

Scottish Prose Non-fiction



Spotlight: Andrew O'Hagan



Biographical Details

Andrew O'Hagan was born in Glasgow in 1968 and grew up on the Pennyburn housing estate between Kilwinning and the new town development of Irvine in North Ayrshire. Versions of this location have featured in several of O'Hagan's books, both fiction and non-fiction. After graduating from the University of Strathclyde with a degree in English, O'Hagan joined the staff of the *London Review of Books*. An essay reflecting on the murder of James Bulger, 'Have You Seen David?', which appeared in the *LRB* in 1993, provided the basis for O'Hagan's first full-length non-fiction book, *The Missing*. O'Hagan has gone on to publish six novels, including *Our Fathers*, *Personality* and *Mayflies*, and has won a number of literary awards as well as being nominated for the Booker prize three times. He has also produced two collections of non-fiction pieces, *The Atlantic Ocean* and *The Secret Life*, and continues to publish widely as a journalist and essayist.



Publications of Interest

- *The Missing* (Picador 1995)
- *The Atlantic Ocean: Essays* (Faber & Faber 2008)
- *The Secret Life: Three True Stories* (Faber & Faber 2017)



Where to Begin?

- 'Scotland's Old Injury', *The Atlantic Ocean* pp.19-30
- 'The Glasgow Sludge Boat', *The Atlantic Ocean*, pp. 150-157
- 'Thin Ayrshire', *The Missing* pp. 63-122
- 'The Invention of Ronald Pinn', *The Secret Life*.



Style

- Investigative reportage
- Social history
- Personal reflection



Core Themes

- Media manipulation of audience
- Social inequality
- Socio-political impact of digital technology



Contextualising

'Have You Seen David?', the essay that established O'Hagan's reputation, is representative of the values that underpin much of his writing. It is characterised by a determination to investigate the individual human circumstances behind headline news stories; a rejection of herd or mob mentality and especially of tabloid and mass media cultivation of this mindset; and a deep interest in the lives of the working class and the socially disadvantaged, past and present, which is often as affectionate as it is critical, but which resists sentimentality and stereotype. More recent work has taken a particular interest in the ways in which digital technology has affected politics, economics and the construction of human identity. O'Hagan, in explaining his attitude to writing, has said 'it's not a question of being brave or being right but of sticking to the material' (*The Atlantic Ocean*).



Understanding

Thinking about your chosen Andrew O'Hagan text, consider the following questions, geared towards checking understanding:

- Identify any **two** reasons why the **socially disadvantaged** are more likely to be victims of crime.
- What key points does Andrew O'Hagan make about the **importance of family**?
- Identify **two positive** and **two negative** aspects O'Hagan associates with **technological progress**.



Analysing

Choose **one** of the features below and explain how O'Hagan uses it in his writing.

Interview	Historical analogy	Personal recollection	Imagery	Structure
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Evaluating

Thinking about your chosen Andrew O'Hagan text, consider the following evaluative questions:

1. How effectively does Andrew O'Hagan illustrate **contemporary Britain's lack of care** for its most vulnerable citizens?
2. How convincing do you find Andrew O'Hagan's explanation of the **links** between **social disadvantage** and **criminal behaviour**?
3. Has Andrew O'Hagan's writing led you to share his concerns over the **impact** of **digital technology** on society?