

Alcemi Questionnaire

1. *'Bumping'*. What does the title mean?

People bump into each other – as simple as that. The novel turns around a number of chance events. All of the characters believe that order, even contentment, are just an arm's-reach away. If only they can get over the next hurdle, explain themselves a little better, show that they are worthy of love... then all will be well. But the pattern of their lives is much more random than they can ever allow.

'Bumping' also means 'lock-picking'. You need to read Barry's story to find out why this is significant. This is what he does, what he can do, it is his own, personal attempt at controlling a little bit of the world.

2. Why choose this theme?

I wanted to write about my native Tyneside and this is how it came out. The place is as much a character as the people and this is how I have always 'felt' it – as somewhere firm and fixed and yet also constantly shifting and unpredictable. I'd travel to school every day from Shields to Newcastle, so this sense of passage, of thousands of paths constantly crossing, is deeply embedded. The paths go much further than this, of course. My father had tales of Merchant Navy days, playing football in Argentina, watching 'land divers' in Vanuatu and then, later, policing the streets of Tyneside: the links seemed endless, more or less random and much stranger than fiction. So it's no surprise that Tom, in *Bumping*, recounts his time as a 'ladybird miner' in the Californian Sierra Nevada.

3. So there's nothing post-9/11 about this fear of things falling apart for no apparent reason?

Perhaps there is, but the catastrophe is very slow-burn. The deeper moral and political point, if there is one, is that a small event, a minor error of judgement, can have big, unintended consequences. This is obviously the case in an increasingly globalised world. But you get that sense of global connection in all maritime communities – it's part of a pattern of work, of family history, of the whole experience of migration. All things are connected.

4. Do you identify with any character in particular?

I can identify easily with Frank – bumbling, well-meaning, ineffectual. Val's acute anxiety and constant desire to be elsewhere have their resonance, too. And as it happens, like Barry, I did once go around trying to pick locks I had no business picking. But I feel closest to old Tom, the erstwhile 'ladybird miner', with whom I have little in common.

5. This is your first novel in English, but you've written fiction in Welsh. What's the difference?

Yes, I've published three novels in Welsh. The obvious difference is that these are set largely in Wales. But there are more important things at work here. Welsh, as my second language, will always be a more challenging medium for me; on the other hand, it has given me the freedom to be 'someone else'. Samuel Beckett said that he turned to French because it allowed him to write 'without style', that is, without the anxiety of influence. In learning a language, one has already constructed a mask: this is very helpful for the creative process. While writing in English is 'easier' for me in a purely technical sense, therefore, it is also a source of anxiety. How will I create such a 'mask'?

6. So, are you ready to say what these influences are?

I can tell you which are my favourite books. They include Saramago's *All the Names*, Adam Thorpe's *Ulverton*, Lewis Grassic Gibbon's *A Scots Quair* and Ciaran Carson's *The Star Factory*. I'd love to do for Tyneside what Carson did for Belfast in this book, and perhaps I'll work up to it. It needs doing. But it needs to be elliptical, full of the unexpected, the awkward, the plainly barmy. For this reason, I also treasure Jack Common's autobiographical *Kiddar's Luck* (1951) and *The Ampersand* (1954), which are still the best books to have come from the area. 'I like a good argument,' Common said. I like books that argue with, wrestle with, our histories. And in this new century of American dream-turned-nightmare, I've recently gone back to Roth and Updike.

7. What do you do when you're not writing?

I live with my partner, Ruth, which keeps me happily busy. I also love seeing my daughters and granddaughters (all of them Welsh-speaking),

climbing mountains, playing the piano, listening to all kinds of music, especially Bach and Beethoven but also Buena Vista, Billie Holiday, Piazzola, etc. etc. I was once an absurdly fanatical supporter of Newcastle United and I'm afraid the virus is still in my system. If anything, exile magnifies irrational loyalties of this kind. But this is really a 'being' thing rather than a 'doing' thing.

8. And what are you working on at the moment?

I'm translating and reworking my novel *Pryfeta* ('Bugging') for Seren. It is full of insects and is a bit odd. Its ladybirds have drifted into *Bumping*. I've a volume of short stories in Welsh coming out in 2010: some are heavily autobiographical experiments in writing about Tyneside in my second language. And I've started work on my next English novel, which will feature an eighty-year-old football referee.