

Elitism and English Literature (Revised)

A few years ago I was asked to give a talk for students at Goldsmiths College, London.¹ I was about four pages into writing it when I realised much of what I wanted to say I had said elsewhere, and some of it back in the mid 1980s. There was no point in going through it all again so I borrowed bits from earlier essays. It seemed appropriate to keep the title of one I published back in 1991. This will be familiar to some who know my essays from an earlier period but some of it may be new.

As a boy I was a great reader. I was lucky, there was a library at the bottom of my street in Govan, Glasgow, right in Elder Park. I started going along from the age of four with my big brother. There was no writer I enjoyed more than Enid Blyton and that lasted a couple of years. Then later there was no genre I enjoyed more than school stories and that went on until probably I was about eleven or twelve years old; the books featured different schools and different pupils but they all seemed related, and most seemed to be written by one author, Frank Richards. Those schools were upper-class sort of establishments.

It is a peculiar thing that children like myself could identify with the pupils in those schools. I mean it was inconceivable that I would ever in my life meet up with boys from my own background, my culture and life experience, between these pages. I'm not talking about Scottish kids in general I'm talking about Scottish working-class kids in general because it was possible to meet a scholarship boy or a boy from a colonial background, whether from Scotland or India or someplace. I cannot remember any African or Chinese boys making an entrance but perhaps it was possible, perhaps it did

¹The invitation was from Angela McRobbie who has lectured there for a long while

happen. These colonial boys would all be youthful aristocrats anyhow, back in their own country, even if they wore kilts, loincloths or turbans, or whatever, they would be accepted as lower-rung aristocracy, and kids like Billy Bunter would give them the benefit of the doubt.

The English language as spoken by these young colonials always exhibited idiosyncratic mannerisms that were quite funny. They were exotic creatures and never made it as heroes in their own right. At the same time they were always supportive and loyal to boys such as Harry Wharton and Tom Merry. Kids like myself would identify with the last pair and other members of that regular cast of young English heroes, white Christians to the core. There was no chance of me ever making a hero out of the exotic young colonials, even if one did happen to be Scottish. At eleven or twelve years of age who wants to be an oddball outsider with no sense of style and a funny way of talking.

While I was at school I had no contact with literature but outside of school hours I was reading various things, including adventure stories by R.M. Ballantyne. Then a major court case happened. It was a full-blown scandal to do with a novel, all because of language and sex, it was *Lady Chatterley's Lover* by D.H. Lawrence. I was fourteen. I went out and bought the paperback. My mother discovered it and burned it, but not before I had browsed through some of it.

Apart from a few wee juicy things I remember I was struck by the extraordinary use of language by the central male character, a salt-of-the-earth working-class country-yokel sort of guy. He was a kind of English John Brown, Queen Victoria's servant. They often crop up in sagas developed from colonizer meets natives scenarios. Lady Chatterley's servant went about saying salt-of-the-earth country-yokel things like 'If thar shits and thar pisses'. I had never heard anything like it. So that was how these salt-of-the-earth English

working-class country yokels spoke! Well well well. Oddly enough, in some weird way the language reminded me of the earlier school stories.

I carried on with my own reading, cowboy and private-eye novels by American writers, then branching out and from when I left school at fifteen, through the next four years, I must have devoured a great deal. One English writer I read was John Buchan. He was actually Scottish, what you might call an assimilated member of British society. Probably that is what you would call him, British, an assimilated Scotsman. One shorthand definition of assimilation is somebody who denies the primacy of their culture. And a shorthand definition of Britain is Greater England; somebody who is content to be labelled a 'Brit' is a Greater Englander.

But perhaps it is unfair to say that someone like John Buchan denied his culture. He was an upper-middle-class guy who worked on behalf of the British Empire, and that was what he was paid for by the British State. He was very high up in Government and wrote novels in his spare time; *The Thirtynine Steps* is one many of you will know, at least as a movie. His books are good adventure yarns, especially for the politically naïve and readers of a reactionary bent; anyone at all with a soft spot for imperial splendour. There's an entire genre of that kind of stuff. Perhaps the creator of Sherlock Holmes is part of it. Many academics and other literary critics argue that writers like Conan Doyle and Buchan should be treated with more respect. Writers of more recent generations, working in related genres and value systems, might include Ian Fleming, Frederick Forsyth and John Le Carré; others like John Grisham and Tom Clancy. I would not be bothered denying any of them was a good writer, at least not a bad writer, not unless I was pushed, but who cares. Nowadays there's a crowd of writers into that sort of right-wing secret-agent stuff, CIA and MI5 heroes, high-flying financier heroes, quirky politician heroes, stalwart soldier heroes, and so on.

In these genres 'white' and 'Christian' can be voiced utterances of approbation, e.g. 'His behaviour was exemplary, he was an absolute white man' or 'My horse has a wonderful temperament, he is a proper Christian.' Eventually the whole thing just done my nut. The heroes belonged to these incredible clubs that were extensions of boarding school, situated in secluded lanes around London's West End, all with log fires and great wee libraries, and these plush, leather-bound armchairs in which crotchety old bods with handlebar moustaches would nod off in a corner over the *Telegraph* obituary columns. Certain villains might also be attached to such clubs, maybe by fraudulent means or through an administrative mess; these characters are always the 'masterminds' or 'evil brains' behind the villainy.

In such clubs there was always 'a man' to bring you a cigar and a large port or claret. It was always 'a man', never a servant. Not only did the 'man' call you 'sir' or 'lord', if not 'your Majesty', but he tucked you up in bed at night and then he came first thing in the morning and dressed you in appropriate clothes. As far as I know the monarchy still get that done for them, and not just the monarchy.

All the English heroes in that genre seem to have these 'men' in one guise or another throughout their lives, they get called various names, 'batman' for example. Maybe the young master has been a commanding officer in the armed forces and the guy now employed as his personal servant was formerly his 'batman' out in the Sudan or the Raj or the west coast of Ireland or islands of Scotland or someplace. Occasionally when a 'batman' exhibits obedience or devotion beyond the call of duty the young master will bring him home after the war to continue his personal 'batman' services. These 'servants', although they seldom get called that, can be from Africa or the Middle East, or the Near East or the Far East, they can even be indigenous Australasians. Any old outpost of Empire will do. Usually they exhibit quirky physical characteristics, or quirky behavioural patterns; these are both endearing and irritating. No

matter where they come from the servants always exhibit peculiar speech mannerisms or patterns. If Scottish the 'man' will speak with what is called a 'heavy burr'. This is what the general run of lower-order Scottish people have in English literature, 'heavy burrs'. The writers may highlight this within the text. Colonial servants and underlings are integral to English literature and different literary conventions exist to deal with them. One such convention is the apparent attempt at phonetic transcription; I mean by that the spelling of words to give an impression of sound. I say 'apparent' because there is no authentic attempt going on.

These servants and underlings do not have to be from so-called countries either, many of these so-called 'people' can be from provincial locations much closer to Westminster and Buckingham Palace: they can be Cumbrians, Lancastrians or Yorkshiremen; they even can be born within hearing distance of Bow Bells; yes, a 'batman' can be Cockney, whatever, just as long as he is working-class, speaks funny and assimilates to the values of the ruling class, at the same time offering an unquestioning obedience to its individual representatives.

Although I still had not finished with its fictionalisation, by the time I turned nineteen I no longer identified with youthful members of the English aristocracy and upper-middle classes. This is not because I was growing up. Very many adults continue identifying with the English upper classes and the values of that culture right throughout their life. British society has been premised on that. I don't think that it is any longer, at least not to anything like the same extent, there have been a few changes in the last hundred years. There is no one reason why I gave up reading that fictionalised stuff, but I do remember one time in Manchester I was involved in some yarn with the usual upper-crust white Christian heroes. I was living in a lodging house and either I was unemployed or else working as a labourer in a Salford copper mill. It was a novel by John Buchan I

was reading, one of an ‘omnibus’ collection. I just gave up halfway through, and that was that.

When I went to university I was twenty-nine years old and had published my first collection of stories nearly three years previously; and my second collection was due to appear in a few months’ time. I had strong ideas about art: honesty, truth, integrity, justice, humanity; these were the marks of the artist. I use the term ‘artist’ here in its general sense; an artist can be a poet, a novelist, a sculptor, a dancer, a song-writer, a painter and so on. I felt uneasy when a writer I didn’t think deserved to be called an artist was being described as ‘good’, and often ‘major’, by the academics. Even the fact that you were given such writers at university meant they were assumed to be ‘good’. The lecturers and university authorities hold the power: they can say something is good without having to prove it. If you, as a student, want to deny that something is good then *you* are forced to prove ‘it’.

And proving anything is never easy. Atheists in the company will know what I’m talking about: it is never the person who actually believes in ‘god’ who has to find the proof, only those who don’t. Proving something doesn’t exist is harder than proving something does exist. Some of the greatest philosophers of the past three thousand years have been defeated by that. Anyway, at university I felt that if certain writers were going to be described as artists then something smelled about the very concept itself: art was just not as great as it is cracked up to be. So I wanted to distinguish between writers who were artists and writers who weren’t artists; take for example the poet T.S. Eliot or the novelist Evelyn Waugh, both of whose elitism I rejected. Evelyn Waugh seemed to be so right-wing you’d be forgiven for calling him a Fascist. And how could you call a Fascist an artist? That struck me as by way of a contradiction in terms. Eventually I found it possible to say: here is a writer who okay might be ‘good’ but either s/he is a bad artist or s/he is not an artist at all, because surely someone who is a good artist cannot be

someone who hates people of a different coloured skin, who hates people that speak a different language or whose racial origin differs from her/his own; surely a good artist will not be somebody who hates people of a different religion, people who come from a different cultural or economic background, who are not heterosexual, not homosexual, whatever.

But at that time I was not aware that so much of this business of the ‘good’ in literature, at least as it applies in education establishments, starts and ends with things like grammar and punctuation; if a schoolteacher or university lecturer calls a writer ‘good’ it might just mean the writer in question knows how to use colons, semicolons and paragraphs in a certain manner, or has a very large vocabulary, or uses a great variety of rhetorical devices, or exhibits a certain educational or cultural background, or shows a wide knowledge of foreign words and phrases. And all of that sort of stuff was not what good writing should have been about, as far as I could see, and certainly not what good art was about.

When I started to write stories I was twenty-two and naturally enough I thought to use my own background and experience. I wanted to write as one of my own people, I wanted to write and remain a member of my own community. That advice you get in the early days of writing, at any writers’ workshop or writers’ group, ‘Write from your own experience!’ Yes, that was what I set out to do, taking it for granted that was how writers began. I soon discovered that this was easier said than done. In fact, as far as I could see, looking around me, it never had been done. If it had, I could never find it. There was nothing I saw anywhere. Whenever I did find somebody from my own sort of background in English literature, there they were confined to the margins, kept in their place, stuck in the dialogue. You only ever saw them or heard them. You never got into their mind. You did find them in the narrative but from the outside, never from the inside, always they were ‘the other’.

They never rang true, they were never like anybody you ever met in real life.

There were no literary models I could look to from my own culture. There was nothing whatsoever. I am not saying these models did not exist. But if they did then I could not find them; because of this dearth of home-grown literary models I had to look elsewhere. As I say, there was nothing at all in English Literature, but in English-language literature – well, I came upon a few American writers. I found folk whom I regarded as ordinary; here they were existing in stories, not as clichés, not as stereotypes. I was also discovering foreign language literature through translation; the Russians and others. I found literary models. I found ways into writing stories that I wanted to write; I could realise the freedom I had. I mean just the freedom other writers seemed to take for granted, the freedom to write from their own experience. Now I could create stories based on things I knew about; snooker halls and betting shops and pubs and DSS (DWP) offices; the broo, waiting in the queue at the Council Housing office; I could write stories about my friends and relations and neighbours and family and whatever I wanted. The whole world became available. Quite a heady experience.

It was after that came the other problems. Things were not as straightforward as I thought. It had not dawned on me that there might be very good reasons why these literary models did not exist in my own backyard; yes, censorship and suppression. I quickly bumped against it through the elementary matter of my chosen artform, language.

You cannot write a short story without language. That seems an odd statement. Yet received wisdom in this society has demanded it. Yes, they say, go and write a story, whatever story you want, but do not use whatever language is necessary. Go and write any story at all, providing of course you stay within the bounds, not the bounds of decency or propriety or anything tangible; because that is not the

way it works. Nobody issues such instructions. It is all carried out by a series of nudges and winks and tacit agreements. What it amounts to is: go and write a story about a bunch of guys who stand talking in a pub all day but if you have them talking then do not have them talking the language they talk.

Pardon?

Write a story wherein people are talking, but not talking the language they talk.

Oh.

By implication those in authority ask the writer to censor and suppress her or his own work. They demand it. If you do not comply then your work is not produced. That is the way it is. That is the way it always has been. You land on the assembly line of compromise, the end result of which is dishonesty, deceit, falsity. Or else silence. Our mainstream media are full of silences. Why is it the better writers never work for the newspapers, for television, radio or the movies? Do you think it is because they prefer art forms like prose and poetry? Well sometimes that is true, but often it is just because every other medium is out of bounds given their first demands of a writer are compromise and dishonesty.

Back in 1987 I edited an anthology of poetry and prose by people attending a writers' group in the east end of Glasgow. Some of the work is of a kind not readily available on the shelves of libraries and bookshops. This is because it is attempting a realistic portrayal of the lives of ordinary people. Many folk are startled to discover such a thing can be classified as 'literature'. In our society we are not used to thinking of literature as a form of art that might concern the day-to-day existence of ordinary women and men, whether these ordinary women and men are the subjects of the poetry and stories, or the actual writers themselves. It is something we do not expect. And why should we? There is such a barrage of elitist nonsense

spoken and written about literature that anything else would be surprising.

The propaganda of elitism operates in different ways but those are the ways of all forms of prejudice: it makes a wide range of statements and will not allow a challenge unless it be done on its own terms, and it continues to make such statements until eventually part of the foundation of the dogma comes to be accepted as a kind of 'truth': fat women have got hearts of gold, men with red hair lose their temper, Catholics are inferior to Protestants; people from Aberdeen are greedy, Jews are greedy, Pakistanis are greedy; people on the dole are lazy; whites are superior to blacks; folk who go to university are born clever; foreigners are evil; strangers are dangerous; asylum seekers are lazy, greedy, inferior, evil, dangerous liars, and anybody who lives in a council housing estate cannot possibly be interested in reading or writing poetry or prose.

A typical misconception when beginning as a writer, when you start creating literature, is that before you get down to the writing itself you have to rush away and do a course in English. You study for your 'O' grade and then you study for your 'H' grade and then the 'A' grade and then you start thinking maybe you should go to college or university and study for your 'Degree in English Literature' – because it seems somehow obvious that the more progress you make in the study of the subject the bigger the chance you'll have of becoming an actual writer, a creator of stories or poems. Absolute rubbish. This lies at the heart of the fallacy that when you are studying English literature within the higher education system you are at the same time studying the ways in which literature is created. Some people even believe that a person who qualifies to teach English is therefore qualified to teach 'creative writing'. They would be as well to believe the person was qualified to teach 'creative sculpting', 'creative musical composition', 'creative movie-making'.

Maybe it is time to stop using the phrase ‘creative writing’. Maybe we should talk about ‘literary art’ or ‘literature’, about people creating literary art or people creating literature, instead of people ‘doing creative writing’. Everybody uses language creatively, even teachers of English. If we are forced to use the phrase ‘creative writing’ let us insist on adopting a fuller phrase, let us call it ‘creating creative writing’. But even that does not work properly, so just to avoid confusion we should stick with ‘literary art’ or ‘literature’; literary artists create literature. Generally speaking, academics will prefer the phrase ‘creative writing’ in its current application because it allows literature to remain their property.

When a person writes a poem, play, short story or novel the person has become involved in the creation of literary art, the person is creating literature. The one way to write a poem, play, short story or novel is to sit down at the desk with your computer or your typewriter or with your pen and paper, and start writing. Literature is no different from other forms of art: when you want to create it and you have the tools and the materials then you just get to work, you begin. The writing comes first, not the theory. When people are involved in creating literature they are involved in a practice, they are engaged in an activity; in other words they have to be doing something as opposed to talking about doing something, or listening, reading, thinking about doing something. The vast majority of those who have studied literature at an advanced level, including English teachers, university lecturers and professors, have never created one piece of literary art in their entire lives. Of course a few have. But there again, so have a few doctors and lorry drivers; painters and construction workers; shop assistants and builders’ labourers; people who are on the brood, people forced to be housebound while having to raise their families. Anyone who is able to read and write has the capacity to create a poem or story. And by practising and paying attention to the work they are doing it cannot help but improve. Everything else is secondary.

Of course it is difficult to make the start and it is difficult to continue having faith in what you do, in the face of what often seems to be straightforward hostility. Writers have to develop the habit of relying on themselves. It is as if there is a massive KEEP OUT sign hoisted above every area of literature. This is an effect of the hopeless elitism referred to earlier. But there are other reasons. The very idea of literary art as something alive and lurking within reach of ordinary women and men is not necessarily the sort of idea those who control the power in society will welcome with open arms. Maybe it is naïve to expect otherwise. Good literature is nothing when it is not being dangerous in some way or another and those in positions of power will always be suspicious of anything that might affect their security.

True literary art makes some folk uncomfortable. It can scare them. One method to cope with being scared is not to look, to turn away and then kid on whatever it is does not exist. Another method of coping is to get your tormentors to stop what it is they are doing. In some countries writers find their work is no longer being published or produced. Writers in other countries can get dumped into prison or banished into exile. Occasionally writers disappear suddenly and are never heard of again. In this country writers are suppressed and censored. It takes different forms. Censors can cut out words and lines from poems, stories, plays or films. They often ask the writers concerned to substitute other words and lines. Sometimes they just substitute words and lines they have invented by themselves. The censors may search through a writer's collection of stories and poems and take out ones that offend them; the censors will emphasise the ones that do not offend them. This is a method of silencing criticism because it makes it seem as if they are dealing fairly with the writers they have just finished censoring.

The folk in control of the power in society feel safest and most prefer it when writers agree to suppress and censor themselves. This happens throughout the media. The BBC is a fine example of it. So

too are all other television companies and radio stations, plus almost the entire magazine and newspaper industry. Almost every writer working for the media, and wanting to continue working for the media, accepts that there are 'dangerous' things that are not to be written about and 'dangerous' language that is not to be used. Those who break these taboos and refuse to take the censoring will very soon discover that their work is no longer being used. Writers who persist in being 'dangerous' (i.e. honest to their art) will become notorious; they will be regarded as perverse, selfish, egocentric. They will be regarded as psychologically suspect, as though they are involved in some masochistic pursuit of failure. The logic is precise. If writers were truly interested not just in 'success' but in 'getting their message across' then they would jolly well stop being so bloody difficult and start suppressing and censoring themselves immediately, just like the rest of their third-rate colleagues.

While this is going on in the media at large, preparations for it are seen in the classroom. This is where folk are first made aware of what society expects in literary art. It is here they first discover how NOT to appreciate the potential of literature as a living art form, as a dynamic activity that might involve their friends, family and neighbours. The classroom is where we discover what is 'good' literature. Very soon 'good' literature and 'literature' become one and the same thing. Literature becomes the thing we are allowed to see in the classroom. The other stuff is the stuff we are not allowed to see.

I saw a letter to the *Independent* or *Guardian* recently in which someone wrote about the film *Billy Elliot* and said how it could be used as a text by schoolteachers if only the language was not so 'bad'. Why had those responsible not thought about such a thing in the first place. Did they not realise that by cleaning up their language their work would be of use to the classroom!

It is pointless being angry at the retired teacher who wrote the letter, if it was a retired teacher. The attitudes on display are simply those of the people in control of the education system, the media and society as a whole. If a writer wants to see his or her work made available in schools then it is high time repression and self-censorship began. When work is created by those who remain honest to their art then they are going to be proscribed, their stories, poetry and whatever will be banned from the classroom and the shelves of the school libraries.

If writers cannot sell their work to the media and cannot have their work sold across bookshop counters then sooner or later they must find other occupations. There was a collection of short stories entitled *Lean Tales* which has work by Agnes Owens, Alasdair Gray and myself. Agnes was also a novelist, published by Bloomsbury, the same as J.K. Rowling. But for most of her life she was never been able to give her best time to her literary work. Instead she had to find paying work in whatever capacity she could, and for long periods the only job she could get was as a servant, as a cleaner of the homes of middle-class people. In our society being a servant pays a wage whereas creating a literary art which attempts honesty in its portrayal of ordinary men and women pays almost nothing at all. Our schools and other institutions, including the media, encourage this actively.

Ninety-nine per cent of traditional English literature concerns people who never have to worry about money at all. We always seem to be watching or reading about emotional crises among folk who live in a world of great fortune both in matters of luck and money; stories and fantasies about rock stars and film stars, sporting millionaires and models; jet-setting members of the aristocracy and international financiers. Or else we are given straight genre fiction: detectives and murderers and cops and robbers; cowboys and indians and doctors and nurses; heroic spies and nasty Communists; science

fiction, historical romance, diverse pornography; ghost stories, faery stories, vampire stories, horror tales of the supernatural, and so on.

The unifying feature of genre fiction is the way it denies reality. This is structural. In other words if reality had a part to play in genre fiction then it would stop being genre fiction. This is what distinguishes it from other forms of literature. But even in the romantic fantasies mentioned above we can catch a glimpse of something approaching reality, as when a dashing financier white Christian hero is about to rush off to catch a friend's private jet to Rio de Janeiro for lunch with a beautiful albeit 'dusky' South American princess, and he just remembers in the nick of time to give last-minute orders to his 'man' to phone the restaurant, not to reserve a table, just to check out the chef is the same as last time. But that kind of detail is rare. Usually the dashing young heroes do not even have to bother with things like visas and passports, the sort of petty details that trouble other travellers, let alone the kind of basic day-to-day worries that encroach on the lives of the rest of the population.

But should we expect anything else? Should we expect those in control of power in society to promote and encourage a literature that is explicitly concerned with the day-to-day existence of ordinary women and men? and by 'ordinary' here the context is run-of-the-mill day-to-day experience, as experienced by the overwhelming majority of the population. It would be quite pleasant to think this is the way things are. It would be nice to believe that ordinary women and men were being given every available opportunity to create a literature of poetry, prose, drama and song about homeless folk having to survive out in the streets or living off the edges of rubbish dumps; a literary art being created out of life on supplementary benefit, concerning itself with drug addiction, child prostitution, glue-sniffing, alcoholism, kids of sixteen being forced on to the streets; stories, poetry and song about old people surviving the outrageous costs of medicine, heating and public transport; the latest round of humiliations being endured in the offices of the DSS or the

Gas Board or the Housing Department or wherever the daily humiliation happens to be occurring this morning; police brutality, racial abuses, sectarian abuses, trade-union corruption, political corruption, and everything else that comprises the reality of this country. Are we really surprised that these things dealt with properly, i.e. honestly and with artistic integrity, cannot be found in the literature promoted in schools and in the media generally? The fact is that we are consistently encouraged to accept that they have no place in English literature.

As I have mentioned before, I left school at the earliest opportunity, which in my day was fifteen years of age. I was an ordinary working-class boy making a dash for freedom at the very first opportunity the schools would allow. Like most working-class kids I was aware not only of the stigma of inferiority on my own forehead but also the one on the foreheads of my parents and neighbours. It is one of the more sophisticated features of the elitism in this country that prior to leaving school the majority of kids know not only what society thinks of them but what it thinks of their parents.

There was in Scotland a journal for English teachers entitled *Teaching English* and I remember a review of a novel just then published. The teacher responsible for the review seemed to like the novel yet he concluded the review by saying that:

Its usefulness as a school text is unfortunately limited by the realistic inclusion in the dialogue of that element which [other writers have felt] necessary to suppress and, by references to frequent and prolonged bouts of drinking and occasional houghmagandie, the parents of your average 'S' grade candidate would certainly be moved to protest. But do read it for yourselves.

Let me tell you that 'houghmagandie' is a Scottish word for sex, not used very often, you will be amazed to hear, but it can still be

heard, generally for purposes of irony. In that context it is not difficult to imagine a priest, church minister, Cabinet Minister, or even a Scottish Prime Minister using the same term. One thing it indicates is that the user of the term is at home in his culture; he is very comfortable in regard to booze, sex, drugs and rock and roll. Although he never gets too involved himself he certainly is not impressed by those who do, especially so-called writers who may want to create so-called literature around those areas for 'realistic' purposes. In his personal opinion writers who do create such work only do so for effect: such so-called 'realism' is a kind of adolescent exhibitionism.

It didn't occur to me for about five or six years after leaving school that literature was something I could be involved in. Then I discovered it was possible to write stories myself, I just had to go out and buy a couple of reliable ball-point pens and a good-sized notebook. I could even write stories about ordinary people if I wanted to. There wasn't anybody going to stop me by using physical force. After that I found out there were other people in this country also doing such things, and there were other people who had been doing such things for a couple of hundred years. It was just that nobody in any of the positions of power in society had got round to telling me.

Some of you may have noticed in the above extract from *Teaching English* how it is not just the kids being assessed, the actual parents have become 'S' grade; only 'S' grade parents have 'S' grade children. Here is the relevant part of the quote:

by references to frequent and prolonged bouts of drinking and occasional houghmagandie, the parents of your average 'S' grade candidate would certainly be moved to protest. But do read it for yourselves.

Yes, it is presupposed that 'the parents of your average 'S' grade candidate' will be less likely to recognise a work of 'realistic'

literature than will the parents of your average ‘O’ grade candidate who in turn will be less likely than the parents of your average ‘H’ grade candidate who in turn will be less likely than the parents of your average ‘A’ grade candidate who will, of course, be much less likely than the parents of your average ‘English-Degree-at-University’ candidate. This kind of shameful nonsense is horrendous when laid out in cold print; it is how matters exist in our society. At best you end up with the patronising tones of the teacher-officer of English giving us to understand that it is fine for ‘realistic’ novels to be read by those who are properly qualified to do so, certainly not by ‘S’ grade adults. Of course there are those of us dumplings who do not even have an ‘S’ grade. Some of us dumplings do not even know what the hell an ‘S’ grade is, including myself and perhaps Agnes Owens, the woman who wrote the novel under review in *Teaching English*. It is one of the absurdities of this type of elitism that prior to when I went to university I was not qualified to read properly my own short stories and much of my first two novels.

Aye, on ye go.

