

Stephen Kelman's *Pigeon English* (2012)

An Afterword

An introduction would do a disservice to the reader of Stephen Kelman's *Pigeon English* by robbing them of the innocence that Harri exudes; following the sudden brutal conclusion to Harri's story it is perhaps appropriate to step back and reflect on his journey.

Kelman follows in a line of talented novelists who have crafted their book around a child narrator, such as Charles Dickens with *Great Expectations* (1861), William Golding with *The Lord of the Flies* (1954) and Robert Louis Stevenson with *Treasure Island* (1883). He also takes his place with contemporaries such as Jonathon Safran Foer, Mark Haddon and Emma Donoghue in creating a convincing childish voice, endearing in its naïveté. The children are simultaneously conscious of the menace surrounding them and yet not truly comprehending the danger they themselves are in; parents are well-meaning, but fallible. Emma Donoghue is quoted on the front cover of the Bloomsbury 2011 edition as saying, "This boy's love letter to the world made me laugh and tremble all the way through," encapsulating Kelman's skill in negotiating humour and tragedy.

Pigeon English, shortlisted for a number of awards, namely the prestigious Man Booker Prize for Fiction, Writers' Guild Award (Best Fiction), Guardian First Book Award, Galaxy National Book Award (New Writer of the Year), and the Desmond Elliott Prize, sparked a bidding war between 12 of the country's top publishers before being secured for a six-figure sum in January 2010 by Bloomsbury. The novel has created a similar stir in the literary world as Faïza Guène did in 2004 with her own first novel, *Kiffe Kiffe Demain*. She infused her Parisian suburb with *verlan* (French slang created by inverting the order of the syllables) in much the same way as Kelman brings the Dell Farm estate to life with a kaleidoscope of Ghanaian pidgin, London dialect, and Jamaican patois.

Drawing heavily on the death of Damilola Taylor and the author's own life, Kelman conjures a depiction of an inner-city housing estate familiar to the reader from media reports; yet there is a complexity to it that presents the environment as more than a breeding-ground for crime, drug abuse, and violence. Born in 1976, Kelman grew up on the Marsh Farm estate

in Luton, Bedfordshire, its brief infamy arising from three days of rioting in July 1995. It is interesting to note that Peckham, the short-lived home of Damilola Taylor (on whom Harri is based), was also involved in rioting: in July 2011 London, followed by other cities, erupted in violence after the shooting of the unarmed Mark Duggan by a police officer.

Kelman described his upbringing as “[not] what you would call ... privileged ... but it was better than many.”¹ He wanted to be a writer from age six or seven, a natural progression from being a voracious reader. He recalled the public library in the shopping centre as being his sole source of culture and a resource for developing his literacy skills.

After obtaining his degree in marketing from the University of Bedfordshire, Kelman worked as a warehouse operative, a care worker, and in marketing and local government administration; he was unemployed when *Pigeon English* took flight, at age 33 and after a year of writing it. This is his first published novel, but it is preceded by screenplays and a novel that never made it to publication (and, according to Kelman, never will). He never took a creative writing course, and counts both the screenplays and the first novel as good practice rather than publishable material. In 2011 it was reported that Kelman was in the process of creating his next book, a story based on Bibhuti Nayak, a journalist friend of his who breaks groin-related records in his spare time. Initially a screenplay, Kelman transformed it into prose to become the first draft of his next novel.

The tragic case of Damilola Taylor inspires and propels *Pigeon English*. Damilola was a ten-year-old Nigerian boy who had been in the UK for three months when he died. After six years and three trials, brothers Danny and Ricky Preddie, at the time of Damilola's death aged 12 and 13, were sentenced on the 9th October 2006 to eight years in youth custody for manslaughter. There are differing theories as to how Damilola died: although it is accepted by the Metropolitan Police that his wound was caused by falling on a broken bottle after he was attacked, it is generally agreed that he was stabbed in the leg with the bottle.

Regardless of how it happened, a trail of blood from a 6cm gash to the femoral artery in his left thigh marked Damilola's 100-yard struggle to make it home – a mere few hundred yards away. Harri's blithe beliefs that “The lift is safe” (p27) and “Our base is the stairs outside my tower ... We're safe there” (p153) are poignant reminders of both Damilola's fate and the precariousness of Harri's own situation. Damilola was not affiliated with any gangs,

¹ Stephen Kelman, quoted in Claire King, ‘Stephen Kelman Interview,’ *View From Here Magazine*, <http://www.viewfromheremagazine.com/2011/12/stephen-kelman-interview.html> (accessed 21st November 2014)

and had told his mother that he was being bullied at school; he was wearing his maroon school jumper when he was attacked after visiting the library, and the police appealed for information on three black youths in hoods. Like Harri, Damilola wanted to be a doctor when he grew up, demonstrating a passion to help others. In many ways Damilola and Harri represent the vestiges of childish innocence that we desire to protect from the nightmare images of wayward youth: hoods up and blades drawn.

The media depiction of inner-city youth and crime prompted the story, but Kelman wished to explore the more positive aspects of the city life in which he grew up, developing the shadowy characters from news programmes into more than anonymous threats, many of whom were based on real people. Kelman draws on the area he lived in to create a varied and realistic setting: simply by going to the corner shop he was immersed in the current slang and perpetual childhood concerns. He lived five minutes from a secondary school, and so could easily pick up what the local youths were talking about.

Kelman's experience with screen-writing is obvious in the text, as the characters' words and actions create their personalities, which in turns invests their dialogue with character, rendering description of their speech redundant. It also hints at the traditional method of childhood story-telling ("He said ... she said") which is devoid of elaborate verbs and adverbs.

Me: "Is it because of your fingers?"

Mamma: "Harrison."

Auntie Sonia: "It's OK. They're not babies, they should know."

Lydia: "I want to know. You're always keeping secrets from us."

Mamma: "Lydia."

(p27)

The environment that Kelman has created coupled with the characters' vibrant personalities and the readers' own inference of the situation means that the raw minimalist exchanges are laden with tone and meaning. Emma Donoghue's novel *Room* (2010) similarly relies on the characters' bare words and contextual implications to produce a clean narrative that is layered by the reader's understanding.

Kelman circumvents traditional narrative with the use of lists, such as the rules Harri has learnt from school and Jordan's record of insubordinations; these are reminiscent of childhood notes and an effort to make sense of the world they inhabit. The same technique is employed

by Mark Haddon in his acclaimed novel *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003), creating a parallel between the two boys attempting to impose logic on unpredictable situations. Similarly, the collection of scribbled messages at the end of term marks the variety between the children, and their equal desire to leave a mark behind.

The illustrations, provided by Holly Macdonald, perhaps encapsulate Kelman's ability to inspire complex meaning from basic markers. Before the first sentence of the novel has been provided, the reader is given a childish minimalist aeroplane, inclined slightly to suggest landing rather than take-off. The simplicity of the drawing suggests a child's hand as does the novel's tone; flight links the child and the pigeon, the two narrators of the story; immigration and displacement are implied. The signs littering Harri's environment are brought bluntly to life, starkly standing from the page to grasp the reader's attention as they do Harri's.

The simple language and conversational tone that Kelman employs, such as rhetorical questions and over-use of slang, ensures Harri's verisimilitude and the reader's absorption: the book does not read as an adult novelist masquerading or performing as a child. It can be difficult to adequately write as a child without being overcome by sentimentality, but Kelman accomplishes it admirably. The reader becomes Harri's companion rather than voyeur, buoyed along by his ebullience. Other more postmodern techniques, such as exaggerating words with bold formatting, multiple exclamation marks and larger font sizes, not only distance *Pigeon English* from more traditional narratives but reinforce the childish style.

In the novel, television and superheroes rub shoulders with sexual experience and violence; tricks, puns and teasing are quickly overshadowed by death threats. Kelman uses the pigeon as the voice of danger, immigration and integration, neglecting Harri's customary blithe innocence for a more cynical moralising. Harri's empathy and imagination culminate in a relationship with a nondescript pigeon that takes on the form of a totem, becoming simultaneously Harri himself and his guardian angel. The pigeon also serves as a consolidation of Harri's appetite for life. "I just want something that's alive" (p25) he laments, and however unappealing his life/pigeon may seem to others, it is still cherished and has worth.

Harri's nostalgic reminiscences about life in Ghana serve to reiterate the ambivalence of immigration. Materialistic aspirations are more likely to be fulfilled – the children's gifts of a mobile phone and electronic car are testament to that – but they come at the expense of community. Harri recalls how he and his friends in Ghana worked together to insulate a

house: "Those kinds of missions are the best, when everybody helps and you get a reward after" (p113). His "missions" in England have a much more sinister agenda, such as knocking an old man to the floor and smashing his shopping. Perhaps more importantly, the emigration creates a splintered family. The father, grandmother and baby sister remain behind, and Harri, Lydia and his mother's relationship with them is reduced to communication over the phone. Even this simple medium is subject to hardship: Kelman's lines cut off mid-word as the phone card runs out.

Dell Farm estate bristles with names that represent a variety of heritages: Mr Frimpong (Ghanian), Manik (Sanskrit), Daniel Bevan (Welsh), Saleem Khan (Islamic), Dean Griffin (English), and Connor Green (Irish). This plethora of multicultural characters draws another link with Peckham, an area that has one of the greatest ethnic diversities in the UK. As the area is brimming with cultural diversity, even the language has been consolidated into an English that has absorbed multiple dialects.

The language may have melded into homogeneity, but cultural origins still inform some prejudices. Harri states matter-of-factly, "Where [Vilis] comes from (Latvia) they burn black people into tar and make roads out of them. Everybody agrees" (p73) and when he spends his RE lesson with Altaf he informs the reader, "You're not supposed to talk to Somalis because they're pirates" (p52). School discrimination, media representations and enduring stereotypes inform interactions, but Kelman demonstrates how interactions may also counter these preconceptions: after spending an RE lesson together, Harri reconsiders, "I don't think Altaf can be a pirate if he can't even swim" (p53). The message of multiculturalism being a positive thing holds strong in Kelman's description of celebrating summer with flying flags and blaring music.

Race also permeates the novel. Harri reassures Dean, "It's only because I'm black. If you were black they'd let you in the gang as well" (p66). Apart from highlighting how issues of race inform gang dynamics, this also serves to identify the gang members as black, something which Harri has neglected to mention: Harri does not distinguish between black and white, demonstrating how these labels are redundant in this environment – except for the gangs.

Racial conflict is not confined to the playground: Harri's mother tells her sister how a patient dismissed her expertise, saying, " 'She don't want no fuzzy-wuzzy just got off the boat' " (p42). She endeavours to protect Harri from the racism she is enduring, a racism that to Harri is a concept more than an actuality: "You'd know if there was a war because all the

windows would be broken and the helicopters would have guns on them ... I don't even think there's a war. I haven't seen it" (p133). Again the media and modern culture have informed Harri's perceptions of what is "war," leaving him with conflicting notions of what it means to be black in 21st century Britain.

The pigeon's narrations are sobering interjections, reminding the reader that we are more conscious of Harri's situation than he is. The omnipresent pigeon may wax philosophical, but its manifestations in the novel are more than that: it serves to separate the reader from Harri's joy and exuberance, and with this distance we can fully appreciate all of the factors at play, as well as rely on our own knowledge. Harri, hindered by his youth and his naïveté of the environment he only newly inhabits, is oblivious to our own preconceptions informed by news reports, noting only that "Somebody dies on the news every day" (p53). Much like John Boyne's 2006 novel *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, adult knowledge serves to draw meaning from the protagonists' ignorance, and the shock of children dying, however expected, is still a blow.

2011 saw a 4% rise in youth violence and 9.6% rise in knife crime in London: 15 teenagers were murdered, 11 of them by stabbings (one was shot, two were beaten to death, and one cause of death was listed as 'other'). Negus McClean, 15, black, was stabbed in the chest and thigh after he and his younger brother were chased down by youths on bikes. Yemurai Lovemore Kanyangarara, 16, from Zimbabwe, was stabbed in the neck in broad daylight (a talented footballer with no gang affiliations). Through Harri, Kelman illustrates poignantly the senselessness of these attacks, as Harri wonders, "Who'd steal a tree anyway? Who'd chook a boy just to get his Chicken Joe's?" (p7).

Initially from the blunt opening it seems as if the protagonist is as much of a spectator to the violence as the reader; we stand side by side as Harri informs us "You could see the blood" (p3). Drawn into his confidence, we are privy to the spectacle of the murdered boy reduced to a patch of blood dribbling in the rain, guarded by his mother and trodden in by a pigeon. Despite the morose atmosphere, the pages throb with a muted vitality as the boys dare each other to "touch it" (p3) and consider taking the boy's boots. Harri's ambivalent fascination with death is explicit from the first page when he expresses his desire to touch the dead boy's blood and yet flees from the scene "before the dying caught us" (p5). After communicating with his family in Ghana, the two become intertwined so that he recalls how a woman died in the Kaneshie market. Playground games remain focused on death, as they play at "suicide bomber" (p13), and Harri's tone is dismissive as he notes that Jordan's

affiliation with the Dell Farm Crew is only worth “some cigarettes or one week of freedom where they don't try to kill him. It's not even a good deal” (p16).

Death is infused with realism: Harri attempts to demonstrate the deference and grief he knows is appropriate, such as informing the reader, “You had to be sad for one minute” (p75). But without falsified propriety Harri expresses genuine sorrow for the dead boy:

I wanted him to be my friend after that but he got killed before it came true.
That's why I have to help him now, he was my friend even if he didn't know about
it. He was my first friend who got killed and it hurts too much to forget.

(p48)

The unnamed boy's death permeates Harri's life beyond searching for the killer: in his Art class he attempts to recreate the exact colour of the boy's blood until his “eyes were all blurry” (p46). Harri laments that “It's not fair” if a person can't be prepared for death (p22), highlighting the abruptness with which life is taken, and reiterated by his simple belief that “Children aren't supposed to die, only old people” (p37), a simple naïve hope that is contradicted throughout the novel.

In an effort to mask the reality of his dangerous situation, Kelman has Harri surround himself with superstitions. Harri endeavouring to protect himself from fanciful deaths (such as refraining from swallowing chewing gum and wondering if “opening an umbrella in church would give you double bad luck” [p36]) is more than believing playground urban legends; it offers control and autonomy. Harri may be being threatened by the Dell Farm Crew, who he suspects are murderers, but at least he can prevent himself from stepping on the cracks between paving stones to ensure a sunny summer.

Harri's exuberance permeates the entire novel, as he explains the new swear words he has learnt and tells us about his activities. His boundless enthusiasm is initially almost incongruous to the gritty environment and adult sensibilities: it is as if he's there beside the reader, babbling in their ear of every passing fancy that takes his attention. “Did you know that dogs can sneeze?” (p18) he asks, wanting to share his discoveries. It becomes more endearing as the reader becomes familiar with Harri's particular idiom. Like Donaghue's naïf Jack, Harri's language is warped: in Jack's case by his lack of experience with the outside world, and Harri, conversely, by being exposed to so many different dialects that he struggles to perfectly integrate all of them. His zest for life is unmistakable, punctuated with exclamation marks to highlight his excitement: when Jordan dismisses Harri's exuberance as

“gay” Harri joyfully contradicts him with, “It’s not gay, it’s brilliant!” (p5). His assertion that “it’s the best way to feel alive” (p5) is heart-warming, but takes on a more tragic significance when read with the knowledge of Harri’s fate. Other ironic allusions to the future – Harri’s aspirations and his assertion that “You’ll never see pink cowboy boots as long as you live” (p52) – provoke further disquiet in the reader.

Harri’s compassionate nature is matched by his courage and protective nature. Even when he’s frightened by the word “DEAD” carved into his door, he strives to protect his loved ones by passing it off as the work of a junkie. His passion for running, for movement and exertion, expand on his vitality, creating life that pounds the streets. He may bicker with and insult his sister Lydia, but they also share more tender moments, such as when Harri gives her footprints in cement for her birthday or he stands up for her against Miquita.

Lydia, however, exists as a more complex character than a recipient of Harri’s benevolence and annoyances; she is ensnared by the Dell Farm Crew’s associates, at first through friendship and trying to fit in, and then under duress of physical threats. Harri doesn’t think of Lydia as going through any particular hardships, perhaps because negotiating popularity and gangs is becoming routine, and she guards her secrets with the laundrette, explaining only that it was a “mission.” Towards the end of the book she protects Harri from the Dell Farm Crew, the siblings’ respective troubles culminating in the scene in the basketball court, where it all began.

The Dell Farm Crew members are the most influential characters of the novel and yet they remain shadowy idols of both fear and respect: “I felt sorry for Dean for having his quid stolen but I couldn’t help admiring it. I wish I could make them do what I say” (p65). Harri, playing at being the dead boy, is both fascinated and repelled by their stories of stabbing people as he foreshadows his own fate. Killa remains quiet throughout this exhibition, causing Harri to question, “Maybe he hasn’t chooked anybody yet. Or maybe he’s chooked so many people that he’s bored by now” (p14). Killa continues to be the most mercurial member of the Dell Farm Crew, showing up at the funeral in what may be considered a show of remorse. Kelman also subtly garners understanding for the boys by comparing them to the pigeons, which take what they can and don’t know how to ask.

Kelman creates a more sympathetic character in “the dead boy,” simultaneously distancing him from the Dell Farm Crew and making their interactions with him responsible for his death. Harri’s wonderment for him is initially nothing more than awe for a dead body, but as

the story progresses the reader is drawn into Harri's respect for the boy who "could ride his bike with no hands and you never even wanted him to fall off" (p4). The dead boy stands as a symbol for courage, as Harri describes how he defended him from bullies, and also for the consequences that can arise in this modern fairy tale where the good are not always rewarded.

According to the Citizens Report (2014), the number of teenage murders in London shows no sign of abating: *Pigeon English* may have been inspired by a specific case in 2000, but its appeal is enduring. While gang crime continues to be so prevalent, Kelman's novel will continue to speak with heartfelt clarity. Kelman's treatment of such a delicate subject matter, an almost exclusively contemporary concern inner-city youth-on-youth gang violence, is certainly laudable – but it is his execution of his skills as a novelist, speaking through a fictionalised child narrator, that has garnered such praise. In writing such a serious topic, as well as exploring the tribulations (and joys) of modern multicultural living and immigration, it is to Kelman's credit that he creates a book that is enjoyable to read with endearing multifaceted characters. With his debut, Kelman has catapulted among the ranks of similarly accomplished contemporary authors, who have used a convincing child's voice to explore heart-rending situations. Kelman's authenticity, from the language used to construct a culturally diverse environment, to his friendly style and alternative formatting to connote youth, never falters. Marking out the character speaking in script-like fashion, rather than going into great depth, and unusual devices such as diagrams and lists, creates a postmodern text that transcends traditional novels, exemplifies the current trend towards further story-telling experimentation, and ushers in a new standard for relevant and gripping literature.

Glossary (In Order of Appearance)

Hutious: frightening or scary. "Manik's papa's quite hutious."

Asweh: Ghanian pidgin for I swear. "Asweh, it was a miracle."

Bulla: Ghanian pidgin for penis.

Chook: pidgin for stab. "Who'd chook a boy just to get his Chicken Joe's?"

Advise yourself: an expression meaning to think about what you're saying. "Me: 'Advise yourself! He only wants to get out.'"

Adjei: a pidgin exclamation. "Adjei, germs are very tricky!"

Kaneshie: a suburb in Accra, the capital of Ghana.

Cassava: A tuber with dark brown skin and white flesh

Fufu: Bread made from cassava, by pounding the cassava with a mortar to make flour before being sifted and put in hot water.

Bo-styles: cool, stylish. "They're both bo-styles."

Pussy clart: a Jamaican patois insult, literally meaning a sanitary towel.

Rarse: a Jamaican patois exclamation.

Asbo: the name of Terry Takeaway's dog, from the acronym ASBO, which stands for Anti-Social Behaviour Order.

Dey touch: pidgin meaning touched in the head, or not all there. "Terry Takeaway is dey touch. It's because he drinks beer for breakfast."

Fugly: shorthand for someone who is "fucking ugly." Described in the book as "a girl who always wants a baby from you ... If you kiss a fugly she'll have a baby every time."

Obruni: Ghanian pidgin for someone from outside of Africa, typically white. "Jordan's ... mamma's obruni."

Shito: word for pepper in the language of Accra. "There was red all over. It was ... too light for Shito."

Juju: West African superstition with a karmic slant i.e. good juju resulting from good deeds and vice versa. "People in the north think twins are cursed by the devil so they kill them before the juju gets them."

Djembe: West African drum

Chop: pidgin for food or eating.

Ampe: a game of clapping and jumping, won by pointing at a different foot to that of the opponent

Batty boy: Jamaican patois for a male homosexual

Further Reading

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