

# Features & Comment



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Adelle Stripe on Andrea Dunbar.

## A GREAT YORKSHIRE WRITER

THIRTY YEARS ago, on the afternoon of December 20, 1990, the playwright Andrea Dunbar walked into her local, The Beacon, for her very last home. The Beacon, for the last time, she ordered half a lager and sat down in the tap room, where she complained of headaches and buzzing in her ears, a pain that was becoming unbearable. It was to be the last drink she would have there, and The Beacon, the source of her creative inspiration, was the place where her conscious life ended. Minutes later, she collapsed in the toilets and was rushed to hospital suffering from a brain haemorrhage and died. She was 39.

Dunbar was the author of three classic plays on working-class life during the Thatcher era. She wrote the screenplay for a successful film adaptation and, at the time of her death, was working on a final, unfinished script, *The Moneylenders*, which was based on a gang of unscrupulous debt collectors on the Butterworth estate, the setting for all of her work. Writing in green biro on notepads, Andrea would sit at home, watch *Max Headroom*, and chain smoke Sovereign Blacks while recalling conversations she overheard in The Beacon the previous night.

The pub, which has recently been demolished, was in the opening scene for *Rita, Sue and Bob Too*, a film based on Dunbar's play directed by Alan Clarke in 1987. Two years later, Yorkshire Television would return to the same spot, where Andrea was filmed drinking with regulars, as part of an interview with Kay Mellor for the Great North Show. This lost documentary reflects on the damage the film had on Andrea's life, her deep affection for the local community and the freedom she felt when writing for the stage. Almost penniless (she had only £45 to her name at the time

It's 30 years since the life of playwright Andrea Dunbar was cut tragically short. **Adelle Stripe, who wrote a novel about her, looks back at her life and the legacy she left behind.**

of her death), she had a job fixing speaker parts into cabs on a factory production line, and after a recent court case, was paying back the £5,400 in illegal benefits that she had claimed whilst receiving royalties at the rate of £3 a week. It was a grim development for one of Yorkshire's greatest writers. Born in East Bowling in 1950, Andrea Dunbar was the third of eight children. Her parents worked in the textile industry, but fell into economic hardship during her childhood, and were given accommodation on Butterworth, an estate with a reputation for housing large, problem families. The frequently violent, foul-mouthed environment that surrounded her formed the dramatic nucleus of her writing, and for three plays displayed an impressive ear for dialogue, an unbridled social realism and contained

a black northern wit that gave her writing a wild, ribald energy that is unsurpassed.

Her first foray into writing began at school, when a teacher encouraged her to record arguments and conversations between family and friends upon discovering her extraordinary gift for total recall. This formed the basis of her play *The Arbor* and became her Drama CSE assignment which she achieved an A for. Two years after leaving school, she worked on the French Comb at Bowling Mills, and started dating a taxi driver who drove her home after late shifts. Their relationship deteriorated after she gave birth to their daughter, and fleeing domestic violence, she was given sanctuary at a Women's Aid refuge in Kettleigh. It was here that she met two support workers who were impressed that this shy young woman (who was the first resident) had turned up with a carrier bag full of notes, which was a rarity. They passed on her script to Liane Aukin, who assisted her in developing *The Arbor*, before recommending her to the esteemed Royal Court Theatre, in London. Within a year, Andrea's work had been staged at the venue, where it won the Young Writer's Award in 1984. She was the youngest person in the theatre's history to have had their work performed at the venue. Her name was displayed across Sloane Square in lights, a sight she could never had predicted just a few years previously.

At one point she had intended to write about her friend Maureen Long, one of Peter Sutcliffe's surviving victims, who she drank with in The Beacon. But it was her second play, the semi-autobiographical *Rita, Sue and Bob Too*, that brought her success. The film adaptation, which was an amalgamation of her first two plays, was infamous for its scene of Bob's car

and its ceiling seats, or the party filmed in a Working Men's Club with Black Lace providing the eringeworthy soundtrack. Andrea considered it to be a dark comedy about everyday life that centred on the relationship between two teenage girls, and their affair with a married man, Bob.

When Alan Clarke started filming, Andrea was barred from the set. The film had a different ending to the play, a decision she was furious about, believing that the cinematic version had rewarded the appalling behaviour of the sleazy Bob, when in fact it should have focused on the powerful friendship between teenage bawlters Rita and Sue. Speaking to TV, she commented, "Once a director gets hold of it, you have no say. But then again, I've got to see it how I want to see it. And not as they do. I need that. My view, not their view." The film with its notorious billboards containing the tagline 'Thatcher's Britain with her knickers down' was instantly controversial and it continues to provoke debate to this day.

### Gone but not forgotten

ANDREA DUNBAR wrote three plays set in Butterworth, *The Arbor*, *Rita, Sue and Bob Too*, and *Shirley*. Her writing documented poverty, deprivation and female friendship set against the post-industrial backdrop of Bradford in the 1980s.

A blue plaque was placed on her family home on Brufferton Arbor to commemorate her literary achievements.

Clio Barnard's acclaimed docu-drama, *The Arbor*, explores the legacy of her work, and her family's conflicting memories through verbatim technique.

Freedom Studios' stage version of Adelle Stripe's novel *Black Teeth* and a *Brilliant Smile*, which was adapted by Lisa Holdsworth, was performed to sold-out audiences in Yorkshire last year.

Rita, Sue and Bob Too would not be made in 2020, or if it was, the storyline would be drastically altered.

In the years following the film's release, Andrea's increasingly turbulent life, one of poverty, the struggle of single motherhood, and the task of writing, took its toll. The pressure of fame, not knowing how to handle money, or even having the facilities to type her own scripts, eventually became so unbearable that walking away from writing was the only option after all the trouble it had brought her.

Through her work, council estate life was depicted in an uncompromising, hard-hitting style. Andrea's difficult truths were unpalatable for some, but the power and integrity of her writing remains intact. Perhaps she was Yorkshire's very own Shelagh Delaney, Jim Allen or Alan Sillitoe, yet there was little indication of her importance as a writer when I started researching her story. My novel, *Black Teeth* and a *Brilliant Smile*, was born out of a sense of frustration: no book had been written about her. I wanted to read one, so I wrote it myself.

In Bradford today, there is scant indication of its famous former resident, or public acknowledgment, aside from a painting in an underpass, or a blue plaque on the wall of her former house on Brufferton Arbor. It would be a fitting tribute to see her acknowledged alongside J.B. Priestley or the Brontës: her writing created some of the defining depictions of working-class life and for that reason alone she deserves her place on Bradford's Literary Wall of Fame.

Adelle Stripe is the author of *Black Teeth* and a *Brilliant Smile*, published by Fleet (£8.99).

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CLASSIC PLAYS: Main, Andrea Dunbar in Brufferton Arbor, Bradford; above, filming of *The Arbor* on the Butterworth estate in 2009. PICTURES: SHUTTERSTOCK/MIK MORA

## Heartwarming stories and triumphs to end a tricky year

THERE'S A plethora of heartwarming tales of triumph and mood-boosting escapism out there for readers to fill their stockings with after a challenging year. We take a look at some of the best ways to get the edge into this festive season.

1. *Naila's World* by Dean Nicholson. Dean Nicholson set off from Scotland to cycle around the world to experience a different life. Three months in, he came across a bedraggled, abandoned kitten who seemed determined to follow him. So he put her in a basket on the front of his bike, continued his journey and they became inseparable. Discover their tale of friendship and adventure in this book.

2. *Bond Cars: The Definitive History* by Jason Barlow. They may have put the brakes on releasing the new James Bond movie this year, but this book about his cars should be zooming into Christmas stockings. Written by

Hannah Stephenson shares her pick of uplifting books, the perfect mood-boosting reads to settle into over the festive period after a difficult year.

motoring journalist and broadcaster Jason Barlow. It's packed with anecdotes, facts, and exclusive assets – such as original call sheets, technical drawings and story-boards, and previously unpublished photography.

3. *Let's Do It: The Authorised Biography Of Victoria Wood* by Jasper Rees. For anyone who loved the late, great comedian, actress and writer, you won't find a more meticulously researched account of her life, written

with the approval and help of her family, closest friends including Julie Walters, Celia Imrie and Dawn French. Rees charts Wood's childhood and her slow climb to becoming one of the most famous comedians of all time.

4. *Play by Rankin*. Considered by many to be Britain's most successful fashion photographer, Rankin has photographed countless iconic musicians. The book collects nearly 200 of Rankin's favourite images of the most influential artists of the last three decades, from David Bowie and Elton John to Pharrell, the Spice Girls, Grimes, and Björk.

5. *My Life In Red And White* by Arsene Wenger. In this autobiography, the world-renowned football manager Arsene Wenger charts his life and career, wins and losses. He also recalls vivid tales of guiding Arsenal to unprecedented success.

6. *Cook, Eat, Repeat* by Nigella Lawson. She's already had us salivating over her recipes in her latest TV series, but now we can follow these deliciously indulgent food escapades in Nigella Lawson's accompanying book, making the most of her favourite ingredients and featuring chapters on family dinners, plus new ideas for Christmas.

7. *Remarkable People* by Dan Walker. The BBC's Breakfast and Football Focus presenter has compiled this ultimately uplifting collection of stories of remarkable people and random acts of kindness, which he has collected from around the world during the course of his career. They include a woman who opened an orphanage for children in a South African township and heroism in Camp Bastion.

8. *Unforgettable Journeys* (DK Eyewitness series). Think an epic bike ride along the ancient Silk Road, intertailing through Europe, driving Route 66, cruising around Antarctica,

or a train journey in Zambia. Organised by modes of transport, this book celebrates the world's best adventures from the big-bitters to off-the-beaten-path highlights.

9. *Songwriter* by Dolly Parton. This hefty look back at Dolly Parton's career spanning six decades features lyrics from more than 175 of her songs, all with short introductions which offer an insight into her inspiration and where she was in life when she wrote them.

10. *Between The Covers* by Jilly Cooper. Cooper's latest book is a collection of her most-loved journalism showcasing her trademark irreverence and caustic humour. Subjects include sex, socialising and survival, the stress of hosting dinner parties and the descent into middle age.

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GOOD SPIRITS: Dan Walker's book is an uplifting collection of stories of remarkable people.