

Edinburgh International Book Festival – A L Kennedy



There was nothing wrong with what AL Kennedy said at all, just that it was a bit difficult to hear anything she said, owing to the traffic, the large fan at the rear of the RBS main theatre, and the fact that for a stand up comic she speaks quite softly. One of the travails of having a book festival in a large city space, although it has to be said that this is one of the more accessible festivals in Edinburgh, largely due to its single venue.

When she read from her book of essays, it was easier to hear and she was, as she always is, extremely entertaining. She emerged a few minutes late with Sue McGregor who was chairing the session, in jeans and a shirt with her usual lace-up brogues, and confessed to McGregor that she is indeed currently homeless.

McGregor (erstwhile Today and Woman's Hour anchor) is patently a fan, declaring that the latest Kennedy novel is "the prettiest book you have ever seen". Never judge a book by its cover and all that, so this alone would not put you off reading it, but McGregor then went on to claim that Alison's books are sometimes a challenging read. So if you have not read any yet, and if you want to avoid the possibility of being too challenged, then you would do worse than start [with the essays](#). As McGregor said, the Dundee-born author is a brilliant writer about herself, and it was from this body of work that she read.

Her life is led at a certain pace. She spends about 70% of her year away from home, and since she is terrified of flying, she ends up travelling slowly. For the last 12 years Kennedy has

had the use of a wooden shed in the US, courtesy of a wealthy American lady who likes having a writer living in the garden which she said is rather like having a peacock, only more interesting. The problems arise when Kennedy is invited to drinks or dinner to meet the lady's guests. She explained:- "When I get nervous, I break things. The things I could break in the big hoose cost more than I will ever earn." The shed, which is clearly a house not a shed at all, is made entirely of wood, and the only annoying part of it is that she is woken each morning at 5 a.m. by a handful of the smallest woodpeckers in America who are "eating my house!"

Having travelled to America on a boat rather than taking an airplane ("terrifying even without the shouting in security"), the problems of US immigration are compounded when she goes by train to Montreal for a few days relief from the woodpeckers. The armed border guard is intrigued about the Scottish novelist, particularly when she lacks a form that is essential for a legal stay in the U.S. The prose is cleverly linked from Jimi Hendrix, the woodpeckers and the wooden house all coming full circle by the end of the tale. And that is what this is, it is a tale of her days while she is actually writing something else which will be published next year, called enigmatically "On Writing".

Part of the talk was given up to a discussion on the demerits of the English conveyancing system, which means she is now in a situation where all her furniture and belongings from her now sold Glasgow flat are still in storage at Heathrow, and she has no house of her own. The people who were 'selling' to her apparently did not actually own the property, which was clearly a difficulty, but was comically pasted over. So she is now dependent on the kindness of friends who are allowing her to stay in their houses for a time, but the author admits the situation has put her on "doom overdrive" at the moment. Her account of house hunting in London during the Olympics and a heatwave was cleverly turned into another comic moment.

Her ethos behind writing is very clear:-“It is to try to make something as beautiful as possible for someone you won’t even meet.” When quizzed about who she thinks of as her readers, she says that she thinks they are probably people who have interests much the same as she herself does.

Asked by one of the audience as to why she wrote a book about bullfighting, she said it was very simply as a result of being asked to. Her editor had a dream about Alison and a bullfight, so it was clear that she had to write it, even though she knew nothing about the sport, nor indeed did she agree with it. She claimed that it would be wrong to act contrary to anyone’s dreams.

“I try to be a friend of my sub-conscious because it helps me no end.”

This was a refreshing and fairly intimate look at one author’s life, an a deservedly acclaimed one at that.