EDICIONES COMPLUTENSE

Complutense Journal of English Studies
ISSN-e: 2386-3935

ESTUDIOS

Just as Surprised as Everybody Else: An Interview with Louise Welsh

María Jesús Sánchez García
Departamento de Filología Inglesa, Francesa y Alemana, Universidad de Oviedo

https://dx.doi.org/10.5209/cjes.95939 Recibido 5/9/2024 / Aceptado 26/6/2025

Abstract: Applauded crime fiction author Louise Welsh published *Plague Times*, a cross-genre trilogy set in the context of a flu-like pandemic, only a few years prior to the outbreak of COVID-19. The fictional nature of *Plague Times* feels particularly realistic and ominous when read after enduring an actual global pandemic, due to Welsh's thorough research on epidemics and her insight into human nature. This interview is structured around the convergence of fiction and reality, and the perspective it provides into human responses to fear. The subjects of solidarity—or lack thereof—and community are key as we approach the main characters, *strangers* who, following their own storyline in the first two instalments of the trilogy, finally team up in the last novel. Their journey is not only that of personal growth, but also geographical; there is a deliberate choice of locations contextualizing the development of both characters and story. This conversation takes place outdoors, on a sunny day in Louise Welsh's Glasgow neighbourhood community garden, a coincidental parallelism with the author's optimistic outlook that permeates an otherwise sombre topic.
Keywords: community; pandemics; Scottish literature; solidarity; stranger

ESP Tan Sorprendida Como el Resto del Mundo: Entrevista con Louise Welsh

Resumen: Tan solo unos pocos años antes de la aparición de la COVID-19, la aplaudida autora de novela negra Louise Welsh publica *Plague Times*, una trilogía contextualizada en una pandemia con síntomas similares a la gripe. La naturaleza ficticia de *Plague Times* se siente particularmente realista y funesta al ser leída tras haber sufrido una pandemia real, debido a la exhaustiva investigación de Welsh sobre epidemias y su ahondamiento en la naturaleza humana. Esta entrevista se articula en torno a la convergencia de ficción y realidad y a la perspectiva que ofrece sobre las reacciones humanas ante el miedo. Los temas de *solidaridad*, o ausencia de la misma, y *comunidad* son clave a la hora de abordar los personajes principales: *extraños* que, siguiendo sus propios viajes paralelos en las dos primeras obras, se unen en la última novela de la trilogía. Sus viajes no solamente son de crecimiento personal, sino que la elección de localizaciones geográficas contextualiza su propio desarrollo y el de la historia. Esta entrevista tiene lugar en un inusual día soleado en el jardín comunitario del vecindario de Glasgow de la autora, lo que supone un paralelismo con su visión optimista que permea una temática mucho más sombría.
Palabras clave: comunidad; extraño/a; literatura escocesa; pandemia; solidaridad

How to cite: Sánchez García, M. J. (2025). Just as Surprised as Everybody Else: An Interview with Louise Welsh, en *Complutense Journal of English Studies* 33, e95939. https://dx.doi.org/10.5209/cjes.95939

1. Introduction

Louise Welsh is renowned for her crime fiction, with novels like her award-winning debut work, *The Cutting Room* (2002), or its long-awaited sequel, *The Second Cut* (2022). Yet, as the author herself acknowledges in her biography section of the University of Glasgow webpage, where she is professor of Creative Writing, she "enjoy[s] exploring and crossing genres."[1] Her *Plague Times Trilogy*, published between 2014 and 2017,

[1] https://www.gla.ac.uk/schools/critical/staff/louisewelsh/#researchinterests

is a perfect example of this. Welsh offers readers an intersection between two non-canonical genres: thriller and science-fiction dystopia, with mystery unfolding against an apocalyptic backdrop as we move from the outbreak of a global pandemic known as "the sweats" toward its aftermath. The two first instalments of the trilogy—*A Lovely Way to Burn* and *Death Is a Welcome Guest*, published in 2014 and 2015 respectively—share a common setting both in terms of time and location: London at the outbreak of the pandemic, a big, exciting city full of possibilities, the epitome of globalisation and capitalism about to collapse. Similarly, a parallelism can be drawn between the main characters in each of those two novels, as Stevie Flint and Magnus MacFall can be considered *strangers,* neither of them conforming to stereotypical expectations and both stepping into a path of self-discovery and growth in unexpected circumstances. Each of them is dealing with their own particular issues and starting their own quests and, as everybody else, they are in desperate need of help and solidarity while the world they knew begins to collapse. The third book, *No Dominion* (2017), takes both characters to the Orkney archipelago and back south to Glasgow, where they deal with the 'new normal' seven years after the sweats swept the world. They witness, and participate of, the beginnings of new—or rather revised—political systems and societal organisation. If the first two books allow for the exploration of the health and prison systems, *No Dominion* confronts us with the idea of community and belonging.

In this interview, conducted on an unusually sunny day in Glasgow, we discussed, with the clarity and calmness provided by temporal distance, a much gloomier reality: our very own "plague times" and how they related to her works of fiction. The COVID-19 pandemic bears a striking resemblance to the flu-like illness that devastates the world in Welsh's novels. Our reflection on solidarity and community, as well as our glimpse into human nature, was set, then, on an apocalyptic yet somehow optimistic context. As we shared our own pandemic experiences and observations of lockdown in Scotland and Spain, we eased our way into these "topical and perennial" concepts, in Welsh's words, around which the interview is structured: solidarity networks that may or may not be woven in the face of disaster and the figure of *the stranger* embodied in the characters of Stevie and Magnus. Just as we feared the unknown during the coronavirus outbreak, so do the characters in Welsh's novels. A decision whether to "behave" and follow the rules was to be made, both in the real world and the novels, while feeling a shock to the core that showed us, and Welsh's characters, that "we just had to manage", as the author acknowledged during our conversation. The reality of whether empathy and union among peers would prevail over behind-the-curtain vigilante figures, as well as the question of whether those in charge of the population's survival truly have our best interest in mind, are key points in *Plague Times*. As pointed out by Engelbert Thaler, both science fiction and pandemic literature provide a window into an alternate reality that confronts readers with existential questions, not only about our emotions and how to navigate them, but about who we can trust (2022, 33-34). One should not forget that fantasy narrative is not just an escape from reality but also a way to make it more palatable, even more so when it is so disturbingly premonitory.

2. Interview

MJS: Are you aware of people reading more, or reading less of this type of fiction now, because of COVID? I've heard it both ways: more people turning to pandemic fiction, films or literature, but also other people not wanting to deal with it, having had enough living through it. And what do you think is the response of readers to this literature before and after coronavirus? For me, it completely changes the perspective.

LW: Yeah, I think I've heard it like you, some people reading a lot more. I went back and read Camus' *The Plague*. It hadn't been so long since I read it, but I thought I might get some more insight. And then if you think of it, *The Last of Us*, have you seen that amazing Netflix series? Oh, a massive hit, absolutely massive . . . it's got all those classic dystopian things going on. And also, people coming together and working together during the threat and some people exhibiting their worst behaviour as well. What I have noticed though is . . . there's a rise in optimistic literature and optimistic movies and in theatre. All the theatre companies and the opera companies, they were closed down and they all had to think "so what's our opening show and how will we welcome people back to the theatre?" I think for the most part they went for upbeat positive, something that people could just... not draw a line under what's past, because that's not possible, but to celebrate being together again. I think in performance there's a lot of that feeling. . . . [W]hether we're feeling it or not in our hearts, there's the need to access that feeling. And it makes me feel how wonderful the shows that were put on after WWI were, what theatres put on, what the popular songs were... I think there was a lot of really jolly jolly happy things.

MJS: We tend to move in cycles.

LW: Yeah, that knowledge that we're all mortal. But most of the time we forget it, don't we. Because if we didn't forget it, we wouldn't be, I don't know, going to the supermarket... all of those boring things that we have to do. And there are points when somebody we care for dies or something like this, or when there is a disaster of any kind; mortality comes a little bit closer. And then again, I think "what do people want? Do they want sad songs or happy, happy, happy because we have to think that life is worth living?"

MJS: Reading the *Plague Times* after COVID-19, after our very own dystopian moment, I remember jumping after certain passages because it felt as if it was written just now, not before. At certain times, it was like reading the news during lockdown, so real and accurate. In the acknowledgements section of *Death is a Welcome Guest*, you mention that the science community said that another

pandemic was on the cards; there was this research on the bubonic plague and we don't know *what*, *when* or *where* it was going to be, but *it was to be expected*. That was just five years before COVID. How did you feel when we had the outbreak?
LW: Just as surprised as everybody else! I think you can know something with your mind without really knowing it with your body or emotions. I had spoken to neurologists; I'd done some radio programmes on the bubonic plague, and I am interested in the black death... so that was the angle I was coming from. But, of course, there have been other plagues—think of HIV/AIDS, which is something, of course, that we are aware of; we are also really aware of that there was a will to look for something that would stop that. So yeah, I felt as surprised and as panicked as everybody else. One of the virologists I spoke to said it is a very silly virus that kills the host. And I found that really comforting. I said, "of course, it's really daft to kill the host." . . . . I was really aware that I was in a fortunate position, and I was really worried about my relatives, loved ones, our students... We were really worried about isolation and about the wider world. Sometimes it can become overwhelming to think about these things, and you have to really protect how you think about it. Perhaps that's another thing that fiction, the arts, does enable because we can think within these parameters and it's a made-up story. We might find connections within it, but we know that ultimately we can close the book and turn off the television, we can leave the theatre, the cinema, and the stories are closed and there is a big difference between that and the real world. I find the science very difficult. I didn't have any privileged knowledge, you know. My partner and I immediately followed what the scientists told us . . . . [T]here used to be this song when we were younger that we used to sing, "breaking the law every day," we'd say "how did you break the law today?" I never thought I'd be so obedient, but it seemed like the only thing that we could do. So when we were told we could travel five miles from our house I had the app to check the distance.

MJS: You were talking about your students. I remember feeling really bad about the first-year students. I was teaching in September 2020, not in lockdown anymore but lessons were remote. To think it's your first year, you're supposed to be making friends and having fun and enjoying these new experiences, but instead you're in your bedroom with your computer, not really having that connection.
LW: It's true. I had a regular class, a workshop class every Tuesday and it was like a little anchor for me. And this class had the most remarkable students and it was meant to be an in person class, they were all meant to travel from around... a really international class, people from North America, Colombia, Poland, the Falkland Islands... they were all different ages, all different genders and very different styles of writing, and they bonded like this—*crosses fingers.* And they had their own WhatsApp group. Given that people were going through this, in terms of having a class, having a group that they could go to... we were all given an opportunity to try and help each other. I think a lot of people went out of their way to help each other. And we learn something from it. Or we really don't.

MJS: That's precisely what I'm interested in: the concepts of community and solidarity. Is there hope? Are we going to bond over this? I'm going to quote here Naomi Silver[2]. In "The Politics of Sacrifice" she talks about community and focuses for a moment on the origin of the word. She mentions two possible etymological derivations. One of them seems to me quite neutral, meaning 'together as one;' but there's another one, that's supposedly more philologically accurate, that's not just 'together' but '*obligated* together.' Getting into the characters of Stevie and Magnus and their particular quests. They're coming in contact with other individuals. How do you feel about this obligatory sense given to the word *community*, especially if we take into account the new normal in the last book? We have this movement from apocalypse to post-apocalypse. And do you think community is something desirable because we need to bond, help? Or is it something that somehow may exclude, marginalise?[3]
LW: It's both, isn't it? I think I feel part of many communities. I'm part of my local community (my building, our community garden). . . . In our building we have to rub along, and we are lucky to have people who are very nice. In our community garden too. But you always have the opportunity to walk away, don't you? Even with family, there are some people who become estranged from their family. There's always the final sanction we can walk away from community. I think that's why finally I put Stevie and Magnus on an island. Because, actually, on an island you can't walk away even if somebody really annoys you, even if their politics is wrong; there may be a point when you have to feed them, or you have to pull them out of the ditch, or they have to pull you out of the ditch. So I guess that idea of being obliged to help someone even if you don't get on... I suppose that we talk a lot about... I don't know what phrase to use because they're all quite hackneyed... I think, gosh, what happens at the end of the war? Even at the end of this awful war that's going on now in Ukraine. What will happen at the end? People will probably sit around the table and will come to some sort of thing. And if only we could do that without the fighting, and the death, and the destruction and all the horrible things that go with it. I guess I'm *for* community because it's better than the alternative, which is just awful destruction.

---

2 "Community derives from the Latin root Word *communis* (common), which itself breaks down into two possible derivations identified in the OED. The first, *com* plus *munis* (what is indebted, bound, or obligated together), is thought to be more philologically accurate, while the second, *com* plus *unus* (what is together as one), carries the status of folk etymology. The story of our modern sacrificial community is the story of the gradual privileging of the second" (Silver 2001, 204).

3 Scott Lyall wonders in his preface to *Community in Scottish Literature*: "What is community? Is community a good thing, something to be aimed for? Or is it exclusionary, a means of dividing people and keeping out the unwanted?" (Lyall 2016, VII). Pandemic literature often puts the focus on this "sense of togetherness" versus individualism and surviving at the cost of others.

MJS: With regards to what you said, having them together in the end in Orkney, I would like to ask you about locations. London, Orkney, Glasgow. What made you choose those different places? I connect Orkney with this idea of community; Glasgow feels more like impending fascism. Why do we start in London? Is it because it's a capital city... a big city?

LW: It's big. It's really big. And I really wanted a world city, somewhere like London, Tokyo, New York... you know, somewhere where everything's happening; very international and exciting. Because when you think of all what human beings have created, we talk a lot about the negative points. And that's correct, we have this climate change which will probably destroy part of this just now. But also how fantastic it is, all of these amazing buildings, the history, the excitement of being in a city where you don't know who you are going to meet, you don't know what's going to happen, you can go anywhere . . . . I love all of that, really, and I guess London was the city that I could most easily access with my imagination. There's always that practical sense because the sense of place is really important in the kind of books that I write. Yes, I wanted to start with the magnificence of human civilisation even though it's dirty, violent, capitalistic and selfish, but the environment can take your breath away, really. And then with Orkney, I wanted to go to this island partly because of it being distinct; that seems like a practical thing. But also, within Scottish fiction often islands are this kind of utopian, bucolic place. And of course they are not: they have drug problems, they have poverty, they have the same problems that we have elsewhere. I also wanted someone who was out of their place. Stevie is a London girl and Magnus is in London, he is someone who has made his home there, but he's not completely... Everything isn't successful, he's not doing as well as he would hope. And I also wanted to think, in his book, about the prison system, I wanted to think about various modern institutions, the health service... We have big pharma, the prison system, what happens when things go wrong, with people who are incarcerated or people who are really low on the list, who are not priority at all. I wanted to think about religion as well, the idea of what do we turn towards and, also, the idea of the resurrection of political systems. Of course, in Orkney they try to have some sort of proto-democracy. And then we have feudalism. They pass through this idea of a dictator. . . . So I guess I was thinking about these different systems. Glasgow, of course, is my home—I've lived here since 1985—so I wanted to think about that journey from the south up to the north and back to the central belt of Scotland; not return to London but to come here. Something else I've been interested in, of course, is the North Atlantic slave trade, the big project on that in 2014, and the history of Scotland and the North Atlantic slave trade. People objected to that system, thought that it was inhumane, and many people worked long and hard to abolish it. Not just people of colour like Frederick Douglas. The previously enslaved people worked the hardest but, nevertheless, we can't help but suspect that the system stopped because it stopped working. Were it to work again, there are people who would like to resurrect that kind of thing. I guess I was thinking about all of that. All of my other obsessions.

MJS: You mention the prison system. It's where Magnus and Jeb meet. I read an interview with you in 2015[4] and you said that you wanted Magnus to be hooked up with someone he couldn't trust. Thinking about the concept of solidarity, is it a "I scratch your back, you scratch my back" kind of thing? What was behind you wanting to pair up those two characters that are so different?

LW: I did want people who weren't natural bed fellows. They wouldn't be friends in any other condition. And Jeb is not a nice person. I don't know if you have anything similar in Spain or if this is a British phenomenon: these policemen who pretended to be activists and were sponsored to get intelligence. It's been a big thing in the press and female activist groups. As part of their spying, they would try to get entrenched in a community of activists and they would do things, they'd be very active. They would always be able to drive and they'd often have a van. Because when you are an activist, often you're poorer because there's not a lot of money in it; you might be a student, you might be young... and these guys would be generally a bit older than the rest of them and they'd have some means of transport. They would always get a girlfriend and the girlfriend would think they were an activist and not actually a policeman. It would help them embed more. Sometimes these policemen would be married, they'd have children with their wives and then they would also go on to have children with these girls. There are some really good books written about this. A writer called Donna MacLean[5], she was with this man that she thought was a fantastic boyfriend and he was a policeman without her knowledge. They would extricate themselves very cruelly. The whole thing was very cruel. They would typically have a nervous breakdown and say "I have to leave, it's not you;" or a parent would die overseas so they had to go and then never come back. One of the women, I can't remember her name, was a very caring woman and a very good researcher. She thought "my boyfriend might commit suicide; I really have to find him." She just doggedly followed this. Things didn't add up and then she realised when the story broke. It was a very big ongoing story in Britain, and I was thinking about that with this character who's a policeman. I wrote this a while ago and I've not read it since, I don't go back and read it—but I have a feeling of unease because I wonder if I was too nice to him. I wonder if I made him too nice a guy because, actually, I think these guys were not nice people. The story has moved on since the point when I wrote that and I wonder if I would write it the same way now.

---

4 Welsh maintains this conversation with crime writer Russel D. McLean after the publication of *Death is a Welcome Guest*, in 2015. In it, it is stated that "Magnus is resolutely normal; a person with ambitions who might or might not achieve them. Jeb is tougher, more worldly, and a man of secrets."

5 Scottish writer and activist Donna McLean's story can be read in her memoir *Small Town Girl: Love, Lies and the Undercover Police*. For two years, McLean believed to be in a relationship with an Italian locksmith. However, he was in fact an undercover police officer posing as an activist.

MJS: I actually wanted to ask you about whether you have revisited your own novels after all this.
LW: Never. You never ever... I don't think many writers do. You want to move forward, and it wouldn't be enjoyment in the same way as when you're reading your friend's book because you read your own book and all you see is... "oh I should have written this differently," or "I repeated that word, why did no one tell me?"

MJS: Your perfectionist side comes out.

LW: You would only go back if you had to read a section, but I would never read the whole thing. I'd start to cry. *Laughs*

MJS: So back to the idea of communication that was introduced at the beginning of this interview. How do you see it playing out in the whole story? Taking into account all of these connections with the people the main characters encounter, how does solidarity intertwine with the concept of community? Is it playing a part in people helping each other because of the moral implications that we may attach to the word, as in "it's the right thing to do", or more in a not so altruistic sense, as in "I'm going to help you because I might need you later"?

LW: I think there's definitely a lot of that, isn't it. I guess where it doesn't come into play is with the children. But amongst the adults... When I imagined this proto-society in Orkney, I imagined . . . some people would be easy-going and community-minded; they would form a knitting circle or a group where people would look after each other. And some people who'd be just a little bit more... it's not even that they have to be selfish, but a little bit more individualistic. And that's ok, that's alright, as long as you are not being horrible to other people. The focus I imagined this community had was on the children and trying to think about the future. But also always feeling that they let the children down because of course they don't know anything. I was thinking about a First Nations person I met in Canada years and years ago, who's a poet. He said, "my ancestors only two generations ago, they could do all these things; they could make a house, they knew where to sleep overnight, they were able to get food, they could read the weather... and I can write some poems." He was really talking about all these skills and I know there are first Nations People that can still do all of that, but he couldn't. And I thought, "I don't know how to do anything—I can cook a meal if I have a stove and a supermarket." But when the electric is taken away and the gas goes off and when the supermarket closes...

MJS: What do we do?
LW: Yeah. Just completely and utterly useless. The idea of the children being angry because there was the Internet, but the adults have no idea how the Internet worked—It might as well have been magic. And if you don't know the right people with the right skills, how would you switch everything back on?

MJS: What is nowadays state-of-the-art will become antiques.
LW: Or is this the peak? This might actually be the peak. I guess we have AI and things coming which will be interesting to see... I might be very stupid but I'm not that worried about AI, I think it will just be something else.

MJS: We adapt, don't we.

LW: Yeah, I think we'll be alright. But maybe I'm wrong because I thought there wouldn't be a virus.
MJS: I was interested in talking a bit more about the children. They do play an important part in this, and we seem to be in this very adult-centric world where we don't care about them, they don't matter. In *A Lovely Way to Burn* they are the centre of everything but, at the same time, they are not. And then we have the new generation in *No Dominion*. I'd like to know more about the process of dealing with the children in the books.

LW: Yeah, it really came from the standpoint of what would happen to these children. We know we have had societies where there have been mass orphaning of children and people don't necessarily look after them in the way that we'd hope. But I want to tap that consciousness of what would happen with all of these children that were left. And this is a small society and there's not a lot of people so I thought, perhaps in a smaller place people would be more able to take these children to their home or try to do their best to care for them. Also, everybody is bereaved; it's very difficult to know how that trauma works. We have a shellshocked population who perhaps aren't as capable as they would like to be and yet they just do their best. What is the hope? Maybe they didn't think they would be looking after somebody else's child or that they would have a child at all. Magnus didn't believe he'd have a child. And then this boy becomes so precious to him because of who the boy is, but also because . . . [t]his boy fills that hole in his heart. And he just tries to do his best. And there's no other distractions—this is it, and he's just sort of inevitably failing as all parents of teenagers do. The best, most thoughtful child psychologist parent will always have moments of failure in the family because children have to push, that's their job. But this is a very dangerous world.

MJS: It is, indeed. I would also like to talk about the main characters themselves and what inspired you to create them. Regular people in very abnormal circumstances. I'm thinking about their jobs,

for example. Or the names—Stevie with the very ambiguous name and her surname as well, Flint; Magnus...
LW: (*laughs*) I wonder if it sounded a bit corny, I don't know. I liked the idea of starting in London, in the heart of commerce, capitalism... and all of this is going to fall apart, it's going to dismantle. Stevie, she has this ridiculous job in the TV sales place. My dad was a sales rep, not for a telly thing but he'd sell beer, wine, spirits... he was one of these guys with the car where you would have your territory and you'd go into the shops and say "ok how many do you want to buy... but I think you could buy more...". And I think he would have this good relationship with his customers and have fun. I always thought they would look forward to him coming in because it was a sociable day. So I guess I'm interested in that, in the art of selling, in what Stevie is selling, stuff that nobody needs. So if you work on market stalls—I did a little bit when I was younger—there's a thing they call swag. So swag is like what the burglar has in his sack. This swag wasn't stolen stuff, it was just whatever you can get from the Cash and Carry. I remember my friend's dad suddenly had all these windup toys; He'd never sold windup toys before but he saw them and he could buy them very cheap and he thought, "everybody is going to want to buy these windup toys." Nobody wanted to buy them. There's a lot of fun, a lot of living on your wits and a lot of judgement good or bad but also performance—I'm interested in performance. In the TV channel, Stevie has to sell, and she has to perform. She's good at it.
MJS: And she's witty.
LW: Yeah. . . . And she's good-looking. Most of the characters I write can't be good-looking. But she can be good-looking, and all of these things help her in the crisis. She's persuasive, she's clever, she's a performer, she's physically able – she goes to Pilates classes, she has physical endurance and she's good looking. She can use these attributes . . . . But also, she's in a bad situation and by the end of the book she's really changed: she's still physically able but even her body's changing, becoming sort of harder because of what's required of her. It's an endurance thing. I imagine her being strong but spare because she has to be able to do all these things. Poor Magnus is just a little bit softer, he's got a lot of positive attributes as well but he's maybe, I don't know, more trusting, more... I don't mean that she isn't vulnerable—she is vulnerable too, but I think she wouldn't let it be seen so much as Magnus would do.

MJS: I think she has more will-power.
LW: Yeah, yeah. It might be will-power. She has the will-power, and he is slightly softer.

MJS: About the names, Magnus means greatest. But even at the beginning, it's not his show, he's starting. He's not *the* greatest. And also Mac*Fall*, like "Scottish" apocalypse.
LW: They all are real names. Magnus of course is from Orkney and quite a lot of books that are set in Orkney have a Magnus character. I liked again the idea of performance and being a stand-up comic—again a difficult job, the stakes are really high, so you could be somebody that never makes it. You work and you work and you work . . . and you can be good but for some reason you don't get the break. Or you can get the break and suddenly you're at the O2 and there are thousands of people and you're rich and you have a lot of influence because people listen to what you say. Magnus is at that point, he's not young but he might still make it... but he might still *not* make it.

MJS: And we have this *thing* happening, cutting through, interrupting the course of all their lives.
LW: Yeah, the idea of things on hold. But I guess for the young people in our world... I remember being young and just thinking that everything was passing me by all the time, that there was a really good party going on somewhere, I didn't know where, but I wanted to get there. I felt really dull. I felt that quite deeply when I was younger, and that must have felt quite magnified. Even the kids who perhaps wouldn't feel that, they felt it.

MJS: In *No Dominion*, how did you come up with the names for the kids?
LW: Oh gosh... names are really difficult. . . . I can't have a standard name. Sometimes you write with the wrong name and it's just not working. You think about people's attributes and then you come back to change it. But in a way that's false. I don't have children and I think it must be really difficult to name a child because you would worry if you gave them the wrong name. I really understand some African countries where people name with the idea of the attribute they would want them to have. I really understand that, it's probably quite a good idea, although maybe it can be a weight, I don't know.

MJS: What about the titles? Is it something you had in mind before or an afterthought?
LW: I find the titles so difficult. Always. Every single book, the titles are very difficult. For the first one, *A Lovely Way to Burn*, I thought the Peggy Lee song really worked. The others I found really hard. *No Dominion* goes back to the Bible, but I still wasn't very sure about it.

MJS: What about *Death Is a Welcome Guest*? Is it to do with this decision of who has it better, those who stay or those who go?
LW: Yeah, and I thought of 'Dido's Lament'—the opera. There's a point where she sings something like death being welcome, being a welcome guest. I thought of the idea of the temptation to slip to the other side. We know that, unfortunately, during this pandemic suicide rates amongst elderly people went up. That horrible thing, that temptation. I guess Magnus and Stevie are both survivors and that's interesting in that it carries its own guilt as well. With Stevie I really thought about somebody who runs towards. . . . It [isn't] a decision, it [is] a response, an instinct. Most of us run away from danger but some people, they find their best self at this point.

MJS: So we're back to the beginning: what do we do in the face of disaster? What's the response that we're naturally going to have? For me, Stevie is the type of person who just powers through.
LW: Yes, and I would never imagine that under normal circumstances she's the type of person to go into politics. She wouldn't be thinking "I'll join the council meeting." It's not where her desires would lie. And yet, in this disaster she's suddenly somebody who's saying, "ok we need to do this, we need to do this, we need to do this." And so she's the leader of this small island.

MJS: In *No Dominion*, could we say that there is optimism?
LW: I think there almost *has to* be optimism. Definitely. Even the title in its own way is optimistic. But I guess the optimism lies in the decency of the people. Most people are decent and, if called upon, they'll do what they can to help. They might not know what they should be doing. The final scene... we don't know if Magnus survives or not, but he may survive. Either way, somehow, he's going home, so there's an optimism there.

MJS: I might be very pessimistic myself because, for me, he didn't.
LW: (*laughs*) I wanted to leave the door open... he might go home, but he might go to a *different* kind of home. It's difficult to kill a character. I wanted it to be "he might, he might not." But we *know* Stevie's made it, she was always going to. Also, he has done the main thing he wanted to do; he has made sure his son is safe. I wouldn't say it's a willing sacrifice but it's a sacrifice he would make.

MJS: It feels like a kind of closure for me. A closure for his quest. There're a lot of *may/may-nots*. This question of solidarity we are revolving around also involves the idea of may or may not be solidarity here.
LW: Also this strange sort of religious society they come up with. They have solidarity. They've got *their* solidarity but, oh dear. It can go in different directions, can't it? It's not an equal society, and I suppose my own urge is towards an equal society and that's what they try to make in Orkney. They don't have one person in charge; they don't have a feudal system; they don't have slave labour, or a "we should do something for God because God's in charge, God will sort it all out." They have it quite arduous and at times boring—we just have to get on with it and try to plant some stuff and try to learn to do some things.

MJS: "Arduous" is quite a postapocalyptic word. I guess it's supposed to be like that. And "boring"... I love that choice of words. I remember many people saying during COVID, "who would have thought the end of the world would be so boring?"
LW: I don't even have a television. We watched lots of Netflix, and films, and lots of comedy, things like that. We made elaborate meals and had long phone calls...

MJS: Regarding the end of the world. I was thinking of the word 'apocalypse.' I've always been keen on learning the origin of words. And apocalypse is 'to uncover, to reveal.' We've been discussing what's behind our human nature, our response: do we flee, do we fight, do we turn to others or against others, do we try to survive at the cost of everyone else...?
LW: What's the story we tell ourselves? The person with the garage full of toilet roll—probably still people with a lot of toilet roll—do they go to take the toilet roll out of the garage and go "ah, I wish I hadn't done that"? I had to really judge our Prime Minister. Judge him and the politicians that thought they could make money from this. But I can't judge the person who panicked and bought the toilet roll because that's a different kind of... bad feeling. Well, of course I did judge them then, because we're only human, but...

MJS: Could we say that this is the truth we are "uncovering" in this apocalyptic world, in the novels, during COVID: that we are only human?
LW: I guess, yeah. I think with these books I really was thinking about economics and inequity, and beginning with bad pharma... what would happen? Because we have the NHS here, and the NHS is a brilliant gift, and people fought really hard to make this, and now it's being dismantled and it's being taken apart for profit and it seems, despite all the protests, very hard to stop this wonderful thing. We go to the doctor and we don't have to pay because we paid already through our taxes . . . . You might have a terrible illness but you'll still have a roof over your head. That's being taken away and I think I was really thinking about that because, even then, we could see these clouds coming towards us . . . . Also, when you have masses of deaths, does one life matter? I think yes, it does. But if a murder happens in a war zone, do you investigate if you can? That kind of idea. High stakes, high stress, high jeopardy, which is really good fun to write, good fun to think about.

MJS: A reality that is made palatable by fiction.
LW: Yeah, exactly. And there's a great deal of cartoon. You sort of explore that subgenre, the sort of humour with an energy that makes it palatable to read or fun to read because it should be enjoyable. It's not a lecture, it's meant to be a story and within stories ideas that if someone was just to sit down and read this have fun and enjoy it and left themselves for a little while and didn't think about any of this, it's great.

MJS: It's worth it.
LW: Yeah. I guess from the very beginning it's always been a political act without being a manifesto. . . .

MJS: Very practical approach. Easing into it. Would you go back to writing this type of fiction?

LW: I can't see it. I can't see it now that this happened, now that we had this experience. I can't imagine going back and writing that world again . . . . I can't imagine going back to an apocalyptic thing. I've written a campus novel . . . and it's set in a central Scottish university[6] and I've set it the year before COVID because I was thinking about a book by an English writer, C.P. Snow, *The Masters*, set in a Cambridge college, just before the Second World War, and all the masters are squabbling and politicking, building big buildings and trying to get the money. Very much what happens now. But he wrote it after the war, so we, the readers, have the knowledge. They do mention fascism, communism; these things are on the horizon. The masters don't know what's going to happen but we readers do. It makes everything look small. The students, some of them will not be there because they'll die, they'll be soldiers. This is not quite the same but I was inspired by that. What were we doing before COVID came? And what are we doing after? This idea that we would come back better. But, actually, human beings are human beings.

3. Final Remarks

Louise Welsh's characteristically accessible and enjoyable prose carries into her conversational style regardless of the topic under discussion, and her observations of human nature intertwine with her research into pandemics as seamlessly as *Plague Times* blends thriller and science-fiction dystopia. The illness that devastates the world in these novels, which seems to predict and mirror the coronavirus outbreak of 2020, offers a speculative vision of the consequences of the pandemic had it escalated further. This already thought-provoking material provides post-COVID audiences with a new layer of critical reflection. Similarly, the protagonists' journeys of self-discovery invite readers to reflect on critical societal and political concerns while simultaneously exploring human emotions and their role in periods of crisis.

In both in Welsh's trilogy and in her reflection on the impact of COVID-19 on audiences, hope and optimism regarding the enduring nature of human behaviour emerges: empathy and solidarity prevail over selfishness and vigilantism. This optimism can be foreseen, as the author acknowledges, in the title of the trilogy's closing volume, which draws from the biblical quotation "death hath *no* more *dominion* over him" (Romans 6:9). Death, whether symbolised by Christ's cross or by a pandemic, will not defeat humanity.

However, Welsh also expresses a reluctance to revisit apocalyptic themes, which materialises in *To the Dogs* (2024), her most recent literary work, through which she returns to her signature genre of crime fiction, here combined with the campus novel. The narrative is deliberately set in a pre-pandemic Scottish city which, although never explicitly mentioned, is immediately identifiable as Glasgow—even before opening the book—a place that serves as a significant source of inspiration for the author and whose university, depicted on the cover of the novel, is where Welsh lectures in Creative Writing.

As this conversation with Louise Welsh drew to a close on a light-hearted note—stating that "it was a pleasure to discuss the end of the world"—it proved as engaging and insightful as her writing itself, a reminder that even apocalyptic themes can be explored with a curiosity and optimism that extend beyond the page and echoed in the bright spring day.

References

Lyall, Scott, ed. 2016. *Community in Modern Scottish Literature*. Leiden: Brill.
McLean, Donna. 2022. *Small Town Girl: Love, Lies and the Undercover Police*. 2022. London: Hodder Studio.
McLean, Russel D. 2015. "It Started with a Cough: Words with Louise Welsh". In *The Skinny, Independent Cultural Journalism.* June 2, 2015. https://www.theskinny.co.uk/books/features/louise-welsh-interview
Silver, Naomi E. "The Politics of Sacrifice." In *Politics of Community*, edited by Michael Strysick, 201-219. Colorado: The Davies Group, 2001.
Thaler, Engelbert. "Pandemic Literature: What It Is, Why It Should Be Taught and How". In *Taking Literature and Language Learning Online: New Perspectives on Teaching, Research and Technology*, edited by Sandra Stadler-Heer and Amos Paran, 29-43. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022.
Welsh, Louise. 2014. *A Lovely Way to Burn*. London: John Murray Publishers.
Welsh Louise. 2015. *Death Is a Welcome Guest*. London: John Murray Publishers.
Welsh, Louise. 2017. *No Dominion*. London: John Murray Publishers.
Welsh, Louise. 2024. *To the Dogs.* Edinburgh: Canongate.

[6] Louise Welsh's campus/crime fiction novel *To the Dogs* was published in 2024 by Canongate.