

Big Book Chat with Douglas Stuart

ALEX CLARK: Welcome everybody to the Big Book Weekend my name is Alex Clark, and I am absolutely thrilled now to be joined by Douglas Stuart, author of *Shuggie Bain*, winner of last year's Booker Prize. Douglas, welcome from New York!

DOUGLAS STUART: Thank you, Alex, it's so good to see you again.

ALEX: Well, we saw each other very briefly didn't we, in this context, on a Zoom meeting, when we were talking with all the other Booker Prize short listees, your fellow nominees, just before the prize was announced and I was chatting to all of you and asking what it was like and then the next day your life changed totally when *Shuggie Bain* won the Booker Prize. Can you just tell us a little bit about what that moment was like?

DOUGLAS: It was perhaps one of the greatest moments of my career I think and so entirely unexpected. I was spending - at the Booker awards thinking about everyone else's work because I'd - weeks leading up to the announcement I had been reading their work because I wanted to be so present in the moment. And when they announced my name, and I was so floored and surprised. But it has changed everything for *Shuggie* and also for my career. It's brought so many new readers to my work and then at the very same time because it's 2020 it has changed nothing because I am still sitting in my living room and stuck at home. But it's marvellous.

ALEX: But *Shuggie* now has been translated into numerous languages, is going around the world, you are getting to meet readers from around the world because of circumstances in which we find ourselves. And I believe the latest language it's going to is Mongolian, so *Shuggie* is really traveling, isn't he?

DOUGLAS: He's really travelling, yeah. I think at the beginning of his life people were worried about the Scots language and the Glaswegian dialect - and I forget the number - but he's in the high 30s, translating into over 30 languages, I think almost 40 and the latest is Mongolian, just the Swedish translation just came out as did the Norwegian and receiving feedback that says the Scot's language has translated beautifully and people are really sort of enjoying reading that.

ALEX: It was really important to you to write in that voice of vernacular Scottish, and I know we are going to talk in a little while about some of the writers who have come before you who paved the way for you to feel comfortable and happy and ambitious to do that. But just thinking first about story, *Shuggie Bain* is a story in some ways very similar to your own about young boy growing up in extremely difficult circumstances with an alcoholic mother, in poverty in Glasgow in the 1980s with all the politics that that entails. That is a story that has clearly captured many people's hearts. Why do you think that is?

DOUGLAS: Oh, that's a great question. I think many people think about the book in terms of its themes. When they come to the book they think about poverty, addiction,

homophobia perhaps. Social unrest. But really the book is about - but when they read it, they realize the book is about love and it's about hope, and about how two souls cling to each other and that is universal. You know, I tried to write in time and place. Glasgow in the 80s no longer exists in the way that it did and it's a very specific time and place but the themes and the struggles the characters go through are very universal. Everyone can relate to some of the things that Agnes and Shuggy go through.

ALEX: Agnes is Shuggy's mother and as I know reviewers have pointed out the book could well have been called Agnes Bain, couldn't it? She's a character who we have so much sympathy for. So much feeling for and also so much impatience with at times. Because we worry about what she's doing with her family...to this little boy. Treading that kind of - those lines of sympathy must have been a big part of making the book work.

DOUGLAS: Yeah, I just wanted her to be as complex a character as people are in real life. And often times we do talk about her as the alcoholic mother but she's so many more other things. You know at the very beginning of the book we see her as a friend, as a foe, a daughter, as a jilted wife. She has a lot of aspirations and a lot of very modest dreams and then she at the same time is very deeply hurt and she sees that all the things that were perhaps promised her from her childhood and from her own sort of mind are not going to become true and then she starts to descend into drink but the whole time I hope we are rooting for her in the same way that Shuggie is rooting for her. Because Shuggie - in the way that children are - he's a remarkable child because he knows nothing else. Everyone I think as adults we look at Shuggie and think, why didn't he or why can't he see this, but children deal with whatever is laid in front of them and whatever their universe is. And he loves no one more than his mother. So, he comes to the situation - he comes to the relationship with nothing but love for her.

ALEX: That moment that you capture so well right at the very beginning of the book where the atmosphere is everything, the claustrophobia, Agnes and her husband, Big Shug the taxi driver, are living with her parents. The children are all crammed in there, the neighbours, it's absolutely permanently noisy and busy. And it feels that there is just nowhere for Agnes to escape to just find a kind of respite and I think that's an amazingly sympathetic portrayal. That was how her life was wasn't it - the life of a character like that.

DOUGLAS: That's absolutely true and actually how my life was as well as a young...I did grow up in the Sighthill Towers and my siblings and I lived with my mum and dad and grandparents in this tiny flat. And it was a good time, and it was a bad time too because all the character of Agnes really wants is a very modest thing. A front door of her own. She wants both a home of her own for - she's in her late 30s - for her husband and her children and she also wants to be able to open the door and enter onto a garden and not be in this high-rise flat. But it was a very sort of claustrophobic time, but it was also a time of enormous solidarity. I wanted to show Agnes at the beginning of the book surrounded - although it sort of chafes against her and she's feeling suffocated - she's surrounded by friends and she's surrounded by love and as she starts to slide into addiction that starts to fall away and part of what I was trying to do with that following away is, oftentimes we think of solidarity within working class communities and there always is. But sometimes the

solidarity is united against you and not into your benefit. And so, Agnes, because she has pride and vanity, and notions that other people would think were above her station she's very quickly excluded towards the end of the book.

ALEX: It's a wonderful moment when she kind of does get what she wants in the sense of her sort of front door and they move out of the tenement and into the, you know, the outside more urban area with indeed the open spaces but also the slag heaps and there's a wonderful moment when she gets there and she says "I dressed up for this" and you have this kind of amazing picture of this woman, trying to kind of keep her family together in the face of overwhelming kind of odds really. In many ways you were writing a portrait of the past, of Glasgow and its surrounds in the 1980s of the key industrialization of the area. How did you begin to put that together?

DOUGLAS: Actually, I began to put it together because I'm such a huge fan of Scottish literature, west of coast of Scotland and also urban Welsh. And every book I read focused on men or a male character at the heart of the industrializing region and my entire experience had been as the son of a single mother had been about the feminine and also being queer, I was completely excluded by men from the age of about six up. Boys and other men didn't know what to do with my femininity and so my experience at the time was never really quite reflected in books because the books were focusing on men so when I sat down to write *Shuggie* I thought I just want to write this from a mother's point of view and from her young queer son's point of view. And just to add another layer to all these books that are set there, and I grew up during that time and I understood the effects of the industrialization. I'd seen my grandfather, my father, my brother and my uncles work really go out and work hard jobs and put their faith in trades and put their faith if they had an apprenticeship and they learnt a skill that that would see them through life. And, you know, we didn't have much, but we had enough and then when the eighties came around, I remember as young boy seeing everybody start to struggle and one of the things I wanted to show in *Shuggie Bain* is that it isn't the Bain family that is just struggling, it's people around them. Unemployment went up to the high twenties under the Thatcher government and I forget the term - without telling anybody the Thatcher government classified Glasgow as a place of decline and they were okay with that. They were going to manage the decline of the city. And to the people of Westminster that must have seemed like a very fine thing to do but there were real people affected by those decisions and I come from them.

ALEX: I wanted to ask you about this beginning of your career, because actually you started writing at a super, super young age - you were writing your mother's autobiography, you've said in interviews. She would say I'm going to tape my autobiography and Douglas the writer started there. But then it was quite a long time from that moment to the publication of this book. Can you just tell us a little bit about that?

DOUGLAS: Yeah, oh, so much ground to cover there, Alex.

ALEX: Yes, I know! Telescope that in.

DOUGLAS: Well, it's true I was an incredibly lonely child but when you suffer or when you have a parent that's suffering with addiction you learn a lot of strategies to cope with that parent. And one of the things I learnt at about seven or eight is I could keep my mother's attention on me if I sat down and wrote her memoirs. If I was a vessel for her stories. She didn't have anyone else to tell and so if she could tell me we could do that. So, I spent a lot of my youth writing my mother's stories down. And we didn't often get too far because that's the nature of alcoholism, but it gave me that sort of practice, I think. But as I go into high school, I want to study English I want to be a writer. But I had grown up in a house without books which isn't unusual, and it isn't a criticism. I can't imagine any kids around me had books at home and so that was just the way it was. But you know, English and academia were seen as not something that boys like me could follow. I only start really truly reading in earnest at 17 and by then it's too late for me to compete or build a life there. And so instead I am encouraged, which has been wonderful for me, into textiles. It's an incredibly pragmatic Scottish industry and I build a career in textiles and I'm actually a knitter by trade. That's what I spent 20 years doing. And that sort of took me to London which took me to New York. But At the height of my fashion career, designing knitwear for fashion brands I was unfulfilled. And so, in 2008 I sat down in private and didn't tell my friends, didn't tell my family and just began to write and that was a ten-year journey that Shuggie began then and over ten years I wrote and wrote and wrote and created this world with these characters.

ALEX: And at that point, at that - when the start of that process began to happen you didn't conceive of this as a book that would be published, did you?

DOUGLAS: Yeah, I had two things that were -more than two things - but I had some things really in my mind. I felt an enormous sense of inferiority. I think I'm a product of the British class system. And so, when I was sitting down to write I thought who thinks I can write a book – what am I doing trying to write this book - and who wants to read this story but that didn't stop me from writing it. And so, I sat down and I began and just managed the project or the book as it came to me. So, I actually began in the heart of the book and I wrote the scene with Leak and Shuggie on the sea of slag. But the whole time I'm writing these chapters I am not imagining it would ever be a book because it's far too intimidating to think of the final thing before you actually tackle the thing in front of you but when I lift my head after a year, I have 900 pages and I have a first draft of a novel – quite an epic novel. It's much more sprawling than the final book you can read today but still, for ten years I don't tell anyone I'm writing the book. The only person who reads it is my husband and part of that was because I was simply just enjoying the writing of it. And everything else in my creative life was about sharing or about collaborating or never feeling like I had enough time for my creativity. And so, writing for me was a very protected, private writing space and I didn't want to share it with anyone. But after working on the book for ten years I realized I had to let it go. I had to close it because I couldn't stop revising it and I was spending too much time with the characters and in 2018 I tried to get it published.

ALEX: Throughout that period before you thought, okay, this could be something, this could be in the world, this could be a book that other people would read. What - as an object,

what was it for you? Was it a space to explore things that had been contested in your own mind but still emotionally painful to you?

DOUGLAS: It was a lot of things. It was an opportunity for me to make sense of myself as a complete person. Because a kid growing up in poverty in Glasgow and then a man working in fashion in New York. Anybody who knew me in New York had no concept of the entirety of me or where I came from or who I loved or what it was like and I think in a way Shuggie is a little bit of a manual - an operating manual to me. And then I think it was also a place for me to reflect and try to understand some of the situations that I lived through as a kid. You know when you're a kid in poverty or perhaps living under a patriarchy, which it was. Or dealing with a parent with addiction you have no control. Everything, anything that happens to you, any trauma that happens without your control or without your understanding or why did that happen? And so, in writing Shuggie, it was a chance for me to really think about addiction, what it meant to be a woman in 1960s Glasgow, the options that would be open to my mother, and so it was a very cathartic thing, but it was also an exercise in empathy for me to try and understand the causes for the traumas that I lived through I suppose.

ALEX: I was very struck a little bit earlier when you were talking about a child of seven or eight, you, Shuggie in the story, as a child dealing with a parent with addiction with deep problems. That age, you're not even able to name those things at that point. The word addiction doesn't mean anything to a seven or eight-year-old. But for you, as a child, going through that and then later making sense of it and for the character, how important is it to be able to feel your way into the mindsets of that almost preverbal child grappling with these great kinds of adult things, traumas.

DOUGLAS: Yeah, it was difficult to do but then I also realize when I was thinking about homophobia, Shuggie is bullied quite often and quite early on for his femininity or sensitivity but there's also no word for homophobia or gay or sort of gay pride or that. It's all slurs and it's all derogatory words and it's also a very sort of alienating thing for Shuggie to go through because it sews the seeds of self-hate inside him very quickly and then he spends the book trying to adjust and to be as he sees normal boys being in not too... that was terrible! But trying to be normal but he has no language for it. And Agnes has no language for it and part of having no language for it was how it was. There was no way to sort of talk about it or express it but also Shuggie is concealing an awful lot of shame on different facets. The family spends a lot of time hiding their poverty which is manifested through Agnes' pride and her shame. He spends a lot of time not telling people how he's being bullied for being queer and then he spends a lot of time trying to conceal his mother's addiction. And so, although he has no language for it, he is spending a lot of time knowing it's sort of - he's meant to feel a shame about it and hiding it and coping with it.

ALEX: Do you think that's what novels do, they kind of allow you to give shape and have feelings for stuff you haven't really had the language for?

DOUGLAS: I think that is absolutely what they do but I think also sometimes it's enough to just show the situation without then going in and giving names to it today. One of the

hardest things to do in the book was actually to write the story about these characters in truth for the characters without imposing a 2021 mindset on it. We obviously know much more morally about misogyny and homophobia and root causes and therapy - the therapy you need when suffering with addiction. And these were just things not available to the character. And so, I wanted to make sure that anything I wrote was in service to them. And not to the filters and the optics we have today.

ALEX: You also wrote a wonderful story called *Found Wanting* that was published in the New Yorker and it's about basically couples meeting one another through personal ads and you kind of made the point talking about it - to the point where you were growing up, you know, this was the way that people made contact with one another – that men made contact with one another. That it's really kind of unrecognizable now. It's again a snapshot of a culture that's been superseded by the way we live now. And I wondered how important it was to you to write about sexuality, about gay lives and I think this is a subject of your next book too. To the point where younger generations just may not recognize them at all.

DOUGLAS: It's crucial to me. And I think you're right. It's the younger generation, I think we've come so far in terms of gay rights and accessibility and really creating communities of connection. You can find people who like the same things as you. It doesn't have to be a sexual thing. It could be you like canaries. You can find them on the internet within ten minutes and growing up in the 80s and 90s on a housing estate in Glasgow I never knew more than the four streets that I lived on. Poverty is about mobility sometimes and about seeing more of the world. I had no access to that. And funnily enough Glasgow was an incredibly cosmopolitan place with a very vibrant gay scene but not for me – not living where I lived. So when I talk to young gay people today and I see the ease that many of them move through the world with I want to make sure that we're always adding to the queer history and just showing all the facets that it was and if you were working class and if you grew up in that kind of poverty, you had to take some big risks in order to find your community and I think that's just part of gay history so I'm fascinated by that. It's also about a time of innocence and loneliness.

ALEX: There's a wonderful thing that you said in an interview about - at that point, if you were gay you had to go into the world - I had to write it down it was so fantastic. Armed only with a novel and a couple of pages torn from your mother's underwear catalogue. And I think throughout that story when you talk about your work through *Shuggie Bain* there is an incredible humour. There is a way of seeing the world that is funny and sharp and I think that is what readers have cleaved to. And of course, many of the things, including the poverty in *Shuggie Bain* are things that you also have to describe in unflinching detail and again treading that line the difficult, isn't it?

DOUGLAS: It is difficult, but I think also in a funny way this Glaswegian spirit. I think even when we are talking about sad and funny things, we have an innate sense of humour or just a sense of warmth that comes through the Glaswegian people. And so, I wanted to make sure I captured all of that but also the characters are living in a way where they don't have much control over what happens to them, whether that's a wonderful thing or a traumatic

thing and so I wanted to keep juxtaposing things that were very sort of opposites within incredible violence there is incredible tenderness. Within sadness there's blinding humour and that for me was life and that was growing up. It was only when it started to get a bit of money and ascend to the middle class that I had control of the things happening around me and you could really sort of deal with that. You know one of the things about Agnes is she's living in this community and she can't afford to up and leave to move away from the neighbours who don't like her. We can all hopefully do that, but Agnes cannot. So, you know, she has to go on a council waiting list that could take forever and so she has to deal with what's there and that can be violence and tenderness and sadness and humour and that for me was just life.

ALEX: I wonder if I could ask you a bit too about Big Shugg, about Shuggie's father who, again, he - you know, is a brute in so many ways. He is violent, he is a misogynist, he treats woman as objects. He's unfaithful to Agnes. He's a very, very difficult man. But he is also struggling with her addiction. He's also struggling with lots of the depleted choices that he has around him and I wonder what that was like creating that character.

DOUGLAS: Actually, Shug was one of the hardest characters to create because although I draw a lot from my life, I never knew my father. Shug is entirely a work of fiction. But I was thinking very much about a man whose ego was very fragile and who enjoyed controlling the women in his life whether because he took some small tokens of sex from them or whether he was married to a woman and wanted to control her whole outcome and Agnes to him is exhausting because Agnes is, first of all, she wants a lot and she's beautiful and vibrant and generous and gregarious and he can't quite control her and then when someone also starts to descend into addiction as with the scene at Blackpool when Agnes is having a great night and singing on the stairs and she won't get up and won't stand up and go upstairs to bed and he can't cope with it. He can't control her. So really, it's about the fragility of his ego and the only thing Shug really has in the world is his control over women. But that's also why he takes Agnes to pit head and chooses that moment to abandon her, to leave her. He could have left her with her mother and father, but he has to almost break this thing because he doesn't want anyone else to come along and enjoy it or fix it or mend it and by it, I mean the mother at the heart of it. And it suits his ego to keep his ex-wife or wife in pain because that makes him feel better because she's always reaching out and wanting him.

ALEX: There is this sense of a great sort of distance and I'm also - and flight, I suppose, he's also kind of in flight from her in a sort of way and I'm really intrigued by this image of you having moved away from where you were brought up. Having moved as you say, class-wise too then you move continents. You establish a whole other life and as you say, other people just don't know the entirety of your life. If you hadn't done that, would *Shuggie Bain* ever have been born do you think? Was the distance vital to the writing of it?

DOUGLAS: I am asked that a lot and I never quite know if it would have been born. I think it would seem different. I think it would have been written but it would have felt very different. Distance did a lot of things for me. First of all, it gave me a longing and it made me long for Glasgow and for home. And actually, my family still live on the streets that I

write about and so Glasgow to me is still home and somewhere I go two or three times a year, but it also gave me a sense of clarity. It allowed me to look back and when my life changed and my own perspective changed I managed to look back and think that was really strange, why was that like that? I suddenly realised other people hadn't grown up like that and so it gave me that sense of longing and clarity and I found that really useful. I think as a writer, distance is always a good thing. Having an immigrant's perspective, it allowed me to focus on the parts of Scottish culture and language that I wanted to translate and sort of share with people, and I think I've always been spending my life trying to make sure people understood me and they didn't always understand me and so the distance can do that as well.

ALEX: I mean it's been really important to you in the wake of publication of *Shuggie Bain* and its great success to pay an homage to those writers who went before you, hasn't it? I mean those Scottish voices. Both as the writers themselves but actually the texture of the voices on the page have been massively important to you, haven't they?

DOUGLAS: That's right and actually my only regret is I came to Scottish writing too late. Meaning I didn't really discover Scottish working-class voices until my twenties to almost my mid-twenties. And when I discovered them and saw my own people on the page it opened a whole world for me. Emotionally an interior world but also a world of literature. And it was really seeing Alan Warner and James Kelman – Agnes Owens is one of my favourite Scottish writers. That not only starts to put the seeds inside me that our lives are vital and urgent and interesting enough to be able to write about. But also, it gives me the sort of the inspiration and the encouragement to keep going because I had grown up in a time and a place in Britain where everything I read. Everything that was given to me at school or that ends up on bookshelves seems like a middle class, white, dare I say it, English experience so I had to almost go back and discover my own people both in terms of region and of class for myself.

ALEX: I wonder how much that's changing and you feel it to be changing in terms of diversity of voices that are published. In terms of what we expect those voices to bring to the enlargement of writing as a whole and also in terms of the way that you're expected to be a representative of somewhere, of the gay community, of the Glaswegian community. What kind of experiences have you had in that sense?

DOUGLAS: I think the rate of acceleration has been really staggering the past couple of years. I think it really has improved so much since I was a young writer and reader and I think we are seeing it now, the call for diversity across everything from class to race, to sexuality and from gender and that's an incredible thing. First of all, the richness of voices is great for the arts and for literature, but representation also matters. I sometimes talk about the response that James Kelman's book got when it won the Booker, *How Late It Was, How Late* is one of my favourite books ever. But James really had to walk into fights so that writers like me could run. And also, the response when it was called after winning the Booker because it was written in Broad Scots in Glaswegian dialect. It was literary vandalism - has a muting effect on everybody that A, talks like that or B, would like to write like that because James wrote it all in truth. It's a beautiful book and the language is absolutely

crackling but when it's rejected by the literary establishment then it mutes the rest of us that would follow James Kelman. And so, I'm so encouraged to see we are starting to really open that up on all levels and that's why it's important. Because if anyone can see me, I think working class voices for a long time have been seen as incredibly niche and certainly through Shuggie's publishing journey even starting in 2018 it wasn't expressed to me – but there was a feeling like who would want to read this and where is this when it sits on a shelf? And so, I am hoping that Shuggie's success just encourages so many more regional voices, working class voices or queer voices.

ALEX: Well, look, Douglas I think you can just point to the award and also to all the contracts for translating the book into other languages. It's a story that travels - and we're running out of time sadly because I could talk to you forever but just very finally, it's been so amazing how much Shuggie has been taken to people's hearts. I mean, the response has been quite extraordinary, and I just wanted to end by asking you how that has felt to you to feel these readers all around the world responding to something in the story.

DOUGLAS: That's almost an impossible thing to put into words. It has - it has filled my heart beyond being able to express. It's been so phenomenal to see people really care for Shuggie and Agnes who are really vulnerable at the heart of the book and people have come to them with such empathy and with such care that it's been great for me as a writer, but it's also just been phenomenal for me as a human. And so, it's surpassed all of my expectations.

ALEX: The next book is coming, isn't it?

DOUGLAS: It is! It's coming next spring, 2022. So, I am working on the edits for it right now and I'm so excited to share it. It's a big love story.

ALEX: A big love story I think is exactly what we need. Thank you so much for *Shuggie Bain* and for being with us today. Thank you, Douglas Stuart, that was wonderful.

DOUGLAS: Thank you, Alex.