

On Being an Ex-Pat Writer

This is what I've come to believe. No matter how long I live in a country I wasn't born in, to some extent I will always be on the outside. There is an unspoken language children pick up, and which cannot be learned later in life. The subtle ways a culture operates are absorbed with mother's milk, unconsciously and reflexively. A response to the way the rain falls on summer days; an automatic rejection of salt on certain food. A gladdening of the heart, when listening to refrains of certain old songs. We are made by the places we grow up in. Later we can make ourselves again, in a new place, but it will only ever be a layer of skin over our true nature.

But being on the outside can feel right to a writer, because writers are often people who feel on the outside no matter where they are, sometimes even in the bosom of their family. Being foreign externalises that secret shameful feeling of freakiness, and more – normalises it. It is acceptable to not fit in when you're living in a foreign country; at home, not so acceptable.

I once read that if you wanted to be a good writer, it was a good idea to suffer from unrequited love, be starving, be a raging alcoholic, or better yet, become an ex-pat. After a while, I decided to sidestep the broken heart, and also the poverty and excessive alcohol. But the exile part appealed to me, and I left my home country at the tender age of not quite eighteen. I gave myself many other reasons – and trotted out variations

depending on who asked me. Viet Nam was happening and I was ashamed of my country. I was red-haired and fair-skinned and could not take the California sun. I had an obsession with the Beatles and Stones and Nick Drake, not to mention Irish, English and Scottish literature. But the bottom line was, putting a distance between myself and everything I knew was intoxicating.

No one knew me in Scotland, which was liberating. I wasn't the overly serious elder sister, not the sulky daughter, not the shy school kid. No one much noticed me at home, but I stood out in Scotland, simply by virtue of my accent. And of course, living 6,000 miles from home gave me the distance I needed to write objectively about home. Or at least more objectively. I viewed America from a kinder perspective. I forgave much, when I saw it in the context of its own history and geography. I let my personal entanglements and memories fall away, and began to see American lives for what they were. Not so sinister, after all. Not so affluent, not so intentionally bullying. Mostly, just a bunch of ordinary people like everywhere else, trying to get through their days. Except of course, Americans are as uniquely a product of their particular culture as everyone else.

So, seems simple, doesn't it? Move from home to write about home sympathetically. But I soon discovered something annoying: the America I perceive with such keenness is rarely reflected in the America I witness when I return home. So, the dichotomy: It is partially an arrogant delusion that I see America more clearly from a distance. I suspect what really happens is that my imagination is given freer rein in describing America,

unburdened by the reality around me. The strangest part of this realisation is that it does not diminish the intense satisfaction of capturing America in fiction. Perhaps that is because fiction does not really claim to echo reality – the truth is, good fiction reflects back a better reality than reality. It is more a credible, emotionally logical reality. Let's face it: real reality is like a really bad B movie. Unlikely, sometimes corny, often boring and repetitious.

What I hadn't anticipated in becoming an ex pat, the icing on the cake, was that living as an outsider in Scotland gave me a unique slant on Scottish life. I will never be able to express the views of a born and bred Scot, but I soon learned the advantages to being a foreigner here. The particular oddities of Scottish events, weather, personalities which might be taken for granted and unnoticed by a Scottish writer, are sometimes glaring to me. That is the theory, anyway. I still need a native to read my manuscript before submission because I still get American and Scottish slang mixed up. After all these years, I am probably not entirely American anymore, but nor am I Scottish. I am a hybrid – and my sense of national identity is quite blurred most of the time.

Homesickness has driven my need to write, for decades. At first, I felt nothing but relief to be living far from home. All things American and affluent repulsed me; I think I was probably quite obnoxious in my reverse snobbism. But gradually, I have come to harbour a growing sadness to be living so far from the place that made me, and in particular, the people who made me (literally and otherwise). For as I stated earlier, we are formed by our early childhood. This sadness, or homesickness, is chronic but low grade. It does not

prevent me from thriving here, but it has injected a certain melancholy into my outlook. I miss my family, I miss the round, blonde hills of northern California. I miss being surrounded by my own tribe, all speaking with my accent. I could not have predicted this longing. I find, however, that automatically I have allowed it to inform my writing style and choice of subject. I am drawn to characters who are displaced, for whatever reason. To situations that dwell on the circumstances of exclusion.

I Love You Goodbye, my third novel, has a Polish main character living in the Highlands. Much of his melancholy is connected to his sense of isolation and displacement. In *Upstairs in the Tent*, a main character is a homeless man who lives on the fringes of society, never really belonging. In *Love Letters from My Deathbed*, the main character is a Scottish woman who is living in California – and experiences the whole range of ex pat life, including intense despair when she finds she is ill so far from home.

Recently, I indulged myself by writing a novel set in my home town, inspired by my parents and their friends. I had considered setting it in Scotland like my three other novels, but after five chapters reverted to California. The characters and their dilemmas could never happen in Scotland. It was an immense relief imagining I was there for months at a time. Writing as therapy? A cure for homesickness? Or an obvious way to alleviate the missing of a place? I didn't care. Like accidental pregnancies growing into people no one can imagine their lives without, it doesn't matter *why* a book is written. Clearly I never would have written any of the books I did, had I remained in California.

Would I have written other books? Possibly, but without the edge of homesickness and stimulation of feeling exotic, I may not have bothered. After all, writing is a huge commitment of time and energy. California is a very easy place to live. Sun. Affluence. Mellow music. If I'd written anyway, I have no idea what I would have been driven to write about. My sense of foreignness has informed all of my work, consciously or not.

Being a writer in Scotland is easier than in California, because of the weird weather. To be driven indoors by darkness and horizontal rain, and then yanked outdoors by luminous low light and rainbows and uncannily warm breezes – well, it's a moody place, isn't it? Moods are good for writing. And long dark winters are especially good.

Ironically, there are lots of us. Other ex-pat writers abound, which would seem to uphold the wisdom I read in my youth. From America, among hundreds of others, there is William S Burroughs, ee cummings, John Dos Passos, T.S.Eliot, F.Scott Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Henry James, Henry Miller, Vladimir Nabokov, Katherine Anne Porter, Ezra Pound, Getrude Stein, Gore Vidal and Thomas Wolfe. Contemporary ex-pats from America include Bill Bryson, Patricia Highsmith and Lionel Shriver. Among my peers here in Scotland, there are writers Elizabeth Reeder, Lucy Ellmann and Tod McEwen.

There is a quote from Hemingway that always makes me smile: *You're an expatriate. You've lost touch with the soil. You get precious. Fake European standards have ruined you. You drink yourself to death. You become obsessed by sex. You spend all your time talking, not working. You are an expatriate, see? You hang around cafes.* He seems

innocent and full of machismo bravado. But I love the simplicity of his words, and the kind of surrender and helplessness. He is not intellectualising the experience of being an American in Europe, he is simply stating how it affected him. But there is no doubt it improved his writing. He met other ex-pat writers and took his writing life very seriously indeed. He considered it his job, to be a serious American writer in France. And America remained his subject. His central characters may have lived in France or Spain, but they were fully products of an American upbringing and American values.

I have lived in Scotland for more than forty years now. With each year I discover more about myself that is essentially American. It's an interesting distinction, because I am quite sure I am not becoming more American – I am simply more aware of the Americanness in myself. My work in progress is a novel focusing on a couple who take a trip across America. For one of the characters, this will be a return to her hometown after many decades. I am excited. It feels a little like cheating, to draw so directly from life. But time is getting on. I still haven't satisfactorily nailed the ex-pat experience, but I feel like I'm getting closer. Like travelling itself being the best part of a journey, perhaps I should just enjoy the striving.