



Being Genre-Fluid

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THOUGH GENDER FLUIDITY is all the rage these days, genre fluidity is not. It's made perfectly clear to debut authors: second books should be in the same genre as the first. Publishers and agents sing the tune written by the marketing departments: 'More of the same, please'. Make your name a brand. Readers should see it and know what they're getting. Marketing departments should not be overtaxed by your reinvention. You are not David Bowie. You found your niche. Now milk it.

This is hard for those of us not keen to be pigeonholed. If I'm inspired to an idea, I want the freedom to pursue it. I wrote three novels, set in the present-day, that didn't get published. Then a novel set in the past that did. Does this mean I am now a 'historical novelist'? The chair of a panel at a literary festival labelled me this, and I balked. I wrote speculative fiction for my second novel as an act of rebellion. Some might say sabotage, since my action got me dropped from my big-name publisher. That is, I was given the choice to shelve the second novel and write something historical or go elsewhere. I went elsewhere. In a double rebellion, my third novel is the novel my first publishers wanted, being set in the past. But it was always my intention to bounce between eras and genres, like Iain Banks with and without his 'M'. Looking at Hilary Mantel's early career, she did the same. It is possible, with sheer bloody-mindedness, to carve your own niche.

The fact is, I have never stuck to a single genre, or even a single form. Even my historical novels are unlike: one was written in verse. I've written



nonfiction books and articles for general audiences. I write and publish academic essays, both in literary history and in the specialist area of computational stylistics. I've written plays, short stories, and three books of poetry.

What genre fluidity teaches you is flexibility: how to vary your voice, your tone, your style and your vocabulary to engage different audiences. On a practical day-to-day level I've also mastered, more or less, the art of task-switching: writing fiction in the morning, and nonfiction or academic writing in the afternoon. The left-right brain divide for creative or analytic tasks is oversimplistic – our brains don't actually work in halves unless we've had a catastrophic brain injury – but writing in different modes undoubtedly feels like it uses different mechanisms and neural pathways, and every time one switches genre or form, the appropriate ones must be cranked up into usefulness from cold.

Genre fluidity has yet to become advantageous, career-wise. I still see how it might, if I press on against the tide. Each different kind of writing has the potential to cross-fertilise the others, enriching fields of reference. Readers curious about my 'other books' sometimes cross over to try them. But in the end, I just have to do it. For the eternally curious, genre fluidity rocks.