

Shakespeare in one culture had served as promotional propaganda of a nationalistic party's electoral campaign! Once again Shakespeare had become implicated in the maelstrom of politics and fight for power, which so many of his plays so skillfully portray.

I would like to believe that both we, as the journal's editors, and the journal's readers are acquiring knowledge not only about Shakespeare, but also about other cultures. Though *Multicultural Shakespeare* will not turn us into advanced specialists in Hungarian history, Chinese folklore, or Brazilian theatrical practices, the local responses to the playwright's texts represent a great opportunity to discuss and circulate information and, hopefully, promote understanding and the acceptance of an ever-increasing colourful canvas of nations, people, customs and beliefs. No one can deny that national, political, social and cultural barriers have been and will continue to be present, even in Shakespeare studies. At the same time, it cannot be ignored that for centuries Shakespeare has been crossing these barriers, contributing to the transformation and improvement of relations within both national and ethnic communities as well as among individuals. We hope the issues of *Multicultural Shakespeare: Translation, Appropriation and Performance* will extend beyond linguistic, historical, political, social and cultural differences, which in the past frequently turned into nationalistic disputes, at times even into war, and will contribute to the creation of a space for global multicultural discourses. In this endeavour it is our desire to also invite you, our readers, to consider helping us spread the idea of international Shakespeare through contributing your scholarly research to our journal. Not only would this further enhance the journal's quality, but also allow us increase its publication to twice annually.

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## INTERVIEW

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### *Everything we do is political* An Interview with Kevin Smith

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In 2012, when *Jammy Dodger* was published, this satirical novel was very positively received by press and literary critics in Britain and Ireland. The author, Kevin Smith, was born in London and grew up in Northern Ireland. A journalist, he spent a few years in the 1990s in Eastern Europe, including Romania, as a foreign correspondent. Until 2009, when he devoted himself to creative writing, he worked for newspapers, radio and electronic media, collaborating with *Financial Times of London*, the *Associated Press* and *Reuters*. He currently lives with his family in Dublin. *Jammy Dodger*, shortlisted for the Desmond Elliott Prize for debut fiction, is an ironic presentation of artistic life in Ireland, filtered by the main character, the bohemian Artie Conville, and projected against the background of the political conflicts in 1980s Belfast. The novel was regarded by critics as funny, sharp, “deliciously absurd” (*Daily Mail*). His second novel, a historical comedy adventure, will appear later this year. Courtesy of British Council Romania and Dr. Nigel Townson, Director of the British Council, Romania, Kevin Smith was a special guest of the British and American Studies conference, organized by the English Department at the University of Timișoara, in May 2013, where he read excerpts from his novel. On this occasion, he was invited to share some of his views on contemporary literature and his experience as a writer and journalist.

**Interviewers:** Welcome to Timișoara, Kevin.

**Kevin Smith:** Thank you very much, it's great to be here. It's a beautiful city.

**I:** Well, let's talk a little bit about this novel that got lots of press. Did you expect that?

**KS:** No, I didn't. I've been very pleasantly surprised by the reception. To write a novel is one thing, to actually publish it is quite scary, but thankfully the response has been very positive and the book has just been longlisted in the UK for the Desmond Elliott Prize for debut fiction, so I'm absolutely delighted. It gave me a great deal of pleasure to write, so I'm glad people like it.

**I:** Which kind of response is more interesting to you? The one in academic journals or the one from bloggers? Because I have seen that you have coverage in all areas, feedback from the readers...

**KS:** Well, of course you're not going to reject or refuse any compliment that comes your way, because that would be foolish. Some of the blog comments – what people liked and what annoyed them – have been very interesting. Some buy into the sense of humour, others simply don't. As for academic journals, while I was writing the novel, I imagined I was packing some stuff in there for the more detailed critics, but I don't think that anyone has actually broken it down in that way. I'd be delighted if they did.

**I:** Do you believe in literary awards?

**KS:** Now that I have been nominated for one, absolutely!

**I:** How did you decide to make the transition from journalism? Or was it a transition?

**KS:** It *was* a transition in one sense. I think a lot of journalists are interested or attracted to journalism in the first place because they like writing and, if you like writing, then very often you're interested in something beyond writing the news, so I think there are a lot of reporters who are frustrated novelists. The British critic Cyril Connolly famously identified journalism as one of the great enemies of promise. And of course there's a long tradition of journalists becoming novelists: Mark Twain, Ernest Hemingway, P.G. Wodehouse, Graham Greene, Ian Fleming, to name only a few. So I think that there's always a tension between the two genres. But for me, basically, I got to the point where I'd done twenty years of hard labour in the Fourth Estate and I just thought 'Boy, am I really going to be writing this objective material at this intensity in twenty years' time?' And the answer was 'no'. Don't get me wrong, it was enormous fun while it lasted, but it was a relief to break free and, when I did I started going back over things I had written in the past, *Jammy Dodger* was actually an abandoned play I'd made a start on ten years previously and I began tinkering with it and gradually it picked up momentum and then all of a sudden it was finished and, before I knew it, somebody wanted to publish it.

**I:** Do you think it works better as prose than it would have as drama?

**KS:** Yes. Well, I failed to write it as a drama. I couldn't get to grips with pure dialogue. While I like writing dialogue, I just couldn't sustain an entire work. I think playwrights have a certain type of discipline. But it came down to the topic, to the theme of the book really, which was an attempt to examine the conflict that I'd grown up with in Northern Ireland from a different perspective. And when I looked at the play, it was too serious, it was in the wrong medium. So I realised that the way to get at what I was trying to say was via comic fiction. So that's how the play became a novel and how it also became a comic novel.

**I:** What does humour mean to you? Because you use it as a medium, you use it to link things together, to get out of straits...

**KS:** That's absolutely correct. I've thought about it a lot. I started out to write a serious novel – not that comic fiction can't be serious – but I soon realized that there was nothing pulling me along, whereas what was so enjoyable about writing *Jammy Dodger* in the end and what propelled the narrative was the attempt to arch from one funny bit to the next, how to connect. You think 'What happens now? What would be funny and how do I get there?'

**I:** Well, there are serious parts in your novel and serious references. I'm thinking about your experience in Belfast. How is that incorporated and how has Belfast changed over the years?

**KS:** Belfast has changed utterly. The novel is set in the late 1980s, when the conflict in Northern Ireland was still raging, and there were still a lot of terrible things happening. Since then there have been ceasefires by the various factions and there's been more or less a stable peace for the last seven years. The whole political landscape has changed. But in the '80s, it still looked like it was going to rumble on and, as you know, the conflict lasted 36 years and 3700 people were killed. Belfast gets a lot of bad press, for obvious reasons, but it has a lot of charms, despite being a very battered and maligned city. I wanted to paint a picture of it that wasn't stereotypical. There are obviously a lot of novels set during the so-called Troubles, but I wanted to write about things that were happening in Northern Ireland *apart* from the Troubles and also possibly *because* of the Troubles, that other people hadn't written about. That was the impulse.

**I:** You've already introduced the notion of 'political' and you say somewhere in the book that 'everything we do is political'. What do you mean by political?

**KS:** Well, that's probably a quote from someone else. I think that line in the book is spoken by a radical, so it's kind of a call to arms that you should think about everything you do in a political context. Because, obviously, at that time in Northern Ireland, there were a lot of people with strong political views. I think the character was just trying to get at the guy he is talking to, who he thinks is a wishy-washy liberal kind of person who doesn't care what is happening -- and to a degree he is.

**I:** What is a jammy dodger? Because initially we thought it was a name.

**KS:** No, jammy dodger doesn't travel particularly well outside the United Kingdom or Ireland. First and foremost it's a popular type of biscuit – actually two biscuits with red jam sandwiched between them and a heart shape cut out of the centre. I don't think biscuits are quite the same cultural thing in Romania, but in the UK and Ireland they're a serious business. Jammy dodger is also a phrase in the vernacular – and I'm not sure which came first, the phrase or the biscuit, presumably the phrase – meaning a lucky person ... in essence someone who attracts luck to themselves without particularly trying. I think that *jammy* meaning 'lucky' goes back a long way in English, several hundred years I suspect. The suggestion is that the protagonist, Artie Conville, is a 'jammy dodger', because he's managed to coast along with little apparent effort. Until the end, of course, when he comes undone.

**I:** Your protagonist is about the age you were in the 1980s and I was wondering how much of you is in there?

**KS:** I think it's almost impossible to write a first novel that doesn't draw to some degree on autobiographical material – all fiction, after all, comes down to the experience and the sensibilities of the individual. Certainly I was about his age in the '80s, I was interested in poetry, I was involved in small magazines, I lived in Belfast, so obviously there are elements of similarity -- and it's written in the first person -- but the situations that occur are not drawn directly from life, most of them being fairly outlandish and some almost certainly criminal. There are also possibly some ghost amalgams of characters who were knocking around in the fish-tank of Belfast life at that time, but I don't think anyone – apart from one particular person – could positively identify themselves.

**I:** You're also talking a lot about the artistic circles, the art world, little magazines, etc. How was it then and how is it now? Because you also talk about publishing and all these kinds of mainstream or underground industries going on.

**KS:** Strangely enough, Belfast at that time was actually a very vibrant and productive place for the arts. There was an extraordinary amount of high-quality poetry particularly – we're talking about poets like Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley, Paul Muldoon, Ciaran Carson, Medbh McGuckian... There was a remarkable flowering of talent that emerged around that conflict, and I'm sure one could analyse how and why that might have been. There was also quite a bit going on in prose fiction, music, and visual art, but for some reason poetry in particular, and a lot of auxiliary arts activity – magazines, readings, writing groups and so on. So, as I say, it was enormously dynamic, but it was also very... enclosed, claustrophobic at times. That's one of the underlying themes of *Jammy Dodger*.

**I:** I'm a big Van Morrison fan and I came across lots of lyrics basically, or verse, if we put it into a poetry context. I was wondering if there was any point at which you thought of footnoting the entire novel and indicating every kind of single line, because you go way back to classical poetry, to music...

**KS:** Yes, I wondered about that. Possibly I could have. I thought I was taking a risk as it was by layering the poetry and cultural and literary references, and some people have objected to that, complaining that there's too much of it. Others, on the other hand, have said it was *because* of the poetry that they liked the book. You can't please all the people all the time. In the end I felt it was enough just to put the acknowledgements at the back for readers to look at if their curiosity had been piqued.

**I:** You've talked about how Belfast has changed; what can you tell us about how Eastern Europe – where you were a correspondent for several years – has changed?

**KS:** Well, I arrived in Bucharest in the early 1990s, not long after the revolution, and I have to say it was a shock. It was rough. Romania was emerging from forty years of dictatorship and trying to come to terms with raw capitalism, starting from scratch with democracy. People were dazed – especially the older generation. But it was a tremendously exciting time. Bucharest feels up to date these days, but, for example, back then the only type of car you would see on the street was a Dacia – now Dacias are the exception. The restaurants are swankier, people are free to travel more, they're integrating into the community of Europe, the media is more sophisticated... But talking to people, I get the impression that some, certainly the older generation, are very frustrated with the lack of change since 1989 and there are certainly aspects I can see that haven't moved too far – by which I mean just in the way things get done. On a personal level I walk around and I'm looking for the city I lived in 17 years ago and that's obviously unrealistic. It's also heart-breaking. I've knocked around a lot of places, but none got under my skin the way Romania did.

**I:** If you were to come back as a correspondent in Eastern Europe, would you write in the same way about it in terms of expectations or perspective?

**KS:** I think I've changed as well so I suspect I probably would write things differently, but also news journalism kind of dictates its own form, if you know what I mean, and you write about what is happening there and then. In many ways Eastern Europe has been transformed and I think the direction of the new, expanded Europe is one of the key stories in the world at the moment. So many disparate identities and vested interests, and such concentration of power... It's fascinating.

**I:** Do you feel that you are influenced by anybody? Because when one thinks of Ireland, one thinks about James Joyce, Oscar Wilde and I thought I might have seen some of it in the witty quick lines that the characters exchange. But do you feel influenced by

anyone in particular? Not necessarily Irish, of course. Or what would you like to have written?

**KS:** Well, I live in Dublin now and James Joyce's *Ulysses* is so much part of the imaginative fabric of the place, it's impossible not to look around and feel its presence. It's everywhere. But I read a great deal of American prose when I was younger, people like John Updike, Carson McCullers, Joseph Heller. Among the comic fiction writers that I admire I would name Martin Amis – *London Fields* in particular – I don't think anyone else comes close to his ability to provoke helpless, painful laughter... a bit of Evelyn Waugh, P.G. Wodehouse. I also like Jonathan Coe. But poetry would have been a major influence – particularly T.S. Eliot, Philip Larkin, Emily Dickinson, Robert Frost. As for a book I would have liked to have written... Well, I recently finished reading *Treasure Island*, which I hadn't read for a long time and a lot of people read that as a child or it's read to them as children and they associate it or think of it as being a child's book, but it isn't, it's just a marvellous adventure, an incredibly well-written story and I just love it.

**I:** Have you ever thought of writing poetry?

**KS:** Oh, I did write poetry. We all wrote poetry in Belfast in the 1980s.

**I:** Published or...?

**KS:** Yes, I published some. As an undergraduate and for a while after. At that time we all wanted to be the new Seamus Heaney. If you talk about the shadow of Joyce in Ireland, then in Belfast there was the shadow of Heaney which was quite difficult to get from underneath. I'm not saying that was why I stopped writing poetry ... I just sort of fell away from it.

**I:** How do you write? Do you have a routine?

**KS:** The only way to write books is to sit down every morning and write them.

**I:** So you are disciplined about it.

**KS:** You have to be. I'm probably not as disciplined as I should be but that's where a journalistic background can help. Deadlines mean you have to produce something and you can't just sit staring at a blank screen. I've found that if you write something, anything -- just words, a sentence – it triggers a reaction in the brain and before long the words start multiplying, like some kind of yeast. But it's hard. As Dorothy Parker once said, 'I hate writing, I love having written.'

**I:** How did you come up with *Jammy Dodger*? You obviously didn't have the entire plot.

**KS:** Is it that obvious? (laughs) No, in fact I only had one bit of the plot. Originally, the play was going to be about the two main characters and a horrible man coming in with a gun, being angry because they haven't published his poems – a paramilitary, a guerrilla man. And that was going to be the basis of the play. In the end that became a subplot and the adventures of the two main characters set off a different direction.

**I:** How long did it take to write *Jammy Dodger*?

**KS:** It took about a year, which is quite fast, although it's not a particularly long book. As I said, it was immensely enjoyable to write and I hated getting to the end of it, because I had to say goodbye to the characters that had lived in my head and it was really quite lonely afterwards.

**I:** Did you take a break after it or did you plunge right into the next adventure?

**KS:** I tried to work on another one immediately, but ended up starting about three that all collapsed. I just wasn't enjoying them. My admiration for novelists has doubled now because it is a very difficult thing to do and it's quite a brave or stupid thing to publish them.

**I:** Well, we wish you good luck with the next novel and if you drop by our next conference, we would be happy to talk about it.

**KS:** Thank you, I'd like that.