

Mr Chancellor,

“Stories can change lives if we’re not careful. They will come in and take the shirts off our backs. Tell the right stories and we live better lives.” So says novelist Ali Smith, CBE, described by Sebastian Barry as Scotland’s “Nobel-Laureate in waiting”, whom we are honouring today for the many right stories she has told over the past two decades, for the many shirts she’s stolen off our backs, and for the better lives her readers all over the world are living as a consequence of encountering her extraordinary work.

Born in Inverness in 1962, the youngest of five children, Smith learned to read at the age of three from deciphering her older siblings’ record sleeves. Her father was an electrician and her mother a bus conductor. She studied English at the University of Aberdeen between 1980 and 1985, and afterwards began a doctorate on modernism at Cambridge – but already writing was calling her in a different direction. Having won Aberdeen University’s Bobby Aitken Memorial Prize for Poetry as an undergraduate in 1984, in Cambridge Smith initially turned her attention to playwriting: several of her early plays were staged at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. After a brief spell as lecturer in English and American Literature at the University of Strathclyde between 1990 and 1992, Smith moved back to Cambridge and devoted herself to her true vocation: writing fiction, which she describes as “an ancient form of generosity, a form that will tell us everything we need to know about the contemporary world, a welcoming-in, a porous art form, where sympathy and empathy are only the beginning of things.” And she’s never looked back.

Smith is a rare phenomenon: an author who has fulfilled her potential at every stage of her writing life, exploding onto the literary scene in 1995 with *Free*

Love and Other Stories, which won the Saltire First Book of the Year Award and the Scottish Arts Council Book Award. It would take far too long to list all her publications and awards since this debut, so here are just a few of her many remarkable achievements: *Hotel World*, her first novel, won the Encore Award and was shortlisted for the Orange Prize for Fiction and the Booker Prize; *The Accidental* won the Whitbread Book of the Year Award in 2005; *How to be Both* was the winner of the Bailey's Women's Prize for Fiction, the Folio Prize, the Goldsmith's Prize, and was a Costa Book of the Year in 2014.

Jeanette Winterson has commented: "I love Ali Smith's work because she is so ambitious for the form," putting her finger on a key aspect of Smith's distinctiveness, which is not just a dazzling formal inventiveness – and this a kind of adjunct to her urgent, risky, compelling subject matter – but the fact that form and content in her work are dynamically interconnected. To tell better stories, we need better forms. The very name of the form known as the novel, as Smith points out, means new: "The notion of newness is always embedded in the notion of the novel" and, in turn, this is connected "to a kind of social reading of where we are." Since 2015, Smith has embarked on one of the most exciting formal experiments in prose fiction of the century with her quartet of novels: *Autumn*, *Winter*, *Spring*, and *Summer* (the latter yet to be published), all of which are written with direct reference to the immediate socio-political moment in which they're composed, all of which feature an artist, all of which are based on one of Shakespeare's last great plays, and all of which are published with a turnaround of less than five weeks, which means these novels are written in real time, or in as close to real time as can be managed.

Such books should be impossible, and yet they exist. They are windows onto our fractured and heart-breaking times. They respond, live, to the divisiveness

of Brexit, the rise of Donald Trump, the nefarious hegemony of social media, the ongoing refugee crisis, the Climate Emergency. But they are the very opposite of off-the-cuff political commentary. As Claire Armistead says: these books offer “a constellation of stories capable of capturing and expressing our space and time with a truth that is beyond the newsfeeds.” And they are not only formally impossible, they admit the impossible into their very structures, because they deal – most unexpectedly of all – in hope.

“There’s no getting away from children in a book called *Spring*,” says Smith. “It’s the open eye of the year, and children are the open eyes of the world.” As fifteen-year old climate activist Greta Thunberg was being granted a platform at the United Nations, the World Economic Forum, and the European Economic and Social Committee, inspiring 1.4 million schoolchildren to strike alongside her, Smith was writing a child angel into the heart of *Spring*, a twelve-year old girl in a school uniform who walks into a refugee detention centre unhindered and persuades the authorities to clean the toilets. “This young generation is showing us that we need to change and we can change,” says Smith, whose work, both in its subject matter and in its formal bravura, not only describes the magic of transformation, but enacts it.

“I don’t want my work to achieve anything,” says Smith. “I want to make it the best I can and live up to the life of and the life in Art, which always give back life to life. And what I want next is nothing but hope – always – for the next thing to get made well enough, so that if it were a boat, it would hold water.”

Mr Chancellor, for her outstanding enrichment of our literary landscape, for the many seaworthy boats she’s built, for those still to be built, and for the

ALI SMITH: DLitt

hope she proffers to all of us that positive change is possible, I present to you Ali Smith for the award of Doctor of Letters, *honoris causa*.

Citation by Professor Sinéad Morrissey, Public Orator

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