



How Late it Was, How Late

James Kelman

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"Ye wake in a corner and stay there hoping yer body will disappear, the thoughts smothering ye; these thoughts; but ye want to remember and face up to things, just something keeps ye from doing it, why can ye no do it; the words filling yer head: then the other words; there's something wrong; there's something far far wrong; ye're no a good man, ye're just no a good man." From the moment Sammy wakes slumped in a park corner, stiff and sore after a two-day drunk and wearing another man's shoes, James Kelman's Booker Prize-winning novel *How Late it Was, How Late* loosens a torrent of furious stream-of-consciousness prose that never lets up. Beaten savagely by Glasgow police, the shoplifting ex-con Sammy is hauled off to jail, where he wakes to a world gone black. For the rest of the novel he stumbles around the rainy streets of Glasgow, brandishing a sawed-off mop handle and trying in vain to make sense of the nightmare his life has become. Sammy's girlfriend disappears; the police question him for a crime they won't name; the doctor refuses to admit that he's blind; and his attempts to get disability compensation tangle in Kafkaesque red tape. Gritty, profane, darkly comic, and steeped in both American country music and working class Scottish vernacular, Sammy's is a voice the reader won't soon forget. --*Mary Park*

How Late it Was, How Late Details

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Author : James Kelman

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Jen says

I think this is the worst book I've ever read to completion. First of all, it's a stream of consciousness novel written in working-class Scottish dialect. Secondly, there was no ultimate payoff for my having to struggle through the frustrating narrative style. I want those hours of my life back!

Scott says

Allright Booker Prize. We're done. You have proven, time and time again, that either you have terrible tastes or I am a total philistine. How late it was is the newest entry into your proud history of Texan timewasters.

Here's what's cool about the book. Scottish working class guy picks a fight with the cops, gets beatdown, goes blind. The parts where he gets out of jail in his hometown and has to find his way back to his apartment is awesome. The part where he deals with government bureaucracy is awesome.. The rest of the book? tiresome.

and the ending....dear god the ending.... I have read in my life a great number of books... This is, quite literally, the worst ending of a book I have ever read. I kid you not.

I almost want to recommend it to you so you could share my pain.

out of sight.

Fabian says

Very few books can make a plateau-styled plot like this one enticing. What occurs when vision is impaired from page one of "How Late it Was, How Late"? Well, the other senses are heightened of course, and this becomes an intrepid trek for the reader himself, as he mirrors exactly the plight of the newly-blinded outrageously-ambivalent protagonist who suffers under the most nefarious of circumstances. The experience is at once disorientating & ultimately fierce. Nauseating even.

With great prose that's hard to forget or imitate, I gather it would be a bitch to translate this into another language, for it would lose all its magic, its unique vernacular of the 90's Scottish lower classes.

Ann says

So a few years ago, after I read a blue streak through God of Small Things, Midnight's Children, Amsterdam, Remains of the Day, Possession, The Blind Assassin – they are all amazing – I decided that I would read every past Booker Prize winner (apparently I am unhappy unless doing something that can eventually crossed off a list.) And although we've had some good times – I mean, wow, I would never have

thought The English Patient worth reading – my current stance is, Booker Prize, can we talk? Last Orders, Rites of Passage, Hotel du Lac, for real? I don't know why I'm so disappointed – this is, after all, an honor that bypassed On Beauty in favor of The Sea – and I sorely hate to break a resolution, but this is starting to take “thankless task” to a new level.

Can you tell that I maybe didn't love How late it was? It fits neatly into that BP sub-category that I like to call “All British Men Are Alcoholics” (others include “No-one Had Sex before 1945” and “Oops, We Sure Screwed Up Our Colonies”), but I've seen stag parties in Prague, so I knew that already. I know I'm supposed to think Kelman's prose is bursting with angry life, a modern bard's view of the gritty Glaswegian streets etc, but, well, I didn't. Sorry.

Becky Douglas says

How Late it Was, How Late is about a Glaswegian man who, having gone out and got drunk and ended up getting a beating from the police, wakes up in a police cell to discover that he's gone blind. It's written entirely in the Scots dialect and in a stream of consciousness style with no breaks for different chapters. It's mostly first person, as told by the unfortunate Glaswegian, Sammy, but Sammy gets confused and sometimes switches to third person. It could not be praised for its readability.

It's easy to see why this is the most controversial winner of The Booker Prize. The choice of character and the swearing used as punctuation, as is common in Glasgow, would not appeal to the typical literary snob who would rather be reading lengthy fan-fiction about Thomas Cromwell to help them to validate their Oxbridge degree (Disclaimer: I've never read Wolf Hall. I'm sure it's lovely). However, it's one of the most perfect character studies I've ever read and it's clearly influenced many Scottish writers who followed. Irvine Welsh is the most obvious example but his influence is also clear in the book I'm reading right now by Janice Galloway.

It's a gloriously bleak story too. I like bleak stories but they can't be comical, they mustn't stray into the ridiculous. This one works because it's so possible. It's so likely that I'm sure I've met many iterations of Sammy The Drunk Glaswegian, stumbling out of pubs and slumped in bus stops. When you're reading the book it makes you wonder how many people you've spoken to who live lives like this one. So the horrible situations Sammy finds himself in become that little bit darker. Somehow, Kelman then pulls off them impossible and manages to make it funny.

It's a strange version of the unreliable narrator too. When Sammy pulls you into the immediate present, for example when he's in conversation with someone, you read what he literally says to that person at that time. When the conversation is over, you read what he was actually thinking. Then later on he might change his mind. Or forget something else, or remember a new detail. You're in his head, so he can't deliberately mislead you, but he's so confused and so easily distracted that you can't really consider him a reliable narrator either.

It's an intense and visceral novel and, as awful as Sammy can be I found myself rooting for him. He makes terrible decisions but he's not an intrinsically evil character and is more of an unfortunate underdog. It's hard to not like him. Nevertheless the book left me a little drained and while it made me want to go and find the rest of Kelman's work, I might have a bit of a rest first.

Alan Wilson says

There seems to be a lot of reviewers who see Sammy Samuels as an unlikeable inebriate and the impression that suggests to me is the main character of *How Late* staggering around like some pathetic wineo throughout the whole story. That is just so wrong. I found Sammy entirely likeable, and why not. He is not a whinger by any means, he hardly has a drink during the whole story (okay, he starts out severely hung-over), he accepts full responsibility for his problems, even being beaten so excessively by the sodgers (coppers) he is made blind, he loves his partner Helen, he is not a snitch ... for the life of me what is there to dislike about Sammy? He is f***ing funny! His observations are so perceptive and honest, his inventiveness trying to cope with the situation is so innocent and affecting, I just think Kelman has given Sammy's particular socio-slice of Scotland an almighty empowering hug with this work. How on earth he managed to get inside Sammy's head and life so intimately and show it so brutally real using such a convincing first/third person monologue I can't begin to comprehend. Kelman is a genius of his art.

Karlo Mikhail says

I was pleasantly surprised to find out how readable the novel is given a considerable number of complaints about its purportedly indecipherable language and use of stream of consciousness as a narrative technique. In fact, the use of the language of the Scottish working classes did not at all hinder the gripping buildup of this dark tale of oppression as experienced by the novel's protagonist, Sammy. He is victimized by police brutality and weighed down by the more grueling instances of day to day structural violence that takes on Kafkaesque proportions. This is a striking contrast to similarly plotted 'absurdist' or 'postmodern' fiction (I am thinking of Beckett or Auster) that frames dark and seemingly inexplicable episodes afflicting the protagonist purely within the 'symbolic order' or the 'prison house of language.' While it takes time to piece the bits and pieces together in Kelman's novel, the crux of the matter can clearly be contextualized to social and political conditions. And amidst the gloominess that pervades the entire novel, it still manages to end on an optimistic note: open-ended but hopeful. I highly recommend '*How Late it Was, How Late*'.

Hugh says

[, even if very little is resolv

Allan MacDonell says

"Nay point in hoping for the best," says Glasgow, Scotland's bold and blinded Sammy early on in *How Late It Was, How Late*. It's hard-won advice, and given with the highest of intentions.

Don't be daunted by the accent. Don't be put off because the entire book takes place inside the mind of a solitary drinking man whose eyesight has been beaten right out of his head—while in police custody.

And where is that formerly loyal girlfriend? Has she scampered, finally, or is she buried somewhere just

beyond where the remembered light of day shines into poor auld Sammy's benighted realm?

James Kelman won the Booker Prize for this one, and the Brits won't award that to a Scot just for nothing.

K.D. Absolutely says

A difficult read not because the narration is told via stream-of-consciousness of a 38-year old drunkard and ex-convict but because the language is that of a working-class Scottish dialect that I am not familiar with. I have no problem with difficult reads as I have read and liked the works of James Joyce and Samuel Beckett but they are written beautifully unlike this book of Kelman whose supposedly humor totally missed my funny bones.

The one that saved this book from getting 1-star rating for me is its Kafkaesque mood all throughout. My take is that Kelman tried to show to the reader the true life of what is going on in the lives of the working-class Scottish men. For example, when **Sammy** this book's main protagonist is filing for disability because he thinks that he has turned blind and when he truthfully says the reason, that he was arrested and beaten by the police, he was denied of the disability. When examined by the physician he was also refused to be considered as blind. I mean, we, the working class anywhere in the world are getting unfair treatment be it in the office, in government offices like when we deal with social security, salary tax and even with medical insurance.

Sammy's insensitivity and directionless life is not something that is foreign to me too. I had a cousin before whose child had to stay in my parent's house because he spends all his money on alcohol because he felt that his marriage was on the brink of falling apart. So, to forget about his pain, he turned to drinking. It was no different from Sammy whose wife left him and his kid was distant from him. I just don't know why men like them fall for alcohol instead of fixing what is broken because obviously as in the case of Sammy and even that of my cousin, alcohol does not solve anything. When they wake up, the problem is still there.

I have not read any of the novels that Kelman beat up in 1994 in the Booker race. I have The Folding Star (tbr) though so I guess I need to pick that up soon. I have read 1992's winner The English Patient (4 stars) and I thought that Ondaatje's a lot better than this. I even prefer Kelman's 1992 novel, my first by him, another 1001 book, Kieron Smith, Boy (3 stars).

Sean Wilson says

"People try to stop ye, stop ye doing things. They dont allow ye to live. But ye've got to live. If ye cannay live ye're as well dead. What else can ye do? It would be good if somebody telt ye. What way ye were supposed to live. They dont fucking tell ye that but they've got nay answers there man, no to that yin, that fucking question, know what I'm saying, it's just big silences, that's what ye fucking get, big silences. How no to live. That's all they tell ye. Fuck them all... It's you. They dont change but you have to. That's the fucking crack."

Ben Peek says

I came across Kelman a while back. I read an interview with him in which he described, among other things, how he was happy to put himself in the likes of Kafka, for he wrote about the petty humiliations of bureaucracy: "I think that is an essential working-class experience," he says. "Intimidation, provocation, sarcasm, contempt, disgust and so on. You learn how to cope with it as a young person, because you see your parents in that situation, for example if they're dealing with the doctor or the headmaster, you know they're watching their Ps and Qs." Later, he went on to describe how, when he won a Booker for *How Late It Was, How Late*, one of the judges quit, calling the book rubbish, and papers called it a disgrace, and complained that it had over 4000 uses of the word fuck. I mean, really, how could you not read such a book?

How Late It Was, How Late is a really excellent novel. It focuses on Sammy, an ex-con who wakes up after a hard night to find that someone has stolen his shoes. Shortly later, he has a fight with the police, and goes blind.

At the centre of the novel is Sammy's blindness. It is both literal and a metaphor and so cleverly done that you'll be in envy of it.

After going blind, Sammy will have to navigate himself home from the police station alone. At home, he'll borrow a saw and cut a mop head off a broom to use as a walking stick. All the time, he'll wonder where his girlfriend is. She has gone missing, you see, and the police are interested in her disappearance. They think Sammy knows something, but really and truly, Sammy doesn't know anything, and as the book pieces itself together, and Sammy's world hints at itself to the reader through his blindness, and not to Sammy, you can't but feel for the poor fellow.

Kelman doesn't write like Kafka - *How Late It Was, How Late* is written in a stream of consciousness Glaswegian dialect complete with spelling errors and bad punctuation - but Kafka is the best comparison, I think. There is a frustrating and bewildering bureaucracy, one that seeks to take advantage of Sammy and cares not for his well being, and there is also a sense of powerlessness for Sammy, that no matter what he does, he'll always be bit a piece caught in a large picture. Because Sammy is an ex-con, a working class guy who has made some poor choices, and who has been taken advantage of by his friends and his enemies, there's a kind of sad tragedy to Sammy, even when he is, at times, funny, or the book is absurdist.

At any rate, once I finished *How Late It Was, How Late*, I went and bought a bunch more of Kelman's books, which is really my highest compliment.

Shovelmonkey1 says

If you have never been to Scotland, then literature would have you believe that it is the bleakest, most soul destroying pit of blackened abject despair. The cities are populated with grey-skinned downtrodden gurners whose only options are alcoholism, drugs or suicide. The rivers Clyde, Forth and Tay are not filled with water, nay, they are filled with the salty tears of Rangers Fans, beaten housewives, victims of police violence and neglected children. Did Hadrian build his wall in 122 AD as a physical barrier to stem the tidal wave of depression, moving down like some sort of unstoppable weather front from the north? Possibly. However I, as an actual bonafide Scottish, am here to tell you that this is not the case. We can be a cheery bunch, honest.

How Late it Was, How Late is doesn't exactly paint a cheerful picture of life in working-class Glasgow and the bleakness is further enhanced by the fact that we only come to know protagonist Sammy, via his stream of consciousness outpourings which are variously angry, confused and stoic. Add into the mix the fact that this book is written in working class Scottish dialect will make it seem grimmer to some, and possibly completely incomprehensible to others. Sammy is not having a good week. In fact Sammy has the very good makings of a country and western ballad on his hands. His girlfriend has left him, the polis have beaten him up causing possible permanent blindness, he's got no giro and his friends think he is a grass. Presumably if he had a dog, then that would have died as well. The book spans just over a week in the life of Sammy as he struggles to adjust to his loss of sight although he is surprisingly sanguine about it which was probably key in getting people to empathise with his plight. I came to this with no preconceptions; seriously I'd never heard of it before but I had a vague inkling it was on the 1001 books to read before you die list, so it was nice to pick it up and after the brief adjustment to grammar and vocab (pause-lite C*nt-heavy), become totally engrossed.

Trainspotting by Irvine Welsh was published one year before Kelman's Booker Prize winning effort and so presumably Welsh deserves a little credit for paving the way and preparing people for the full frontal attack of an entire book written in Scottish dialect. Check out my review of Morvern Callar if you wish to learn yourself Scotch before hand.

Louis says

Have you ever met a Glaswegian who wasn't complaining? "The weather's shite, sob sob, the sodgers beat me, boo hoo, the gers lost again, wah wah, I've gone blind." I was 35 pages in and I flicked to the back to check how many pages there are because, seriously, how long can you write stream-of-consciousness Scottish dialect about a guy who's gone blind? 380 pages, apparently. But nah it picks up, you get to love the guy, he's adorable.

the gift says

somebody does not like this book, not me, i love it. the steady, crazy, profane, beautiful voice of sammy never relents, never pauses, and this is one seriously fast read. this blind man's vision of the world from the disenfranchised, drinking, rousing, lower class- but vibrant and alive- is a voice to hear. i read this over and over, trying to get the full effect in strong doses. i have read stream of consciousness before, read modernist works built of unbroken voice, but never enjoyed, never so happily horrified as in this book. the rate of f-bombs alone must be a record of some sort. but then, what should he use to characterize his straits? just go on, man, for when you are going through hell... keep going.

Tony says

HOW LATE IT WAS, HOW LATE. (1994; U.S. Ed. 1995). James Kelman. ****.

I had not heard of either this author or this novel before a friend recommended it to me. Turns out that it was the winner of the Booker Prize in 1994, but never managed to become a notable seller on the book market. There are obvious reasons for this. The novel is written in what is, presumably, lower-class Scottish dialect. At first, I was turned off by it, but eventually it began to flow without my minding it so much. The author is

a Scotsman and sets this novel in Glasgow. The protagonist is Sammy. Sammy is a thirty-eight-year old man. He's an ex-con, and currently living with his girlfriend in her apartment house. He's on the dole, although he does take on jobs of unskilled labor when forced to by various agencies. On a Friday night he has a fight with his girlfriend, Helen, variously described as a "tiff," or an "argument," or a strong disagreement. He takes off for the local pub where he proceeds to get roaring drunk – to the point that he doesn't even remember Saturday. On Sunday, he has a malicious hangover and leaves the pub headed back to the apartment. He encounters a group of four soldiers. His term soldiers is applied to policemen, and we ultimately see that that's who these four were. He manages to pick a fight with them for no reason and gets brutally beaten as a result. The police (more soldiers?) pick him up and take him into the local station. From here on out, the novel is a clever alternative to Kafka's "The Trial." He is questioned as to whom he met and drank with over the weekend, but he can't remember because of the blackouts. While sitting in his cell, awaiting another interrogation, he goes blind. This man has no luck. Even Job had a better deal than Sammy. He is finally released from jail, even though he is now blind and broke and tries to make his way back home. When he arrives, he finds that Helen is gone – really gone. He has to develop a strategy to deal with his blindness and how to make it until his next welfare check comes in. He believes that the police are following him, but he can't be sure since he can't see. He'd like a drink, but between the effort of getting to a pub and the lack of ready cash, he can't have one. Things don't get any better for Sammy. When he finally makes it to the welfare bureau on Monday, he begins to encounter the coldness and indifference of the system. He can't win, although he does manage to hook up with a "rep," a person who is willing to help him through the maze of the system for a 1/3 cut of any awards that might come from his claim against the police. Telling you any more would ruin the story, but you have to first decide what the story is all about yourself, first. Recommended.

McNatty says

I started out with 4 stars..I loved the language and the stream of consciousness style of writing, it really intrigued me and I enjoyed reading the story. I was whizzing through it so I guess I have to give Kelman credit for that..

..I couldn't wait to find out what actually happened on the Saturday night, what happened to Helen, I swore he must have killed her in a violent episode and he had become so traumatized he had mentally broken down..or something to that affect. I was desperate to know what illegal schemes Sammy was really hooked up into, whether he would regain his eyesight, whether the police would pick him up again, how Charlie was involved, maybe Sammy would get bumped off..my mind frantically creating different endings and I couldn't wait to discover it.

...but the pages kept turning, Sammy was stumbling back and forth to the shops, wandering around his apartment paranoid about his future, drinking cups of tea, smoking, I got down to 50 pages, we meet his son..and I thought brilliant, his boy is going coming into the story ..how is this going to unfold..20 pages..he goes to the pub..10 pages...Im waiting for the story to unfold and it finishes..I almost threw the fucking book across the room. The suspense was great, now all James Kelman needs to do is actually finish the book. Fucking Bampot

Nahed.E says

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Jonathan says

Waiting rooms. Ye go into this room where ye wait. Hoping's the same. One of these days the cunts'll build entire fucking buildings just for that. Official hoping rooms, where ye just go in and hope for whatever the fuck ye feel like hoping for. One on every corner. Course they had them already – boozers. Ye go in to hope and they sell ye a drink to help pass the time. Ye see these cunts sitting there. What're they there for? They're hoping. They're hoping for something. The telly's rotten. So they go out hoping for something better. I'm just away out for a pint, hen, be back in an hour. You hoping the football'll come on soon? Aye. I hope ye'll no be too long. I'll no be; no unless I meet some cunt – I hope I don't!

Guille says

El personaje de memorias del subsuelo enfrentado a los muros que angustiaron a Josef K y contado por el maestro que influyó a autores como Irvine Welsh; o bien, el flujo mental onanista de un paranoico que jode su vida a base de no poder contener al imbécil que lleva dentro, aunque sea un imbécil consecuente que nunca busca cobardes excusas exculpatorias; o bien, un Bob Slocum que se pregunta y se pregunta y se pregunta y se pregunta ¿En qué momento me jodí del todo, Zabalita?, pero no desde la burguesía acomodada del personaje de Joseph Heller sino desde el centro del más barriobajero lumpen escocés de mediados de los 90.

Vamos, una auténtica maravilla no apta para paladares delicados (el protagonista y el narrador se enfrentan en una apretada competición a ver quién es más malhablado) ni para ese lector-hembra del que nos hablaba Cortázar. Una narración en tercera persona que se parece muchísimo a una primera persona y cuyo discurso no presenta ninguna interrupción por capítulo alguno entre la primera y la última palabra de las 328 páginas que componen el libro. Un libro intenso, arriesgado, claustrofóbico, brillante; brillante es su narrativa y brillante en la plasmación de ese mundo marginal encarnado en ese personaje perdedor entre los perdedores que es Sammy, alejado de esa horquilla facilona que va desde el paternalismo romántico a la sordidez molarizante.
