



Creative Writing

Structure, Revision and Theme

Bill Greenwell

Liz Jensen discussed her use of structure, analogy, revision and theme. I began by asking about the narrative structure of her novels *Ark Baby* and *The Ninth Life of Louis Drax*.

One of the things that interests me about your writing is the way in which there's a constant tension in each one of them between one narrative and another narrative or one time and another time. *Ark Baby* has four voices. *Louis Drax* has two voices, the nine year old boy in a coma and the neurologist who's dealing with him. Is this to do with wanting to keep the reader busy?

Liz Jensen

It's to do with wanting to keep me busy. [Laughter] You know, it's, for me, it really is about entertaining myself. And so if I get bored, that's no good, there won't be a book. So it's, the change of pace and the change of point of view is largely about that. Because I need to do something a bit different. And it's also because the problem very often with just one first person narrator is they can't know everything and so then you have to think of ways in which they could find something out and that's not always very convenient so in the case of *Louis Drax*, it, quite early on, I realised I can't tell the whole story from the point of view of a boy in a coma who never wakes up. I have to bring in someone else, so I brought in the doctor. Sometimes I'll bring in a third person narrator rather reluctantly, and inter-cut it with a first person narrator. Interestingly, the average reader never notices whether it's first person or third person, they simply don't notice. I've asked a lot of readers questions about books they've read and I say, What person is it in? And they don't know. Very often, they don't know. Cos, in a way, it doesn't matter.

Bill Greenwell

As long as the information is getting to the reader.

Liz Jensen

As long as they keep reading.

Bill Greenwell

There's also a strong sense that, of you, not just entertaining yourself as a writer but entertaining the reader by making the language busy as well as the structure busy. So that there's a constant rush of metaphor and simile.

Liz Jensen

Yes, I like larking about with language. I love that. I enjoy, you know, playing around with all the different possibilities and using unusual words and turns of phrase.

Bill Greenwell

For instance, in *Egg Dancing*, your first novel, there's a moment where, of one character, you say 'His eyes turned the colour of an old anorak'. And a little later, of another character, you say there was 'a smile tweaking at his mouth'. And I wonder if you get a little kind of feeling of pleasure when the word suddenly appears?

Liz Jensen

Oh great pleasure, yes, if you can get it right and if you're pleased with it then it's an enormous pleasure. And you hope that that pleasure will convey itself to the reader and that they'll take a similar pleasure because how was I to know that everyone would know what I

meant by 'the colour of an old anorak'? What colour is an old anorak? Everyone has their own idea. I think the reader does half the work with a lot of these things. And I remember when my father came across this line about the old anorak, he said to me, 'That's my anorak you're talking about, isn't it?' And it was. Because he had a particularly washed out, grubby-looking, greyish, greenish anorak and we joked about it.

Bill Greenwell

Most of your novels have got institutions of some form in them...

Liz Jensen

Yeah, I'm a sucker for institutions. [Laughter] There are a lot of reasons why I go in for the sort of hospital and mental hospital type environment. I'm very interested in the borderline between fantasy and reality and I think, if I do have a theme in any of my books, that's the one that holds them all together.

Bill Greenwell

The satire in your novels seems to me one in which you laugh very hard at the absurdities of life and perhaps particularly, scientific experiments to do with fertility and eugenics, the absurdity of twenty first century science and also the absurdity of twenty first century religion.

Liz Jensen

Well, I'm very interested in the clash between science and religion. I mean, I'm particularly interested in science and I read The New Scientist and I always gravitate towards science stories in the newspaper because they're so fertile. If you're ever stuck for an idea, read The New Scientist. There's your next novel. I mean [laughs] I really do believe there's so much going there. Religion I've always found very interesting, because of the fact that I'm interested in the mind and what it does to the mind and what people use it for. I'm not religious at all myself, I'm an atheist, but I'm very fascinated by other people's faith and probably rather envious of it too because I think life would be so much easier if you could believe in something, some kind of higher power who was in charge of all this mess. I think I'm actually laughing because otherwise I would cry; I do think the world is a total mess, it's a disaster. And I write to find a way of coping with that fact. I'm, I think, an optimistic kind of pessimist.

Bill Greenwell

In War Crimes, Gloria actually says, one of her jokes is about the optimist and the pessimist.

Liz Jensen

Oh, the optimist, yeah, which kind of sums everything up for me. There's an optimist and a pessimist and the pessimist says, 'Oh no' and flings his head in his hands, 'Oh no, things just can't get any worse'. And the optimist says, 'Oh yes they can'. [Laughter] I think the targets of my satire are quite personal sometimes. I think, with the Paper Eater, for example, that idea was born in a supermarket, and I think that idea was born out of my own rage, being a consumer. It's a howl of fury really against consumerism and I think satire is very often born of anger and I think, in my case, it has been born of anger. If you take the more satirical works I've done which were my first three novels, they were quite angry under the surface. And, I think, probably darker than many people realise but because I deal in comedy, I think it's quite easy to forget that, actually, they're born of rage.

Bill Greenwell

Can we talk a little bit about the structure of Ark Baby in which there are several narratives going on?

Liz Jensen

With Ark Baby, what happened was I wrote one novel about a vet. Or started to write one novel about a vet set in the twentieth century or the turn of the twenty first century. And then I sort of gave up on it cos I didn't think it was working and then I started another novel which was about a Victorian foundling, and that was also, the theme, the general theme of that was the relationship between humans and animals. And then I lost faith in that as well and I went through a terrible crisis and almost gave up on both of them. And then at some point, I

thought but, actually I'm writing the same novel but they're just two very different stories, why don't I put them together. So it was really a sort of cutting and pasting. And forcing them together. I changed the modern story enormously so that it would fit and so I could make sense of it. I did it in a way out of desperation because I just had to make this novel work and so it ended up looking far more carefully constructed than it originally was; it was born of an enormous and intricate cut and paste job which, fortunately, I managed to pull off.

Bill Greenwell

Would you say that, as a means of coming to writing the story, looking at the relationship between two stories and seeing how they might interleave is a good idea?

Liz Jensen

Well, it was a fun idea. It was fun to do because I mean, for example, in the Victorian story, I have this foundling boy asking his adoptive father, 'Where did we come from?' And so his father recites the book of Genesis to him and the earth was without form and void and darkness on the face of the deep and so on and so forth. And, and then, Tobias says, 'But if God made all these things, well, who made God?' And he keeps asking that annoying question that children always ask which is why, why, why, why, why. And then we jump to the next century where you've got the vet as a young boy with his father in the garden and they're doing some kind of gardening and the boy asks his dad, 'Where do elephants come from?' or something like that, and the father makes the terrible mistake of telling him they evolved. 'So what did they evolve from?' And then, the father says, but he's not sort of very well up on evolution, 'The mouse, I think.' 'And where did the mouse evolve from?' And on and on it goes, and you can see in two different centuries, two fathers faced with the same irritating boy, asking the same irritating set of questions, to which they actually don't have an answer. So that kind of thing was fun to do, to point out that actually there isn't a huge amount of difference between the eras in which we live because human nature remains the same across the centuries.

Bill Greenwell

When you write passages, do you go back over them and over them to change the rhythm, to change a sentence structure?

Liz Jensen

Yes, I do. And I think most writers do that actually. I find dialogue quite easy so I've, usually get that right first time in terms of the rhythm. I spent many years as a radio producer and that helped me enormously with dialogue and the rhythms of normal speech. But I believe in editing. I believe in going back again and again and again and re-writing; some writers are lucky enough to get it right the first time but I'm not one of those.

Bill Greenwell

I'm also interested in your endings and how you see endings for the reader?

Liz Jensen

Well, I do like to end on a mixed note. Because I think most people end on a mixed note, don't they? So it's, there's a sort of certain realism to tying up the ends to some extent, and, and, I suppose leaving the reader with a nice warm feeling – but I don't want that nice warm feeling to be so artificial that it kills the sense of the book. Deborah Moggach put it very well, she said it's rude. It's rude to leave people feeling depressed, you mustn't do it. And I feel that I agree with her, [laughs] I feel that very strongly. However bleak you think life is or the world is, if you don't end your book on some positive note, some notes of hope, then you've wasted everyone's time. Because you just drag them down and it's quite an investment to read a book. It's several hours of reading and you want them to smile or feel lighter at the end of it.