

Author of *Life After Life*

KATE ATKINSON

EMOTIONALLY
WEIRD

‘Achingly funny’

Meera Syal

‘Memorable’

Helen Dunmore

‘Brilliant’

Telegraph



About the Book

On a peat and heather island off the west coast of Scotland, Effie and her mother Nora take refuge in the large mouldering house of their ancestors and tell each other stories. Nora, at first, recounts nothing that Effie really wants to hear, like who her father was - variously Jimmy, Jack, or Ernie. Effie tells of her life at college in Dundee, the land of cakes and William Wallace, where she lives in a lethargic relationship with Bob, a student who never goes to lectures, seldom gets out of bed, and to whom the Klingons are as real as the French and the Germans (more real than the Luxemburgers). But strange things are happening. Why is Effie being followed? Is someone killing the old people? And where is the mysterious yellow dog?

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Emotionally Weird

A Comic Novel

Kate Atkinson

For Lesley Denby, née Allison, with love

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Helen Clyne, Lesley Denby, Helen How, the Howard Hotel
(Edinburgh), Maureen Lenehan, Gareth McLean, David
Mattock, Martin Myers, Ali Smith, Sarah Wood.

The University of Dundee portrayed in this book (and especially the departments of English and Philosophy) bear little resemblance to real life, past or present. Neither are any of the characters portrayed based on anyone real, either living or dead.

'That's a great deal to make one word mean,' Alice said in a thoughtful tone.

'When I make a word do a lot of work like that,' said Humpty Dumpty, 'I always pay it extra.'

'Oh!' said Alice. She was much too puzzled to make any other remark.

'Ah, you should see 'em come round me of a Saturday night,' Humpty Dumpty went on, wagging his head gravely from side to side: 'for to get their wages, you know.'

(Through the Looking-Glass, Lewis Carroll)

The Hand of Fate

(First Draft)

1

INSPECTOR JACK GANNET drove into Saltsea-on-Sea along the coast road. Today's sun (not that he believed it to be a new one every day) was already climbing merrily in the sky. It was a beautiful morning. Shame it was about to be spoilt by the *Lucky Lady* and her cargo – one very unlucky lady. One very dead lady. Jack Gannet sighed, this job didn't get any easier. Jack Gannet had been in the force longer than he cared to remember. He was a straightforward, old-fashioned kind of detective. He had no strange tics or eccentricities – he didn't do crosswords, he wasn't Belgian, he certainly wasn't a woman. He was a man suited to his profession. What he wasn't, was happy. He didn't want to be dealing with a dead body on a glorious morning like this. Especially not on an empty stomach.

Madame Astarti didn't know about the dead body yet. She was having some trouble opening her eyes. They were glued shut by sleep and mascara and one too many gins in The Crab and Bucket last night with Sandra and Brian. Madame Astarti sighed and groped blindly around on her bedside table for her lighter and a packet of Player's No. 6 and inhaled deeply on a cigarette. She loved the smell of nicotine in the morning.

Seagulls were clog-dancing on the roof above her head, heralding a brand new day in Saltsea-on-Sea. Through a gap in the curtains she could see that the sun was the colour of egg-yolks. Sunrise, she thought to herself, a little daily miracle. It would be funny, wouldn't it, if it didn't happen one morning? Well, probably not very funny at all really because everything on earth would die. The really big sleep.

1972

Blood and Bone

MY MOTHER IS a virgin. (Trust me.) My mother, Nora – a fiery Caledonian beacon – says she is untouched by the hand of man and is as pure as Joan of Arc or the snow on the Grampians. If you were asked to pick out the maiden in a police line-up of women (an unlikely scenario, I know) you would never, ever, choose Nora.

Am I then a child of miracle and magic? Were there signs and portents in the sky on the night I was born? Is Nora the Mother of God? Surely not.

On my birth certificate it states that I was born in Oban, which seems an unlikely place for the second coming. My beginning was always swaddled in such mist and mystery by Nora that I grew up thinking I must be a clandestine princess of the blood royal (true and blue), awaiting the day when I could come safely into my inheritance. Now it turns out that things are more complicated than that.

I am twenty-one years old and I am (as far as I know, for we can be sure of nothing it seems), Euphemia Stuart-Murray. Effie, for Nora's sister, who drowned in a river on the day that I was born. Nora herself was just seventeen when I entered the material world. A child looking after a child, she says.

These Stuart-Murrays are strangers to me, of course. As a child I had no kindly grandfather or playful uncles. Nora has never visited a brother nor spoken wistfully of a mother. Even their name is new to me, for all of my life Nora and I have gone by the more prosaic 'Andrews'. And if you cannot trust your name to be true then what can you trust? For all she has acknowledged her family – or vice versa – my

mother may as well have washed ashore on a scallop shell, or sprung fully formed from some wrathful god's head, her veins running with ichor.

The closest Nora ever came to talking about any family until now was to claim that we were descended from the same line as Mary Stuart herself and the dead Scottish queen's flaws had followed us down the generations, particularly, Nora said, her bad judgement where men were concerned. But then, I doubt that this is a trait exclusive to Mary Queen of Scots, or even the Stuart-Murrays.

I have come home – if you can call it that, for I have never lived here. My life is all conundrums. I am as far west as I can be – between here and America there is only ocean. I am on an island in that ocean – a speck of peat and heather pricked with thistles, not visible from the moon. My mother's island. Nora says it is not her island, that the idea of land ownership is absurd, not to mention politically incorrect. But, whether she likes it or not, she is empress of all she surveys. Although that is mostly water.

We are not alone. The place is overrun with hardy Scottish wildlife, the thick-coated mammals and vicious birds that have reclaimed the island now that the people have all left it for the comfort of the mainland. Nora, ever a widdershins kind of woman, has made the journey in reverse and left the comfort of the mainland to settle on this abandoned isle. When we say the mainland we do not always mean the mainland, we often mean the next biggest island to this one. Thus is our world shrunk.

Nora, a perpetual *déraciné*, the Wandering Scot, a diaspora of one (two if you count me), spent the years of my childhood in exile from her native land, flitting from one English seaside town to the next as if she was in the grip of some strange cartographical compulsion to trace the coastline step by step. Anyone observing us would have thought we were on some kind of permanent holiday.

I used to wonder if, long ago, Nora began her journey in Land's End and was trying to get to John o'Groats, although for what reason I couldn't imagine – unless it was because she was Scottish, but then many Scots live their whole lives without ever finding it necessary to go to John o'Groats.

Now she says she will die here, but she is only thirty-eight years old, surely she is not ready to die yet? Nora says that it doesn't matter when you die, that this life is nothing but an illusion. Maybe that's true, but it doesn't stop the cold rain from soaking us to the skin or the gales blowing in our hair. (We are truly weathered here.) Anyway, I don't believe that Nora will ever die, I think she will merely change state. It has begun already, she is being transformed into an elemental creature, with tidal blood and limestone bones. She is unevolving, retiring into the ancient, fishy regions of her brain. Perhaps soon she will crawl back into the watery realm of Poseidon and reclaim her Saurian ancestry. Or metamorphose into something monumental – an ice-capped ben, littered with granite boulders, or a tumbling, peat-brown burn, bubbling to the sea with its cargo of elvers and fry and frothy green weed.

I am bound to the unknown and neglected Stuart-Murrays by spiralling tapeworms of genetic material. We are, dead and alive (but mostly dead, it seems), the glowing molecular dust of stars, a galactic debris of bacteria and germs. Our veins are the colour of delphiniums and lupins, our arterial blood a febrile brew of crushed geranium petals and hot-house roses, thinned with plasma like catarrh and—

~ Wheesht, says Nora, talk sense, our bloodline is that of ancient warriors, of berserkers and invaders. Our blood tastes of rusted weapons and hammered-out coins. We are not the sort, she says, who stoically slit their thin veins like reeds, and slip away quietly down their own bloodstream, we don our breastplates and hack and hew and rive at our enemies.

The Stuart-Murrays, it seems, are even-handed – they have fought against the English and also stood shoulder to shoulder with them in support of Empire and exploitation. We are numbered amongst those wha' bled wi' Wallace and have been present at nearly every rammy, stushie and stramash in Scotland's tortured history.

And where are they now, these feckless Stuart-Murrays? The line, Nora says, will end in daughters. Or, to be more precise – me. I am, it seems, the last daughter of the house of Stuart-Murray.

I am a young woman composed of blood and flesh, sugar and spice, all things nice and the recycled molecules of the dead. I have thin bones that snap and shatter too easily for my liking. I have Nora's narrow insteps and broad toes, her love of sentimental music, her hatred of Brussels sprouts. I have my mother's temperamental hair – hair that usually exists only in the imagination of artists and can be disturbing to see on the head of a real woman. On Nora it is the colour of nuclear sunsets and of over-spiced gingerbread, but on me, unfortunately, the same corkscrewing curls are more clownish and inclined to be carrotty.

I also have my mother's native tongue, for we led such an isolated life when I was a child that I speak with her accent, even though I never set foot in her country until I was eighteen years old.

Some people spend their whole lives looking for themselves, yet our self is the one thing we surely cannot lose (how like a cheap philosopher I am become, staying in this benighted place). From the moment we are conceived it is the pattern in our blood and our bones are printed through with it like sticks of seaside rock. Nora, on the other hand, says that she's surprised anyone knows who they are, considering that every cell and molecule in our bodies has been replaced many times over since we were born.

Some people say that we are nothing more than a bundle of perceptions, others claim that we are composed entirely out of our memories. My earliest memory is of drowning – like my mother, I am clearly drawn to the dark side. Perhaps I am a living, breathing example of reincarnation – perhaps the drowning Effie’s spirit leapt out of her body and into my newborn one?

~ Let’s hope not, Nora says.

Memory is a capricious thing, of course, belonging not in the world of reason and logic, but in the realm of dreams and photographs – places where truth and reality are tantalizingly out of reach. For all I know I have imagined this aquatic memory, as insubstantial as water itself – or remembered a nightmare and thought it real. But then, what is a nightmare if it isn’t real?

Before she had a purpose (turning into landscape) Nora herself was always a distracted and absent-minded person. Mnemosyne’s forgotten daughter. How else can you explain the obliteration of the Stuart-Murrays, not to mention the terrible circumstances of my birth?

We are walking along the puffin-populated cliffs that fall away into cold-boiling sea. Above our heads a succession of wheeling, screeching birds – kittiwakes, guillemots, gannets – are creating complex and unreadable auguries.

We can see almost the whole island from here – the big house where we stay, the bracken and heather and boggy peat and beyond, on the far side, the yellowing machair, home to rabbit and feral cat, the latter the terrifyingly ugly product of genetic isolation – animals descended from a pair of pet Siamese brought on holiday by some long-gone Stuart-Murrays. For this island, according to Nora, is the holiday home of our ancestors.

I have no reason to dispute this fact with her, although why anyone would want to holiday in this blighted place I cannot imagine. Even in high summer I expect there is an

air of autumnal desolation about it. In winter, it is like a place that has been long-forgotten or never discovered at all. Nora says she remembers holidays here, remembers being a small child, dipping in and out of rock pools for little brown crabs and tiny tinsilver fish and eating windswept picnics on the impoverished sea-salted grass of the lawn.

Nora is a woman with a past, a past she has always resolutely refused to speak about, and you cannot imagine how strange it is to hear her talk about it now. It disturbs me more than it disturbs her, for she has carried it in her head all these years, whereas for me it is a newly opened box of frights and wonders.

Nora says that we shall wrap ourselves in shawls and blankets like a pair of old, cold-boned spinsters (Euphemia and Eleanora) and sit by the cracking flames of a driftwood fire and spin our stories. When she spills her own tale into the silence for me, she says, it will be a tale so strange and tragic that I shall think it wrought from a lurid and overactive imagination rather than a real life.



~ Hurry, hurry, Nora urges, we must get on, we must tell our tales. How will you begin? she asks. *A lone fisherman up early looking for sea trout . . .?* And will it be real? Or will you make it up as you go along?

~ Will you excise the tedium of everyday life - the humdrum of kettles boiled, toilets flushed, curtains drawn, doorbells rung, telephones answered, the skin shed, the nails grown, and so on (ad infinitum, ad nauseam)? Do we really, she asks, want to listen to the prolixity of petty marital disputes over the cat, the lawnmower, the bottle of blood red wine?

~ Nor, says Nora, do we want commonplace tales of *Hausfrau Angst*, of the woman heroically making over her life with a handsome new lover, a beautiful child, a happy

ending. Instead, we shall have murder and mayhem, plots and sub-plots, a mad woman in the attic, purloined diamonds, lost birthrights, heroic dogs, a soupçon of sex, a suspicion of philosophy.

Very well. I shall begin at an arbitrary moment just over a month ago (how much longer it seems). The season is winter, it is always winter Nora is the very queen of winter.

The place is the land of cakes, the city of the three Js, the home of the Broons, the schoolyard of the Bash Street Kids and William Wallace, the kailyard of Scottish journalism, Juteopolis – Dundee!

Dundee. A place far, far away in the magical north country, whence I got my nature but not my nurture. ‘The North’ – that magic road sign with its promise of ice floes and Eskimos, polar bears and the aurora borealis. Dundee – land of outlandish street names – Strawberrybank, Peep o’Day Lane, Shepherd’s Loan, Magdalen Yard Green, Small’s Wynd, Brown Constable Street, Bonnybank Road.

Dundee – built on the solidified magma and lava of an extinct volcano, Dundee with its crumbling, muddy-sandstone tenements, impenetrable accent, appalling diet and its big, big estuary sky. Bonny Dundee, where the great Tay broadens into the firth, carrying with it salmon, sewage, the molecules of the watery dead, perhaps even of Nora’s sister, beautiful Effie, who drowned on the day that I was born, swept downstream like a dead fish.

~ Just get a move on, Nora says.

Chez Bob

A MONDAY MORNING and my dreams were interrupted at some unearthly hour by the doorbell ringing with a shrill urgency that implied death, tragedy or a sudden, unexpected inheritance. It was none of those things (not yet anyway), it was Terri. It was only seven o'clock and it seemed likely therefore that rather than being up early she hadn't actually been to bed at all.

Small and thin, Terri was dressed, as usual, in the manner of a deranged Victorian governess. She had the pale pallor of a three-day-old corpse on her cheek and, despite the dark on the unlit stair, was wearing Wayfarer Ray-Bans.

Although I had opened the door, Terri's finger remained on the doorbell, as if she had been struck by *rigor mortis* while pressing it. I forcibly removed the finger, almost having to break it in the process. She held out a hand, palm up, and said, 'Give me your George Eliot essay,' her face as expressionless as an assassin's.

'Or what - die?'

'Fuck off,' she said succinctly and lit up a cigarette in the manner of a *film noir* villainess. I shut the door on her and went back to bed and the warm, slack body of Bob with whom I lived in urban squalor in a festering tenement attic in Paton's Lane, former residence of Dundee's reviled yet noble-hearted poet, William Topaz McGonagall. Bob rolled over and muttered some of his usual sleep gibberish ('The leopard's going to miss the train!' 'Got to find that radish,' and so on).

Bob, known by some people as 'Magic Bob', but for reasons which were obscure and not based on any sleight-

of-hand on Bob's part, was in fact an unmagic Essex boy, Ilford born and bred, although when he remembered, he affected a monotonous, vaguely northern accent to give himself more credibility with his peers.

Like me, Bob was a student at Dundee University but said that if he had been in charge of the university he would have thrown himself out. He seldom handed in an essay and considered it a point of honour never to go to a lecture and instead lived the slow life of a nocturnal sloth, smoking dope, watching television and listening to Led Zeppelin on his headphones.

Bob had recently discovered that he was in his final year of university, he had already repeated second year twice – a university record – and for a long time had presumed that somehow he would remain a student for ever, a misconception that had only recently been cleared up. He was supposed to be studying for a joint degree in English and Philosophy. If people asked him what his degree was in he always said 'Joints,' which he thought was a brilliant joke. Bob's sense of humour, such as it was, had been developed by the Goons and honed by The Monkees. Bob's screen hero was Mickey Dolenz, right back to Mickey's early days as Corky in *Circus Boy*.

Bob was an unreconstructed kind of person, his other hero was Fritz the Cat and he had a complete lack of interest in anything that involved a sustained attention span. Nor was he political in any way, despite the three unopened volumes of *Das Kapital* on his bookshelf – which he never could explain, although he had a vague memory of joining a radical Marxist splinter group after seeing *If . . .* at the cinema. He was prone to the usual obsessions and delusions of boys his age – the Klingons, for example, were as real for Bob as the French or the Germans, more real certainly than, say, Luxemburgers.

The doorbell rang again, less insistently this time, and when I opened the door Terri was still there. 'Let me in,' she

said weakly. 'I think I've got frostbite.'

Terri was a little mid-western princess, a cheerleader gone bad. She may have once had corn-fed kin back in the heartland (although it was easier to imagine her being hatched in the nest of a prehistoric bird) but in time they had all either died or abandoned her. Her father, an executive with Ford, had enrolled her in an English Quaker boarding-school during a brief secondment to Britain and had carelessly left her there on his return to Michigan.

Terri liked to keep her ethnic origins chameleon, sometimes hinting at Italian, sometimes pogrom-fleeing Russian, a touch of the Orient, a hint of the Hebrew. Only I knew the dull mongrel mix of Irish navvies, Dutch dairymen and Belgian coalminers who by mere genetic chance had given her the appearance of an exotic houri or a handmaiden of Poe. We were the best of friends, we were the worst of friends. We were the sisters we'd never had. I felt sorry for someone so at odds with the mainstream of humanity. Sometimes I wondered if my role in Terri's life wasn't to mediate between her and the living, like a vampire's assistant.

Although she hated staying in it, Terri did have her own ruffled lair in Cleghorn Street - an unappealing cold-water flat that wasn't good for much other than storing her coffin of earth. In a rare fit of activity she had painted it purple throughout, a colour-scheme that did nothing to alleviate her own darkness. At least Terri, unlike myself, had worked out her future destiny - she was going to marry a very old, very rich man and then 'screw him to death'. She wouldn't be the first, but I doubted whether she would find a suitable candidate in Dundee.

I fumbled around in the dark for a candle. We were in the midst of a discontented winter of strikes and three-day weeks which meant there was no electricity this morning. If I had been capable of forethought, which I feared I never

would be, I would have bought a torch by now. I would also have managed to acquire a Thermos flask. And a hot-water bottle. And batteries. I wondered how many three-day weeks it would take before civilization began to break down. Sooner for some than others, I supposed.

From the window I could see that across the water in Fife they had electricity. The houses of Newport and Wormit were studded with cheerful lights as more purposeful people than us embarked on their day. If it had been daylight we would have had a magnificent view of the rail bridge and its freight of trains, the black iron lace-work curving lazily across a Tay that was sometimes silvery, often not, and which in today's dark dawnlight was like a ribbon of tar running past the city.

In the bedroom, Bob was still fast asleep. In these night-like days of hibernation his waking hours were even more severely curtailed than usual.

'The butterfly's got the cornflakes,' a sleepfaring Bob warned us in a loud voice.

'I don't know what you see in him,' Terri said.

'Neither do I,' I said gloomily.

It couldn't have been his looks that attracted me, as Bob looked much like everyone else did – the Zapata moustache, the gold hoop earring, the greasy Royalist locks curling over badly deformed shoulders. He looked, if anything, like a tramp – an impression reinforced by the second-hand army boots and the oversized air-force greatcoat he habitually wore.

Bob had recently discovered the meaning of life, a discovery that seemed to have made no difference whatsoever to his everyday existence.

I met Bob the first week I was at university. I was already eighteen years old and thought that I could discern a certain librarian caste to my features and was afraid I would end up a lonely figure, forever wandering a spinster wasteland, and

it was mere chance that Bob was the first person to cross my path the morning I decided to lose my virginity.

I met him when he ran me over. Bob was on a bicycle and I was on a pavement, which perhaps gives an indication of whose fault the accident was. I broke my wrist (or rather, Bob broke my wrist), and the exciting combination of circumstances – drama, blood and a brown-eyed man – all served to make me think that destiny had spoken and therefore I should listen.

Bob hit me because he swerved to miss a dog. The man who would sooner run over a woman than a dog introduced himself by bending over me where I lay on the pavement, staring at me in amazement, as if he'd never seen a woman before, and saying, 'Wow, what a bummer.'

The dog came out of the accident unscathed, if a little surprised, and was returned to its tearful owner. Bob rode to the Dundee Royal Infirmary in the ambulance with me and had to be physically stopped from inhaling the gas and air.

Terri had finally taken her sunglasses off after tripping over Bob's boots left carelessly in the middle of the floor. There were many drawbacks to living with Bob, not the least of which was the way he created a mysterious amount of self-replicating debris that constantly threatened to engulf him.

With no power and the cupboard bare, we had to imagine breakfast. Hot chocolate and cinnamon toast for Terri, while I preferred Braithwaites' 'Household' blend tea with one of Cuthbert's well-fired white rolls, its outside crisp and blackened, its inside filled with doughy white air. We remained hungry, however, for you cannot really eat your own words.

'Well, at least being up at this hour means we'll make it to Archie's tutorial on time for once,' I said, without any great enthusiasm, but when I looked at Terri closely I realized she had fallen asleep. She should take more care, she had just the kind of sluggish metabolism that gets people buried

alive in family crypts and glass coffins. In some ways (but not in others) Terri would have made the perfect wife for Bob – they could have simply slept their way through married life. Rip van Winkle and Duchess Anaesthesia, the lost, sleepy daughter of the Romanovs.

I gave her a little pinch and said, ‘You know you shouldn’t —’ but then I came under the sleep spell as well.

Sometimes I wondered if we weren’t all unwittingly taking part in drug trials being conducted covertly by a pharmaceutical company, perhaps for a drug with the opposite effects of speed. They could just call it *Slow* when it hit the market. Perhaps that was who was watching me – an undercover research assistant observing the effects of *Slow* on his unsuspecting guinea-pig. Because I was sure someone *was* watching me. (‘Well, you know what they say,’ Bob said, in what I think was a misguided effort to comfort me, ‘just because you’re paranoid it doesn’t mean they’re not out to get you.’)

For several days now I had been aware of the unseen eyes on me, of the inaudible feet dogging my every footstep. I hoped it was merely the projection of a heated imagination rather than the beginnings of some paranoid delusional breakdown that would end on a locked ward in Liff, the village where the local mental hospital was located. (‘Take more drugs,’ was the advice of Bob’s best friend, Shug.)

I woke up with a jolt. My head had been pillowed uncomfortably on the edge of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* and the book had left a painful gouge in my cheek. Terri was making little whimpering noises, dreaming about chasing rabbits again.

I shook her awake, ‘Come on, we’re going to be late.’

My new resolution, rather late in my final year I realized, was to attend all the lectures, tutorials and seminars that I was supposed to. This was in a vain bid to curry favour with as many of the English department staff as possible

because I was now so behind with my work that it was becoming increasingly unlikely that I would even be able to sit my degree, let alone pass it. I didn't understand how I'd got so behind with everything, especially when I was trying so hard to keep up.

Terri was even more behind than I was, if that was possible. The George Eliot essay ('*Middlemarch is a treasure house of detail, but an indifferent whole.*' *Can Middlemarch be defended against this criticism by Henry James?*) was just one of the many pieces of work that we hadn't managed to do.

I dressed as if for a polar expedition in as many clothes as I could find – woollen tights, a long needlecord pinafore dress, several reject men's golfing sweaters that had been acquired in a St Andrews Woollen Mill sale, scarf, gloves, knitted hat, and, lastly, an old beaver coat, bought for ten shillings in the pawn shop at the West Port, a coat that still had a comforting old lady smell of camphor and violet cachous about it.

'Ontological proof,' Bob shouted mysteriously in his sleep – a concept he wouldn't even know the meaning of if he was awake.

Terri grimaced and replaced her sunglasses and pulled on a black beret so that now she looked like a deranged governess engaged in guerrilla warfare. A Weathergirl.

'Let's do it,' she said, and we slipped out into the shock of a morning that crackled with cold so that every time we spoke our breath came out in cold white clouds like the speech bubbles in the *Beano*. We trudged up Paton's Lane and as we turned onto the Perth Road, the invisible, ever-watchful pair of eyes monitored our progress.

'Maybe it's the eye of God,' Terri said. I was sure God, if he existed at all, which was highly unlikely, would have better things to do with his time than watch me.

'Maybe he doesn't,' Terri said. 'Maybe he's like a really . . . trivial guy. Who knows?' Who indeed.

The Art of Structuralist Criticism

'BLAH, BLAH, BLAH,' Archie said. (Or something like that.) Ten minutes after eleven in Archie McCue's room on the third floor of the extension to Robert Matthews' soaring sixties' Tower – the Queen's Tower, although no queen was ever likely to live in it. The gloomy atmosphere was made gloomier by the absence of electricity. A candle, stuck in an empty Blue Nun bottle, burned at the window like a signal. The university was still managing to run its heating although no-one knew how – perhaps they were burning books, or (more likely) students. The room was hot and airless and I had to peel off my layers of reject golfing sweaters, one by one.

Archie was talking. Nothing will stop Archie talking, not even death probably, he will rumble on from the inside of his large coffin until the worms get fed up with the noise and eat his tongue –

'When words no longer strive for mimesis they become dislocated and disconnected. They illustrate in themselves the exhaustion of forms. Writers who eschew mimesis, looking for new ways of approaching the fiction construct, are disruptivist – challenging what Robbe-Grillet refers to as the "intelligibility of the world".' Archie paused. 'What do you think of that statement? Anyone?' No-one answered. No-one ever had any idea what Archie was talking about.

Archie's blimpish body strained to escape from his dark green polyester shirt, a shirt stained at the armpits with large damp triangles of sweat. He was also attired in brown trousers and a tan-coloured knitted tie that sported a different quality of stain – dried boiled egg-yolk, or custard.

He spun round in his tweedy, executive chair, so much more comfortable than the chairs assigned to his tutees – the little *faux* wood tables attached to our chairs seemed to be specifically designed to restrain us, like a cross between a baby's high chair and an asylum straitjacket. The chairs were made from some artificial material – a hard grey plastic substance that the university seemed over fond of. It was only possible to be even remotely comfortable in these chairs for a maximum of ten minutes. An unfettered Archie, on the other hand, was free to birl and twirl around like a fairground ride on his Easy-glide castors.

'The act of writing itself comes to occupy the centre of the stage as the author is no longer concerned to invoke some a priori meaning or truth. Jacques Derrida reinforces the point . . .'

Archie McCue was an argumentative Marxist who claimed to be the progeny of a Glaswegian shipbuilder, although, in fact, he had been brought up by his widowed mother who owned a sweetshop in Largs. This long-suffering woman was now 'dottled' according to Archie and had therefore recently been transported across the river to Newport-on-Tay and an old people's home called The Anchorage with a 'view of the water'.

'Valery claims that literature is, and can be nothing else than, a kind of extension and application of certain properties of language . . .'

Archie lived in a big house in Windsor Place with Philippa, his bossy English wife. I knew that because I was the most recent in a long line of McCue babysitters – Philippa and Archie, both nearing fifty now, had been breeding, at spaced-out intervals, since the end of the war. They had four grown-and-gone offspring – Crispin ('Cambridge'), Orsino ('Oxford'), Freya ('year out in France') and their eldest son, the mysterious Ferdinand ('Saughton Prison, unfortunately'). Only one child, nine-year-old Maisie ('a mistake'), was now left at home.

' . . . and in its multiplicity and plurality it cries out for a new hermeneutics . . . '

We were a shrinking tutorial group. At the moment there were four of us – myself, Terri, Andrea and Olivia. Andrea was a grammar-school girl from the middle echelons of North Yorkshire society. Today, reeking of patchouli, she was wearing a flouncy, flowery dress, all buttons and bows and intricate bodice seaming, that looked as if it had been made for an amateur dramatic production of *Oklahoma!*

Andrea had recently converted from the Church of Scotland to paganism and was studying to be a witch. To this end she had apprenticed herself to a warlock in Forfar. Few things were more worrying than the idea of Andrea with magic powers. Not that I have anything against witches, *per se*, of course – I am only too aware that my own mother is a wizardess of some kind – or wizardina, or wizardelle, for there appears to be no feminine form for the word. Perhaps I can just start making words up. Why not? How else do words come into being?

Andrea said that she wanted to be a famous writer and accordingly had done an evening shorthand-and-typing course run by a man in Union Street who turned out to be more interested in his female students' sweated chests than he was in their Pitman short forms. So far, all Andrea had written were flimsy stories about a girl called Anthea who came from Northallerton and was studying English literature at university. Andrea's most interesting story to date was about a strange sexual encounter her *alter ego* Anthea had with a teacher at secretarial college. I thought that *The Adventures of Anthea* would be a good title for an English pornographic film – the kind that involves a lot of window cleaners and innuendo but not much actual sex.

Anthea was always having poignant moments sparked off by mundane experiences – going to lectures, finding spiders, buying A4 narrow-ruled with margins. Personally I think that reading the details of other people's domesticity

is almost as tiresome as listening to them recount their dreams – *and then the fork-lift truck turned into a giant red squirrel that crushed my father's head like a nut* – fascinating to the dreamer, but tiresome for the indifferent listener.

Archie himself, of course, was famously writing a novel – an experimental and epic tome that had now reached seven hundred pages. It was, reportedly (for no-one had actually seen it), an *Angst*-ridden, labyrinthine fiction about the metaphysical *Sturm und Drang* of the self called *The Expanding Prism of J*.

' . . . a technique which might be considered emblematic of the essential arbitrariness of all linguistic signifiers . . . '

Olivia politely stifled a yawn. A fair, willowy girl, Olivia was a doctor's daughter from Edinburgh, a St George's girl and a clever, methodical student, the kind who write up their notes every night, underlining everything in three different-coloured inks. Olivia was clearly a student who belonged at St Andrews or Warwick, or even East Anglia, rather than Dundee but she'd had 'some kind of a breakdown' during her A-Levels and had ended up with Es instead of As.

For the last year, Olivia had been having an affair with a lecturer in the Politics department called Roger Lake (generally known as 'Roger the Dodger' naturally) who was always trying to be trendy and hang out with students. Roger had a wife called Sheila and a clutch of small, blond daughters ('Just like Goebbels,' Terri said), aged from almost nothing to nine years old.

Although sex between staff and students was rife at the university, it was nonetheless forbidden by the Dean who took 'a dim view' of it. Roger Lake worried constantly that he was going to be caught in a scandalous situation and insisted that he and Olivia behave in a cloak-and-dagger fashion, exiting buildings separately and ignoring each other in public (and sometimes in private, she reported). Having