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Louise Welsh, Then and There

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From the publication of her first novel, *The Cutting Room* (2002), Louise Welsh (1965) became one of the most relevant narrative voices in the contemporary Scottish literary panorama. Winner of several literary prizes, including the Crime Writers Association Creasy Dagger and the Saltire Award, she has recently published her sixth novel, *A Lovely Way to Burn* (2014). This interview, which discusses issues of literary genre, character creation, reality and textuality, took place in The Briggait, Glasgow's city market for over a hundred years and now turned home to artists and writers, who find a space to create and exhibit their work or studios to write in, as is the case with Welsh.

EGA: *In most reviews of your novels, there is a tendency to classify you as a crime fiction writer, and you have won important crime fiction prizes. Are you actually a crime fiction writer*?

LW: I guess it is a circle, because, first of all, I don't mind being called a crime writer and I think part of that is because in the past some of this fiction has been snagged on and regarded as the thing you buy in a train station and you throw away. Part of that appeals to me because it is the kind of book that the man or woman on the bus or the train would read and they would feel frightened of them. I think there are good reasons why I am classed as a crime writer, because, at the same time, there is usually a strong story, you know, a narrator, and the kind of things associated with crime fiction. I guess that, especially in *The Cutting Room*, I used to be much engaged with the crime conventions. I think after that you establish something, genres usually take you much further than you are. With regard to that idea of the parameters of the genre, which were quite pleasing to me, there are also many things you can turn around, such as the idea of having a gay protagonist in a kind of genre that often denigrates gay people. So, yeah, I enjoy engaging with crime fiction, so I am not annoyed or distressed that people say that I was crime fiction. Also, I suppose it's done me a lot of good. I think possibly I wouldn't have sold so many books. So I don't mind all of that. I don't know how well I fit, you know, and I guess from the readers' perspective I think sometimes a reader may come to the book thinking: "Oh, I like those crime books, about murderers." So I guess that, in that aspect, I worry a little bit that somebody will want to get one thing and actually get something which is not. I guess that is my only reserve... nobody's ever said to me you can't do this because you're a crime fiction writer, so that would be what the problem was and I guess the authors I admire,

people I really like, like J.G. Ballard, people that did not know where to fit... sometimes he is kind of a science fiction writer... And I guess, in terms of getting better, that would be my dream to be as good a writer as someone like him, so yes, it is fine with me.

EGA: *However, there are also some elements from other genres: lots of Gothic in your writings, science fiction too, in a sense*.

LW: I guess if I had to class myself, I would say Gothic, which comes for me before the crime and I like all of that, the unsubtlety of it: I like those bright colours that things are painted in, not being scared to go a little bit further, to go over the top. But of course you try to pull it back so it does not become too cranky, you know, and I think I agree with that. I am quite interested in gender, sexuality... and the Gothic is always engaged with those subjects: sometimes the Gothic is very offensive, sometimes it is quite simpler and there is a lot of place in there for a writer to decide how to approach it. As I said, I like all of that. The Gothic is often associated with the supernatural, that, although I quite particularly enjoy, I don't particularly want to write about the supernatural elements, but the engagement with the past, the atmosphere, what's around the corner, that sort of stuff is pleasant to my taste.

EGA: *Actually, it is as if characters became kind of monsters. In* The Cutting Room*, Rilke is a Walking Dead, he is a Nosferatu impersonator, but in the same novel, the prostitute is a ghostly presence, as she is haunted by the house and simply can't go out. Besides, nobody can see her from outside*.

LW: It is true. Some of those things, as calling and comparing Rilke to Nosferatu – it's quite conscious, isn't it? In a way I'm quite unsubtle. You know that your reader knows these images so well... This idea of an old city in which all the different pasts lay on top of each other, and you can almost see and at the same time travel there. And the idea that we walk the same streets as each other but we don't necessarily see the same things and that there are criminal things that we ignore or depravation that we ignore and you get used to it. Sometimes in a city, especially somewhere like London, which is much bigger than Glasgow, you walk along and you see people that are sleeping on the street and we actually walk past and it's quite amazing that our compassion isn't such that we say . . . We don't do anything about it.

EGA: *Related to that, your characters seem to inhabit a kind of a small group in the city, like Rilke with his friends or when he is at the auctions; in the case of Jane and Petra in* The Girl on the Stairs (2012)*, they live surrounded by Petra's friends. Somehow they discover this outer world, a world of prostitutes, transvestites, people who kill their children, like Christie and, consequently, they discover that reality is not their reality but it's a bit wider*.

LW: Yes, It's funny, I guess that's it. In Rilke I was thinking mostly of people like Marlowe or Melmoth the Wanderer, who is the night surveillant: they walk alone in their societies, but I wanted Rilke to have a friendship network, so he has Rose, he has Les, the

people he knows from work... So he is alone but he is not completely alone and maybe that is quite a bit due to sexuality as well, as I wanted to show that it is not because he is gay that he is alone, he still has friends. With Jane and Petra, I wanted to reduce Jane's world and to picture what they were like in London before they moved to Berlin, with a more sociable world, and how she is currently living as in one of those photos where everything has shrunk to more or less those two streets: the apartment faces the graveyard, she goes to a market around the road once... it's very claustrophobic. Looking back, I think it is all the unconscious effect of writing about that, without even considering how Gothic that was. I guess the idea of the house with the buried body where she is carrying this child parallels the idea that she is in the house in the way that the child is inside. This is actually very female gothic, with the containment. And you are right: there is an outside world, but is it frightening? Is it not frightening? And I guess I wanted to count on that also with the other half, which is Petra's Thielo and his wife Ute. It is her Petra and Jane look down on very much, they like her but they are very condescending to her. However, she turns out to be quite nice, you know, she is possibly the most sensible person in the book and she has her priorities right. To that idea of the world as a good place which is not necessarily threatening and which can also be quite nice, I wanted to add an unpleasant and untidy environment in Thielo and Ute's house so that they do not think about aesthetics, and where children can live. In *Naming the Bones* (2010) Christie and Murray Watson are in the island of Lismore, which is very easy to get to, as you can travel there very fast from Glasgow, and yet it is a completely different world, and Murray feels very detached, as if he were a hundred miles away from Glasgow, but he is not, he is very close and he can easily come back. And when his brother... well, maybe there is some kind of connection between those two books.

EGA: *I was going to mention that, as in both of them, it is easy to notice the importance of the idea of the family. In Petra and Jane's case, it is motherhood and in the case of Murray and Jack in* Naming the Bones*, it is fatherhood, though both of them see their father in Jack's video art work, where he is displayed with his Alzheimer. He can remember them when they were kids but he cannot remember and recognize them now. There are also other kinds of fatherhood, as in Archie Lunan's poetry book, on which the scholar Fergus writes his name and publishes it as his own. Discovering this fact is like unveiling the paternity of the book in a sense*.

LW: Maybe the friendship and the family thing... In *The Bullet Trick* (2006), William Wilson has this mother: she is important to him and he is important to her but actually they don't speak in the way that families can. And with Jack and Murray Watson, they only have each other, that is the only family they have. Jack can produce art and Murray can only write about poetry, he cannot write poetry. Fergus as well steals the poems, with this idea of appropriation, which is taken art. Wanting to be an artist and yet somehow not being able to do it is a strange thing, isn't it? One wants to do something that you cannot. There are various jealousies between the brothers and Murray feels his brother has

exploited his father and yet it is also the opposite: he really wants to honour his father and he's done it his way. And that also gets Murray and the others too exposed.

EGA: *In Petra and Jane's case, they have Boy, who is a boy actually. Is there a certain connection with Tarzan films but with a new, different type of family? Tarzan was never the biological father of the boy, but here Petra is the real mother, no matter who the sperm donor is.*

LW: I didn't think about that, you know. I used to watch these Johnnie Weissmuller films all the time when I was a child and maybe... I guess Petra and Jane are not man-haters even if they live in a female world, I suppose. There's definitely some playing around with these ideas and these perceptions, you know, of two women living together. It is Dr Mann who lives next door, but it is also a very common name in German and Jane would have probably felt the same if she were a single mother with a daughter. There is a bit of hesitation and the questioning of responsibility: whose is our responsibility? Is it to our own family? Jane has this child who is coming and it should be one of her priorities and yet, does that mean that she should ignore the plight of this child who is next door? And I think people go in different ways, don't they? Sometimes they think, "I have a family and, my goodness, it makes me realize how many vulnerable children there are," and sometimes you simply ignore that. And there is always somewhere in between. And with Jane, I think the child coming but also her past...

EGA: *Jane also remembers her mother as a reflection in the mirror. Many of your characters do not see one another directly but via a mirror, like William Wilson in* The Bullet Trick*: he is the master of mirrors and he exposes himself but always reflected in them; or Jane's mother, who sees her daughter in the mirror but not directly: she does not open the door and check that she's sleeping there.*

LW: It's true. In my latest book, *A Lovely Way to Burn* (2014), Stevie finds the body of her boyfriend in bed. She has come to this house to collect some stuff and she opens the bathroom cabinet in the en-suite and she sees him in bed reflected in the mirror. So it freaks in a sense that we have seen this image in films, on television, the view through the window, which is also very common, but it is also as being not quite there. Maybe a little bit like the photographs in *The Cutting Room*, where you see the dead body but you don't quite see... she's not quite there but here. I guess in *The Cutting Room* I was just trying not to produce the dead body on the floor, which was less problematic for me.

EGA: *In the case of Sheila in* The Bullet Trick*, you never see her body. She is an absence in a photograph of Bill and Montgomery and you know she must be buried there but you have to guess it, as William actually does when he sees that picture. A picture is meant to show everything, as when you take a picture you think that is reality but, in this case, the reality is also hiding something in its image.*

LW: In terms of being a feminist I suppose, I want not to just use the image of the female body as entertainment and yet I am much, as I said, engaged with that genre. So

the photo, the image... With William Wilson, I was thinking about *Pandora's Box*,[1] and this idea of the past and that in the end she has to die. So you can enjoy all the excesses but she has to be killed, she is actually killed in the film by Jack the Ripper. In *The Bullet Trick* I wanted to resurrect her. She is not dead at all, she is there.

EGA: *She is a ghost coming back from the afterlife who wants to get her revenge and her story to be told.*

LW: She's very much that. And William is a manipulator in terms of vision, of dealing with things that we do not see, he's been at the centre of a different trick and it's as a result of her being dead that he goes through quite a lot.

EGA: *Now that you mention that, in your novels there are references that are not only literary, but, for instance, to the names of the characters: they are related to other texts, as in the case of Jane and Boy and the Tarzan films; Rilke and Rainer Maria Rilke; Marlowe in* Tamburlaine Must Die (2004) *is Christopher but he is also Philip; William Wilson, as in Poe's tale; Murray Watson, who is Dr Watson. However, his brother is never Watson but Jack. And then, names can be confusing: William is William, Will, Wilson, Bill.*

LW: Sometimes it has to do with vision as well, perspective, the point of view, even though it is third person, we are seeing it from Murray's perspective and to him his brother Jack is Jack. But these names can shift around: with Rilke I was much thinking about a poet that is used as detective. Names are quite hard. I usually try not to use too many fancy names. With *The Girl on the Stairs*, I was thinking for a long time on that book with that building in my head and it changed very much, but I think I always thought of *Jane Eyre*, and that's where this plain Jane's name came through: you just can't find a simpler name than this. And Jane has this imaginative capacity and she is somebody who reads a lot of novels. It is not that you have to trust her because she reads too many novels. But at the same time she is also a fairly practical person. I wanted readers to trust her and not to trust her altogether. I so often change names, and yes, it can be quite hard.

EGA: *There are also some characters whose names are gendered according to the person they are naming, as in the case of Leslie, which can be a male or female name, Kit in the case of Christopher Marlowe, or Stevie, which relates to women like Stevie Nicks and men like Stevie Wonder. There is some ambiguity in the naming of your characters.*

LW: Stevie is a very physically active character and it is almost like an adventure novel: she is very fast, like somebody who is a presenter in a shop television programme, the TV programmes that sell things to you. She is also very physically fit, very physically active. I think at some point she is eventually called Stephanie. She has got qualities that, although she is a quite feminine character, would be associated with men. In the book she physically

[1] A reference to the German film *Die Büchse der Pandora*, directed by Georg Wilhelm Pabst and based on the novels by Frank Wedekind Erdgeist and released on 30 January, 1929.

changes as it goes on. We meet her when she is about to go on a date, she is wearing this dress and she looks lovely, but by the end of the book she is much more masculine, much more beaten up. I think she goes through a transformation like the ones you see in action films.

EGA: *Thinking about names and references, there is a special case, Crippen, mentioned him in three of your novels. I assumed it was just a name until I started reading about the life of the real Crippen and how he apparently killed his wife, escaped to Canada and was sentenced to death. In a sense, his real life could be somehow read under a Poesque perspective. Reality sometimes resembles literature or perhaps it is that, through our readings, we read that reality*.

LW: It's also become one of those phrases that maybe the generation older than me would refer to, like parents and grandparents. It's also interesting to see a photograph of Crippen and he looked very creepy, like somebody that, if you were on the bus and there was a seat next to him, you might just stand, you know, even if it was the last seat. He is a classic case of British murderer that George Orwell writes about. He says, what else do you have to do than to sit down on a Sunday afternoon and read about crimes. You know, this is horrible, because there is an element of truth in this.

EGA: *Your novels are not very conclusive about reality. At the end I feel like "was it real?," "did it really happen?" I went to a reading club session on* The Cutting Room *and everybody seemed to have a different opinion on what actually happens in the novel in the killing of Roderick. As a reader, you do not know the facts so you have to trust the people who tell the story. However, they hide facts: for example, in the police records, they don't mention the people who are involved*.

LW: I like leaving enough space for the reader to take part in the story. In terms of plots, I want readers to be interested in them, so they also fill these gaps. I guess in *Tamburlaine Must Die*, we don't see Marlowe dying. The reader imagines, hopefully, what happens next, as I leave enough space. I think in each book there are moments the reader must decide and I guess the most extreme one is *The Girl on the Stairs*, where actually you can interpret that story in different ways. I have not been to any reading group. Sometimes, as a writer you get to attend a reading group and they can ask you, say what they think. You can answer some questions and the readers in some way decide: "Did he do it? Did he not? Was Jane right? Was she interfering?" I quite like that idea of the readers' opinion and experience: some readers say she was absolutely right and I am so glad that that man died. Somebody else may say she was interfering too much. I also think the story is much more straightforward, but there are people who do not know what happens and that is what life is like. I think you kind of promise to the readers to make some things up, you shouldn't just have that horrible killing at the end, and you think, "but I just wasted several hours and you told me you would tell me a story and you didn't tell me a story, you just left the ending." It must have a conclusion, but it does not need to be all explained. As you know,

I am very inspired by history and I suppose the gaps in history are part of its appeal. You have facts and then you have these things that remain for ourselves.

EGA: *At the same time, I have the impression that your characters could continue the story. In the case of* Naming the Bones*, it finishes with Jack introducing Murray to a girl, and he thinks, let's see what the future brings, so we ideally imagine there could be a second part to the novel, in a sense, that their story could continue. Your latest novel,* A Lovely Way to Burn *is actually the first part of "The Plague Trilogy." I must admit I had this need for a series on a character since I first read* The Cutting Room*. And I was not the only one, as some reviewers were expecting the next Rilke novel.*

LW: That was all I had with Rilke. That was the only thing and, commercially, it would have been quite good, but I did not want to, I did not feel the urge to. I sometimes get offered money to do things and I would like that money but I do not want to do it. So you have to keep faith in those characters. But I like the idea of an active ending and the idea of hope. With Rilke we have a similar feeling as with Murray Watson at the end. He has actually met someone [Professor Sweetman] and they could actually get together. There is hope for love. In Murray's case as well there is hope for love. If it is not her, maybe someone else. He is not such a bad person.

EGA: *I am also interested in the different gender constructions in your novels. The only reference to real girls is in the porn video in* The Cutting Room*, but all the other people are constructing their own genders, like Rose, who feels she looks like a man in drag and is very proud of that. There are drag queens, drag kings and burlesque girls, who are feminine but in a constructed way. Anna, in* The Girl on the Stairs*, can even choose when she wants to be a woman or a child.*

LW: I guess people go through that phase. You see that in teenagers wanting to be grown-ups and sometimes the edge they cross makes them really, really vulnerable, and that is the contradiction: we cannot interfere very much, because we cannot say, "Don't do that!," but at the same time it is actually something that they must do. As a society we are meant to keep them safe and you feel their vulnerability. I like dressing up much, I like the idea that people can change themselves. Yesterday I was sitting on the underground and I saw somebody sitting opposite me and I thought, "Oh, gosh, that dress looks good on that woman." It was a nice dress, perhaps a bit odd, and then I looked a bit closer and it was a man. And I would not have noticed if I had not been on one more stop. I like that people can decide they want to be something else, I suppose, I would like to live in a society where that was not dangerous. My partner Zoe [Strachan] works at the university and she has a student who is from a small town in America, and he says that, at the weekends, there are prostitutes at his doorstep. And she answers that no, they are not prostitutes, they are girls, they have probably been working hard during the week and they are now dressed up for the weekend with tiny mini-skirts, everything on display, as much make-up as they can put on their face, high, high, high heels and, no, they are only dressed up and they just want to

enjoy the weekend. That is okay, they drink too much, but they will not do you any harm. They only tease you. And he says, no, no, no, I can assure you these girls are prostitutes. I used to enjoy that when I was a girl, I don't do it much now. We used to go clubbing a lot, get as dressed up as you possibly could. We used to go to shops, figure outfits together, and sometimes they fell apart before you finished the night.

EGA: *Yes, I guess you control your image and you control what you want other people to see.*

LW: It is something that especially young people have to do because you're quite dependent on these things. Yes, it is fun to dress. I've been to Edinburgh and when I came back home, at about half past two, we were walking along all of the way to the train station and I used to see all these girls that started on those high heels and ended up walking barefeet, and that's a sign of having a good time. I guess the embrace of that, the heaviness of the enjoyment, a lot of this orchestrates in these books: drinking, some drug taking as part of that is also part of the Gothic, it is part of that genre.

EGA: *Marlowe is somehow writing his final will, his statement to the future, to a future reader that may understand his situation perfectly in an ideal world, somehow as if he were Isaac Asimov imagining a future society. Are we that future he was imagining?*

LW: To me, human nature has not changed much and I suppose that is part of the pleasure of reading the past, you recognize people or voice. Therefore, in the sense of technology, we are living in a world of science fiction and yet in terms of our motivations, like love, passion, greed, selfishness, they are all the same things that Marlowe and his contemporaries were motivated by. We read all of these elemental things in his plays and we recognize them, even though the language is different. I remember when I was writing in *Tamburlaine Must Die* how Marlowe was involved in a court case of a man who had killed somebody and he describes the words in the court case. The man he was with had a sword and he takes his sword and says, "come here if you want some of this," and I thought, you could see that on any city street but in the twenty-first century. You want this, so come here. I think he would be amazed that many things have not changed.

EGA: *In that novel, they are also stabbing each other constantly, even sexually, as in the case of Walshingham, who penetrates Marlowe the day before his departure. And Marlowe's is not the only body that is opened. In* The Bullet Trick*, William cuts girls in two and produces weird objects from their inside, or he creates kind of Frankenstein's monsters, half Ulla and half Sylvie, thus creating a perfect female body.*

LW: Yes, I guess that in the world of entertainment we want to see that and what is better than seeing women being cut up. And I suppose that's maybe a bit of fun on the genre, as well, you know, what is the next victim. In *The Cutting Room*, I was exploring the naked female body chopped up, and that is a little bit what William does on stage as well. I suppose when you are writing these books, you don't want to think consciously

on it because I think that if you think about it too much, then the idea can become too important and it's the story that should be important.

EGA: *At the end, William is the victim. He thinks he is the main magician but he is actually the male assistant and that is an interesting change as, up to that moment, women are kind of an accessory to the trick and, in this case, the idea that he is the accessory is necessary*.

LW: Yes, and when he sees Sylvie alive, he is pleased to see her. And even though he acknowledges he is furious, he is so really relieved. There is also sort of a love affair as well, that is maybe an element of loss, an element of weakness, which perhaps makes him nice after all he has experienced. It is a kind of active ending, and I guess it is about trying to take charge. And in *Naming the Bones*, I wanted Murray to have a different life. When Murray becomes more active, then things change. In William's case, when he becomes a more active agent he manages to resolve things. The passivity he has when he is in Glasgow is a real problem and he needs to be more active.

EGA: *Your characters are moved by others whose lives are completely unrelated. Rilke feels moved by the girl in the photograph, William is interested in knowing what happened to Gloria Noon. Jane is interested in Greta's life... and none of them has actually seen nor met them. And Murray too with Archie Lunan. However, they turn these people into their leitmotif*.

LW: Yes and much of that quest is maybe also displacement, you know, now we have something in our lives that perhaps we should tackle and think about, but we put them aside because they are too difficult and we go along this other path but you cannot necessarily escape this other thing. For Jane, I suppose, with this baby coming, she is left home alone, she is left without friends, away from the world that she knows... She is left without economic independence, which is a big thing. In my books, work is important, as it helps to define who you are, and Jane has given that up. She is completely left to rely on Petra and it probably seemed like a good idea when they were talking about it in practical terms. It made sense on paper. And Jane doesn't have anything to hold on to at this moment and if she had been in London and the same things had happened next door, she would have had more things to occupy her mind in, friends she could have talked about it to, she would have been able to explain herself better to the police...

EGA: *Eventually, she appropriates language. First she understands nothing, then she starts to understand some things and tries to speak German, but nobody pays attention to her. Eventually, she is able to command German, which also becomes her secret language with her newborn baby Boy, like a secret between a mother and a son. Language, as photography, implies that you never get the full picture of what happens*.

LW: That is interesting and, also, I guess, is that final picture a warm picture or is it a sinister picture? You know, the vision of the mother and child should be very nice, but I

was also thinking of the end of *Rosemary's Baby* and there is something comic about that, there is something funny. At the same time it is also very... ughh.

EGA: *Now you mention that, there is a certain similarity between the building where Jane and Petra live and the Bramford building in* Rosemary's Baby*: their neighbours. Every time Jane leaves the flat, she meets them. Everybody is constantly looking. Even Jane looks through the spyhole to see who is outside or to the hinterhaus to see what is going on there. It's a bit like a panopticon*.

LW: Yes, very much I suppose. In Glasgow you can see the centre of the city where most of the people live in apartments, and it is not so uncommon to live in them in Berlin, so this idea of looking at another apartment that you like and the question is you don't really know until you move in: is it okay? Are people noisy? It is also the idea of who you are living with and who has lived there before. Opposite my house there is a park and a little square where you can see the buildings with their windows shining. Even with the idea that people can see you, you see the windows of everybody. You see families living there, but at the same time you also think that, if you were in their flat, you would see me in the kitchen. If you wanted to be surveilling somebody, this is the kind of place to do it. And the truth is that we all do, we all are as in *The Rear Window* idea of this. If you had a broken leg, you would be sitting looking through the window to your neighbours.

EGA: *And knowing that they are also seeing you. People gaze and at the same they are also gazed at*.

LW: Yes. In Jane's case the backhouse is shadow and reflection, intimacy, I don't know, the body in the floor... I started to think about it at the beginning of my stay in an apartment block in Berlin which had this window to the backhouse. And to and fro, to and fro this girl goes to the backhouse. I was also thinking of the buildings opposite the square and the people who used to live in them before. It is a house in the east of the city, which is very close to the cemetery with these cobblestones with the names engraved of the people taken away by the Nazis. This is incomprehensible and you get an idea of these people who were taken away and murdered and they probably lived in the same house that I was. This idea is what happens to Jane with Greta and I suppose maybe she would not be so interested if it were not for the presence of Anna and the idea that what had happened to Greta could also happen to her. And then she feels this need to protect her because she is a child rather than a woman, even though Anna sees herself as a woman.

EGA: *Your novels also frequently use insults such as "poof" or, significantly, it seems to me, "whore." Jane hears that word through the wall, though in German; In* The Bullet Trick*, Sylvie is called "whore" when she is caught giving oral sex to Kolja. On the one hand, my question is whether insults create some kind of power relation between those who are insulting and those insulted. On the other hand, can this be compared to the way in which the word*

"queer," originally an insult, was appropriated. Sylvie says, "what's so bad about being called a whore?"

LW: In that book, that insult is really important. In the film, *Pandora's Box*, the woman played by Louise Brooks dies because she is a whore and that is one part of the narration: when she ends up in a situation alone with the man who is going to kill her because she is a prostitute herself. In the case of the morality of that story, the convention demands that she must be killed. But in my novel, she does not get killed and there are many, many, many worse things than being sexually open or free. It makes me think of a graphic writer who used a word and we asked, "what does it mean? What does that word mean?," and he said: "I can't tell you," but he eventually explained, "well, it is a girl who is a prostitute, but it is worse than that because she wouldn't take money for the sex." So this idea of morality is, you know, really important in that moment of the book. In terms of Jane, I guess I wanted to use a word she could recognize, her German is quite elementary, and the word is not so different. Some words carry better than others the meaning in just a one-syllable word that you might think you have heard or you might have not. Besides, you can imagine somebody saying that, but it would not mean that he is going to kill her, you know, she is at a point when she is discovering her sexuality and that can be very difficult. I wanted to leave the possibility that Jane might have heard that, she might not. Besides, it might not imply much, but it is definitely a word related to sex.

EGA: *When Jane confronts the skinheads, one of them is translating what Anna is saying in German into English and he states: "she says her father was a* whoremeister.*" This hybrid word might imply that he is dealing with prostitutes, but also that he is the husband of a prostitute.*

LW: Yes, it is that sort of ambiguity. And I like the idea that the skinhead is actually the speaking character. You quite often see young men like that in French, German trains, sitting and you never know if it is a style thing, sometimes you never know.

EGA: *Perhaps it is a kind of constructed masculinity in the same way as girls become burlesque.*

LW: There is also, as you know, this ultramasculine man that is also gay. You have that very difficult thing for gay men, who are meant to be very glamorous but in this case it is very masculine. There is a funny bit in *Trainspotting*, where one of the characters wants to look like his father and he grows a moustache, which is very masculine, but at that point in the 1990s is quite gay style. He does not realize that and he is quite pleased with it, but the next day the moustache is gone.

EGA: *I'm remembering now when Montgomery approaches William Wilson in the Irish pub in* The Bullet Trick. *They are sitting together, as Montgomery is holding a gun, and one of the punters in the pub says, "You're a pair of poofs." William sees in that his possibility to escape and he says he is being harassed. The punter keeps on insulting them until he discovers that*

Montgomery is a police officer. Then, he backs up and says, "I've nothing against gay people. As I say, live and let live."

LW: There is some comedy there. I picked a guidebook in a bookshop because I wanted to see what it said about Glasgow attitudes to gay people: if it were not a good idea to be gay or if everything was marvellous and people were happy. And it said that, in general, it is okay to be gay in Glasgow but you would not like to walk holding hands. And I thought it was quite right. All in all it is a very tolerant city, but not everybody is tolerant, so you know, you just have to be careful. So that idea of live and let live... You see there have been a lot of changes, but it has not changed the same all over the world, essentially with regard to prejudices and violence. When you think of your own country, you think things are okay, but they could change, with economic problems, a change of government, all that can change.

EGA: *Returning to your novels, there are characters who become commodities. Rilke is in the world of auctions and he knows how to sell things, but he also discovers the world of prostitution, where girls are sold as commodities. Or in the case of Sylvie, they say there is a rich American who is going to pay a lot of money to see her shot to death. Money can buy lots of things.*

LW: I guess, just about anything. I come from a normal background, everybody worked and if you enjoyed your work, that was a great thing, but it was a bit like going to school: you have to go but it was not expected that you enjoyed it. My father was a sales agent and he had the satisfaction of working, but his real life was the family life. For some other people, it would have been their hobby or being into nature. Work itself was not so satisfying. I guess that idea that you sell your labour is part of the way the system works. For me, I feel I find this incredible escape, this amazing escape. With my friends we used to play this game of what we would be doing in ten years' time, and I thought of myself as a very old lady cuddling drunks in return for a free drink... and you're right, the idea of commodification, of selling oneself. When I wrote *The Cutting Room*, I was aware of the women trafficking in Glasgow and that was quite shocking: we thought of ourselves as a country that had social problems, but we didn't think we had such a social problem as prostitution. The prostitution that took place was associated with drug-addiction, and that's horrible, because you could think that the problem would be solved if people stopped taking drugs, it would be solved. But the idea that there were people paying for girls is a real shock. Scotland has always been a largely socialist country and that does not go with it. I guess it is that idea of supply and demand, that there are these international gangs that are trafficking with these poor men and women. Here what is shocking is that we have people that somehow want to use these services and I guess it is the opposite to the burlesque, isn't it? There is fun in the burlesque, and it engages a set of boundaries, and that is something completely different. With regard to prostitution, it is the commerce, the violence of that commerce that is the horrible aspect of it.

EGA: *Now that you mention the burlesque, there is a difference between the shooting of Derek's porn video or the photographs that Rilke finds and Anne-Marie, who is very burlesque,*

forcing those attending her show in the Camera Club to use polaroids so that they can only take photographs which cannot be reprinted or manipulated, whereas other pictures can be manipulated or not. In burlesque there is this kind of control.

LW: Absolutely. I like Dita von Teese's style and attitude, she is just such a pleasure, and I guess this idea of the Camera Club is naturalistic and fun, literally fun. These camera clubs did kind of exist, not perhaps as elaborate as that, but in principle perhaps, photography clubs where men came and there was a model. I think there are also different elements in these camera clubs as these men may not have ever seen a naked woman before. I loved writing about that. Maybe there is an element, although they are very different countries, of that danger that Anna might feel, that Anna might have, I mean, this small element of danger of Anne-Marie as well, as she has this brother who is a bouncer, and yet she takes a step too far. This idea of stepping the line, which is part of the crime fiction and Gothic conventions: that last drink that you should not have had, that unwise moment when you do something which is wrong. I don't know what it is like in Spain, but you quite often read about these crimes, which I think it is a bit how I imagine that Christopher Marlowe died in real life. They were sitting there, drinking, on a very hot day, they had their swords, all these men together, they had this bragging... Most of the murders that happen in Glasgow are between friends: something has gone wrong and then everybody is very sorry and somebody is dead and somebody else is going to jail... a disaster, you know. These are the real murders, not the elaborate.

EGA: *In Spain we are really concerned about the violence against women, it is now a legal term and there is a law to prevent it... And maybe a family living next to your apartment and one day he kills her and he commits suicide, or not...*

LW: I guess we have similar campaigns here. When I was a child, for a man to beat his wife, the police would come round and the police would say, we cannot do anything about this, you have to solve it as it is part of the domestic problems. In the last fifteen, twenty years, it has completely changed, and the attitude towards it is that it is a crime.

Once the interview was over, Louise Welsh explained that there was a project afoot to have the bell of the Briggait tower working again, which according to her was an excellent opportunity to get access to the tower and have a privileged view of the city. On leaving the building, I started my walk towards Saint Mungo's Cathedral, under a heavier and heavier rain, leaving Louise Welsh then and there.

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