WHY DOES THIS IMAGINARY STUFF FEEL FAMILIAR?

Autobiographical elements of Alasdair Gray's literature and artwork.

by Teya Zeinalabidin

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1 "Like any artist, all you can use is the material your life has provided you with."

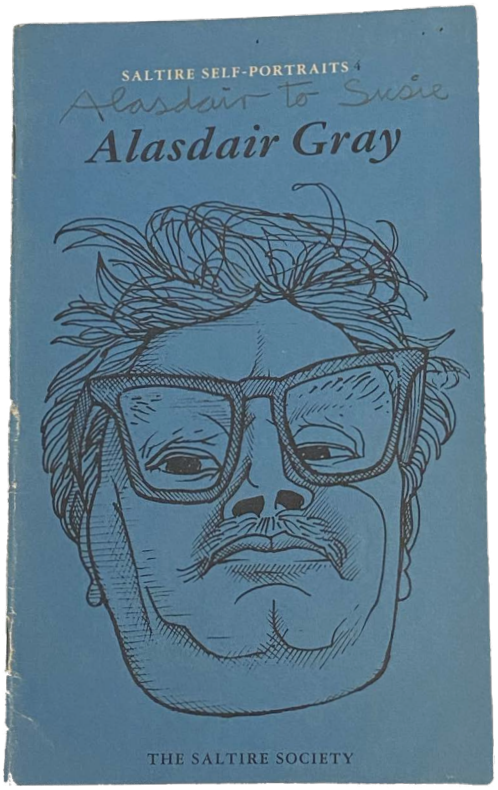
In the second chapter of 1982, Janine Mcleish asks himself "Why does this imaginary stuff seem familiar?" (23). Delving into Alasdair Gray's impressive oeuvre, this becomes a poignant question as common threads emerge between short stories, novels and visual art.

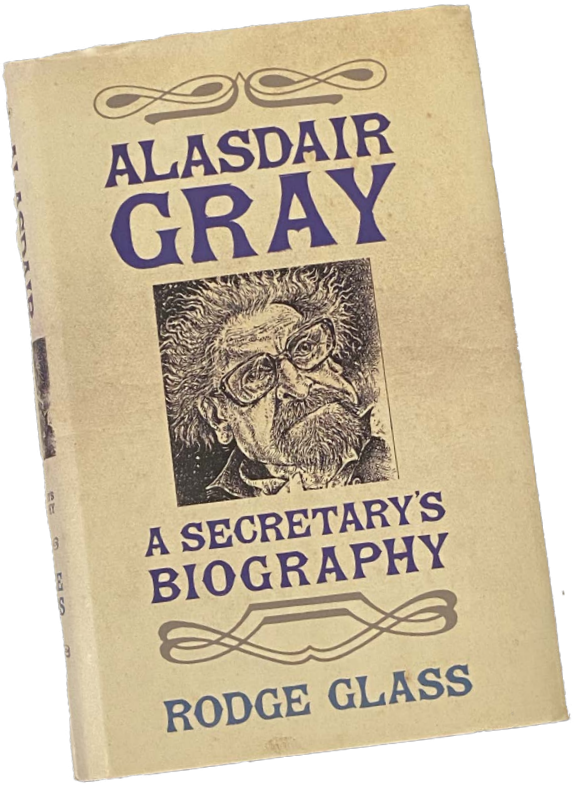
From these connections, one cannot help but think to themselves that, indeed, "this imaginary stuff seems familiar". Gray is an artist who consistently and firmly situated himself within his immediate locality- that is, primarily, in Glasgow. It is of no surprise, then, that the places and people he encountered daily throughout his life should be so tightly woven in with the fictitious worlds he imagines and the characters he peoples them with.

B&W picture of Glasgow, Scotland in 19th Century

The archive, alongside existing documentaries, interviews, The Saltire Self-Portrait, A Secretary's Biography by Rodge Glass and the tailpieces and epilogues found in most of his literature work to stitch together a history of the maker himself. These instances of spreading information on the artist, either from himself or those around him, allows the possibility to corroborate elements from the creative output as a true culmination of experience, time, memory, influence and inspiration which has taken a lot more than mere genius to arrive to, though this he had plenty of too. If a writer's collection of work is considered as a whole and common threads are revealed, those engaging may begin understanding key aspects of the artist.

Intertextuality can transform into an implicit form of biography, bringing about ideas on who the artist is and why they choose to explore the subjects they do.





This series will not simply make comparisons between reality and fiction but focus on divulging the complex influences that life had on art and vice versa.

2 Portrait of the Artist as an Old Man

It is a great critical question whether the artist should be considered separately from the art they produce. In the case of Alasdair Gray, maker of imagined objects, an informed observer/reader will find it difficult to carry out such separation, as Gray takes so much from himself and his history as inspiration.

His own childhood and family life, friendships and creative partnerships, education and career paths all have clear influences on the characters he invents and the figures he draws, whether that be in the form of likeness or by way of opposition, such as McLeish's character in 1982, Janine.

Whilst he laces through elements of his past and present into his work, there is, unsurprisingly, evidence of distortion and exaggeration for the sake of artistry.

A piece titled *'Portrait of the Artist as an Old Man (Seven Days)'*, 2004 created using pen, ink, acrylic, tipex and collage on paper- readily accessible materials typical to Gray's arsenal.

Gray illustrates himself drawing an image of himself, a stylistic choice that compliments the metafictional style he explores in his writing, particularly in Lanark: A Life in 4 Books and 1982, Janine.

Portrait of the Artist as an Old Man (Seven Days)', 2004

This piece depicts Gray's propensity to keep himself, as artist and architect of stories, firmly in the mind of those observing and is one of many self-portraits completed by the artist throughout his career.

3 Intentional auto/biography: Gray's Saltire Self Portrait and A Secretary's Biography.

The Saltire Self-Portraits, published by The Saltire Society founded in 1936, are inspired by the autobiographical essays of David Hume and Sir Walter Scott. These essays offered readers the chance to learn more on the 'essence of the man and his time' and so the group wished to promote 'men and woman who have made their mark in twentieth-century Scotland. Autobiographical essays in the series by well-known Scots include work by Hugh MacDiarmid, Naomi Mitchinson, Sydney Goodsir Smith and, of course, Alasdair Gray. Alasdair produced content specifically for the series, as well as including an interview he had taken part in for the BBC in August 1982, with questions conducted by Christopher Swan and Frank Delaney.

Other biographies of Gray include:

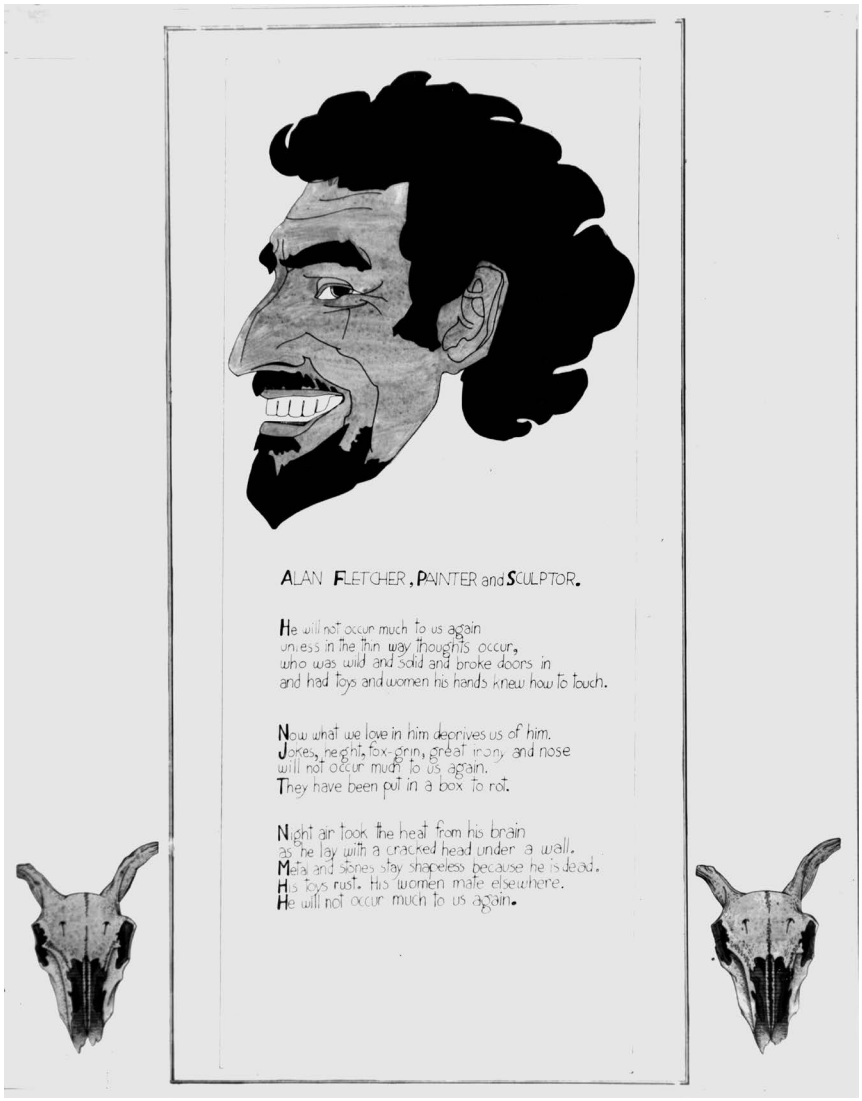
A Secretary's Biography: chronologically ordered and separated including a section of black and white photography, from 1934-2000s

Way up a 'Ky: The Christmas 1947 issue of Whitehill School Magazine includes a rare insight into Alasdair's early style and development. Diary excerpts from as early as 1950-'partly conventional diaries recording thoughts and feelings, and partly notebooks for writing out his fiction and poetry

4 Illness, Displacement, Grief.

When Gray is asked what his childhood was like in the tailpiece interview that accompanies Lanark, his response is 'apart from the attacks of asthma and eczema, mostly painless but frequently boring'. A great deal of Gray's childhood was gripped by the episodes he had with asthma and eczema, so it comes as no surprise to the reader to see the extent to which they are explored through his characters, namely in Lanark, 1982, Janine, and the short story titled "Job's Skin Game" in The End of Our Tethers.

Gray additionally novelises the grief over the loss of his mother and close friend, Alan Fletcher across 1982, Janine and Lanark. By fictionalising these very real aspects of his life, Gray perhaps sub/consciously explored the therapeutic dimensions of writing, drawing from personal memories and the emotions that attached themselves to them and pouring them into his writing.



'ALAN FLETCHER-PAINTER AND SCULPTOR', 1965

Alan Fletcher was a close companion and an inspiration for Alasdair before his premature death in 1958 at the age of 35.

In A Secretary's Biography, Rodge Glass reports how **'Alasdair believes Alan was a truly great artist and thought of him as a great friend'**
(Glass, 2012:58)

Gray's character McLeish in 1982 recounts his grief following the death of his college friend with the same namesake, Alan. Fletcher's likeness also appears on the cover of Lanark, immortalised forever in print. Fletcher's face crops up in Gray's drawing, (pictured on the right) and again, due to similarities, is arguably used on the cover of Lanark.

On his mother, little is known apart from details Gray shares in his Saltire Self-Portrait and in the second chapter of A Secretary's Biography titled "1946-59: Amy Gray, School and Art School". Gray shares of his mother-

'(She) was a good housewife who never grumbled, but I now know wanted more from life than it gave' (160).

In recognising the despondency in his mother, connections arise between Amy Gray and the mothers of the protagonists of 1982, Janine and Lanark, where Mcleish feels that his mother had 'too much energy and intelligence' and that 'cleaning a room and a kitchen, serving a husband and son and entertaining the neighbours did not use her up'.

Lanark's Thaw notices his body fighting against him for the first time when the family leaves home, and Glasgow altogether, for the duration of the war- a true reflection of the experiences of the Gray family. Thaw's ailments (and Gray's) are likely to have been exasperated by increased stress and big changes in environments, away from homely comforts. Similary, in "Jobs Skin Game", a short story in The Ends of Our Tethers, Job experiences a rapidly worsening skin condition that is evidently brough on by the premature death of his two sons. Glass included a short excerpt of a diary entry which Gray subsequently shares:

"Eczema breaks the skin surface of the cheeks...arms and backs of hands. I brood for half-hours or more'.

As a guest on the Glasgow Caledonian University's blog, 'Shades of Gray' by Douglas Erskine covers Alasdair and Alan's friendship, the 1959 exhibition of Alan's work organised by Gray and the importance of the effort Gray put into the promotion of his friends and colleagues in the art world.

Handmade sign by Alasdair Gray promoting a collection of work by him and his friends ©Richard Demarco, 1986

5 Jock McLeish/Duncan Thaw/ Lanark/Kelvin Walker

Many of Gray's narratives are centred on following the journey of a man of Scottish nationality as they navigate through the education system, professional workplaces and the socio-political sphere, often finding themselves in internally repressive and conflicted states as a result.

Encumbered in one way or another, in a familial sense, romantically, financially, in (lack of) nationhood etc., the stories traverse these impediments in a very intimate way. In his writing, Gray shows a rigorous devotion to the effect of Thatcherism in the 1980s, the State of English rule over Scottish people and the portrayal of a 'nuclear' middle-class Scottish family consisting of, oftentimes, dour parental figures who are skeptical of the arts but who are otherwise as generous to their children as their class allows them to be.

These tropes become signifiers, bounding the texts to time and place in their verbal idiosyncrasies. Gray masterfully imbues characters with such a complex blend of invention and reality, so much so that it becomes difficult for the reader to understand where to draw the line.

"Self Portrait as Bankrupt Tobacconist," 1977

After all, 'aren't all fictions forms of emotional autobiography', as Will Self states in the introduction of **1982, Janine.**

To what extent would putting McLeish's character against Gray's for correlative purposes be a beneficial light in which to view the text? In many ways, McLeish transforms into a mirrored image of Gray- an antithesis of himself primarily in his political views and social standings. He describes himself as-

'The instrument of a firm which installs instruments to protect the instruments of firms which produce meat, cloth, machines and whisky, instruments to feed, dress, move and stupefy us'.

Perhaps McLeish stands as a parallel universe alternative for what Gray's life may have looked like had he not pursued the role of the artist. The path Gray paves for Duncan Thaw, in his attendance of the Art School, is much closer to the author's lived experience. Where analogy does become interesting is in the exploration of sex, both in McLeish's real life and that of his twisted fantasies. Gray reveals how

'This particular story started discoursing of improper things: sex fantasies I had meant to die without letting anybody know what happens in this head sometimes...'.

In this sense, Gray unveils a very vulnerable part of him, using McLeish as a segway for these secrets to be sent out to the world and to essentially risk being picked apart.

The text draws on what it is to be Scottish- Scottishisms- and Britain as it exists separately from Scotland. It covers religion, love and the powerhouses of media that existed (and still do) in London- the eye of the storm.

Kelvin moves from Glaik to London in the hopes of flying up the rungs of the success ladder, a dream that does come true right before it is all ripped out from under him.

Animated, eccentric, zealous, characteristics that may be used to describe both Kelvin and his creator, the bildungsroman narrative is allegedly inspired by a visit to London that Gray paid as a struggling artist. No amount of travel moved Gray away from the true commitment he felt for making literature from and about Glasgow and any distance simply reinstated this belief; the thread tethering the soul to the city never wavered.

Image adapted from the cover of The Fall of Kelvin Walker

6 Glasgow-Gray as artist (and literary) city recorder. McCrimmon in A Night Off as the recording angel of Glasgow.

"Tom McGrath in his Office at the Third Eye Centre with Secretary Linda Haase and View through the Window behind of Scott Street, 1977,"

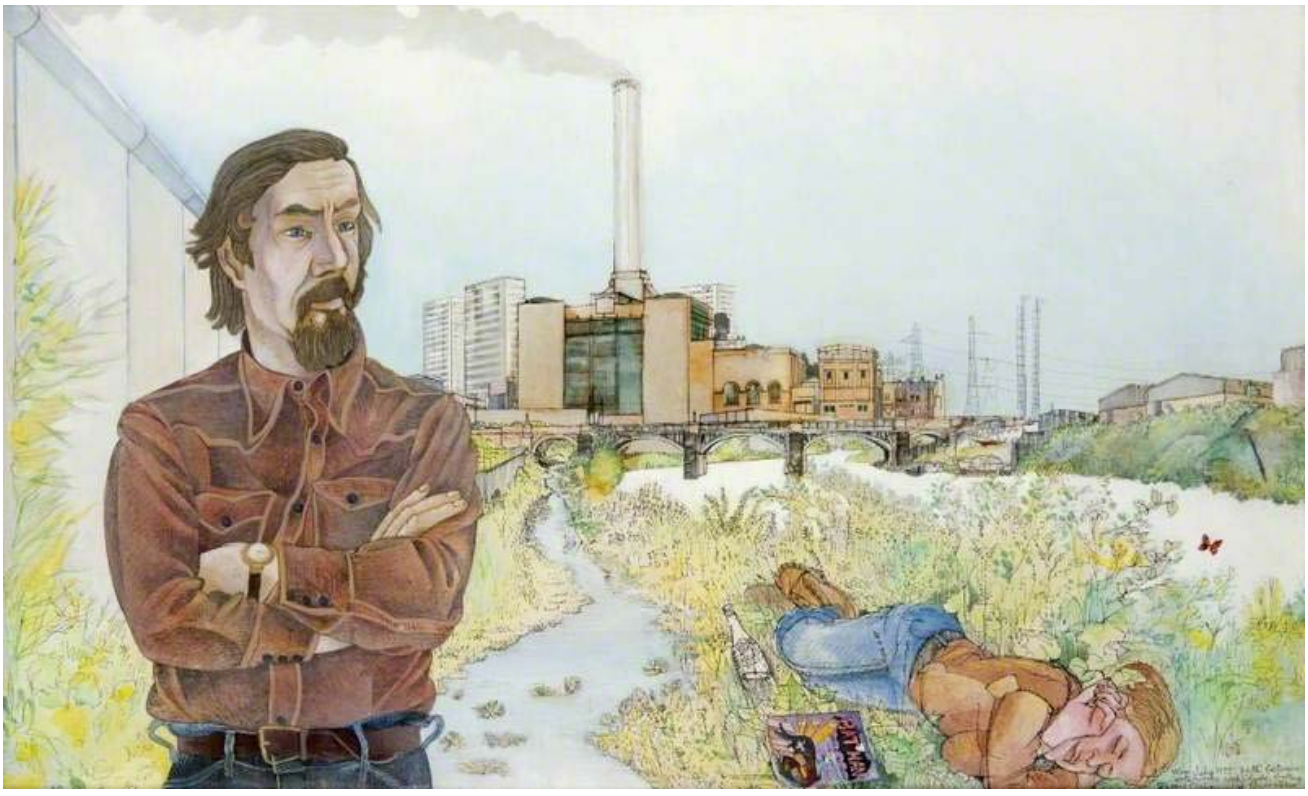
"Glasgow is a magnificent city," said McAlpin. "Why do we hardly ever notice that?" "Because nobody imagines living here.... think of Florence, Paris, London, New York. Nobody visiting them for the first time is a stranger because he's already visited them in paintings, novels, history books and films. But if a city hasn't been used by an artist not even the inhabitants live there imaginatively. "

In Lanark, Thaw and McAlpine, a fellow student in the Glasgow School of Art, discuss the general dismissiveness with which they feel Glasgow is regarded, even by the inhabitants themselves. The influence of literary cities

and the imprint they subsequently leave on their real counterparts is tantamount to the creation of identity and Gray's importance in shaping Glasgow in the 20th and 21st centuries is undisputed. In 1977, Alasdair Gray was contacted by Elspeth King who was the acting curator at the People's Palace. Alasdair was asked to step in as Glasgow's "artist recorder", a role created by King, at a time in Gray's life when he did not have a steady occupation.

He went on to produce around 33 paintings and drawings. These documented a mixture of private members of the general public, what Gray called 'local worthies' (primarily political figures and artists), interiors of workplaces and staff and streets and buildings with an imminent threat of demolition. The series worked to form a visual tapestry of Glasgow, as it existed then, to preserve it before modernisation gained more traction and swept it all away.

From these details, the inspiration for "A Night Off" and McCrimmon's character become increasingly apparent. In many ways, Gray was a recorder of Glasgow before



"Archie Hind on the Banks of the Clyde, Dalmarnock Power Station Behind, Alasdair Gray", 1977

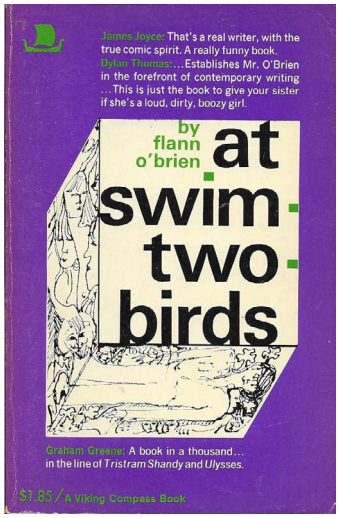
this experience and continued to do so afterwards, with literature as his medium. Lanark is the portrait of the Glasgow artist as a young man. The statement itself reveals two key points in the function of Lanark. Firstly, as an account of the story of the artist as a young man and, secondly, as an account of Glasgow and the role the city plays in the former.

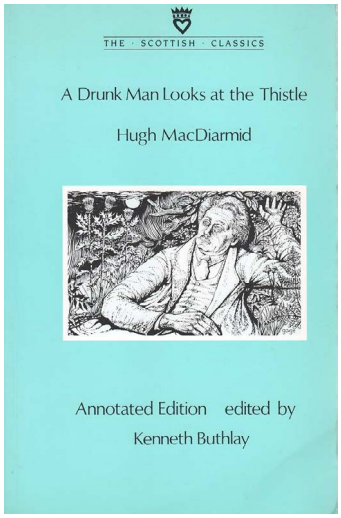
In an article he wrote for 'Worker's City', Alasdair reflects on his time as acting city recorder and the unfairness which he feels King, who commissioned him, was treated with. This text alone highlights the strong regard he had for his peers and the importance he placed on fighting for and protecting the creative constellation of Glasgow that he was so prominently and proudly a part of.

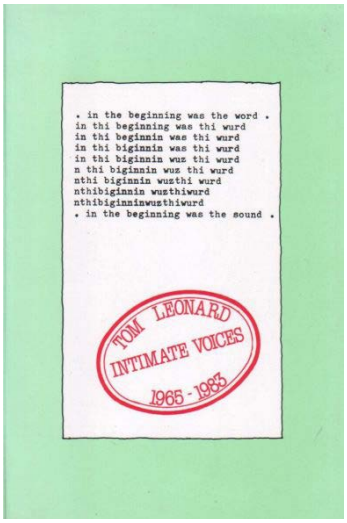
7 Epilogues

Unsurprisingly, Gray's use of epilogues resists indulging in the traditional definition of what that entails too much. In 1982, Janine. Gray uses the space of the epilogue as a declaration of plagiarisms, breaking down elements of McLeish's narrative, bit by bit, in order to disclose the real-life sources that influenced him.

Titles that shaped **1982, Janine**, include Hugh MacDiarmid's **A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle**, Brian O'Nolan/Flann O'Brien's At **Swim-Two-Birds**, Tom Leonard's poem **Four of the Belt** and Luis Buñuel's movie **Belle de Jour**. Gray subsequently shares that he 'consciously took information and ideas... from a correspondence with Tina Reid... anecdotes from conversations with Andrew Sykes, Jimmy Guy and Tom Lamb, also three original phrases of Glasgow invective from Jim Caldwell'.







Alasdair revels in the circularity of literature, in its self-referential nature. Whether drawing from others' work or day-to-day life, both avenues are certainly not unique to Alasdair Gray. What sets him apart is just how transparent he is in divulging details of who, when and where these influences come from. Alternatively, the epilogue in Lanark transpires as an entirely different structural feature, as it finds itself between Chapter 40 and 41, rather than the end. The epilogue introduces Lanark to his author, Gray himself, in a section of text that is too important to go at the end and 'contains critical notes which will save research scholars years of toil'; these are presented in the marginalia of the pages under the heading 'INDEX OF PLAGIARISMS' and, like Gray's epilogue in 1982, Janine, set out the precise source of influences and piracy.

Lastly, Gray's **'Epilogue to Edison's Tractatus'** is structurally over three times as long as the story itself. Working in harmony with the text, Gray writes a 'list of ingredients which went into "Edison's Tractatus"', detangling various elements of the text to corroborate their origins in his personal experiences.

The epilogue begins with Gray introducing Andrew Syke and sharing an anecdote from a trip they took to Ireland, as well as the memory of a woman on a train 'who was writing in

red ink on a block of graph paper' and whom Gray wanted to put into a story 'exactly as she appeared'. Gray also openly admits to mixing elements of his own personality into this character. He shares that he is 'too shy and pessimistic to start conversations with strangers' but that he often fantasised about sitting near an attractive one in such spaces.

8 Tailpiece

Tailpiece: How Lanark grew poses as the more conventional epilogue of Gray's magnum opus, in which extra details are revealed under a question-and-answer, interview format.

This is structured similarly to the many interviews Gray likes to attach as appendages to his texts, as seen in Mavis Belfrage and his Saltire Self- Portrait submission. In these Gray reflects on his own life and how details from this align with the lives explored in his stories. In this instance the interview is conducted by Tom Toremans with Gray and James Kelman with the title "An Interview with Alasdair Gray and James Kelman".

Gray sets out to disclose which details from Books 1 and 2 in Lanark were sheer inventions and which are taken directly from experience. Stories on his family home in Riddrie, distinct memories of books he read as a child, as well as his aversion to mathematics and Latin at school run in parallel to Thaw's experience. However, despite Gray stating that these two books are his most prolific instances of autobiographical writing, there are still undeniable discrepancies, such as Thaw's tumultuous relationship with his parents over his preference for creative studies.

‘If you read Lanark you will notice how much of Book 1… draws upon my childhood. It does not show how much help and sympathy my mum, dad and sister gave me…When I came to use the material of my childhood in the novel what I remember were our quarrels- they were more dramatic than the support I took for granted’.

In Gray’s own words, ‘remember if you cannot remember, invent”; in fictionalising his childhood, there is emphasis on certain feelings and aspects of experiences, favouring form and content over accuracy of the whole.

9 Portraits

Whilst Alasdair Gray achieved more recognition as a writer, his journey as a visual artist is equally significant and indispensable, and the merging of these disciplines has paved the way for his distinction. Gray originally studied at Glasgow School of Art from 1952-57, the same years he began writing out sections of Lanark- though ideas for this had been with him for many years before.

After graduating from GSA, Gray was employed as a scene painter and went on to produce several landmark murals around Glasgow. Most notably today, due to their still being accessible in Glasgow’s West End, are the Celestial Ceiling Mural at Òran Mór, imbued with biblical and stellar imagery, the Glasgow Hillhead station mural, entitled ‘All Kinds of Folk’ and the Ubiquitous Chip mural on Ashton Lane. The subway station mural blends the imaginary fierce dragons and greedy raptors with the very

real hard workers and independent women amongst a multitude of other characters.

Portraits from the 'Ubiquitous Chip' Arcadia Mural 1979–82, restored 1999-2000

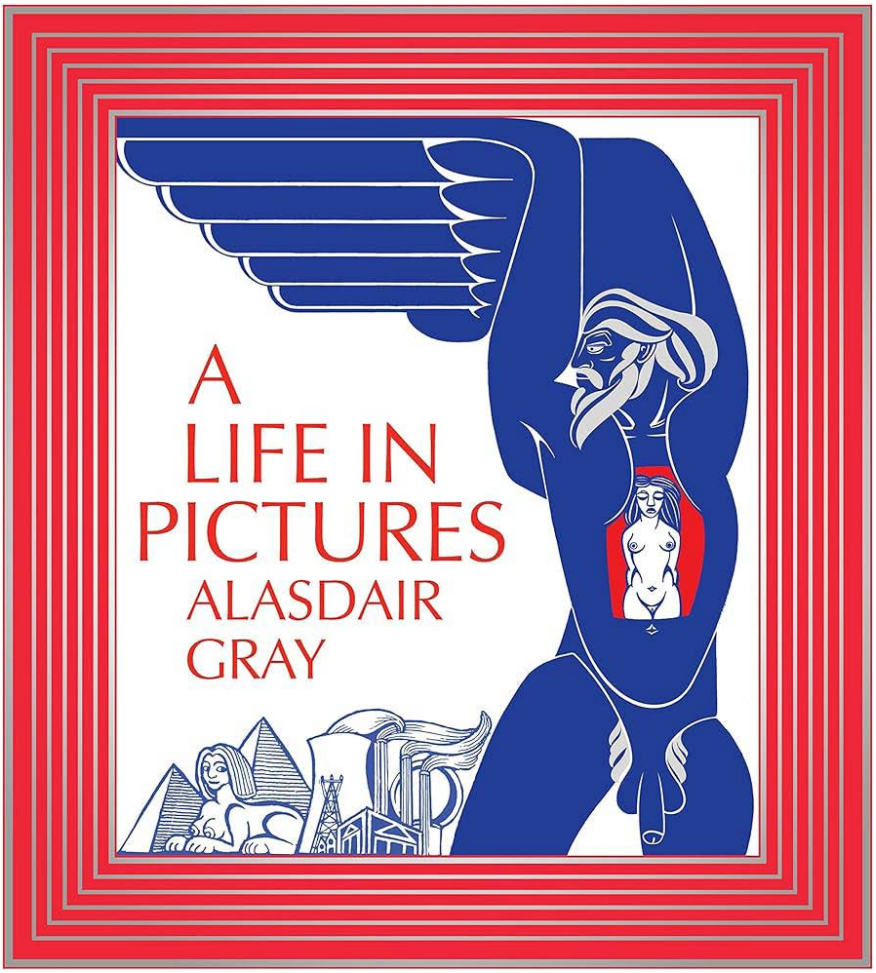
The Ubiquitous Chip mural comprises of two murals. 'Florid Jungle' was painted in 1976 whilst 'Arcadia', which wraps around the staircase and features staff across the years and local faces, was completed in 1981 with additions made around 2006. Gray completed many portraits of those he loved dearly and felt inspired by, many of which can be viewed at the archive, but a handful more which people hold dearly in their personal collections. For help on entries for the Book of Prefaces, Willy Maley, Professor of Renaissance studies at the University of Glasgow, was given payment by way of a portrait.

Willy Maley portrait, 1998

The exchange of ideas for personalised artistic ‘currency’ hits at the heart of the progressive mentality and healthy valuation of creativity that Gray so strongly upheld throughout his career.

Details on how Willy Maley’s portrait came about are documented in a blog post, where Maley shares how working on the Book was the ‘most eccentric and most interesting project’ he has been involved in and one where he feels he was ‘paid most handsomely for the least labour’.

10 A Life in Pictures



Alasdair Gray practiced the art of self-archiving very early on. With the publication of A Life in Pictures in 2010, readers were offered a truly vivifying experience between the book’s glossy pages, pressed between electric blue hardback richly engraved insilver with yet another of his illustration as though it were not enough to have the privilege of exploring all those contained within it.

The Gray family in Dunoon, circa 1945

Candour reverberates throughout, amongst textual recollections of mementos from childhood, family life and school competitions won for his writing float an expansion of sketches and paintings made as early as 1951, at the age of 17, coupled with photographs. These photographs taken by his father ‘with camera activated by a time-switcher on a tripod’ showcased Alexander Gray himself, the enigmatic Amy Gray and young Alasdair and Mora in various backdrops, at home and on weekend outings. Gray shares how, when very young, he would draw ‘every scene with a firm brown, horizontal line at the foot of the paper representing ground and a blue horizontal line representing the sky’, a memory that harks back to the opening line of Book 1 in Lanark.

Picture this: ‘Duncan Thaw drew a blue line along the top of a sheet of paper and a brown line along the bottom. He drew a giant with a captured princess running along the brown line, and since he couldn’t draw the princess lovely enough he showed the giant holding a sack’.

The writer gives pieces of himself up for his artistry, shaping and puzzling his characters with these pieces whilst they, in turn, replenish him. Images from illustrated books Gray had happily lost himself in, from Rudyard Kipling to Hugh Lofting to an illustration by Aubrey Beardsley used on the title page of an unpublished book from 1986 set out the blueprints of his influences.

Just So Stories by Rudyard Kipling, illustrations by the author, 1902

In very Gray fashion, the content that comprised his 'autopictography' also drew attention to and celebrated that of others, with no fear of ever undermining himself. He was and always will be an amalgamation of voices and ideas coming together.

An interview conducted and written by Adeline Ama with Alasdair Gray, "Autopictography: A Study in Gray" for The Skinny Issue in 2010 (pg 12-13) goes into more detail about Gray's life in general as well as A Life In Pictures.

Teya Zeinalabidin graduated from the University of Glasgow in the summer of 2020 with a degree in English literature. She first encountered Alasdair Gray when she saw a facsimile of one of his murals exhibited in The Lighthouse in Glasgow. After that, her imagination was captured by Poor Things , and she became captivated by all things Gray. During her fourth year, she completed her dissertation on Gray's literature. This research resulted in a thesis entitled 'This Imaginary Stuff Seems Familiar': The autobiographical dimensions of Alasdair Gray's fiction. After graduating she volunteered at the Alasdair Gray Archive, and contributed to Poor Things: A Novel Guide.

Formatted by Teoh Jennings