

## Caroline Edwards

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[caroline.edwards@bbk.ac.uk](mailto:caroline.edwards@bbk.ac.uk)

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Caroline Edwards

### An Interview with Jon McGregor

Born in 1976 in Bermuda, Jon McGregor grew up in Norfolk and currently lives in Nottingham in the UK. McGregor came to literary prominence with the publication of his first novel, *If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things* (Bloomsbury, 2002). The novel was an immediate success and at just 26 years old McGregor was the youngest contender – and only first-time novelist – for the Man Booker Prize long list that year. Shortlisted for the British Book Awards Newcomer of the Year, the Commonwealth Writers Prize and the Sunday Times Young Writer of the Year Award, *If Nobody Speaks* went on to win the Betty Task Prize and the Somerset Maugham Award in 2003. This critical success enabled McGregor to write full-time, move out of his narrow boat and give up his various part-time jobs; which had ranged from working in a call centre, a t-shirt factory and a post room to standing in a bear costume to advertise the new pound shop in Barnsley high street.

McGregor conceived the novel whilst studying Media Technology and Production at the University of Bradford, where he became absorbed by the anonymity of urban life and its complete contrast from his own rural childhood. As he has written:

For a long time, I had felt alienated by this urban landscape; I had grown up in a small market town in East Anglia, and I missed the open spaces, the flat land, the ability to wander from my front door to the woods and the streams of the countryside close at hand. I resented the noise and the enforced hurry of urban life, the litter, the disregard, the fear of violence. But that night, standing on the roof of my house and hearing the symphony of the city by night, I fell in love. I decided to

write a novel about this love, and I decided that it would begin here, in the brief moment of quiet before the dawn (McGregor website).

This moment provided the opening to *If Nobody Speaks*: the brief pause in the city's all-night "constant crush of sound" as road-menders, factory machines, delivery lorries, fighting cats, night fishermen and drunk teenagers observe "the briefest of silences" (pp. 1, 3). McGregor's lyrical attentiveness to the moments of unremarked beauty in the minute workings of inner-city daily life frames a novel of great warmth and sensitivity, exploring the connections that puncture the otherwise anonymous urban routines of what he has called "the archetypal inner-city terraced street" (qtd Cocker).

McGregor's second novel, *So Many Ways to Begin* (Bloomsbury, 2006), explores a similarly balanced investigation into the joy experienced in the most mundane and everyday occurrences as well as the emotional impact of long-term depression. Shortlisted for the Encore Award (2007), *So Many Ways* traces the steady erosion of the youthful ambitions of its married protagonists David and Eleanor Carter (parents of the unnamed female narrator in *If Nobody Speaks*), structuring the narrative around a collection of personally archived objects from both characters' pasts. The novel's portrait of a marriage is set in Coventry – a city McGregor chose because 'the 20<sup>th</sup> century history of Coventry is a microcosm of the history of England' (McGregor qtd Cocker) – and traces David's search for his own identity after he accidentally learns of his secret adoption shortly after WWII. David's biological mother was, he discovers, an Irish migrant worker and the novel's themes of exile, migration, alternative possible histories, and personal and national identity are echoed in David's work as a museum curator, organising an exhibition entitled "Refugees, Migrants, New Arrivals." Although it was less celebrated than *If Nobody Speaks*, McGregor's second novel was well received by critics and has to date been translated into Turkish, Romanian, French, Finnish, Italian, Dutch, German, Greek, Spanish, Portuguese, Korean and Hebrew.

2010 has seen the publication of McGregor's third novel, *Even the Dogs* (Bloomsbury), which offers a compassionate and unflinching interrogation of a community of homeless characters: from the novel's central, dead character, Robert, to heroin addicts, runaway teenagers, army veterans who have served in Afghanistan, the Falklands and Northern Ireland, as well as the many different welfare institutions they drift between. The novel offers an interesting companion to *If Nobody Speaks* in its examination of the marginalised underbelly of contemporary inner-city life, but retains McGregor's poetic intensity and his refusal to ignore the idiosyncrasies of individual characters at the expense of transmitting any social or political message. The novel has already received high praise from a variety of reviewers, and despite his desire to 'be an anonymous recluse who spreads lies and misinformation about himself' (McGregor website), an emerging body of critical work is starting to gather around McGregor's life and works. One critic, for instance, signals McGregor's stylistic contribution to contemporary British fiction, writing that in *Even the Dogs* 'McGregor turns a clear-eyed and compassionate gaze on lives that contemporary fiction has often shown itself more likely to ignore entirely or reshape into tendentious tales of social alienation' (Rennison 2010).

This persistent concern with prioritising the particularities of individual characters above any "tendentious" social or political message – particularly in his representation of the war in Afghanistan or the breakdown of community in inner British cities – distinguishes McGregor from many of his British contemporaries. Whilst his novels are firmly located in the minutely-observed emotional nuances underpinning apparently ordinary, unremarkable lives McGregor's own life, however, seems to be peppered with political involvement and local activism. According to his website, McGregor spent most of his summer in 1995 'lying down in front of bulldozers in an attempt to stop them building a road in Kent' (McGregor website);

whilst, with what I have come to appreciate as his typically dry sense of humour, McGregor describes his involvement in the anti-Iraq War march in 2003 in the third person:

Somewhere off Goodge Street he sees a man peering from the window of his handsome Georgian townhouse, plotting a novel about a man who lives in a handsome Georgian townhouse and has a nice car (McGregor website).

This self-conscious fabulation – which inserts his own persona into the historical and fictional events that inform Ian McEwan’s 2006 novel *Saturday* – betrays not only McGregor’s instinctive sense of a good story but also an investment in politics that is deliberately absent in his novels.

Fittingly, given the importance of chance meetings in his novels, I first came to be introduced to Jon McGregor by accident after meeting a mutual friend who was involved with the pioneering Nottingham Writers’ Studio. The Studio is a collaborative resource and work space that McGregor helped set up in 2006 for Nottingham-based writers and now boasts over 75 members: from novelists, playwrights and screenwriters to journalists and critics. I first met Jon at the Writers Studio in February 2008 to discuss *If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things* and *So Many Ways to Begin*. We met again shortly after the publication of *Even the Dogs* in February 2010 at the University of Nottingham. The substance of these conversations forms this interview.

Q: Perhaps I could start by asking you about this idea of the “moment” in both your novels; where so many multiple possible alternative things might have happened. Why do these specific moments excite you as a writer?

A: Well, partly, that’s where I started out writing – taking things that I’d seen in real life and then running away with them. The key starting point for *If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things* was regularly seeing children playing in the street, almost getting run over and thinking “what would happen if...” And on a lesser scale an argument at someone’s front door, or something you hear on the bus, these little moments that you just spend the rest of the day thinking over. And maybe it’s because this sense of observing was how I got into writing in the first place that the theme fed back into my early stories – the idea of lives pivoting on single moments and lives being changed by passing remarks and stray comments and accidents and coincidences. I think in the first book it was just part of the aesthetic, and in the second book, *So Many Ways to Begin*, it was more of a theme, more of an idea that I was playing with – why people’s lives go the way they do, why people think that their lives go the way they do, and what meaning they put onto that and how they deal with that.

When you were asking in your email about the purposes of fiction, one of the things I was thinking about was if you read a lot of fiction, and a lot of *good* fiction, then ideally that creates in you, in the reader, a kind of capacity for empathy and curiosity and imagining yourself into somebody else’s position – because that’s what fiction is. And it had never seemed like a strange thing to me; it just felt like a natural way to be in the world. But this was a big problem for me between the first two books – it wasn’t something I’d ever given much thought to and suddenly the first book was out and people were talking about it and it made me quite self-conscious about, say, if I was listening to someone’s conversation then suddenly, “oh, that’s part of my job, I need to put that on my expenses or something” – and it made me very self-conscious about doing that. Before that it had been a very unself-conscious thing, and it’s just not anymore.

Q: I read that in an interview you described the lyrical prologue to *If Nobody Speaks* as “a kind of old-fashioned storyteller’s ‘come here and pay close attention.’” And storytelling plays an important part in your second novel, *So Many Ways to Begin*, as David struggles to find an audience to whom he can narrate his life story. Can you talk a bit more about the role of storytelling, since it’s flagged up in the second book in a self-reflexive way.

A: Yes, and I think it was also part of what I was trying to do in the first book, to a lesser extent – setting up moments when people are telling each other their own stories. Especially with the young people in the first book, there’s quite a lot of storytelling and anecdote telling. Again, that was part of what first got me into writing. I’ve become a bit wary of referring to Douglas Coupland as an influence, but when I read *Generation X* it seemed obvious to me that it had been completely misconstrued by most people, and rather than being this very hip survey of a generation it was actually all about storytelling and the importance of storytelling and the function of storytelling in a society. And I read it when I was at university, and some of the modules I was studying were sociological and anthropological, and so I did a bit of reading up about storytelling in the anthropological context, particularly Joseph Campbell, and really latched onto it as an idea and as a concept. So some of my very early writing was very consciously drawn from real life, from other people’s experiences and from my own experiences – and was an attempt to mythologise small moments and turn them into stories. In a way that was my function with the first novel and then it became my theme with the second one. Because it’s all about David’s wish to understand his own story and to tell it to somebody – he comes to understand that there’s no such thing as the whole story and that the “somebody to tell it to” part of the equation is the more important. That’s all about storytelling as a kind of a way of moving forwards.

Q: I was wondering if you intended to strike a balance between the difficult or traumatic things that happen to characters like Eleanor, Kate and David and the optimistic moments in the two novels where something incredible can happen and characters become aware of what’s beautiful and sublime around them.

A: It’s not something that I’ve consciously thought about while I’m writing either of the books. Hopefully it comes as a natural result of trying to put rounded, true characters into rounded, true situations. One of my big motivations with the first book was that I wanted to write about an urban context, an inner city environment, without writing about drugs and crime and poverty and all of that stuff because, particularly at the time when I started writing *If Nobody Speaks*, it was what all young British fiction was about. It just seemed (a) quite boring and (b) a very narrow perspective. I was quite keen to focus on everything else, on the interesting stuff or the stuff that was going unnoticed. But within that – because it was hopefully a kind of truthful account, and of course there are negative things about urban life – those kind of environments are generally very transient and that has certain problems associated with it, the little negative things going on in the novel – vandalism, litter, when the old guy gets spat on from the bus. And it was the same with the second book, although maybe it was more deliberate, because one of the things I was interested in with David and Eleanor’s story was why they stayed married for – presumably their whole lives, certainly for as long as we see them – despite the difficulties and disappointments and frustrations. And perhaps if they’d been born a generation later, they would have been thinking well “I could do this, I could do that, I could go here, I could go there, I could leave this person behind...” But people in their generation didn’t really have that mindset of absolute choice, so my question was: what is it about a relationship that makes it survive, how do they get past all the bad stuff and then still find something new and something positive? Which is what

the very last chapter is all about – moving forwards. I was maybe more conscious in that one about the balance between pessimism and optimism, but generally it's not something I consider.

Q: How do you feel about representations of “community”? In *If Nobody Speaks* it seems structurally that you're very much trying to overcome hackneyed representations of urban anonymity by finding a compassionate way to narrate the collective story of an entire street.

A: Well, it's tricky because it is one of those topics. The “sense of community” is like “the sense of national identity” – it's just an excuse for people to get on the radio and talk a load of nonsense. It's such a nebulous concept. Everyone seems to think they know what they mean when they're talking about it. I think for me, it was something I was thinking about a lot when I was writing the first book; the idea that people can live next door and not know each other's names did bother me a lot, and still does. It does just seem wrong somehow, out of kilter with the way that human societies have mostly existed through history. And it seems obvious that that has created problems. But I think the problem in discussing it is that really this absence is a symptom of lots of other stuff – economics, social, political, structural stuff – yet it gets talked about as if it's a cause, as if people are lacking in community spirit, as if they just need to have a couple of street parties and village fairs and everything will be alright again.

But having said that, where I live now, where I've lived for 7 or 8 years, usually if I go to the shop I'll bump into somebody I know on the way, and usually if I go into the pub there'll be someone I know there, and usually if I take my children to the park there's other parents with children who I know. To me that network of connections is enough for a community. And I wonder in hindsight whether I was being more anxious about transience and community because actually I was a student and I was in a street where people were chopping and changing the whole time and the people who lived there permanently weren't in the least bit interested in getting to know people who were going to be leaving a year or two later. But I do think there's a much bigger role in society for co-operation, collective action, collective ownership, a greater sense of ownership of common resources, all that stuff. But what can you do? I don't like cars, for instance, partly for environmental reasons but also partly because I think they create the disparate, transient, scattered non-community that everyone's so worried about; but you have to let things like that go sometimes, because the world is how the world is and you're only going to get a headache from banging your head against a brick wall.

Q: If those are your political or social beliefs – is that something you'd ever try to get across in your novels? Do you see them as having a political function in any way?

A: No, not really. I think it's pretty essential for a work of fiction to be a story about some people to whom some things happen and as soon as you start trying to put any other kind of agenda onto that you kill the story. I mean, I've had a few invitations to contribute a short story to an anthology which is about, say, Scotland, or an anthology where all the stories have the titles of Smiths' songs. People seem quite keen to put out anthologies of short stories on certain themes: “Go and write a story on X, Y, or Z” or “come on a three week residency in some town or island and write a short story based on that...” And as soon as you've got some artificial or external reason for the story I think you've killed it. And I think the same applies to any kind of political agenda. I was actually quite worried when I was writing *If Nobody Speaks*. I was aware that I had these two quite clear themes: one about the community in the urban environment and the other about remarkable things going unwitnessed. And I was very aware that I was feeding those ideas into the book and constantly trying to pull back from that and concentrate on the characters and not give the characters

things to say to express those themes. Although I think once or twice they did. Well, I know they did... But I would always be very wary of that. And I've kind of got the same problem with the book I'm writing at the moment<sup>1</sup> – there's great potential for a political message or a political context which is basically irrelevant to the story that the characters are living so I just have to pull back. If you do a good enough job of telling the story and of making the characters come to life then the reader will draw their own conclusions. Maybe not the ones you want them to but that's not your problem.

Q: I wanted to talk about the representation of time in *If Nobody Speaks*. It seems to be very plastic – you begin with the rush and speed and noise of this city at night and it suddenly stops in “some rare and sacred dead time,” which seems to me to foreshadow the recovery of Shahid at the end of the novel when there's an interruption in “the way of things.” What inspired you to freeze, to pause, and to accelerate time in this way, and what was your idea about “dead time”?

A: Hmm.

Q: “Dead time,” for instance, is used in nuclear physics to describe the moment after an event when particle detector systems can't record something else if it happens. Like when the beam which lights the pixels on a Cathode ray TV set remains for a second after the beam has stopped.

A: Well that's interesting, because I was doing a whole bunch of imaging physics on my course at university, so maybe it was something I picked up in a lecture one day, about Cathode ray tubes. I don't really know. Originally the first chapter was going to be the boy running out into the street and stopping the accident. But then I was thinking through the whole book in filmic terms, and I realised that I really needed a kind of opening credit sequence so I did the opening as a big crane shot, and this kind of riff emerged of noises and sound, and silence. That was an aesthetic thing really; the big establishing shot and then coming down, down, down, down to the couple dancing outside the restaurant and coming to the street. And then at the end of the book when there's all that stuff about the interruption and the quasi-mystical business with the other boy at number eighteen and the kid in the ambulance. I don't know, that was just the way it came out.

Q: It seems to be quite consistent with the theme of memory and the way you might remember a traumatic event in minute, frozen detail, but you can't remember if there was any noise. Certain moments seem to be stretched and elongated, then there's a sudden rush. It's a very subjective idea of time.

A: Yes, you're right. When I was writing the scene of the accident it was very clear in my head that if you see something like that you have this horrible sense that you can't move and things happen really slowly, and they can't possibly be happening this slowly, and why can't you move and how come you can see everything; and then you realise that actually that's how you remember it, that's not how you experienced it at the time. That was a very clear aesthetic basis for writing that scene. In fact, when I started writing the book I was hoping to stretch the 30 seconds of the accident out over the whole novel, but that turned out to be impossible, or beyond me at least. That sense of time stretching was crucial – people talk about that a lot with any traumatic incident.

Q: Your second novel, *So Many Ways to Begin*, is much tighter in focus and interrogates fewer characters. I found the novel's structure very interesting – with each chapter being centred on a specific object that David has archived in the

construction of his family history. Sometimes, however, it feels as if the objects are taking over: they seem to have more reality, more depth and more authenticity than his sense of self. They seem almost to threaten to destabilise the fragile narrative he's using to construct his identity. Is that something you were thinking about?

A: Well, there are two things. Firstly, the further the reader gets into the book, hopefully the more they realise (before David does) that he's on this quest for completion which he's never going to achieve and that this quest is derailing him a bit and cutting him off from the people closest to him. That somehow what has started out as a positive thing – his sense of wonder that he had when Julia first showed him the tobacco tin and those early experiences he had and those early collections he built up – becomes more overweighted, overburdened, and he's constantly trying to add to them and complete this story that he's never going to be able to complete. And then the other aspect is that – and in a way this was my problem as much as David's – not all the objects and the letters and the photographs provide a very solid basis for a story or for a chapter. And partly that was me sometimes trying to shoehorn scenes into this structure that I'd set up. And partly, as David, clutching at straws and trying to attach significance to things when it's not really there, and being very concerned with the question of authenticity and the genuine original object. But it was quite interesting – as I went on with it there were a lot of parallels between David as a person, David as the museum curator trying to build his story, and me the writer trying to do the same thing – and the struggle I was having to get things into the right sequence and to give the story to the reader at the right pace was the same struggle he was having.

Q: It reminded me of Julian Barnes' *Flaubert's Parrot* and the postmodern preoccupation with multiplicity and the pointlessness of searching for an authentic point of origin. I don't know if anyone's said that about *So Many Ways to Begin* – or if you yourself have thought that – but it seems quite a contemporary theme to be exploring.

A: No, people have generally talked about *So Many Ways to Begin* as old-fashioned. Quite a few people have problems with that idea – the multiple versions – but to me it was a core part of the story. And that's one of the most enjoyable and the least enjoyable parts of writing a novel – you get to certain decision-points and you have to go down one path or another. It's quite easy to start thinking “well I'll try both – I'll write this version and that version and I'll see which is best.” You get yourself into a whole world of pain, and it ends up like a “choose your own adventure” book. You have to just decide, you have to keep deciding and trusting your instincts and it's quite a challenge. Maybe that's part of what David's failing to do.

Q: I have a question about the subjunctive mood. In both novels you talk about “the way of things,” but the repetitions of subjunctive clauses – perhaps it was like this, perhaps it was like that – seems to threaten to disrupt “the way of things,” the way in which things might have been different, the ways in which unknown events like David's birth might have happened. I was wondering what is it about this subjunctive condition of possibility that interests you. The characters in Alan Bennett's *The History Boys* refer to it as the ways in which events in history could have happened differently.

A: That's interesting. When I was starting *So Many Ways* I had a friend who was writing a philosophy of history PhD about causation and alternative histories and all that kind of business, and for a while I was trying to draw in some of those more academic ideas but it didn't really work. I don't know why it's interesting. It just is to me and that's why it's come through in both books. Partly it's just an aesthetic thing,

it just feels right when I'm writing. I wonder if – and this is slightly off the top of my head – but I wonder if it's partly a way of giving me an excuse to address the reader, because most of the time I go out of my way to avoid addressing the reader, and to avoid telling the reader anything, or saying "he felt like this" or "because this had happened..." Maybe when you say "perhaps it was like this, possibly this, this and this..." the tone shifts a little bit and it's as if you're addressing the reader.

Q: There's a passage in *So Many Ways to Begin* in which Aunt Julia is talking about her whirlwind wartime romance with her husband and a period of several years is depicted through one very surrealistic, extended dance. It seems that a surrealist or non-realist perspective can give you so much more freedom as a writer: if you're exploring the emotional life of a character through memory – and how mutable it is – it seems really suitable as a narrative mode. The dancing scene reminded me of passages from some of Kazuo Ishiguro's novels and how critics have insisted on distinguishing between the surrealist and realist sides of his work. I wondered if you were thinking of exploring surrealist ways of telling a story in the future. And why that one particular moment is so out of context with the whole tone of the rest of the novel.

A: Well yes, it almost didn't survive in the book because it felt so out of context. And the original thinking behind it was to try and demonstrate Julia's state of mind, almost as if the walls had collapsed between different memories and they've all merged together. But also it was just a really fun piece to write, as soon as I came up with this notion that ok, it's all going to happen within the space of this one dance, it was just really good fun to write it. It was one of those rare pieces that comes out in one day. So I was glad it did survive. I don't think it jars but it's certainly out of step with the rest of the novel, which is quite deliberately pegged down. And yes, it's definitely a mode that I am exploring in the new book. When I was writing the first book I was coming out of film-making – well, attempting to film-make – and thinking very visually, "here's my big establishing shot," and cutting from doorstep to doorstep, very quick cuts. And then when I wrote the second book I was thinking "I'm writing a novel, I'm not writing a film so I have to think more textually for a novel – there's going to be chapters and more interior life and all that kind of stuff." And then when I wrote that dancing section I thought that this was something in between – which feels very visual and plays out in the reader's mind, yet which you really couldn't film adequately. It's visual but it's not filmic, and it felt like I'd stumbled on something a bit new. Well, new to me anyway.

But yes, it seems that as long as you can carry the reader with you as a writer, you can get away with a lot more. I've never been interested in "and then his hat turned into a cauliflower" – you know, that kind of magical stuff. But sometimes in a realist story a characters' perception can be kind of "woven" through a non-realist way of telling a narrative. I really enjoyed writing that and I'm continuing to explore it, so who knows where it will go.

Q: Turning to your latest novel, *Even the Dogs...* Firstly, I'd like to say I think it's a really fantastic novel – structurally and thematically it's doing some very interesting things. My first question really is how did you research the novel and did you have to do a lot of research for it?

A: Yes I did. There were two main strands of research – the first one was to do with death and dead bodies, and that was fairly straightforward because that was just textbook stuff – how bodies decay, what the police do when they find a body, the mortuary, what the mortuary looks like, post-mortem examination obviously, and the coroner's court. I spoke to a pathologist and to a coroner, sat in on some inquests, and medical textbooks basically. And then the other strand was all the stuff to do with



lifestyle, of living on the streets, being a heroin addict, being an alcoholic, and again I tried to keep that as factual as I could. I spoke to a couple of ex-heroin addicts, and I was quite careful not to get into asking about their life stories and their own histories because I knew that if I spoke to loads of people and collected interesting stories from them that I'd end up putting their stories in the book and I didn't want to do that. So I was mainly talking to people about logistics – how much the heroin costs, where they buy it from, how you inject it, what it feels like, how long it takes before you want some more, need some more, the difference between wanting it and needing it, what withdrawal feels like, all that kind of stuff. Information about benefits, what the day centre's like, hostels, why you might choose to sleep rough instead of in a hostel, I also spoke to a lot of job workers and rehab workers and GPs, nurses, professionals who work with drug users ... And I always felt like I wasn't doing quite enough research, but I kept having to remember that I was writing fiction. My main concern was not to write anything in the book that would stand out as wrong to someone who knew more than I do. Part of the research was showing the early draft to the people I'd spoken to and hearing their feedback and their corrections. It involved a lot more research than the other two books.

Q: Had you anticipated that level of research?

A: Yes I had, and that was one of the things that put me off writing it for a while.

Q: I wonder if I could ask you a question about your portrayal of drug-taking. There are some really incredible passages in *Even the Dogs* where the characters take drugs. Danny describes the feeling as:

Feeling well, feeling sorted, feeling like all the, the worries have been taken away. The fears. All the emotions taken care of. That feeling of, what is it, just, like, absence, from the world. Like taking your own life away, just for a while (p. 81).

And the first time Steve takes heroin, he describes it as being “wrapped up warmer and warmer and warmer. Like being cocooned in blankets and silk. Like more than any of these things. Like being held” (p. 114). There's this real sense of touch, of contact in the novel – Danny talks about moments when the chiropractor would cut his nails and touch his feet, or the hairdresser would touch his scalp – these little moments of almost professional care that mean so much to these characters. Was that something that you came across when you spoke with drug users whilst researching the novel?

A: No, it's not really something I got from the research. The descriptions of the sensation of taking heroin were taken partly from the two guys I spoke to, but also I was just looking at stuff on the internet – chat-rooms and blogs – and it seemed quite consistent that people would talk about the feeling of warmth and the feeling of comfort. One person mentioned to me that it felt like the man in those Ready Brek adverts, do you know them?

Q: No...

A: This shows how old I am. Well, the advert shows a guy after he eats Ready Brek porridge and he has this red, glowing outline around him, he's all cosy with this porridge in his stomach. Somebody described it as that – this cocoon of warmth – it's quite a specifically literal the feeling of warmth, something to do with the blood flow and it's a major cause of hypothermia, when people feel warm and don't realise how cold they are and can freeze to death. The whole stuff to do with touch and being

touched by the chiropodist – that was just my assumption. I imagined that in that kind of life being touched would be unusual and nice. I heard a few years ago there was someone in Southampton who got an MBE for her work with homeless people in the Salvation Army – she washed people’s feet for years. I think for her it quite an overtly Christian thing. People come into the Day Centre and she would wash their feet. She was talking about how people experienced that sense of touch, or not so much their being touched but their not *not* being touched, not being avoided, not being shrunk away from society.

When I was conducting my research, the thing I kept asking people was “what does it feel like?” And the main answer I got was, “you won’t know until you’ve tried it.” It was interesting to learn that taking heroin produces a very basic experience of just feeling very relaxed, very disassociated, very at ease. It seems very basic. It sounds quite morish as well.

Q: You weren’t tempted to try some?

A: No.

Q: Were you surprised that you managed to write so convincingly about something you’ve never experienced?

A: I wasn’t convinced that I was writing it convincingly until I first showed drafts to people – and that was what I was most anxious about. It was a question of asking people repeatedly in different ways to try to describe their experiences and picking on up the key images that they were using. That was one of my biggest concerns without a doubt. One of the things that struck me when I was doing research – partly talking to the two guys who’d been on the streets, but partly also talking to the various professionals – was that people who come into contact with the services quickly get very used to telling their stories, inventing a story to get what they need. So many of their encounters with social care workers seems to involve assessment of needs, and a couple of people told me it’s never hard to get people to tell you the most awful stories about their own backgrounds, because it becomes a kind of script for them.

And another aspect of it is this realisation of loss, that these characters had never shared their stories with each other when they were alive. Heroin addiction is so all-consuming – it becomes such a priority for people that it’s almost as if their stories get put on hold. Talking to people, I realised that quite a common pattern is for someone to get into heroin in their late teens or early twenties, and have a twelve year addiction, the last few years of which are spent trying to get clean. And then they come out the other end and it’s almost as if they’re still nineteen, because they haven’t had any of the emotional development or maturity – nothing’s happened for them in those twelve years, other than this very repetitive taking of heroin.

Q: I particularly liked the language barrier between your homeless characters and their care workers. This is summed up in your description of “the old blokes who the keyworkers call what is it entrenched and everyone else calls fucked” (p. 47).

A: Yes. That came through quite quickly – the different vocabularies or registers – but that doesn’t represent a lack of awareness or lack of connection between these groups of people. One of the interesting things is that a really significant proportion of the people who are professionals in the drugs field and in rehab are actually ex-drug users themselves. These are people who really know what they’re talking about, and really understand the people they’re working with. But they become part of an environment where this professional vocabulary is predominant. I’m always interested in jargon and slang, and it seems to me that the main characters’ use of

slang is no less jargonistic than bureaucratic phrases like “entrenched.” They’re speaking different dialects.

Q: You’ve said in the past that structure’s been really important to the way in which you develop an initial idea. How important was structure in shaping and propelling the writing of *Even the Dogs*? Did the conceit of the spectral “we” allow you to flesh out the novel?

A: I guess in terms of structure it was more the very simple idea of having five – it was going to be six – stages of the process of Robert’s body being taken away. That immediately gave me very clear idea of where the book was going to go – it’s quite a simple idea of having a narrative backbone which gives you a lot of freedom to do something quite unstructured within that framework. I decided very early on that each chapter would have quite different themes – the first one’s all about discovery, in the second the reader discovers things about Robert’s life, the third one’s all about the journey – so the juxtaposition of the body being carried through town and Danny running all over town. That gave me a lot of structure to play with, really. The business of the “we,” the perspective – I think that was what made me decide that I wanted to write the book. It put me off for a long time because I’ve always been very uncomfortable with anything supernatural or non-realist, but it seemed like a perspective that had a lot of opportunities for doing different things – a narrative perspective that implicated the reader through this collective point of view, and gave me the excitement to write the novel.

But it was also one of the big difficulties in writing the novel – getting that level of ambiguity right. In earlier versions it was more ambiguous. The first time my wife read an early draft of the first chapter, she said “I’m quite enjoying this, but I think you should make it more clear that the narrators are dogs.” And then I told my agent that story and she laughed and then she said, “They’re not dogs, are they?” so I thought, “I need to work on this a bit more.” That became a really interesting conceptual challenge because every reader is different and every reader is going to have their own level of willingness to accept ambiguity or frustration with it being non-realist. I had to choose my target reader in a way but, on the other hand, you don’t want all your readers to be thoroughly confused from the outset or they won’t finish the novel. That was quite challenging.

Q: Continuing with your narration of this ambiguously posited “we,” this omniscience perspective that these characters have – it made me think about the cinematic aspect of your writing, that we particularly saw in *If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things*. Is that something you were thinking about employing in *Even the Dogs* as a way of tying places and times together?

A: It was actually quite consciously anti-cinematic, because although it’s very visual it’s also *unfilmable* – it’s visual in that kind of quite dream-like way, where stuff just changes in a very unfilmable way. I took that from the scene in *So Many Ways* when Julia is dancing with David when he’s a boy, showing him how to dance and telling him about dancing with her husband, mixed up with the war and bombing and everything. I know it’s confusing but if you can get it right the reader will be able to experience these different perspectives simultaneously. That was an exciting thing to play around with. It felt like a victory for prose over cinema. I was trying to bring that concept into *Even the Dogs*: partly because it’s fun, but also because I always get fed up with the fact that one of the first questions people ask about your book is, “has anyone bought the film rights yet? Would you write the screenplay for it?” as if a book is just a stepping stone on the way to becoming a film. I don’t like that at all.

Q: I did feel a certain commonality between that dancing scene and the extraordinary scene in *Even the Dogs* where Ant is airlifted to Camp Bastion in Afghanistan – he’s lost his leg in a bomb, and there’s this incredible passage detailing the transport of heroin across the mountains, through Iran and into Europe in Toyota pickup trucks and – if I can quote you here – ‘in coffee jars, coal sacks, butcher’s vans, freight containers, arseholes and vaginas and crudely stitched wounds, forced in and out of desperate bodies, glued in under wigs and false beards and fake-pregnant bellies’ (p. 118). There’s this remarkable parallel journey between Ant coming home having lost part of his body and then these other bodies transporting the drugs. I wonder if you could talk a bit more about that passage, because it seems so important in the novel.

A: I decided to include that piece quite early on in the writing process. I knew as I was developing the characters that at least one of the characters was going to be ex-military, just because there are a lot of ex-military people on the streets. I guess I made the connection – heroin, poppies, Afghanistan – it seemed like an obvious thing to do. It feels more relevant now than when I wrote it. Actually, when I wrote that passage Afghanistan wasn’t a big news priority the way it is now, which is weird because we’ve been there since 2001, essentially. Afghanistan hasn’t gone away, but in the last year or two it’s been in the news a lot more. It seemed like a nice idea to trace the route back to Afghanistan and to parallel that with Ant.

Q: Your portrayal of drug-use made me think of the very successful HBO series *The Wire*. Do you think there’s a timeliness to *Even the Dogs*?

A: I was certainly watching *The Wire* from about halfway through the writing of *Even the Dogs*, and had to be careful sometimes not to put its vocabulary into the novel. I was initially getting all my information about the mechanics of drug-dealing from *The Wire* but when I spoke to a couple of people about how dealing works in the UK, it’s actually much more mundane.

Q: That’s what’s really remarkable about your novel – you don’t explore anything to do with drug-dealers. Apart from that passage where we see drugs transported from Afghanistan to the UK, you’re really focusing on these particular characters. When homelessness is represented in other novels, you often get the sense that it’s mediated or filtered through our guilty societal conscience and that’s something that’s really absent from your novel.

A: Yes, that was quite deliberate. I wanted to get away from the simplistic depiction of the poor homeless man curled up in a blanket in a doorway because (a) there’s a real cliché here (b) it’s not useful, and (c) it seems to lack a certain respect really, to paint people as victims of an uncaring society when it’s so much more complicated than that and denies any agency to people and the choices they’ve made. As I spoke with drug-users during my researching of the book it became apparent that the mechanics of the drugs trade were not relevant to them. I read interviews with David Simon and his book *Homicide: A Year of Killing on the Streets*. He was saying that his priority was to “fuck the average viewer” (qtd Burkeman 2009). The idea is not to spell everything out for the reader who doesn’t know about this stuff, but to make sure that the people who do know about this stuff do believe the book. In *The Wire* nothing is explained, you just have to piece together a vocabulary – that was something I was quite consciously aiming for – throwing in acronyms and slang words without explaining them.

Q: There’s so many different institutions being represented in the novel: sheltered housing, the courtrooms, the Salvation Army, day centres and lunch projects. I’m wondering, given your carefully thought out reluctance to put in any message or

agenda into your novels, if you think there's any room for a social critique here? Are you interested in readers drawing their own moral interpretations?

A: Hmm.

Q: If I could give one example, there's the suggestion that the shrapnel in Robert's brain from his military service in Northern Ireland may have contributed to his alcoholism. There's this connection between war veterans and alcoholism or drug use, which might suggest something more broadly political.

A: I guess that's an interesting example. It wasn't that I had a bee in my bonnet about how the army treats its veterans or how society treats army veterans and therefore decided to use characters to make that point. As I was thinking about it the characters were going to be it was obvious that at least one of them was going to be someone who'd come out of care, one of them was going to be someone who'd had abuse in their childhood, at least one of them was going to be someone who'd come out of the army, just because that's how it is. Those are the characters you need to have if you're going to tell this kind of story. I wanted, really, to try and "tell it how it is" and leave readers to draw their own conclusions. It is surprising to me that someone can be in the army for twenty years and not receive any support when they leave to adapt to civilian life. But it's not something I've got a bee in my bonnet about. I was quite keen to hold back from any messages or meanings.

Having said that, I did have a fairly clear political (with a small "p") intention in *If Nobody Speaks*. I had quite an agenda, really, with that book. Although it feels as if it would be crazy to read that book without picking up on that agenda or engaging with it. Whereas I tried very hard not to portray any political or moral agenda in *Even the Dogs* but I imagine – well, I know – people will be looking for one and will be wondering what my angle is. My representation of professional therapists and counsellors working with homeless people certainly wasn't intended as a critique. It was more intended to reflect the service users' own defences – and the ways in which they can become very cynical as a defence mechanism. I wouldn't want to be critical of those organisation and agencies because there are a lot of them working very hard to try and do something good. I feel like with this book my main agenda was "this is quite interesting, this is something people probably don't understand very well," because I didn't before I started researching it. I really wanted to try to show some of the characters' complexities and the social nuances involved in this kind of lifestyle. But I'm all in favour of the reader being in charge of what the novel means to them, once it's written.

Q: What's remarkable about the characters is how much community there is between them all. You've said you're interested about writing about people who are surviving on the margins and – largely invisible to the rest of the world – somehow manage to keep going against all the odds. And there are incredibly touching moments of solidarity, as well as of selfishness, in the novel.

A: That was quite an interesting thing to find out more about in the research. My first assumption was that you could live on the streets there'd be I assumed initially that there'd be a distinct subculture, looking out for each other and knowing each other very well, taking it in turns to use a particular begging pattern or saving a space for each other in the queue for the hostel. And I was quite quickly corrected on that – actually it's just as competitive as any other subculture environment and probably more so. There were lots of stories I heard about people being robbed on their giro day, or people not being able to get a certain space because they knew certain people were going to be there, lots of stories about people coming together to buy gear because you get bulk discounts, you get 2 for 1 offers. What I picked up is that's it's a

quite complex relationship – sometimes mutually supporting, sometimes trusting, often competitive, often not able to trust. Both sides of that still constitute a community – even if you’re avoiding somebody because you owe them money or they’re going to rob you, you’re still in community with them. I wanted to depict this sense of a parallel world or subculture.

Q: In many senses there seems to be a continuation here of the themes you started out with in *If Nobody Speaks*. Although *Even the Dogs* is portraying a group of heroin addicts and alcoholics, really they’re still trying to deal with those emotional difficulties of connection and disconnection that you explored in your previous two novels.

A: When I started writing *Even the Dogs* it felt as though I was making it very sharp departure from the previous two books, and a very abrupt change in tone and style, which was another thing that encouraged me to write *Even the Dogs*. But it did feel as though this was the flip side to the first book, because I wrote *If Nobody Speaks* as a reaction against the idea that the urban means drugs and poverty and this was my concession that although urban doesn’t have to mean all those things, those things are present within the urban landscape.

Q: I’d like to ask you about the poetic, pastoral images in *Even the Dogs*. For instance, as Danny is scrambling around the city under flyovers and through underpasses trying to get some gear, there are moments of the remarkable beauty of nature, even in the urban context. Or your description of the place where Ant is discovered lying after he’s been beaten up and his crutches have been stolen, and he’s lying there looking at the sky and he sees: ‘[t]his huge stretch of waste ground covered in weeds and flowers and trees and piles of rubble. Like a bloody nature reserve or something’ (p. 110). That coming together of the urban and the natural and the poetry of it is really remarkable, particularly in a novel that deals with the darker sides of drug-taking.

A: Well, thanks. I was quite conscious and that’s why I was so pleased with image they chose for the British cover of the book, because on a metaphorical level and an actual literal level I was quite interested in the imagery of the weeds and the wildflowers which survive against the odds. It does sound a bit ridiculous said aloud. But hopefully it comes through naturally that that’s what these people are doing. Surviving constantly in a very creative and inventive way – it takes a lot of creativity to buy that much gear every day and not die or get robbed or get arrested. I was quite consciously looking for those images of the heron, the flowers and the trees – I’ve always been quite fond of waste ground and unexpected nature in the city.

Q: You introduce the reader to Robert’s dead body, lying in his flat, and then juxtapose this horrific present with a happier past – a different time when Robert was young and he was moving into the flat with his wife Yvonne, and then later they are shown living there with their young daughter. There’s this real sense of temporal simultaneity – of different traces and residues, of the emotional histories contained within this space.

A: Yes, I was doing that quite particularly in that chapter to play on this idea of discovery and the idea of the peeling layers of wallpaper and the peeling layers of time. Also to be very clear with the reader right from the outset that the narrative is going to be a bit weird, a bit non-realist. That was a principle I’d set for myself right from the beginning – this was going to be a realist story told in a non-realist perspective.

Q: That brings me to the question of death. What I found particularly interesting was that *Even the Dogs* wasn't really so much about death. Your narration speculates what Robert *might have* felt just before he died but we never know what his last thoughts were or even *when* his last moments were. The novel is actually much more concerned with mourning; what Jacques Derrida has called 'something much worse than death.'

A: That's a nice quote. I always wanted Robert to be a blank character and I definitely didn't want to get into hearing from him, hearing anything from his perspective because he's dead. And I know that slightly contradicts the fact that the others are dead and we do hear from them as well, but his is the central death so I wanted that to be very blank. But also, because as soon as I came up with the idea of the ghostly "we," the ghostly narrators, because I was so uncomfortable with that I wanted to keep it as ambiguous as possible and I didn't want to get into anything to do with the mechanics of being dead. I didn't want the characters to start saying "now we are dead..." It's never interested me when I've heard it in other people's books and it seems like such idle speculation to imagine that or invent that perspective. The idea of them as mourners was the key image and you can always read their point of view almost as a mourning journey – when they're in the van going to the mortuary it's as if they're in the funeral cortège, and when they're in the mortuary it's as if it's a wake, and I've made that quite explicit. And when they're in the post-mortem it's them doing the hospital, overlap there, they go to the funeral and the inquest as well.

Q: But it's also so much less than that – there's this real sense of guilt concerning the things they should be doing – he should be laid out properly in a suit, made up properly and attended to and he isn't. There's this disjunction between the "good" and the "bad" death, or at least the good and bad processes of grieving and remembrance.

A: That's interesting. Yes, I guess that wasn't conscious but certainly that was my idea of a good death. That's partly their guilt of not having been there when he did die, or feeling that he died because they weren't there – Danny, for instance, finding his body and then not telling anyone about it. It's also a more generalised anger on their part that things are not as they should be, that their lives have not been as they should have been, and now his death is not as it should have been. I suppose, also, that was the logic of the storytelling structure that I'd given myself – that this chapter was going to be all about Robert's body and his post-mortem. But it's also a way of conferring dignity and respect. And this comes back to politics. It became quite clear to me – talking to people like the coroner and the pathologist especially, as well as undertakers and the vicars who conduct funerals even when there's no one there – that our state is very well geared up to treating people with a lot of respect once they're dead. That's obviously not a bad thing in itself but it does present an interesting contrast to how we see people who get lost in the system while they're alive. It seems to be harder to deal with living people with minds of their own: from a bureaucratic point of view it's very easy to have a system in place with a dead body. It was quite striking to me – especially talking to the coroner – to discover the sense of responsibility that people feel to perform such activities properly, even though there's no family around. Because a post-mortem is such a thorough process that it can seem very brutal and cold to someone who hasn't got any experience of it. It looks like butchery.

Q: You didn't sit in on a post-mortem examination?

A: No, I read some text books, wrote the chapter and then showed it to a pathologist who corrected me here and there. But the fact that a post-mortem is so thorough –

regardless of who the person was – struck me as quite a dignified thing, which is why I went into so much detail.

Q: Did you have any literary precedents in mind when you set out to write *Even the Dogs*?

A: No, but when I started writing it I did think “I hear that Jim Crace has written a book all about dead bodies decaying, I’d better go and read this,” so I read *Being Dead*. I was about half-way through writing *Even the Dogs* when I read William Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* – about carrying a dead body away. And I re-read James Kelman’s *How Late It Was, How Late*. It was the anxiety of influence – I just wanted to make sure I wasn’t ripping anything off subconsciously. Those were the three main books I looked at. I also read Dante’s *Inferno* and for a while I was toying with the idea of structuring *Even the Dogs* very closely around the structure of *Inferno*, but I gave up on that – it seemed pointless, really. I was originally interested in the idea of heroin addiction as a kind of possession, or a hell, or that kind of quite symbolic language.

Q: You’ve said in interview that when you were younger you hitchhiked frequently and picked up enough stories to last you a lifetime. Are you still working through some of them?

A: Yes, but not consciously. I started hitching a lot when I was 15 or 16, and I started writing when I was about 19 or 20. I stopped hitching when I was about 25. I can remember becoming increasingly aware that I should probably write this stuff down and then never did. I picked up some amazing things travelling around the UK. I was just getting around, getting to university and so on. It was really interesting because fairly uniquely it was always men who would pick you up, almost always men that did a lot of driving for their work – lorry drivers, travelling salesmen, business people – people who were often just quite lonely or were used to being on their own, and would tell you the most astonishing things. Partly I think because being in a car with somebody is quite an intimate space, but also because they didn’t know who I was – they knew that in a couple of hours they were going to drop me off, and then they would tell me these incredible things. But it wasn’t so much the specific stories as the way people revealed them, the way people told them, and what it said about them as people to have done so.

Q: I wondered if I could ask you something more about your experiences living in Nottingham and writing about places that aren’t named but could, in some instances, be Nottingham. The city has its own quite strong literary tradition and rich working-class social history. Does that influence your thinking or your writing?

A: In *So Many Ways to Begin* it was important that the particular cities (Coventry and Aberdeen) were identifiable – that was part of the story. Whereas, with the other two novels it felt important not to name places, because it felt that these could be any places. But a lot of people read *If Nobody Speaks* as being set in Nottingham and that’s fine. It only really bothers me when people read it as being set in London. However, I definitely didn’t want to name the setting of *Even the Dogs* as Nottingham because I did my research here and I didn’t want people to feel that they were being represented. It’s not Nottingham in its topography – the map doesn’t really fit, although there are certain locations you could find in Nottingham.

I’ve been in Nottingham for ten years now and I feel like I’m finally becoming interested in the heritage of Nottingham and that whole literary-historical chain that spans the Robin Hood ballads, Byron, Luddite and Chartist literature, D. H. Lawrence, Alan Sillitoe, Stanley Middleton and B. S. Johnson. But I’m interested in



that in a cultural, non-fiction sense – I’ve never really written with a sense of being part of any school or group or tradition or inheritance. Partly because it feels a little bit pompous to try and align yourself with other writers. But it would be nice one day to write something non-fictional about Nottingham. I’m also really interested in the work that Nottingham Contemporary<sup>2</sup> did the year before they opened – it was really interesting how the gallery engaged with that radical Nottingham history in a way that institutions in Nottingham seem to have been slightly embarrassed about. Certainly concerning Robin Hood. It always amazes me how little the city council make out of Robin Hood – they’ve even dropped him from the logo, which is daft. And it’s such an interesting cultural phenomenon on so many levels – the historical context, for instance, or the politics of land ownership. I noticed recently you can do an MA in Robin Hood studies and I was quite tempted.

Q: This brings me to a different question concerning tradition. Your father was a vicar and I wondered whether you have any interest in writing about spiritual or religious perspectives at a future date.

A: I’ve started describing myself as a “secular Christian.” I grew up with a Christian heritage and with faith and so was exposed to that whole inheritance of Bible stories and that whole package of values and aspirations. And although I now no longer have the spiritual faith, I’m still very fond of that Biblical storytelling tradition and see very little wrong with the morals and values of the Gospels. They seem like a very straightforward, incredibly radical model for twenty-first-century living. I haven’t rejected any of that; I just no longer have spiritual faith. But I’m quite sure that my Christian background has influenced by writing in quite major ways – partly in imagery and allusions, and partly in a sense of values.

Q: Finally, can you tell me anything about your next project?

A: The next book is short stories. I’ve got a bunch to hand already and I need some more. It’s nice to have the opportunity to write some short stories. Who knows what’s next after that. Maybe an MA in Robin Hood Studies.

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**Notes:**

<sup>1</sup> This book was subsequently published as *Even the Dogs* in February 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Nottingham Contemporary is an art gallery which opened in 2009.