

# INSPIRED BY DREICH DAYS AND ROMANTIC NOTIONS

Murderous skies, late summer nights and the beauty of the Highlands ... writers from around the world are drawn to Scotland to join in with its lively literary scene. But is the rain really to blame for all the great novels or could it be the music, drinking and curries?

INTERVIEWS  
BY COLIN  
WATERS

## LUCY ELLMANN: AMERICA

I CAME to Edinburgh because it's beautiful. I don't write about beauty much but I like having it around. I was living in the wilds of Hampshire before, which seemed beautiful until I noticed it was full of right-wing hunting folk and the video shop was lousy. I was ready for a city again.

I came for the medicinal passageways, the Georgian terraces, big windows with shutters, blue-grey cobblestones, low-slung sunlight, lively talk and Nepalese curry. I need these things. But I'll have to leave before the council wrecks it all. They've already wrecked Calton Hill since I got here (jamming a megacinema in its side), they want to wreck Granton pier. They don't understand they have a beautiful city here. They seem to want it to look like Glasgow - this is like harbouring secret longings for Detroit. *Lucy Ellman's next novel, Dot In The Universe (Bloomsbury, £12.99) will be published in January*

## AJAY CLOSE: ENGLAND

IN 1988 my partner died. I wanted a new start and my best friend lived in Edinburgh. Scotland is where life began to get better for me and where I began to write fiction. Every writer has their optimum focusing distance: how far away they need to stand to bring their subject into perfect sharpness. Scotland, with its blend of familiarity and strangeness, gave me mine.

It helped that Scotland was going through a period of self-definition. Every other newspaper article, television programme, poem and play seemed to be about Scottish identity. Everyone else was having their say, why shouldn't I? My novel-in-progress takes the Scottish half of its setting for granted. The rest of the book is set in the north of England during the miners' strike. These days, it's my birthplace I write about as a stranger. *Forspoken (Vintage, £6.99)*

## KIRSTY GUNN: NEW ZEALAND

I CAME here because my husband got a job. It wasn't like I was in need of Scotland,

as in some kind of in-need, inspiration sort of way, although having said that I do find Scotland - the Highlands, in particular - enormously inspiring. When we lived in Perthshire a huge chunk of that went into my new book (*Featherstone*), the shape of the land and the village, that gorgeous big rain-soaked purple and yellow sky, the kind you get in Scotland late summer, the nights drawing in but still acres of light. That's all there, in the books. But here in Edinburgh I just work away. First draft written in bed, longhand, subsequent drafts at my desk and I could be anywhere then. Any desk. Any room. Any window looking out to any view. It's inside my head that's different. Over the Forth Road Bridge and away. Up the A9, the road peeling off and the signposts ahead saying the north ... That's where you'll find me.

*Featherstone (Faber, £10.99)*

## SIAN PREECE: WALES

LOOKING at the range and number of international events in this year's Edinburgh Book Festival, it's clear that the lack of Welsh writers wasn't a deliberate slight, they just ran out of tents. I think one of the things that inspired me to start writing in Scotland was that openness to other voices. You see it in the establishment, like the Scottish Arts Council and the BBC, and you see it in Scottish writers who are incredibly generous and non-hierarchical.

Wales looks eagerly to Scotland's literary success because we see similarities in our humour and conscience, our proximity to the behemoth England and I would point out that Scotland's openness and the confidence of the literary scene here are linked. I've lived in Canada and France as well as Wales, and I find it easier to write about places after I've left them, but I don't want to leave Scotland! *From The Life And Other Stories (Polygon, £8.99)*

## BASHABI FRASER: INDIA

I CHOSE Edinburgh University for my PhD programme because it was where my late friend Julian Dakin had taught and Julian had initiated me into the love of English literature. I came to stay with Julian's widow. Here I met my present husband, Neil Fraser. My daughter values her Indian background, but her Scottish nationalism and Neil's heritage have led me to explore my multicultural experience of living in Scotland and express it in my writing.

I find my work reflecting this dual experience of living between two worlds. The beauty of Edinburgh and its festival and its poverty, which it has tried to push to its peripheral estates, remind me of Calcutta. I grew up on the Himalayas and the foothills and the hills within Edinburgh and the feeling that the Highlands are not too far

away, is the same feeling that sustained me when I was in the city, away from the hills in India. While there is always a sense of nostalgia wherever I am, I can combine my two countries in my writing, in poetry and in books such as *The Geddes-Tagore Correspondence (Edinburgh Review, £5.99)*.

## GRAEME WILLIAMSON: CANADA

I WAS born in Montreal and I went to school in the UK. My parents moved around and I gained and lost several accents in the process. I've spent most of my adult life in Scotland and Canada so my affections are evenly divided. My natural speech is English or Canadian but I also think in Scots. I suppose language is a political issue in Scotland. I don't think about the English language in political terms.

Besides being the language of colonisers, it also thrives because it's adaptable and inclusive. Every language throws a light on a different piece of the universe and Scots is no exception. Perhaps mutual mistrust between nomadic and settled people has some relevance to language politics in Scotland. A problem I find with the English narrative voice is that Scots-speaking characters can sound as if they have inverted commas around them - so I avoid specific geographical settings. *Strange Faith (11/9, £9.99)*

## LINDA CRACKNELL: ENGLAND

I WAS pulled north 12 years ago from Devon by a research opportunity for my partner and a hillwalking habit. I wasn't a writer when I arrived, but Scotland definitely helped. Being in a different culture sharpened my observations. The landscape inspired and provoked me. My first teacher was Liz Lochhead. The first reading I went to was by Janice Galloway and AL Kennedy.

As I got going, I found established writers supportive, benefited from bursaries and initiatives, and a new publisher of Scottish fiction, 11/9. The number of contemporary Scottish writers launched by short stories heartened me to start out with a collection rather than a novel. The short story seems to command respect here (illustrated by the status of the Macallan competition, which I won as a novice in 1998). Many of my stories have Scottish settings, but I'm still surprised (and honoured) to be classified as a "Scottish writer". *Life Drawing (11/9, £9.99)*

## BERNARD MAC LAVERTY: IRELAND

I MOVED to Scotland in August 1975. I had just completed an English degree and teacher qualification in Belfast when it struck me that I didn't have a say in such a place where murder and mayhem and bombs and hatred and bigotry and bullying were an almost daily occurrence.

In my medical technician job I'd been sent to Scotland to study chromosome techniques and I had been very impressed by Edinburgh. So I applied for a teaching job there and got it. Scotland has been very good to me and for me - awarding me prizes, giving me insights, enriching me with friendships. I have lived in three places - Edinburgh, Islay and Glasgow. Each has a different character, each has its own rewards. *The Anatomy School (Vintage, £6.99)*

## CYNTHIA ROGERSON: AMERICA

USUALLY I tell people I'm here because I married a man I met in Dingwall 21 years ago, while I was travelling around. Sounds romantic, plausible too, doesn't it? But the truth is, I was already smitten when I met him. I loved the emptiness, the mountains, the barrenness, the west, the accents, the humour, the generosity, the music, the drinking. I even loved the weather. I especially loved the weather.

I have a theory that rain is to blame for all great Scottish books. Rain gives you the perfect excuse to stay indoors ... it makes you miserable and makes you suppress and store up all those things that end up needing expression. Climatic conditions as cause for creativity? Quite a lot of my recent novel *Upstairs In The Tent* takes place in the rain and it was written as the result of rain. *Upstairs In The Tent (Headline, £6.99)*

## REGI CLAIRE: SWITZERLAND

SCOTLAND "happened" to me when I fell in love with a Scotsman. I hadn't written creatively before moving here from Switzerland and, you might say, that Scotland proved a catalyst. Moreover, it made me write in English - my fourth language - so my husband could understand. This means the writing process is slow, often painstakingly so.

In many ways I work like a poet, savouring sounds and rhythms as I write. Rather than being constrained by the conventions of a mother tongue, I can play with the language. I sometimes agonise over where to set a story or novel. I have no experience of growing up in Scotland, while I feel a bit out of touch with contemporary Switzerland. I've found some delightful solutions: frequent long-distance phone calls and sherry afternoons with elderly local ladies. *The Beauty Room (Polygon, £8.99)*

## MEAGHAN DELAHUNT: AUSTRALIA

IN 1998 I was back living in Australia, halfway through writing my first novel. In Melbourne, unaccountably depressed, I felt a longing for Edinburgh and for Holyrood Park: the low, murderous skies, the acid green colours. I imagined returning to our old flat - vacated three years earlier for Greece and Australia. Scotland represented a red door, a key turning in the lock, myself at my desk, working.

I love the rhythm of the words here: the literature, the humour, the self-deprecation. There is the feeling that a writer, whatever the nationality, can make a cultural contribution. A dreich day is often a perfect writing day. Being an outsider is good: the eye, the ear are sharpened. Alastair Reid once wrote: "Home is where the new words are" and for me, most of the time, Scotland is that place. *In The Blue House (Bloomsbury, £6.99)*

## ROBIN SMITH: ENGLAND

AS I wrote in the preface to *The Making Of Scotland*, my first visit to Scotland - in 1949-1950 - was mandatory and at state expense. Scotland being so varied, so well endowed with fine scenery and so historically, socially and economically different from England, I could hardly fail to be drawn back here for holidays. In 1971 a career crisis in England was resolved thanks

to a job offer by Kirkcaldy town council. Our children have made their homes in England, but my wife Dorothy and I still live in Kirkcaldy.

After taking early retirement, my fascination with urban character and development led to my researching almost every aspect of Scotland. I found that nearly every place offered something of special interest to write about. For those who think my book too pricey, consider that it offers a concise history of more than 1200 Scottish places for an average of 3p each.

*The Making Of Scotland (Canongate, £40)*

## MICHAEL ALLANBY: ENGLAND

I LIVE in Tighnabruaich, in a cottage overlooking the Kyles of Bute. My wife and I moved here two years ago from Cornwall, where we'd spent the past 28 years. A friend sent us an advertisement for the house. It gave us what we need - peace, room to work and floors that don't collapse under the weight of our books. I'm English, but my wife is Scottish and we've spent so much time here I feel halfway naturalised.

Now, authors can live where they choose. I write books on environmental science, especially climate and weather, mainly for publication in New York. I think my work has improved since we moved. Perhaps it's the quiet that helps me concentrate. I don't know. I do know I've been made very welcome here and the village has become my home. *Author of about 80 books, including Encyclopaedia Of Weather and Climate, How It Works: The World's Weather and DK Guide To Weather (Dorling Kindersley), which won the 2001 Junior Prize of the Aventis Prizes for Science Books*

## MICHEL FABER: NETHERLANDS/AUSTRALIA

THE Scottish Highlands are the last place I would have imagined living when I was younger. I'd never been a nature boy and if I could have picked my ideal base I might have chosen Prague or Budapest. But my wife fell in love with Tarrel, a tumbledown farm on the Moray Firth in Ross-shire. It was a magical environment - it opened my eyes to the beauty of landscape, and it inspired my novel *Under The Skin*. Sadly, the farm has since been sold. I don't know where I'll be living when I'm old.

Maybe I'll end up in Prague after all, still posting my manuscripts to Canongate. Scotland has been very welcoming and I love the weather.

To be honest, though, I could live anywhere that gives me the space to write. Writers live in their heads. *The Crimson Petal And The White (Canongate, £17.99)*

