

# Alasdair &

# *Other Stuff*

‘A Sunny Day in Miniature’:  
Alasdair Gray’s Cigarette Cards

with an introduction by Sorcha Dallas



# Alasdair Gray: Process, Cognition & Neurodiversity

Written by Sorcha Dallas, 2025

With thanks to Chloe Duncan from Hope for Autism

The connection between Alasdair Gray and neurodiversity is largely interpretive rather than declarative. Gray did not write about neurodiversity in the contemporary clinical or activist sense, nor did he publicly identify as neurodivergent. Yet his work - both in its characters and in its methods - repeatedly centres forms of thinking, learning, and creating that sit outside dominant “neurotypical” norms. For many readers, particularly autistic and ADHD readers, Gray’s work feels uncannily aligned with neurodiversity not because it represents diagnoses, but because it is structured around minds in friction with systems. This alignment becomes clearest when Gray’s process is considered alongside his fiction. His methods of learning, making, revising, and world-building resemble what might now be described as neurodivergent cognitive strategies: iterative, parallel, non-linear, and resistant to rigid hierarchies of value or form.

## *Learning as Making: Anti Mastery Thinking*

Gray was openly hostile to the idea that one must first master knowledge and then produce “proper” work. His guiding assumption was simpler and more radical: making is thinking. Learning does not precede creation; it emerges from it. This stance closely resembles neurodivergent learning styles, particularly autistic and ADHD ones, in which abstract instruction or delayed application is often ineffective. Instead, cognition is embodied, iterative, and process-driven. Understanding arrives late, sideways, and through repetition rather than linear accumulation. This philosophy explains why Gray constantly remade his own material. Motifs recur obsessively. Stories rewrite themselves inside other stories. Texts are revised publicly, sometimes contradicting earlier versions. These are not signs of indecision or lack of craft. Gray was not polishing toward an ideal form; he was thinking out loud in material. Revision was not failure but continuation.

## *Influence as Synthesis, Not Derivation*

Gray also rejected the modern anxiety about influence. He made no effort to conceal his sources, which range from Blake, Bunyan, Dante, and Bosch to Scottish folk art, political pamphlets, and municipal signage. Rather than originality through isolation, Gray practiced originality through recombination. This approach aligns with pattern oriented processing, often associated with both autistic and ADHD creative modes. Existing systems are absorbed deeply, then reorganized into new configurations. The result is work that feels dense rather than sleek, visibly constructed rather than seamless. One sees the joins and Gray wants you to see them. His openness about influence is inseparable from his political commitments. To deny lineage is, for Gray, to deny collective thought. Creativity is not the product of a solitary genius but of minds in conversation across time, media, and social class.

## *Parallel Making and Distributed Focus*

Gray’s career defies the expectation of singular focus. Over decades, he worked simultaneously on novels, plays, poems, murals, illustrations, and political essays. This was not distraction; it was distributed focus. When one project stalled, another unlocked something. Ideas migrated laterally across forms. Momentum was maintained by switching channels rather than forcing continuity. This mode of working is strongly ADHD-compatible, but it also fits autistic “special interest ecosystems,” in which multiple expressions orbit a single core concern. Rather than disciplining himself into linear productivity, Gray structured his life to accommodate cognitive parallelism. The ambition of the work was not reduced by this approach; it was enabled by it.

## World-Building as Cognitive Containment

Gray's world-building is often misunderstood as escapism or grandiosity. In fact, it functions as cognitive containment. His invented worlds repeat symbols obsessively, embed footnotes and diagrams, contradict themselves, and spill across media. Painting does not stop at the canvas; text does not stop at the page. Murals are crucial here. They extend Gray's thinking into public space, refusing the boundary between private art and shared environment. This is not about scale for its own sake. It is about refusing to fragment thought across artificial disciplinary or institutional borders. In this sense, Gray's worlds are not fantasies but working models—spaces large enough to hold complexity without forcing premature coherence.

## Unbounded Painting and Non-Hierarchical Attention

Gray's visual work reinforces this cognitive style. He treats margins, frames, title pages, covers, and walls as active zones of meaning. There is no strict hierarchy between foreground and background, main text and aside, art and commentary. This reflects a mind that does not naturally prioritize according to conventional aesthetic rules. Everything is potentially meaningful. The result is work that feels crowded, sometimes overwhelming, but unmistakably alive. Attention is allowed to roam rather than being tightly managed.

## Remaking Without Despair

Perhaps the most quietly radical aspect of Gray's practice is his lack of despair about remaking. Failure, contradiction, and revision are not framed as inadequacies. They are expected conditions of working in an unfinished world with an unfinished self. Value is not placed on final mastery, and identity is not tied to a single successful object. This stance is deeply compatible with neurodivergent resilience, where progress is often non-linear and survival depends on iterability rather than closure. Remaking is neutral, not tragic.

## Neurodivergent Characters and System Mismatch

These process-level commitments are mirrored in Gray's characters. He consistently centres outsider minds: socially awkward, hyper-focused, those with broader emotional expression, and uncomfortable with authority and social scripts. Characters such as Lanark, Duncan Thaw, and Bella Baxter disregard normative conditioning and expose how arbitrary and oppressive "normal" can be. Gray's fragmented, non-linear narration - footnotes, multiple realities, broken timelines - resonates strongly with readers who experience thought as layered, recursive, or associative. His suspicion of medical and institutional authority, particularly in Lanark, aligns with neurodiversity critiques of pathologization and forced normalization. Crucially, his characters are rarely "fixed." They may suffer or remain misaligned with society, but the text does not insist that becoming socially homogenous is the price of meaning.

Autism-coded traits in Gray's work include social misattunement, sensory intensity, rigid ethics, and solitude as default rather than tragedy. ADHD-coded traits include cognitive restlessness, hyperfocus (especially creative), executive functioning support needs and emotional fluctuations. Often these overlap, producing characters who feel distinctly AuDHD-coded: craving structure yet chafing under it, intensely focused yet distractible, independent yet aching for connection.

## A Mind Built One Way, a World Built Another

Gray does not write quirks; he writes systemic misalignment—a mind structured in one way, set against a world structured in another. This tension lies at the heart of neurodiversity, a concept formally named in the 1990s though its ideas long predate the term. His work endures not because it offers resolution, but because it remains alive: iterative, parallel, and deeply systemic. To read Gray is not to arrive at closure, but to step inside a mind still in motion, still thinking.

# 'A Sunny Day in Miniature': Alasdair Gray's Cigarette Cards

Written by David Lothian, 2025

At the time of writing, David Lothian was a fourth-year doctoral researcher at the University of Glasgow and a Scottish Graduate School for Arts & Humanities (SGSAH) funded intern at The Alasdair Gray Archive (AGA). David's research engages with discourses of autistic physicality, embodied neurodivergence, and the nature of autistic spectatorship.

With an academic background in Disability Studies, David found that the chance to get to grips with the physical aspects of researching objects, documents, books and artworks helped to broaden his understanding of how we engage with sources and both develop and support ideas. At AGA, David enjoyed working closely with both the physical aspects of Alasdair's legacy and engaging in new forms of research on his work, the culmination of which was a workshop, 'Exploring Our Collection Through a Neurodivergent Lens' (11.02.25), and learning resource, 'A Walk Through AGA With David (2025)'. He was delighted by the unexpected opportunities the Archive provided: including the chance to help procure items, such as a collection of vintage cigarette cards to replicate those owned by Alasdair for the collection.

The following text is a reflection on the process and methodology behind the acquisition of the cigarette cards as well as the broader conceptual framework of 'material meaning-making' - a neurodivergent approach inspired by Alasdair Gray's collecting practices and its resonance with David's own lived experience.

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*"Of all my long-running identifications with the habits and proclivities of Alasdair Gray, few have touched me quite as deeply as the impulse to collect..."*

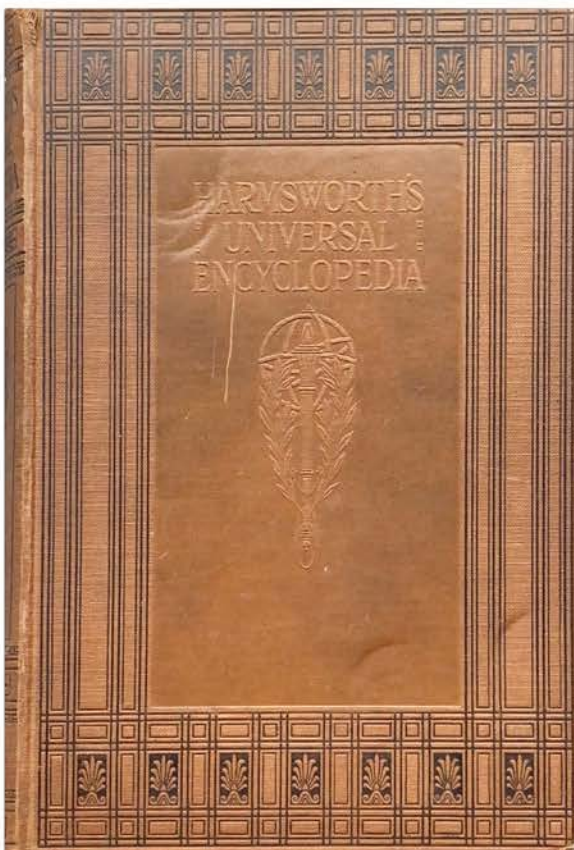


Of all my long-running identifications with the habits and proclivities of Alasdair Gray, few have touched me quite as deeply as the impulse **to collect**...

Gray's vast legacy is lent a kind of physical shape by the Archive's collection- painting a picture of not just a grand literary life, but also of the man himself. With the heart of a poet and the sensibilities of a magpie, Gray amassed a treasure trove of artefacts and books bound together by diverse systems of personal meaning and significance: chiefly, the construction and retention of knowledge.

This concept was not new to me (I had been practicing a similar form of collecting all my life), but it was, without question, a delight to discover myself in company with someone as famously erudite as Gray. Indeed, I was reminded of my paternal Grandfather (another poetic magpie) whose collection of Scottish & Irish literature and countless objet d'art often served as his private universe in which to immerse himself and anchor his extensive knowledge on many subjects. Who needs the internet, I ask you?

This '**material meaning-making**', as I took to calling it, was and still is a huge part of my identity as a neurodivergent individual and a continual source of inspiration & motivation: the process of using physicalised knowledge to understand and analyse abstract or ephemeral concepts. Take the Harmsworth Encyclopaedia, for example: Gray's prized possession from childhood, preserved in the Archive's collection and memorialised in his 2013 essay 'Childhood Reading': "...I gathered that these volumes contained explanations of everything there is and had been, with lives of everyone important. The six syllables of the name EN-CY-CLO-PAED-I-A seemed to sum up the thick brown books which summed up the universe. Saying them (the syllables) gave me a sense of power...". Gray found himself particularly drawn to the illustrations which backed up and contextualised the words- particularly the plates of national flags & coats of arms whose shapes, compositions, colours and vibrancy proved a source of fixation which both complemented and empowered his drive to soak up knowledge.



AGA.1.5.9 front cover (left) and page 429 (right)



Funnily enough, he also acknowledges a kind of longevity- quipping that both encyclopaedias and cigarette cards are "...still a source of information and imagery" for him even in old age. When something is in -as Gray puts it- 'the best condition' it becomes easier to understand. You can learn more from a picture of a factory-fresh Cadillac than a rusting, engine-less example. Furthermore, there is something oddly democratic and socialist about learning the wide world's complexities from an object intended to be disposable. Very Gray.

Looking at these cards, I can easily see what Gray meant: they truly are a collection of 'bright afternoons'- portals leading directly to the rosy pre-war glamour of '20s & '30s Britain in which the pastoral pride of the naturalist exists side by side with the clanging, droning might of industry and military. Stuffy fighter planes keep company with adorable bluebells, and puckish pine martens watch middle-class cyclists purr along on status-symbol bikes. Thus, the encyclopaedic universes of nature, commerce and manufacturing which these cards stir up in my brain (and the knowledge they impart) were what motivated me to suggest acquiring groupings I had found online as part of my SGSAAH funded research project; a link back to my own past of obsessive film poster and trading card collecting (though -without exception- my cards featured Daleks, not stoats).

The fact that these cards have helped progress my own research at the Archive goes without saying, and I was proud to be able to incorporate them into a workshop on my findings from experiments between Gray's work and a Neurodivergent form of looking & understanding. After languishing in some obsessive eBay seller's drawer, it is my happy task to make them back into portals once more.

It is also my pleasure & privilege to see these cards enter the Archive collection. The joy I felt when unboxing the first arrival (the commemorative framed set of animal cards) helped keep the subjective importance and power Gray bestowed on these images alive. I confess that I even wondered about buying some for my own personal collection.

There's still something of the magpie about me too.



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**Written by David Lothian, 2025**

At the time of writing, David Lothian was a fourth-year doctoral researcher at the University of Glasgow and a Scottish Graduate School for Arts & Humanities (SGSAH) funded intern at The Alasdair Gray Archive (AGA)

**Design by Abby Carter, 2026**

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