LOOKING OUT, LOOKING IN:

ON REALISM AND INTERIORITY IN MY WORK AS A NOVELIST

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LOOKING OUT, LOOKING IN: ON REALISM AND INTERIORITY IN MY WORK AS A NOVELIST

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In memoriam Ian Barnett

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INTRODUCTION

The open window

(Wyeth, 1947)

The National Gallery of Art, Washington; May 2015

It is not a large painting – 47cm by 70cm, roughly the same size as the mass-produced print that now hangs in my spare room. But it captures my attention, and holds it, so that for some time – ten minutes, perhaps fifteen - I am unable to look away.

My husband Andy comes to join me, and we stand side by side, looking at… What? A painting of a window, egg tempera on hardboard; the angle of the aperture a little offset, not quite occupying the centre of the frame. Soft muted colours. A hairline crack in the plasterwork. The sash thrown open; wind – not *there*, of course, not in any physical sense, and yet I am sure I can feel the warm breath of the sea breeze on my face, lifting the lace curtains, casting them askew. Beyond them, a greenish expanse of lawn, a sliver of sea, and the shadowed crouching horizon: trees, low hills, the faint outlines of houses across the shore.

Andrew Wyeth is the artist, according to the sign on the wall. This is *Wind from the Sea*, painted in 1947, depicting the view from an upstairs window of the Pennsylvania home of the artist's friends, the Olsons. We haven't heard of Wyeth, Andy and I, much less the Olsons, but we like what we see. Still we stand there, looking, taking it in.

It is May 2015. A few days before, we had flown, separately, across the Atlantic: Andy to Dulles to stay with family in Maryland; me to LaGuardia, to meet my new American publishers in New York. My debut novel, *The Versions of Us*, is to be published in the UK in a few days' time, and in the US the following year. In an auction the previous September, seven British publishers had bid for the book; stirred by the buzz, my US editor had made a generous pre-emptive offer, and around twenty other foreign imprints have followed suit. I have dreamed of this happening since I was five years old. In this moment, I am thirty-two.

Here, then, before *Wind from the Sea*, I find, perhaps, a moment of stillness amid the giddy whirl. It's tricky, at the distance of almost a decade, to remember exactly what drew me to this painting; this commentary will comprise, in part, an effort to remember. But we love it enough, Andy and I, to buy a poster reproduction in the

gift shop afterwards, and then, once we are home, to frame it and hang it on the wall of our flat.

(Barnett, 2024a)

This poster, as you can see, also advertises an exhibition of Wyeth's works named *Looking Out, Looking In*, a title I am now borrowing for this commentary.

For a long time – until I sat down to write this, in fact – I was convinced that Andy and I had seen this show. I could picture us walking round it, immersed in Wyeth's sepia colour-scape, his bleached East Coast skies. But, checking the dates, I realised that they don't match up – we were not in Washington in 2014, so we must have seen the painting in the gallery's permanent collection a year later. Such is the

permeable line between lived reality and the version of it we recall, or, in the case of the artist or writer, (re)create. There will be more – a lot more – on this soon.

But no matter: the painting was there, and I saw it, and it caught me – 'hammered' me, to cite the American writer Patricia Hampl, whose recollection of encountering a work in the National Art Institute of Chicago – Matisse's *Blue Arabesque* – has much in common with mine. 'I didn't halt, didn't stop,' Hampl writes. 'I was stopped. Apprehended, even. That's how it felt. I stood before the painting a long minute. I couldn't move away. I couldn't have said why. I was simply fastened there... I wasn't thinking in words; I was hammered by the image' (Hampl, 2007, p. 5).

That's how it was for me, too, and Wyeth's painting lives on, in my memory and on my wall and now here, on this page, as a frame through which to view my own work as a novelist.

I'll get to why and how in a moment. For now, let's just open the window. Let's feel the breeze on our faces. Let's lean on the sill, look out, and see what we can see.

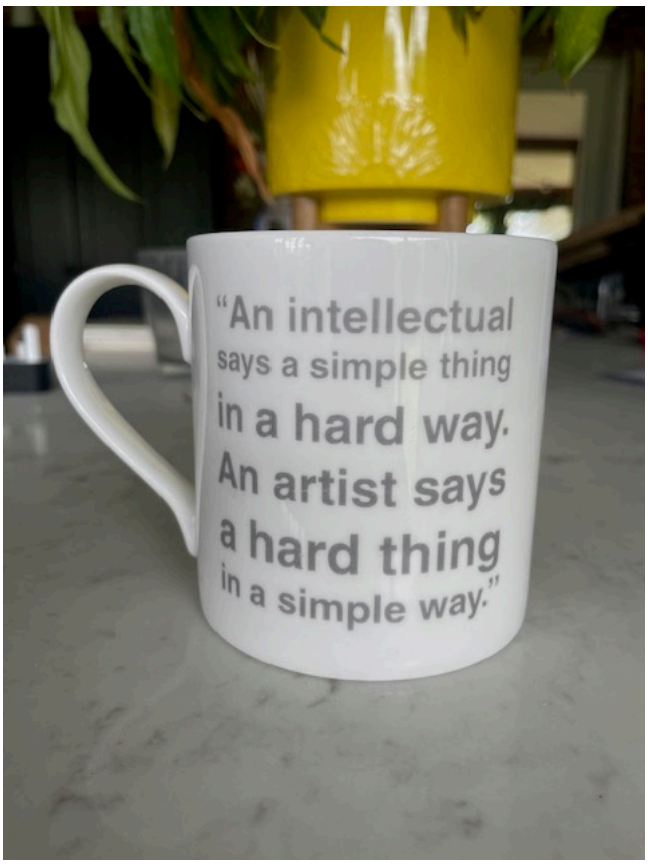
Why this commentary is a little different

As an author, teacher of creative writing and journalist – I spent ten years as an arts journalist and features writer on various national newspapers and magazines before the publication of *The Versions of Us* – the worlds of academia and critical writing were not, until recently, places in which I felt comfortable – and are still not, to some degree.

As an undergraduate studying Spanish and Italian at Cambridge University back in the early 2000s, I did my best to immerse myself in key critical texts and theories – works by Hélène Cixous and Jacques Derrida; postmodernism, poststructuralism, postfeminism– and I must have produced at least some semi-decent essays, as I graduated with a triple first. But I remember sending some of these essays to my mum to read, and my mum – a voracious and intelligent reader, who did important and difficult work running outreach library services in a series of tough London boroughs, and fostered my own love of fiction from the moment I opened my eyes – telling me gently that she imagined the essays were very good, but she couldn't understand a word.

I shared her suspicions. In fact, my beliefs about the apparently wilful abstruseness of much critical writing could be summed up by a mug I bought for Andy not long after we met in our mid-twenties. 'An intellectual says a simple thing in a hard way,' the mug reads (see below), quoting the American author Charles Bukowski. 'An artist says a hard thing in a simple way.'

I have since discovered that the quotation should actually read 'an intellectual is a man who says a difficult thing in a simple way; an artist is a man who says a simple thing in a difficult way' (Bukowski, 1969, p. 480), but the point still holds.



(Barnett, 2024b)

You may understand, therefore, why I initially approached the research and writing of this commentary with a degree of trepidation, if not outright fear.

Not long after joining the staff of Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) as a lecturer in fiction on a fractional contract back in 2018, I learned about the existence of the PhD by Published Works, and was intrigued. Here, it seemed, was a rare and valuable opportunity to reflect on my creative practice – as I was gradually learning to call my work as a novelist – and to bridge the gulf between my world, the creative one, and that of my (highly respected, I must add) critical colleagues.

I soon expressed interest in pursuing this PhD, and am extremely grateful for the support given by the department. Various delays followed – a high-risk pregnancy; maternity leave; the pandemic; MMU's withdrawal of funding for staff PhDs. Once I

did get started, in April 2023, I tried to do so alongside writing the first draft of my fifth novel, *Births, Deaths and Marriages*, and soon discovered that trying to think and write about my practice while actually *being* creative was a bit like trying to rub your stomach and pat your head at the same time. Namely, impossible for many people, including me.

Again, then, I am grateful for the forbearance of the University in allowing me to take a six-month interruption, during which I completed *Births, Deaths and Marriages* – one of the five novels I am presenting for this PhD, alongside this commentary – while on a research sabbatical. This additional time was useful, too, in allowing me the space to think about how I wanted to put this commentary together; about how I might strike a tone that lay somewhere between the novelistic, the journalistic and the critical.

At first, I considered trying to make this entire commentary a creative one – an extended short story or novella, perhaps, about a novelist trying to write a commentary about her own work. Satisfyingly metafictional or just appallingly pretentious? I decided, thankfully perhaps, on the latter. Anyway, I *wanted* this commentary to be non-fiction, to have the opportunity to read widely and to analyse my own work; this, it seemed to me, was a large part of the point of doing the PhD.

So I have arrived here – at a commentary that is still analytical, but perhaps reads a little differently to other essays of its sort. One that draws together elements of fiction, memoir, creative non-fiction and journalism into a language that feels distinctly my own, and that reflects, I believe, the creative playfulness - with structure, with language, with expectations – that I have brought to each of my novels.

I would also like to acknowledge the debt I owe to my two mentor/supervisors, Ginette Carpenter and Angelica Michelis, for gently revealing my own prejudices when it comes to the clarity, incisiveness and pure pleasure of much contemporary critical writing.

Their input has proved transformative, both in terms of reading suggestions – particularly of works by critics like Susan Fraiman and Rita Felski, whose assertion that there may be a more subtle, emotionally cogent way of writing about art cracked something open for me - and in their ideas about how I might use this reading to excavate my ideas about my own writing. As Felski puts it, 'We need to step back and once again ask some fundamental questions. Why are music and literature and novels and paintings worth bothering with? Why should anyone care?' (Felski, 2020, p. 24). These are the sorts of questions I am setting out to answer here with reference to my own work.

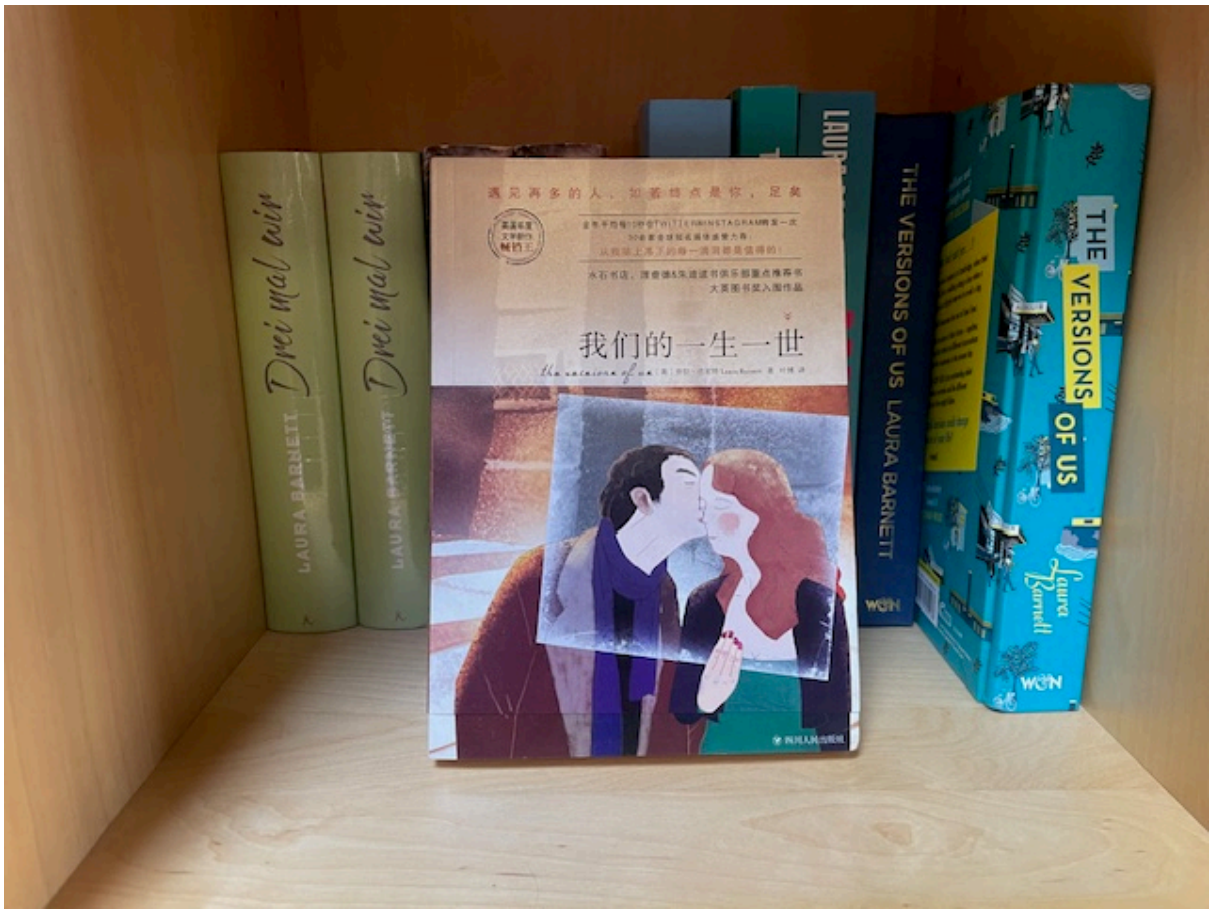
The stories so far

Together with this commentary, you will have received copies of my five novels. Four – *The Versions of Us* (2015); *Greatest Hits* (2017); *Gifts* (2021) and *This Beating Heart* (2022) - have been published by Weidenfeld & Nicolson (W&N) in the UK, and by various other international publishers. The fifth, *Births, Deaths and Marriages*, is to be released in the UK by Doubleday in spring 2025, and appears here in the most up-to-date manuscript form available at the time of submission.

What I'll do now, then, is offer a potted history of these novels, and the critical reception afforded them.

As mentioned above, in September 2014, my agent Judith Murray of Greene & Heaton submitted my debut novel, *The Versions of Us* – the story of the relationship between two characters, Eva and Jim, told across 60 years, in three intertwining iterations – to editors. An auction ensued, with seven publishers bidding. The winner was W&N, who published the novel in hardback in May 2015. The American edition was published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt a year later.

Twenty-four translations followed. My favourite is the Chinese-language edition, reproduced below, whose cover art is – in my view, anyway - singularly beautiful.



(Barnett, 2024c)

The Versions of Us was optioned for television by Trademark Films, named book of the month by Waterstones – below, I've included an image showing some of the many window displays created by Waterstones booksellers around the country - and quickly entered the Sunday Times bestseller list, where it climbed to number one.

(Barnett, 2024a)

Most UK broadsheets and many national magazines ran reviews, as did many international publications. In *The Times*, Kate Saunders wrote, '*The Versions of Us* is well written, deftly crafted and constantly surprising, in the way that chaotic real life is surprising' (Saunders, 2015, p. 16). Jenny Colgan, in *The Guardian,* said that 'its very scope is a joy, the technical achievement seamlessly done, and the ending - all the endings - suitably affecting' (Colgan, 2015, p. 20). Max Liu, in the *Independent,* was less kind – 'at times,' he wrote, 'the title could be "the clichés of us" so predictable are the characters' trajectories' (Liu, 2015, para 4).

Such views appeared, happily, to be in the minority, and between 2015 and 2017, I was invited to talk about the novel at bookshops and libraries all over the UK, and at literary festivals in Cheltenham; Wigtown; Morges (Switzerland); Pordenone (Italy); Denver (USA) and Perth (Australia). I was also interviewed on BBC Radio 4's *Front Row* and by Claudia Winkelman on Radio 2. The novel was picked for the spring 2016 Richard and Judy Book Club, and was named the readers' favourite. The French edition, *Quoi Qu'il Arrive,* was nominated for the Prix Relay.

I wrote my second novel, *Greatest Hits*, through this period; it was published in the UK in 2017, and in the US two years later by Europa Editions. This novel, like my first, uses a structural conceit as a container for 'chaotic real life' (Saunders, 2015, p. 16). Here, we have a celebrated English singer-songwriter, Cass Wheeler, now in her sixties, sitting in her studio across a single day, choosing tracks for a greatest hits album. Each track that she chooses becomes a chapter about how and when that song was written, so that gradually, song by song, decade by decade, we learn the story of her life so far.

Uniquely in fiction at that time – to the best of my knowledge; a few similar projects have followed, but I have found no precedent – the novel was released alongside a

soundtrack of Cass's songs, written and performed by the real-life English singer-songwriter Kathryn Williams.

I had approached Williams in 2015, asking her to collaborate, and couldn't quite believe it when she agreed, as Williams later put it, to jump off a cliff with me (Duerden, 2017, para 5). As I completed the novel, Williams started work on the songs. She wrote the music, we collaborated on the lyrics, and one freezing week in February 2017, she invited me to a studio in Eastbourne to watch and provide occasional backing vocals as she and her band laid down the album's sixteen tracks.

Again, most critics were kind – 'deserves to be a hit', was the *Observer*'s verdict on the project (Sethi, 2017, para 6) – though the *New York Times* did state that 'at times the narrative can veer into cliché, with predictable vignettes packed together like the grooves on a record' (Murnick, 2019, para 6). But happily, the reviewer continued, 'The book's most original sections see Cass reckoning with the tightrope walk of being an artist and a mother, asking herself whether creativity and child-rearing can ever peacefully coexist' (Murnick, 2019, para 6).

In support of the novel, Williams and I toured the UK performing in bookshops and small venues through 2017 and 2018 – see below for a photo of us being interviewed by Tom Robinson at the Hospital Club, London, in July 2017 - and at the Bath and Edinburgh literary festivals. We were interviewed by the *i* newspaper, and *Sunday Times Culture*, and appeared together on BBC Radio 4's *Front Row* and on Robinson's Sunday-night show on BBC Radio 6 Music.

(Barnett, 2017)

For someone who had dreamt of becoming a published novelist since she was three feet tall, it was all about as exciting as a professional life can get.

My personal life soon got in the way, however – namely, in 2019, a high-risk pregnancy, and then, in 2020, the birth of my son Caleb, and… well, we all know what that year brought on a global scale. So it was not until the winter of 2021 that W&N published my third novel, *Gifts*, set at Christmas in a fictional market town in Kent, where I had moved from south London in October 2020.

Here, again, I employed a taut governing structure. This is a novel in short stories, with each character buying a gift for the next, comprising scenes from ordinary lives, shot through with, as the *Daily Mirror* put it, 'that bittersweet mix of joy, yearning, sadness and hope that accompanies the festive season' (Gilmore, 2021, p. 50). A scatter of bookshop events accompanied publication – in Faversham; in London – and I was interviewed about it on BBC Radio 4's Open Book.

My fourth novel, *This Beating Heart*, is decidedly different in tone. Where *Gifts* encompasses twelve characters, and their various lovers and relatives and friends, *This Beating Heart*, like *Greatest Hits*, follows just one – Christina, a forty-three-year-old woman living alone in the flat her estranged husband has recently vacated, trying to come to terms with their five unsuccessful rounds of IVF.

At a structural level, the novel is more straightforward than the others – one protagonist, a simple linear narrative. But the emotional pulse of the novel – its interiority, with which I am fairly obsessed as a novelist, and which we will shortly examine in some detail – is, I hope, as layered and ambitious as in the rest of my work, particularly in its unflinching examination of the emotional and physical toll of fertility treatment; and of the many ways in which we are all, in midlife, forced to re-examine the trajectories of our lives. Or, as Hephzibah Anderson put it in *The Observer,* 'Barnett's well-crafted backlist is big on emotional acuity and this novel is no different, forging from Christina's grief an insistence that we think more creatively when it comes to happiness, and especially to the shapes that our families might take' (Anderson, 2022, para 2).

Finally, then, we've arrived at my fifth novel, *Births, Deaths and Marriages*, for which I have signed a two-book deal (the second, as yet untitled, book will follow in 2027)

with a new publisher, Doubleday. As stated above, this novel will be published in 2025, and it marks a return to the broader canvas and sweeping, filmic lens of *The Versions of Us*: we have six characters sharing the narrative, a group of old university friends turning forty and navigating a year in their post-pandemic lives.

It's too early, at the time of writing, to know yet whether the novel will fare as well as *The Versions of Us* in terms of sales, screen options, translation rights and broad-based press and broadcast coverage. But as every writer knows, such things are beyond our control, and all we can really do, in the end, is write books that we would like to read. That has been my central aim with all my five novels.

Looking out and looking in

What, then, defines the type of novel I would like to read, and therefore end up writing? Which key themes and ideas underpin all my work, and where does it stand in the broader literary field – in relation to the work of other contemporary novelists, and – here it comes - to certain aspects of literary theory and criticism?

These are the central questions I am setting out to answer with this commentary, and it is here that I'd like to return to the image with which I began this introduction: Wyeth's painting, *Wind from the Sea*, which so 'hooked' (Felski, 2020, p. 6) me on the day in Washington in May 2015, just a few days before *The Versions of Us* was published, and my life changed irrevocably.

Looking Out, Looking In was, as we know, the title of the Wyeth exhibition organised by the National Gallery of Art the previous year. It was aptly named. For what drew me, I think now, to that painting, and to the many other Wyeth works held by the gallery, was that Wyeth, like me, is interested in performing two simultaneous acts

as an artist. Firstly, in looking outwards at the world, and reproducing it in a way that feels realistic; 'realist', we might more usefully say here, though Wyeth himself often insisted on describing his work as 'abstractionist' (Ferguson, 2014, para 2). And secondly, in looking inwards, to our interior, our emotional core, to the ways in which our psychological makeup, our relationship with what it is to be alive in a particular place and time, shapes our experience of the world, so that what is tangible and true for one can never be entirely so for another.

(Wyeth, 1947)

Look again at *Wind from the Sea*. We see it all: the window frame, the fenestrated world beyond – real, realist, or at least, *seeming* so. And, at the same time, as in an Impressionist painting – unsurprisingly, perhaps, as Wyeth was himself influenced by the Impressionist style, and particularly by the American painter Winslow Homer (Adams, 2006) - or a photograph by Ansel Adams or Dorothea Lange, we

look *inwards*, to the implicit mood of the artist – sombre, the colours; solitary (where, after all, are all the people?); thoughtful – and, by extension, to our own.

As the American critic Andrew Ferguson wrote of the exhibition, 'Beneath the frequent prettiness, most of the pictures are just this side of harrowing, not just lonesome and melancholy but portraits of life as it seeps inevitably away. The wind that lifts the lace curtain in *Wind from the Sea* makes the hair on your arms stand up. Jamie Wyeth, Andrew's son and a celebrated artist himself, confesses to being puzzled by the benign view of Wyeth's work. "My father's work is terrifying," he said. "It's not sentimental. It's luminous! But in a creepy way."' (Ferguson, 2014, para 14). I agree. Wyeth's work unsettles as much as it comforts, if it comforts at all. It is eerie not only in its emptiness, but also in its measured composition, its lines and squares; the palpable sense we have of the presence of the artist, of the selectivity and partiality of his perspective. In this way, Wyeth's paintings speak to the fundamental paradox that defines realist art and literature: the fact that the artist or writer seeks to present as 'real' a vision of the world that is necessarily artificial and contrived. I will return to this issue in some detail.

Ferguson also draws our attention to the key controversy surrounding Wyeth's work, one that began during his lifetime and has continued since his death in 2009. For every critic – and viewer – who finds his work as engaging and unsettling as I do, there are others – more, perhaps – who consider his style too middlebrow, unserious. 'In my opinion he can't paint,' the critic Hilton Kramer told the New York Times in 1987. '[Wyeth's paintings] are just sort of colored [sic] drawings. It's one of those illustrated dreams that enable people who don't like art to fantasize about not living in the 20th century' (McGill, 1987, p. 61). Is this art, Kramer instructs us to wonder, or non-art? Where does the line lie between the highbrow, the intellectual, and the sentimental, the simplistic? If people, droves of them,

actually *like* an artist and their work, does this necessarily make it less worthy of critical attention?

As a writer whose novels sell well – at least, some of them have; *The Versions of Us* sold more than 250,000 copies in hardback, an extremely high number, I am told, for a debut – and tend to be marketed at the more accessible end of literary fiction, in the place that some in publishing refer to as the 'sweet spot' between literary and commercial (Hadley, 2016, para 8), I have encountered similar comments in relation to my own work.

Beneath the first broadsheet review of *The Versions of Us*, an online commenter wrote, in response to Jenny Colgan's assertion that the novel was 'a little careless around the edges' (Colgan, 2015, p. 20), 'Still, only chick-lit, innit?' (MatSnow, 2015). Well, actually, no: the novel is by me, a woman, and yes, one of its two protagonists is also female, but the term 'chick-lit', with its Hilton Kramer-esque air of condescension, is one that makes me shudder. I don't know a single woman who describes herself, without irony, as a 'chick' (do you?). And given that women are in the majority as readers of fiction, buying 80% of all novels sold in the UK, US and Canadian markets (Thomas-Corr, 2019) and female writers dominate today's prize lists - of the authors shortlisted for the Costa first novel award between 2017 and 2021, for instance, 75% were women (Thomas-Corr, 2021) - we hardly need a special category to delineate novels written by and/or for women.

I find myself relating to Wyeth, then, on more than a purely aesthetic level; and my primary intention with this commentary is to take these parallel activities of Wyeth's – looking out, and looking in – and use them as a frame through which to examine my own work as a novelist.

In Part One, Looking Out, I consider realism as a literary concept, and explore the paradox, introduced above, inherent in attempting to portray the 'real' while accepting that all perspectives are partial, all art and literature an artificial construct.

And in Part Two, Looking In, I examine interiority – the act of looking inwards, of rendering the inner workings of a character's mind on the page – and discuss how I use this in my fiction as means of bringing the 'real' world to life, and building a bridge or conduit between the reader and my protagonists. To conclude, I bring these two ideas together, and discuss how I intend to build on them in my next writing project.

It is rare for a writer to have the opportunity to reflect on the full body of her work at a particular time in her creative life – to consider and discuss not just one novel, at the time of its release into the world, but to trace the bifurcating paths and networks that connect *all* her work, that run through the various channels and plains and backwaters of the writer's mind. I am enormously grateful to have had that opportunity through this PhD, and delighted to invite you to accompany me now on my own creative journey.

Right, then. Are you ready? Then off we go…

PART ONE

LOOKING OUT: On Realism

Waterloo sunset

(calliwag, 2021)

St Thomas's Hospital, London; 1987/88

It is the winter of 1987, or possibly the spring of 1988. I am sitting beside my mother in the waiting room of an outpatients' clinic at St Thomas's, London, the same hospital in which I'd been born early one midsummer morning almost six years before.

My right eye isn't working properly. It is disobedient; it has a will of its own. A squint, I have learnt to call this. We are, my mother and I, waiting to speak to a doctor about whether I will require an operation.

It is early evening. The sun is setting over the Thames. The view can't have looked exactly as it does in the photograph above, posted on Reddit by a patient at St Thomas's in 2021 – the London Eye hadn't yet been built, for one – but it wouldn't have been wildly different. I can remember watching the colours seeping onto the river, the mirror-image of water and sky. The image 'hooked' me (Felski, 2020, p. 6) – meaning, in Felski's usage, that I became attached to it, enmeshed with it, both seeking its meaning, and imposing my own, as I would do again before the Wyeth painting some thirty years later, and some five thousand miles away.

What do I remember, now, about this scene? Beauty, yes, and stillness, but above all, a sudden overriding desire to record the moment before it slipped away and was forever lost.

A child today, overcome by the same impulse, might reach for a digital camera (Caleb, now four, has one that he likes to carry around, kept safe inside its soft dinosaur-shaped rubber case) or a smartphone. I had neither of these. I wanted to write the moment down, to capture it in words and pin it to the page.

I asked my mum for a pen and paper. She rummaged in her handbag (as a mother now, I feel for her, trying hard to meet her demanding child's latest request at the end of a long, hard day) and produced a napkin and a black kohl eyeliner. With this, I wrote a poem, describing what I saw.

I did not need the operation, in the end, but my mum kept the poem on the napkin; she still has it somewhere.

And I, years later, am asked, around the publication of my debut novel, what inspires me to write, and I remember that sunset, that hospital waiting room, that waning afternoon, and realise that – yes – it was then that it started; this desire to reproduce the real, to capture a moment, to render in the words, as best I can, the way it feels to be alive in this place, this time, this small corner of the ever-shifting world.

The realist paradox

At the age of five, I was – probably – still young and solipsistic enough to imagine that my poetic rendering of that moment, that view, was strong, tangible and *real* enough to imprint itself on the mind of a reader with the grainy clarity of a photograph. I wrote down what I saw, and what I saw was *there*: the river, the sky, the blurred colours of the lowering sun.

Now, I know better; and I suspect I might even have done so then, had I stopped to think about it. Reality is fractured, untrustworthy. The world that seems so solid and true, that we can – if we are lucky enough to have access to all these faculties – see and hear and touch, is in fact a conjuring trick produced by the fine-tuned circus act of brain, synapse, optical nerve.

My 'reality' is not the same as yours. I can never know whether the colour I call blue is the same shade that you see – Andy and I, in fact, disagree frequently as to what is blue and what is green, which can prove problematic when it comes to decorating

our home – and your view of a river from a hospital window, or of anything at all, will necessarily be different from mine.

To speak of capturing a moment, then – of 'tak[ing] an instant out of time, altering life by holding it still', as the photographer Dorothea Lange described it (*American Masters*, 2014, para 1)– is, inevitably, to speak also of the presence of the artist, and the way in which they choose to present what they see. In the words of John Berger, 'every image embodies a way of seeing. Even a photograph. For photographs are not, as is often assumed, a mechanical record. Every time we look at a photograph, we are aware, however slightly, of the photographer selecting that sight from an infinity of other possible sights' (Berger, 2008, p. 6). To engage with any apparently realist work of art or literature, then, is to acknowledge the curatorial presence of the artist's way of seeing.

We might call this tension – between reality and perception, between the seer and the seen – the central paradox of realism, and it is one that has been there for as long as anyone has sought to capture reality – or some partial version of it - in art, whether expressly acknowledged by the artist or writer or not.

Andrew Wyeth's work unsettles in part because of the uncompromising starkness of the view, of the choices he has made about what to include in each studied composition. Wyeth's windows are a literal framing device: they scream at us, *look, this is a construction, a fiction, inherently partial and incomplete,* while, at the same time somehow persuading us that what we are looking at is as real, as faithful to the moment as anything we might perceive with our own eyes.

It is with this tension that I, along with many other contemporary authors of realist fiction, am most concerned. I seek, as a realist writer, both to persuade the reader

that what I am writing about is 'true', or at least plausible; and to remind them, at every turn, that what they are reading is an artificial construct, a necessarily partial perspective. The remainder of the chapter is concerned with exploring the ways in which I do this, and how this corresponds with, and builds upon, the broader literary context in which I work.

The defective mirror

In relation to literature, realism is inseparable from the 'grand narratives' of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; from what the Oxford English Dictionary defines as 'a concern with accurate and objective representation', and also 'a deliberate rejection of conventionally attractive or appropriate subjects in favour of sincerity and a focus on the unidealized treatment of contemporary life' (Oxford English Dictionary, 2023c). As the OED goes on to point out, the term is 'applied to a late 19th-cent. movement in French painting and literature represented by Gustave Courbet in the former and Balzac, Stendhal, and Flaubert in the latter' (ibid).

The term was, as Ian Watt notes in *The Rise of the Novel*, first used in France in 1835 (Watt, 2015, p. 8), but has its roots in earlier works by English writers such as Defoe, Richardson and Fielding (Acheson and Ross, 2005, pp. 1-2), with aspects of its practices and conventions – usefully defined as 'a mode of writing that gives the impression of recording or "reflecting" faithfully an actual way of life' (Baldick, 2001, p. 184) – stretching as far back as Chaucer. And realism has now long outgrown its original context to send its roots and branches down through the canon of literature written in most languages, in most parts of the globe.

In anglophone fiction, with which I am primarily concerned as a writer in English, we see realism grow through the novels of Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy, Jane Austen, George Eliot et al to flourish into the twentieth century, becoming something particularly knotty and complex in the hands of the modernist greats such as Virginia Woolf and James Joyce, with their emphasis, through dazzling stream-of-consciousness narratives, on the individualism inherent in each character's psychological and physiological response to lived 'reality'.

The realist paradox may be more overt in modernist fiction, then, but it was also acknowledged by the Victorians and their predecessors. See Charlotte Brontë, breaking the fourth wall with her playful address to the reader in *Jane Eyre* - 'reader, I married him' (Brontë and Townsend, 2003, p. 473) - or Eliot, writing in *Adam Bede:* 'My strongest effort is to… give a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my mind. The mirror is doubtless defective; the outlines will sometimes be disturbed, the reflection faint or confused; but I feel as much bound to tell you as precisely as I can what that reflection is, as if I were in the witness-box narrating my experience on oath' (Eliot, 2001, p. 284).

Glorious in its precision, this assertion is the best summary of the realist paradox I have come across, and it is the foundation on which the iconoclasts of postmodernist fiction built their citadel. As Daniel Bedggood observes, after the late American critic Frederic Jameson, postmodernity – and, by extension, postmodernism, its cultural expression – is 'a condition brought about by the "radical break" in cultural forms and systems in the 1950s and 1960s, with the wane of political, social and philosophical models of modernity. Jameson suggests that the old certainties, aims and ideals of modernity are now insecure and debatable, and this is expressed in postmodern cultural forms as diverse as architecture, film, advertising and literature' (Acheson and Ross, 2005, p. 204).

I first encountered postmodernism as an undergraduate, losing myself in the spiralling fictional pathways of Italo Calvino and Jose Luis Borges and the Italian hardcore 1990s literary movement known as the *giovani cannibali*, or 'young cannibals' (Bernardi, 2003), in whose work realism was pat, a dead concept, as mainstream and meaningless and superficial as its brash newborn cousin, reality television. For who, in this fractured postmodern universe, could accept any authored text as a mimetic representation of reality, and any disparate, fragmented, fictional psychology as worth rooting for?

And yet, as we have seen, realism has always carried this paradox within it. The difference, perhaps, in the wake of the postmodernist *cri de coeur*, is that realist writers today must find their own way to make peace with the contradiction inherent in trying to persuade readers of the verisimilitude of a fictional story, of creating characters that feel 'real' despite the fact that they, and the text they inhabit, are artificial constructs, shot through with the partiality of the writer's own perceptions.

Frederick M. Holmes considers this in his analysis of the novels of the contemporary British-Japanese writer Kazuo Ishiguro. 'Although the novelists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had a shared view of the nature of reality,' Holmes writes (given the examples cited above of novelists of this era acknowledging the complex nature of reality, this seems a little reductive, but his broader point carries weight), 'those of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries are generally aware that what constitutes reality is a matter for speculation and debate… most realists [today] recognise that language does not so much mirror reality as use conventions to construct simulacra of what some readers can accept as reality' (Holmes, 2014, p. 11). This emphasis on 'some readers' is important, and a point to which I will return.

In search of verisimilitude

So how do we, as realist writers, construct our mirror, however defective we know it to be? One answer is verisimilitude, a term, from the Latin 'truth-likeness', referring to 'the attempt by narrative discourse to convince readers that the storyworld is a faithful imitation or representation of the "real" world' (Ribó, 2019, p. 44). Building on Aristotle's principle of mimesis – the Greek word for imitation, now used to refer to any work of literature that presents itself as faithful to some external reality (Baldick, 2001, p. 137) – verisimilitude is the most essential tool at the writer's disposal in constructing a 'consistent illusion of truth to life' (Baldick, 2001, p. 236).

My own thinking on verisimilitude began, I believe, with the American author Anne Tyler, whose work I encountered for the first time aged thirteen, via her novella *A Slipping-Down Life* - given away free one month in 1995, as I recall, with my mum's copy of *Good Housekeeping* magazine – and is still deeply indebted to her approach.

Across dozens of books, Tyler has chosen, almost without exception, to locate her fictional action in and around Baltimore, Maryland, where she has lived since 1967.

In *Breathing Lessons* (1988), my favourite of Tyler's novels – and a definite contender, in its tenderness, insight and technical brilliance, for one of my favourite novels of all time – Ira and Maggie Moran, a long-married couple, set out from their home in Baltimore to drive the ninety miles to the funeral of an old friend in Deer Lick, Pennsylvania. In *Ladder of Years,* another Tyler classic from 1995, Delia Grinstead, a frustrated wife and mother, also from Baltimore, strides off an East Coast beach to make a new life for herself in a small Maryland town. As *Guardian* writer Hadley Freeman observes, '[she] has said that she's a writer so she can live out different lives, but it seems that whatever life she imagines, [Tyler] always wants to live in Baltimore' (Freeman, 2020, para 9).

When I began to write fiction seriously in my twenties, I thought deeply about Tyler's ability to write such a prolific, involving series of novels set in a single city in a single country; to turn the local into the global, using small, specific details to evoke all the grand narratives of life: birth, death, marriage, family, connection, failure, success.

Another American author, the late Kent Haruf, further persuaded me of the centrality of place and detail to verisimilitude. Across a series of novels set in the fictional Colorado county of Holt, Haruf, like Tyler, charts a rooted, realist narrative course that, exactly because of its specificity, the way it is so firmly anchored in time and space, feels authentic and truthful, even to readers whose own lived experience may be very distant from that of his characters.

As the writer and book blogger Valorie Grace Hallinan observes of Haruf's 2014 novel *Benediction,* 'Haruf writes about goodhearted people way off the beaten path trying to do the right thing. His prose is entrancing, deceptively simple, powerful. You may begin to be lulled by the humanity Haruf captures on the page, but before you get to feeling incredulous he hits you with some dark reality: bigotry, abuse, cruelty, abandonment, addiction' (Hallinan, 2013, para 3). That reality, dark or otherwise, holds such power precisely because Haruf has managed to persuade us, despite our better judgement, that his fictional town and its inhabitants might actually exist, and that their concerns are therefore as valid, as involving, as our own. We can call this 'cultural verisimilitude', by which a work of fiction creates plausibility by setting itself in the context of 'real life' in the 'real world' (MasterClass, 2024, para 8).

Across my own five novels, like Tyler and Haruf, I have worked hard to achieve cultural verisimilitude, placing my characters in specific, recognisable geographic locations. Some of these are real: Crystal Palace, the slightly dusty, back-of-the-

cupboard area of south-east London where I lived for ten years, features in several of my novels.

In *The Versions of Us*, Eva and Jim move into a pink house on Gipsy Road in Crystal Palace. Both the road and the house exist – I've included a photograph below - and an illustrated version of the pink house even ended up as part of the novel's cover design.

(Barnett, 2015a)

Crystal Palace features, too, in my fourth novel *This Beating Heart* – Christina lives in the area, though her flat is invented – and in *Births, Deaths and Marriages*, as the location for the home my character Al had shared with his late wife Estelle.

Clapham, the south London neighbourhood where I lived as a child, is an important setting in *Greatest Hits*. Cass Wheeler, my fictional singer-songwriter, grows up opposite Clapham Common, and, though I never name it, the church in whose vicarage she resides is based on Holy Trinity, famously the spiritual home of the eighteenth-century abolitionist Clapham Sect, and the place in which my Church of England primary school used to host its Christmas carol concerts and leavers' services.

(LondonRemembers.com, no date)

Elsewhere in my fiction, we find Bristol – a city with which I have family connections, and where Jim lives in various iterations of his life in *The Versions of Us*; Cambridge; New York, a city I know fairly well; and Kent.

In *Greatest Hits*, Cass finds solace at Home Farm, the rambling Georgian house she buys on the Kent-Sussex border, and where she builds her music studio. I invented this location entirely, borrowing – as I often do – photographs of various similar

properties from estate agents' online listings, and wrote the novel while still living in London. But I did feel a slightly terrifying shiver of recognition several years later when my husband and I found, and bought, the house we now live in, Church Oast – which is not Georgian, but is certainly old and rambling and in Kent, and also has a recording studio in the garden.

Gifts, my fourth novel, is set in a fictionalised version of Faversham, which I called Lenbourne, and features several real places and locations, including a caravan – pictured below - that I found in a field close to my home not long after moving to the area. In the novel, my character Jake lives in a slightly less dilapidated version of this caravan, but the field is the same; and the whole novel, as I note in the acknowledgements (Barnett, 2021, p. 195) draws heavily on real geographical locations around north and east Kent.

(Barnett, 2021b)

Simulation and illusion

The inclusion of real places in my work is only one aspect of my search for verisimilitude. I have also deliberately tried, across all my novels so far, to blur the line between reality and fiction by creating characters that, I hope, feel so real to readers that they find themselves wondering whether they might exist beyond the page.

This approach is usefully delineated by the late American critic and author Taylor Stoehr, who, in his 1969 article 'Realism and Verisimilitude', identified a number of key techniques adopted by writers in the creation of verisimilitude, including, most relevantly here, 'simulation and illusion'. He wrote: 'Devices like the autobiographical mode, the epistolary narrative, the quotation of invented (or genuine) documents, newspaper articles, manuscripts, letters, poems, and so forth, are among the means which some authors use to convince readers of the truth-to-life of their novels, by simulating (not the same as imitating or representing) things familiar in everyone's experience' (Stoehr, 1969, p. 1283). It is as if, by including these additional layers of realistic invention, we are better able, as writers, to conceal the essential artificiality of the narrative.

I use both simulation and illusion often, and particularly in my second novel *Greatest Hits,* which was inspired in part by the tricksy, shapeshifting work of the novelist William Boyd. Here is a writer who appears to be fully cognisant of the realist paradox, producing work that is both realist and playfully experimental: Boyd often has real people wandering in and out of his fictional universes, and includes interpolated photographs, artworks and texts to play with the readers' understanding of what is real and what is not. This approach reached its apotheosis in his novel *Nat Tate: An American Artist 1928-1960,* a fictional biography of an invented artist that gave rise to the 'Nate Tate hoax', with luminaries such as David

Bowie and Gore Vidal joining Boyd in convincing the world, for a time, that Tate was a real artist (Boyd, 2011).

Boyd had blurred the line between reality and fiction to similar effect in his 1987 novel *The New Confessions*, a fictional autobiography of a film director, and would go on to do the same in his bestselling *Any Human Heart*, a novel that plays similarly with reality and fiction, and had a significant impact on me when I first read it on its publication in 2002. 'One of my main ideas,' Boyd wrote of *The New Confessions,* though it holds true for his other novels, 'was to write a fiction that blurred into the world of fact – the world of documentary, reportage, history – to such an extent that the reader would be confused: was this made up, or was it real?'(Boyd, 2011, para 4).

With *Greatest Hits,* I too, want readers to be so convinced that Cass Wheeler and her music might actually exist that they end up googling her, as I'd heard many readers had done with Boyd's Nat Tate (there are few things more satisfying, to my mind, than knowing, as an author, that you have created *such* a successful version of reality that your readers are no longer sure where to draw the line between fact and fiction). Working with Kathryn Williams to create – *simulate* - a real album of Cass Wheeler's musical output was a key part of my project here; Boyd, too, had produced real drawings to illustrate his biography of Tate. And, as in Boyd's work, a number of real people are referred to in *Greatest Hits* – musicians Mark Knopfler, Black Francis, and (tee hee) Kathryn Williams, among others – while others appear, on the advice of my publishers, as carefully disguised simulacra (writers of fiction are still subject to laws of privacy and defamation, so editors tend to be cautious about having real, living people appear in works of fiction lest the subjects decide to sue).

For me, then – as for many other contemporary novelists, Boyd among them – verisimilitude rests not only on *looking out* on real places and locations, but on playfully blurring the boundaries between reality and invention.

The experiment of the real

As we have seen, the realist author usually seeks somehow to persuade the reader of the 'truth' and authenticity of their fictional universe, in the full knowledge – shared by both writer and reader – that the text is an invented, artificial object. The reader, as a result, enters into a form of contract with the realist writer, in which the reader suspends their disbelief, and the writer works – using the techniques explored above, among others – to create and sustain the illusion to which the reader has willingly submitted.

As an author, I am particularly interested in how far I can push the boundaries of this illusion without breaking that contract.

I have done this by experimenting quite deliberately with narrative structure: inventing, with several of my books, what is known in publishing as a 'high concept', a structural conceit that draws attention to the artificiality of the work of fiction, to its nature as a constructed artefact. According to Phoebe Morgan, an editorial director at publishing house HarperCollins, 'High-concept fiction is often a concept that hasn't been done before, and might be quite unbelievable – something that wouldn't necessarily happen in everyday life' (Khan, 2021, para 11). One of my key aims as an author has been, then, to employ high-concept, experimental structures while also drawing the reader deeply into my realist world, so deeply that they – as explored above – start to question what is real, and what is fictional.

Thus, in *The Versions of Us*, we get a high-concept narrative weaving together three versions of Jim and Eva's lives, together and apart, each stemming from one key

moment when they meet, or do not meet, as students at Cambridge in 1959. In *Greatest Hits*, I structure the main spine of the narrative across a single day in which Cass, aged 65, is sitting in her studio, listening to her back. *Gifts*, as I have said, is a novel in short stories, in which each character is choosing a Christmas gift for the next; the narrative passes from person to person like a literary relay race.

I was aware, in writing these novels, of drawing on two dual influences: my central fascination with realism, and with the work of contemporary realist authors; and my interest in postmodern, experimental fiction, developed – as mentioned above – during my time at Cambridge. I became fairly obsessed, as an undergraduate, with postmodern works that pushed the boundaries of structure, asking searching questions about what a novel is, or could be.

Experimental narrative structures are, in their inherent break with the 'old certainties' (Acheson and Ross, 2005, p. 204) of literary form, intrinsic to much postmodern literature, with notable examples including Joseph Heller's 1961 *Catch-22*, with its achronological layered form, and Italo Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveller* (1979), which I first read in translation as a teenager, awed by Calvino's sophistication in creating a metanarrative about a reader trying to read the novel that I was also trying to read.

After leaving Cambridge, however, and becoming serious about writing my own fiction, I became disillusioned with the literary mind-games played by postmodern authors. As Alison Gibbons puts it, in a Times Literary Supplement article entitled, provocatively, 'Postmodernism is Dead: What Comes Next?', 'postmodernism refracted reality into endless language games' (Gibbons, no date, para 4). Ultimately, these games came to seem to me like so many Chinese boxes - to borrow Brian McHale's infamous metaphor (McHale, 1987, pp. 112-130) – disappearing into infinity, or, to put it another way, a game with no heart, no soul.

With *The Versions of Us,* I resolved to do something different: to experiment with structure while also retaining sufficient emotional warmth and engagement to ensnare reader to the point that they might not even notice the experimental structure, so involved would they be (I hoped), in the lives of my characters.

Two other contemporary novels were a key inspiration here: David Nicholls's *One Day* (2009), with its high-concept conceit about two characters whose lives are recounted across two decades via one single July day in each year; and *The Time-Traveler's Wife* by Audrey Niffenegger (2003), with its highly experimental non-linear structure, in which a married couple attempts to deal with the fact that one of them has a genetic disorder that allows him to travel in time. In each case, it seemed to me – and still does – these novels did something remarkable: told broadly realist stories (well, in the case of the Niffenegger, as real as a tale about a time-traveller could ever feel) that were deeply emotionally involving, while also pushing at the boundaries of their contract with the reader, reminding the reader of the artificiality of the fictional text.

It has been my intention, with *The Versions of Us* and my other high-concept novels, to achieve a similar effect.

Whose reality is it anyway?

It is essential to my work as a writer to acknowledge that any construction of reality is inevitably partial and informed by my own identity and experience, and that in presenting our fiction as reality – or something like it – we must also consider the limitations of that experience.

To expand upon Frederick Holmes's point about contemporary realist authors constructing 'simulacra of what *some readers* can accept as reality' (Holmes, 2014, p.

11; my italics) I am at pains, as a realist writer, to explore and deconstruct the fact that I am a white cis-gender female middle-class heterosexual human being, and that the version of reality that I explore in my fiction will necessarily be coloured by that.

I do this, in part, by ensuring that not every character in my novels looks, thinks and sounds exactly like me; that the reality I represent in my fiction is as diverse and complex as the contemporary or near-historical (the furthest I have gone back in time in my fiction so far is to the 1930s) world I seek to depict. Thus, across these five novels, we have characters who are non-white; whose backgrounds are working or upper-class, and whose sexuality does not correspond to my own.

Mindful always of the perils of cultural appropriation, whether deliberate or inadvertent – trying, above all, to avoid becoming, in author Vaseem Khan's words, 'lazy, disrespectful, insensitive, or merely using someone else's lived experience to create a titillating story that distorts the cultural experience of the community they have chosen to portray' (Khan, 2020, para 16) – I have, with each of these characters, sought to represent their versions of reality as sensitively and multidimensionally as possible.

This activity has been summarised beautifully by novelist Hari Kunzru. 'Good writers,' Kunzru writes (Kunzru et. al., 2016, para 3), 'transgress without transgressing, in part because they are humble about what they do not know. They treat their own experience of the world as provisional. They do not presume. They respect people, not by leaving them alone in the inviolability of their cultural authenticity, but by becoming involved with them. They research. They engage in reciprocal relationships.'

This is certainly what I have tried to do with each novel, via reading, interviews, discussions, and in the case of my character Eddy in *Gifts* – a black man raised by a

white family, an experience that I was not confident I could embody via empathy and reading alone – employing, via my publisher, a sensitivity reader from a similar background to ensure that my depiction felt as realistic and truthful as possible.

Through the frame

I conclude this chapter, then, by returning to that central image of the window frame: Wyeth's window – or that of his friends the Olsons, in their Pennsylvania home – and my own; both real and literal (see below for a representation of what I am looking out at from my own window as I write these words) and the symbolic window that I construct with each novel.

Through each frame, we - Wyeth and I; all figurative artists, all realist writers - observe a moment, a place, a time. We look out, and in the act of looking, of minute observation of a particular reality, a particular place, a particular way of seeing, we try to represent some aspect of the world we live in, and the experience of living in it, while acknowledging the paradoxical truth that there can be no such thing as empirical reality, and that our artistic representation of it can never be anything other than partial and artificial. It is the balance between these two parallel endeavours that that excites us – well, it certainly excites *me* – and, when it goes well, that excites, moves and entertains our readers, too.

(Barnett, 2024d)

PART TWO

LOOKING IN: On Interiority

Car windows

(Barnett, 2018)

Various English roads; 1987 – 2000

As a child, I spent a lot of time staring out of car windows.

My parents separated when I was five. My mother continued living in our small first-floor flat in Clapham, south London, while my father and his new girlfriend found the first in a shifting series of homes in which they never seemed to stay for more than six months at a time.

Every other Friday he would come to London in his Ford Mondeo to collect me from school and drive me back to wherever he was living at the time: Tufnell Park, north London; Thame and Chinnor in Oxfordshire; Stroud, near Gloucester; then Monmouth, in the Welsh borders. On Saturdays, we would hop in the car again and

head off somewhere for the day: to ride our bikes in the Chilterns, or walk in the Mendips, or eat cream teas at Banwell Castle in north Somerset. I remember speeding down the M4, watching the blur of the roadside barriers, listening to Bob Dylan or Paul Simon or Little Feat. I remember the high limestone walls of Cheddar Gorge, and the loop and dip of ribboning country roads, and the sudden exhilarating glitter of the sea.

But what I remember chiefly, of these drives with my dad, is not the places we visited or passed through – though these are there, of course, carrying the high saturated tints of recollection – but the way I *felt* about them; the way that the exterior landscapes I observed created internal responses within.

I was always a thoughtful child; not quiet – no, rarely that – but carrying a richly imaginative inner life. I had no siblings – not until my mum met my stepfather, Peter, when I was thirteen, and I acquired two stepsisters – so I spent a lot of time alone. And I enjoyed that aloneness – as distinct from loneliness, which I remember feeling only rarely. I wove elaborate stories in my head. I invented worlds and characters and complex, interconnected plots, and moved them around the chambers of my mind like pawns on a chessboard.

I became, in short, a writer; and never do the stirrings of that identity, that essential part of myself, seem clearer to me than when I remember those car journeys, that passenger window, that view. The looming stone of Cheddar Gorge becoming, in my mind, the backdrop to a battle between warring medieval factions. Banwell Castle transformed into the crumbling seat of an impoverished aristocratic family. The country roads carrying us past villages, farms, thatched cottages, rutted dwindling tracks: all of them fascinating, all of them speaking of unknown people, living out their fathomless unknowable lives. Lives I wanted – I could already feel it, that desire, that need, whispering in my ear, tugging at my sleeve – to document

somehow; to investigate, to probe, and perhaps, some day, somehow, to understand.

Interiority: a definition

The fourth-century philosopher and theologian St Augustine of Hippo wrote beautifully about interiority, in a way that still resonates across the centuries. For him, interiority was one of the four central elements that make us human, the others being exteriority, the self, and the nature of the human being (Berry, 2017; THC, 2023).

For Augustine, interiority refers to 'an inner world, an interior space of the self that is not literally a place, but rather a dimension of being in which truths may be found' (Cary, 2020, p. 227). In his *Confessions*, Augustine writes, in prose as lucid and poetic as anything we might find on today's Booker longlist, 'And people go marvelling at the height of mountains, the vast waves of the sea, the wide course of rivers, the extent of the ocean and the cycles of the stars, and leave themselves behind, not marvelling that when I spoke of all these things I didn't see them with my eyes, but I couldn't have spoken of them unless the mountains and waves and rivers and stars I have seen, and the ocean I believe in, were something *I inwardly saw in my memory, in a space as vast as I outwardly saw them'* (the italics are my own, and the translation by Cary, 2020, p. 227).

The act of looking inwards, then, was a keystone of Augustine's understanding of what makes us human; essential, in his view, as a means of coming closer to God (Cary, 2020), and no less so now, in contemporary fiction, as a means of coming closer to our characters.

In fiction, interiority – building on one of the Oxford English Dictionary's two definitions of the word, 'the quality or state of being interior or inward' (Oxford

English Dictionary, 2024) – is the means by which we, as novelists, perform the act of shapeshifting that is, for me at least, one of the most profound and fundamental aspects of the writing process.

Through interiority, we render the texture and substance of a character's inner world: their thoughts, feelings, memories, desires; all the glorious shifting colours that define their worldview, that make this character, this human being, who they are. As author and editor Susan DeFreitas puts it, 'when I talk about interiority, I'm talking about what happens inside the point-of-view (POV) character, as opposed to what happens in the external world of the story' (DeFreitas, 2021, para 2).

A number of techniques, some of them usefully outlined by DeFreitas (DeFreitas, 2021, para 3), are open to us as writers in order to render interiority on the page. The most obvious is internal narration, or internal monologue, by which the writer captures the passing thoughts of their characters like fish in a net and spears them to the page, blurring, especially in third-person voice, the roles of author, narrator and character.

As we have already seen, this technique reached its apotheosis in the stream-of-consciousness narratives of modernist authors such as Virginia Woolf and James Joyce, where the text reads almost as a transcript of the contents of a character's mind (I say almost, because it is not, of course, quite that simple: as ever, we sense, too, the presence of the guiding hand of the writer/narrator, and the selectivity of the character's own account).

The phrase was first coined in an essay on Joyce by the French poet Valéry Larbaud, and in its original usage was more or less synonymous with stream-of-consciousness (Cuddon, 2012, p. 364), though many now – myself included – take it to stand 'for all methods of self-revelation' (Cuddon, 2012, p. 364) alongside free indirect discourse – 'the presentation of thoughts or speech of fictional characters

which seems… to combine the character's sentiments with those of a narrator' (Cuddon, 2012, p. 290) – and direct or reported thought, by which the narrator offers us an account of what the character is thinking, but this account, as with spoken dialogue, is separated from the main flow of the narrative, sometimes with the use of italics.

Each writer, naturally, makes their own choice about which of these techniques to employ on the page, and most of us use a combination of all of them. The degree of interiority we offer is also a personal and stylistic choice; we might describe interiority as a continuum, with each writer deciding where to place themselves along it.

At one pole, we have Joyce, Woolf and fellow modernist William Faulkner, whose immersive interior monologues create an experience for the reader that the novelist and critic David Lodge describes as 'rather like wearing earphones plugged into someone's brain, and monitoring an endless tape-recording of the subject's impressions, reflections, questions, memories and fantasies, as they are triggered either by physical sensations or the association of ideas' (Lodge, 2011, p. 47). It's Marmite stuff. I adore it – Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, for one, has been a huge source of inspiration for me in considering how to bring a character to vivid, three-dimensional life. Others – many of my writing students among them - feel differently, finding Woolf's texts, and that of her fellow modernists, impenetrable and exhausting, or even sharing the view of novelist André Aciman, who has said that he would like to remove *Mrs Dalloway* from the literary canon, calling it 'an overrated novel that I don't find particularly gripping or interesting. I'm not even sure it's well written' (*The New York Times*, 2019, para 24).

And at the other pole, then, we have the writers who choose to keep themselves at a distance from their characters, offering far less interiority; writers like Ernest Hemingway, Graham Greene, and Jean Rhys, whose 'flat characters', to borrow the

author and *New Yorker* critic James Wood's illuminating expression, 'seem to think very little, are rarely seen thinking' (Wood, 2009, p. 82).

A novel with no interiority at all, however, is a rare thing, and one that is unlikely to engage the reader. I'd argue, in fact, after DeFreitas, that such a book isn't really a novel at all, but one that 'read[s] like [a] fictionalized screenplay…, with the story largely narrated as if through a camera' (DeFreitas, 2021, para 5). For it is with looking in, in rendering the particular experience of inhabiting or observing another person's mind and body – in depicting, in short, what it is to *be* another human being - that the novel as a form is most deeply concerned.

As Milan Kundera puts it in *The Art of the Novel*, the novel begins, 'with [Samuel] Richardson, … to examine "what happens inside," to unmask the secret life of… feelings' (Kundera, 2005, p. 5). This is the work with which we novelists are still primarily preoccupied today.

Realism and attachment

Let's turn, now, to considering the approach I take to interiority – looking in - in my own work as a novelist, and how this amplifies and intersects my broader preoccupation with realism – looking out – and with creating an emotional attachment between reader and character.

I am, as a writer, fairly obsessed with interiority, definitely closer to Woolf and Joyce (though I make no claim to sharing even an iota of their genius) than to Rhys or Hemingway. Just ask any of my students, both here at MMU and at Curtis Brown Creative, the agency-led writing school in London where I teach a number of courses: if any of them were to cite any particular buzzword associated with my classes, I am sure it would be this.

The inner world of my characters fascinates me, and is, as explored above, fundamental to my readers' understanding of who they are: interiority is, in my view, the lodestone of the bridge we build, as writers, between the world of the reader and the fictional world of our characters. Interiority is, by extension, inherently connected with realism; it is only by looking *in*, to the inner lives of our characters, to their thoughts and hopes and memories and desires, that we can fully understand the world they, and we, inhabit; that the view we are looking out on, as writers and as readers, becomes real, tangible, true.

To illustrate this visually – always helpful, I find – let's look again at *Wind from the Sea*.

(Wyeth, 1947)

As already stated, the painting not only looks *out* at the world, but also implicitly *inwards*, at the state of mind of the artist – thoughtful, we surmise; perhaps more than a little melancholic - and, by association, the viewer.

Such a duality is an inherent quality of visual art, particularly of a figurative and/or Impressionist nature, even if much critical theory, as Rita Felski observes (Felski, 2020, p. 9), has long dismissed the primacy of emotional responses. She writes, in a paragraph as bracing and refreshing as anything I have ever encountered in academic writing, 'In contrast to the bourgeoisie glued to their possessions—or women bound to their families and children—modern artists and intellectuals strive to slip free of ties, taking their cues from the figure of the Baudelairean dandy. The critical frameworks of the last half century largely echo and endorse this modernist vision; any specialness accruing to art lies in its power to desist or resist, to break bonds rather than make bonds. The language du jour is one of dislocating, disorienting, demystifying. But perhaps the true naïfs are those critics who imagine themselves free of attachments' (Felski, 2020, p. 9).

I have found myself enthralled, in researching this commentary, by Felski's ideas about attachment to art, and (with some caveats, as I do find the work of its architect Bruno Latour fairly mystifying) by the related concept of affect theory: the framework by which critics attend to 'affective charge', seeing the world as shaped not simply by narratives and arguments but also by mood, atmosphere and feelings (Hsu, 2019, para 6). I don't remember encountering anything like this in my undergraduate studies; had I done so, I might have found it easier to enter the impenetrable (to me, at least) towers of critical theory.

These ideas about both affect and attachment are useful here in considering the ways in which both visual art and literature evoke an emotional response in the viewer and/or reader. Illustrator Lindsay Braman articulates this cogently in an article for the New York Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), recalling a formative

encounter with a work of art as a child that echoes both Felski's description of being 'hooked' by art (Felski, 2020) and my own encounter with Wyeth's painting in Washington.

'I found myself drawn in by a particular portrait,' Braman writes. 'I vividly remember what it felt like to tumble headfirst into the emotion of the grieving woman depicted in the painting. As my classmates moved on, empathy—that profoundly human emotional response that allows us to feel what other people are feeling—unleashed within me my own grief. When I left that museum, my shared experience with the woman in the painting followed me' (Braman, 2022, para 1).

Braman produced an artwork illustrating both this experience, and – with a delicious ironic wink – the broader set of emotions likely to be encountered by the casual visitor to MoMA's collections. Here it is:

(Braman, 2022)

Empathy – 'that profoundly human emotional response that allows us to feel what other people are feeling,' in Braman's words (Braman, 2022, para 1) – is the engine of attachment, and in fiction it is interiority that helps build empathy, that allows us to feel what our characters are feeling – to feel with, as well as for, the people whose

fictional lives we are watching play out across the novel's pages. As Suzanne Keen writes in an illuminating report on her study of narrative empathy and the reading experience, 'character identification often invites empathy, even when the fictional character and reader differ from one another in all sorts of practical and obvious ways' (Keen, 2006, p. 2).

Felski, too, cites interiority in discussing the ways in which we become 'hooked' by a work of fiction, not only identifying with a character, but also perhaps coming to know ourselves in new, unexpected ways. 'Recognition,' she writes, 'is not repetition: it denotes not just the previously known, but the becoming known… In a mobile play of interiority and exteriority, something that exists outside of me inspires a revised or altered sense of who I am' (Felski, 2020, p. 49). Significantly, here, the interiority is not just that of the character, but of the reader.

Building a narrative

Interiority is also a key building block in narrative: it is only by rendering the three-dimensionality of our characters' inner lives that we can fully explore the ways in which they are changed by the events of our story.

As Christopher Booker observes in his masterful survey of storytelling across eras and cultures, *The Seven Basic Plots,* the vast majority of stories are driven by an impetus towards some kind of resolution, and this expectation is woven into the fabric of the reader's approach to the story (Booker, 2004, p. 18). It is only by offering sufficient insight into what a character in a novel is thinking and feeling about what is happening to them – and, importantly, about what has happened previously (backstory or analepsis, 'the narration of an event at a point later than its chronological place in a story' [Oxford English Dictionary, 2023a]) and may happen in the future (prolepsis, 'a prefiguring or foreshadowing of a future event in a

narrative; the narration of an event at a point earlier than its chronological place in a story' [Oxford English Dictionary, 2023b]) that we can hope to fully involve our readers in this essential process of change and resolution.

I will now offer two examples from my own work, considering some of the techniques I employ to render interiority on the page, and how these various ideas about interiority play out within them.

Example One

This comes from early in my debut novel, *The Versions of Us*. Here, in version one of the scene in which my protagonists Eva and Jim meet as students at Cambridge in 1958 (or *don't* meet, as occurs in version two), we see Eva and Jim sizing each other up, deciding whether to act on the frisson of attraction that has passed between them in the short moments since Eva fell from her bicycle, and Jim stopped to help her.

> ' They are silent for a moment, each feeling they ought to make a move to leave, but not quite wanting to. On the path, a girl in a navy duffel coat hurries past, throws them a quick glance. Then, recognising Eva, she looks again. It's that Girton girl, the one who played Emilia to David's Iago at the ADC. She'd had her sights set on David: any fool could see it. But Eva doesn't want to think about David now.
>
> "Well," Eva says. "I suppose I'd better be getting back. See if the porter's boy can fix my bike."
>
> "Or you could let me fix it for you. We're much closer to Clare than Newnham. I'll find the kit, fix your puncture, and then you can let me take you for a drink."

> She watches his face, and it strikes Eva, with a certainty that she can't possibly explain – she wouldn't even want to try – that this is the moment: the moment after which nothing will ever be the same again. She could – *should* – say no, turn away, wheel her bicycle through the late-afternoon streets to the college gates, let the porter's boy come blushing to her aid, offer him a four-bob tip. But that's not what she does. Instead, she turns her bicycle in the opposite direction and walks beside this boy, this Jim, their twin shadows nipping at their heels, merging and overlapping on the long grass.' (Barnett, 2015b, pp. 10-11).

Here, as in much of my writing, interiority works alongside dialogue and action to build a composite picture of the external world – looking out – and the internal one – looking in. Though much of the novel is written in close or limited third, 'in which the narrator appears to know everything about one character only' (Cowan, 2011, p. 139), and it is Eva's perspective that dominates here, we get brief insights into what the other characters are thinking through flashes of omniscience – the passing student actress recognises Eva (Eva can't know this for sure, so the perspective must have switched to the other woman); both Eva and Jim are described as 'not quite wanting' to leave.

It is, however, Eva's interior world to which we are given fullest access: through free indirect speech ('it's that Girton girl…'); dialogue; action ('instead, she turns her bicycle…'); and reported thought ('…it strikes Eva that…') with hints of prolepsis, of a sense in which Eva is projecting forward into the future, anticipating – through instinct, through desire – the significance that this stranger is going to play in her life to come.

Example Two

> ‘Something woke Christina in the night. She lay stricken for a long moment, the rush of blood loud in her ears. The sound came again: a rustle, a crunch. Footsteps on gravel, just beyond the French windows. *Shit*. Her pulse redoubled; she could feel her heart thudding in her chest. She reached across the cool expanse of sheet to the empty pillow, felt beneath it for the hammer, gripped the handle in her hand. Its solidity was reassuring; she lay still, forcing herself to breathe. Nothing. A fox, a cat. Breathe.
>
> Nobody knew about the hammer: she’d placed it there not long after Ed had moved out, under the pillow she’d also left on his side of the bed. There had been a spate of burglaries: Mrs Jackson upstairs had urged her to take care. ‘Two women alone,’ she’d said. ‘We can’t be too careful.’ Christina, without thinking, had opened her mouth to rebut this – she, at any rate, was not alone – and then closed it again. The truth, of course, was that she was. That night, she’d found the hammer in the Ikea toolkit (Ed had left her this, taken the better one with him, the one he’d bought from B&Q), and put it under the adjacent pillow.’ (Barnett, 2022, pp. 7-8)

In this second example, drawn from the first chapter of my novel *This Beating Heart*, we see again how interiority is intrinsic to the impact of the scene – even more so here, as Christina, the protagonist, is alone in her room, so there is no dialogue (other than the remembered conversation with her neighbour, Mrs Jackson) or present-moment interaction with other characters.

Here, then, we are entirely inside Christina’s head – participating, I hope, in the full spectrum of her anxiety and panic, woken in the night in the room she now sleeps in alone, without her estranged husband Ed.

We are in close third with Christina – this novel, alone among the five I have published so far, is written entirely from this perspective, as a means of emphasising the intensity and claustrophobia of Christina's mental and emotional state, at least at the start of the novel.

We have action, in the form of the footsteps, or whatever they are (it turns out to be nothing more threatening than a hedgehog), beyond the French windows. We have both direct reported thought, rendered here in italics – '*shit*' (Barnett, 2022, p7) – and free indirect speech – 'breathe' (Barnett, 2022, p7). We have memory – the interaction with Mrs Jackson – and, significantly, access to the gap between what Christina *says* to Mrs Jackson in that moment – nothing – and what she *wants* to say – that no, she is not alone, there is no parallel to be drawn between the two women's situations.

It is in such gaps – between what a character is thinking, and what a character says or does – that interiority has a particularly central role to play.

Action can go some way towards indicating that a character is not being honest (perhaps she rubs her nose, or shifts her gaze away, or offers any of the many other small physical gestures with which we are all familiar as indications that a person may be lying) but by giving the reader full access to the character's thoughts and feelings, the fact of this is rendered concrete.

Such access is, as Lodge observes in *The Art of Fiction*, an essential element in the function of the novel, at least in its traditional conception. 'What kind of knowledge, ' Lodge writes, 'do we hope to derive from reading novels, which tell us stories we know are not "true"? One traditional answer to that question is: knowledge of the human heart, or mind. The novelist has an intimate access to the *secret thoughts* of her characters denied to the historian, the biographer or even the

psychoanalyst. The novel, therefore, can offer us more or less convincing models of how and why people act as they do' (Lodge, 2011, p. 80; my italics).

We can perhaps imagine, then, a 'model' of the scene above that comes closer to the 'fictionalised screenplay' (DeFreitas, 2021, para 5) mode, with everything happening on the surface, underpinned by minimal interiority – we might, for instance, just see Christina wake, hear a sound, and reach for the hammer – but it would, at least in my view, be a much less 'convincing' one.

I offer these examples, anyway, not to argue that my particular approach to interiority is the *only* one, or in any way superior to that taken by other novelists, but to illustrate the nature of that approach – the way I build interiority on the page, and the function it plays in my fiction – and to emphasise the importance, throughout my work, of looking inwards as well as outwards in order to build a real, authentic, immersive world for my characters, and my readers.

CONCLUSION

The sadness of Annie Besant

(English Heritage, 2020)

Colby Road, London SE19; October 2015

Something is wrong with this house. We both feel it, Andy and I, as we wander from room to room: through the dark, narrow hallway to the living-room – small, chilly, cast in an equal greenish gloom – and on to the kitchen at the back, which is large but scruffy, its dusty windows giving onto a small garden, untidy borders, a bedraggled patch of lawn.

The estate agent is dauntless, Tiggerish: lots of potential, a blank canvas, good bones. We make appropriate noises. Oh yes, this room is a good size… If we took out these cupboards, then maybe we could… Stripped wooden floorboards, lovely… Yes, the price is good for a period house in this part of London… Ah, here's the master bedroom, and the bathroom, and here, on the top floor, is another

bedroom – ideal as a nursery, maybe, yes – with ceilings that slope so low that we can only assume our full height by standing on one threadbare spot at the centre of the ancient carpet.

It is here, in this attic room, that I stand alone for a few moments while my husband and the agent move on elsewhere. It is here that I feel it most intensely: not a presence – no, not that; not at eleven o'clock in the morning on an autumn Tuesday – but a deep discomfort, one that catches at my throat and raises goosebumps on my skin. Sadness, too; someone, I think, has been unhappy here, deeply unhappy, and their unhappiness clings to the plasterwork, the bricks and slate, and if we were to live here, it would infect us, like a virus, like a poison. But we won't live here. We can't live here. I don't want to spend another moment in this room, this house. Every part of me is urging me to leave, to go, to get *out*.

So we go. Out on the street a few moments later, we stand looking back at the house, reading the blue plaque that it bears, alone among the short undistinguished row of terraced houses. *Annie Besant, Social Reformer, Lived Here.* We know this already: our rented flat is only a mile or so away, and we have done our research, pored over the online listing. The location is good. The house has stairs – unprecedented for us, as millennial urban tenants. The historical association is intriguing. And yet, when the agent has shut his car door and driven away, we agree, at once, that we couldn't live here, and not only because we lack the money to do the necessary renovations.

'It felt weird in there, didn't it?' Andy says.

I nod. 'Yes. It did.'

Later, I read more about Annie Besant – 'a freethinker, a journalist, a publisher and editor, an atheist, a promoter of birth control, a socialist, a theosophist and a

political leader' (English Heritage, 2020) – and learn that she had rented this house, at 39 Colby Road SE19, after separating from her clergyman husband.

Her mother and only one of her two children - her daughter - had been permitted to go with her. Her mother had grown sick, and her son had remained with a husband she hated. I was sure, then, that the sadness I had felt in that room had been Besant's – or some kind of echo of it, as inexplicable, at least on a rational level, as this seemed then, and still does now. Sure enough, anyway, to feel the stirrings of an idea, sowing itself in the place between the real and the imaginary, between looking out and looking in, where a work of fiction begins to take root, and grow.

The Mother Line

And now, as I write the conclusion to this commentary, some ten years since my husband and I walked around that sad, gloomy house, I find myself returning there in my mind, and in my work. Again, I am looking out – at a real view, a real place; or at least, my own realist version of it – and looking in, at the way a fictional character of my own invention feels about that place; at the particular hue and heft of her interior world.

Right now, in the autumn of 2024, with the latest version of my fifth novel *Births, Deaths and Marriages* submitted to my editor Kirsty Dunseath, my thoughts are turning, as they always do, to the next novel I will write. There is a contract attached to this novel – I signed a two-book deal with *Births, Deaths and Marriages* back in 2022, so I am due to discuss my plans for this next book with Dunseath imminently, and to deliver a manuscript some time in 2025. Publication, if all goes well, will follow a year later.

I have in mind, then, a novel that takes place, at least in part, in Besant's house on Colby Road. The title is *The Mother Line*; the idea is to trace the lives of, and

connections between, five generations of women in the same family, starting with a version of Besant, back in the mid-1800s, and moving down the ladder of the generations to somewhere close to the present day.

I am interested in inherited trauma – in how a crisis suffered by one woman, more than 150 years ago, can make its presence felt across the generations – and in the intricacies of the relationships between mothers and daughters, and in the intense, all-encompassing business of mothering, so often absent from conventional histories.

I am interested, too, in crafting my own version of a family saga – a type of novel I adore, from Elizabeth Jane Howard's masterful Cazalet chronicles, tracing the fortunes of an upper middle-class English family through and after the Second World War, to Jane Smiley's peerless, immersive Last Hundred Years trilogy, exploring the lives of a farming family in the American Midwest across a century.

And I am interested, again, in both looking out – at the complex reality, or some version of it anyway, of life, love, work and motherhood for each generation of my fictional family – and in looking in, at how each of them responds to the particularities of their environment, their opportunities and challenges, the ways in which each of them is raised by the woman who came before.

I am, at the time of writing, thinking about which structural device to use to best explore this. I might tell the story backwards, beginning in the present day and gradually working my way back to a version of Besant's story in the 1840s. Or I might weave the five women, the five interconnected timelines, together, offering up comparisons and contrasts between them, much as I did with the various iterations of Jim and Eva's stories in *The Versions of Us*.

This, right now, is a delicious moment, when the idea still feels fresh and full of potential (more, certainly, than the actual house on Colby Road seemed to offer as a home), and I might go anywhere with it, and the horizons of the story are unbounded, limitless. It is, I suspect, for this moment – perfect, crystalline, unsullied, as yet, by the messy business of actually trying to wade my way through the murk of the first draft – that I keep writing, as much as for the satisfaction of completing a novel, and connecting with readers, and, a decade or so into my writing career, having had this unprecedented opportunity to reflect on my creative practice; on what I do as a writer, and how, and why.

Closing the curtains

Let's take a final look, then, at the painting that so 'hooked' (Felski, 2020) me in the National Gallery of Art in Washington all those years ago, and to which I have returned at various points throughout this commentary: Andrew Wyeth's *Wind from the Sea*.

(Wyeth, 1947)

This painting, even in a small digital reproduction, still moves me more than I can fully express. Perhaps it is the landscape – that parched, yellow-green stretch of grass, the shadowed horizon, the silvered glimpse of the sea. I know the East Coast of America quite well; we visit the US often, as I have mentioned, and Andy and I spent our honeymoon driving a Ford Mustang around New England. Perhaps there are memories there – us as newlyweds, before parenthood, before the chaos and drudgery of middle age - triggered by the image; as well as that overall feeling of reflectiveness, of melancholia, and the way the breeze lifts the curtains, bringing with it a soothing breath of briny air that I can almost feel against my skin.

But above all, now, I suspect that the painting speaks to me because it encompasses something fundamental about the way I see the world, and about my work as a novelist. Like Wyeth, I look outwards, through the window frame of each new

manuscript, and try to capture what I see. And as with Wyeth, too, both the pattern that this frame constructs – the abstraction, if we like, conveyed in fiction through structure, experimentation, playfulness with form - and the feelings that the view inspires, in myself and in my characters, are equally essential.

Realism and interiority are the twin pillars of my work as a writer; two qualities that I admire in so many of the contemporary authors from whom I draw inspiration, many of whom have found their way into this commentary – William Boyd; Anne Tyler; Ann Patchett; Elizabeth Strout (herself a chronicler of New England, as it happens); David Nicholls; Audrey Niffenegger; Tessa Hadley, and others too numerous to name. Two qualities that I now understand better, with far greater complexity and subtlety, after working towards this PhD.

I had hoped, in setting out to write this commentary, to achieve two things: to 'critically explore the relationship between the published work submitted and the current body of knowledge in the field', as required by the examination rubric (MMU, 2020); and, in so doing, to more fully understand my own work as a writer - to open a new window, if we like, onto my work as a novelist.

I have, like Wyeth, found that window; I have pulled back the curtains, thrown wide the sash. I have leant out, and seen what there is to see. Now is the time to draw the curtains, and return to my desk. The next novel is demanding to be written, and my task is to look inside – myself; my characters; the restless curiosity that keeps me writing, asking questions, seeking answers to them where I can – and begin again.

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