

# Grace Lavery at the University of Edinburgh

She's the *enfant terrible* of Trans academia, described in her book as "the David Bowie of Californian English professors." Grace Lavery is at the University of Edinburgh to promote her memoir, *Please Miss: a heartbreaking work of staggering penis*, and like Bowie, the book constitutes in its diversity of styles and switches of voice a marmite quality you'll either love or be bewildered by. This is not to question the book's value; it is in parts beautiful, hilarious, and poignant, as well as sometimes oblique: a mould-breaking series of self-reflections in other words, unlike the other, 'straighter' memoirs that largely make up the trans biographical canon. Prepare, then, to disorientate and depart from the linear trans life-story, and so too the cagily respectable one-woman show. Grace, unlike *Please Miss* with its multiple metaphors, is an open book and a brilliantly responsive improviser to her audience.

At the UoE talk, shared with the laid-back suaveness of the chair Lindsay of the Lighthouse Books team, the auditorium is full and the carefully be-spaced audience laugh and applaud Grace's free-flowing sharpness and self-deprecating humour. This includes her fabulously kinaesthetic reading of the 'Trans-Woman-As-Alien' homage from her book, and her rapid onset of spinning good yarns. Grace and Lindsay bond quickly over their mutual inability to summarize the book in a few short words, with Grace waving her hand, "My complete failure to describe the book in fact is not a bad descriptor of the book." Perhaps if there is a guiding theme it is of the memoir as partly a response to the media narrative of trans people hating their bodies. The playfully constructed *Please Miss* is Grace's rejoinder, with its focus on the sex and sexiness of the trans body, as a celebration of "trans joy." Another

driver is the desire to create a queer text – and therefore a convention-busting one – that switches font and tone because transition is all about such switches. The body of the text, then, as trans female body, one that captures the ethos of Oscar Wilde, never settling on one thing but expressing itself via complex and contradictory multiplicities, and doing so with Wildean elan.

As both an organizer and an increasingly seduced audience member, I sit and watch Grace Lavery in awe and with love as the talk continues. Rarely does a 60-minute talk go so quickly, a good and bad thing. Grace's sincerity, channelled through her hyperactive mind and charismatic conversation, rewards us early with her tale of a robbery of an Edinburgh McDonalds hashbrowns gone wrong, before she gets down to analysis and shares her counter-narrative about the 'transition' story: "Everything that's interesting and worthwhile and worth affirming about transitioning ... takes place in the strangeness of transition, not in its capacity to harmonize or normalize or neutralize our feelings of intensity or antagonism." The strangeness and surrealism include a darkness too, of course. An audience member asks Grace for her survival strategies in the face of online abuse that Grace is well-known for bearing. The online campaigns against her have included sex photos of her and her husband hacked from her account and sent to her boss and to her mother. "I'm sometimes scared," Grace confides. With this fear, though, is her recognition that what happens online is a distortion of the real world, in which the hate and hostility are generally absent. She came to the UK uncertain what to expect, she says, expecting a Beatlemania of 'gender-critical' hatred, but all she has seen so far is a single woman handing her a piece of paper in a Manchester book-signing talk, asking her if 'woman' is being erased by the existence of people like Grace. Judging by the number of women in this UoE audience who are loving Grace with every passing minute, the absurdity of the notion is never clearer.

In the blink of an eye, the talk ends, and concerning *Please Miss*, there are some parts of the book which shall remain a mystery (the book's recurring clown scenes, what do they mean? I think I might know, though I'm not even sure if Grace knows, or whether she wants to know). We all leave this warm and electrifying space with its unsolved plethora of mysteries and maybe a single shared sentiment left to offer the wonderful Grace Lavery: Please Miss, give us more.

By Gina Maya

*Grace's talk, organized in a collaboration between the UoE's Staff Pride Network and Lighthouse Books, can be seen at the Lighthouse Books youtube channel:*

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<https://www.ginamaya.co.uk/theatre/grace-lavery-at-the-university-of-edinburgh.html>