

Abdulrazak Gurnah:

A Brief Reflection

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This year, Abdulrazak Gurnah received the Nobel Prize for Literature following over three decades publishing novels and short stories inspired by his exile from Zanzibar and Tanzania. He was my PhD supervisor at the University of Kent from 2001. I wrote “The Public Personage as Protagonist in the Novels of Anthony Burgess” under his guidance. I share here some brief reflections of that time.

Dr Gurnah’s office was downstairs in the School of English at the University of Kent. He never taught the MA in a classroom; we were always huddled into his tiny office, nine or ten of us, three or four rows deep. His module wasn’t one that I’d signed up for. I was in his class because the mid-twentieth-century literature one was dropped due to a lack of numbers. And this is how my intention to study a straight line from modernism through the twentieth century became disrupted. I ended up learning about colonial literature instead.

Once on this track of study, I decided to stay for the second MA module Abdulrazak was teaching that year, completing the journey through postcolonial writing.

I’m not sure whether he agreed with my assessment of *The English Patient* that it was rather dull when everything is revealed at the beginning and there is no reward in reading the book to the end, or my viewpoint on Joseph Conrad that irony travels poorly across time, making it impossible

to unquestionably uphold accusations of racism against the writer. But he listened and everyone discussed.

There was a group of students highly driven by postcolonial studies, who knew the line to take, while I thrashed about, trying to find my way. These were the same students who connected with Derrida, and Deleuze and Guattari, while I preferred the company of Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard. They knew the right things to say, I was out of my depth, and my pronunciations sounded funny, they sounded funny even when no one in the class knew the correct ones.

In the year that my PhD began (or perhaps it was the year after), Abdulrazak was promoted to the Head of English and gained the status of Professor Gurnah. From then on, he resided in an office on the top floor about four or five times the size of his previous one. I would arrive, sit down in the comfy chair, and talk, talk, talk.

Among the general advice he gave me on surviving the PhD, he told me not to worry too much about the teaching. Advice that was impossible to take given the need to teach drama from Shakespeare to Beckett, another area where I was out of my depth.

I was juggling all this time my first child's sleeping, eating and nappy changing routine, while working as a freelance copy-editor alongside sessional teaching to pay the bills. I was sleep-deprived and my brain was in a haywire state. Every meeting with Abdulrazak was a welcome break and a moment of calm.

I remember once there was a special seminar on Abdulrazak's work at Kent and this was the first time that I was able to ask him about the style of his writing, with its limited use of dialogue, in preference for narrative. It was a question he'd been asked before and his reply was simple: he found it easier to write in this way.

Everything was always relaxed with Abdulrazak, he didn't make time to be flustered or stressed about anything. His office was tidy, especially in comparison to others in the department and he never looked buried by his work.

I don't think he directly shared any thoughts about Anthony Burgess when I was writing my thesis, except perhaps that I shouldn't venerate the writer or presume he knew what he was talking about in any great depth. He did put me in contact with A. S. Byatt, after she'd received an honorary

ANTHONY LEVINGS

degree from Kent, and I asked her about her inclusion of Burgess as a character in her novel, *Babel Tower*. For the rest of the time, Abdulrazak acted as a sounding board.

If I'm honest, often his feedback would annoy me a little because it seemed off-key, but then I'd go away and realise that what he'd said opened entirely new avenues and a sense of clarity on the revisions I should make to my text.

The best thing about researching under the guidance of Abdulrazak was that he just let me get on with it. He knew I was putting the work in, and he didn't have an agenda to push me one way or another, it simply was what it was, and I went about the research in my own way.

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Anthony Levings is managing editor at Gylphi Limited, an independent arts and humanities publisher with a strong focus on the twentieth century and beyond. He received his doctorate from the University of Kent in 2007 on the subject of the public personage as protagonist in the novels of Anthony Burgess, and has published chapters in several essay collections on the writer, including *Anthony Burgess and Modernity* (ed. Alan Roughley, Manchester University Press, 2008) and *Anthony Burgess, Autobiographer* (ed. Graham Woodroffe, Presses de l'Université d'Angers, 2006).