



A Disaffection

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Patrick Doyle is a 29-year-old teacher in an ordinary school. Disaffected, frustrated and increasingly bitter at the system he is employed to maintain, Patrick begins his rebellion, fuelled by drink and his passionate, unrequited love for a fellow teacher. *A Disaffection* is the apparently straightforward story of one week in a man's life in which he decides to change the way he lives. Under the surface, however, lies a brilliant and complex examination of class, human culture and character written with irony, tenderness, enormous anger and, above all, the honesty that has marked James Kelman as one of the most important writers in contemporary Britain.

A Disaffection Details

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Guille says

Hay quién piensa que el mayor atractivo de la literatura de Kelman, quizás el único, es su destreza para llevar al papel el habla de la clase trabajadora escocesa. Yo, triste mortal que no he podido leerla en su idioma original y que, por tanto, no he podido apreciar ese aspecto de la novela, puedo decir que la obra tiene muchos más atractivos, tantos o más que su famoso y controvertido premio Booker “Era tarde, muy tarde”.

Toda la novela es la paranoia en la que vive su protagonista, Patrick Doyle, y que nos llega a través de una tercera persona que se transforma sin transiciones ni disonancias en una primera persona (y viceversa) para introducirnos en la mente de este insatisfecho profesor de escuela. Así, seremos partícipes de su tumultuosa cascada de pensamientos, reflexiones, invectivas y fantasías, más o menos obsesivas y neuróticas, sobre sus fracasos y carencias, sobre todos aquellos con los que se relaciona y sobre todas las cosas que le van sucediendo en una semana de su anodina y odiada vida y en un claro estado de ansiedad creciente.

Kelman es en su personaje un Thomas Bernhard malhablado de clase obrera, que en forma de corriente de conciencia se expresa con una sintaxis más salvaje, una puntuación más caótica, pero con la misma rabiosa fuerza en su prosa, similar capacidad para decir siempre mucho más de lo expresamente dicho, la misma indignación hacia una sociedad hipócrita e injusta y la misma insatisfacción consigo mismo. Como en Bernhard, Patrick Doyle es un suicida que no se suicida, alguien incapaz de tomar decisiones y de atenerse a ellas, con aspiraciones inalcanzables desde el día en el que aceptó ser el primero de su familia que accedía a la universidad y pasó a ser lo que él denomina un “civil titulado representante de fuerzas que corrompen” y falto de aquello que es la única “cosa por la que merecía molestarse y eso era la verdad del asunto: amor”.

Una novela a veces triste, incluso deprimente, de un divertido patetismo y, como marca de la casa, un libro provocador.

Ryan Williams says

I've always rated this novel higher than Kelman's 1994 Booker Prize winner. This is *How Late It Was, How Late* minus the bloat - and is just as truthful, deep. I can't think of many books today that take you so thoroughly into every nook and cranny of a character going about the daily business of living.

Some might be frightened off by Kelman's obscenities and truth-telling. Too bad for them.

Samuel says

Who knew a book about a disaffected teacher who lives alone and finds some pipes round the back of an arts centre in Glasgow could become one of my all-time favourites? Kelman's narrative style is staggeringly original, adapting the modernist stream-of-consciousness to a Glaswegian dialect, refusing to separate dialogue and narration and creating the most accurate representation of the interior life, a kind of simultaneous third- and first-person narration. Patrick Doyle is an exceptionally crafted character, an example of the self-destructive psychology that comes with working-class masculinity. I related to this on a deeply personal level and I seem to have read it at exactly the right time. It's just a fuckin brilliant book -

honest, uncompromising, heartfelt, hilarious and oh just such an absorbing and natural evocation of a life half-lived.

Margreet Heer says

Patrick Doyle needs to get laid.

And I mean that in the nicest way.

Although it's doubtful if even that would save him; from living in 1980's Scotland, from feeling an instrument of a corrupt society, from himself and his bitter misgivings and his blindness to Things As They Are around him.

Because he is really a good teacher, and the woman he loves is in love with him, and he could make a change if he wanted. But he won't. And that's where the title comes in.

Not an easy read, but a satisfying one.

I feel for Patrick.

I hope the 1990's have treated him better, if he ever made it that far.

Catriona says

An absolute beauty of a book from James Kelman. How he isn't recognised more widely as one of Scotland's greatest authors is beyond me. A heartbreaking, intense, compelling book covering one week in the life of Patrick Doyle, a secondary school teacher struggling with life. This book starts off with Patrick finding a couple of electrical pipes round the back of a pub, but really it's about love, hope(lessness), class, education and and life.

Karen says

I read this book in a class ten years ago and just pulled it on out again. It's written in dialect, which gives me a small but persistent headache, hence the one-star discount. I remembered it as being about a sad Scottish teacher going through a midlife crisis, but it turns out he's only 30. Eff. Melancholy, and full of funny but incredibly cringe-y moments--suits my current mood very well.

Robert Irish says

Well, what do you expect to happen when you enter into the stream-of-consciousness mind of a 29-year old Glaswegian school teacher who is utterly disaffected with his role in working for the Greatbritish rulers who oppress the working class? Well, you can't call them working class now can you? What with most of them on the dole ...

Like brother Gavin. Yes, Gavin, who in spite of being married to Nicola

Now, Nicola is a fine woman. If Patrick were married to her instead of his auld brother Gavin, well that would be a different story. A totally different story, but what's the point because that's not the story, this is.

The story of a school teacher who's just going to toss it all. Chuck it. Frankly, it's a story in which little

happens. He doesn't get the girl. In fact, he most decidedly un-gets the girl. The girl is ungotten. Pulled away. Forget that she's already married. As if that were a disincentive ...

So the story doesn't go there. It doesn't go anywhere, in part because a certain auto, a certain vehicle of the motorized variety, wouldn't go anywhere. At least, not without some significant investment, some significant input, and we know full well it's easier just to give the door a kick than to get it actually fixed. For if you take it to get fixed, they'll just take you for a ride--of the monetary riding type. Thinking that one is a middle-class wanker and nay someone to be reckoned with ...

Even though one is one to be reckoned with. Certainly reckoning is required. Or not. Not if, as in the current instance, one just couldn't be bloody bothered.

David says

Along with 'The Magus', 'The Idiot', 'Catch 22' and 'The Monkey wrench gang', this is one of the few books I return to each decade approximately. Sad, hilarious and emotionally exhausting, I recommend this to anyone who, deep down, feels isolated and desperate.

Chris says

A Disaffection

By: James Kelman

1989

What is the role of Males in education?

“I mean it fucking stinks, it’s rotten from the outside in and the inside fucking out. Every last fucking thing about it, it stinks. And what goes on in the classroom, it’s a load of dross. This is how I’m fucking chucking it. And all these wee weans Christ they think ye know everything, every last thing in the fucking universe – especially about how to change for good. I’ll tell ye something else, bastards people think lies are true and even when they know they’re no true they’ll say fuck all because the shitey fucking arse who’s telling the lie holds the position of power.”

James Kelman – A Disaffection

The discussion of gender and its impact on education should include an historical account of how males are perceived through a cultural lens. It is important to trace the lineage of how men are understood in the classroom in regards to knowledge production and distribution. De-gendering male teachers and the pedagogy they symbolize is paramount for understanding why gender is an important issue in education. De-gendering male teachers takes the form of seeing males in positions that are uncommon in learning. More specifically, working with very young children.

The word "education" can be attributed to a masculine, positivistic pedagogy, while women, in opposition, can be perceived to perform a nurturing role in human development. If men are symbols of patriarchy in education, they are marked as purveyors of knowledge and power. What ramifications do these notions harbour for students? Is it impacting their learning in a positive or negative way? Do traditional symbols of masculinity and femininity in education negatively impact learning in children? Should these traditions be upset to provide balanced learning for children at a critical time in their formation of their own understanding of gender?

Joe Kinchloe's article *What We Call Knowledge is Complicated and Harbours Profound Consequences* situates knowledge and its production by discussing procedures and guidelines that have been employed to create particular kinds of knowledge. He references standardized test driven curriculums that create learners that are dependent on their teachers for information. The delivery of information is from the teacher to the student, and the student, in turn, synthesizes the information, then demonstrates their mastery or proficiency of the subject by accepting the information as truth, and recounting the information verbatim on a test. This positivistic pedagogy is further employed by taking the recounted information and filtering it through a measurable system and assigning a grade that is supposed to reflect the quality of work submitted. Therefore, if this pedagogy thrives in a patriarchal institution such as school, male teachers become symbols of this positivistic pedagogy. They become responsible for the dissemination of information that engenders a student that is reliant on their teacher for praise, feedback and grades. Kinchloe continues the article by providing applicable suggestions for creating a learning environment that produces critical knowledge, where learners are responsible for their own development and are mindful of social justice.

“In the epistemologically mechanistic, test driven, standardized and scripted classrooms of the present era students learn that school is not connected to the world round them. They learn that there is nothing complex or problematic about knowledge – it is produced by faceless experts and it is our job as students to learn it.” (Kinchloe, 12)

The above quote recounts the positivistic pedagogy by creating a student that accepts knowledge without being critical of it. It is important to understand that the expert or holder of knowledge and power is indeed not faceless or genderless. While Kinchloe could be referring to a distant empirical body that communicates information through teachers, he omits references to gender and its implication of knowledge production. We as learner should critically examine knowledge as gendered to understand its implications of learning. The face or gender of knowledge is not blank or empty. It is the face of patriarchy and the symbol of man.

Here it is important to state that patriarchy does not limit social transformation. Feminism has thrived in a patriarchal environment and positive social change has occurred in history. By understanding the implications of a patriarchal system one can be critical of its underpinnings which can engender social transformation. Teachers who employ a critical pedagogy in their work help to create critical learners who question traditional notions of knowledge. Women, in positions of authority upset the historical norms of gender in education. Men consequently disturb their roles as teachers by taking on the responsibility of human development of preschool children. Critical pedagogy should not be limited to school age and adult learners, but should be implemented with human development of preschool children. With higher numbers of men working with young children, with an articulated philosophy of education that is founded on critical pedagogy, young children will enter school questioning knowledge rather than accepting it as truth.

A difficulty arises from this troubling of gender norms. How can males be attracted to this profession? Presently males are not visible in preschool environments. Women are perceived as being accepted in preschool professions. Pre-conceived gender norms have made the profession one where women are intended to belong. Subsequently, if women are allocated to this profession, men will not feel as though, according to critics such as Judith Butler (who argues that people need to feel that they belong in their jog/gender/race etc to be accepted in culture), that this is an unlivable vocation, where they will be encumbered by isolation, and discriminated against based on their gender. Men are meant to feel like they belong when teaching older children and adults where they employ a positivistic pedagogy. How can men be invited to feel as though they belong when working with all age groups?

Kinchloe discusses the ideas of “a literacy of power”, where particular textbooks and mandated curriculum undermine people's best interests. Material in textbooks reinforces an empirical truth, not to be questioned by students. These textbooks are meant to be read and the information regurgitated and supported as they are tested on the material. Evidence of “power” is present in how textbooks are used every year to convey the same information, often taught in the same fashion. Continuing to teach the same knowledge (from the same

textbook) annually assists in valuing the material as something that is essential and universal for all learners. In regards to attracting men to preschool environments, textbooks or journal articles should reflect a diverse population of educators. Showing men engaged with young children in a positive and nurturing way in photographs or anecdotes assists in helping men feel like they belong in a female dominated vocation. This is one way of presenting the occupation as accepting and inviting for men. Since there are so few men working in this field it is imperative to see them as visible, accepted and helpful.

Kelman's quote above serves as part of a tirade from a Scottish male teacher. His character also serves as a symbol of the male teacher, one who embodies patriarchy and a positivistic pedagogy. He becomes annoyed, and there is evidence of that in his words above, while attempting to disrupt his traditional gender performance. He is frustrated by the universal pedagogy that is implemented in his school. He sees students every day that believe he is the foundation of knowledge, and since he is a teacher he must have an encyclopedic knowledge of everything conceivable. He feels conflicted by implementing a critical pedagogy to his students. His teaching strategies vary from having the children repeat aloud nonsense political conjecture and asking them forwardly why their families are considered poor. The protagonist is understandably frustrated when he is attempting to invite the children in this class to be critical of their everyday lives, but they still ask him to relay truths in politics and cultural theory.

Subsequently, he is coming to terms with the irritation of embodying the symbol of patriarchy. His response to his exasperation is quitting the profession. He no longer feels, as Butler argues, that he belongs. This turmoil is created because he perceives himself to be a failure as a teacher. He cannot de-gender the minds of his students, and have them begin to think critically as learners. This could be reflected in that his teacher education did not support a critical pedagogy and he was intended to continue to employ a positivistic approach to teaching. Perhaps where he might feel as though he belongs would be in teaching younger children. This way he can introduce pedagogy to young learners as reflective and arguable. He will have to clean up his language first.

This is one of the greatest novels I have ever read. Absolutely amazing.

Grade:

A+

Sean says

29-year-old Glaswegian secondary school teacher Patrick Doyle is, as the title implies, disaffected. Instead of teaching lessons in his classroom, he rails against authority in all its forms and encourages his students to think for themselves. Bored with his colleagues, he alternately agitates and ignores them. Hopelessly smitten with his fellow teacher, the inscrutable (and married) Alison, he makes repeated clumsy attempts to share his feelings with her. Uncomfortable with his middle-class earnings he struggles to connect with his working class family, namely his parents and his unemployed brother Gavin, who is married with two young children. In short, Pat is dissatisfied in virtually all areas of his life and contemplates suicide on more than a few passing occasions.

On the very first page of the book, while urinating in an alley Pat finds these two pipes, which are never quite adequately described, although they appear to be some sort of cast-off construction equipment, at one point even referred to as being made of cardboard. Whatever their intended purpose, he perceives them to be musical instruments, as they remind him of large saxophones. So he blows on one of them and the resulting sound speaks to him. He takes the pipes home and paints them, then doesn't do much with them for a while.

He fancies playing them for Alison, which does in fact happen, though not exactly as he had imagined. He believes in their potential to tap into a primal center that without realizing it he has yearned to access. But he doesn't end up playing the pipes much, and their ability to stimulate lasting change remains elusive.

Despite its publication date of 1989, the novel feels modernist in both its concerns and style. It's mostly written in a limited third-person stream-of-consciousness style, with occasional sections of dialogue (all transcribed in Glaswegian dialect). The progression of the narrative is slow and aimless. Pat and Alison dance around their possibly mutual attraction for most of the novel. Pat cares less and less about teaching to the point where no one can ignore his failing performance. He avoids seeing his family until late in the book where suddenly there is a long section in which he visits his brother Gavin's house, and ends up drinking the afternoon away with Gavin and his two buddies, an experience which serves to accentuate the alienation he feels from his working class roots.

I came away from the reading experience uncertain as to how much I liked the book. It feels, at some times more than others, like it could be autobiographical in nature. As a piece of literature evoking a singular personal experience in a specific place, and perhaps time, as well, it's certainly successful. The grim economic realities of the working class in Glasgow are readily evident, and Pat's position is unique in that he is a university graduate, the only one of his family, with a middle-class job. So to an outsider it could appear that he's made it, risen in the ranks, transcended his original social position, become a success, etc. Yet it all feels phony to him--the entire system is rigged is what he perceives. He feels disaffected. And he's not certain what to do about it.

Hugh says

This is my final book from the 1989 Booker shortlist and perhaps the hardest to assess. Kelman is an uncompromising writer with a very striking style, and I suspect that I might have enjoyed this one more if *How Late it Was, How Late* was not still fresh in the mind.

This time we are in the head of Patrick Doyle, a 29 year old Glaswegian teacher in a sort of early mid life crisis in which he rebels against what he sees as the futile conformity of the educational system and his part in the perpetuation of a system and society he feels fundamentally opposed to. He is also seeking personal fulfilment, pursuing a married fellow teacher who wants to help him but does not requite his feelings, dealing with family issues and pursuing a strange dream in which he sees some electrical pipes he has found as musical instruments that offer some form of escape.

The whole book covers less than a week in his life, and very little is actually resolved, but the whole amounts to a compelling vision, if a very bleak one.

Alex says

It would be hard to convince you how great a book about a guy finding some discarded pipes can be, so I won't bother. The dialect may be off-putting to some, but you'll catch on. You have to like Kelman's voice to love this, and I do. Oh, how I do.

Cau says

If you are a teacher in Scotland, you're allowed to say fark in the class.

Pete says

It felt too personal to review, or even to recommend. *A Disaffection* struck me with a force that I had thought art could never again strike me. I had become convinced that adulthood disallows a sublime sense of warmth and engagement in response to the arts. This feeling was commonplace, my memory claims, in youth, but experience had tempered the impact. And then this. I doubt the reaction could be a universal one, although Kelman has earned high praise and a Booker. This is a book for a particular kind of person in the midst of a particular kind of life, and written in a voice which can seem to come from within.

Sean Wilson says

A Disaffection is an endlessly passionate and masterful piece of existentialist fiction. James Kelman has crafted a brilliantly bitter, isolated character with some of the most intense and moving prose ever committed to literature.
