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'My uncle is not a slum landlord'

Linda Grant on the art of invention



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A few years back I did a reading tour of American cities for my novel *When I Lived in Modern Times*. In Seattle, an elderly woman intercepted me as I arrived; she wanted to talk about our shared experiences in Palestine in the 1940s, where most of the novel was set. But I wasn't alive in the 1940s, I pointed out, smiling. She gave me a stare, at first appraising, then bewildered, then accusing. "You're too young!" she cried. "You couldn't have written that book - you weren't there." It was true, I was not in Palestine in the last days of the British Mandate. "Then none of this happened to you?" she said. "Nothing. I made it all up. It's fiction." I knew that I had let her down; she had come a long way on a cold night to exchange memories of the past with one who had been there with her. Instead, she found herself confronted with a professional liar.

I can forgive that elderly woman more readily than the BBC World Service interviewer who, as we were about to go on air, was still insisting that *When I Lived in Modern Times* had to be autobiographical, even though the events occurred before I was born. But none of it compared with the red film of rage fogging my vision as I read on the internet the dismissive verdict of the anonymous member of a reading group: "It's just written-down autobiography."

I have just published another novel, *The Clothes on Their Backs*. And once more: I am not the child of timid Hungarian refugees, nor have I ever had a slum-landlord uncle. I did not grow up in a mansion block off Marylebone High Street. None of my relatives were survivors of second world war slave labour units. I did not have an early marriage that ended in disaster on the honeymoon. I am not a widow; I don't have two daughters. It is all a tissue of lies and invention.

More than a decade ago, a literary editor sent me to interview the Irish novelist John McGahern, whose book *The Dark* was about sexual abuse. McGahern met me at the station and took me to his farmhouse in Leitrim. We sat outside on the porch before dinner and talked about writing. He discussed the function of the precise placing of the paragraph break. He described it as, "like tact, in conversation". When I got back to London, the literary editor said, "Didn't you ask him if he was abused?" I had finished the novel on the train to Leitrim, my heart hammering like an iron clapper against the ribs, and what the hell difference would it have made to me to know that sometime in the 40s the author had been fiddled with by his old dad? For such knowledge is the business of the peeping tom who looks through the cracks in drawn curtains at other people's privacy.

And why my intense irritation at this persistent, boring and inane insistence that fiction must be autobiographical? Because it reduces the imagination to material for journalism; it takes an axe to fiction. Such journalism tells me of

the reading public's growing fascination with what it considers to be the authentic, the "misery memoir". Is the imagination now regarded as "spin"? For writers of fiction are what they are: those who make things up, who exaggerate, who cannot be trusted with the facts, whose inner world is more realistic than the one outside the window.

I have never written about myself; you might even say that I write to conceal myself, to invent personae that I cannot be (might like to be). If I were to write an autobiographical novel, it would focus on an event that took place in my mid-30s. But I will never write about that. All my other attempts at fictionalising incidents from my past have been abject failures. No one I have ever known has ever appeared in my novels. When I try, they die on the page in front of me. I tried to write a novel about my parents, but felt I was cannibalising parts of their lives and wrote a non-fiction memoir instead.

It is the broader details of my upbringing - born into a family of immigrants with no obvious place in the class system, memories of past persecution breathing down their necks, a love of luxury and finery because they were only a generation removed from poverty - that make me write at all. And intense feelings of difference, and of the need to "pass" as a member of the Anglo-Saxon majority. Of understanding that, when your only resource is to make a good impression, as my grandfather understood, "the one thing worse than being skint is looking as if you're skint". That the clothes on our backs are our first and last possessions.

In the novel I named after this phrase that rang through my childhood ("We came here with just the clothes on our backs"), I ask some questions about survival and suffering. What do we need to do in order to survive? What moral compromises must we make? For the strong survive, not the good or the weak or the altruistic, and this, perhaps, is why a great error is made in the current cult of victimology. Suffering, in general, does not ennoble or improve the character.

These were lessons I learned early, from my parents, and in that sense what preoccupies my writing is indeed autobiographical. What you are writing about is how you feel and understand, not what you did or where you lived or whom you slept with. Amos Oz, once asked if one of his novels was autobiographical, tartly replied that you should ask not if the work is autobiographical about the writer, but autobiographical about the reader. And this is the substance of literary fiction. The writer sits alone in a room, writing. The reader sits alone in a room, reading. Neither is ever likely to meet the other. Literature is an act of solitude and privacy. Never mind if it's about me; is it about you?

• **The Clothes on Their Backs** is published by Virago, price £11.99, and is longlisted for the Orange Prize for Fiction. To order a copy for £10.99 with free UK p&p go to guardian.co.uk/bookshop or call 0870 836 0875.

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