

Ali Smith

Ali Smith's fiction demands of its reader some basic requirements. Firstly, one must be the bearer of a sense of humour, and, if possible, a sense of the ludicrous, for we are everywhere treated to a stream of in-jokes and puns that reflect their author's fondness for both whimsy and surreality. Secondly, one must give up any reliance on the conventions of narrative realism for though her works are often explicitly set in recognisably contemporary worlds, they rarely limit themselves to the visible parameters of social reality, preferring audacious imaginative flight over intricate description or plot trajectory. Finally, one needs to tune emotionally to the pitch of writing that while fearsomely clever is also hauntingly affecting. Smith does not manipulatively wring from her reader an emotional reaction to the heart-breaking concerns with loss, vulnerability, grief, and loneliness about which she often writes, rather through echoes and associations one comes obliquely to appreciate and empathise with the difficult work of being human that Smith captures. Armed with these prerequisites the reader can feel prepared to tackle one of the most innovative, thoughtful, and witty writers of her generation.

Alison Smith was born in Inverness, Scotland on 24th August 1962 to an English father, who was an electrician, and a mother from the very north of Ireland, who worked as a bus conductress. The last of five children, Smith recalls a happy childhood but one in which she, as the youngest by seven years, spent much time amusing herself. She learned to read at the age of three and had devoured her siblings' book collections before her teenage years. A profound sense of her difference to many in her Highland community preceded her recognition of her

lesbianism; she fell deeply in love with another girl in her teens and though she experienced straight relationships during her student years – which she describes as ‘terrible and [...] fine’ (Bowditch 2001) - her sexuality never seems to have been in serious doubt. Smith studied as an undergraduate at the University of Aberdeen, taking her Bachelors in English Literature, and had planned to enrol for a PhD at the University of Edinburgh before receiving an offer to continue her study at Newnham College, University of Cambridge. There, she wrote her doctoral thesis on William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens and James Joyce, though she was not awarded her degree on her examiners’ judgement that the topic was too broad. By this point, Smith seems to have been losing faith in the fustiness and pomposity of academia, but she did take up a lecturing post in English and American Studies at the University of Strathclyde, an experience which appears to have been disheartening: ‘I’d be talking about *To the Lighthouse* and people would be waiting for an answer! [In giving it] I knew I was lying’ (Akba 2012). In her late twenties, whilst working at Strathclyde, Smith developed the chronically debilitating condition ME (Myalgic Encephalopathy), and though her illness was relatively short-lived, it did prove a turning point in her artistic development: ‘It was a visionary experience. You're faced with a different world and, if you are going to live, you have to renegotiate this world. The illness was the catalyst for my next stage. It allowed me to write’ (Bowditch 2001). It also provided her with the personal experience to create the chronically fatigued character of Lise in her break-through novel *Hotel World* (2001). After six months sick leave, Smith gave up her job in Strathclyde and returned to Cambridge with her partner - the artist and film-maker Sarah Wood, who had been

an undergraduate at Robinson College, Cambridge - determined to commit herself to writing, which, at this stage largely took the form of short stories and poetry.

Her first collection of stories, *Free Love* was published in 1995, and over the course of four further collections (*Other Stories and Other Stories* [1999]; *The Whole Story and Other Stories* [2003]; *The First Person and Other Stories* [2008]) and *Public Library and Other Stories* [2015]), and eight novels (*Like* [1997]; *Hotel World* [2001]; *The Accidental* [2005]; *Girl Meets Boy* [2007]; *There But For The* [2011]; *How To Be Both* [2014]; *Autumn* [2016] and *Winter* [2017]), she has established a reputation for narratives of great virtuosity and depth. She is undoubtedly prolific – to the above should be added *Shire* (2013), a collaboration of stories and images with her partner Wood, *Artful* (2012), a series of lectures that Smith gave whilst Weidenfeld Visiting Professor at St Anne's College, University of Oxford, and a number of plays. The regularity of this output has led to some criticisms of diminishing return. Sophie Gee for instance, when reviewing *The First Person and Other Stories* felt that her characteristic caprice and subversion of literary culture 'are no longer jolts from the margins; they are comfy and relaxed, too much at home' (Gee 2008), and as I have argued elsewhere (Lea 2016), the stylistic quirks of some of her stories in particular have become repetitive. Indeed it is for her novels, which continue to be consistently ground-breaking, that she has received the critical acclaim that she deserves. She has been shortlisted for the Booker Prize three times, for the Orange Prize for Fiction twice, winning its most recent incarnation as the Baileys Women's Prize for Fiction in 2015 for *How to be Both*, has won the Whitbread Novel of the Year (for *The Accidental*), and has been awarded the Scottish Arts Council Book of the Year Award

twice (for *Hotel World* and *Girl Meets Boy*). *How to be Both* also claimed the 2014 Goldsmith's Prize for fiction and the Costa Novel of the Year award.

She has repeatedly turned to a number of issues across her career and rather than try to give an exhaustive account of her contribution to contemporary writing, what follows here will address only the most salient and recurrent concerns of human connectedness, technology, and the transformative capacities of language. Though many of her novels and stories critique the nature of individualism in a hyper-technologised contemporary world where intimacy has given way to solipsism, many also address more universal concerns with love and its failure, death, the search for meaning through art, the human compulsion to tell stories, and, encompassing all of these, the existential problem of connecting with other people. The difficulty of understanding how the self connects with an other is one of the most consistent themes of Smith's work, but in fact it might be more accurate to say that it is the failure of connection between people that is a more persistent trope. In many of the short stories especially, the absence of empathy or simple understanding provides context for Smith's analysis of human interaction as perennially caught between conflict and resolution. Her narratives are filled with contrasting points-of-view, which often forcefully express their right to primacy. These voices explain the world as it appears to them, but none are allowed the ultimate satisfaction of determining the meaning of another's experience. Instead Smith relishes the argumentative grist of opposed perspectives, replacing singular with plural truths. Her novels, and many of her stories tend to be constructed as duologues or multilogues, with characters' differing versions of the world built around shared events or experiences. These 'you-me' stories (Murray 2006, 220)

pitch voices against each other but never with the intention of establishing an authorised account. The real point of interest is not the victory of one voice over another but the profusion of different registers, *paroles*, tones, vocabularies, accents, and pitches that feed into the dialogic ambiguity inherent in communication.

Smith is one of the great contemporary writers of domesticity, and much of her questioning of the nature of human connectedness is set in and around the home. Her stories display an acute awareness of the pain of individual loneliness and the cost that is involved in combatting that emptiness by placing other people and other things in our lives. Repeatedly she portrays the emotional and moral difficulties of being with others, and emphasises the fragility of understanding and potential for disruption that overshadow even the strongest and most intimate of human bonds. The voices that emerge are often conflicted, fearful, melancholic, and in thrall to the hurtful memories that have defined, and limited them. Yet, at the same time, these voices are also often hopeful, daring, altruistic, and open to the possibilities of transformation that being touched by the other can bring.

Three interconnected tales in *The First Person and Other Stories* illustrate well her even-handed treatment of different perspectives. 'The First Person', 'The Second Person', and 'The Third Person' tackle, from different thematic and grammatical positions, not only the problem of knowing the other, but also the temptations of speaking for, over, and about the other. 'The First Person' plays on the double sense of first person as a point-of-view (the 'I' of the story) and an agent (the first person to do something). As with many of Smith's stories, it involves a couple in bed imagining how they will tell the story of their relationship to others,

and there is a sweet tenderness to the banter as they tease each other with the accusation 'you're not the first person to ...'. Yet the slight underlying defensiveness that this intimates, the warning to the other not to get above themselves, is touchingly resolved by the novelty that fresh love brings. Actually the narrator experiences a stripping away not just of her cynicism about intimacy, but also of her identity to reveal her first-personage in an ordinary sense: 'You have peeled the roof off me and turned the whole library into a wood. Every book is a tree. Above the tops of the trees there's nothing but birds' (Smith 2008, 196). The connection with a lover is transformative here, turning a spirit calcified through experience back into youthfulness and hopefulness. And this reversion to first-ness brings with it a new, but welcome, awareness of the self as strange and malleable.

In 'The Second Person', Smith opposes two squabbling lovers, each recounting what the other is 'like', and each upsetting the other with their analogy. One is the 'kind of person' who would make nonsensical impulse purchases out of unrealistic ambition, the other is the kind of pedant who points out to a pianist all the historical nuances of the songs s/he is playing. Of course each protagonist is like and unlike these character sketches, but each sees in the other's story their own self-doubt about how the world sees them. Neither sees the romantic sub-text that the other implies, the open-hearted acceptance of another's enlivening and maddening totality; in the heat of an argument, they hear only the accusatory 'you'. The story ends with reconciliation and the uplifting, wry, 'You're something else, you' (Smith 2008, 134), a phrase that combines the acknowledgement of the other's strangeness with the recognition that we are equally mysterious to ourselves. 'The Third Person' opens with a characteristically vivid metaphor for that strangeness: a

relationship, Smith claims, is like being trapped in a small room with another person and a piano which is just too big to make moving around comfortable. This comic image captures well the clumsy intimacy of many of the relationships she describes, and the story then unfolds to explore the interpretive trouble involved in being in the outsider position of the third person. Presented as a series of unconnected vignettes, the story involves moments of anxiety and self-doubt: a petty theft on holiday, a theatre visit for a couple nearing the end of their relationship, a man's fear of being observed as he is cruel to a cat. In each case the perspective is singular, the thought-processes of the other an unreadable blank, and the reader is left with a clear sense of the piano in the room that underpins all intimacies – closeness and awkwardness as inseparable bedfellows.

These stories encapsulate the contrary impulses of selfishness and selflessness that Smith positions at the core of many of her protagonists' relationships. Intimacy is the simultaneous desire for what is to be denied to the other, the recognition that the needs of the other are legitimate but demand a troubling degree of self-sacrifice. These contradictory motivations can lead to cruelty such as in the intemperate locking of one partner out of the home ('The Start of Things' in *The Whole Story and Other Stories*) or the denial of another's feelings (as in the exclusion of Ash from Amy's diaries in *Like*), but they can also lead to moments of tenderness and wordless identification such as the unquestioning acceptance by one protagonist of their partner's romantic love for a tree ('May' in *The Whole Story and Other Stories*) or the humanitarianism that Lise shows in *Hotel World* in allowing the homeless Else to sleep in one of the unoccupied rooms at the Global Hotel. Finding momentary common ground with a would-be combatant, or

sharing the sadness of another's life through wordless physical contact, infuse Smith's stories with a humane acceptance of life's trials and triumphs. The intimacy that Smith describes is quarrelsome and destabilising precisely because it involves the surrender of oneself to another whom one does not understand, and it demands a commitment to connect with that other. That commitment is not a predicate of love, but an ethical choice that human beings have to choose to make, or not make. Smith's fiction – both short and long - presents connection with the other therefore as a challenge to the boundedness and self-interest of the individual. It is an offer to explore beyond the known, to open oneself to the caprice of the other and the mutability of connection. As she says in conversation with Boddy:

There's something which is really exciting and something which is the same about the places of connection and disconnection. They're about either acceptance or decision to connect or to be part [...] They are like a kind of interstice, they're like the stitches. Even the disconnections are the things that hold things together.

(Boddy and Smith 2010, 69)

Understanding the whole of the other is as impossible as understanding the whole of the self, but to live in the way that Smith seems to advocate requires a deliberate decision to reach out to the possibility of a life-enhancing connection that is guaranteed to bring with it the painful knowledge of difference.

Contemporary society's infatuation with technology as a means of augmenting human connectedness is a facet of this issue to which Smith has returned increasingly regularly in recent fiction, and without a great deal of

optimism. Far from decreasing loneliness and social exclusion she suggests, the Internet, 24-hour television, celebrity culture, and mobile technology have simply generated new kinds of soul desolation where profound connection with others has been replaced by superficial coincidence. The “Intimate” as one of the older characters in *There But For The* (2011) tellingly misnames the Internet, typifies the retreat from meaningful relationships in a culture of obsessive observation and instantaneous gratification. Information technology supposedly offers unprecedented and uninhibited access to data from every spectrum of human experience, yet Smith wonders at the extent to which this allows us to know things, and particularly others with any depth. It might seem curious that a writer as celebratory of the carnivalesque and anti-hierarchical as Smith would reject the open architecture of the Web - in many ways it would seem an ideal metaphor for her narrative anti-authoritarianism. However, the kind of passing attention that the Web tends to facilitate is diametrically opposed to the considered, ethically committed focus that she believes underpins true empathy. For Smith, the ‘great sea of hidden shallows’ (Smith 2011, 159) opened up by the Internet is the consequence of allowing machine technology to replace genuine connection. Or rather, of allowing it to become the excuse we use to absolve ourselves of the responsibility of connecting with another, for real intimacy demands a morally engaged and humane recognition of the other, not the superficial kind of knowledge that an Internet search engine can provide. As one of the characters in *There But For The* muses: ‘Google is so strange. It promises everything, but everything isn’t there. You type in the words for what you need, and what you need becomes superfluous in an instant,

shadowed instantaneously by the things you really need, and none of them answerable by Google' (Smith 2011, 159).

Part of the problem with the information revolution lies in its excessive surplus, a surplus that inevitably turns to unfulfillable promise, in Smith's eyes, because it cannot come close to conveying the depth of human experience, nor the diversity of desire. The structural advantage of the Internet is its proliferative tendency that promises the answer to all desire through sheer informational bulk, but in embracing its democratic diversity we are at risk of mistaking breadth of reference for depth of understanding. This leads, as one character in the novel remarks, to a hollow and ultimately soul-destroying individualism: 'the charm is a kind of deception about a whole new way of feeling lonely, a semblance of plenitude but really a new level of Dante's inferno, a zombie-filled cemetery of spurious clues, beauty, pathos, pain, the faces of puppies, women and men from all over the world tied up and wanked over in site after site [...]' (Smith 2011, 159).

The same dilemma of 'how to walk a clean path between obscenities' (Smith, 2011, 159) in an age of over-exposure assails George in *How to be Both* (2014) who, following her mother's death, tries to commemorate her feminist politics by ritually watching a demeaning pornographic film on the Internet in the hope that repetition will engender empathy with the young woman portrayed:

This really happened, George said. To *this* girl. And anyone can just watch it just, like, happening, any time he or she likes. And it happens for the first time, over and over again, every time someone who hasn't seen it before clicks on it and watches it. So I want to watch it for a completely different reason. Because my

completely different watching of it goes some way to acknowledging all of that to this girl. (Smith 2014, 224; italics in original).

Watching the film, she believes, generates a connection with the woman, offering at least a token acknowledgement of the humiliating disempowerment endured. It thus grows from a creditable ethical impulse, but like the digital format in which it is distributed, George's viewing is automatic, repetitive and identical. Sympathising with the pain of others is a reaching towards something that matters, an attempt to feel like/for the girl in the film, but her repeated viewings are superficial. In watching over and over without getting any closer to understanding the suffering that the girl endures she is merely seeing rather than connecting.

Though Smith clearly does not believe that the Internet is the 'cesspit of naivety and vitriol' (194) that Sophia describes in *Winter* (2017), she does warn against mistaking its ubiquity for reality. For all its allure to the curious – and Smith's writing clearly reflects the increasing Wikipediation of contemporary fiction - the Internet-age is characterised by systems of ideological simplification and covert control that run counter to genuine expressive freedom. Though the prospect of multiple, crowd-sourced answers to any conceivable question appears to democratise and extend access to knowledge, Smith's conviction is that technology is a false god, in that it offers a system for ordering the world but misinterprets human desire as satiable by pornography and consumerism. The bland reduction of needs to shopping and fucking drastically undersells the human capacity for inquisitiveness, iconoclasm, transformation, and transcendence, qualities that attest to the richness and wonder of lived experience. Moreover these qualities need not

be traduced by online extremity nor mediated by technology for they already exist in the domestic and the ordinary settings in which self and other collide, a collision that generates more mystery than the Web can capture.

If our submissive dependence on contemporary technology highlights our discomfort with life's unanswerable questions, Smith celebrates the compensatory solace offered by an older *techne* - storytelling. She writes about the value of words as microcosmic universes for grander stories; she is a crafter of narratives in which wordplay is central not only to the diegetic energy, but also to the thematic investigation. Puns, neologisms, jokes, and metatextual references dominate her stories, but above and beyond this technical attention to the vitality of words, Smith's writing also creates characters of books, joyously identifying our relationships with them as some of the most significant and fulfilling of our lives. 'Text for a Day' from *Free Love* for instance follows a character in crisis who literally disassembles her library - tearing out page after page after they have been read - in a bid to reattach herself with the unrepeatably experience of discovery. 'The Universal Story' in *The Whole Story* constructs biographies for the contents of a second-hand bookshop, detailing their experiences with consecutive owners and lovingly drawing out the ways in which the intersection of life and literature affects both. Each book's history is enshrined in another story, a form of endless recession that indicates the continual resonances of stories through each other and through their tellers/readers. Smith's book/story is like her relationship: always open to fresh interpretation and analysis, but also subject to surprising transformation and redirection.

In 'Believe Me' in *The Whole Story* we see how this transubstantiation of word and person can occur:

[...] because I can read you like a book and because the thing about a beloved book, if it's a good one, is that it shifts like music; you think you know it, you've read it so many times, of course you know it, of course the pleasure of it is in how well you know it, but then you hear, in the background, the thing you never heard in it before, and with the turn of a page you see a combination of words you know you've never seen before, you thought you knew this book but it dazzles you with the different book it is, yet again, and not just that but the different person you have become, the different person you are now, reading it again, and you, my love, are an excellent book for me, and then us both together, which takes some talent with rhythm, but luckily we are quite talented at reading each other. (Smith 2003, 146)

Reading and loving are thus closely related for Smith – her characters love to read, but they also read to love. Both practices come with costs and benefits and they both offer ways of understanding the world. Throughout her collections books act as forms of distraction, forms of consolation, forms of shaping the past in new ways, and forms of ordering the difficult lives we live. This can be seen in 'Erosive' (2003) where the narrative structure of a story about loss is reordered in order to better comprehend the shifting nature of grief, and in 'The Book Club' (2003) where the ordering of the story and the algorithmic protocols of a sat-nav device overlap as metaphors for control of the disorienting realities of the physical world. Narrative is

alive for Smith, it is organic, and as a consequence, it has the ability to be disruptive and disorderly, challenging with a voice as loud and ornery as any of her protagonists.

Stories as constitutive means of self-knowing and self-deception play central roles in the novels too. From the overlaying voices of the four narrators in *Hotel World*, through the self-deluding stories of the parents in *The Accidental*, the messianic hagiographies of Miles/Milo in *There But For The*, and Art's hopelessly pretentious blogging in *Winter*, Smith's protagonists narrate themselves, and are narrated in ways that are frequently elliptical and ambiguous and always point towards the mystery of being that eludes them. Self is elusive in Smith because of the limited means it has to express itself, as for all the productive mutability of language it frequently fails to live up to the task of capturing the meaningful connection between things. In *Like* – a novel that Smith describes as 'a nasty warring book' (Murray, 2006, 222) because of the way that it sets one view of knowing and telling the world against another – Amy contemplates the disjunction that language produces: 'The word and the thing it means, the barbed dark between the word and the world; nothing but a rope bridge hanging by knots across a ravine, dropping loose slats as soon as you put your weight on it. A path around a chasm, that's all there is' (Smith 1997, 96). Language is the primary but precarious mechanism we have to combat the barbed darkness of our uncomfortable relationship with the world and with the other. As with the path around the chasm it always represents a detour into metaphor, which while suggestive is often painfully vague as a form of self-expression. Smith's treatment of language in *Like* reveals an interesting contradiction that is evident elsewhere in her longer fiction: on the one hand, she is

committed to the idea of language as forever open to playfulness and transformation, and regards this as a foundational aspect of language's anti-authoritarian ability to avoid cliché and hierarchy. Stories are told and retold, language is formed and reformed, and words are shifted from their accepted moorings to take up temporary residence in other semantic regimes. But on the other hand, there is a palpable regret that language does not perform the task of describing the individual's experience of the world with any degree of accuracy. Words, for all their potential, are endlessly frustrating and imprecise and cannot encapsulate authentic human experience in a way that is ultimately true to it.

'True Short Story', an autofiction from *The First Person and Other Stories* illustrates this paradox well. The story begins with the narrator over-hearing the conversation of an older and a younger man sitting in a café who are discussing the relative sexual merits of the novel and short story, with the former described as a 'flabby old whore', the latter 'a slim nymph [...] in very good shape' (Smith 2008, 4). The incident allows the narrator to make a diegetic leap to Smith's hospitalised friend Kasia Boddy, an academic and expert in the short story, and to introduce the idea of contrast as a form of play. As a patient, Boddy is subject to the pathological determination of a mirthless disease, and to a hospital system that is characterised by well-meaning indifference. Systematised logic underpins the decisions made by health professionals about their patients' care, most pointedly in Boddy's case over whether to administer the effective, but costly, breast cancer drug Herceptin. The unenviable choices about who should and shouldn't receive the treatment are shrouded in defensive acronyms such as PCT (Primary Care Trust) and NICE (National Institute for Health and Care Excellence), and Smith's resistance to authority butts

against these euphemisms with undisguised ironic emphasis: “Primary”. “Care”. “Trust”. “Nice” (Smith 2008, 11). Each term is punctuated not just to highlight the distance from reality of these terms in the context, but also to open those terms out to the many, and varied meanings that each one contains, many of which fly from the limited and dishonest co-option by institutional speech.

For Smith, language is captured and perverted by authority, used to mask the small truths such as the two-centimetre tumour in Boddy’s breast, whose undeniable and irreducible reality defies description. Yet the story suggests that the only answer to these truths and the hard twists of language made to cover them, are the lies of stories. Smith is not romantic about the healing power of imagination but rather she suggests that the invented is all that can be offered in the face of the coldness of things as they are. Words transform reality through their refusal to be monologic, so, in telling Boddy of her experience in the café, the nymph transmutes between a dirty joke; a fishing fly; and ultimately the mythological story of Echo, which is retold by Smith as a tale of answering back against the immovable power of disease. ‘True Short Story’ becomes a celebration of the liveness of language, and of the possibility of responding to the seeming immutabilities of the physical world with a defiance born of humour and multiplicity. However, the story never claims that such strategies are anything more than compensation. Narrative, imagination, and a creative unwillingness to accept the way things are, will not prevent them being thus, but they at least provide a temporary respite and the sense of a small victory.

The importance of language and storytelling as a tool of resistance to monoliths of authoritarianism is everywhere apparent in Smith. She gleefully mocks

the territorial pretensions of 'official' culture whether that is manifest in the philistinism of the Pure Corporation seeking to marketise Scottish water in *Girl Meets Boy*, the pomposity of the power-crazed Borse D'Este in *How to be Both*, or the esoteric sterility of academia. As her irreverent treatment of institutional literary study in *Like* and *The Accidental* suggests, Smith loves undermining the claims to ownership of language by any privileged clique and is intent instead on reminding her readers that Literature (in its most emphatically capitalised form) is not the preserve of those of us whose job it is to objectify and decode it. Rather she glories in the ways that readers live in and through the stories that they encounter and create, continuously repurposing them for the different challenges that life offers. She had the opportunity to convey this creative approach when she gave a series of lectures on her own engagement with literary criticism whilst Weidenfeld Visiting Professor at St Anne's College, Oxford. Published as *Artful*, they are distinctly unlecture-like in format, blending literary criticism with the first-person narrative of a bereaved woman whose partner has died whilst writing a series of invited lectures. The device displays Smith's formidable literary erudition without ever falling into the dry impersonalism of the academic. Rather the lectures playfully slip between fiction and criticism emphasising how the two feed, and feed off, each other, and reminding the reader again, that reading without a personal, moral engagement leads to the kinds of intellectual and emotional paralysis that she has resisted throughout her career.

Smith is creatively restless, and believes that stories become sterile once they are structured into a narrative in a specific way and for a specific purpose. Instead, narrative is most vital, intriguing and perceptive she argues when it is allowed to

form itself outside the imperative of order. This led to her most metafictional experiment with *How to be Both*, which consists of two distinct but interrelated accounts, both identified as being book/part/chapter 'One', and alternately ordered depending on the version a reader might select. Half the print-run of the volume was published with the narrative of a transgendered Renaissance painter, Francescho del Cossa first, and half with the narrative of George Martineau, a precocious teenager in present day Cambridge. There is nothing in the book's front or back matter to advertise this narrative device, so the reader falls into an interpretational pattern which is at once likely to be both predetermined by the ordering of the text they hold, and provisional depending on the happenstance of selecting one copy from a bookshelf rather than the one next to it. This is an intriguing attempt to circumvent the problem of plot progression by offering an illusion of simultaneity – two interchangeable narratives each dealing with past, present, and future - even though readers are ultimately likely to consume whichever text they choose sequentially. Nevertheless, within the narratives, there is a concerted effort to problematize linear diegesis, especially in the use of time. Smith fluidly blends temporal positions, slipping between each frame within the space of several lines and creating, if not simultaneity, then at least a blurring of temporalities. The effect is to generate a sense of disorderliness, but one that is open to limitless reshaping and reinterpretation. The novel is thus never closed but remains aesthetically and morally mobile just as the relationship between George and Franchesco remains narratively ambiguous.

Trying to capture the texture of a writer's range of work for a volume such as this is tricky, but if I were to sum up the fiction of Ali Smith in a word, it would

probably be 'but'. Though it might seem an inelegant and uncritical way of describing the achievements of Smith, the contingency of 'but' encapsulates a stand-out quality of her fiction that might be termed conjunctive. Smith's novels and short stories are always concerned with the pivots that balance alternative perspectives and world views, and gain their richness from the divergence from singularity that is implied by 'but-ness'. If what precedes the 'but' is a forceful statement of subjective point of view, that which succeeds it brings depth, polyvocality and, crucially for Smith, opens up the creative possibilities of ambiguity. As one of the main characters in *There But For The* comments: 'the thing I particularly like about the word 'but' [...] is that it always takes you off to the side, and where it takes you is always interesting' (Smith, 2011: 175). Being taken off to the side, detoured, disoriented, or derailed are adventures to which the reader of Smith must get accustomed, for her style, though often directly personal in its address, is characterised by a quirky roundaboutness that demands a continuous openness to others' ways of seeing the world. That those ways often embrace the voices of children, outsiders, the dead, or inanimate objects, points us back to the liminality of the 'but', which sits between, conjoining disparate stories and forging difference into a grammatical coherence. As the title of one of her collections of stories suggests, our stories, like the voices in which tell them are always, and never, whole.

Works Cited:

Akba, Arifa, (2012) 'Conversations with the Undead'. *Independent* 27 October, 27.

- Boddy, Kasia & Ali Smith, (2010) 'All There Is: An Interview About the Short Story'.
Critical Quarterly 52(2), 66-82
- Bowditch, Gillian, (2001) 'From the Bucket to the Booker'. *Sunday Times* 14 October,
 14.
- Gee, Sophie, (2008) 'Mad for It'. *Financial Times* 11 October, 19.
- Lea, Daniel, (2016) *Twenty-First Century Fiction: Contemporary British Voices*.
 Manchester, Manchester University Press.
- Murray, Isobel, (ed.) (2006) *Scottish Writers Talking 3*. Edinburgh, John Donald.
- Smith, Ali, (1995) *Free Love and Other Stories*. London, Virago.
- (1997) *Like*. London, Virago.
- (1999) *Other Stories and Other Stories*. London, Granta.
- (2001) *Hotel World*. London, Hamish Hamilton.
- (2003) *The Whole Story and Other Stories*. London, Hamish Hamilton.
- (2005) *The Accidental*. London, Hamish Hamilton.
- (2007) *Girl Meets Boy*. Edinburgh, Canongate.
- (2008) *The First Person and Other Stories*. London, Hamish Hamilton.
- (2011) *There But For The*. London, Hamish Hamilton.
- (2012) *Artful*. London, Hamish Hamilton.
- (2013) *Shire*. Woodbridge, Full Circle Editions.
- (2014) *How To Be Both*. London, Hamish Hamilton.
- (2015) *Public Library and Other Stories*. London, Hamish Hamilton.
- (2016) *Autumn*. London, Hamish Hamilton.
- (2017) *Winter*. London, Hamish Hamilton.