

Before Brexit, Grenfell, Covid-19... Ali Smith on writing four novels in four years

'The novel form is ever-evolving, ever-communal, ever-revolutionary'

When she embarked on a project to write four contemporary novels in as many years, Ali Smith had no idea what was about to unfold. As the final book is published, she reflects
5 on an epic undertaking

Sat 1 Aug 2020 Guardian Ali Smith

10 Long long ago. In the days before the words "Brexit" and "Covid-19" existed. Back when "unprecedented" wasn't yet an everyday kind of word. I'm talking back, before the words "Windrush" and "Grenfell" took on terrible new meaning, before an MP was murdered outside the library of her constituency by a man shouting the words Britain and First, back when the word "humbug", traditionally a sign of its speaker's Scrooge-like spirit, hadn't yet been used in parliament to handbag female MPs pleading with a British prime minister to be less aggressive given the real threat they faced (and face)
15 every day. Back then, on a quiet winter dark afternoon in December 2015, I met my publisher, Simon Prosser, outside the British Library in London.

20 We were on our way to see some of Keats's handwriting. I'd had an idea for a series of books; the first one, which I was about to start, was going to be called Autumn, and we thought we'd visit Keats's poem about autumn in the original as a sort of talisman.

25 That was then. This is now. In honour of the new fractured concentration span of the covid era let's completely change the subject. How well are you sleeping at the moment? I'm asking because my own recent experience of lying awake in the middle of the night - I mean, the number of times I've seen the dawn come up this spring and summer - has reminded me of something I'd completely forgotten till recently, that I didn't sleep much as a child.

30 One reason was that I had much older sisters, we all shared a small bedroom, and I'd make myself stay awake to talk or listen to them when they came upstairs to bed hours later. Another more seasonal reason was the highland summer light, light like nowhere else in this country, which gives way to the dark between 11pm and midnight only to come right back up again not long after 1am.

35 But the other lockdown night, while I was lying wide awake in my bed, I remembered this, something sure to keep me awake, winter dark or summer light - a legend my sisters would tease me with, about a village long ago where one or two people have arrived back from the city with the plague.

40 One or two at first, my sister'd say, But then the plague spreads. That's what plagues do.

Which sister? They both liked to torture me with this story in their different styles. One was good at spooky noises and would tell the story with a singsong whooOOoo aaaAAaah at the end of each sentence. The other was more matter of fact as a storyteller, though she knew I was scared of the pictures of medieval torture I'd seen in the history
45 magazine she subscribed to and would, like all my older siblings, nonchalantly put one particular issue down in front of me, open at the picture of the man with his arms attached to one horse and his legs to another, with both horses being whipped to run in opposite directions, just to get them all laughing at my reaction.

50 But then more and more people in that plague village get sick, and people start to die. Also, the food is running out. So the villagers send a child to the outskirts of the next village to ask the people there if they'll be kind enough to bring any food they can spare and leave it at a safe distance for them.

55 Is the child they send OK though? Won't it give them all the plague at the other village too? I'd say.

That's not important in the story, she'd say; whichever sister was doing the telling would be keen to get to the punchline, the whole point, where the people of the next village
60 are delivering food to a crossroads outside the plague village every day, unloading the provisions and leaving them where they left yesterday's food, careful not to touch anything that might've been touched by a person with the plague, for several days. Until.

65 Yeah, I know, I know, I'd say.

Until one day they arrive with the day's food - and the food they left the day before is still there by the side of the road. Untouched. WhooooOOOooo. AaaaaaAAaah.

70 It was always the same ending, I'd scoff to myself even as I braced myself against it. In other words, every person in the plague village? Dead. (At least my sisters left it to my imagination, I mean lucky this bedtime story wasn't being told to me by my brothers, who, before I went to see Bambi at the cinema told me Bambi's mother dies, she's a skeleton, the whole film is full of skeletons.)

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Yeah but it's just a story, it's not real, I'd say.

Plague is historically true, one sister would say.

Yeah, but true like way back in history, I'd say.

History repeats itself, the other'd say. WhooooOooo.

80 There's me lying awake again in the sound of them both happily asleep, thinking wide awake thoughts like: were they all dead, the people? Or still alive but helpless? And would

that child's visit pass on the plague after all to the other place? And who would feed the villagers in that second village if it did? Would they then send another child to another village for food, and so on, in a fatal chain? And what about all the people in the city where the villagers went to get the plague in the first place? Who was looking after them?

At the end of my bed one night, a pale, transparent British child, a village child from the past. She was dressed in dusty flour sacks. Maybe she worked at a mill, a mill that had stopped working, the wheel going round in the water and nothing to grind because its people were unwell. She was sitting looking right back at me. That's what history is, the wheel, turning. But what's the point of the story. Is it the plague, or is it what happened to me? Or is it the way their telling you the story's let them sleep and kept you awake?

She's bright, that plague girl, I thought.

[I thought] whatever time brings they'll be gentle books. That was then

But back to that more recent past this essay's supposed to be about. British Library. December 2015.

Simon and I were making the talismanic visit to the archive to see the handwritten manuscript of Keats's poem, "To Autumn". This was because I'd had a wild idea, about which Simon and the whole of the Penguin and Hamish Hamilton teams were more than humouring me.

The idea had come about because in 2014 I'd handed in a novel way over the deadline. In practical terms, in production terms, this was asking a lot at short notice. It was a novel with a more complex form than usual, was to be issued in two separate editions that looked identical to the eye, but in one print run one half of the book would come first and in the other print run the other half would. I'd missed my deadline. But my publishers didn't miss theirs; just six weeks later I found myself holding two different finished copies of the book in my hands.

It more usually takes nine months, from manuscript to finished copy. Or a year and a half.

But if a book could be produced at a speed which let publishing be so fast on its feet and so lithe, then what would it be like to write a book set in recognisable real time and publish it as close to that time as possible? It made me think of Charles Dickens, publishing the latest pieces of *Oliver Twist* as he went along not knowing where the next instalment would take him.

I'd had a plan for decades, since I began writing anything at all, to try, at some point, to do four connected but separate books about the seasons. I suggested it now. I'd try to write one a year, deliver one a year. I'd start with *Autumn*, so we could end on the open

125 leaf, the long light days of summer. If we did it like this, under time conditions, a kind of
experiment sourced in cyclic time but moving forward through time simultaneously, it'd
surely become about not just how story works but also how form, and society, and
contemporary language itself - given that the novel form one way or another is always
about all of these things - move and progress over a given time.

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It felt liberating. It could easily go wrong. It might well. It was a real risk. But whatever
happened it'd be an interesting thing to try to do. Something would come of it. And the
novel form itself, I tend to think, is ever-evolving, ever-communal, ever-revolutionary,
and because of this, ever-hopeful to work with, whatever it formally does. Plus, the
135 form's named for its own newness, and for its relationship with the news, the latest
thing. That's why it's called the novel.

Let's give it a go. Whatever the time brings, they'll be gentle books, about, oh, you
know. Leaves. Bare branches. Frost. Buds. Leaves again.

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That was then.

I can't remember which of us, Simon or me, thought it'd be a good idea to go and visit
Keats's "Autumn" manuscript right at the start. It was a gesture to the process, a nod to
145 the roots of ever trying to write anything, and over the formation of the four books it
became a ritual; we kickstarted the books over the years by visiting handwritten
manuscripts by John Keats, William Shakespeare and Katherine Mansfield at the British
Library, and then finally at the V&A, by Dickens himself, David Copperfield.

150 The pages of Shakespeare manuscript, from *The Book of Sir Thomas More*, is the only
literary manuscript of his that's extant, and happens to be a brilliant and stirring speech
about the wrongs and errors of xenophobia, the blindness of being "a nation of such
barbarous temper" sold on "hideous violence" and "mountainish inhumanity".

155 Visiting Mansfield's last letter, written to her friend Ida Baker just before Mansfield died
and never posted, there in the archive with its addressed, unfranked envelope, paper as
thin and transparent as the skin on that imaginary plague child at the end of my bed,
was really interesting when it comes to human error and slippage. There are two
versions in the archive: the original, and a later typed-up version, and both differ not
160 just from each other but also from the official version in the final volume of Mansfield's
Collected Letters (2008); an example, in miniature, of how history loses stuff in plain
sight - and in plain sight just makes stuff up.

165 On the first page of David Copperfield, Dickens has inked so many crossings-out and illegibles that the pattern his corrections make almost forms the shape of a face emerging through the text.

170 But back on that first December afternoon, Rachel Foss, the head of contemporary archives and manuscripts, kindly took us to a room which, when it's locked, automatically sucks all the air out of itself so that if there's ever a fire at the library nothing stored in there will be damaged. She showed us the poem Keats had copied into his handwritten notebook in his elegant forward slope: "Where are the songs of spring? aye, where are they?" I'd never really thought I'd care so much, before, about the physical remains, the leavings of writers. But I was electrified by seeing his handwriting. 175 Uncanny presence and absence! Pale Keats, warm and come to vivid life. Then, as a kind of beneficent gift Rachel also opened the manuscript of Hyperion, with Keats's various changes of mind, his crossed-out words, his own process of correctings, then she took us into the stacks of the modern archive where she opened a box and showed us the first manuscript pages of Angela Carter's Wise Children in her lovely, clear and rounded hand.

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From Keats to Carter. It was quite an afternoon, and we went and sat in a little cafe outside the library and Simon took a roll of papers out of his bag and unfurled them on the table in front of me.

185 They were mock-ups he'd had done of the covers for four books called Autumn, Winter, Spring and Summer. Eh, no pressure! We'd talked about - and I'd thought it an unattainable, a dream - asking David Hockney if he might do the covers for these imaginary books. The same day as he was asked he faxed back four stunning images, the same country lane each painted in a different season. Uncanny presence and absence: 190 though the books didn't exist, they all of a sudden did.

That was then. It feels like a lifetime ago. It was less than five years ago.

195 This is now. They exist, those imaginary books, now. Summer's about to be published. Lockdown, with its uncanny presence/absence, fed into the book, and so did isolation, and the unexpected communality in us that this tough time has revealed, and the griefwork and transformation that the virus has visited on us all across the country, all across the world. I was lucky enough, as lockdown started, to be on the final trajectory of this piece of work I'd been doing for the last five years, lucky to be carried steadily 200 along for some of those weeks in a work rhythm, in what my friend Kate Atkinson calls the "splendid isolation" you're sort of in anyway when you're writing.

205 That's the kind of thing I'm supposed to have been writing this essay about. I'll write a series of books written tightly to deadline, about time, and about the times in which they're being written. What it felt like to finish that project. Well, the project's

finished, and nothing's over. The novel's a form of continuance. I've been thinking about it in the middle of the night, with the plague child still there at the end of my bed, flour-dusty, friendly, wiry, pale, uncompromising. Old young friend.

210 So what happens when you tell some of the stories of the time and space between the coining of the words "Brexit" and "Covid?"

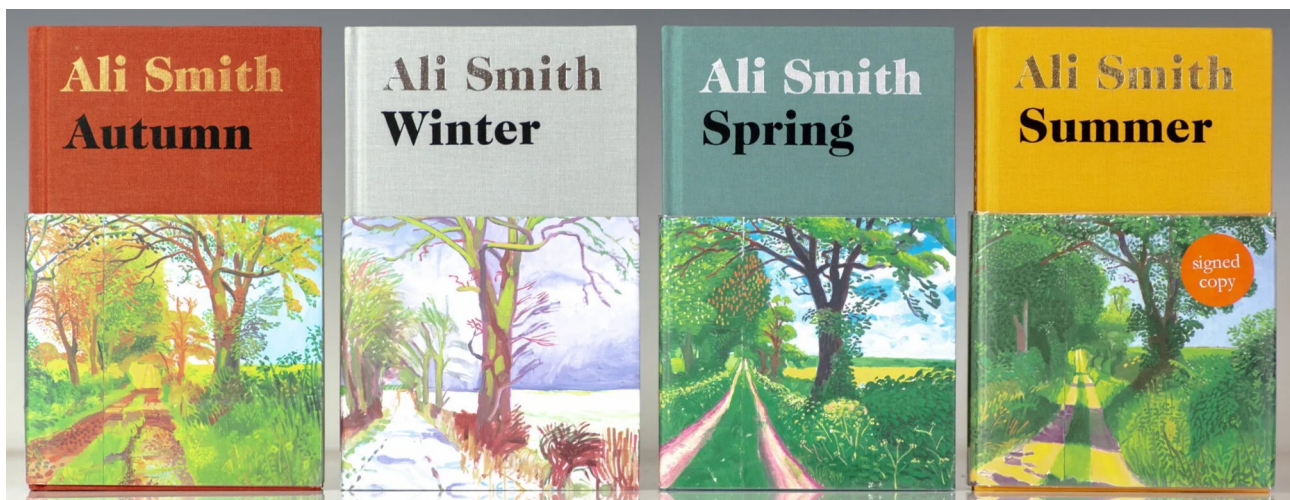
Time, art, thought, history, language; who gets to speak and who doesn't; people real and fictional and how their stories are and aren't told; division, loss; protest, activism, 215 resistance; generosity, the story of unexpected and extended family. Human coldness, human warmth, human work.

Leaves. Bare branches. Frost. Buds. Leaves again.



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'Leaves. Bare branches. Frost. Buds. Leaves again.' ... a track near East Kilham in Yorkshire, often painted by David Hockney. Photograph: Mark Buckle/Alamy



<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/aug/01/before-brexit-grenfell-covid-19-ali-smith-on-writing-four-novels-in-four-years>

225 In the article you can see the different covers better