

## On Writing While European

Alex Brianson

If Brexit goes according to schedule, in less than one month I will no longer be an EU citizen. We will crash out of the Union with no deal. There will be chaos, there will be economic cataclysm. There will be the first overt steps to making my country the Singapore-on-Thames so desired by the disaster capitalists, albeit without the emphasis on social housing and welfare. And I will no longer have the legal right, among other things, to live, love, study, and work in 27 other countries.

Just writing that sentence brought me to the edge of tears. And yes, I know, the PM's Deal may yet make it through Parliament, and there's an outside chance of a people's vote, but the upper hand is with the Europhobes of the ERG - all they have to do is sit tight for another 4 weeks, and then, by automatic operation of the law (h/t David Allen Green), out we go. Bye.

The days since 24 June 2016 have almost all been coloured by this reality; ever since that Goddess-forsaken day I have known this was coming. It has been agony to watch, made worse by the ham-fisted negotiation style – if such it can be called – of the British government, wrapped in deliberate lies, and deliberately-ignored crime: deliberately poached in hypocrisy, deliberately misrepresented by those supposed to know better. Even if the departure negotiations had been handled competently and honestly, this would still be a rupture; as it is, I feel flayed almost to the point of expiring.

Brexit is personal. Don't ever forget that. The EU-27 nationals living in the UK, and Brits living in the EU-27 can't. The Northern Irish can't. And I never will.

Nor will I ever forgive the liars who brought this catastrophe about, or the dilettante callow fools masquerading as a Tory government who visited it upon us, or the party-first brigades of the Labour Party whose partial, eleventh-hour 'opposition' to Brexit is far too little and far too late.

I find it hard to forgive those who voted for Brexit too. Oh, I know it's bad politics to blame them. They were misled. They were lied to. They were lions led by donkeys. They were using their votes to signal their alienation.

**BOLLOCKS.**

They were too ignorant to make a decision on something so significant. They were too lazy to find out the facts. And they were too stupid to realise it. For the usual mess of pottage, and an imaginary one at that, they were prepared to overthrow the mainstay of our country's prosperity and security.

But we mustn't blame the working class. They are paragons of virtue, the playthings of the capitalist class. And we mustn't blame the babyboomers – they were too used to their diet of filth from the Daily Heil to see how they were being played.

**BOLLOCKS.**

I went to a comprehensive school in a rough council estate. I can tell you, dear Reader, if you're from a different class, that working class people have their own agency and

can work things out just fine. And as for the babyboomers in the Shires, their ridiculous Tory blinkers and exceptionalism damn them forever; who else could believe that non-nationals in the UK are foreign immigrants, but Brits on the Costas are ex-pats who can talk, when interviewed in their sunny retirements, about the evils of ‘Brussels’ without the faintest clue that their lives in Spain are purveyed to them solely by the EU? As Danny Dyer put it: *twats!*

So, I have some anger to work out through all this. Have you guessed? It feels like part of me is being forcibly wrenched away. And I hate it. From the very depths of my soul, I loathe it.

Now, I admit I have more skin in this particular game than many. I used to be a Professor of EU Studies. I was one of those superfluous experts who was marginalised in the Referendum campaign. I had spent years of my life trying to explain how and why the EU matters to the public and to the elites. I could tell you loads of stories about how entitled, ignorant, privileged people told me to my face I understood the EU less than they did, because they had read that morning’s *Telegraph*. About the politicians who refused to understand when I explained things like the codecision procedure (you know, the bit that gives the European Parliament real legislative power). About the journalists, and even the fellow academics, who couldn’t or wouldn’t understand the role of the EU in the issues they were reporting or researching.

But more than that, I actually lived European integration. I studied French and German to ‘A’ level, and found out about the countries as well as the languages. I did French and Politics for my degree. I lived in France, and Belgium, and Ireland. I didn’t visit. I LIVED THERE. AND NOBODY HAD THE RIGHT TO STOP ME, OR SEND ME ‘HOME’ BECAUSE THEY FELT LIKE IT. With rights to health care, and welfare, and to a life free from discrimination.

Yes, I worked in the European Parliament too. Twice.

Greedy, right? You bet. Starters, main course, pud. Fucking apéritifs and digestifs too.

European Citizenship was my first citizenship. Before that, I was merely a Subject of Her Britannic Majesty, and I still am. As a Republican, that sticks in the craw. And now, I am about to lose my EU citizenship, that membership of a continental polity of half a billion souls, those rights and entitlements that made my life so much more pleasant and more capable of cure if things go south (Reader, did you know that EU citizenship gives you rights you can enforce against your national government?).

If I love the EU so much, why am I still in the UK? I wish, dear Reader, I could tell you I had decided to stay and fight, to oppose Brexit and if necessary campaign to re-join the EU as soon as possible. And I still may do that.

But the real reason is half a choice about a different subject, and half a recognition of a truth that is not just inconvenient but fucking eviscerating. The choice part is about caring for my ageing mum. The other bit is to do with my own health – as an EU citizen, I can move to, say, Sweden, and receive health care there on the same terms as Swedish nationals. I can work there without imposing extra costs and responsibilities on my employer. After Brexit, I’d need health insurance and an employer willing to pay extra for me to go through visas and so on – and although the latter part may be possible, I doubt that a nearly-fifty year old guy

with depression, chronic fatigue, and anxiety is seen as a good bet. And the health insurance wouldn't be cheap either.

Before Brexit, I wouldn't have had to choose. Now, I do. And my life is the poorer for it.

Now, Reader, this blog is supposed to be about how I'm transitioning from academia to fiction-writer, as you doubtless fear I have forgotten amidst this diatribe. Shove a pikelet in it, Martha Longhurst. I'm coming to that.

European integration fills both the novels I've finished (or, very nearly, in the case of novel 2). The first one is set in a fictionalised version of the place where dear friends live in Sweden. It's suffused with aspects of Swedishness, as well as gay culture, in a way that would have been impossible without my EU citizenship, and that of my friends, bringing us together in the first place and pulling me there dozens of times since then. And I drew on that because, well, everyone says you have to have your own 'voice' as a writer and for good or ill - let's call it good, Reader dear - part of what gives mine originality is my particular experience of being (a) European.

In novel 2, I ramp things up considerably. There's no Sweden in this one, loves, but there *is* France. There is *actual French*. And there is Brexit.

Again, I'm drawing on my lived experience here, following the divine Ms Austen's injunction that writers should write about that which they know, as a left-wing lower-middle Europhile (and yes, I know just the first two would be unusual enough...welcome to my life ☺). But I'm also, deliberately, using my fiction to help readers understand the impact on people's lives that Brexit will have, and that has been a great exercise as a novelist because it has taught me how to use, and write about, my academic expertise in a very different way. Academic prose is all about argument and evidence: tell, don't show (i.e. be explicit and leave no room for doubt about your intention.) Fiction is all about showing, not telling - leading the reader to understand a thing, or consider a thing, without actually telling them that straight out. It's been a hard thing for me to learn, but I'm getting there.

So don't worry. My novel doesn't explain codecision, or the Open Method of Coordination. It does not evaluate in great detail the need for a critical turn in integration theory. It doesn't even give a for-and-against about Brexit. Instead, my hero finds his job prospects curtailed because of it; his mother finds her Euroscepticism challenged by exposure to the reality of life for Brits in Brittany; and the French finally get to challenge the insularity of British pop culture and show a big chunk of the British population just how fabulous Mylène Farmer is.

This *is* fiction, remember.

And if you persist to the end of the novel, Reader dearest, upon its eventual publication (I'm being positive), you'll see how I pull that off.