A Strong Voice from Scotland

Helen Lamb is an award-winning short-story writer and poet. Her first poetry collection, Strange Fish (with Magi Gibson), was published in 1997. Her first short-story collection was published by Polygon in 2001 and in the US by Columbia University Press a year later. Winner of the Scotland on Sunday/Women 2000 short-story prize, Lamb's work has been widely published in literary journals and anthologies. It has appeared in translation and been used on National Poetry Day postcards. Many of her stories have been broadcast on Radio 4.

RAHAD ABIR



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What is the situation of women writers in Scotland? And how was it 20 years back?

Twenty years ago, very few women were getting published. But in the late eighties and early nineties some Scottish publishers, like Polygon, started to promote women's writing. Many of us got our first break in Polygon's Original Prints series and quite a few of those writers are well known poets and novelists now. It has been easier for the women who followed us and these days women are a force to be reckoned with in Scottish Literature.

Scotland has its own language. What about the usage of Scots language at this time in Scotland? Does any litterateur write in Scots now?

Actually, there is more than one native language in Scotland. Scots is similar to English and draws on many of the same roots, such as German, Latin and French. Some would argue that Scots is just a variant of English, a dialect. But many Scots words have subtleties of meaning that are lost in the equivalent English word.

The other language spoken in Scotland is Gaelic and it is not related semantically to either English or Scots. Nowadays, Gaelic is spoken by only a small minority, mainly in the Highlands and Western Isles, though it used to be more widespread. 'Cheerio' is an example of a Gaelic word that has been adopted into English; 'whisky' is another.

Both Scots and Gaelic are well represented, alongside English, in contemporary Scottish writing. But, of course, if you choose to write in Scots or Gaelic, you are limiting your potential audience. There is a worldwide market for writing in English.

What is the state of Scottish literature? And what is its condition in the scale of world literature?

There are so many facets to Scottish literature and, of course, much of it is written in English. So it is also British literature. Many of the best-selling writers in the UK are based in Scotland. In children's literature J K Rowling's Harry Potter series have sold millions, possibly billions, worldwide. Irvine Welsh's Trainspotting epitomizes a very different strand in popular Scottish literature, one that is dark, gritty, amoral but truthful.

In the second half of the twentieth century, Scotland produced some great poets, notably Norman McCaig and Edwin Morgan. It remains to be seen if the next generation can match them.

Why do you write? What works behind your force?

Curiosity, I think, is what drives me to write. I always hope to discover something new in the process of creating a poem: maybe a grain of truth, some small moment of illumination, or some revelation that takes me by surprise. If there was nothing to be discovered, there would be no point to it for me.