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'The question of dimension at every level': An Interview with Ali Smith on *Companion Piece*, Contemporaneity, and Crisis

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An interview with Ali Smith about her latest novel *Companion Piece* (2022), its relationship to her *Seasonal Quartet* (2016–2020) and responding to contemporary society through fiction. In particular, Smith discusses how *Companion Piece* came out of the *Seasonal Quartet* and discusses writing fiction in relation to its own time and questions of both contemporaneity and history. This conversation also spans both recent and recurrent concerns throughout Smith's writing, including: language and narrative, art in contemporary society, technology and capitalism, environmental crisis, and the COVID-19 pandemic. This interview was held in-person on 24th June 2022 in Trinity College, University of Cambridge and has been edited for clarity and length.

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In June 2022, I interviewed Ali Smith about *Companion Piece*: a follow-up to the contemporaneous experimentation of the *Seasonal Quartet*. This title references the novel's proximity and commentary on the quartet, being at once a standalone text and a fifth addition to the series, while the recurrence of motifs and devices from her other novels hint at more wide-ranging forms of creative introspection. During our conversation, Smith mentioned how the title was adapted by Merete Alfsen for its Norwegian translation with a linguistic equivalent which encapsulates the novel's ethos.[1] Instead of 'companion piece', it is titled *Andre tider* – 'other times' – based on a Norwegian idiom which Smith summarised as 'a shoulder shrugging possibility of things changing when you think they can't change [...] a perfect phrase instead of *Companion Piece* [...] about times and the workings of otherness and so on'. Set between the narrative of a collage artist navigating tragedy and farce during the COVID-19 pandemic and the story of an orphaned girl who becomes a blacksmith in sixteenth century England, *Companion Piece* is propelled by linguistic playfulness and metafiction to explore British politics and society, intersubjectivity and companionship, and questions of history in relation to the present.

The tension between superficiality and experiential depth – key to earlier novels such as *Hotel World* (2001) and *How to be Both* (2014) – also features prominently in *Companion Piece*, particularly the possibility of 'something dimensional happen[ing]' beyond what seems static or circumscribed (Smith 2022: 134). The plot follows the consequences of an artist called Sandy receiving a phone call from an old university classmate who has been arbitrarily detained by border control and is subsequently preoccupied by a mysterious riddle she either hears or imagines: 'Curlew or curfew [...] you choose' (16). These words are used for each section of the novel, as the juxtaposition between these concepts sets in motion Smith's novel and the following interview (edited for brevity and clarity).

A fun question to get us started: curlew or curfew?

They're stuck together as far as I'm concerned. They're the same. It's the aggregate name for curlews as well, a curfew of curlews. I was just intrigued by the similarity of the two words with one consonant different and the way that words are random. The whole Saussurean question of how a word means, and then past that the alphabetic question of how we construct meaning from a system of letters which then can shift in a moment between one shape to another, one kind of flick of a pen. But then I found out that there

[1] See also Alfsen on translating Ali Smith's fiction (2013, pp. 130–36).

was such a thing as a curfew of curlews. And there is now an actual curfew of curlews, because they're becoming endangered and people are having to work very hard to make sure they have their babies. There was an online curlew cam which showed a curlew on a nest somewhere in Oxfordshire or Gloucestershire, giving birth to four curlew babies out of the egg and I was completely riveted by it this whole spring. I'd never watched anything like it but after I'd written that book, I found myself desperately, desperately attached to the male and the female curlews who would come and go and swap over, very happily just to keep the eggs warm. And then the babies come and then one day later, they're all away: the babies are born – completely self-foraging – they don't need parents, the nest is completely empty. It was heart-breaking and beautiful. In the aftermath of the book, I spent a long time watching the day rise and fall on a nest with a bird in it which never lost attention. They clearly took turns in shifts sleeping, and never slept on the nest the whole time. Even in the night camera you could still seem them, albeit in negative, beak moving and head moving all the time, all the time. And then off they go into the world. It was terribly moving. So both.

Both, not versus?

No!

I think it's interesting with the particular words curlew and curfew in relation to the pandemic context. Because, like you say, on the one hand it's this arbitrary consonant change, but then it's also an attention to the actual as well as the linguistic.

Well a curfew, being something that we've had since French-inflected English, is in other words the covering of the fire at the end of the day. Again, which is why it was interesting watching a bird at night, never sleeping: that there was no curfew, no point at which the day closed in for these creatures, they were alert all the time. And the ways in which we have organised our civilizations – so-called – is all held in the word curfew. And then you have all the ways that the curlew has turned up in our storytelling, our mythologising, our religious mythologising, and our understanding of a world in which we share a space with other species. And we make up our narratives about them and presumably they have their narratives about us. It wasn't even the first thing that happened with this book. The reason I started to write it was the 'V' of Vagabond, which would then be burnt onto people, and I began to wonder about who would have made those single letters that were then used as brands. What was it like to put the wood onto the metal for the brand which would then mark a person with a letter? And the very

notion of a single letter. It just lands on your chest or lands on your head, the question of what happens when a single letter shifts.

Attention to the letter and wordplay seems really important throughout the novel: that idea that in times of great doubt you can still be playful.[2] I want to ask about writing *Companion Piece* after the *Seasonal Quartet*, because it is sort of adjacent but not quite part of it.

Aye. It's whatever I was working on *Seasonal*, it's actually liberating from them. It was a liberating book to write, and I knew I wanted to break the form. I didn't want its closure. You know the good thing about the seasons is that they don't – well they do have closure because of global warming! – but they don't have closure. They keep on rolling but at the same time there's something in closure in that rolling. And there's a constant, closed roll of the wheel and something in me wanted, when I was writing *Summer*, to do something else. I knew I couldn't because I had to honour the cycle, to honour the form, and yet there was another form which was wagging its finger at me, telling me 'Come on, there's something else here. You know, this isn't where it ends'. And yet it was. And yet it wasn't, you know.

So it's like a continuation but also a moving beyond at the same time?

Yeah, a kind of breaking open of whatever the tale in the mouth of the snake was. You know that Celtic image of the snake with the tail in its mouth which is supposed to be an eternity or completion? It was the point at which the snake opens its mouth again: lets its tail go, so that there's a way.

In general, do you find it difficult to write to the moment? I think that you're always writing to the moment, in different ways in your books –

I do too.

– but it's that more conscious way in the *Seasonal Quartet*.

It was more conscious; that actually made it more frustrating to have felt myself have to become quite so porous to it. The form was always going to go that way and it was always going to ask of itself for these reasons. But with *Companion Piece* it could

[2] See also Terrell on Smith's wordplay in relation to *Seasonal* (2022).

dimensionalise differently. And I hope it's a liberating thing to read after the *Seasonal* books, I don't know how liberating they are to read. I don't even know if they'll last, if any of these books will last.

It's hard to say, although I have feeling they will, personally! But one thing that's very striking about *Companion Piece* – right at the beginning, but also throughout – is that there's this real fury. I think *Seasonal* was interested in modes of protest but this seems to be individual rage.

Well it's first-person. I mean, I haven't written very many first-person stories. *Artful* is first-person and second-person and it can be about mourning because of that, in a way that allows mourning to be its proper impetus. A properly – again dimensional – emotionally dimensional presentation of mourning. *Like* has a first-person half, which sets itself against the third for the way in which feeling will, and fury will, and loyalties, and all the things that move through us as individuals can run concurrently and/or bounce off the third-person in the ways in which we think that narrative is more fixed in something objective or objectified, or in a kind of given objectivity of authority. So *Companion Piece* is, again, able to take personally the things which in the *Seasonal* books could not be taken personally. How personally can you take history? The other day I met by chance Jamaica Kincaid and we had a quick talk. And she said this amazing thing, she said, 'Well that's time, isn't it?' She said: 'There's time – you stub your toe, you're enslaved, your whole people is enslaved –' Time doesn't give a fuck, is basically what she said. She said, time just moves on and it doesn't care what size or level of epic or non-epic thing is happening to the people who are in time, time just moves on. And *Seasonal* was pretty much tied to that wheel, I think. Not in a bad way actually, because we were in time and we had to remember to be able to shift with the changes that were coming. At the end of *Grey Granite*, that paean to change, 'all there was change' [Lewis] Grassic Gibbon says repeatedly, change, change it was all there was. And I think of it and I think of Ovid, too. If we don't change, then we will break: that sense that if we are not fluid enough to move with whatever time is bringing, then you won't survive in any form.[3] And I was really interested when she said that. I thought that's exactly it: time doesn't give a fuck. So whatever the construct we make of time, time itself doesn't give a fuck about us, it's much more interested in – something that Sophocles says about time – which is simply its kind of dusting over and then it's gone: an archaeologically re-finding the truths which get lost or which get refound or lost as time moves. So

[3] See also 'On Form' in *Artful* (2012).

I think *Companion Piece* was a response to quite those questions that are also in the *Seasonal* books that couldn't directly, formally be answered by them.

Throughout the *Seasonal Quartet*, I love these scenes, these little moments often at the ends of chapters which are like the buddleias in *Winter* (219–220), the grassblades in the pavement in *Companion Piece* (120). There's that possibility of otherwise, but also just poetic thingness. In my head I connect it to the nevertheless principle of Muriel Spark.[4] There's something Sparkian about *Companion Piece*, I felt.

Big compliment. I hope so, she can't not be in my pores cause I love them and I've read my way around them. I can't be as merciless as she is with such merriment, I'm not the same kind of writer. I really appreciate that she can do it, she can give us the worst of ourselves by allowing us to see what it is and to understand it. That takes a kind of merciless that is all about mercy. I think that she's an extraordinary writer, Spark.

In *Companion Piece* there's a situation of unacknowledged grief in the context of the pandemic but also ecological grief, this broader existential difficulty which is also across the quartet.

Ecological grief: what are we gonna do, because how can we not have it? We see it around us now, everywhere, all the time ignored, or rhetorised about and ignored. As if that will fix it, because someone has spoken about it performatively, rhetorically in a soundbite. Resource-wise, the earth is getting rid of us you know, because it's not gonna survive with us on it, and why would it? I imagine us now as kind of dinosaur creatures tapping with our fingers like tyrannosauruses up here while not moving anywhere at all. Or if moving at all we're just thrashing about in oil, as if this is the only way to live. It's an insanity. Hanging out with students for the last four years, seeing the ways in which the pressures on them and of the people who are now coming up – with any luck – to change this, do something about this will be in a position of doing something about it, I have hope. Then I look at my own generation and I have no hope because I think we came through with all the gifts of possibility and look what we have done so stupidly with everything we were given and we would be denying to those coming after. What on earth are we like? How can we not admit that nightmare is real at every level?

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[4] See Muriel Spark, 'What Images Return' (1962) in *The Golden Fleece: Essays*, edited by Penelope Jardine (2014), pp. 63–5.

Yeah, for sure. It's difficult because I think often people put it in terms of prevention or saving the world, as if there is a way of doing it, but I think what's more likely is that there will be some kind of major environmental crisis and change. That's just unavoidable now, almost scientifically. I think that this comes back to time in the *Seasonal Quartet*. Potentially, there is this possibility of constant renewal but also – right in the epigraph of *Autumn* you reference George Monbiot – there's actually limits. There's a limit to time.[5]

There's this many harvests left, and that's it.

Scientists use estimates in terms of reaching tipping points: ten years, maybe less. It's difficult because how do you respond to that without despairing? Or how do you find momentum to try and even acknowledge and understand that, let alone change it?

The one person I've heard talk, it's not optimistic, but practically about it is [Margaret] Atwood, who says that what we can hope for the future is that whatever the catastrophe is that hits humanity, if it's an ecological one maybe we can all work together and do something about it. This is basically the gift of hope that she passes on as the seer that she is about where we're going and where we've been. And she can really see it, she's seen it all those years, you know. She's marked it with her fiction and her essays and her thought. And that's what she sees: a point at which we will *have* to work together, and she trusts that we will. So I trust it too. But at the same time, my antenna says that the people who know that the resources are nearly gone already have already amassed themselves, decided what to do with the resources and decided what to do with the rest of us. The rest of so-called humanity has split into the people who have got the resources and the people who aren't going to get the resources unless they're working for us. And the rest, who's gonna care?

Something that's often associated with your writing – particularly your more recent writing about these crises and contemporary politics – is hope or utopian possibilities, or just possibility in general.

What do you think?

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[5] See Monbiot (2016).

I don't know. It's interesting, because it's easy to criticise aesthetic possibilities, but it feels like without them –

Yeah, what are we gonna do? I long to write a revolutionary, a proper revolutionary utopian book. I don't know if I can. I want to, I feel it in me, partly sparked exactly by the generational thing that I was just trying to talk about. Because we are brilliant, human beings are brilliant. We can do this, we can, we have made things better before.

It's that bothness which is really key I think, like that capacity for cruelty and just terribleness. The 'complex cruelties' which are the 'silent companion' to simple piano melodies, but then there's the beauty of the piano melodies, as you write in *Companion Piece* (84).

Thanks for noticing that. I felt that particularly listening to Beethoven as a little, simple-seeming set of musical texts called bagatelles, in fact. They're beautiful, they're almost throwaway. They are not at all throwaway. They're extraordinarily complex but they sound like simplicity as you listen to them you can hear history and behind their seeming simplicity you hear its catastrophe. And I don't know how Beethoven does that. You know he really understands history and time, and dimension if we are talking about the place where those two things come together.[6] Aesthetic understanding and/or lived understanding. They hold all the purity and all the dangers of that word purity.

A question particularly important in your work is not just what art can do, but who can it do it for? Is it accessible, is art for people, that question?

I cannot – I'm gonna swear – I cannot fucking bear the rhetorising of art into elitism. It is such a political trick. It is what they do, the people who want power to stop anybody else having it. It is one of the tools of taking thought away, presence away, awareness away, and dialogue away from everybody, and they do it to the people who have no money and to the people who are not supposed to have education.

It's interesting the way you represent education in *Companion Piece* because it's about that primacy of encounter, it's not about knowing certain discourses or anything like that. It's more about: look at the poem, what might this word mean?

Took a real chance with that chapter because I didn't know if I would be able to do it, to basically graft a prac-crit into a novel, how to make that work, and felt as I was doing

[6] See also Grimes (2021).

it that I was going to be lucky to get away with it.[7] I think it's alright, it does say the merest paying of attention is repaying to us at every level, I think that's what it says.

Then in that subsequent chapter there's the awareness of ee cummings as not pure, as very flawed – having written things that are sexist and racist and supporting McCarthyism. And the narrator just goes 'Sigh, that's life' (48–49). But I was wondering, what do you think we do with knowledge of these things? I'm thinking of so-called cancel culture or just the general sense of uncomfortable truths meaning boycotting or withdrawal.

What I think is that you can't cancel culture. It's an oxymoron, you can't do it. Culture is something which grows, and something organic and that's why we call it mould culture as well as aesthetic culture and/or social culture. It just is, you can't cancel it. I was speaking to a man who told me how you stop someone attacking a politician. He was a security man and he described to me the point at which someone has come towards a politician and they've taken hold of their hand and you don't know whether actually they're going to do something. He said that when they've got the politician by the hand and you have sensed something is up and they won't let go, he said very, very lightly you come towards them and tap their wrist and then they let go. That tight hold on something makes me think of our propensity to take offence and/or to be attached to something so that we can't let it go, even if you're attracted by it and you love it, you can't let it go. Celebrity culture. Even if you're furious at it, you can't let it go. At some point we're going to have to have something that taps us on the wrist which will allow us to step back from our own anger and/or fixations so that we can understand what it is that we are feeling, where the feeling has come from, why we're feeling it, and what to do about it. Because the point of engagement of it is a closer rather than an opener and when we close things down, whether it's a feeling or the possibility of dialogue – everything between those two things – then everything stops working for us humanly, is what I think. And we have become a culture which now expresses itself very fast and supposedly simply with very short terms. It partly suits us and it's exciting to do that, because you are so up with the feeling of it, and partly it's ruination of all thought and all dimension. And so we have to, in a way, be able to let go to be able to see what it is that we are holding or that we want to hold.

[7] 'Prac-crit' is short for 'practical criticism': the name of the English close reading classes and examinations in the University of Cambridge Tripos (honours level curriculum) based on I.A. Richards's pedagogical experiments in the 1920s.

Something you constantly emphasise in your books is that things are not static and can be otherwise – that dynamic understanding of self. In other places, you've talked about form and time and style: what's the significance of character in your writing?

I think character is in syntax. I think you can tell who it is you're working with by the way that they speak. It's why the notion of a writer having a voice seems to me nonsense. Voice is always about the person who's either speaking in the third-person or speaking first or second-person in whatever you're writing. And as soon as someone speaks it's an utter giveaway about character and you understand their whole lives from attention to the pieces of a sentence. You might only hear a bit of broken sentence, but it will hold. It's like if you opened a book in the middle and you just read a piece, you can sense a narrative around it, or if you stop a single frame on a film you can sense at least something around it. It's like you understand from phraseology the workings of a life, which is why language is so important. And also *Companion Piece*, in particular, is interested in our preconceptions of character, it's interested in blowing that – with any luck – apart so that we stop doing it. But of course, we don't because as soon as we look at a screen or fall in love with someone we make up rubbish about people. So wherever it is that we are narrativising ourselves and others, we will be making about rubbish about people. It's like being able to hold that in our heads at the same time as allow the other person not to be completely narrativised by us. The being narrativised by others and/or as narrativising others. The best description of fascism I have ever heard was by [John] Berger – I've written about this elsewhere – where he said that fascism is when one people decides that it can make its mind up about other people, that it can choose to exclude or include other people.[8] He said that's it at its most simple, and I think he's right. Narrative is a form of openness: we all need story, we all need to listen to it, and we all long for it, and we all survive by it. So a narrative that closes things down is going against its own nature.

Do you think at this time – with, like you say, those objectifying factors and a screen and image culture that we have – do you think there is a particular importance for things that fiction or poetry can do in response to that, or different ways of seeing and thinking?

I think… Yes, I do. I do think exactly that. I think fiction is becoming more and more important as a means of an exit and an entrance – an exit from and an entrance into – a dimensionalised self. It's a lesson in both sympathy and empathy at every level, as well

[8] See Dyer et al. (2017).

as a discursive gift, as well as a dialogic necessity, as well as an ancient human tool for understanding anything. Also you've also got the immense problem of judgementalism, which happens as soon as a screen is put between us and something else. So that you're on the outside and start to objectify it. There's a part in one of the Javier Marías books which I really love because he talks about exactly that problem. He's so great: in English I've read him, he's translated by a really, really good translator called Margaret Jull Costa.[9] And there's a trilogy of his books from ten years ago and they're called *Your Face Tomorrow*, and they're kind of spy books and they're not. They're about the Spanish Civil War, Spain and fascism, and the balance between then and now. And he says at one point in one of them: that's what a screen does, a screen makes you judge. You sit down in front of a TV and immediately you are not part of whatever it is that you are looking at on the screen. And the screen itself is about something hidden and about something between us. I've just read a great little book called *Radical Attention* [by Julia Bell, AC]. And she talks very pertinently about what it means to live digitally, and what the digital does to us while we think we're objectifying on the outside of it, it's objectifying us all the way. So, again, that question of dimension at every level in all of those things I've just said is, I think, at play in a way that we could not have imagined from the times we went to the post office and there was a screen between us and the person because they had money behind there, or the times we went to the doctor and there was a screen we stood behind so that you could disrobe, without the doctor who is about to see you anyway. All the notions of politeness and/or protections that already existed with the use of a screen have shifted radically.

In *Companion Piece*, there's the moment where Sandy looks at the Pelf twins with her preconceptions, then they look back with theirs (96). Or the moment with the blacksmith girl: people know she's a stranger, so they already know that they don't know her, what Sara Ahmed calls 'strange encounter'.[10] But what's interesting is that as a reader you have this intermediate position, where you have access to this other dimension or interstice if you like. It's not quite empathic, because you can see their feelings and you see their perspectives but also you can see both sides of it and are therefore in-between it. That conjunctional space. It's like the way that even just talking about syntax and the level of sentence, in your narratives there's always a 'but' or an 'and', a 'maybe this' or 'what about that'.[11]

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[9] See Smith's foreword to *Things Look Different in the Light and Other Stories* by Medardo Fraile (2014).

[10] *Companion Piece*, p. 198. This passage is an almost perfect example of Sara Ahmed's concept of 'strange encounters', whereby the stranger is not merely an unknown other but rather 'that which we have already recognised as 'a stranger' (Ahmed 2000: 3).

[11] See Lea defining Smith's writing as 'conjunctional' (2018, p. 404).

See that's why I like that you've called it conjunctional, because I hope that's true, it's exactly right. It has to be about connection, it has to be about the connective force whether that's in language or just in life because that's what an 'and' and a 'but' do, they take you to the next phrase.

I like that it's not just a naïve, 'only connect' – everything connects and it's lovely – it's also about the disconnections and the juxtaposition and tension of that.

I like that very much. And I hope that's true about this book because of the way it has taken that isolation which is now – which is pandemic in fact – and looked at what isolation is and whether it really even exists.

In the writing process, when do the epigraphs come in? Are they a basis, do they come later, or are they a finishing touch?

They come as I go along. Mind you the Dylan Thomas 'cry me down' I first read when I was working on *Autumn*. I was reading Dylan Thomas's poems at that point and I wrote it down 'curlew cry me down to kiss the mouth of their dust' and thought, my god that's gorgeous.[12] And then at one point in *Autumn*, Elisabeth has been talking to Daniel about Dylan Thomas. For some event I was doing I had to reread *Autumn* and I was like there we go, the Thomas has been a steady force through this. When I got to the curlew I thought, presumably the curlew was somewhere behind me all the time while I was working on the *Seasonal* books and of course I had no idea.

Intertextuality and dialogue with other writers and other traditions is definitely to the fore in your books. But I thought the omission of a visual artist for *Companion Piece* was intriguing, because in a way Sandy is the visual artist.

You know it's about those anonymous artists, the ones whose names you don't know, the ones you don't have reproductions for. So when we were putting the book together and my publisher Simon said to me what shall we do with the endpapers? And then I said what if we just took one colour, one of the greens, and just made it richer so that by the end of the book something has greened. And we tried it and it worked, and it's very very subtle but something deepens in the colour of the endpapers. You wouldn't even notice but it does happen. They lifted one of the greens from the [David] Hockney and saturated it more and more richly. There was a point at which Simon once sent me

[12] Dylan Thomas, 'In the White Giant's Thigh' (1971), line 45.

a photograph from Clays the printers of just these green green green boxes and those were the endpapers. The design of these books has been one of the reasons I could write them. It's weird but true. Simon and I went to the British Library in London when I first thought I would write these *Seasonal* books – November or December 2015, way before I knew anything about them – and looked at some Keats because I knew I was gonna write *Autumn*, and I wanted to do a talisman thing and Simon came with me. So we went and looked at Keats's handwriting and it was beautiful and an amazing thing to do, and that afternoon we went and sat in the café and he brought out all the covers all of the books and unrolled this thing. I hadn't even started and immediately was kind of bombarded with four books that did not exist and yet they had covers. When they published *Autumn* I couldn't actually believe how beautifully they'd done it, a beautiful dark brown linen. And actually putting together those books and also *Companion Piece* was a communal effort at every level publishing-wise. And it was wonderful to work with people who were so good and wanted to work on their feet fast, and thought it was a good idea and they made them so beautiful. It has always felt like a team effort.[13]

You mention that community on the production side of things, but do you have a sense of the community of readers that encounters your books, or is that something you don't think about?

Oh god, that's such a lovely thought that there would be a community of readers like that –

Absolutely. I mean there was anyway but particularly after the *Seasonal Quartet* there's now really quite a passionate community of readers I'd say.

That's lovely. I do not want to let anyone down. Actually I felt it, it's funny with coming through Brexit. My partner Sarah told me a thing, she said she was in the ICA one day, of all places, and she was having a cup of tea or something. And she was sitting in front of people and they were saying 'yeah but I can't wait for them to come out, it's really important' and she realised that they were talking about the books. It was between *Spring* and *Summer*, and actually in those times, the books were making a difference to people. Cause it's a crazy idea to write about the times, because the times are so partisan so that my own partisanry is bound to be deep in these books and with any luck or delicacy I've managed to keep something equable happening, I don't know. But the idea that it was actually important. Jackie Kay, my pal Jackie, said

[13] See also Vincent's feature article on producing *Seasonal* (2020).

to me a thing which made me feel a lot better about it, because I feel a mix of guilt and responsibility about the realities of things, I always have done. When I was writing *Shire* and I was dealing with real people's lives, the responsibility of real people's lives, it can drive you nuts. Are you doing it right, are you doing it right? And these books have all been about real people's lives from Pauline Boty onwards. And Jackie said the point at which in *Autumn* very early on an MP is shot and stabbed – she isn't named but there she is, and we all know Jo Cox – and I said to her what about that? And she said that it's important to know that the things that are happening in our lives and that we see on our screens and/or the news are real, and to find their reality in story or narrative form that means that they have not passed you by, that they are footholds in an understanding of where we are in a reality that is very narrativised. So I was like ok, that sounds right to me.

As a reader, one of the liberatory aspects is the COVID farce element and the acknowledging of that grief. I think particularly now because we're at this really weird stage in the pandemic where it's over but it's not over and there's no memorialisation, no processing, there's no gradual release. It's like: ok it's done now, get back to work.

Like I was saying about when I first got here, it was October/November and the dark would fall like that and we are used to gloaming, we are used to a slower slip into the night. That's what's been like with COVID, it's like now it's over, bang. On the 1st April [2022] COVID was over.[14] It's rubbish. We will find out differently and we are finding out differently.

Personally, as someone who had to be very cautious during the pandemic, reading *Companion Piece* it's refreshing to see that Sandy is so careful and then up against the farce –

Of everybody being not careful. It's appalling. I mean what are we like as a society? We can be brilliant, we were brilliant, everyone going out of their way for it, and then governance decides that it can wreck everybody's carefulness and legitimise a carelessness which then everybody feels forced to follow.

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[14] Here, Smith refers to the easing of COVID-19 restrictions across the UK, particularly reducing lateral flow testing availability in England (UK Health Security Agency 2022).

After these books, do you now feel a greater need to respond to events?

I think the books have always done this, that's the other thing. Since *Like* really, since the first stories even, I think that whatever the fabric of the time is comes into the story. But I also think it does that in everything, it's not just me. Everybody's everything they write comes with the fabric of its time. Whether it's critical writing or whatever form the writing takes, it comes with the fabric and gives off the fabric of its time.

You've written before that writing is of its own time but also the time which it is read, and the correspondence between those.

I think so. And we can't really do anything about that. Again, it's about the porousness of us to both the notions of time and the actuality of time, to think again about Jamaica Kincaid.

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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