

Salon talk for debut novelist

Literature

REFERENDUM fever served as both inspiration and hindrance for writer Kellan MacInnes when he made the decision to set his debut novel in the build up to 2014's big vote.

He will be talking to the Highland Literary Salon on Tuesday about his work, *The Making of Mickey Bell*.

Published by Dingwall's Sandstone Press, much of his book is set in the Highlands as HIV-positive Mickey – "a benefits scrounger from Glasgow" with a serious Munro-bagging habit – literally heads for the hills when trouble hits.

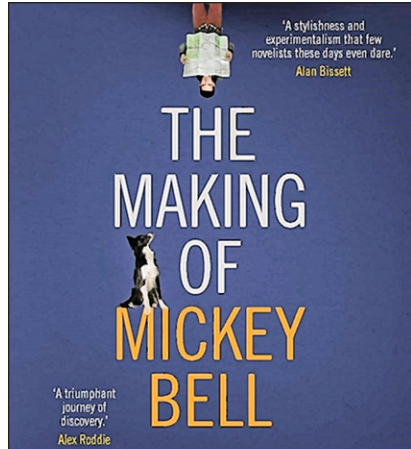
And for Kellan – who will also hold a writing workshop before his author talk – the return of the referendum to the political agenda, is ironic.

His book always had the referendum as its backdrop – which caused a few tweaks on publication. And subsequent political upheaval from the fall-out of the Brexit poll and moves towards another independence vote have meant further tweaks in the edit.

"I'd had some ideas for a novel and by the end of the two weeks, I had 60,000 words and the bones of Mickey Bell.

"That was back in 2013, so I was actually writing about a referendum that hadn't happened yet.

"Fast forward – my book was accepted by Sandstone in 2015 but would take a year to publish. We were editing in May 2016 and then the whole Brexit



The cover of Kellan's debut novel.



Kellan MacInnes's debut novel takes inspiration from the independence referendum and his own experiences as a gay man living with HIV.

thing came up and the second Scottish referendum idea went live.

"So at that point we took out any date references to the referendum and the book being set in 2014.

"But now it could almost be read as a book about a second referendum!

"Mickey Bell is a sort of Scottish everyman – and his journey to becoming more independent mirrors Scotland's journey.

"But it can also just be read as a boy meets boy romance as well. Or just a kind of adventure story."

In the book, Mickey is a gay man living, like Kellan, with HIV – so did it take courage to reveal that?

"I've always been open about my HIV status. My family and friends all know and to an extent I sort of addressed that in my first non-fiction book Caleb's List," said Kellan.

That book was subtitled "Climbing The Scottish Mountains Visible from Arthur's Seat" and was nominated for 2013's Saltire Society First Scottish Book Award.

Kellan said: "What is important is that by writing more about HIV it maybe breaks down some of the stigma.

"I worked for one of Scotland's leading HIV charities. Quite a lot of that experience there was working for clients of the charities and that fed into the book as well."

Some of the characters bear a passing resemblance to people in the public eye – and appearing as themselves are Hollywood's Bette Davis and mountain writer Alex Reddie.

Kellan said: "But other than those appearing as themselves, it's just bits of different people and different experiences put together.

"At the end of the day it's fiction. And it's all made up."

■ **Kellan addresses the Highland Literary Salon at the Glen Mhor Hotel, Inverness on Tuesday from 6.30pm (writers' workshop) and 7.30pm for the author's talk. The Making Of Mickey Bell (Sandstone £8.99) is available now. More: www.sandstonepress.com**

Mickey Bell is a sort of Scottish everyman – and his journey to becoming more independent mirrors Scotland's journey

Kellan MacInnes

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Record is a snapshot of 50 years of Scottish folk

Album

REVIEW: Sensus The Producer's Choice Battlefield Band Temple Records COMD2108

WHEN the sleeve notes on this career-spanning compilation declare that the past membership of Battlefield Band reads like a Who's Who of Scottish music, there is absolutely no exaggeration.

The list of Battlefield veterans is extensive.

It includes John McCusker and Alasdair White, both of whom were recruited as teenage prodigies, Karine Polwart, the late Davy Steele, Sylvia Barnes and such masters of the pipes as Iain MacDonald, Dougie Pincock and Tain's Duncan MacGillivray.

And not forgetting multi-instrumentalist Brian McNeill, who found his enviable form as a songwriter while a member of the Batties – and the man who was a mainstay of the band for four decades of its 48-year history, Alan Reid.

Even with a healthy 72-minute running time, selecting tracks to represent the musical legacy of what is now a Scottish folk institution would be a potentially



The Battlefield Band.

daunting task.

Fortunately the task of picking the 19 tracks for this album, which celebrates the Batties' induction into the Scottish Traditional Music Hall of Fame, goes to the man who knows their music best, the group's long-serving producer and manager, and former member of the Boys of the Lough, Robin Morton.

Any long-term listener to the Batties would have their own list of tracks to include (for what it's worth McNeill's lovely "Bnoching about the road" song Snobhs of France and Holland would have

been on my must include list).

But nobody would quibble too much about the man who knows the band's music inside and out making his selection of personal highlights.

In a nice touch, he also uses each track to highlight each of the 19 members of the Battlefield Band he has recorded with over the years.

Some of his selections, like Irish comic song *The Bachelor*, show their age, but others, especially those adrenaline pumping instrumental sets, show just how far ahead of the curve Battlefield Band were.

They still sound as fresh and lively today, and guarantee to set toes tapping.

Then there are the gentler moments like McCusker's *Leaving Friday Harbor*, which is a little thing of beauty in its own right.

This record is more than just a portrait of one band's evolution – with the most recent incarnation of Sean O'Donnell, Mike Katz, Ewen Henderson and Alasdair White maintaining those high standards.

This is also a decent snapshot of Scottish folk music over almost half a century viewed through the prism of one incredibly influential band.

CM

Letters inspire interactive play

Theatre

A SIT-down session that took place last week will provide inspiration for a new interactive play that explores people's most important relationship – with themselves.

Letters to Myself, which comes to Eden Court in Inverness on Wednesday, uses real letters and contributions from the public to tell a story of people trying to find themselves.

And at the Mobile Living Room session last Wednesday playwright and producer Becci Sharrock sat down with Invernessians to help them tell their stories in preparation for next week's show.

"It was an absolute joy," she explained. "It's a bit scary when you put yourself out there in a venue, hoping that people will engage in what you're doing, but everyone was great and really happy to stop and talk and I met a really wide range of people.

"I don't think people know straight away what they're going to write about but we often talk about general advice or the idea of letter writing.

"I met a lovely woman who told me she'd recently been back in touch with people she'd met when she evacuated aged four or five, and now, decades later, they were writing letters to each other."

The play is still looking for

contributions, and anybody can take part by going to www.letterstomyself.org.uk

"The most important thing is to be completely honest with yourself," she said.

"We would rather you write a really honest letter and then decide that you don't want to send it in than have the worry about that prevent them from writing the letter altogether.

"It's about making time to have a conversation with yourself and enjoying that."

■ **Letters to Myself is at Eden Court's OneTouch Theatre on Wednesday from 8pm. To book tickets, go to www.eden-court.co.uk**

Powerful new tracks 'a delight'

Live music

REVIEW: Kathryn Joseph Inverness Cathedral Hall ★★★★★

WITH its DIY feel and half-time tea, crisps and juice, Monday's Inverness gig staged by the Get In project's young promoters contrasted with the brilliance of Kathryn Joseph and support acts.

The basketball hoop high above the musicians added a touch of the surreal to a night that slam-dunked the showcasing of talents – all very individual and not afraid to go their own way.

In her set, Kathryn told the audience that at an earlier gig on the tour, a mirrorball had unexpectedly creaked into life in the venue, continuing to spin through the music.

"So just imagine that," she grinned, casting the spell so you heard it too.

The night in Inverness Cathedral Hall was sprinkled with that kind of eerie magic.

Jacob Reid from Forres conjured an orchestra of strings out of his guitar by looping many different effects – playing it with a fiddle bow, strumming, finger-picking and ghosting harmonics.

Twenty minutes in, he added a poet friend's barely-heard words about seasons passing, trying to



Kathryn Joseph.

forget a lost love "because this is what I do now".

Chloe Rodgers and Nicky Murray's set reminded of the kind of beauty that can come out of raw, unfussy arrangements, whether they are sets of tunes on guitar and fiddle, such as the one featuring Chloe's favourite bulldog – Bree And Me – or voice, fiddle and piano as we got in Winter More showcasing Nicky's husky, sometimes John Martynesque vocal.

After a break, Kathryn and percussion-meister and producer Marcus Mackay walked onto the familiar set they create for gigs, candles (safe, artificial ones there), a thick rug under Marcus's drumkit with electronic gadgets and

Inverness-born Kathryn's upright piano and tiny three-legged stool. Business as usual for the duo, in other words.

But the set offered a good chance to catch up on how the music has been evolving with the promise of new songs and a second album on its way.

The drama and sinister, spellbinding power of the songs from her debut album, *Bones* you have thrown me and blood I have spilled, has only grown more intense.

From *The Bird*, on to *The Blood* – with its keening mantra "Your baby's here" – we got *The Outtakes*, *The Why What, Baby*, and *The Bone* with its gripping crescendo.

Then it was on to the almost cooing, child's voice Kathryn broke out for *The Crow*, heart of the set *The Mouth*, the Good and straight into the Weary.

Throughout, Kathryn gently rocked on her stool, the voice going from little girl to devastated whisper, big raw surge to cracked-voiced sorceress.

And the range of moods Kathryn can create in her performance is as wide as ever – the tools are still an unflinching glare, impish smiles, flirtatious gazes and, at times, a look of devastated sorrow – all of which raked across Monday's rapt audience.

The intensity of the experience as she sat side on to the crowd in

front of her piano, contrasted with her knowing humour revealed in between-song chat.

Referring to the f*** words that pop up in her lyrics, Kathryn grinned: "This is the first night there haven't been children – I've been having to try to muffle my 'f***s'."

And earlier Kathryn told the crowd how much she had been enjoying the tour, her very individual humour echoing the dark heart of the music, as she told the audience: "I'm already unhinged with love which is a bit disturbing but nice!"

The almost psychic connection between Kathryn and Marcus was echoed in his choice of perfect musical accompaniment for each song – from a fiddle-bowed cymbal screaming softly in *The Bone*, to brushes or felt-headed drumsticks applied as appropriate to the drums and cymbals, or a big bassy surge of electronica to throb under Kathryn's piano melodies.

The singer revealed she'd end the set with new songs – one being the now-popular *The Mountain* whose lyrics suggest a Scandi-drama plot of their own.

And the good news is, the new songs – unnamed or introduced by Kathryn as with the rest of the set – are as powerful and dark as their Scottish album of the year-winning predecessors.

They were a tantalising taster enhanced by that creaking mirrorball.

MC



Kathryn Joseph's new tracks are as "powerful and dark" as their award-winning predecessors.

'Gripping' Faslane heads to chapel

SCOTLAND'S uneasy relationship with its nuclear arsenal – and the base that hosts it – is to be explored in a new one-woman play.

The award-winning Faslane – written, directed, and performed by Jenna Watt – will come to Eden Court on Monday as part of a tour of Scotland, England and Sweden.

The show focuses on Jenna's connections with the military base – drawing on the experiences of family who worked there and friends who protested outside its gates – and will attempt to delve into the personal struggle of taking a stance on such a divisive issue.

Debating at the 2016 Edinburgh Festival Fringe, the play scooped a coveted Scotsman Fringe First award. It has also won praise from critics, with the Scotsman calling it "exceptional... fascinating, and completely gripping", while the Edinburgh Festivals Magazine hailed Watt's "intelligent creativity" and said her performance kept the audience "gripped".

Faslane – also known as Her Majesty's Naval Base Clyde – is situated 40 miles outside Glasgow, and is home to the UK's nuclear missile programme Trident.

■ **Faslane comes to the chapel at Eden Court on Monday, March 20 at 7.30pm. To book tickets, which cost £12 per seat, go to www.eden-court.co.uk or call the Eden Court box office on 01463 234 234.**



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