gratitude* Diski's daughter emphasizes how generous her mother was: "She could think herself into anyone's mind, which is why she could attack with such precision when she felt threatened, but it also meant she was able to be the most kind and caring person I have known" (Diski 2017, 263). Diski's generous attitude towards others is one of the hallmarks of the comic spirit. Most scholars have emphasized that one of the benefits of humour is that it makes us more tolerant of

people's differences and more willing to forgive and be affable. In Morreall's words: "[T]he willingness to see things in new ways makes us more understanding of other people, what they think, and how they act" (2010, 20). As Conrad Hyers explains, one of the characteristics of the comic vision is that it allows us to appreciate the muddiness of human nature and realize that people and circumstances are not neatly divisible into right or wrong, black or white (1996, 28-9) and notes that some of the virtues associated with comedy are: humility, willingness to compromise and forgive, sympathy and empathy, generosity, affection, love (1996, 28). What is more, people with a comic view of life do not place themselves above the others but laugh at their own failures and shortcomings: "Contempt is a sentiment that cannot be entertained by comic intelligence. What is it but an excuse to be idle-minded, or personally lofty, or comfortably narrow, not perfectly human?" (Meredith [1956] 1980, 33). A comic perspective allows us to love others as they really are and see ourselves in a more objective way: "You may estimate your capacity for comic perception by being able to detect the ridicule of them you love without loving them less; and more by being able to see yourself somewhat ridiculous in dear eyes, and accepting the correction their image of you proposes" (Meredith [1956] 1980, 42). In fact, the highest form of humour is that in which laughter is opened up to sympathy and good will and therefore becomes the humour of humility, love and compassion (Hyers 1996, 78, 92). Sypher also believes that in the highest form of comedy "laughter is qualified by tolerance, and criticism is modulated by a sympathy that comes only from wisdom" ([1956] 1980a, 212).

Both Hyers and Sypher argue that only a few people can achieve this generous view of life, and I think that Diski is one of them. Hers is the humour of humility and compassion, which allows her to accept others in spite of their differences and defects and laugh at her own limitations and failures. In fact, throughout her career Diski always had the courage and wisdom to laugh at her own foolishness and mistakes, at her shortcomings. We have a very good example in *In Gratitude* when Diski's mother starts worrying about her daughter staying with Lessing: "She looked up at me and said: 'Do you think this is the right place for you, it's a bit peculiar.' When I asked what she meant, she said: 'They don't eat meat. And they feed you something called muesli.' […] Looking back at my mother's spoken anxieties, I feel a dim affection. At our best moments we had the makings of quite a good comedy duo" ([2016] 2017, 84). It is precisely because Diski is capable of including herself in her laughter that her humour is defined by mercy and good will.

In his analysis of comedy and tragedy, Bentley makes a comment that is highly illuminating: "Both tragedy and comedy demonstrate, with plots and characters that provide horribly conclusive evidence, that life is not worth living; and yet they finally convey such a sense of the majesty of our sufferings or the poignancy of our follies that, lo and behold! the enterprise seems worth having been a part of. Both tragedy and comedy are about human weakness, but both, in the end, testify to human strength"

(1964, 308). Diski recognized that the shadows of her past sometimes haunted her, but also that they were just "a passing wind blowing through me" and that "[t]he past can still make me shiver, but no bones are broken" ([1997] 2014, 167). As a child she learnt how to stand up for herself, how to hide her fears and terrors from others: "There was a tough child, right from the start, with a sense of herself. A survivor" ([1997] 2014, 207).[8] Although she admits that sometimes she feels ashamed of being a survivor, it was precisely this trait in her character that allowed her to /fight "against the flaky genes and the training in hopelessness" ([1997] 2014, 207). In spite all her personal tragedies, Diski never gave in to despair, but insisted on delighting in life, being grateful for all the good things she had been given.

This article has demonstrated that Diski's comic view of life gave her the strength to confront her painful past without being destroyed by it. Her capacity for distancing herself from her most traumatic experiences and laugh at their incongruities allowed her to transcend them. Any kind of sentimentalism in her writing is avoided, because, as Bakhtin has accurately stated: "The sentimental aspect cannot be universal or cosmic. It narrows the world, makes it small and isolated" (1994, 141). But what most defines her comic spirit is her generosity, which endows her with the wisdom to accept herself and others with a compassionate heart, although Julavits also points out that we should "also read Diski to learn what we may think, in the future, about how, were we possessed by foresight, we might have better performed our humanity in the now" (2017). Luigi Pirandello argues that a humourist sees the painful side of life, but "instead of feeling disdain, he will rather, in his laughter, feel compassion" (1960, 132) and this is a perfect portrayal of Diski. She shows us that no matter the thorns and thistles we may encounter in our path, life is still our most precious gift.

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[8] Brauner argues that by repeating the word "survivor" four times in the paragraph to which this quotation belongs, Diski is making implicit reference to the legacy of Jewish history and its transmission through what he calls Jewish memory (2014, 209-210).

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Received 26 July 2023 Revised version accepted 17 October 2023

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