
JAMES KELMAN

INTERVIEWED BY MICHAEL GARDINER

This interview was conducted in James Kelman's office, Glasgow University, while he was teaching creative writing there and just before the May 2003 Scottish elections.

MG: Why write *Translated Accounts* instead of something safer and more apparently naturalistic, like a *How Late It Was, How Late Part 2*?

JK: Well, we don't always have a choice about what we write. I don't think that *How Late It Was, How Late* is naturalistic. Whenever you try to use 'indigenous' language, to put it that way, people get the impression that it's supposed to be naturalism. But that isn't the case at all. *Translated Accounts* came about I suppose through working with short stories that appeared to be related in a certain way. This meant that I kept them back from my last collection of short stories [*The Good Times*]. They didn't seem to fit into an ordinary collection, and I kind of left them there while finishing *The Good Times*. I worked on them later.

MG: I suspected you might object to the word 'naturalistic'. I suppose I'm thinking of a certain use of the word in contradistinction to realism – I'd never describe your work as 'realistic' – naturalism as, at best, a method of artifice with a certain commitment to describing specificities. Naturalism isn't the word but it's hard to think of an alternative word to describe the aesthetic.

JK: Well, one of the things about this is that once you start to use language as it is used by people then it can give the impression of naturalism, that this is the goal.

MG: And a knee-jerk journalistic response is to say, he's trying to write exactly the way people talk –

JK: Yeah –

MG: And this allows people to ignore any craftsmanship that goes into it.

JK: Sure.

MG: I wonder if *Translated Accounts* is a kind of 'revenge' – since for Scots to engage in English Literature is always an act of translation.

Structurally, *Translated Accounts* looks very much like earlier stories, the sentences assume the same kind of shape, yet are lexically and grammatically dislocated. Here I'm also thinking of W.N. Herbert's comments on Edwin Morgan's 'The First Men on Mercury', that the Mercurian language sounds uncannily like Glaswegian speech. Similarly in *Translated Accounts*, there is that odd sense of familiarity. Is this change of tack a way of making the scenery more 'real' by making it more strange?

JK: Yes, I think I see what you're saying, about naturalism and so on. I suppose it's impossible to approach or get into *Translated Accounts* without being aware of formal necessities – it makes it impossible to assume that the stuff is done without any attention to form.

MG: I kept noticing how often in *Translated Accounts* where you'll get a word which in Standard English would be seen as inappropriate, yet its meaning is obvious – this struck me as a pointed re-location of the linguistic integrity of using non-standard words, 'ken' for 'know', and so on. And you could make a similar point about the orthography itself. So structurally the book felt not that far removed from previous work.

JK: Yes.

MG: Back to the specificity; in a recent *Edinburgh Review* dedicated to your work Alan Freeman questions your politics of apparent total libertarianism in the essays of *And The Judges Said*. Freeman points to a disjunction between the committed presentation of *detail* in the stories and novels, and the advocacy of a *universal* freedom in the essays. Universal statements are very dangerous, and you carefully avoid them in the novels. Why not in the essays?

JK: Well, fiction and non-fiction are different and the thing about working in fiction, in creating art, is that there doesn't have to be any intentional thing behind it, there isn't anything aside from the act of creating the work. It's not usually possible in the way I work anyway, the working methods. Quite a few of the essays in *And The Judges Said* only came about as papers for talks, so there was always a knowledge of where I was going before I began. That's not the case at all in my fiction – there's never any notion of getting to a certain point in the writing. It doesn't happen. I mean you might have quite a clear political view personally, but it's not going to really get into the way of the fiction. At a deeper level who or what the author is cannot help but flavour or colour the work in some way but that would be within the body of work. You've got to look at a writer's or artist's body of work to be really sure on that. A lot

of the stuff that has been written about my work before *Translated Accounts*, or even before *How Late It Was, How Late*, doesn't know the body of my work at all, it makes sweeping judgements without knowing the short stories for example, or without knowing the other novels, or the plays, and generally doesn't *want* to know.

MG: Do you feel happy with *And The Judges Said* and *Some Recent Attacks* [books of essays]?

JK: Yeah, why shouldn't I, they were both things it was time to do. It would have been good if two or three essays in *Some Recent Attacks* had gone into *And The Judges Said* – in retrospective that might have been an idea. But it was hell of a big as it was. So yeah, they are just part of my work as a writer. But again you get kind of irritated on occasion by some of the attacks in the press, the critics and so on.

MG: So you do read the reviews then.

JK: Well I don't get sent as much now, because Random House no longer seem to use such a clippings agency. And I don't get them all sent from the States. There might be some quotation from the *LA Times* or the *Herald Tribune* or something appears on a back cover and, you know, I've never seen the original. A few years ago everything would have come, roundabout *How Late It Was*, but they stopped after that. When reviews come you tend to kind of scan them, even good reviews, it's difficult to read them.

MG: Especially around the time of *How Late It Was*.

JK: Yeah, but there were so many and it lasted so long. So I don't read all the reviews. It can depend whose it is, if it's somebody whose name I know, if it's somebody I know is going to attack, if they're Scottish maybe, it can be useful to see what they're saying, you know, for future reference. Lies are difficult, though. And I sometimes wonder whether it's because they know I can't respond, I can't send a letter to the editor of *The Guardian* or *The Herald* for instance, that's ridiculous, so unless I start to think about 'defamation' – doing them for 'defamation' is about the only response I can make.

MG: On the other hand, you know how many novels you sell, you know how many readers you've got.

JK: Oh yeah, well certainly, in respect to your question about reading good reviews and bad reviews and what's written about you, I'm saying that the

kind of ones I'd be more likely to read would be those of people whose names I knew.

MG: This is almost a restatement of the question on and universal values versus specific details: in the essays it sometimes sounds like you want everyone to write and get published, you know, you say there are countless great stories written by truck drivers and cleaners and the rest of it, and anyone should be able to write and get published. But if you take this to its logical conclusion, it means the de-professionalisation of writing, since if everyone got published, no-one would really get paid properly. This seems to sit uneasily with a comment you made to some schoolkids in Texas [reproduced in *And The Judges Said*], that you were 'lucky' to be a writer. In fact it doesn't seem like luck, it seems like a long struggle to maintain integrity while dealing with a very standardising publishing industry. Now, not everyone can have that sort of 'luck'; most remain truck drivers and cleaners.

JK: I can't remember ever saying there were 'countless great stories written by truck drivers and cleaners and the rest of it' and the point about 'de-professionalisation' and not getting 'paid properly' is just silly. I'm not sure how specific I was being with that comment 'lucky to be a writer', but I might have been talking about Mary Gray Hughes, who I happened to meet when I was 25 and who showed my work to a publisher over in the States. That may be what I was talking about, and that in that sense it was 'lucky', it was a kind of fluke, you know, most writers are not published as young as 26. It's never a worry if you're not published then, whereas if you're involved in rock music you might worry about it more. It just takes longer in writing. I still feel nowadays that it was kind of young and that it was a fluke. I think it is good for young writers to know that. You could go to so-called 'writers' pubs' forever in Scotland and just get drunk, never meet anyone especially interested in anything outside of themselves. There seem to be periods when there is a generosity around, and other periods when the generosity is not there. So if you look at the period when [Sorley] MacLean and people were around, [Norman] MacCaig and [Hugh] MacDiarmid and others, you know, there was a feeling of generosity then, a solidarity, as there was for myself and writers from the '70s and the early '80s. I'm not sure how much of that there is now. Certainly there has been something around the *Clocktower Press*, and around the *Edinburgh Review* and maybe *Rebel Inc.* I'm not quite sure if that's still around at all. And the proliferation of Creative Writing courses may not necessarily help matters, although it can do. Some of the generosity can go, it may be likelier to happen with the more organic ways of developing contact with other artists. The point that everyone can write, it is the capacity to write, it doesn't mean that

merit goes out the window or something. The web can bring a kind of democratisation in one sense, with everyone using it standards don't have to go down they can go up. I don't see what else it will do other than oblige people to make their writing better, they won't get read otherwise.

MG: It's a kind of meritocracy then?

JK: Well, in writing, certainly the better writing will eventually go somewhere; to improve your chance of being read you pay attention to what you're doing. I mean it's more to do with the idea that there's some kind of *a priori* going on, because of class or something – that you cannot be a writer if you're like, you know [working-class].

MG: Yes, but given the proportion of people that write in some capacity, most of those people who are driving buses or clearing floors are going to have to keep doing so. Sometimes in the essays it sounds like you're almost believing that we can all become writers.

JK: Well, we *can* all become writers, if we are literate. Put it this way, I could easily have said that we could all become musicians, or all become composers, or sculptors. That's really the kind of context I'm saying it in. So when I talk about writing I mean as an art, as literary art, so what's brought to bear in any art you have to bring to bear in creating fiction.

MG: To go back to luck, the way I read your idea of luck, in stories like 'My Eldest', is that luck represents a hegemonic space waiting to be filled with recognition or action. We feel that your hopes for your characters is *not* simply to wait around, but to convert luck into action. Is that a reasonable reading, do you think?

JK: I think it is a reasonable reading, and that element of what you are saying about luck is an underlying thing with my work.

MG: There's something about *The Good Times* that isn't like the earlier stories, where, for example, at one point you describe pubs as 'waiting rooms' –

JK: That's *How Late It Was*.

MG: Right. But *The Good Times* feels very different, it feels like the old waiting for a change of luck is being gradually converted to action. The characters are audibly asking themselves, why is there all this empty space we call luck, and what can we do to fill it with social action.

JK: You know, I actually see that very much in all my work, and I see it as central within the first three novels too before *How Late It Was, How Late*. *How Late* is different in a sense, because the central character I think is more positive, a character who's used to action, and is used to having to fend for himself and fight his way out of difficulties. In the other three novels I think characters *are* in a situation where, it's a kind of anti-existential thing in a way, it's almost like, *when* will action be pre-determined – and it's not going to happen. I think the guy who's closest to that awareness would be in *The Busconductor Hines*, who's more aware of what's involved, but again part of the conflict within him is that he is just in an ordinary kind of job, and a job that is dehumanising in some ways, but only in the ways other jobs generally are. He's married with a young kid and the house is going to get pulled down, there are always these things pressing in on him, and it looks as though something like that may force change, or force action, but that's not the case. Actions can't be forced onto anyone, people are going to have to act for themselves.

MG: That's also very true of *A Disaffection*, except that the stakes are raised because he's educated, he [Patrick Doyle]'s a schoolteacher, alienating him from his family and giving him an obsessive interest in his own situation. We see him walking back and forth in his head between action and inaction, driving half-way to England. It's quite a terrifying book at times. Anyway, a different question: in your essays you've often fairly candidly set yourself against academics generally assumed to be middle-class; yet you now find yourself in this academic position, sharing a university chair with another two figures of very similar standing. Where do you draw the line between the institution and the person in the institution?

JK: Yeah, I mean I'm not sure. It's a complex thing, also in the way the so-called Creative Writing courses are programmed. It's not simply to do with class but about employing artists within the institution. This is quite a radical change, and I think that difficulties are arising because of those who have been brought in, like myself, Alasdair [Gray] and Tom [Leonard], and those in similar situations on other university Creative Writing programmes. I think the situation is, unfortunately, that you're having to conform to academic criteria – not so much academic *standards* as the bureaucratic criteria – for what it is to be employed within a university. For academics, that's part and parcel of their career, these administrative and related pressures, it's integral to what they do. For artists, it's not at all, but it really takes an effort to radicalise working practices, and stuff like that, which in effect is what we would be having to do, and I think the university has to adapt to cope with us, that the error they'll make is forcing us to adapt – why invite us in at all.

MG: Is that another way of saying it takes up too much of your time?

JK: Well, it's not another way of saying that, but certainly that's one of the effects of it. Yes, that is the case: the time for creation gets cut – and that's where an important contradiction comes in. You can't be here as a lapsed artist, it's not like you take a year's sabbatical every five years to write a book in the way some academics can do. It isn't how artists work – which is constantly, we work at what we do pretty much all the time. So you have to have a genuine part-time sort of thing that can acknowledge that, none of us works part-time, it is all the time, no matter the job conditions or the wage we get.

MG: So the universities have to adapt to working artists' practices if they want working artists. But universities don't always want to adapt.

JK: Who knows. Because again – and this goes back to what you were saying about the line between the institution and the individual – that's a kind of fundamental question across the board. It's become fundamental because of corporatism. It's like the average decision is not a real decision at all, just a kind of logical inference, and no discretionary practices are allowed. Every time you make *a* decision, there's always pressure on you to make *the* decision. There is only the one way. That is how things have gone, but that's not to say things must always be like that. Machines don't rule, there has to be an individual somewhere. It's like being involved with the DSS or something, you have to try and find a 'loophole' but so-called loopholes might just be where discretionary judgements are allowed. You have to go for it and let it be known to the bureaucrat that discretion is allowed, they can't hide behind the 'my hands are tied' stuff. It's the same in a university. Individuals are going to have to make a change to things. And people at the top are not necessarily opposed to that, you know, sometimes people who get higher up in a job, it's not simply because they play the game – though they might play some aspects of the game – but also because they can take account of an unusual step, you know, they are capable of making a decision. That's one way to get to the top. It's not necessarily because they're fucking cowards or something. So also it doesn't mean that people in my situation won't be supported by people at the top. You *can* be, but you have to find, how can they do it? How can they support us, how can things be altered?

MG: Why do you stress in the essays that you don't have to go to university and study English Literature to become a writer, even though that was exactly what you did as soon as you started getting published?

JK: Well, I *was* a writer, that is the whole point, I'd been published three years before –

MG: Yes, but why did you go?

JK: Purely economics, you know, I had two kids at that time, and I really was becoming unemployable. I was no longer able to drive a bus; I'd been in the job too often, so I was basically barred out of the three bus companies at that time – Alexander's, SMT, and the Corporation of Glasgow. So the only job I had was working in a factory and I was very lucky to get that. It was a really difficult job, you know, working night-shift and it was a physically dangerous job, and there was no other way of surviving. At that time a mature student had an earnings-related grant, and it wasn't means-tested. My wife was working part-time, so it was quite straightforward, it was the alternative to working in a factory. But even then I'd written a great deal, not just what I had had published. In my second year at Uni. I continued working on *The Busconductor Hines* – I had begun it a while before, never mind *A Chancer*, which was before that again. I was just really playing a game at university, well not playing a game, but it was a means to an end. I was only conforming to the criteria necessary for them not to take away my grant. If I could manage that, I could get on with my own work. That was basically what I did, why I went.

MG: Yes. A lot of your characters have lazily been associated with indolence, drinking, and alcoholism, even though only Sammy Samuels [in *How Late it was, how late*], and the odd early character, drink to excess.

JK: Yeah, I mean much of that is simply the usual stereotype about Glasgow working-class males. Working from the old stereotype. So that's the kind of thing I get accused of – it's just assumed that that's the way I would be too.

MG: The history of the whole process of the Booker judgement would make an interesting book, the collected journalism and so on.

JK: Yes, it is an interesting one. Both the attacks during the short-listing and after it. I mean it was difficult for me to read the papers. Up here it became so bad in *The Herald's* attacks on me, the editor at that time was Arnold Kemp, and he actually came out with a kind of defence, saying, well, some of his work can't be all that bad, or there must be a couple of good points somewhere. It was like being an Aunt Sally, you know, all the time, it was just constant. It didn't matter whether it was the music critic or the diary guy, whatever, it was just all the time.

MG: As you know, I've been looking into getting a publisher to let me co-translate *How Late It Was* [into Japanese]. This has proved remarkably tough despite the fact that including yours there have only been two, I think, Booker Prize winners of the last couple of decades which haven't been instantly translated into Japanese on winning. The official reason for reservations about the translation seems to be that the book didn't sell well enough in England, but you can sense also the journalistic shenanigans rubbing off – though I'm not sure how much Japanese publishers know about that – a sense of the book being somehow risky, and therefore probably better not touched.

JK: Yeah, because I don't think the argument about figures is sustainable, certainly looking at the figures for a period of fifteen to twenty years.

MG: Do you feel angry about the whole thing?

JK: Well at the time, occasionally. Yeah, it was a surprise as well, because one of the heaviest critics was the director of Dillons, and at that time they were competing with Waterstone's. So here I had this guy, director of the second largest bookshop group, attacking me publicly, saying my book shouldn't be stocked, and if you've got to have this book it shouldn't be in our bookshop, which means our chain of bookshops throughout the UK. Now another interesting thing is that my publisher at that time was Reed, and Reed and Dillons were supposed to be working in a synergetic kind of way. So it was like, hang on a second, this is my publisher's partner, he is supposed to be working with my publisher to sell these books, it's a business deal. That was a throwback for me to *The Busconductor Hines*, when they said take the book out the shop window. These people take away your living. Your anger or disappointment also is that it hurts your publisher, and it hurts them in such a way that your marketing team then start to lose confidence in your work, so if your work is experimental or risky in some way then that public hostility consolidates the fears of a marketing team. So you don't get any real space: there's no longer any proper marketing given to your stuff. And when you look at the editions [passes over a couple of the now-familiar two-tone-covered editions], they really are not very good at all, horrible paper, and you can't even read the titles. It's the cheapest kind of quality you can get. But if you look at the American version of *Translated Accounts* [shows book], you can see immediately they're still trying to sell the damn thing.

MG: Right.

JK: Although, fair enough, the English paperback version of *Translated Accounts* is okay. But obviously these decisions are taken at a high level,

and when there's a drop in production quality maybe the booksellers start to lose confidence in it as well.

MG: It's interesting, because I appreciate these publishing worries, but from another perspective, you've just had an *Edinburgh Review* dedicated to your work, and you have very suasive expositors like Cairns Craig, who really understand your method, and in those circles you couldn't be doing better. It's ironic you have to feel worried about the presentation of books.

JK: Yeah well, like it or leave it.

MG: Okay, so back to the question of action. R.D. Laing said of Kafka – someone you've written about – that his only form of positive participation was in his own anxiety at the unreality of the world around him. There seems to be a parallel in the way your characters are constantly rushing into doing nothing, are centred in trying to escape from inactivity. The story 'It happened to me once', for example, is a perfect example of the prevalence of what Laing called a 'false-self system', taking over the conversation of a narrator waiting in a dole queue and really wanting to connect to the guy in front. In this story you neatly remove the chance of recognition to leave the game of evasion played out by false selves. Yet in other stories in *The Good Times*, like 'Strength' and 'The Norwest Reaches', mutual recognition is there in abundance. Is *The Good Times* a turning point?

JK: I'm not sure but a couple of stories had been written earlier and sometimes it's good to look at the way other artists function, the way musicians build an album, or how visual artists hold an exhibition. Often it means they want to mark the end of a period and move on, but while they are working towards the finished thing they are already working on the new stuff. I'd already started some of *Translated Accounts*, so had to shelve them eventually, because there were other works nearing completion that I had been working on before. So in a sense you might say the change or turning point, yes there could be, I wanted to explore certain things and in *The Good Times*, yeah, there is a range of situations, males from ages 14 to 74; there's one story based in New York, one story in London, one travelling around in England somewhere, but apart from that I think they're all based in Glasgow.

MG: But a story like 'The Norwest Reaches' – with its almost blissful sense of recognition and community – I can't think of anything as positive before that.

JK: [laughs]

MG: Before that, you get scattered points of recognition, but not the prolonged content of ‘The Norwest Reaches’.

JK: Yeah. When you mention that, I mean in that sense of when people look for positive things in some of Kafka’s stories, and you think, for fuck sake [laughs]. But they are, in a sense. The elements of this story concern the relationship of this guy who seems to be quite settled emotionally or something, or maybe the other way, who knows. Yeah, but that’s valid I suppose. Some of the stories of *The Good Times*, like what’s the [second] last story, ‘Constellation’, a story about a boy with his girlfriend who seems to be moving away, you know, it’s a positive story – but it’s actually quite a hard story. Obviously it has a class thing, and has a lot to do with forms of elitism. I think it’s a kind of positive story, but you know, it’s tough.

MG: I think it’s also ‘tough’ in a philosophical sense – in *The Good Times* you have this combination of some people completely failing to talk to each other, and others talking in blissful abundance.

JK: Yes.

MG: In your account of the stones on the beach in ‘My Eldest’ [in *The Good Times*], did MacDiarmid’s poem ‘On a Raised Beach’ cross your mind at all? In the MacDiarmid poem, there is a kind of ontology locked into the stones, a wishful end to the separation of the subject from the world. The narrator can’t quite get at it, he remains alone, but his determination to open up this ontology seems to wish at a dialectical method of writing. Your story offers a very similar scenario, plus hints that the narrator, or perhaps the narrator’s son, really has become part of his surroundings.

JK: Well, I don’t know MacDiarmid’s ‘On a Raised Beach’ that well, but that makes sense, it raises a lot of things. But then who knows; the character himself is aware of other members of his family apart from his son, yet I think he’s more aware of a certain understanding between him and his son, and perhaps his son’s rejection of that. You know, the story in a sense is to do with suicide, and I think in some way the father’s dawning awareness of the possibility of suicide is intuited by his son, and the son rejects it.

MG: What makes it very interesting is where you set it [the beach overlooking a nuclear base], and that fact that ‘chance’ in relationships is explored within a location marked by radioactive dangers, a form of chance via which the narrator views his son as his own genes warped in some way, the extent of which dangers are in a sense decided by the government yet unknown to him, since he can’t measure radioactive damage.

JK: Yeah. Right. It's a complicated story. When I used to read from *The Good Times* I used to read that one. I once stopped half-way through it, because somebody laughed at the wrong place. They were very apologetic and it wasn't anything to do with it, but I just stopped [laughs]. I didn't stop the whole reading, I just stopped reading that story. It was nobody's fault, you know, it wasn't deliberate, and I wasn't even angry. I just couldn't read it any longer, so I read something else.

MG: The issue of nuclear bases was a very national one. Why do you go to such lengths to avoid nationalism in the essays, when so many modern liberation struggles have been nationalist in character?

JK: Well, I'm not too sure what you mean there, I'm not involved with any parties, you know, the idea that this guy's an anarchist, is a bit of a laugh in some ways. I have no leaning towards any party or party-type politics. I would find it hard to appear on a platform these days, whereas a few years ago I'd go on most any left-wing platform. The kind of non-debates we have now in Scotland are shocking. I think we'd need Frantz Fanon to talk about the kind of stuff we have here, but so many of the Scottish politicians, it's like they're crawling to TV interviewers, never mind anything else, it's weird. It's like the school bully who caves in at the first appearance of authority, I'm thinking here not only of Labour politicians, but mainly so.

MG: Frantz Fanon is exactly the sort of figure I have in mind. He is careful not to speak of nationalism, but a revolutionary politics which functions strictly at a national level without being nationalist in the classic sense. And I'm thinking about what seems a majority view amongst the Scottish people – not necessarily amongst MSPs [Members of the Scottish Parliament], but amongst people – that they want national determination because they want more democracy, not because they want to vent some kind of ethnic pride.

JK: Yeah, you know, that has been the situation for some time, 'nationalist' is the conventional terminology, but has to be quickly qualified by arguing that any country should determine its own existence, so I'm in favour of the self-determination of Scotland. It's maybe worthwhile looking at the time of the First World War and after, when the CPGB was formed and the anarchists were quite big up here, and it was quite valid to have these theoretical discussions among different kinds of socialists about different ways forward. And self determination was certainly where James Connolly and [John] Maclean went, and that is where a lot of socialists have gone, in their case the idea of a workers' republic in Ireland, in Scotland. And I kind of go along with that. I think there is a basic, healthy

socialism in Scotland, I think it's a gut thing here, and I don't think the Scottish Parliament's going to destroy that or kill it although like Whitehall I think they're trying, and will try for many years to come.

MG: One of the ironic things about being a Scot living outside Scotland is people coming up to you and saying well done, you've achieved freedom now.

JK: It's shocking, the disinformation, you know.

MG: You've struggled for an integrity of local language in your work, despite people complaining that Glaswegians don't swear all the time. Yet one thing that's noticeable about your fiction, and again someone pointed this out in the *Edinburgh Review*, is that your women hardly ever swear. Why is this?

JK: In some cultures the men will not use certain language in front of women, they try to cool their language. Some of the characters in my stories inhabit such cultures. But the premise of that sort of argument, I just don't go along with it. This is about these false notions of writers representing the people again, you know, the idea that the artist represents his community. I don't see that at all. I really don't represent Glasgow people at all, yet so many critics and other people want to point to how people are 'in real life' as the proper way to evaluate my stories, whether they succeed or fail, it's a function of how closely they resemble 'real life'. It's weird. What was it one Scottish writer said about my work – 'my father says people don't speak that way in Glasgow' – I mean Jesus Christ, it's such a pathetic comment for another writer to make. Another Scottish writer claimed that in *How Late It Was, How Late* – I'm paraphrasing – 'Kelman expects us to believe that Sammy wouldn't be given his taxi fare home [by the police].' But again, the people who are supposedly critics, so many lose their critical values in prejudice. Some of the more basic notions that you'd try to instil in first year students about distinguishing between fictional characters and the author, all that goes by the board, so that the fictional characters are all read as being like me. I don't think that sort of thing happens to these ordinary standard eng. lit. type writers like Julian Barnes or Graham Swift or Ian McEwan or Martin Amis. What I think is the crucial point is why does one Scottish writer feel obliged to say that stuff about another Scottish writer, something that is complete nonsense, which makes banal assumptions about the nature of literature. The second point is, why the hell am I being so irritated about this.

MG: On the other hand, this so-called controversy; if you look at the impact your work will be seen to have had in twenty years' time –

JK: Yeah well a translation of *Translated Accounts* has already started in Russian; the French publisher abandoned the idea because the novel was said to be untranslatable. Now the Croatians are looking at it and seeing if it is possible to translate. My work, and Alasdair [Gray]'s and Janice's [Galloway] and others, we've kind of had to somehow avoid Scottish views of us – for like two decades, because of hostility, right. Now that's not to say it's always water off a duck's back, but you're always having to aim at something wider, and that's the case about Europe these days, or the States, where you're seen just as a writer. Especially now in Europe, for my own work, there's more translations being done. In a way it's too late in Scotland for those who are attacking us and don't want to regard us as 'real' writers. Outside this country people ask questions about Scottish writers and there is great respect for contemporary Scottish literature, so it doesn't really matter what they do here where some of the treatment has been disgraceful – what they have done with the likes of Janice [Galloway] and Alasdair [Gray] once or twice to try and attack or ridicule them, you know, which is an extraordinary situation. Fortunately there's a more honest response from outside, including England. But, on the whole, I can't complain about the actual reviews I've had, and that includes Scotland.

MG: As you've already said, you've written as, and about, many different kinds of males, from many perspectives. Have you ever thought of seriously adopting the voice of a woman?

JK: Well yeah, a couple of stories are from women's perspectives; there's no reason at all, if I live for another fifty years I'll maybe extend my range.

MG: I was thinking, because the presentation of men-women relationships works well in stories like 'The Norwest Reaches', why not take it a step further and take up the female voice more?

JK: I'd love to do that, I really would, you know. Also the thing about age groups, it would be great to write as certain age groups, or certain types of male, it'd be good to operate within different types of psyches, but part of this comes back to time. If I look back on the last twelve years, how much time have I actually had for writing? it's been a case of scrabbling to earn a living. Sometimes I feel like I've never actually had the time to be a 'full-time' writer, to relax with it. I'm always buying time. So it would be great to have the time to do all the different kinds of writing, write in other types of voice, and explore everything. I'd love to do more plays, and again there's different ways in which I'd like to handle things, explore relationships. But part of the problem of, you might say, the formal aspect of where my work has gone, is that transition from imparting the narrative

of the inner psyche, the most natural place, and 99% of that time is in the male psyche, it is natural for me, because I am a male. So maybe because of the formal thing it would be more natural for a writer like me to try certain things in drama, I mean by that what maybe you mean by the female voice, if I had the time and the opportunity to be involved in drama, I'd love to. But I can't even get a damn play on in this country for no money, as a profit-share, never mind get a commission or something. The real pressing thing for me has been the prose, and this is where the urgency goes in my work. So it's like any other artist – if you're a musician who works acoustically, sure it would be nice to work with a blues band, but there's never been time for it. I would love to have the space to do it all, and if I *had* the time and the space I would do it all.

MG: Right. Thanks very much.