

On Writing While Crying

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I've just been to see *Mamma Mia: Here We Go Again!* I was not the only middle-aged gentleman with good hair accompanying his mother. And there were dozens of younger grannies with granddaughters under 10. Which is ace because it means the music will, natch, go on; it will always be part of something special that they shared. I wonder if it will mean as much to them as it did to me. I doubt it, but then they are young, those girls, and I have in all likelihood lived more days already than I will live in future.

Many reading this will know how deeply ABBA are engraved on my soul. Since I was six not a week has gone by without me playing, or singing, one of their tracks at the very least. (As it happens, that's an Aspie thing apparently; many of us sing even without realising it, which means if we've spent any time together you've doubtless had a few serenades. You're welcome.) So going to see this movie was treacherous territory; I cannot abide when ABBA are treated as a camp joke without reverence for the music, the singing, and the poetry. I felt the first movie flirted with this a bit, in ways the stage show didn't. Perhaps that's because Julie Walters and Pierce Brosnan were woefully miscast.

I needn't have worried. Both of them do much better in the sequel, chiefly because they sing less, and Amanda Seyfried holds up better too. Lily James - is it just me who thinks she and Emma Watson are secretly clones? - is lustrous and captivating as the young Donna, and the whole thing is gorgeously, wonderfully, effervescent with a few secret shots of pain. Note perfect then. Sophie and Sky are still having problems; Donna is no longer shuffling round this 'ere mortal coil; and a storm wrecks the party Sophie wants to throw to mark the official opening of the hotel she's done up in her mother's name. The ending is tremendous; saying too much would spoil it for those yet to go see it (why haven't you? Are you quite normal?), but there was not a dry eye in the house. Me? I started weeping when the mandolins usher you into *One of Us*, song number 2 in the set, and that was that.

Why are these songs so powerful? And what have they got to do with my long schlep to writerdom? I'm no musicologist so I can't get technical with the first question, but their visceral quality has been attested by millions for decades now. Their familiarity helps too; surely everyone knows that glissando opening to *Dancing Queen*, and knows it means utter joy is just nanoseconds away. (Frida cried too when she first heard it, so we're in good company: she was so moved that this thing of beauty was to be hers and Agnetha's to sing.) And of

course there's the lyrical force of so many of them, the acuity of observation, the reportage quality, the keying into the collective unconscious and pulling out experiences like regret, doggedness, celebration, wistfulness, courage.

The songs are so personal that I feel proud of them. It's ridiculous. I had nothing to do with their creation. But when they play, it feels like part of me is having a conversation, and part of me is being **acknowledged**. And I felt so *gratified* when, about 25 years ago, famous musicians of very different genres (rock, punk, classical) came out as huge ABBA fans and admirers. Bono, I'm looking at you. And you, Pete Townsend. It felt like years of teenage ridicule were being wiped away. Years of being the overweight spotty gay kid in the reject corner rendered slightly less awful.

I'm not bitter. I'll just say that I don't see Jesus Jones or any other temporarily-hip band having enough UK number one singles written in a language that wasn't their mother tongue to leave out of the first musical based on their work, and used in the sequel instead. Number Ones that collectively racked up 16 weeks at the top. (*Knowing Me, Knowing You*, *Fernando*, *The Name of the Game*, and *Super Trouper* since you ask). (5 weeks, 4 weeks, 4 weeks, and 3 weeks, for bonus points.)

For me though – bear with, this all gets sewn up shortly – there's something else. ABBA songs have been the cloak I wrap myself in when low or when happy or when puzzled for four decades and longer. Their words, melodies, cadences, iridescence are part of me. They are my vocabulary. Literally. Those of us on the spectrum often experience the world at one remove; we need a means to interpret it, to filter it in ways that make sense. These songs have been part of the distilling for me, both inwards and outwards. I use the lyrics to help me understand what people are going through, what I'm going through. It's impossible to think of a life without them. At the Shrine (ABBA The Museum for the uninitiated) there's a recording of the Benny, Björn, Agnetha and Frida as you leave, saying 'Thanks for all your generous love, and thanks for all the fun.' From *When All is Said and Done*, of course. It must get played hundreds or thousands of times a day. But it took me by surprise, and, Reader dear, all I can say is you missed your chance to see whether 6'3" of weepy ageing gayer is as undignified as it sounds.

It is.

But who cares?

So, back to the becoming-a-writer thing. Book number 2 was completed in a drug-induced 10 day mania. Sadly, I wasn't doing a Romantic thing with the drugs – it was crossover time for my old and new meds, and I got turbocharged but also very very VERY weepy. There are many tears shed in book 2, and I wept while writing them. I'm selling it as channelling my characters, darling, but there actually was a sense of connection there. I felt so sorry for my two boys having to go through all that dreck before things come good in the end. I knew they would; my poor boys didn't, and I kept wanting to apologise to them.

The experience made me realise in a fresh way just how deeply personal a process writing is. You have to know what your 'voice' is as a novelist, and you have to use it in a way that nobody else would, because that's what brings originality. And for me, of course, that means a drenching in ABBA, and Kylie, and Jane Austen, and Victoria Wood, and they get whirled around in the blender of my mind, and they come out as words on my keyboard.

It's not just the references. It's a way of seeing the world too. Quietly, everyday feminist – in MMHWGA you get this the whole time, through the adamantine friendship of Donna, Rosie, and Tanya, the fact that the male characters are secondary, the fact that the primary relationship of the movie isn't that between Sophie and Sky, but that between Sophie and Donna, the quiet competence of Sofia helping Donna give birth, and so on and so on. Treading a line between scorn for orthodoxy and respect for hard work. Unafraid to wear your heart on your sleeve. Giving two fingers to the stuffy. And gay as all get out.

Obvs.