Edinburgh International Book Festival 2024: Lucy Caldwell

Lucy Caldwell is fascinated by everyday lives. Originally focusing on her own Belfast girlhood and later, her experience of motherhood, she's written novels, stage and radio plays, but it's the short story that interests her most.

She's published three collections, and she's here today to talk with **Peggy Hughes,** CEO of the National Centre for Writing, about the latest one ***Openings*** and her illustrious career to date. The event's title is *Moments that Change a Life* and as we will hear, it's those moments that inform all of Caldwell's short fiction.

> *'The ordinary is miraculous. There is no such thing as an ordinary life. Every life is extraordinary. The quotidian is where the greatest challenges come.'*

It took Caldwell ten years to write these stories. She found she was again and again revisiting certain themes; how hard it is to grow in any long-term relationship, and how one can 'stay open to wonder and change.' It's so easy, she says, to become defensive and ossified; she didn't want that either for herself or for her work.

Caldwell started writing early. Her first short play *The River* was performed here in Edinburgh in 2004 when she was just 23 years of age; it won the PMA Most Promising Playwright Award. Her first novel *When They Were Missed* appeared two years later and was shortlisted for the Dylan Thomas Prize. Numerous awards have followed.

As she concentrated on the short story form, Caldwell began to see it as more akin to a poem or a play than a novel. It is, she says, a form that needs space on the page just as a poem does, and she persuaded Faber & Faber to publish hers in that style,

> *'The reader needs space, I want them to work with the story to conjure up atmosphere, to be involved. I started to see the stories as spells…with an intensity of feeling and atmosphere.'*

Plot, she says, is secondary; short story writing requires a completely different approach from a novel, in which you can develop consciousness and a commitment to your characters over time. In a novel the writer has an idea of the high points, the milestones to come along the way; in a short story she has neither. As Hughes says,

> *'You have to pour it all into a smaller space.'*

Caldwell thinks about her stories for a long time before she begins to write, listening to the rhythm of her characters' speech, hearing their voices in the street,

> *'I am feeling the contours of their presence…it's emotional research.'*

Once she does start to write though, she does so quickly. Overthinking, she says, is not good, writers shouldn't be too present in the process,

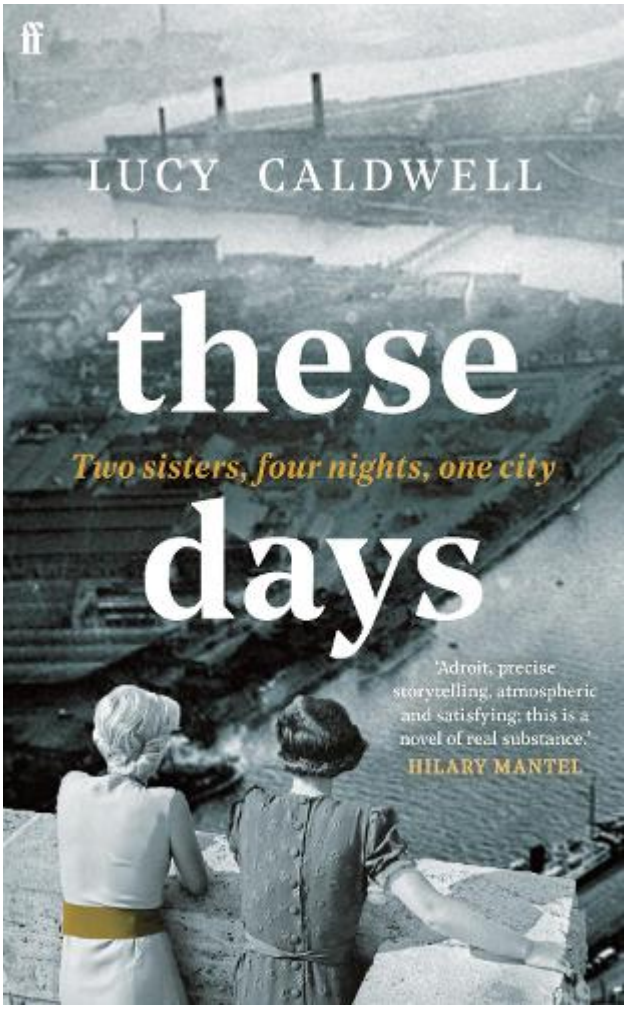
> *'you just have to create the conditions in which it can happen….sometimes the story takes what it needs of you, like a magnet.'*

She used to worry that she had no idea what her characters looked like, but now realises that it doesn't matter. Although she feels familiar with these people before she starts, she discovers still more about them during the process, and leaves space to update her draft as she gets to know them better.

Hughes refers to *Cuddies,* a story full of Northern Irish colloquialisms and expressions – does Caldwell think about the issues this may cause for her non-Irish readers? No she does not,

> *'If I'm writing a story properly you shouldn't need to get the literal meaning all of the time.'*

People can, she points out, Google the meanings of words if they wish, but it’s the richness of the speech rhythms that bring her joy.



These Days is Caldwell’s acclaimed novel about the Belfast blitz. After she’d written it she felt ‘eviscerated’ and could hardly write at all, Eventually she took her own advice,

> *‘Make space for the writing…take an hour every day and see what comes.’*

At a soft play area with her own children she watched a woman struggling alone with three of them; an idea started to form. Talking later to an old university friend, the memory of another student’s mother popped up. The two combined in a story about a single mother, a kind mother-in-law, and the pomegranates she brings to her deserted daughter-in-law. Although Caldwell does not write entirely autobiographically,

she does admit to ‘scavenging’ bits of her family’s lives (she found herself using her husband’s old flat – one she’d never even seen – as a location),

> *‘there’s a kind of amorality in it.’*

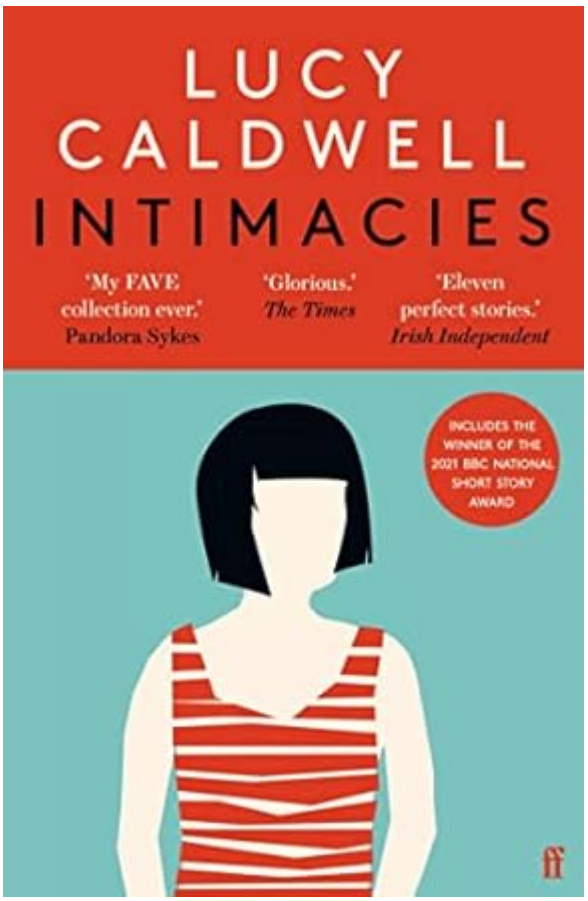
Motherhood affected Caldwell deeply, but not in the way she had anticipated. Much as she wanted children, she thought having them would be the end of her writing,

> *‘It was such a joy to find that motherhood was the true beginning of my creative life.’*

The birth of her son was traumatic, for some time his survival was in the balance. After that she stopped worrying about what anyone else thought of her work. She looked after her children herself, fitting in her writing when she could, ‘making tiny moments count’,

> *‘If I hadn’t had children I’d have written other stories, but this is what I had so this is what I wrote.’*

She found that motherhood was almost unrepresented in fiction, though this has changed over the years. She credits writers like Helen Simpson and Margaret Drabble for paving the way, being ‘the portals’ for younger writers to step through.



Openings, Caldwell says, has more range than *Multitudes* or *Intimacies,* the former being mostly about her Belfast childhood, the latter about motherhood. She feels experience has given her more technical skill and also the freedom to spread her stories across continents (these are set as far apart as London, Berlin and Marrakesh.) Above all she wants her stories, and her life, to remain open to possibilities.

Lucy Caldwell (c) Tom Routh

When she was writing *These Days* Caldwell felt as if she was tuning out of 2020 and into the 1940s. Time, or more particularly the time/space continuum, is a great interest of hers; she's even been to CERN to talk to astrophysicists about it. Before she starts to write she always asks herself how time is functioning in the story; in short fiction, she says, the writer chooses 'where to make the incision in time.' The story then transforms the mortal into the immortal. Memory is fallible; she wrote *Multitudes,* a story about her baby son's early days in the Neonatal Unit, as it happened. She could already feel her mind 'blotting it out', but the story still exists to remind her of it.

Hughes observes that in Caldwell's stories characters often seem to be on a precipice. Yes, she agrees, in this form you can go straight into those moments of irrevocable change, or of knowledge that once acquired can't be repressed. She finds such moments dramatically interesting, and tells us about the time one of her children choked on a strawberry (he was ok.) With children especially things can go wrong so quickly, 'the constant peril',

> *'We think that the great challenges will come when we're ready and well slept, then we realise they happen in day to day life; the real test of being human may come when we're at our worst, it may stem from a very tiny moment.'*

It's these tiny moments that Caldwell is so able to crystallise; her brilliantly polished shafts of light leave us gasping in recognition.

Or, as Hughes so succintly puts it,

> *'I'm just fan-girling all over.'*

Openings by Lucy Caldwell is published by Faber & Faber.