

Our Country, the Brexit Island: Brexit, Literature, and Populist Discourse

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This article assesses the popular/populist media discourse on Brexit alongside three very different publications: *Alice in Brexitland*, *Five on a Brexit Island*, and Carol Ann Duffy's play 'Our Country'.

On 24 September 2018, the European Commission announced that it 'will call for a more responsible approach by the media' (Boffey 2018: n.p.) as far as Brexit is concerned. This announcement came in the wake of divisive headlines in the British tabloid press, most notably *The Sun* that had labelled European leaders such as Emmanuel Macron and Donald Tusk 'dirty EU rats' (*The Sun* 20th September 2018). *The Guardian* outlined the EU justice commissioner Věra Jourová's speech that would call for 'a European approach to media based on quality and smart regulation, if needed', appealing to the media to remember their 'responsibility to avoid encouraging hate' (Boffey 2018: n.p.). In addition to the 'dirty rats' cover, the speech was going to make reference to the 'enemies of the people' headline of November 2016 that had named and 'shamed' a group of High Court Judges who had ruled in favour of the anti-Brexit campaigner Gina Miller. For the EU commissioner, 'The Brexit debate is the best example' of media disabusing their power and position (Boffey 2018: n.p.).

Various media, of course, have their own political agenda; different newspapers present the same story in divergent ways: *The Guardian's* article about the EU Commissioner's announcement has a measured tone and a headline that is not different in font or size from those of other articles, simply stating 'British media's Brexit coverage sows division – EU Commissioner' (Boffey 2018). The *Sunday Express's* coverage, by contrast, though in text almost identical with *The Guardian's*, immediately uses its headline to stoke up aggression: 'Brussels to ATTACK UK media over Brexit coverage: EU accuse tabloids of sowing discord' (*The Sunday Express* 25 September: n.p.). What stands out here is the capitalized 'ATTACK UK' – it almost becomes irrelevant who attacks, how or why. In fact, even reading the article is not really a requirement – the headline does enough to stir up emotion, anger and partisanship. What is at stake, clearly, is the UK's freedom. And this is something picked up – in varying degrees of rancor – in the comments' section where Brexiteers (their voices are in the overall majority) argue heatedly for freedom of speech and freedom of the press – in addition to using the opportunity to abuse the EU in general, and the Czech justice

commissioner in particular, in the most graphic terms. Words that stand out in the comments' section are, in particular, 'we', 'us' and 'our' ('It's OUR media...') versus 'they', 'them' and 'theirs'. The EU is 'otherised' in the process, a clear enemy of the British people, conspiring over decades to limit British freedoms. Mrs Jourová herself is attacked not only as a woman ('A lot of sleeping involved probably' as a highly sexist comment about how she achieved her position; 'Is that meant to be a female' as a disparaging comment about her appearance) but also as an Eastern European, aligning her to Russia ('Interesting she has a Russian name...'), labeling her a 'Commi B****' and, generally, disallowing her any right to the very free speech the angry commentators are demanding for the British press¹.

The EU's interest in, or rather, watchful eye over UK media coverage should not have come as a surprise. As Levy, Aslan and Bironzo show, 'in the early 1990s the European Commission [had already] set up a website to debunk the myths they saw as being propagated by the British press' (2016, 10) – among them most famously the 'straight EU bananas'. Dominic Wring explains that 'one of those journalists most associated with propagating ... baseless "Euro-myths" designed to undermine [the EU's] credibility' was, in fact, Boris Johnson (2016, 12). Consequently, both the screaming *Daily Express* headline and the abusive and downright threatening comments have had precursors. In the run-up to the Brexit referendum on 23 June 2016, and ever since, British print media, and here in particular the tabloids, have not held back with covers and headlines actively seeking to fear- or hate-monger, or, at the very least, to sow dissent. As early as 2013, papers such as *The Daily Express* and *The Daily Mail* had headlines about Romanian criminal gangs in Britain and hordes of Bulgarians heading for the UK (see <https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/380512/How-Romanian-criminals-terrorise-our-streets> and <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2531440/Sold-Flights-buses-Romanians-Bulgarians-head-UK.html>). While the most hotly-debated topic before the Referendum was initially the economy, immigration soon gained more prominence and was quickly (ab)used by politicians especially in the Leave camp to garner support and whip up electoral frenzy. A study commissioned by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism and dedicated to 'UK Press Coverage of the EU Referendum' found that there was a decisive shift towards the divisive and incendiary issue of immigration towards the end of the Brexit campaign, with the language used predominantly negative in tone (Levy, Aslan & Bironzo 2016, 22-3).

¹ All quotes are from <https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/1022414/Brexit-news-EU-accuse-UK-media-of-sowing-discord-coverage-latest>

The press was not alone in this approach. Even the pro-EU David Cameron had succumbed to otherising rhetoric in the context of migration when, during a speech, he referred to migrants trying to get to Britain as a ‘swarm of people’ (Elgot & Taylor 2018, n.p.), language that was, at the time, harshly condemned by fellow politicians both at home and internationally, yet gleefully picked up and perpetuated by the press and the Leave campaign. Nigel Farage’s infamous ‘BREAKING POINT’ poster that played with the imagery of ‘swarms’ or ‘hordes’ is just one example and was duly reported to the police for ‘[inciting] racial hatred’ and ‘[breaching] UK race laws’ (Steward & Mason 2016, n.p.). As Steward and Mason’s article outlines, Dave Prentis, of the British union Unison, had contacted the police about UKips inflammatory poster. Prior to this, politicians, among them Nicola Sturgeon and Yvette Cooper, had already condemned the poster and even Boris Johnson had used him to distance himself from Farage’s party.

But despite these complaints, and as Anshuman A. Mondal has shown, the EU migration issue became conflated with migration in general, and migration, in turn, was used to discuss national security and the threat of terrorism (Mondal 2018, 86). For Mondal, it was this that made in particular the Leave campaign so ‘emotive’, appealing to its voters’ disaffections that, via the prevalent press and political discourse, became ever more closely linked to (im)migration. It was easier to appeal to vague British values and British *Greatness* when they and it could be contrasted to an Other.

Brexit thus seems to have ‘divided’ the country – but, as Kristian Shaw has convincingly argued, ‘Brexit did not divide the nation, it merely revealed the inherent divisions within society’ (2018, 16). According to Mike Berry, for decades, the majority of the print media had depicted the EU in a negative light – via EU topics, immigration had become linked to the housing crisis and the near collapse of the NHS as well as shortfalls in the benefits system. He concludes that ‘before the campaign even began large parts of the public had been primed by the media to be Eurosceptic’ (2016, 14). Yet since 23 June 2016, and to a large degree thanks to the free reign given to comments in online versions of the press, it seems to have become acceptable to loudly voice narrow-mindedness and xenophobia. This populist discourse has, in turn, started to trickle into wider cultural production. As Robert Eaglestone has pointed out, ‘Brexit is not only political, economic and administrative: perhaps most significantly it is an event in culture, too’ as it ‘grew from cultural beliefs, real or imaginary, about Europe and the UK’ (2018, 1). As such, and as many commentators have already written about, literature has played, and still does play, an important role in forming and shaping public opinion, a sense of national identity, and a sense of community. Increasingly, commentators

and literary critics use the term ‘BrexLit’, which, according to Shaw, ‘concerns fictions that either directly respond or imaginatively allude to Britain’s exit from the EU, or engage with the subsequent socio-cultural, economic, racial or cosmopolitical consequences of Britain’s withdrawal’ from the EU (2018, 18) – a small and, of necessity, very new subgenre.²

So far, so good. The birth of BrexLit certainly has to be applauded. As Baroness Young of Hornsey says so astutely in the Preface to Eaglestone’s collection on *Brexit and Literature*, ‘There’s a role for literature, so adept at humanising big questions and creating emotional and cultural landscapes, in metaphorically poking us all in the ribs and urging us to start thinking critically and becoming politically active again’ (2018, xviii). Nevertheless, this comment also has to be taken with a pinch of salt, and I might have to resort to two generalisations in order to substantiate my concern here. First of all, it is probably unlikely that a convinced Leave voter will pick up and read a BrexLit novel, most of which are at least covertly anti Brexit and urge for multi-culturalism and inclusion. Hence, much of the literary production *could*, potentially, further contribute to the already rampant division in the country, with the Remainers reading BrexLit for confirmation of their own opinions and Leavers eschewing it for contradicting them. And secondly, BrexLit, a self-reflexive and critical genre, might not necessarily engage with the vitriol and purely emotionally charged discourse of ‘othering’ that can be found in the online comments’ section of the *Daily Mail*, the *Sun* or the *Daily Express*.

For these reasons, the remainder of this article will look at three rather different texts. Although maybe loosely still falling under the umbrella term BrexLit, Bruno Vincent’s *Five on a Brexit Island* of 2016 and Leavis Carroll’s *Alice in Brexitland* of 2017 are markedly ‘popular’ in their approach: distinctly illustrated, beautiful small hard-cover books that fall into the category of stocking filler or coffee table book. They will then, in turn, be compared and contrasted with Carol Ann Duffy and Rufus Norris’ more high-brow representation in their performative work in progress *My Country*, first staged in 2017. All of these texts, I argue, make conscious use of the divisive populist discourse about Brexit outlined in the opening section to represent the warring factions in the Referendum campaign. This allows different groups across the political spectrum to voice their own thoughts and opinions – but then leaves it up to the readers to weigh up the evidence to form their own opinions.

² Titles include, to date, Ali Smith’s *Autumn* (2016) and *Winter* (2017), Jon McGregor’s *Reservoir 13* (2017), Amanda Craig’s *The Lie of the Land* (2017), Douglas Board’s *Time of Lies* (2017), Adam Thorpe’s *Missing Fay* (2018), Anthony Cartwright’s specially commissioned *The Cut* (2017) or Jonathan Coe’s hotly anticipated (at the time of writing) *Middle England* (2018).

Five on a Brexit Island, another book in the successful series of Enid Blyton spin-offs aimed at an adult market, was the first Brexit-related title to hit the book shops. As the Press Association revealed in August 2017, the satirical title had been ‘the UK's biggest-selling book the week before Christmas, shifting 82,522 copies’ (2017, n.p.). The book’s cover already makes it clear that it will not necessarily assume a political position but, instead, focus on satirising the didactic Blyton texts that have ‘edified’ generations of child readers. The Famous Five are spread over two boats: Julian and Anne, the unsurprising upholders of conservatism, represent the Leavers, the ever-more adventurous Dick and George on the other boat the Remainers. Timmy the dog, swimming between the two boats, remains seemingly ‘neutral’ – or maybe simply ‘at sea’ about which way to decide.

Alice in Brexitland, by comparison, is more overtly political from the outset. Hiding behind the pen-name ‘Leavis Carroll’ is the TV comedy writer Lucien Young who made no secret of his own political affinity when he stated, tongue-in-cheek, ‘if [the book’s] release should happen to bring down the government, this will all have been worthwhile’ (Cowdrey 2017, n.p.). The book’s mission statement declares that ‘a young British voter finds herself thrown into a magical realm of post-truth politics, where up is down, black is white, experts are fools and fools are experts’ (Cowdrey 2017, n.p.). Where *Five on a Brexit Island* predominantly focuses on the tensions caused by Brexit between a close-knit group of friends, *Alice* openly satirises those in power, featuring characters such as the ‘David Camerabbit’, ‘the Corbyn-pillar’, ‘the Cheshire Twat’ (and for those in doubt as to his identity, the accompanying sketches, in the style of the original Tenniel illustrations, make it very clear that this is no other than Nigel Farage), ‘Tweedlebox and Tweedlegove’ and ‘The Queen of Heartlessness’.

Carol Ann Duffy and Rufus Norris’s *Our Country*, in contrast, is a play, written to be performed rather than read. It was first staged at the National Theatre on 28 February 2017 and then went on a national tour. Brexit, as this article has already outlined, is a divisive topic and one that has been built – far too much – on generalities and clichés. And at the risk of adding yet another one, a play performed at the National Theatre does, again, address a different demographic, and, as such, might be praying to the converted rather than converting, so to speak, the unenlightened. But *Our Country*’s subtitle is ‘A Work in Progress’ – as Brexit itself – and is also constructed, as the title page states, ‘in the words of people across the UK and Carol Ann Duffy’

(Duffy & Norris 2017). As such, it features a plethora of voices and opinions without, in turn, being opinionated. The play is chaired by Britannia herself who asks representatives for Caledonia, Cymru, Northern Ireland, the South-West, the North-East and the Midlands to speak up for their respective regions. The ensuing play then consists mainly of one-sentence opinion pieces and excerpts taken from interviews with the general public in the run-up to and in the immediate aftermath of the Brexit referendum. As the play progresses, Britannia herself is taken over by the voices of politicians such as Michael Gove, Boris Johnson, Nigel Farage, David Cameron and Theresa May, again utilising snippets of their real-life political speeches or interviews. The result is not so much a coherent, straight-forward play with an introduction, a main part and an edifying conclusion, but a veritable Babel of voices and opinions that, inevitably, cannot find a common denominator but that still, like rivalling newspaper headlines, vie for our attention.

These three otherwise quite different texts are consequently united by using a populist discourse that had developed around the Referendum. ‘Populist’ is, of course, a contentious term that comes with political implications and might conjure up images of 1930s party rallies. It can refer to inflammatory speeches pandering to the people’s deep-seated fears and / or prejudices, aiming to whip up political support. In this paper, I am using populist to suggest ‘of and by the people’: in some instances, most notably Duffy’s play, passages are taken from real-life interviews with the general public to provide a rounded view about a contentious issue, for instance. As such, Mark O’Thomas, in *The Conversation*, has labelled Duffy’s play as ‘verbatim theatre’, ‘where people’s words are transplanted to the stage in a documentary style format – can provide a powerful means of articulating contemporary concerns’ (2017, n.p.). Although *Five on a Brexit Island* and *Alice in Brexitland* are very different from Duffy’s *Our Country*, the three texts still work alongside each other because they all engage with the often vitriolic debate pro or contra Brexit in the country.

Five on a Brexit Island, the earliest of the texts, tries to steer clear of the inflammatory immigration and free movement debate. Instead, it mirrors the two different Referendum campaigns – Leave and Remain. The majority of political speeches and slogans come from Julian whose appearance seems to have changed (as his sister Anne muses) to resemble (the unnamed) Boris Johnson (2016, 5). Julian’s speeches repeatedly reflect popular Leave-campaign slogans: ‘we must fight to retain the *values* that make this country wonderful’, the ‘tyranny of Brussels’, ‘the

degradations of those unelected career bureaucra[ts]’ in the EU; the ‘bureaucratic nightmare of the EU’ with ‘214 laws covering the production of raspberry jam’ and their ‘Frankenfruits’ of ‘straight bananas’ (2016, 1; 13; 23; 71). His campaign also refers to the infamous 350 million pounds claim, money that could be used for the country, in particular the NHS, rather than be paid to Brussels, as well as decrying ‘experts’ and vowing that ‘Krexit means Krexit’ (2016, 72; 77). By contrast, George, representing the Remain campaign, uses what some readers might see as ‘common sense’, others, however, decry as arrogance, responding to Julian’s flamboyant speeches with a mere ‘He’s talking such rubbish, it’s not worth dignifying with an answer’ (2016, 69).

Julian and George thus mirror the official Leave and Remain campaigns, the one permanently shrill and blustering, the other subdued and almost detached. As Berry has shown, the Leave campaign was more successful at formulating its strategies, employing ‘a simple KISS (Keep it simple stupid) strategy, focusing on a simple message – “Take Back Control” – which was repeated at every opportunity’. He explains that, adversely, ‘the Remain campaign lacked a clear, simple narrative on the benefits of the EU membership that could resonate at both a national and emotional level with different audiences’ (2016, 14). Added to this is, as Levy, Aslan and Bironzo have outlined in their study on press involvement during the Brexit campaign, the fact that more national newspapers openly supported the Leave campaign, among them the *Daily Mail*, the *Daily Express* and the *Sun*. As these are also the biggest-selling national newspapers, the Leave Campaign inevitably received more exposure: ‘of the 2,378 articles analysed, 41% backed leaving the EU, while only 27% supported remaining’ (2016, 15). Prominent Leave campaigners such as Boris Johnson, Michael Gove or Nigel Farage seemed more visible on the campaign trail and were certainly louder. Consequently, the Leave campaign had a distinct advantage as far as press coverage was concerned. In *Five on a Brexit Island*, Julian is thus constantly pontificating and mansplaining whereas George might roll her eyes but does not really have her own distinct campaign strategy to attract supporters.

Alice in Brexitland is similarly in full campaign swing. Alice, bored by facts and figures, agrees to follow David Camerabbit – ‘you can call me Dave’ (2017, 4) – down the Brexit hole to find out more about the pro or contra Brexit debate. From the outset, the book’s agenda as a whole-hearted political spoof is obvious when the Camerabbit announces ‘I see no options but to resolve the debate over our national

interest by jumping in this hole' (2017, 4) which can only refer to the fact that the real-life David Cameron did, indeed, dig his own political hole with the Brexit referendum – even though he is currently trying to reemerge from it (Jones, 2018, n.p.). *Alice in Brexitland* gives voice to all the major players in the Referendum, both from the government and opposition. As such, it appears to be neutral – yet the biting satire in the depiction of certain characters is obvious. Tweedleboz (Boris Johnson) and Tweedlegove (Michael Gove) are depicted as a 'couple of great schoolboys', who huff and puff, stammer, ridicule and demean the opposition and merrily stab each other in the back (2017, 60-8). Unlike *Five on a Brexit Island*, *Alice in Brexitland* does not shy away from the immigration debate – in fact, it makes it central. On arrival in Brexitland, Alice is labelled 'an immigrant. An *illegal* immigrant', who is 'probably a criminal, or worse, a health tourist', 'coming over here and stealing our jobs' (2017, 18). As such, the book picks up on some of the clichéd anti-migrant discourse pre-Referendum.

Additionally, the mob mentality of the Brexiteers becomes apparent when Alice is surrounded by enraged Brexitland denizens who shout 'Go back to where you came from!' and 'British jobs for British workers!' with the 'popular mood ... turned against her' (2017, 18). This reflects the ugly reality in post-Referendum Britain when EU migrants were singled out and abused, threatened or even beaten up in the streets of Little England, aggression and xenophobia having been given a licence via the narrow pro-Leave result. The Cheshire Twat, surely the most repugnant of the Brexitland characters, similarly voices his own racist thoughts through song:

How I long for the olden days, golden and gay
When posties would whistle and bid you good day
When folks were polite, wouldn't dare make a fuss
And no one spoke Polish while riding the bus (2017, 33).

Not shying away from labelling other countries as 'Wop Country, Frogsylvania, Bongo Bongo Land' (2017, 35), he does not even try to hide his xenophobia while issuing repetitive soundbites – cue Berry's classic KISS strategy – such as 'We need to take back control – British laws for British people' or 'I am so glad of this fight, for our country will never be free until it casts off the yoke of Brussels' (2017, 32).

Apart from utilising excerpts from real political speeches such as Farage's call to 'take back control' or David Cameron / the Camerabbit's 'I believe with all my heart in the will of the people' (2017, 4), *Alice in Brexitland* also remorselessly satirises the press, the *Daily Murdoch* and *The Gordian* in particular (2017, 7; 11). It clearly illustrates the effect that reading certain publications can have on the general (voting) public. Alice is quickly changing her political tune after perusing a long poem in the *Daily Murdoch* that warns its readers:

Beware of the Eurocrat, old mate! [...]
He'll make all your bananas straight [...]
He'll bind you with his Krautish rules [...]
He's why a horde of Turks and Poles
Steal jobs from Pete and Trevor
He's why your Team just missed that goal
And why we have this weather (2017, 7-8).

The poem, which goes on for 7 stanzas, highlights the ludicrousness of tabloid accusations against the EU and migrants who are blamed for, quite simply, every shortcoming in Britain. Yet Alice's reaction is telling. She concludes 'I had no idea the EU was as bad as all that!' and finds herself 'growing more and more angry' and 'as her anger grew, so too did her stature. She shot up to five foot, then ten foot, then fifteen, until soon she filled the entire hall' (2017, 9). Alice's wrath stands for the bitterness and anger of parts of the electorate, fed by fear-mongering headlines. And, just like the growing Alice, who soon threatens to burst the confines of the hall, the number of those voters grew and grew, the more these headlines were read and repeated.

Carol Ann Duffy and Rufus Norris' *My Country* similarly utilises headlines, soundbites from political speeches and excerpts from interviews with real voters. The play is divided into eleven sections dedicated to 'The Arrivals', 'The Six Arias' (performed by the six regions making up Britannia), 'The Voices: Europe' (with ordinary voters talking about their feelings about the EU), 'The Voices: Patriotism' (which many of the voices conflate with a problematic nationalism), 'The Voices: Hardship' (which gives space to disgruntled voters complaining about the shortcomings in the country – which they then blame on immigration), 'The Voices:

Immigration’ (which is largely based on clichés and stereotypes learnt from tabloid headlines); ‘The Voices: Listening and Leadership’ (which shows the average voter’s distrust of politicians), ‘The Feast’ (representing the day before the Referendum), ‘The Vote’, ‘The Aftermath’ (represented by soul-searching) and the ‘Leave Taking’ which engages with the potential end of the union.

‘Immigration’ is one of the longest sections, reflecting the increasing press coverage of the topic in the run-up to the Referendum. From early on, *My Country* is dominated by words such as ‘we’, ‘us’ and ‘our’ versus ‘they’, ‘them’ and ‘theirs’: ‘We have sent *them* billions’; ‘I want *us* making *our* decisions for *our* country’; ‘*they* shouldn’t be allowed to come and fish *our* waters’ (2017, 16; 17; 18; emphases mostly mine). The anti-immigrant stance of most of the interviewees is rife, and it is also clear that most of the people who voice their opinion conflate the issue of EU migrant workers with immigration in general, and jump to conclusions from immigration to national security and terrorism, as well as blame immigration for the impact that years of Tory Austerity policies have had on their own lives. The fact that their own benefits have been cut – it is the migrants’ fault; the fact that wages are low – it is the migrants’ fault; the fact that house prices have been going up – it is the migrants’ fault; the fact that crime rates are up – it is the migrants’ fault (2017, 22; 23; 28). As the character William, speaking for Caledonia, explains ‘It all works on Otherism. [...] And when there’s enough others to blame, then the majority’s quite happy, aren’t they?’ (2017, 30). This might read like mere polemics to some; yet it reflects a worrying trend in the country where otherising language and open xenophobia are increasingly considered acceptable.

Our Country ends with the Referendum result: individual characters own up to the way they have voted, explain their motivation, admit their abstinence, or confess their disorientation. There seems to be an overwhelming sense of chaos and confusion: ‘I think I made the wrong decision’; ‘I didn’t vote – and I feel like an arsehole for it’; ‘I thought this would be on majority’; ‘I would have voted to stay’ (2017, 48; 49). And whereas the middle section of the play is dominated by the voices of ordinary voters, the latter section of *Our Country* is given over to the politicians speaking for Britannia – to Cameron announcing that ‘I think the country requires fresh leadership’, to Gove announcing that ‘I’ve realised in the last few days that Boris isn’t capable of [...] providing [...] unity’; to Farage, taunting ‘Well, I have to say, you’re not laughing

now, are you?’ – and to the new voice of ‘Theresa’, declaring, fatuously, that ‘Brexit means Brexit and we’re going to make a success of it’ (2017, 52; 55).

Michael Billington in *The Guardian* condemned Duffy’s play for becoming ‘increasingly fragmented’ and for offering

little in the way of fresh information or insights’. He concludes that ‘we already knew that the EU had become a scapegoat for popular discontent and that there are serious fissures between, and within, the UK’s separate parts. Even though the show ends with a plea for “good leadership”, it offers no hint from where, in our disunited kingdom, that might conceivably come (Billington 2017, n.p.).

But – is that the role of literature, of film, of drama? To return to Baroness Young of Hornsey’s previously cited comment, literature and cultural productions should ‘poke us’, to nudge us and encourage us to think – and not necessarily provide solutions. The solutions need to come through a democratic process built on political education that also allows for frank and free debate that is just that: frank and free, without being aggressive, hostile or threatening to those who are perceived as ‘others’; that does not consist of elitist politicians talking down their noses at the common voters while simultaneously denigrating the informed advice of acknowledged experts. The 2016 Referendum was, effectively a victory of fear over common sense, of reactionary nationalism over democratic liberalism, of nostalgia for something evasive over a stable future. The national press, in particular the broadsheets, are full of opinion pieces lamenting the loss of common sense, warning of a resurgent nationalism, predicting a catastrophic economic downturn. Britain, in the eyes of many commentators worldwide, has lost credibility by returning to Little Englandish values rather than nurturing the very multiculturalism it had once been famed for. Even at the point of writing this article, September 2018, a mere six months before the UK is set to leave the EU on 29 March 2019, the future is unclear, the mood in the nation either despairing (the Remainers), despondent (the 3 million EU Citizens in the UK) or blusteringly aggressive (many of the Leavers). And for this particular EU citizen, living and working in the UK for the past 20 years, a once beloved country has become a rather strange place that does not quite feel like home anymore. The texts discussed in this article might amuse us as they carry their political content lightly. But they also do just what Baroness Hornsey asks for – they make us think. In an era of post-truths and alternative

facts, of election campaigns being run on barefaced lies, of politicians going unchecked – surely it is that very ‘poke’, that little ‘nudge’ that is needed, that encouragement to switch off from the media discourse and think for ourselves.

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