The European English Messenger 18.1 (2009)

"History is the stories you tell" Louise Doughty and Andrea Levy in Conversation

Eva Ulrike Pirker (Freiburg, Germany)

Louise Doughty and Andrea Levy have been writers of novels and short stories for years, both with growing success. Both tackle questions of what it means to be British or English from their unique vantage points. Both were born and raised in Britain, but whereas Doughty's family background is partly one of Romany travellers, Levy's origin is a Jamaican mixture that includes Jewish, Scottish and African components. Both therefore share the experience of a complex relationship with notions of Englishness and national identity, defined both by claiming and questioning these notions for themselves and in their writing. Both come from a working-class background and both have come to writing via detours: Louise Doughty took her MA in Creative Writing with Malcolm Bradbury and Angela Carter at the University of East Anglia after studying Literature at the University of Leeds, but went on to work as a secretary for years before becoming a full-time writer. Andrea Levy worked as a graphic designer before beginning to write in her thirties; she initially developed her literary talent in writing courses at the London-based City Literary Institute.

Louise Doughty's early writing seems to have been motivated by the discovery of the extraordinary in the ordinary: The dark satire *Crazy Paving* (1995) was informed by her secretarial work; *Dance With Me* (1996), a story about love and betrayal guides its readers into human abysses and mental illness, and the murder-mystery *Honey-Dew* (1998) is a cunning play with conventional patterns of the genre. In her next novels and short texts, Doughty has turned towards Romany history: *Fires in the Dark* (1999) is devoted to the experience of Romany travellers in Czechoslovakia before and during the Third Reich. *Stone Cradle* (2006) marks a return to Britain and tackles the difficult love and marriage between a traveller boy and an English girl. Largely set in the inter-war period, it is also a novel devoted to generational issues and is told from different perspectives. Also in short texts like the story "Doikitsa" (2005) and journalistic texts, Doughty puts the experience of travellers on the agenda and asks uncomfortable questions about racialised English, British and European notions of belonging and conditions of conviviality.[1]

Andrea Levy began her writing career with novels of formation that are informed by her experience of growing up in a Jamaican family on a North London estate block: *Every Light in the House Burnin'* (1994) is a portrayal both of her dying father and herself as a child and in the coming of age process. *Never Far from Nowhere* (1996) juxtaposes the experiences and perspectives of two very different sisters who grow up on a council estate in London. In *Fruit of the Lemon* (1999) the protagonist returns to Jamaica, the place her parents had left long ago, for the first time, and the novel culminates in the establishment of a complex family tree that involves a highly diverse genealogy. *Small Island* (2004) is generally hailed as Levy's breakthrough piece. A novel set in wartime and post-war Britain and written from Jamaican migrant and English perspectives, it has struck a chord with a wide readership and won several prestigious prizes, among them the Orange Prize for Fiction (2005) and the Commonwealth Writers Prize (2005). *Small Island* was read publicly on the bicentenary of the abolition of the British slave trade in 2007. An adaptation for television has been prepared by BBC One and Ruby Films.[2]

Works by both novelists have been translated into several languages; both have been invited to numerous literary festivals, conferences and reading tours. Both have not only received prizes, but have also functioned as judges for literary prizes: Andrea Levy for the Saga Prize (1996), for the Orange Prize for Fiction (1997), and for the Orange Prize Futures (2001); Louise Doughty for the Man Booker Prize in 2008. Levy said that reading many books for the Orange also made her more ambitious in terms of her development as a writer. Both novelists have struggled with aspects of the publishing world and speak about these experiences in the interview below. Time and date were kindly arranged by Louise Doughty (LD), wine and cake were provided by Andrea Levy (AL). The conversation took place in Levy's North London parlour on the evening of 12 March 2008.

Eva Ulrike Pirker: In 2007 the anniversary of Britain's abolition of the slave trade was commemorated on a very large scale – there were more than 200 official events all over Britain throughout the year, and public readings and discussions of your novel *Small Island*, Andrea, fared quite prominently among these. You also did readings yourself, right?

Andrea Levy: I did, I did do a lot. My book was chosen for the 'Big Read'.[1] People got given a book; fifty thousand copies were given away. I went to Bristol, Liverpool and Glasgow, which were big slave trading ports, and did readings there; kids did stuff in school, and I got to go on television and talk about it.

EUP: You could say that there are other novels that address the slave trade more immediately and directly, you could say that *Small Island* does not really centre on this.

AL: If I was being cynical I could say it's because it was about black issues and they were just hunting around trying to find somebody to use. I would have to be very cynical to feel like that, because I think it does have a lot to do with it. And the people who have used it have often used it in that way, because it does have something to do with it, because it is about the consequences of some things. In that sense I think it worked very well. They actually drew attention to the reason why the people in *Small Island* had come from Jamaica. So that connection was certainly being made, and it absolutely worked. And it makes it easier or more relevant to be talking about what actually happened in the Caribbean during slavery which is something that we haven't quite come around doing.

EUP: The writer Howard Jacobson once said that in order to be able to write his novel *Kalooki Nights* he needed his father to die first.[2] Some things are obviously difficult to address before a generation passes on. Is this a feeling you both share?

Lousie Doughty: My parents are still alive; my father is eighty-three. I certainly needed my parents' generation to get old enough not to mind me writing about the whole Romany thing. When my uncle was still working – he was a builder – he said to me, "I don't want any of my customers to know we're Gypsies." So I could not have written either *Fires in the Dark* or *Stone Cradle* while my uncle was still working. He's still alive, but he's safely retired. And his mother-in-law is dead, and that's important because Uncle Ray married posh, as we say. His wife's family owned a jewellery shop; that was posh enough in Leicester. While her mother was still alive, I couldn't have written about our family background. But basically, when the generation above my parents all died off and my parents got to retirement age, it became okay.

AL: That's interesting. I think it probably would have felt different writing *Small Island* if my dad had been alive. My dad's not alive but my mum is. She is eighty-eight. I do think I'm always very sensitive to how people are going to perceive my work, but then I also think that there's a bigger issue at stake as well. It's kind of worth it sometimes for your family to be a bit peeved because it's a bigger thing that you are dealing with. They've got a writer in their family and it's their tough luck. And it *is* tough luck sometimes. So you have to have a bit of a thick skin in that respect. I do think that this isn't just about my family and I want to

explore bigger areas. It was very personal with my first three books. I was very upset when they had issues with it because it is something about washing their dirty linen. I don't feel quite the same way since I have gone outside that sort of autobiographical writing. It does feel that nobody can say, "That's not what I'm like." It was such a relief to have that, to be honest.

EUP: To me, the protagonist of *Small Island* is the nation. It portrays Britain.

AL: Oh, you academics! [*Laughter*] It is, it's true. It is a book about the British Empire and about Britain's relationship with its satellite nations and so, yes, it is definitely about that, too.

EUP: And it's also about a very specific moment in history. I find it quite intriguing that the Second World War, but also the First, still fares so prominently in Britain's national identity.

AL: Both world wars were fantastically important to us culturally. The Second World War started in the middle of the break-up of the Empire, a sense that Britain was no longer this great nation striding the world, a sense that it was all becoming much smaller and a lot of chickens were coming home to roost. Things that hadn't been dealt with were now having to be looked at. And I still think that there is an enormous amount of work to be done on that. You don't have an empire for three hundred years without repercussions. You can't just say, "Oh well that's that done and let's just all get on with it." With any relationship and any power struggle, there are always consequences, and one of the major consequences has been racism. And it's got to stop! It's got to be looked at, it's got to be seen how we came to this. That's why I write books, to add a part to that.

EUP: I still want to come back to the Second World War, the blitz and the myths surrounding it: The cultural critic Paul Gilroy has expressed his puzzlement at the fact that the blitz still marks "the nation's finest hour".[3] It seems astonishing that the war is still so present, so defining for Britain today. Why?

AL: It *is* myth-making, in terms of the way in which it's come down to be perceived, as "that moment that we've been in together!" The myth-making of the blitz is a little bit like the myth-making of Empire: A nation has decided that it is *like* this, that it is like this in adversity, that it is like this in power, that it has a sort of identity of its own. It's a big thing at the moment, the whole thing about British identity, what is it to be British. You've got to swear allegiance now when you come into this country, and people are really trying to understand what it is to be British. What they mean by that is English, actually. But it's that sort of notion that somehow the British are *like* this; they always talk about the British in the Caribbean, for example, in the sense that they were much better than the Dutch. And a hell of a lot better than the French! That they were very "fair" etc. – This is myth-making, exactly like it is with the blitz, because it's about a time when the nation believes it was at its best. These two things have a slight parallel.

LD: We once had an American lodger in our house, and one day he came and did the school-round with me. Our kids' school is this really nice old Victorian building that had a very narrow miss in the war when it got bombed. It's on this street of Victorian two-level, two-storey houses. In a couple of places on the street there are modern houses. You see this sort of thing on London streets all the time. You've got a whole row of Victorian terraces, and then a few modern houses and that's where the bombs dropped – here, they just missed the school. They went bang! into a couple of houses here and bang! into a couple of houses there. I found myself saying to the American lodger: "Oh, those modern houses that would have been where the bombs dropped during the war." And I just said *the war* quite naturally as if he would know which war I was talking about. *I* knew which war I was talking about – but it was almost as if it was only five years ago. I found myself referring to it as if it was recent history and I realised then how culturally prominent it is, particularly if you live in London. Then I saw the slight look in his face and I realised that, to him, it probably sounded very odd. The ease with which I referred to it – as if it was something current.

AL: If you had been walking with a European, that would not have been a thing; it's because

the Americans have never been bombed from above. If you had been walking with a French person, or a German, they might say, "Well, just that loop!" [*Laughter*]

LD: Cologne is such an interesting place, it was completely flattened and then kind sprang up like mushrooms. There were all kinds of re-growth.

EUP: The city where I live, Freiburg, near the French and Swiss borders was almost completely rebuilt.

LD: At least they seem to have rebuilt Freiburg quite coherently. I only saw the centre, but it felt like a town centre, whereas in Cologne – I got so lost! Even the Germans who looked after me got lost in Cologne. We were staying in this 'Wasserturm' and it's in the middle of what appears to be a housing estate.

AL: A fascinating place.

EUP: The character Arthur in *Small Island* is a veteran of the First World War and shell-shocked. In *Stone Cradle*, shell shock is also a theme, or rather problematised as an 'absent discourse'. In Germany, there are some memorials for the First World War, but it is not a war that is commemorated actively, not as in Britain, where it is still the 'Great War'.

LD: Is it because the Second World War almost wiped out the First?

EUP: It is probably mostly to do with the holocaust and the public agenda of commemoration attached to it. It has been rather difficult to think of German history in terms of a national story ever since, although this is beginning to change. But it is still very different from Britain's memory of the war.

AL: I tend to think of these wars as kind of the same war, with a bit of a break in between them. It was the same sort of tension. I don't see how one century could have two massive wars that are completely separated, that had completely different reasons. They had the same impetus. A lot of things happened in the Second World War that didn't happen in the first, and they were completely different in terms of the way they were fought. But Hitler came out of the First World War, absolutely; he stepped out of the trenches. What happened after the First World War is very much to do with the war, a re-establishing of this nation that had been humiliated. And for us, it's a fascinating war, I don't know why. One of the reasons, I think, is because we had this empire. In both those wars, there were so many unsung people taking part who just didn't get their dues. Certainly with the Second World War, when they had the first marches to commemorate it, they didn't invite people from the Caribbean, from the Empire, and those things are extremely important. The same applies to the First World War.

EUP: It is a rather recent development, the commemoration of colonial soldiers in the wars.

AL: Yes, absolutely. There is a gate in town to commemorate the 'coloured' soldiers.

LD: There's also a memorial that Jilly Cooper had initiated, the block-busting novelist. She's a big animal-lover and she campaigned and raised funds for a memorial to the animals that died in the Second World War. And there is this huge statue of donkeys and horses, and the inscription underneath is, "They had no choice." [*Laughter*]

EUP: That's very strange!

AL: I like it…and there's also one for women… some adjunct! There is a women's memorial with all these different coats.[4] So there is a sort of move to say "our own war".

LD: One of the most interesting poets from the First World War is Isaac Rosenberg. He's an amazing poet. He was an East End Jewish man from a very poverty-stricken background. All these 'official' poets like Rupert Brooke, Siegfried Sassoon joined up and went straight in as lieutenants.[5] Isaac Rosenberg joined up because his mum needed the money - he joined up for the money because they were desperate, they were so poor. And he is the only one of that whole lot who wrote poems that were about the reality of the war before he actually got there. He was like a Cassandra figure. He sort of saw the way it was going before anyone else did, because he didn't have any romantic illusions about Englishness. He had seen what Englishness did to himself and his family with anti-Semitism in the East End. And he wrote this amazing poem – he was in South Africa, in Cape Town when war was declared in August

1914 and he wrote this poem "On Receiving News of the War." It's got this fantastic stanza "Snow is a strange white word / No ice or frost has asked of bud or bird / For Winter's cost."[6] He saw, he absolutely saw straight away the reality of it in a way that the 'very English' poets didn't. They all went into it full of heroism until they got their comrades killed.

AL: A lot of it is class, as well – we have an enormous class system in this country and although there was a rise of the middle class, the class system was at its most rabid during interwar times. And that has had quite an effect, also on the First World War. So all these things are about what Britain is, and how this has affected the way Britain deals with things. It has also affected the people that are now in the country and how they feel and how they see the place presently. I think it's very interesting; I'm very glad that I wasn't born a hundred years ago. I prefer it now – but it's interesting, because it is the sort of fallout – What's it going to be now? What is Britain going to be, what is England going to be?

LD: There's also that strange thing about the war in Yugoslavia, at the end of the twentieth century. I remember seeing a play about how the twentieth century began in Sarajevo and ended in Sarajevo. It started with the assassination of Franz Ferdinand and then it ended with the siege of Sarajevo. And I remember that an American friend said to me, "Now I know why you Europeans are all so gloomy, it's because every generation has known a war. The Yugoslav war didn't end up with bombs on London. But when that started, particularly when these incredibly shocking photos came out of the camps where Bosnians were being held; it was absolutely plugging in the collective memory of the holocaust, the barbed wire, and the very skinny guys, and there was a sense that this was in a way completing the trio; even though it didn't affect us directly, it was still the same sense of this awful thing happening on European soil; actually, before, awful things had stopped happening on European soil, and here it was happening again. It was a very strange sensation of almost rounding up the century.

EUP: It was indeed a big shock all over Europe that this could happen again, and so close to home. But talking about photographs, or even film – today, you look at these wars through television; it makes you wonder what the mediatisation does to our perception.

AL: You're used to seeing certain things on television and you're used to reacting in a certain way. Nobody ever sees a full war on television or even gets an understanding of what is going on. I remember seeing an exhibition of the siege of Sarajevo. I just kept looking at the dates under these pictures and was thinking, "God, I was just watching the telly!" I wasn't aware of this, I wasn't up in arms. I wasn't realising what was happening; and the same now - I'm sitting here and what's happening in Iraq, what's happening in Sudan, you know, I've got no idea! I've got no idea, and in twenty years time I'm going to think, "What was I doing?" So you don't really have an idea. Coming back to the Second World War – when I started writing *Small Island*, I realised early on that you only ever have what was going on around you, that's your only ever real understanding of anything. So I would talk to people who had gone through the war and it was never the war that I knew on the telly, it was never the war that became a sort of 'trope', it was never the war that became sort of the way that we saw things, it was something else, it was something personal like, "Oh, we couldn't get condensed milk." [*Laughs*] I found that amazing. I'm writing a book about history now. You have to realise how people don't live through history. You live through time, and history is what you make of it afterwards. History is the stories that you tell about it afterwards.

EUP: ...and that you use to define yourself.

AL: Yes, absolutely. And you take that bit or this bit and identify with that bit or this bit and that sort of thing.

LD: When I was researching *Fires in the Dark*, I read loads of books about Second World War history. And in one of them, there is an account of a group of partisans that hid in forests in Poland or Ukraine. It was a tremendously brave group that kept going for years and years and sheltered Jews in the forest. Some particu-

larly charismatic man led this partisan group, and there's a point at which this man was killed in the war. One of the people who fought with him described how he would invigorate everybody with his terrific speeches and how at one point he said to them, "You do realise that what we're fighting for is a paragraph in the history books. That's all we will be getting." And I was sitting there and I was reading a paragraph in a history book. It was a really peculiar sensation. Because I suddenly had the sense that, actually, this was a real man who knew precisely that in sixty years time somebody like me would sit and read about him saying this – a paragraph in a history book.

AL: Writing about historical things is fascinating because of that. You have to cover such a breadth and then you have take into it human activity. I lived through the sixties. Whenever I see the sixties on television, there's always these women, they've got mini-skirts on and their hair up, and they are always doing this [*indicates swinging movement*], and then there's a few hippies with bare breasts, and I think, "Well, I lived through that." But I remember it as my dad sitting on a sofa and we were watching *The Golden Shot*[7] and being board-stiff. And that *is* the sixties. So when I'm writing a book and I've got the sixties in it, which do I use? Which is the one that resonates? Which is the one that has become something that everybody can have a consensus about? So it's quite interesting to see how history is made or how these stories are set.

EUP: Do you think about how your writing is going to resonate with the reader?

AL: I usually try to write against what is normally thought, anyway, but you do have to think of that a little bit. Do you think you do?

LD: Yes, I think so. You have to have a sense of *a* readership and how it's going to be received.

AL: I remember people going to see Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* and saying: "It's really got the gangsters and the way that gangsters speak. It's fantastic! It's just like gangsters speak!" And I thought, "I've never met a gangster in my life!" I've never, ever heard a 'gangster' speak. I have absolutely no idea. And what Tarantino had tapped into was what we all *knew* of what gangsters spoke like – which is from all the Hollywood films we'd ever seen. That was what he gave us. And so we immediately think we know what 'gangsters' talk like. Of course we don't! How many of us have ever met a gangster?! [*Laughs*] Might be boring as hell! So he used our understanding in order to give us that, and we've got our understanding not from life but from the movies. And any sort of cultural engagement like writing is always a little dance with what you think is true and what people might know in some way.

EUP: A film is currently being made of *Small Island*.

LD: Oh you're filmed!

AL: The BBC bought it, they paid me money.

EUP: And it's also with Ruby Films...[8]

AL: Yes, bless them, Ruby Films. You know, they'd scouted the locations and everything, but it hasn't materialised. They had Sarah Williams do the scripts, and they were fabulous scripts, I really liked them, she did a great job. But the BBC work on scripts for a long time and things can take years to come to the screen. I've stopped holding my breath on this one. But they've spent a lot of money on it so far, and they've got the cast in place.[9]

EUP: Ruby specialises in big audiences.

AL: Well, certainly. What TV people tell me is "It's gonna be so big! We're gonna get the best!" That sort of thing. This is to the author's face. You can't believe anybody. That's one thing I have learned. That may be why I butted out of the whole thing. Within this 'literary world' there is this sort of slight of blurring of the edges between friendship and work. You don't quite know – to be working where you're just out getting drunk and gossiping with somebody doesn't feel like work. I realised that there is *work*, there are people who are working. But when people are saying, "Oh, we love it, Andrea," I'm just thinking, "Well, show me!"

EUP: Are you worried at all about the product that might come out of it?

AL: No, because I've always got my book. But, if nobody had bought the book, if the only thing people were going to see was the thing on the telly and it wasn't going to be very good,

then I would be worried. It would be horrible if the film was terrible. It would be the worst thing. Wouldn't it be awful? Wouldn't it be awful? But I'm not particularly worried about it and I've sort of moved on and am doing something else now.

LD: It happened to Douglas Kennedy, the thriller writer. He's based in the UK, but he's actually an American writer. His first novel, *The Dead Heart*, is a psychodrama set in Australia: It's about a travel writer who goes off into the outback and gets kidnapped by hillbillies, and this woman hillbilly who wanted to use him as a kind of sex toy. It's actually a quite serious drama about domestic entrapment. Douglas was delighted when the film rights got sold; and then, they got sold on to the guy who made *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*. He rang Douglas up and said "I'm gonna put some show tunes in this." And Douglas said, "What do you mean, you're going to put show tunes in it? It's a serious kind of psychodrama." And it came out with all these Rodgers and Hammerstein tunes in it, and it was renamed *Welcome to Whoop Whoop*. [*Laughter*] It is one of the worst films ever in history.

AL: I'm hoping that I don't have any ownership over a film. I don't feel that sort of ownership over it. That's why I don't want anything to do with it. Every so often, they take me out for lunch and say, "It's gonna be great." But it's nothing to do with me, really, I just want to get on with something else, but – *Welcome to Whoop Whoop*... That would be terrible! When I hear all these things, I just want to go back to bed and put the duvet over me!

LD: The only book of mine which got optioned for film was *Honeydew*. The only reason why it got optioned was because it opens with a murder. There's this discovery of corpses in the very beginning. Of course film people who are very literal say, "Corpses! A murder! Great! It'll make a film." When the rights got optioned, I thought that actually, *Honeydew* is an unfilmable book, because the dramatic arc is the main character realising that she is not a very nice person. That's it, that's the plot of *Honeydew*. But it just has these corpses that keep everything up and there's this kind of subtext to this rural English murder. But it's really very much one individual's story. I had this meeting with this incredibly enthusiastic American woman who worked for Crucial Films, which is where Lenny Henry's at. Full of enthusiasm. She's gone back to the States now. Perhaps I finished her career at Crucial [*Laughs*], me and my novel personally saw her off. We had all these meetings at Crucial, and she said to me, "Oh Lenny has read your book and he loves it!" I was so seduced by it, but it took away eighteen months of my working life.

AL: Did you work on it?

LD: I did. They commissioned me to the treatment and then a kind of scene-by-scene.

AL: Oh, you were up for it!

LD: Yes, what a fool I am...

AL: You're not, you're full of life and energy, and you're fearless! You're a wonderful woman!

LD: No, eighteen months! What a fool! Eighteen months of my working life! Endless meetings of co-production partners, etc., and at the end of the process this American woman finally sat back in her chair once and said, "Louise, I think this is an unfilmable book." And I thought, "I could have told you that eighteen months ago." They'd sort of got seduced by their own rhetoric. Almost as though having bought the rights in this rush of enthusiasm, they had to carry on believing that it was a good idea. And the option got renewed once, and then even when she went back to the States, she renewed it herself, personally. I thought, "Darling, it's very sweet, but give it up! This film is not gonna fly! It's an absolute waste of time." But it was like she had to believe her own publicity. They're very strange, film and TV people.

AL: Oh, they're very strange. They're very, very strange, very different to writers, very different in the way they see things.

LD: They sent me flowers, "Let's make movies together – exclamation mark!"

AL: They're very odd. Weird... [*Laughter*] It's best to stay out of that whole bit. *Fruit of the Lemon* got optioned. And I had talks – endless, endless talks! – when I first started, with people who wanted me to write things. At

that time, I was so seduced by somebody thinking I could write that I tried to do it. And then I realised very early on that this was just a complete sidetrack. If you want to write novels, forget it. This is going to take up all your time and you're going to be pissed about. And so I never have anything to do with any of these things apart from just talking to people. But the people who are producing *Small Island* are doing sterling work.

LD: When it comes to production, things often get difficult. Liz Jensen's novel got optioned by Miramax. It was her fifth or sixth novel called *The Ninth Life of Louis Drax*. It's a good thriller – you read it and you think you can see exactly how this is going to be filmed. It got optioned by Anthony Minghella and Harvey Weinstein at Miramax and they got in a bidding war with Warner's. She told me she's actually got a twenty-six page contract that basically says that she mustn't say how much she got – it's a huge amount of money. Minghella was going to do the script, they were full of enthusiasm, but then the Weinstein brothers fell out with Miramax and set up their own production company, and there was some dodgy thing about who had the rights to the novel, a whole big drama. And it started out so enthusiastically.

AL: I wonder what it's like to be optioned and paid a lot of money, and then nobody is going to make the film. I would be happy to get quite a lot of money with it never being made.

LD: Yes, just give me the cheque, it's not a problem at all.

EUP: So film adaptations and scriptwriting are a sidetrack – but what about the literary publishing world: Unless they're Kafka and writing for a drawer, probably most writers have an eye on publishing, but there are also limits and constraints in this, if you think of the way books are marketed, advertised, positioned, if you think of the blurb and the cover design. Is this a controversial issue for you?

LD: I don't think you can think about that too much when you're writing; otherwise you would drive yourself mad. If you think too much about the way your work is going to be marketed you can end up being just kind of sideswiped completely.

AL: I think that's what happened to me. I'd been sideswiped. I had to come back from being side-swiped. Absolutely. You do get sideswiped and you do start thinking, "Oh no, that's not what I'm here for."

LD: I think there are different sorts of ambition among writers, one in terms of commercial success and another in terms of being ambitious for one's art, a sort of 'never stopping being hungry' for the art.

AL: All my ambition is entirely in what I do. The only thing I want to do is write the best book that I can possibly write and really concentrate on that. I will probably only write one other book.

LD: You've said that before, haven't you?

AL: It's not the literature that interests me in writing; it's what I'm writing *about* that interests me. As soon as I don't have that thing to write about I won't do it. It's not about feeling complacent, it's just that to be a writer for me is about having something that I want to say, a story that I want to tell. It's really not about writing. There are some writers who I would consider much more *writers*, for instance Zadie Smith. She *loves* literature, she loves writing. That is where she places herself. And I think you also…

LD: I would say that I'm nearer you.

AL: Really?

LD: Zadie is a really good writer but not such a brilliant novelist. To me, it's all about form with her writing. It's all about being literature. But to be fair, she's very young, so it may be that she discovers content more profoundly when she gets older. Whereas for what I write, content is as important as form. And I don't think I will reach a point where I'd say I'm going to do only one more.

AL: Until a few months ago, I wasn't going to do even one more. [*Laughs*] This was it. And then I suddenly said, oh I just have to do that. I can't imagine just going on and on, but I really enjoy it at the moment. It's not about complacency and resting on my laurels, it's about finding what I enjoy within what I'm doing, and then doing that. And I it's about getting older. I've got less time ahead of me and so I want to

do what I enjoy.

EUP: Many of the things that you write about are very political in a sense. How can one drop that sort of engagement?

AL: With politics, there are things that you feel you can do, and then you do them and then you're done. I mean, it's sort of like anything, you make your contribution. You know, I'm not going to change the world, but I hope I can make a contribution to change people's thinking and the way people look at things or add something to it. But, you know, it's a dynamic process, you just do what you can and then that's it.

EUP: And then retire?

AL: Yeah, and then spend time doing what I like. Staring, actually. [*Laughter*]

LD: I think you have got a bit further artistically than I have, because I still feel that I can be a much better writer than I am at the moment. And actually there was one thing that Zadie Smith said which I think was spot on. She said that she writes each book to correct faults in the previous book. And that's really good.

AL: Yes, absolutely.

LD: I've got to write so many more books to correct all the faults of the previous ones. It is going to take me at least a half dozen even to get near.

AL: You have such an energy for writing. I can just feel it coming off you, for the whole business, the whole paraphernalia, the whole thing, you have a real energy and a passion for it across the board, which I never had, and even less so now. But I have a great passion for the writing. A great passion for wanting to push myself and see how far I can go with this.

EUP: How did it start?

AL: Oh, God knows! If you told me thirty years ago that I was going to be a writer, I'd have thought you're insane, really!

LD: This is where we're bonded, in our unwriterly background.

AL: Yes. It's all a bit of a shock to me as well, and I don't quite know where it came from. I mean I suppose what it was just realising that I had something that I wanted to explore and that there was a theme that I was passionate about. I've always been quite a political person, personally political about things. So to find something that I felt passionate about, and then a way of expressing it, was perfect. It means that there was some reason for your existence.

EUP: Louise, what about your unwriterly background?

LD: My family think I'm an alien. The idea that our family has produced a writer! My dad left school when he was thirteen. My mum when she was fifteen. My brothers and sisters and I were the first generation to even finish secondary education, and then go to university.

AL: Do you feel you've got something to prove?

LD: Yes, but in a good way, because I think it's been a huge bonus knowing – and I knew it right from the start – how much work I had to do. There was no significant surname or an uncle in publishing. I knew right from the start that it was going to have to be sheer hard work. And also, we were raised with this kind of strong protestant work ethic: Don't drink, don't get yourself in debt, the world doesn't owe you a living, etc. At the time it was horrible, but it's such a gift when it comes to creativity: Talent is nothing unless you know how hard you've got to work. I've met so many writers, particularly from my earlier days when I was at the UEA where I took the MA, writers that were much more talented than me and have gone on to do nothing because they do have got that absolute bedrock-feeling of "My God, I've got to work so hard on this."

AL: When you say that you've got to work so hard, where is your finishing line?

LD: Death, I suppose. I just think I will have to drop dead.

EUP: Thank you very much, both of you.

NOTES

1. See, for instance, Louise Doughty, "History Repeating," *The Guardian*, 16 September 2008, 6.
2. The screening of the two-part television drama is scheduled for autumn 2009.

3. For more information about the reading events, see the website http://www.smallislandread.com

4. Jacobson speaking at the British Council's biennial Cambridge Seminar in 2007.

5. Paul Gilroy, *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?* London: Routledge 2004, 95.

6. The memorial to commemorate the role of women during World War II was unveiled on the sixtieth anniversary of the end of the war, in 2005. It is a 22 ft high bronze sculpture designed by John Mills.

7. Rupert Brooke was a sub-*lieutenant* at a Royal Naval Division. Siegfried Sassoon served as a second *lieutenant* among battalions of the Royal Welsh Fusiliers.

8. For a recent biography of Isaac Rosenberg, see Jean Moorcroft Wilson, *Isaac Rosenberg: The Making of a Great War Poet*. Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2009.

9. *The Golden Shot*, a successful weekly game show, was broadcast by ITV between 1967 and 1975. Bob Monkhouse hosted the show during its golden age, the late sixties.

10. Ruby Films is a London-based production company.

11. The film adaptation (on which Williams has collaborated with Paula Milne) went into production in February 2009 with Naomi Harris, Ruth Wilson and David Oyelowo in the lead roles. The two-part television drama is directed by John Alexander and will be broadcast by BBC 1 in Autumn 2009.

STAN SMITH

Theatres of War

I.M. Harold Pinter, d. 24 December 2008
and for Colin Phipps

One by one they blink out, the luminaries
of our early years, and with increasing haste.

At the Royal Exchange we watched as Donald Pleasance
wheedled and whined to pleasure Alan Bates
in the Northern premiere of *The Caretaker*,
while in the row in front some businessman
dragged to the play by a social-climbing spouse
spluttered and squirmed at each non-sequitur
in a performance which brought down the house.

In a far galaxy a star collapses
starting a wave which in ten thousand years,
give or take, say, a thousand, will wash up
upon our solar beach, bearing hot gossip
or rave reviews of the latest cosmic farce.

© Stan Smith 2008

John Eppel

A HARD DAY'S NIGHT

Presented here is an extract from John Eppel's new novel *Absent: The English Teacher*, to be published shortly by Weaver Press, Harare, and Jacana Media, Johannesburg. A native of Lydenburg, South Africa, John has lived for most of his life in Zimbabwe, of which he is also a citizen. He is a teacher of English at the Christian Brothers College, Bulawayo, and over the past forty years has published both fiction and poetry. A small selection of his poetry appeared in *The European English Messenger* 17.1 (2008). In his foreword to the new novel, the Harare academic Kizito Z. Muchemwa points out that "collapsing the distinction between the historical and imagined allows for entertaining inventiveness in plot construction. Historical and invented occurrences are recast and amplified to create a fictional world in which the incredible happens. Change turns a white school teacher into a domestic servant for a black family; the black madam, in parody of her white forbears, speaks to the white lackey in Kitchen Kaffir and forbids him to speak to her in English; cabinet ministers maintain a string of mistresses; and wilfully destructive programmes are foisted on the country by a reckless and ruthless elite. If there is a whiff of improbability, it must be remembered that the comic mode that dominates the novel thrives on its capacity to stretch credibility to the limit. Zimbabweans need no reminding, however, that the so-called real world has recently been shaped by what most people would understand as the incredible and unimaginable." For further information on John Eppel's writing, see, for instance, *John Eppel: Poet, Novelist and Storyteller* at <http://conversationswithwriters.blogspot.com/2007/02/interview-with-poet-novelist-and.html>.

George's duties as a domestic worker began promptly at 6 a.m. or sparrow fart, in the local idiom. The madam expected, nay demanded, her coffee, white with six sugars, and a plate of *vetkoek*. The ritual was for George to place the tray on the carpet outside madam's bedroom door, knock gently and say, "Coffee, Madam!" Then he would tiptoe back to the kitchen and start preparing breakfast for the family: the three children and Beauticious, and, occasionally, the Minister of Child Welfare, Sweets and Biscuits. George quite liked the Minister because he always tipped him with a middle-of-the-range bearer's cheque. "Yes, *umfaan*," he would say, "go buy yourself some laces for your tackies."

"Don't spoil the boy!" Beauticious would retort. The Minister would chuckle and take another bite of his Colcom pork sausage with scrambled egg and baked beans. "Joji, more coffee for the boss; and enza lo ma toast, checha!"

"Yes, Madam."

In the early days of his servitude George spent much of his life feeling mortified. The chipped enamel tin mug for his fifteen-minute mid-morning left-over coffee break, which he shared with Joseph, sitting on upturned wooden crates in the back yard outside the kitchen

door was bad enough; so was the forty minute lunch break with its thick slice of yesterday's bread (when available), and mixed fruit jam, washed down with tea dregs; but worst of all was the uniform Beauticious compelled him to wear. Gone, except on Sundays, were the powder blue safari-suits of his school-teaching days; gone were his light brown Grasshoppers, with socks from Woolworths; gone (Oh dear, George) was his beloved floppy hat, which he wore to umpire inter-school cricket matches. Beauticious made him wear khaki shirt and shorts, the former much too small, the latter much too large. His head-wear was a tasselled red fez while his footwear was white tackies (though Beauticious didn't mind if he went barefoot). But time heals as it destroys, and habit, time's cicatrice, had inured George to the shame of his new role. After all, wasn't it Nell in *Endgame* who said "nothing is funnier than unhappiness"? And when George caught his reflection in one of the madam's many mirrors scattered about the house, he had to smile.

"Ipi lo toast, Joji? Lo boss yena funa hamba sebenza. Aziko time!"

"Sorry Madam, the power has just gone. I'll have to use the outside fire."

"No ZESA, no fuel, no food. Who is responsible, Joji?"

All five faces at the formica table looked at him expectantly. "We are, Madam: the British, the Europeans, the Americans."

"You have raped our country barren, Joji. First our women and girls, next our motherland. Shame on you." The Minister clicked his tongue in sympathy.

"Sorry, Madam."

"Sorry? What is sorry? It is too late for that word, Joji. By the way, have you been helping yourself to my sugar?"

"No Madam, I – "

"Basop, wena!"

"Sorry… I mean… shall I do the toast on the outside fire?

"Yes, and be quick about it. Checha, checha! Fuga steam, Joji!"

Beauticious was just one of the Minister's numerous mistresses. He kept a lady in all the major towns of Zimbabwe, set up in what is quaintly known as small houses. His big house, a mansion on several sprawling acres of prime land in Harare's Borrowdale suburb, was occupied by his wife and his seven legitimate children. The Minister, like all men of great power in Africa (and the world for that matter) had broadcast his seed far and wide. Recently he had been venturing, incognito, into the NGO world. Fruitful pickings there, he had been advised by the boys in his recently (and unfairly) relegated football team, the Black Bustards. Go to the Zambesi Bar, they advised him, and feed your mamba till it regurgitates. The Germans are the easiest; it helps them deal with their Nazi complexes. Why, one *intombi* took on the entire football team as well as the coach. Just ask for *intethe*.

Beauticious was the Minister's favourite; hence the custom-built Mercedes Benz, the immediate cause of George's downfall. Only his wife, Cushion, did better in the vehicle department, terrorising the cyclists and pedestrians of Harare in her beetle black Hummer with mounted machine gun and a place to hold a can of coke. All his other mistresses, those he had set up in small houses, in Mutare, Masvingo, Gweru, Gwanda, and Kwe Kwe, drove Mitsubishi Pajeros – all at 40 kilometers per hour.

It was time for the children to attend school, and George handed them their packed lunches, which he had prepared before breakfast. To supplement this wholesome food, their mother gave them, every school day, the equivalent of George's monthly wage to spend on junk at the tuck shop. George rather enjoyed driving the children to and from school. It took him away, briefly, from the drudgery of never-ending household chores, though he was always fearful of being seen by one of his erstwhile colleagues, to hear one of them crow "how are the mighty fallen" (even though they didn't read the Bible) or "here comes Johnny head-in-air" (even though they had never heard of Heinrich Hoffman).

Breakfast over at last, George washed the dishes (once his property) while Beauticious let her man out of the gate where his chauffer waited for him in a silver-grey Rolls Royce. They waved goodbye to each other, both with cell phones stuck to the sides of their heads like cancerous outgrowths. The Minister was on his way to Gwanda to give support (Parliamentary elections were looming) to the Minister For Medium to Small to Tiny Business Enterprises who was opening a Chinese built, Chinese owned, Chinese food processing factory. Beauticious was chatting to her best friend, Titty, and inviting her over to tea (she loved to parade George in front of her friends), while the Minister was chatting to his Gwanda mistress, Copacabana, and making sure that she would be available for him while he was in her neck of the woods, so to speak.

After washing the breakfast things and leaving them to dry on the rack and on the sink, George turned to the extremely arduous task of doing the laundry. There was no washing machine so it all had to be done manually using bars of smelly blue or yellow soap. George's hands, now hard as the spines of leathern Bibles, had suffered terribly in the first weeks of washing, rinsing, and ironing the family's clothes and linen. He would soak a load in the Zinc bath, then item by item (the madam's scarlet and black thongs shocked him) he would apply soap and then scrub them on a ribbed wooden board until all dirt and nearly all stains had been removed. Then he would rinse the soap out of them, and hang them on the clothes line to dry. He used an assortment of plastic and wooden clothes pegs to keep them from falling to the ground. Hercules and Ajax, since there was nothing to kill, would keep him company.

So would the birds, the doves in particular. The laughing kind were resident; the red-eyed turtle kind were occasional visitors. George couldn't get over the way they walked so that their heads bobbed like the cork floats he used as a boy, fishing for bream and barbel at Mtshelele Dam in the Matopos, his favourite spot in the world (what world, George?). He had a tendency to anthropomorphize animals, so he worried that the continuous bobbing might give the birds headaches. He attempted to remedy this by dissolving a few grains of aspirin in the bird bath every morning. Not being Doctor Dolittle, he couldn't ask the creatures if their headaches had eased, but judging by their amorous behaviour towards each other and their aggressive behaviour towards other species, not to mention their voracious appetites, he was optimistic.

It wasn't the doves that attracted his attention this morning at the washing line; rather it was the antics of a fork-tailed drongo, the only bird in George's experience that could actually say "Tweet, tweet". The drongo was perched in one of the few remaining trees in the garden, an Acacia erioloba, which George had germinated from a seed. He recalled pocketing that seed on a camping holiday to Hwange National Park, more than thirty years before (but where, George, where, are the snows of yesteryear?). Below the drongo several African hoopoes ambled about poking their beaks into the ground. Whenever one came up with a

worm, the drongo would swoop and take the morsel straight from the hapless hoopoe's beak. George wondered how the late Florence Partridge might have allegorised this event.

While the washing flapped at his ears and the doves flapped at his feet; while Hercules and Ajax gazed at him with adoring eyes, George sang a medley of songs, songs he'd heard his father sing, and his grandfather before that, and his great grandmother before that.

Just a song at twilight, when the lights are low,
And the flick'ring shadows softly come and go;
Though the heart be weary, sad the day and long,
Still to us at twilight, comes love's old song,
Comes love's o—

"Joji!"

"Madam?"

"Haikona wena iswili mina, Joji?"

"Sorry, Madam."

"Buya lapa, checha. Lo Missis Titty yena enza visiting lapa gamina. Tina funa lo ma tea na lo ma keks, iswili?"

"Yes Madam, mina… er… I'm coming."

George took the peg out of his mouth and used it to secure on the wash line a scarlet thong, as small as David's sling. Then he wiped his hands on his apron and hurried in to the house. The power was back so he could use the electric kettle. There were two brands of tea in the grocery cupboard: Five Roses for the Madam and Fresh Leaves (in truth, stalks) Tea for the servants. Fortunately he had baked a batch of cup cakes the day before, so he wouldn't have to undergo the humiliation of being shouted at in front of a guest. Despite the shortages of groceries in the country, the shops were virtually empty, Beauticious presided over a pantry which was laden with the choicest of goods, and a deep freeze which was packed with the best cuts of super grade beef, pork, lamb, and goat; and a dozen plump chickens; and, and, and.... How did she do it? Connections. Let's leave it at that, shall we?

Beauticious liked to use her, well, George's maternal grandmother's, silver tea set, when she had guests. Again fortunately, George had recently polished the items, tray included, and had washed and carefully ironed the beaded lace doilies; so he had high expectations of a little praise.

He was not disappointed. *Inkosikazi* Titty, speaking simultaneously to her cell phone and to Beauticious, nevertheless gave him a brilliant smile when he handed her a cup of tea with milk and six sugars, and a plate of cup cakes decorated with white icing and hundreds and thousands in five bright colours. The television set was on (it was on all the time) featuring some mid-morning American soap opera. The sound was down, however; instead an elaborate music centre leaked from one of its multiple vents, a strangled voice going on nostalgically about all the girls he'd loved.

"That will do, George, thank you," said Beauticious after he had handed her tea and cake.

"Thank you, Madam." He backed out of the dangerously over-furnished lounge wringing his hands and taking extra care not to knock anything over. Then he waited anxiously in the kitchen for the inevitable:

"Joji, futi tea!"

On their way home from school (in the Madam's second car, a Toyota hilux double cab) Ultimate began to complain about all the homework she had been given: maths, geography, history, biology, and English. George was concentrating on avoiding the new potholes that had formed since the rains had begun, rains that heralded the mother of all agricultural seasons. Traffic was heavy during the lunch hour, so swerving and weaving was dangerous. But he always kept a sympathetic ear open for the children, and he picked up the note of distress in Ultimate's voice. One of her braids had worked loose and was dangling over her right eye. Or was it her left eye? George couldn't be sure looking at her reflection in the rear view mirror. He asked her what she had been given for English. It was a *Macbeth* contextual. They had to discuss the appropriateness of the opening scene.

"Did you know that the witches speak in trochaic tetrameters?"

"I beg yours?"

"You know, strong-weak, strong-weak, strong-weak, strong."

"What?"

"The metre is incomplete. Catalectic. The final weak syllable is missing"

Ultimate frowned and looked at her brothers for support. She put her forefinger to her temple and made circular motions with it, thus suggesting that George was out of his mind.

But her brothers would have none of it. "Why don't you ask George to help you with your homework?" said Helter. "Don't forget he was once an English teacher."

"But I don't know what he's talking about." She brushed the braid off her face; it soon returned, swinging slightly like an insufficiently weighted pendulum.

"He'll explain. He's good at explaining. Ask him?"

"Would you, George?"

"Of course! When is your homework due?"

"First thing tomorrow morning. Mr Sibanda is very strict."

"Oops, well... that's going to make it a little difficult. But we can talk in the kitchen if you like; while I'm preparing supper."

Ultimate's face brightened. "Great! We can help each other. I'll peel the potatoes."

"And I'll explain the paradoxes."

"Look out!" cried the twins in unison. George swerved to avoid a pothole that would have broken the Toyota's suspension. He nearly collided with an oncoming car, which hooted at him and kept on hooting until it was out of hearing. They were all relieved to get home in one piece.

Early that morning George had taken out a chicken to defrost, and he had dried a couple of slices of bread for the stuffing. Ultimate joined him in the kitchen with her copy of *Macbeth*. "What can I do, George?" she asked. She had managed to return the errant braid to its allotted place, and she was all smiles.

"Why don't you prepare the vegetables, Miss Ultimate. There are those potatoes and those carrots to peel, and those lovely young green beans to top and tail. Meanwhile I'll prepare the stuffing for the chicken..."

"Yummy, I love stuffing. What shall I use to peel with?"

George gave her an instrument for stripping the skin off vegetables, and showed her how to use it. Now let's talk about that scene. How does it begin?"

"Hang on." She opened her text and found the place:

ULTMATE: When shall we three meet again?

GEORGE: In thunder, lightning, or in rain?

ULTIMATE: When the hurlyburly's done,

GEORGE: When the battles lost and won.

ULTIMATE: That will be ere the set of sun.

ULTIMATE: Where the place?

GEORGE: Upon the heath.

ULTIMATE: There to meet with Macbeth.

GEORGE: I come. Graymalkin!

ULTIMATE: Paddock calls.

GEORGE: Anon!

TOGETHER: Fair is foul, and foul is fair:

Hover through the fog and filthy air.

Ultimate beamed. "How can you say all that without looking at the page?"

"I was an English teacher."

Ultimate sensed that it would be less than tactful to pursue this line, so she said, "Which vegetable shall I start with?"

"Suit yourself. You've got yellow, green, and white. My mother always said that a complete meal should include those three colours. Can you think of another combination?"

"Yes... wait a bit... what about... um... pumpkin... um... rice..."

"And?"

"And... spinach!" She smiled happily.

"That's it! Well done! Now, how many witches are there?"

"She started on the potatoes. "Three. Like the three vegetables?"

"Yes, but the only thing they've got in common is the number three, and that's the first important point to make about this scene."

"Why, George?"

"Because, Miss Ultimate, the number three is a universal symbol of good, or at least of order; and Macbeth is a play about the conflict between order and chaos (or disorder)."

"Our teacher said it's about good versus evil."

"That's a more subjective way of putting it." Ultimate frowned so he added, "You could see good as order and evil as chaos."

Ultimate relaxed her frown. "But don't the witches represent evil?"

"Yes."

"Then why are there three if three is a good number?"

"That's the point: the devil can assume a pleasing shape. The witches have appropriated the Trinity." While he talked George squeezed a tube of sausage meat into a bowl. He reduced the dried bread slices to crumbs and added them to the meat. Then he selected an egg from the fridge and plopped it into a jug of water.

"Why are you doing that with the egg?" asked Ultimate who was on her third potato.

"To see if it's fresh. If it floats it is stale; if it sinks it is fresh. In the olden days that's how they tested women to see if they were witches."

"That's not true, George!"

"It is. If a woman was accused of witchcraft she was thrown into the river. If she floated she was guilty; if she sank, she was innocent."

"So if she was innocent she drowned?"

"I'm afraid so. Either way the poor woman lost out. If she didn't drown, they burned her at the stake."

"That's so unfair!"

"It is. Life is unfair." (Easy, George, easy.) Expertly he cracked the egg and, with one hand, emptied it into the bowl.

Ultimate, watching, was impressed: "I have to use both hands."

"It takes a little practice. He added some dried parsley and sage, some finely chopped onion and garlic, and a squeeze of lemon juice. Ultimate was fascinated by the way he used his fingers as a strainer. Finally he added salt and ground pepper. "Ground black pepper is useful if there are weevils in the food. It camouflages them."

"Yuk, that's gross, George!"

"It is, isn't it?" He used a fork to mix the ingredients, then he checked to see if the chicken was sufficiently defrosted. The giblets, neck, and feet were in a separate plastic bag inside the bird. He gave a foot each to the dogs, chopped the giblets and mixed them in with the stuffing. He thought about stealing the neck for himself but decided against it. Beauticious missed nothing. "How are you getting on with the spud-bashing?"

"Spud-bashing?"

"Peeling the potatoes. It's slang."

"I'm on my fourth."

"Good. Now let's get back to your homework. Notice the first line of the play begins with a question. That's good drama. It creates anticipation in the audience. Notice too that, though the play is entitled *Macbeth*, and focuses on the character of that name, we don't see him in the opening scene."

"He gets mentioned."

"Yes, he gets mentioned, but we don't actually *see* him before scene 3. That's also good drama."

"Because the audience can't wait to see him?"

"Yes. Expectation, anticipation, suspense.... Notice the setting: thunder and lightning, 'an open place'. The chaotic background is appropriate for these bringers of chaos. That's a kind of metaphor known as the objective correlative. If the setting is personified in any way you can call it the pathetic fallacy. All these words!"

Ultimate had moved on to the carrots. "I won't remember any of this for my assignment."

"Yes you will. Enough." George was stuffing the chicken, front and back, with his fingers. When it was done he sealed off the back by tucking the ends of the drumsticks into a flap of skin just below the parson's nose. The front was trickier. Ultimate's eyes boggled like cotton reels as she witnessed George actually putting stitches in the skin with a needle and thread.

"Can I help you in the kitchen more often, George?"

"You can, and you may, Miss Ultimate. Now, the finishing touch." He fetched some rashers of fatty bacon from the fridge and draped them over the bird. Carefully he placed it in a clay roaster (with the politically incorrect RHOASTER stamped on the lid), and then turned to the girl: "Would you like to put it in the oven?"

"Okay, but won't I get burnt?"

"Not if you aren't a witch." They both laughed. George made her put on the oven gloves, and talked her through the process. "Careful, the oven is preheated to 180 degrees. Well done! Now you can tell your mother and your brothers that you helped prepare tonight's dinner."

"Mom's still at the gym, and my brothers are glued to the TV."

"Well, you finish the carrots and I'll do the beans."

"You said you would explain the paradoxes in this scene."

"Oh yes. Well, we've already discussed the first one. The witches are wicked but they appear to be good because there are three of them. 'Appear' is the key word. The entire play, like all Shakespeare's plays, is about appearance versus reality or art versus nature. The second paradox is the line 'When the battles lost and won'. Can you see why?

"You can't lose *and* win a battle."

"In a sense, you can. Macbeth won the battle for Scotland and lost the battle for his soul. Have you heard of a pyrrhic victory?"

"No."

"Go and fetch your dictionary and we'll look it up." While she was out of the kitchen George quickly washed the potatoes and put them in a pot of water, ready for boiling; then he returned to topping and tailing the beans.

She came back slightly breathless, clutching the *Concise Oxford Dictionary, Ninth Edition*. This had been one of George's books, which Beauticious had refused to re-sell to him. "How do you spell it?"

"Eye, tea,"

"No man, George man," she giggled, "Pyrrhic."

"Pea, why, are, are, aitch, eye, sea."

She soon found the word and read out the definition: "'(Of a victory) won at too great a cost to be of use to the victor, [from the name of Pyrrhus of Epirus, who defeated the

Romans at Asculum in 279 BC, but sustained heavy losses’].”

“There you are!”

“But look, George, here’s another entry for ‘pyrrhic’: ‘a metrical foot of two short or unaccented syllables – ’”

“The opposite of a spondee. Let’s see if we can find any pyrrhics in your opening scene... er... the second line, ‘or in’? What about – “

“’ere the’?”

“Possibly. Yes. Well done, my girl... I mean, Miss Ultimate. You learn quickly.”

“I came first in class last term.”

“I know that. We are all very proud of you.”

“Are there any other paradoxes? I’ve got to go and write this thing up.”

“The most important paradox of all; the focus of the entire play: ‘fair is foul and foul is fair’. The witches are foul in appearance but their equivocations are in a sense fair, because Macbeth and Banquo are allowed to make their own choices. Lady Macbeth is fair in appearance but foul behind the scenes. Cawdor did a foul deed when he betrayed Scotland, but he died fair: ‘Nothing in his life / became him like the leaving it’... and so on.”

“What did you mean, in the car, by ‘strong/weak, strong weak, strong/weak’?”

“Oh that! Metre. The witches speak in an opposite rhythm to the human characters, but let’s leave that for another time. My chores are piling up.”

“Thanks, George. Is there anything else I can do in the kitchen?”

George smiled. “No thank you, my dear. You’ve been a great help to me. Better go and do your homework before it’s too late.”

She skipped all the way to her bedroom. George returned to his duties, which would keep him going until knock off time at 8 p.m. – feed the animals, polish the shoes, finish the ironing, scrub the kitchen floor, serve dinner to the family, fold down the bedding...

PARP-parp. PARP-parp. PARP-parp.

The madam was back from gym. Was Joseph around to open the gate, or would he have to run for it?

PARP-parp. PARP-parp. PARRRRRRRP!

© John Eppel, 2008