



## A.L. Kennedy, interviewed by Ailsa Cox

AC: Hi.

AK: Hello.

AC: Great to see you.

AK: Nice to be here.

AC: With our bookcases behind us.

AK: Yeah, I think they're compulsory.

AC: So, I'll start by introducing you. It's really good to see you and I hope you're coping in these weird times. I'll just introduce you for people who don't know your work. The title of A.L. Kennedy's seventh short story collection *We Are Attempting to Survive Our Time* couldn't be more prescient. Open the book and the very first line is: 'You can't even touch a woman, not in the slightest.' When you wrote that, maybe you were thinking about the #MeToo movement. Reading that now it resonates so powerfully because we're all scared of touching in the middle of this pandemic. Like this one, *Panic Attack*, the stories in the collection cover themes of personal space, paranoia, confinement, isolation, disorientation, and crowds and public spaces are often quite scary, yet there's also a need to be with people. I'm thinking, for instance, the woman who's in hiding but she'll risk everything because of the sound of that piano in the café. Those of us who've followed your career since the 90s know you've got one of the most distinctive voices in literature. You've won a lot of prizes, such as the Costa Prize for your novel *Day*, but what particularly pleases me about your work and your career is that



your very first book won so many big prizes, your first publication, and you've followed that with more short story collections and we're now on your seventh: *We Are Attempting to Survive Our Time*. I'd really like to stop talking now and hear you read a bit of your work.

AK: I'm actually going to read from that first story [*Panic Attack*] which is about Ronnie, who at the beginning of the story seems to be like lots of people, pretty annoyed and infuriated, and you don't quite know why he's saying to himself that you can't touch a woman. He seems to be very angry and possibly he wants to touch women in a bad way, though he turns out to be nice. I quite often read from the beginning of this and he does not come off well. I always feel quite bad for him because you find out more about him as time passes. I think it takes like 30 minutes to read the whole story. I have done in it Germany because they have a tolerance for using your brain over a long period of time. I did say 'Do you mind, shall we do this?' And they were like 'Yeah'. It's like a three-hour event over there. They're not scared of letting culture get out, because they remember what happens when you don't.

This is mainly in italics. I will do my bad London-y accent, talking to himself. People in a crowded King's Cross Station, which we aren't going to see for a while. He's discussing a man with a beard and hypothesising:

*'It's not a hipster bastard beard he's got, not the full Gandalf I-have-mice-in-here nonsense, either. Average beard. Not a white bloke trying to show off being Muslim. Not that. The way he looks – round shoulders and a little box-set-watcher's belly – he's just slack. The beard is because he can't be bothered shaving. That's all it is. Laziness is growing out right across him, springing out plain on his face.*

*I bet he says he's got sensitive skin. Prone to shaving rash and spots.*

*I bet he keeps ointments round the side of the bath and is full of weaknesses and talks about them.*

*I bet he hasn't got a bath – shower. Mildew in the curtains and towels with no colour left in them anymore. No self-respect.*

*I bet.*



The woman is still shaking.

Ronnie does not like the man with the beard, although they haven't met and never will.

*Knob. Look at him. Wouldn't wipe my hands on that one. Wouldn't wipe my feet.*

*Useless.*

The man is wearing beige cargo pants, slung low beneath what will surely become an ever-larger gut. He has additionally a pair of trainers with show-off, over-complicated laces and a purple T-shirt displaying what might be Japanese characters. *Something like that.* He is clearly afflicted by reading magazines of the most arsehole sort and then adjusting himself to fit the world they show him.

The woman is still shaking.

*He won't know what the words on his T-shirt mean and probably they're saying, 'This dickblister bought a T-shirt and can't even read that it's calling him a Dickblister.'*

The man has a backpack lolling against his left shin.

*Little brother of your rucksack, isn't it? Just as terrible, but half-hearted.'*

So that's Ronnie.

AC: Thanks, that was great. So, last time we spoke, some years ago, when I interviewed you previously you said a short story is small like a bullet is small. Can you say a bit more about what you mean by that?

AK: Yeah, way back then we were at a time when there was an emphasis on novels as thick as a brick, as if you necessarily had to take that long to say things. I mean *War and Peace*, you do, *Life and Fate*, you do. They both have massive, historical sweeps of years and casts of thousands. But you don't necessarily want to take up somebody's time for quite that long. And there was a little bit of intellectual contempt about a form that is naturally small, which did annoy me. You can always tell, I think, when you read a novel that is by someone who writes short stories too because there is no fat. Or there is just the fat, that means you can eat the meal; there is just the necessary fat for flavour. Everything is in its place because in the short story it's tiny. We don't live in a time of Chekhov, whose short stories would be called novellas



now, or even short novels. In 2,500 words, 3,500 words, 5,000 words which is what you're given now, everything has to absolutely work. You have to follow all of the rules supposedly you only apply to poetry, which is not true, they apply to prose too, but you have to add a forward motion, some kind of plot and character, which you don't necessarily have to do in poetry. So it's absolutely the highest form of prose just to make this tiny thing work, most of them don't. Most of them are 80% and that will still be a lovely punch to the head, they are impactful, and they have to be penetrating because otherwise they don't work enough. You get in – especially if you're reading a collection or anthology – you're getting in and you're leaving, you're getting in and you're leaving, you've got to grab the person in a way that will really work.

AC: So when you're writing a story, what's your process? Do you write a lot and then cut it back afterwards, or...?

AK: I generally I avoid doing that ever because it's dismaying. You don't want to be putting words on the page before you know why, because then you're practicing not writing at your best. Particularly at the beginning of your career you don't want to be doing that. I accidentally found out that you don't want to be doing that, purely because I was so anxious and terrified, I wouldn't go near the page until I really knew what I was doing. But if you're trying to imply a sense of character particularly in a short space, if you're trying to give a sense of psychology and voice, and those are intertwined, and get that right – for people who know about people and how they work – you have to absolutely know how to layer in information so that every word is establishing character, atmosphere, plot, psychology, imagery, rhythm, musicality – it all has to work so you need to know before you hit the page, really what you're aiming for. Now because I've been doing this for 30 years, I can get away a little bit with a slight amount more busking than I would, but you just want to know what you're going to say, and you only have to rewrite because you're doing something very difficult and you always have to rewrite! You don't want to be rewriting because suddenly it's not about a camel anymore, it's about a dolphin. That's a clear argument that you totally missed. It's practice not perfection, but you



want to give yourself the best possible chance and get into habits that are habits that will allow you to succeed in something that's really difficult.

AC: In *On Writing*, that really interesting book that is not quite a book about creative writing, but many creative writing students read, you talk about inappropriate staring, or staring inappropriately. There is a story in this collection called *Inappropriate Staring*. I have this idea of you as a bit of a flâneuse, that you maybe wander around thinking about your stories and staring at people and then come back and write them.

AK: I like looking at the world, the world is nice. It's my job to make something else. So while I'm very interested in the world and people, I'm not wandering around looking for things I can nick. I like enjoying people without thinking 'I'm going to cut your finger off and take it home in my pocket' because frankly that's just creepy. I just like the operation of people because they're interesting. I think it's more fruitful and healthy and nourishing to listen to people. I spend a lot of my time endlessly talking at somebody who isn't there, which is why they can't shut me up. It's just a monologue and the meanness of me, and hopefully I'm interjecting characters, so it isn't the endless meanness of me because I've been with me for all of my life and it's not that fascinating. But somebody being themselves and me not having to put in any effort with that is kind of wonderful and fascinating. I do have a rule, which I've had for a very long time, because when I was starting out writing I was meeting starting-out writers and they were talking about 'Hmm, I steal things from people, and I go to bed with people and make stories out of that.' How? My rule is that if I meet anyone for more than 20 minutes then I can't use anything they tell me. I'm totally fine with that and, to be honest, I've not ever found it frustrating aside from in one particular instance in thirty years, because if I'm making a fictional world, even if it really closely resembles the real world, real people don't fit in it. You have to kind of chop them about and mangle them anyway. So you may as well make them up so that they actually live in that place. But you're always thinking 'the reason it will be a different person is this.' But equally, for a short story, you're also looking for that point where a reasonable person becomes unreasonable, because that's the drama.



AC: The voices are very strong in your writing. Do the voices come back to you? Do the voices stay in your head?

AK: Yeah. You're always looking for the point where, when you break off writing, you can sit back down into that tone of voice and kind of get it. So I'd spend a lot of time trying to string four or five words together to get the voices. It's odd actually, yesterday I was online watching Steven Colbert, the American comedian, and he was talking to another comedian, and they were trying to think of a Joe Biden impression. They were sad that Bernie had left the democratic race, from the point of comedy, because he's really easy to impersonate. He has the high shoulders, he has emotion, and he has a way of talking. And Joe Biden is just the way I could distantly enjoy caramel or something. They were talking about a hook, because if you get a little phrase that you can say in the voice of the person you're impersonating or trying to be, you've got a hook. Or if you're trying to learn an accent, you say the phrase that gets you into the accent. It's almost as if I have to write a hook to then be able to be that person, and then after 2 – 3 days . . . I mean I'm in the middle of a short story now and I'm probably at the point where I still don't know what that person sounds like. Or sometimes it'll arrive. I don't think often you get a fully formed idea unless you've really been prevented from having ideas and they've been mining away in your subconscious. Where you get your ideas from quite often is odd. It's endlessly asked about but it's difficult to give a proper answer because, you know, my head is full of shit the way everybody's head is full of shit and weird things occur to me. All that's different about somebody who does my job is that you begin to notice that there's a little bit of a shine on five of those things, that mean they belong in a little box that begins to be a story. Those little five things, or three things, or two things interact with each and they begin to be a story. Then you begin to have the beginning of an idea. So it's quite an odd thing, but sometimes it'll be a tone of voice. I wrote a story about somebody who was a dreadful person. I was sitting on a train, I had this terrible job where I went up and down Strathclyde endlessly on public transport that didn't work even back then, to go to prisons and elderly care centre and goodness knows what, and I was tired all the time. The actual working with the people was great but the journeys were mad. I was looking out the window and this



sentence came into my head – ‘You can make someone deaf with a pencil, just put it in their ear and shove’.

AC: Oh, really. Can you do that?

AK: Oh, yeah. Obviously, yeah. You can kill someone with a pencil – shove it in their ear and put it in their brain. Famous murder in Florida with a pen. Don’t do that at home, it’s a terrible thing to do. That arrived as a complete sentence and I can still remember it two decades later, because I had to memorise it in my head, because I had nothing to write it down on. I was going to work until the evening, and then I’d come home and had to write it down – ‘You can make someone deaf with a pencil, just put it in their ear and shove’.

And that’s the opening sentence of this story, about someone who knows that and indeed has done that.

AC: Yes. One of the other stories that I especially like is *Point for Lost Children*. That’s another station story, isn’t it? A homeless woman sitting there – a kind of monologue, the voice is so vivid and powerful.

AK: Yeah. She’s sitting like lots of people do in the London Underground. There is a sign in the tube station. It’s a point where, if you’re a lost child and you happen to see the tiny sign, they’ll also take your parent or whoever was looking after you. The beginning of that idea was partly seeing that sign and thinking that’s heart-breaking and geographical, bizarrely fundamental thing to nail to a wall.

AC: Yeah. Another thing about that story is the way you flip it so that the woman who approaches your narrator, Ann, this other woman, Marilyn, seems to be middle class, outwardly more respectable, but the tables turn as a reversal. You’re really challenging the reader to think about their perceptions about other people, I think. Do you want to say some more about that?



AK: I talk to a number when I go to London. I know homeless people don't get talked to. I mean you can give them stuff or buy them food, but you need to chat as well, because one of their many problems is people won't even look at them, so that they seem to not exist. Well that destroys you, psychically. And if you talk to people everybody's got all these stories because there's just rice-paper between anybody.

AC: Another one of my really favourite stories is the last one, the title story: *We Are Attempting To Survive Our Time*. That's the last line of the collection, isn't it? That one is a very accurately observed, re-constructed argument between a couple in Cologne cathedral. And it was so well observed, about the way people argue and how pathetic and absurd it all is. It was making a connection between the fragility of relationships and the fragility just of survival in this day and age: a backpack that might have a bomb turns out, luckily, not to have a bomb. It is quite hopeful at the end. So you're leaving us with a message of hope. It does sound that you do feel quite hopeful. I should say that the stories are also funny.

AK: Yeh, yeh . . . (laughs).

AC: A lot of really important things. But I wouldn't want anyone who hasn't read the collection to think this is serious improving literature.

AK: No.

AC: It is really, really funny the way that story begins. It's a bit like a scene from a movie. It's all completely ridiculous and people are staring.

AK: Yeah. You never want to be in a huge row where you have an audience. I wanted it to be super embarrassing. They're at the top of Cologne cathedral. I do know Cologne very well, love it deeply, and I have been up to the top of Cologne cathedral. Actually I was thinking about this story the last time I was in Cologne, or maybe one time before. I climbed up and thought, this



is where they have a fight because it's one of the worst possible, ridiculous places, where you're constantly going to be surprised by people being funnelled up huge staircases, exhausted then so they can't go straight back down, and they have to look at you, tearing strips off each other, and occasionally thinking we must look terrible. And the fact that you say dreadful things to people you love, and you don't mean them. It's this expression of strangeness, that anger is rooted in fear so you might suddenly become angry. You have to have hope.

AC: There is that dark humour, that I enjoy, and I think you do, and a lot of other people must as well. *Breaking Bad*, which you mentioned, hugely popular. It does seem as though, in these times, people like this dark, subversive, quite violent humour. There is a tone, that reminds me sometimes . . .

AK: Yeah, yeah. It's about the nature of reality, which is that it comes at you mixed. The emergency is fight-flight, but if you can't flee or fight there's the silent f, which is funny. You just make jokes about it, you know . . . 'I've lost my arm! I've lost my arm!' 'No you haven't, it's over here.' That's world war humour. And if you read *The Wipers Times*, they are making jokes about a combined gas mask and mouth organ. If you suggested that to *The Daily Mail* or *The Telegraph* they would be outraged, and their moustache hairs would fall out. But those were people in the trenches who might, at any moment, have to put on a gas mask; and maybe it wouldn't work very well, or they wouldn't have it around, or they wouldn't get it on quick enough and they'd drown on dry land. Thinking about making a joke, attaching it to a mouth organ . . . how else will you survive? You can't leave because they'll shoot you. It's odd that the only place where that doesn't make sense is literary establishment, where everything has to be comfortable and every emotion, every tone has to arrive one at a time. So, like Shakespeare has 'problem plays'. No! They're the real plays, that are both tragic and funny. And if you've got anything like decent actors and directors, they will absolutely blow your mind if they get them right. But they're very difficult to get right, because it's difficult to be really real about reality without being reality. It's how life works. I miss it, especially now, Glasgow. I moved to



Glasgow because of the sense of humour. It's the same with Liverpool, with the majority of people whose lives are not fantastic and comfortable. You get, immediately, the dark sense of humour, the fire brigade sense of humour, the medical sense of humour, the army sense of humour. How do you cope? How did Spike Milligan cope in the army, with a gun falling over the cliff and nearly landing on him . . . (laughs). The only way he could. It's so human and normal but we've allowed the narrative to put this in a weird little box and, because I'm a serious writer, you're have to not write about the fact. Of course I'm going to be funny, because I write about terrible things. I'm not going to make you think about a terrible thing without giving a laugh now and then. That would be rude!

AC: Do you ever feel that there are things that you can't say or worry about saying, that you feel people might have a go at you . . . certain topics?

AK: That's climbing into the ring and being afraid of them. No, no, no! At the moment I'm not censored by anybody so I can't pre-censor myself, particularly while I've got people like Ahmet Altan in jail in Turkey; I had to sneak his book out by devious means. I'm gonna censor myself, when I don't have to? I don't think so. No, no, no. There are things I would avoid saying but there are things I would find not true. So I'm trying to avoid saying things that aren't true about people, and things that aren't true about reality according to what I feel is true. Other than that you've got to say what you've got to say, and sometimes you have to talk about terrible things. I remember watching a film – I can't remember which film. I've never been able to find it again – It was a guy in the German army, in the Wehrmacht. He'd heard all this shooting, left his detachment and gone. And there's a whole bunch of Waffen SS, shooting civilians into a pit. He's never seen anything like it in his life. He's a soldier but he can't describe it. And he goes back to his unit and obviously looks insane. The guys say, 'What is it, what's happening, what did you see?' And he says you're going to have to go and look because I don't have words. So you have to be able to describe that for people who aren't there. You have to have words for the terrible things, otherwise terrible things don't get talked about. You don't want to go on about them, but you have to be able to give them words. You couldn't prosecute people for genocide until that word existed. So Raphael Lemkin had to make that word, specifically having



looked at what genocide was and thinking it had to be a legal concept. In the meanwhile most of his family disappeared.

AC: Yeh. A little while ago you spoke about missing Glasgow. How do you think it's affected your writing, moving away . . . if at all, of course?

AK: I don't know. You get different locations. I mean, there are two German stories in the collection because I spend a lot of time in Germany now. But then there's a Glasgow one in the collection too. I wouldn't want to not have it. I just miss it. I always will miss it. It's the only city I really deeply wanted to live in and then was able to live in.

AC: There's so much more that we could talk about, about the London stories, and the sense of history that you capture so well, and the fabric of London. But I just wanted to ask you that question, that we might have started with, about the short story again. Is it easier writing short stories now? Are more people reading short stories now than when you began?

AK: When I started there were still some places where you could have them published. But publishers decided they didn't sell well so they didn't invest in advertising them and getting them into bookshops. It was a self-fulfilling prophecy. We always said, make some big prizes, give them more attention, there's a reason why it exists as a form, you can't just let it die. Maybe it's springing back. From the point of view of writing it's the finest training ground for prose. You want it to exist. And they might be coming back. They've been talking about the death of the short story for the first fifteen years of my career, and then they've been talking about the resurgence for the last fifteen years. I haven't actually noticed a difference during either of those fifteen-year periods. I'd be very upset not continue to write in the form. Novels are different, and I like writing them too, and I like writing drama. But they are a fine, fine thing.

AC: I think that's a great note to end on. I think we are at the end of our chat, although we could continue some other time perhaps. Thank you very much. May you continue to write short stories. I look forward to your eighth collection.



AK: Me to. Thank you for having me. Big love to Liverpool because I'm watching what's going on there. Having a hotel full of NHS workers is fantastic. What you're doing in your hospitals is truly beautiful. I know you've lost people up there in Liverpool, care workers. It's a great, great city. I'm sad to not be physically coming. It's kind of like the brother or sister of Glasgow. I always love being there, so stay safe.

AC: Well we hope to have you back here for Writing on the Wall some other time. Thank you very much.

AK: Take care.