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Armelle Parey

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## '[All] this is gone, and yet I have the power to make it immortal'—An Interview with Lucy Caldwell

ARMELLE PAREY

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### Résumé

The following is an edited version of an interview with Lucy Caldwell conducted on October 17th, 2024 during the conference on the (neo-)historical in British literature and visual arts (20th-21st centuries), held at the university de Caen Normandie (France). This interview focuses on the genesis and circumstances of writing of *These days*, winner of the Walter Scott Prize for Historical Fiction in 2024. It gives insight into Caldwell's sense of responsibility and impression of temporal and emotional superposition when writing historical fiction as well as her approach to style and narration in this novel but also in her stories.

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### Texte intégral

The editor would like to thank Lucy Caldwell for granting permission to publish this interview.

**Armelle Parey:** *These Days* is your fourth novel, but it's the first one to be set in the historical past, namely the Blitz in Belfast in 1941. Could you start by telling us about the genesis of *These Days*? Very simply, how and why did you decide to write that? Why write about the past today? and why in particular the Blitz in Belfast?

**Lucy Caldwell:** This novel is my first that follows the slightly arbitrary rule of the Walter Scott Prize, which takes its cue from *Waverley* and its subtitle 'Tis 60 years since'. But funnily, when I was writing this novel, I didn't think 'I'm writing a historical novel' because when I am writing the rest of my stories, my novels and plays, I am never, ever writing a generic recent past or generic present. And I think that's so important. If I'm writing a story set in, say, 2003, I think, okay, so at that point, did we have mobile phones? Had they shrunk until they were the size of credit cards and they couldn't get any smaller so people started making them bigger again? How did we navigate the city? Did I have a London A-to-Z? Did I have to print out

directions and try to follow a map? Did I have Google Maps with the blue dot that told me exactly where to go? I think of all these things, when I'm setting a story.

Also coming from Belfast, I haven't a hope of writing a generic Belfast of the past ten or 15 years. I need to know exactly where my story is set to have a hope of getting it right: what the city was like, what the mood was like, even if that scaffolding falls away, even if the reader is never aware of that. When I'm writing my Belfast-set stories, there's a resource, called the Conflict Archive on the Internet (Cain).<sup>1</sup> I was involved in the campaign to save and preserve it a couple of years ago. It's a day by day account of the conflict in the Troubles, and it tells you just exactly what was happening every single day: political events, deaths, everything. Resources like that, I find, very, very, very valuable.

So there were those specific challenges which I loved. When I had decided that I was writing this novel, I combed the journals of Virginia Woolf, say, for the moments when she says 'a looking glass', not 'a mirror'. And you want to get all these details just absolutely right. But, again, if I do it too right, it'll be like if we're listening to a BBC broadcaster from 50 years ago, it would sound completely ridiculous. You would sound like you were doing a bad imitation of that voice as an actor: you have to do just a version of it. So I have to get the balance right because too much will start to sound like pastiche. I very much enjoyed that sort of technical literary challenge of getting the feel of the period, to feel truthful.

When the book came to me, we were living in the Docklands of London, in a Victorian White House building, and it was an area that had been very, very badly bombed by the London Blitz. And my son at the time—he was about 18 months—was obsessed with a children's book called *Peepo!* by Janet and Allan Ahlberg. It goes, 'here's a little baby. One, two, three stands in his court. What does he see?' On each page of the book, there's a cut-out circle and you look through the circle to see the back of the next page. It tells a day in the life of a baby but the background is the London Blitz. It's a beautiful book. All the observational details are really poignant. At the end of the book, the baby's father is in uniform. He's saying goodbye and heading away. But the baby doesn't know that his father's going. This baby is just being put to bed. When you're reading a story repeatedly to a child, especially a young child, you really appreciate those books that have enough room for the adult to be part of the story. I was reading this book to my son every single night for months in this flat in the Docklands, thinking how strange it was that in this room we would have survived everything the London Blitz had to throw at us. And yet everything around was gone, you know, for streets and streets and streets. If we'd been a couple of meters that way or a street that way, we wouldn't have survived the Blitz. And yet in this room we would have survived the Blitz. Many of my favourite writers, Elizabeth Bowen and Virginia Woolf, Rosamond Lehmann, Sylvia Townsend Warner, Graham Greene, Henry Graham, Louis McNeice, they're all great writers of the Blitz. So I wrote a story called 'Daylight Raids', which is in my collection *Openings* (2024) but was actually written before *These Days*. It's a kind of homage to Bowen. It's set in the London Blitz and it's very experimental in form. I loved writing that, and I thought, 'hang on, there was a Belfast Blitz'. People just don't know the Belfast Blitz but Belfast was one of the worst hit places in the entirety of the UK.

My grandmother had just died. She had never liked talking about the Blitz and towards the end of her life, she had very advanced dementia so that all questions were traps and she was very suspicious of you. So I'd lost the opportunity to ask her anything. But yet I knew there had been a Blitz in Belfast and I went looking for it in fiction. And it doesn't exist in fiction. There's one novel: a very, very fine semi-autobiographical novel by Brian Moore called *The Emperor of Ice Cream*, just reissued by Turnpike Press, but there's nothing else. I'm always interested in untold and under-told stories so I started to think, this is great, there's definitely a story here. So I started interviewing people, reading the historical accounts. I'm indebted to the magisterial work of the historian Brian Barton. I cite them all at the end of the book. This was in 2019 and when we started tipping into 2020 and Covid happened, suddenly it became very precious to collect these stories and these memories while I still could because we were losing the people who lived through this as children.

**AP:** Rather early on in the novel, in chapter two, Audrey, one of the two sisters, thinks briefly about the Battle of Waterloo. I quote: 'all the history book battles, discussions of statistics and manoeuvres and outcomes to memorize, and recite. They bore no relation to how it must have been, to how it must have felt' (*These Days*, 15). Could this be read as your manifesto, that fiction does or should give us a sense of, 'how it must have felt'?

**LC:** I think there are truths that are accessible only through fiction. This is something Hilary Mantel says as well. We can know that two people were in a room. We can have transcripts of what they said. But that sense of what it feels like, truths like this are approachable maybe only elliptically or maybe only through fiction.

It's a truism that we're only ever writing about the present but I think it's a very true truism. I think that when you look at the film *Amadeus*, it tells us far more about the 1980s than it does Mozart. So, when I'm writing *These Days*, I'm thinking about what it means to come from the time and place that I did. When I talk about being in a flat in the Docklands and thinking that two meters away, a street away, we wouldn't have survived, I think of my childhood and I think of the arbitrariness of it all: that that Friday night you decide to go to the chip shop or you don't, or you're five minutes early or you're five minutes late, or you run the way that they tell you to, or you run the opposite way, or when you walk into a bar, you choose to sit on the left hand side rather than the right, the complete arbitrariness of all of these decisions. So when I'm writing the Belfast Blitz, it's a new way for me of writing the place and time that I came from.

This is also a Covid novel. Suddenly, our first lockdown for Covid in the UK was April to May, and the Belfast Blitz takes place from April to May as well. The first draft of this novel I wrote in weeks and almost in real time. In the British media, there was a lot of idle talk about the Blitz and Blitz spirit, how British people are good in a crisis and so on, and I found that I suddenly had a radically new understanding of what it was actually like to live through the Blitz.

And again, it came back to the question of that complete provisionality. You didn't know if you were safer going to the air raid shelter or staying at home. You didn't know if the bombs that were falling that night had your name on them. There's a brilliant book by Lara Feigel called *The Love Charm of Bombs*. It's a work of literary history and what you get with all these writers of the Blitz is these incendiary love affairs, and all the stuff that people do when they don't know if they're going to live, when the normal course of their life has gone off kilter. There was something similar about living through lockdown, even in my own family. One of my sisters who had been in a very long term relationship and was engaged to be married suddenly broke that off. Another sister met someone and very quickly moved in with him. People were making these radical decisions about their love lives, about their jobs, about where they wanted to live, about the life they wanted to have. There's a sense that we were shunted from the normal groove of what we could expect. And so, something about our experience allowed me better to understand the experience of the characters in my novel. I think this is one of Hilary Mantel's remarks. The greatest thing that she does is that even though we know from the very first line that Cromwell is going to be executed, her genius is that you read the last bit of the book with your heart in your mouth, thinking there might be a different outcome, that it might still not happen. And for me, the writing of historical fiction is that sense that for the characters, it isn't history yet, it's still provisional. We know that the Blitz ended with the last raids in May. They don't. And, for me, it's in that sense of radical provisionality that aliveness comes.

I had, have in fact, a quite mystical experience with time. I'm interested in theology, in all the great mystics and the ways of understanding our relationship in time. And sometimes I get it when I'm scrolling through my phone and my phone will throw up, 'on this day' or 'London lunches through the years' or 'Belfast Christmases' and you're scrolling through the pictures of your children rapidly growing up. And sometimes I have the sense that without meaning to, you could just scroll forwards—I'm in the realms of sci fi now, not historical fiction (laughter) —, we could just scroll forward and see what happens to them. It doesn't seem beyond the realms of possibility that we could be unmoored from reality like that.

And there were so many curious moments when I was writing. In the novel, the worst raid happens on the 7th of April. And in the UK, that was the first day that the (covid) death toll rose above a thousand. I was letting myself write day by day in my first draft of this novel, and you could feel the sense of dread in the air and I didn't know if I was feeling the 1941 dread or my present day dread. There's a section in the novel where the city has been devastated, all the comms are down, and the red phone on the desk of the head of the civil service, Sir Wilfred Spender, goes. He picks it up. It's Churchill and Spender thinks 'thank fuck, you're going to give me some aid' and instead, Churchill says, 'what are you doing to protect the statue of Carson at Stormont? The statue must not be allowed to fall.' And Spender is like, 'are you being serious?'<sup>2</sup> (laughter) And on that day, literally on the day I was writing that scene, they were toppling the statue of Edward Colston in Bristol Harbour. Later on, I was writing a scene

where the upper classes are having a party to raise their morale. About a year later, it came out that this is what it was like in 2020. And you think 'what's happening? Am I causing this by writing it?' (laughter). But I started to understand time as something that you could tune into and out of, in the same way that people say the present can affect the past or the future: we don't live in a teleological chronological time. That's a consensus reality. That's an illusion. We live in cycles. We live in loops. And so for me, this is a historical novel on the level that I'm writing about what it's like to grow up in Belfast and I'm writing about what it's like to live through Covid through the confines of the Belfast Blitz.

**AP:** Thinking about this notion of the present influencing the past, what about anachronism? Do you write with the notion of anachronism in mind, in terms of politics or ideas, which obviously resonate with us as 21st century readers, more than with the characters of the period. For instance, Audrey in *These Days* is very aware of marriage as limiting in a way that I'm not sure someone at that time would have been.

**LC:** As I said, I'm always interested in untold and under-told stories. That tends to be women's stories. There's a couple of real people woven into this book. There's this one character called Moya Woodside, who has a cameo in this novel, and kind of gratifyingly I had a letter from a retired Professor at Manchester who wrote to me, and he said he absolutely recognized his mother's friend Moya, and he remembers Moya telling his mother she was a cabbage for giving up her medical career to have children. In the 1930s Moya brought Marie Stopes over to Belfast to meet with women, to have lunches and Moya's whole idea was that contraception and abortion should be made widely and commonly available, not just for birth control, but so women could enjoy their sexual pleasure. She said once a woman doesn't need to worry about whether or not she's going to get pregnant, she's free to enjoy sex, and this will radically revolutionize the female experience. And she's saying that in 1936 Belfast!

There is also Doreen Bates who is a much bigger character in this novel. She was a diarist that I completely fell in love with. Her *Diary of a Wartime Affair* was published by Viking and I've just helped get the second volume of her diaries into print. Doreen Bates was a very well educated woman, a tax inspector who was posted to Belfast during the Blitz, and she had a love affair with her much older supervisor who was married. His wife was a former ballet dancer who, reading between the lines, was probably anorexic. They didn't say that, but she was very, very thin, kept having to go to clinics, had problems eating and didn't have any children. Doreen tried to break off this affair and couldn't. She decided she wanted a baby so she got pregnant by him. She found a sympathetic gynecologist who wrote her a certificate to say that she would need six months' leave from work. And of course, everyone knew. Doreen's bosses knew that she was pregnant. And they called her in to say, look, you're not planning on doing this again, are you? Because it might be a problem, but we'll let you off the hook this time. She went on to be a single mother of twins and she just completely rejected shame. She was ferociously intelligent. What I love about her diary is she also says things like 'I'm really pleased with my hair today because it's greasy enough to be stylable and to hold its style, but not greasy enough to look greasy' or she says 'my nail varnish on my fingers is starting to chip a little bit, but no one will notice for a couple of days'. Garcia Marquez says that when you are a journalist, and I guess a historian, one erroneous fact and your whole edifice crumbles; when you're a novelist, one true fact and your whole thing takes off and comes alive. And so for me, I'm conscious of not wanting to have iPhones in the Blitz or whatever, but I'm also looking for, the things that we might not expect, the things that don't tend to be recorded.

When I spoke to people about their memories, women especially, they'd say, 'ach love, sure, I've nothing to tell you'. And then they proceed to talk for maybe two, three hours about things that for a novelist are gold dust and things that you think no military historian is necessarily going to be interested in recording. That's not going to make it into the columns of statistics. That's the sort of thing that I was I was looking for.

**AP:** The novel is strongly anchored in Belfast. There are many references to real places, to street names, which of course brings to mind the realist framework with which historical fiction is often associated. And yet the narrative is rather fragmented, jumping from one chapter to the next, from the thoughts and experience of one character to the next. And it actually evokes the stream of consciousness technique. Sometimes there's no punctuation. Would you like to comment on your narrative technique before you read the extract on Wee Betty Banks?

**LC:** Well, I'm very much with Hilary Mantel when she says from a godlike perspective, you could cut a cleaner swathe through your material but actually the interesting bit comes from the tensions and the contradictions and the ambiguities. And so I tried to be as faithful as

possible to the facts as I could uncover them. So Doreen Bates is in this novel under her real name and if in her diaries, she talks about taking a particular walk up a particular road in a particular weather on a particular day, I tried to stay faithful to that. I wasn't able to travel because I was in London in lockdown but I would send my mum and dad out on errands for me and I'd say: 'go and stand on this particular point in the street and look up. How much of the hills can you see through the trees?' Because, as you commented earlier, Audrey walks up the street and she thinks that these are the beech trees that were planted to commemorate the victory over Napoleon of Waterloo. These are the same trees that the characters see. These trees survived the Belfast Blitz. Again, untethering ourselves from time a bit, these trees are moving at a different pace. Every single walk in this novel, I did following a facsimile ordnance map from as late in the 30s. When we could travel again, I did every single walk that's in this novel, partly as a way of honouring the book; partly, as a way of bidding farewell to the book and to the intense psychic world that I lived in while I wrote it, but also as a way of kind of checking that it worked.

And so, as much as I can is utterly faithful, and that gives me freer rein as a stylist because of course, this isn't a work of history even if I wanted it to work as a work of history as well. This is a novel. And so my primary concern is: is this truthful and real as a work of fiction? If it's historically inaccurate, that may be annoying for a reader who knows but if it's fictionally implausible or untrue, then for every single reader, I've completely failed.

I'll read a very short extract, about a very minor character. The best advice I ever got about characters came from theater director Ian Rickson who said, 'there is or there should be no such thing as a minor character. If a character only exists to walk on stage and deliver a prop or a line to another character, they're dead, they're inert. They're not truthful. We need to get the sense that you could tilt the perspective slightly and their story would be as worthwhile'. And I think this is very interesting because of course, he's coming from an aesthetic point of view, but I see that as a kind of a moral philosophy as well. I think that there's no such thing as an ordinary life. I think all lives are rich and extraordinary. I think every life has its public self, its private self, its secret self, its chambers of secrets and battles. And I'm so interested in every one of them.

Wee Betty Banks is a little 13-year-old girl from a very poor family and earlier on in the novel, I use a true story that I got from the history archives that a man had a vision of 10 coffins falling from the sky, one for every member of his family. He lived in a two-up, two-down house. All his mates were laughing at him but he took off the big front door and he nailed it to the top of the kitchen table. And a couple of nights later, all the bombs came. His family sheltered under this reinforced kitchen table, and they all survived. And this was a true story. In the novel that's Wee Betty Banks' father but then she doesn't survive the next Blitz. So this is one of the most minor characters in the book but it's one of my favourite passages.

1 [LC reads extract on Wee Betty Banks, *These Days* (258-259)]

**LC:** I think about what my duty, what my responsibility is as a historical writer. With this excerpt I think you see everything that I was thinking about: what is my responsibility to these times that we're living through? What is it that survives of us? One woman I spoke to was 103, and I got her memories. Another woman, I spoke to her once, and she was quite tired and she said she was going to organize her thoughts and if I called her in a week, she'd have everything written for me. The week turned and she had died. All of that was lost.

There's a beautiful poem written by my compatriot Nick Laird, called 'Up late', about the death of his father during Covid, being unable to be there and saying goodbye to his father via an iPad. And there's a line in that poem that goes 'an elegy I think is words to bind a grief in'. I was writing *These Days* simultaneously parallel and the first ever reading I gave from this novel was in Berlin, along with Nick, on the day that Russia invaded Ukraine. We arrived in Alexanderplatz in Berlin, on the day that suddenly there was this new European land war. And we were thinking: what does a writer do, what the writer's role, what the writer's responsibility? And we were talking about how that section, when I was writing it, I was elegising. The magic of an elegy is that you're conjuring up, you're preserving. So there I've caught something and I've preserved it, and there it is. We were thinking about what it is that literature can do, and whether you are a reporter, whether your role as a creative writer is something more than that as well, something a bit more mystical, a bit more magical. And that's one of the things I was trying to work at in that section specifically: all this is gone, and yet I have the power to make it immortal.

**AP:** The excerpt you've just read actually goes with the notion of the inventory mentioned in a talk earlier on.<sup>3</sup> In your novel, there is this reference to objects, to events, given as a list, to get us to feel and

understand the materiality of the past. The other thing I was thinking is that the notion of intimacy that gives its name to an earlier collection of short stories—*Intimacies* (2021)—seems to fit your whole work. This same personal, intimate approach to characters that you show in the short stories seems to have made its way into your historical fiction.

**LC:** It's interesting you think of an inventory which is a very material list. But I'm also thinking of a list as a litany in the religious sense. I grew up in Belfast with a Protestant father and a Catholic mother, not going to church. So my first encounters with the transportive power of litany would have been through music, in the car listening to Van Morrison, you know, 'take me way back, take me back, take me back, take me way back, take me way, way, way back, way back' There was a sort of transfigurative power. And then in religion and in religious texts, you see that in what we require of ritual and how ritual is transportative. And so I think I'm pushing the inventory into something akin to a litany or something more transportative, maybe more spiritual.

**AP:** The fact that this inventory/litany works with other passages which are about the characters' feelings and experience makes a very striking balance.

**LC:** Yes, I wrote my first novel while I was an undergrad. It was published the year after, so I was writing plays and short stories at the same time but the short stories only started working when I stopped seeing them as prose forms at all, and I started seeing them as spells. I started seeing them as words and rhythms in a particular order to conjure up a particular mood. So some of my stories have a lot of plot, some have almost none. But the plot is secondary. The plot is incidental. The primary thing is translating atmosphere or translating emotion into words. And so I think that's what you're picking up on here.

I played Suzuki violin as a child when I was about four. In Suzuki violin, you listen and you repeat. You never learn to read music. There's nothing in between you and the music, and there's something of those years and years of musical training, I think, when I'm trying to think about the rhythms and the tone. The truth that I'm trying to access is something felt or something that's understood through being apprehended maybe emotionally rather than intellectually.

**AP:** A few remarks on your style. *These Days* starts in the present tense. And using this tense has become a regular feature in contemporary historical fiction, starting with Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall*. You use the present tense a lot for your contemporary stories as well but I would like you to comment on your use of the present tense with respect to historical fiction.

**LC:** I think a lot of writers find it very exposing writing as 'I', but I think the playwright in me may find it very easy to ventriloquise. When I'm writing 'I', it's not me, it's my character. My first novel is written from the point of view of a six-year-old child and then later, her 16-year-old self. It's in the first-person present tense and that's pure theatrical monologue. Or in, say, Belfast, if you go to the pub and you're telling your mates a story, you slip into the present tense: 'So here's me walking along and I sees him and I says to him', you know. It's a way of telling a story that I feel very comfortable with. But I reached a point where my first-person narrator started not serving me very well in my stories. I was writing teen suicide, depression, or characters who didn't like themselves and weren't very much fun to be with or didn't have enough self-awareness to be able to tell their story in an interesting way. Also, if you tell a story in the past tense in the first person, instantly you're getting the summary or the moral of experience rather than the experience itself. Again, we've lost something about provisionality. So I started writing then in the second person, because I found the second person was not asking the reader to roleplay, but to be witness to a psychodrama that was taking place between the character and a voice in their head. For instance, my story that starts with 'Two weeks after your cousin dies, you're on a night flight back to London from Toronto'<sup>4</sup> is one of them. The reader has to be positioned at the shoulder of the character, almost holding their breath, not daring to do anything, just being witness to this kind of intense thing, that is happening between the character and the voice in their head, or maybe the character and a future version of themselves or the character in their higher self. And so I was writing these stories for a while.

I had always resisted the third person because, as I said, my absolute favourite writers are Woolf and Bowen and Lehman and these great, great stylists. And as a young writer, I found myself completely paralyzed by writing the third person because I think I'm suddenly present in the text in a way that I'm not in the first, I would tie myself up into existential knots thinking, 'who am I to be commenting on what these characters are thinking and doing? And suddenly I, Lucy Caldwell, I'm there as a stylist and I'm not a stylist'. And so I found it much

easier not to use third-person. But then I reached a point where it changed. My first novel was published in 2006, almost 20 years ago. Recently, I've been writing more in the third person. And for this novel, as you said, historically, it's very faithful and traditional. Stylistically, it's a bit more experimental. It's a novel of the city, really, and a novel of voice. And I didn't want to have to keep on inventing first-person voices, because you just lose a lot of energy: you have to differentiate the voices; every time you jump, it becomes jagged; you prefer one character to another as a reader etc. I needed a sort of supple, elastic prose that could do all the things that third person can, moving in and out of characters and incorporating characters who have a greater or lesser sense of self-awareness. Funnily the stories that I've been writing most recently are third person and from the point of view of men, I don't know what's happening to me now (laughter).

**AP:** I wanted to go back to the story 'Daylight Raids' published in the collection entitled *Openings*. It is another story set during the Blitz, in London this time, with two characters involved in an affair. What I've found striking is how—even though I said it was fragmented—, there's something seamless about the narrative of *These Days* where the narrator is very diffuse, whereas in the story 'Daylight Raids' the narrator is really in your face. Could you comment on this completely different technique for stories set in the same period?

**LC:** A historical book that I love is Amy Sackville's *Painter to the King* which I think is very underrated. In this novel, there's a sort of self-conscious narrator that comes up at times, then disappears. And another book that I love is Laurent Binet's *HHH* with a sort of self-conscious narrator, a narrator narrating this-might-have-happened sort of thing. And I love that, but it's a sort of thing that you can do in a short story. So in my short story, 'Daylight Raids', there is an I narrator we never find out anything about, but that says things like:

'And now the moment's come: here it is: here they are, we are, now, and there is something they need from me, us, that is in our power to give them. Mine to give, perhaps, and yours — to bear witness.  
So for a moment, look: I'm letting her see it'. (*Openings* 130-131)

So there's a narrator that's in conversation with the reader. And I had this idea, first of all, that I would write my Blitz novel like that. But of course, the magic of a short story is you can do things with tenses, with points of view that you just can't sustain over the course of a novel. So my first draft of *These Days*, which had a different title then, just wasn't working. I tried various things like I tried to have more of a me avatar living through Covid, researching a story, but then it didn't work. And I thought, what if I make it a fictional version of my grandmother, a bit like Binet, and that didn't work. I just didn't know what to do with it. And then one day I just kind of had the revelation of 'what if I just remove myself from the frame?' And suddenly it felt to me then, like the novel that I'd written so far had almost been like born in its caul. And once you stripped that away, there was a formally less inventive and more traditional historical novel there but as soon as I removed myself and my own self-consciousness at the telling of it, the characters started coming to life in really interesting ways.

One of the most interesting writers and thinkers in recent years is Professor Saidiya Hartman at Columbia University. She wrote the brilliant essay 'Venus in Two acts' and she also has a book called *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, in which she talks about the academic and moral possibilities of using the conditional tense when you're writing archives of the African-American experience in the slave archives. And she says we can't narrate that because so much wasn't deemed worth recording. The archives have these blanks in them. Where characters do exist in archives, they are given a name like 'female 24'. And a novelist might step in and invent but then you get into the problems of anachronism and putting what people may or may not have thought about their experience. And is that right to do? is it ethical? And so Saidiya Hartman says you can use the conditional tense to have it both ways. For instance, you say 'it might have happened like this' and so you summon up the possibility of it, but it probably didn't. An interesting writer Eley Williams has a brilliant historical short story called 'the Rebecca Riots' set in 1839 and told in the conditional tense. She's gay and she's using queer theory to think through a bunch of men who dress in their woman folk's clothes to go and protest against unfair taxes. They dress like that so that they won't be recognized: it's just a form of disguise but suddenly this lovely sort of possibility opens up for these sturdy men and their working boots. Suddenly something kind of inarticulable, suddenly something possible opens up. And when I'm doing things like tone with my students, we read the opening of that story out loud, and then I get them to transpose that into choral past tense. And

instantly the tone is gone. The magic, the sense of possibility, is gone. You're just giving straightforward fact. 'We pulled on our skirts and our petticoats and we set out into the night', rather than the 'what if we...'. I think somewhere in the margins are these really interesting questions about what unusual forms of narration can do. There's a ghost version of my book, the words stranger, more experimental, more 'what if' - than the finished version. But maybe it has so much going on character-wise and stylistically, that in order to work, it needed to be a bit more solidity, more of a traditional sense of form to hold it all together.

**AP:** You placed two epigraphs at the start of this novel, one by Sylvia Townsend Warner, another one by Louis MacNeice that goes 'these days the lost will be all your days'. I've noticed you use another line of that same poem for another novel. Can you comment on the choice of these epigraphs?

**LC:** How beautiful is this? This is from Sylvia Townsend's private correspondence.

'No one feels well or happy just now. No one in war time can quite escape the illusion that when the war ends, things will snap back to where they were and that one will be the same age one was when it began, and able to go on from where one left off. But the temple of Janus has two doors, and the door for war and door for peace are equally marked in plain lettering. No way back. And the dead are not more irrevocably dead than the living are irrevocably alive'.

I love that. I read that during Covid when my children were two and five. During that lockdown, my son turned six. And so we bought him his first bicycle and he learned how to ride a bike. And I was interviewing people about their experiences of being children during the Belfast Blitz. And sometimes the stories they would tell me were full of joy. When word got out that Turner's grocery had oranges, they'd seize their granny's wicker basket and they'd run because they were eight and they were the fastest runner in the family. They'd run to get in line for the oranges and they'd have the oranges. Or they'd tell me about the dress that their mother made for their daughter. There'd be these joyful experiences. I think of my son living through Covid: one of the things he will remember is the joy of getting his first bike and learning how to ride a bike. I think of the assumptions that people have of me, of what it must have been like to grow up through the Troubles. I'm always interested when narratives start to ossify in questioning those and then contradicting them and kind of asserting as well. There's a moral sense in asserting the joy even at times, maybe especially at times of great devastation. Two of the most moving things I've seen recently are: a young man in the bombed out refugee camps of Rafah, taking his viva and receiving his doctorate; an image of a little girl, running through these awful bombed camps in Palestine, with a little avocado that has just sprouted, showing it to the camera. You think you have a responsibility to people to allow them the fullness of their humanity, to allow for there to be joy as well as the terror.

**AP:** At the end of *These Days*, war isn't over but the main protagonists have gained a new consciousness, they have had a revelation of what they really want. The novel thus seems to come to a natural end. Could you tell us how you dealt with the question of the ending? Was it in any way different for you because of the genre of historical fiction?

**LC:** I think that's such a beautiful way of putting it. The novel has something of an open end, because for each of the main characters, something is only just beginning. One of the crucial things for me to bear in mind—I think for any writer of historical fiction to bear in mind—is that for the characters in the novel, they're not living in 'history', they're living right at the cutting edge, at the furthest moment humanity has reached! They live with the same provisionality, in the same radical uncertainty, as we do at this moment now. It would be a mistake to allow them to feel my knowledge of what comes next—that the Belfast Blitz, for example, is over. We know that only with hindsight—we know that but they don't. They don't know if the bombers are going to come again that very night—but life has to go on anyway, as it does for all of us, wherever we are and whatever our circumstances might be, growing up in the Troubles, or living through Covid. The novelist has to make what I have heard Claire Keegan brilliantly call 'the incisions in time'—you choose where to cut in and where to cut out, and I did this with great care, but also with the consciousness—as I have said previously in this interview!—of time being mysterious, and simultaneous, and ongoing. I do like to think that Emma and Audrey and Florence are still living their lives, just as we live ours, even though the book is set in the past, even though they are fictional characters... and I want the reader to have that sense, too, that their stories will continue to unfurl.

**AP:** One simple final question from me: do you think you will write more historical fiction?

**LC:** Everyone always asks, do you have any writers in your family? My mum's the child of very, very poor Irish immigrants to England. My dad's from a very working class family. So I don't know because none of them had the space and time to write things down. But my mum does have an extraordinary story in her family where, a man, father to seven, soon to be eight children, living in abject poverty left to go to America to seek his fortune. They never heard from him again. The wife gave birth to an eighth baby and then died. The eldest daughter, Lucy who was only 16 and then 18 at the time, was trying desperately to keep her siblings alive and keep them together. We have some of the letters she wrote to the orphanage, begging them to take in some of her younger siblings because she couldn't feed them and they were going to die. And then we have letters from her to the orphanage saying one of her siblings is wasting away through homesickness. She wants to take the sibling home. But will they take in another child because she can't afford to feed them all? And I think there's something there: the sisters, the untold stories, the keeping the family together and the resilience. I feel maybe there'll be something there. But again, I'm not approaching it as, 'oh, I've written a successful historical novel, I'll write another one'. It's 'where is the story that feels like it has something useful, alive in the present?'

**Vanessa Guignery:** I have a question about the way in which you wrote your narrative and especially the pace of the story. When I read *These Days*, I was struck by the first chapters, which seem to go at a sort of regular pace, and suddenly there's the raid and suddenly it's utter chaos in the city of course, but also in the narrative itself. And I feel that here we enter a different narrative. So I was wondering how you got to organize the novel and, and if you thought of that, that different pace, when the raid started.

**LC:** Yes, absolutely. One of the really interesting things that happens in wartime is people's lives get knocked off their grooves, and that happens my characters in the novel and also people's relationship with the city has radically changed. People encounter people at times in ways and under circumstances in which they would never otherwise normally meet. For some people, that's extremely liberating. You know, doing the research, I was thinking of women who got to go to work, who got to drive ambulances, who got to have a role in the civic life of the city, first aid responders in a way that without the Blitz, they would never have had that. And so I wanted that sense that nothing can be taken for granted. And I wanted the pace to be the sudden jolts, the blindsiding, then attempting to make your cauliflower pie and set up your distribution centers, and the ways that we attempt to impose order and time as we understand it.

I wanted to explore exactly all of that. I wrote it in quite an instinctive way. Following the moment that we move from one character to another, I had my overall scaffolding, my framework of events, but my own progression through the narrative as a writer, I just let myself be very instinctive, very intuitive and follow the character, whom I thought would be most augmenting the story or interestingly complicating the story at that time.

I love the girls' mother, Florence. We have these two girls aged 19 and 21 and they're callow: Mother to them is just Mother, who disapproves of you by the angle of her knitting needles. And then you discover that she lost the love of her life in the battle of the Somme and part of her soul died there and she's been suspended then, even though she went on and she married, and she was lucky to do so because a lot of women never married as a lot of men just never came back and so we have this whole generation of spinsters. She was lucky. She married a doctor. She had two children and a baby that died but then she had a son and she's got a good house. Betty Banks is her maid. She's got a housekeeper. And yet she feels that she's lived through her whole life at a remove. It's been unreal to her. And that's a quiet sorrow no one in the novel ever knows. It's muted, unlike the sisters and the sort of drama of being caught up in the Blitz. I think this sort of quiet desolation is a necessary note as well, against all of the pyrotechnics of the rest.

**AP:** Just one quick remark about this character and that particular scene. All the characters have some sort of sudden understanding but Florence, after one of the attacks, thinks that her daughters may have been hit, and she drops to her knees and she thinks, 'I must give him up' (162), 'him' being this memory of her first love. And this scene really made me think of Graham Greene's *The End of the Affair*.

**LC:** Yes, it was a conscious reference. That's one of my absolute favourite books. In *These Days*, Florence has been kind of sleepwalking almost through her life. But her fantasies about that possible reunion with the love of her youth start to get kind of sad. She starts to think, if he could see me now, of course he wouldn't love me. I'm a 40 something year old woman. My hair is greying and he's a young boy. There's too much distance between us. We will never be able to meet up. I have to give him up. It's been an indulgence for me loving him. And it has

prevented me from living. And all I've got is this here, this here now. So, yes, it's exactly like *The End of the Affair*.

**Diana Wallace:** I wanted to ask you to speak a little bit more about the sense of yourself as a writer from Belfast, from Northern Ireland, who's lived in London, and whether you have a sense that you have a different view from the kind of English approach to the Blitz and other things.

**LC:** Thank you, that's such an interesting question. I said it took me years to write my first collection of short stories *Multitudes*, which is about girlhood and womanhood during those Troubles years. Partly that was technical craft but also partly I had the sense these were not stories that people wanted to hear about that time and place.

As I said, I have a Catholic parent, a Protestant parent. For years I saw myself as neither. And one of the reasons I love Louis McNeice so much is he's the great poet of plurality of both/and rather than either/or, and of multiplicity and the way that we can all contain equal and simultaneous contradictions and that enriches us all rather than diminishing us all. That's something of a sort of article of faith for me, that sense of both/and. I think I noticed it most when I signed my first publishing deal and my sisters made me a congratulatory card. It was that famous sepia toned picture of great Irish writers with Yeats and Joyce and Behan and Wilde, etc.. And my sisters found a very serious looking photo of me. I have like a very severe fringe and thick-rimmed glasses and no makeup. And they stuck me on underneath Oscar Wilde's shoulder and tipexed in 'Lucy Caldwell'. And I've still got that card. It was kind of a joke, I was like 20, and but then you start thinking, okay, so where are the women actually? Where is Edna O'Brien, where's Mary Lavin and where's Kate O'Brien etc., etc.? I had David Marcus's edited anthologies of Irish short story for Faber on my desk—technically before I was Irish because I grew up with a British passport, and then the Good Friday Agreement allowed you to have both and to be both so in my first year of university, I applied for my first Irish passport—and I always used to think if I was ever asked to edit one of those anthologies, I would just do all women. I grew up with sisters and I always used to think you start writing what you know. And in my plays I would write female parts and actors would start to say, it's so rare to have parts of a woman that aren't predicated on their relationship to men. And then, Sinead Gleason did her wonderful anthology, *The long Gaze Back*, of Irish women writers for 400 years. And I was published in that. There was a panel that we did in Belfast with the northern writers, and we were saying, this is the first time in my whole publishing life that I've been on stage with not only one other woman, but four other women. So then Sinead edited an anthology of short fiction from the north of Ireland—as of course, Northern Ireland as an entity is younger than the 300-year span of the anthology. Then Faber did ask me what would be my version of this book of Irish fiction, were I to write it.

I've just written a kind of personal essay, the first in my life, for the literary magazine *The Stinging Fly* about how my mum is from Bristol and her dad's family originally hails from Cork so I never had a Belfast accent. I grew up with people saying to me, where are you from? And I'd say from here. And they say, no, where you really from? Then, in almost every single interview that I've done with broadsheet press, they comment on my voice and it starts making you feel that it's not just your voice that's being questioned but your right to tell certain stories. And so when I edited my version of the Faber anthology, which I called *Being Various*—from McNiece, 'I peel and portion of Tangerine and spit the pips and feel the drunkenness of things being various'<sup>5</sup>—I tried to break open the canon a bit, and I opened it with a story by younger, brilliant, brilliant Chinese-born novelist who married an Irishman and moved to Dublin and started writing in English. In fact, it was a second ever story that she's ever written in English. And I introduced her to my editor at Faber and to my agent, her first English language collection came out with my editor last year, and in fact, my stories are coming out in Chinese next year through a connection that she made.

I also had a story by a Nigerian-born writer who came to Ireland as an asylum seeker. I had a story by a Finnish-born writer who moved to Ireland in her early 20s, married an Irishman, had three Irish children, marriage ended, children grew up and left home. She cried when I asked her for a story because she was only ever asked for a story as a Finnish writer, never as an Irish writer. And she said, for her, Finland is an accident of birth. Ireland is a country to which she came, to which she chose to remain. So I tried to break open the canon thinking that the more that we can break open a sense of who gets to be Irish, the more enriched we all are.

I think it's very exciting at the moment to be an Irish writer because of this sense of questioning stories. Ireland has changed a lot as a society over the last few decades, and a lot of that has been to do with literally rewriting the Constitution. The equal marriage referendum,

the bodily autonomy referendum, those were won by the power of personal narrative, by people telling their very, very personal stories. A quarter of a century on, Northern Ireland people have enough distance, as in Anna Burns' *Milkman*, to be able to think, what was it that we lived through? How is the narrative ossifying? How is that interesting? How is that problematic? So I think there's a sense of story being questioned in a way that you'd think that the same conditions were there in the UK, but it feels a lot more atomized. That doesn't seem to be the same. It feels that a lack of a sense of coherent national identity isn't a febrile thing in a good way. It feels kind of atomized. To me there are Welsh, Scottish, northern, southern brilliant writers doing brilliant things. But there doesn't seem to be the same sense of cohesion that you feel you get among the Irish community writing.

This is partly as well for economic reasons. The Irish government is paying a lot of money to send Irish writers abroad and to support conferences in Japan, in Brazil, in Spain but you can't buy this sort of engagement with literature, and this love of a country and this cultural diplomacy that's being forged through literature. It's something that I think the British Council used to do but the budgets were cut. And then, of course, that's bound up with Empire in really problematic ways. So I think that sense of British is a kind of different thing.

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And yet I do hold both passports. I think there is going to be very soon a referendum on reunification. I think the partition was a disaster and I think that the island should be united. But it shouldn't be subsuming into something that already exists. It needs to be something new, maybe a federal entity. And yet, even though I think that should happen, even though I have an Irish passport, I will feel a sense of loss for the country in which I was born. I'm one of a particular sort that considers myself Northern Irish, and that's an identity for which I can't have a passport. I do consider myself a Belfast writer, a Northern Irish writer. I think it's a very interesting place of ambiguities and contradictions. I think that can be useful for a writer. I never thought I'd write another Belfast novel. And then in coronavirus, I felt that there's something about diaspora. We think of diaspora as far flung. If you go back a couple of generations, you would leave and you would never come back, you would never see your family again. If you go forward a generation, you would leave but you would come back, maybe for a visit to distribute dollars in your best suit and to show how well you'd done. Or then you might come back for a wedding, or you come back for a funeral. These days, with cheaper flights and with the illusions of proximity that contemporary technology gives us, you kind of feel that actually you're not that far away. And then during Covid, one of the things I certainly felt was: 'I'm in London and I always think that actually I'm very close and I'm not. I'm banned from traveling. I cannot get back there'. And I was surprised at how emotionally distraught and psychically distraught I felt at having that connection cut off. And for me, immersing myself in Belfast to write *These Days* was a way of keeping that psychic connection alive when I couldn't physically travel. That was a very long multiplicitous answer, but thank you for your question.

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## Notes

1 The website is [cain.ulster.ac.uk](http://cain.ulster.ac.uk).

2 See *These Days* (155).

3 See Jean-Michel Ganteau, 'Neo-historical Fiction, Material Realism and the Poetics of the Inventory' *EBC* 69.


4 The story is entitled 'All the People Were Mean and Bad'. It won the 2021 BBC National Short Story Award and was published in *Intimacies*.

5 From the poem 'Snow' (1935)

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## Pour citer cet article

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## Auteur

Armelle Parey

-  IDREF : <https://idref.fr/120268248>



- ORCID : <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9931-543X>

**VIAF**

• **VIAF** : <http://viaf.org/viaf/266072547>

**isni**

• **ISNI** : <https://isni.org/isni/0000000382616409>

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