

LINDA GRANT

TALKS TO BEVERLEY COHEN ABOUT CLOTHES, IDENTITY AND WRITING

Linda Grant leans forward eagerly when I introduce the subject of clothes and make-up, and tell her how a tip about putting on mascara, gleaned from one of her novels, has revolutionised my eye make-up routine. “Yes, quite a lot of readers have picked up on that one,” she says, crossing her brownish bare legs. It’s a hot day. I expected her to be intimidatingly smartly dressed, with an eagle eye for details of appearance, like her female characters, so I had made an effort to discard my *shloch* gear and repaint my chipped toenail varnish.

Surprisingly, she is wearing a casual comfy summer dress and looks relaxed, like a friend I would visit for a cup of tea. The lounge of her north London house has two *menorahs* on the mantelpiece and a mural that a friend painted on her wall. “I went out one day and found it there when I got back.” “Did you mind?” I asked. “Nah,” she says, tossing her head at the idea. She’s warm and informal.

Clothes, make-up, girly subjects. Not what you’d expect from this heavyweight writer, winner of the Orange Prize for Fiction for *When I Lived in Modern Times*, winner of the

probably done a whole lot more. “I knew where I stood, some ideas I dropped, some stayed with me.” Then she realised – “with a sudden gasp of revelation” – that she’d been formed by growing up in the Jewish community. It was a shock to Grant to realise how much this influenced her.

“I had slammed the door on it, thought none of it had any relevance to me. Then I thought about Jews not having a sense of knowing their place, and about the sense that you can do whatever you want.” For me, these two themes underpin Grant’s writing.

Her father left school aged 10 and went on to become a successful hairdresser. Her mother’s siblings went barefoot to school; the only reason her mother wore shoes was because she was the youngest. There was the sense that “we came here with nothing and you can achieve anything through brains and hard work.” Her grandparents were Russian and Polish immigrants.

Liverpool’s small ‘first generation suburban ghetto’, she says, was nothing like Howard Jacobson’s strong Manchester Jewish community. “And there were no Hampstead Jewish intellectuals. I didn’t know anyone who

wasn’t a member of the United Synagogue. Most people were in business, with no

connections with anyone non-Jewish. Sometimes I feel like I come from nowhere, it’s like it’s me and six people.” Linda went to university (York) at a time and in a place where girls like her were expected to marry young, live round the corner from their parents and dutifully provide grandchildren.

“So your parents were open to you going to university?” I ask her. “You speak as if they had a choice,” she says. “They wouldn’t have been able to stop me.”

She describes herself as ‘at war’ with her mother’s expectations. Being a nice Jewish girl would have been “like being walled up”. She has no regrets. Her mother’s bitterness at not having a

typical Jewish daughter came out in explosions to total strangers in front of her daughter, when her mother was suffering from dementia – described beautifully in Grant’s *Remind Me Who I Am, Again*. This was “harrowing,” says Grant, “but I never had any sense that I didn’t do the right thing”.

Belonging, not belonging, a sense of place, Grant keeps revisiting this theme. Evelyn and Sybil, her main characters in *When I Lived in Modern Times* and *The Cast Iron Shore*, are both young women who leave home to make a journey and find a new life, Alix in *Still Here* returns home after a journey. There are repeated themes of being half German, half Jewish, being an outsider searching for one’s place. “You’re neither one thing nor the other and that drives people mad,” Stan says to Sybil at the end of *The Cast Iron Shore*. But Sybil is looking towards the sea at the Liverpool docks, and there is a sense that she accepts that she will always be looking elsewhere, at another place, a potential journey.

The only place Linda Grant feels she belongs is Tel Aviv. She has lived in London for 21 years, longer than she has ever lived anywhere, but doesn’t feel like a Londoner. Her next novel is set in London. “It’s invigorating and exciting for me to inhabit a sense of the city as my city.” I have a feeling she is exploring this sensation as a writer, without taking it on as her own identity.

She thinks her personality is far more suited to the New York Jewish community than its British counterpart, but “no-one accepts me there because I’m English. A New York American Jew said that English Jews are not real Jews, they speak with a la di da accent and drink their tea like this” – she holds up a little finger. “I felt completely erased, my Britishness was seen as making me not really Jewish, yet in Britain my Jewishness makes me not really British.”

In Tel Aviv, she says, “everyone comes from somewhere else. I feel I have as much right to be there as anyone else who lives there.” She emphasises that it is not Israel where she feels she

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David Higham First Novel Award for *The Cast Iron Shore*, author of the recently published *The People On The Street, A Writer’s View of Israel*.

She launches into the subject of clothes enthusiastically and moves it away from the domain of trivia. “If you want to write about people who have an insecure sense of belonging, then clothes can change identity.” The identity of the narrator of the novel she is currently writing changes in this way. It’s a fascinating subject but it’s time to move on to Jewish matters.

By the time Grant was in her late thirties – she is now 55 – she’d done hippy, she’d done communist, she’d



Photo: Judah Passow

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belongs, but Tel Aviv only, and it is “not to do with Zionism at all.”

With Grant, it is all about the personal, it's about her or her characters. She's not one for getting a political message across. Her latest book, *The People On The Street*, was not meant to be about Israel at all. Originally it was called *Suppose A City*, a book about “a city where everyone comes from somewhere else.” But three readers told her it wasn't working, that it was clearly about Israel. This was tough for Grant, who had invested two years' work (with accompanying financial issues) into it. She tried to leave the Occupation in the background, but the result was “off-kilter and skewed”. So off she went to the West Bank and to Gaza.

“I didn't want checkpoints and settlers, but without these it would have been jumped on, even though the book is a writer's view of Israel – it's not meant to raise questions about society.”

In *People On The Street*, a group of Israeli soldiers move in to an upstairs apartment carefully designed by a Palestinian family for their son and his new wife. The apartment is trashed, there is no respect for the family. Was it a struggle to be polite to these soldiers? “Not at all, I was merely observing, the soldiers were kids and they were also occupiers.” Nothing she saw while researching, she says, was “any kind of struggle for me, I was just very interested.” She was more surprised by some of her feelings, for example she visited a ‘fabulous’ community centre in one of the settlements. “These kids will lose their friends, they will be spat out across the country.” She wasn't expecting empathy, “I thought I'd feel very cold towards all the settlers.”

Grant is both a journalist and a novelist. “The purpose of literature is not to impart information – that's journalism's role. Literature should throw a bit of light into the darkness of ourselves, what is our being, what is this thing that is you and how is it different or the same as somebody else?”

She cites Jane Austen. “You don't read her to find out about life in regency England. It's about the people.” The book Grant most admires is Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis*. “He doesn't write about the war taking place, he tells you everything you need to know about being human.” She dismisses books such as the *Da Vinci Code* as “junk – a temporary phenomenon that will be replaced.” She dislikes it because – she says disparagingly – people say they have “learned something” from it. This, according to Grant, is not the purpose of literature, it does not need to be didactic, you can get this from an opinion piece in a newspaper.

Grant describes her own Jewish identity as completely secular. “I think a fairy blessed me at my birth by making me Jewish, it's a thing of such enormous value, such extraordinary diversity, so fascinating. At the same time you can feel quite smothered. How do I exist in this?” She resists the cliché ‘proud of being Jewish’ but clearly

revels in this wealth of writerly material. “I just have to return to my upbringing, there are so many fascinating things to write about and that's just my family. When I venture beyond into contemporary Jewish history, it's a treasure trove.”

What does she think about Anglo Jewry? Grant ponders for some time and says she keeps forming sentences in her mind and deleting them. “Is that because they are not accurate or because they sound awful?” I ask, suspecting the latter, and I am right. At last she says, with determined positivity, “Anglo Jewry has made its mark on society and has had a huge impact in all kinds of ways – finance, science, arts, medicine. As a group, there is a fairly stodgy feel to it, a sense of not rocking the boat, it's an honours system, OBEs and knight-hoods, a faint tinge of obsequiousness. I think Anglo Jewry has been less dynamic and vital than it could have been. But this is changing – look at the increasing presence on the literary map of Jewish Book Week, it's a truly wonderful sign.”

Is she proud of herself? After all, she's achieved a lot. She sits back, looking slightly stunned at the question and starts using ‘you’ and ‘one’ instead of ‘I’ or ‘me’ for the first time.

“Every two or three years you feel like perhaps you have achieved quite a lot. I suppose one feels that nothing is good enough. Occasionally you have to remind yourself that you are doing better than other people. You know you are in a certain category that other writers would kill to be in, but even when you write something which is up to your own highest standards, it doesn't feel good enough.”

She describes her daily working life. “It's not collaborative, it's not glamorous, you use a computer like everyone else, you slop around in your nightie making a coffee and staring out the window.”

Very few writers are recognised on the street. Would she want to be. She throws head back and laughs loudly. “Good God no!”

People on the Street A Writers View of Israel, Virago Press, 2006

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