



Attuned to the Surface of Things: An Interview with Ali Smith

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To open this special issue on Ali Smith's Seasonal Quartet, we asked Ali Smith a number of questions which she answered via e-mail. Her answers appear below and are meant to be in dialogue with the papers that follow this interview.



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This special issue of *C21* is inspired by your *Seasonal Quartet*. In previous interviews you have talked about what inspired you to write these novels, and also the quartet's publication history is by now quite well-known -- the speed of the publication process, the topicality of the novels. How do you look back on the project now, several years after finishing the quartet?

I look back on all my books, not just the quartet, with the same sense of recognition, estrangement and disconnect that a person trying to construct, I don't know, let's say pianos, or a large harp, some stringed instrument, might, where there's a time when you're working concentratedly on getting everything from detail to complete whole as right as you can, from the curve of wood to the place where the wood meets the string, you hope you've done it right, then off it goes out into the world and from now on other people will tune it themselves and send their music through it, but all you can see when / if you encounter it again is the curve of that piece of wood, the place where that string connects, is it sound?

We would characterize your novels as 'open texts': they are hospitable to readers in the sense that readers are invited to participate in meaning making, in making creative associations. On the other hand, some readers may feel lost or estranged because of the sudden jumps between story-worlds or timeframes (sometimes commented on by the narrator, f.e. in *Spring* 'That was October. It's now next March). Is that a tension you consider when you are writing?

All you can do when you're writing is listen for – and honour – what the thing you're writing asks of you.

How do you cultivate (if that's the right term) your own creativity, how do you keep that openness? Does it get harder when you get older?

It's never any easier to write anything; whatever you're trying to write makes you a novice to it. But this is a good thing. Maybe that's one of the things creativity does or is – it's always both new and renewing. You have to be open to its openness. Much of the time that means leaving all of yourself behind and entering the spirit of it.

In *Spring* it says 'The times we're living in is changing nature. Will it change the nature of the story?'. Can you reflect on that? We read it as a remark about the relations between climate change and storytelling. What can the novel – as a genre –

do when it comes to climate change? Does it require new ways of writing? New ways of storytelling?

It can and will tell us how we're living and what the consequence of living like we are will be. It can give voice to the voiceless. It will inevitably tell us the story of the time in which it's written, because the novel is always porous to the time in which it's being written, while story itself is always ancient and immediate, both. So the stories we tell will be saturated in and made by the times in which they're being told, and at the same time be resonating up and down dimensionally through all the centuries in which we've, as a species, ever told each other stories, and why do we tell stories? To entertain, to keep us together and keep us imaginative, and to reveal what we have in common regardless of whether we disagree or agree with each other. Story has no agenda other than to be itself, and story will always open us to others rather than close us off from or divide us from others – because story is not ever exclusive, and a story that says 'this story is only for me or us, not you', isn't a story, it's a construct for another reason, whatever that may be. What the novel can do is reveal to us where we are in time, society and history; it can reveal the structures by which we're living; and remind us of what narrative has always told us; that all things are interconnected (including us), that when one thing happens, another will happen because of it, that sequence and consequence are related, and that we've been learning from story for all the centuries we've ever told each other stories. What will survive of us? Story, and it will tell us true.

One tension in climate discourse, which we also perceive to be present in the *Quartet*, is that between one's own observations ('I like the weather today') and climate change as a global or planetary fact. That to us seems like interesting and fruitful ground for a novelist – how do you navigate that tension?

I don't have to – it's the bones of story, that tension, that metonymy. As soon as you start to write, all things glow with meaning. Even meaninglessness is meaningful. As soon as you ask of it, it begins: the play between the revelation of the workings of what bankrupts meaning and what shores it up, works to protect and dimensionalise meaning and understand how and why we make things mean. That's what working with language, one of our best meaning-making tools, is all about.

One of the epigraphs you chose for *Companion Piece* is from Marilynne Robinson:

I am angry to the depths of my soul that the earth has been so injured while we were all bemused by supposed monuments of value and intellect, vaults of bogus cultural riches. I feel the worth of my own life diminished by the tedious years I

have spent acquiring competence in the arcana of mediocre invention, for all the world like one of those people who knows all there is to know about some defunct comic-book hero or television series. The grief borne home to others while I and my kind have been thus occupied lies on my conscience like a crime.

Do you agree with Robinson? Or do you feel addressed by her rage (we do)? Is 'mediocre' the pivotal word here (is it okay if we spend years on superb invention)? What does this mean, if anything, for your own writing?

This quote comes from *Mother Country*, her book about the UK nuclear industry and its poisoning of the environment, a book which understands centuries-worth of the corralling of common ownership into private, ownership, corralling of the masses into workforce and controlling of the free movement of people into politically or hierarchically / colonially expedient pattern. It's an extraordinary book, about how to understand (and the pressure on us all not to understand) the history of power, what it's done to us and what it will do given the chance. Myself I think the key word is bemused, and that the anger in this asks us to rouse ourselves from our own cynicism, move beyond our bemusement and out of our cynicism, before history turns us into cartoon, or something defunct, to use and rephrase her own terms.

Your *Seasonal Quartet* brings specific moments from the past into the present. These moments are historical or mythological (or both), and are turning points, catalysts, openings of chaos, shifts or redistributions. The start of *Autumn* points to this explicitly: 'Again. That's the thing about things. They fall apart, always have, always will, it's in their nature.' You're not the only one turning to this line from Yeats's 'The Second Coming' – a 2016 analysis by media aggregate Factiva showed that this poem was quoted more often in the first seven months of 2016 than in any of the preceding thirty years. How can turning to these past moments of intensity help us to navigate the intensity of the present? How can we do this responsibly, and what are the dangers? What is the role of literature in this – or the role for modernism today?

All I know is, it's what the character I was writing, a man who'd seen the cycles of history repeat and repeat over a century, wanted to say. These books, formally, were planned as conscious antennae tuned to the surface of things, to see what would happen if you asked of a contemporary surface, and simultaneously asked story what to make of it. They coincided with a time in our lives in these parts of the world where intense change was happening; their coinciding meant they'd be sensitive to this change as a formal requirement, and the spirit of the form was always about what happens if you ask the novel really to be 'novel' or the latest thing (which is what its name – and its

formal root – in English means) while knowing that story is, as I said, ancient, and ever-renewing and -revelatory. The danger is that belonging to a time so specifically will age everything, date it inevitably. The hope is that these books will, if they last (and they might not, and that's a risk both I and they had to run) act as breathing space from whatever surface pressures, in contemporanea, in history, that a person reading them happens to be under, and act as footholds on that rockface via the notion of how novels, being made of their time and always being formally concerned with time itself, simultaneously free us from time.

Your work has always been intertextual, and the *Seasonal Quartet* brims with intertextual references: whether it's *Autumn*'s play with the opening line of Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, or the inclusion of Shakespeare plays in each of the quartet's novels. Your novels are hospitable like that. Can you say something about what makes Shakespeare so enticing for you? What is his charm?

I was eighteen when I sat, one afternoon, in my first year at university, and read for the first time, one after the other, knowing nothing about either, *King Lear* then *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The light fell outside, it was the north of Scotland, deep winter, and I didn't even notice. What is this writer, I thought as I closed the book, who can do *all* these things, and who knows us so wildly, so savagely, so terribly, so comically, so truly, so kindly, so uncompromisingly, so wisely and so well? Now everything is possible. That's what I thought, and that's what I think.

Your novels are filled with dialogue, and themselves also dialogic: they entertain ideas, bring forward various viewpoints. What is so interesting in the dialogue as theme and form for your writing?

Hello!

Now you say something back.

That's what.
