

James Kelman's Booker Prize Acceptance Speech

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"Elitist Slurs Are Racism By Another Name"

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Unlike many parents in Scotland and elsewhere, I don't have the daily worry that my children are physically assaulted on the way home from school on account of the colour of their skin. But as a white parent from an ordinary Glaswegian environment I expected my children to receive various intellectual humiliations and the attendant psychological abuse as they journeyed through the lower and higher educational system, this on account of the language and culture that was natural to them. I wasn't disappointed. How could I be? The actual educational institutions are structured on hierarchy; elitist values pertaining to class, race, gender, religious difference, sexual inclination and so on are endemic. Departments of English Literature are scarcely exempt from this although many people are outraged when those who fall victim to it have the temerity to complain.

A couple of weeks ago a feature writer for a Quality Newspaper suggested that the term "culture" was inappropriate to my work, that the characters peopling my pages were "pre-culture" -- or was it "primeval"? I can't quite recall. This was explicit, generally it isn't. But -- as Tom Leonard pointed out more than 20 years ago -- the gist of the argument amounts to the following, that vernaculars, patois, slangs, dialects, gutter-languages etc. etc. might well have a place in the realms of comedy (and the frequent references to Billy Connolly or *Rab C. Nesbitt* substantiate this) but they are inferior linguistic forms and have no place in literature. And *a priori* any writer who engages in the use of such so-called language is not really engaged in literature at all. It's common to find well-meaning critics suffering from the same burden, while they strive to be kind they still cannot bring themselves to operate within a literary perspective; not only do they approach the work as though it were an oral text, they somehow assume it to be a literal transcription of recorded speech.

This sort of prejudice, in one guise or another, has been around for a very long time and for the sake of clarity we are better employing the contemporary label, which is racism. A fine line can exist between elitism and racism and on matters concerning language the distinction can sometimes cease to exist altogether.

... There is a literary tradition to which I hope my own work belongs, I see it as part of a much wider process -- or movement -- toward decolonization and self-determination: it is a tradition that assumes two things: 1) The validity of indigenous culture; and 2) The right to defend in the face of attack. It is a tradition premised on a rejection of the cultural values of imperial or colonial authority, offering a defence against cultural assimilation, in particular imposed assimilation.

Unfortunately, when people assert their right to cultural or linguistic freedom they are accused of being ungracious, parochial, insular, xenophobic, racist etc.

As I see it, it's an argument based solely on behalf of validity, that my culture and my language have the right to exist, and no one has the authority to dismiss that right, they may have power to dismiss that right, but the authority lies in the power and I demand the right to resist it.

... one of the remaining freedoms we have as writers is the blank page. Let no one prescribe how we should fill it whether by good or bad intention, not the media, not the publisher, not the book trade; not anyone ... in spite of everything it is the creation of art that keeps us going. Anyway, the second literary tradition to which my work belongs is the existential tradition. And really, the bottom line of this tradition as far as I can see is also quite basic: if any writers prefer to assimilate then why not, it is their right.

Reaction to Kelman's Booker Prize Win

Simon Jenkins

"An Expletive Of A Winner"

***The Times* 15 Oct 1994. P20.**

'the award of the Booker Prize To James Kelman is literary vandalism'. Should have gone to Brookner, Amis, Ackroyd, Carey, Gordimer or Mount instead.

'I am glad that Mr Kelman is a cultural pluralist. We have that in common. I too believe in the right to culture and language, which in my case is what he calls "colonial" Standard English. I believe something more. If it comes to war my English will win as long as Mr Kelman and the Booker judges are in the enemy camp.'

'I once found myself alone in a no-smoking compartment of a corridor train to Glasgow. An ambassador for that city lurched into the compartment and crashed down opposite me. He took out a bottle of cider, rolled himself a cigarette, lent across to me and belched, "Ye git a light, Jimmy?" For almost an hour I humoured him, chided him, remonstrated with him, fearful for the safety of the Indian conductor who I knew was coming down the train (and who wisely passed us by). My reeking companion demanded attention like a two-year-old. He told me his so-called life story, requested money with menaces, swore at me and eventually relived himself into the seat.

Reading Mr Kelman's book was a similar experience. I refuse to play his "colonialist" game by dismissing the work out of hand. He is welcome to transcribe the rambling thoughts of a blind Glaswegian drunk, though my drunk had more humour than his. In the book's first half, the hero Sammy fights some policemen, finds himself blind in a cell, goes home, makes a cup of tea and takes a bus to the DSS office to claim benefit. I am reluctant to cheat readers of the excitement of the second half. Suffice to say that Sammy comes back from the DSS office, returns to the police station, goes home, has an overdue bath and, in a rare moment of embourgeoisement, gets a taxi.'

'literary barrenness' of the book. Quotes a passage then says: 'Even using the old newspaper safeguard of the asterisk, I would not inflict it on readers of *The Times* if the gods of literary criticism had not starred it with the mark of genius.'

Dismisses the 'so-called punctuation'. Says of word "fuck":

'Mr Kelman is totally obsessed with the word. He sometimes writes it over and over again when he cannot think of anything else to fill a line. His language is not Older Scottish, or Scots English, or Lallans, or any dialect of Burns's "Guid Scots Tongue".

The Guardian called it “the authentic voice of Glasgow”, a libel on that city. I would call the language merely Glaswegian Alcoholic With Remarkably Few Borrowings.’

‘I try to envisage the Booker judges tittering in the corner of my railway compartment. “Oh isn’t he naughty,” says the Professor of English with a seraphic smile as Mr Kelman gobs on the floor. “Oh but I think he’s really sweet,” says another judge, hugging his knees. “Mightn’t he be just a teeny weeny bit of a genius?” pipes a third. A string of expletives from Mr Kelman sends a thrill down their rubbery spines. They huddle together. Booker judges seek safety in numbers except the admirable Julia Neuberger, who ran from the compartment in horror.’

‘This is literature’s answer to the Turner Prize’. Says of literary critics of national newspapers: ‘A dozen Henry Higgineses queued up to pat the head of the new Eliza Doolittle. Mr Kelman, I must say, had the measure of them. He failed to attend an earlier Booker dinner, fearing defeat. Scouting better luck this time, he turned up having paid as much attention to his dress as Liz Taylor at a Hollywood premiere. He eschewed the notorious dinner jacket and made his “statement” in the form of a pinstriped suit and tie, in which garb, I gather, his friends had never seen him before. Much care went into this. The double-breasted jacket was left carefully open, thus diminishing its capitalist content. But how could the tie not signify English cultural domination? Mr Kelman’s solution was to undo the top shirt button and lower the knot just one inch. That inch was rebellion superbly controlled. Lear’s Fool knew the measure of his licence.’

‘I can only assume that the judges were aspiring to some apogee of political correctness. They greeted Mr Kelman as an inversion of the norms, a Jilly Cooper of the gutter, a Barbara Cartland of the Gorbals. They wanted to give awfulness a break. Here was a white European male, acceptable only because he was acting the part of an illiterate savage.’

‘Any fool can defend Mr Kelman’s “right” to write English in his own way. It is a free world. But to give him the Booker Prize? What lunacy has seized English literature?’