I'm drawn to strong women'

Writer ADELLA STRIPE talks to Neil Mudd about her latest works celebrating working-class heroines who have battled against hardship

EXCEPTIONAL working-class women provide the heart-beat of Adelle Stripe's fiction.

The late Bolshie Bradford dramatist Andrea Dunbar, whose bitter brief story is retold in her debut novel Black Teeth and a Brilliant Smile, is one.

Mary Mudd — not a relative of mine — is another. She's Stripe's maternal great-great-great-grandmother and subject of The Humber Star, the poet's collaboration with Icelandic composer Halldor Smarason.

As we convene at the neat Victorian terraced home Stripe shares with writer Ben Myers and Cliff the Wonderdog in Yorkshire's Calder Valley, I notice that the date inscribed above the door outside is 1897. Inside, it is airy and modern. As in her writing, Stripe maintains a foot in each era.

She's a generous interviewee, agreeable to seeing a book or record from the shelves to illustrate a point. Her enthusiasm is contagious, so much so that three hours pass before either one of us realises.

Black Teeth and a Brilliant Smile began as autobiography, the result of nearly four years' painstaking research during which Stripe amassed hours of interviews and boxes of cuttings, play scripts, photographs and personal letters embroidered with Dunbar's curt-estate life were catnip to a media network existing in Bradford at the time. The London's Royal Court theatre produced The Arbor and its ribald follow-up, Rita, Sue and Bob Too.

The unflattering depictions of council-estate life were catnip to a media tutting Thatcherite class separation. The fallout was poisonous.

"The press called Dunbar 'a genius straight from the slums,'" says Stripe, "which I felt took away from what she really was."

"She was an incredibly warm and honest woman but she refused to sugar the pill. People resonated for that, particularly in Bradford."

Both fested among metropolitan literary circles and door-stepped back home by journalists keen to stoke north-south antagonism, Dunbar buckled under the weight of her acclaim and notoriety. The conventional wisdom is that her life was a tragedy waiting to happen. Stripe disagrees. "She expressed incredible hope," she says. "It just wasn't a very convenient narrative."

Hope and adversity intertwine The Humber Star which features Stripe's real-life ancestor Mary Mudd who — like Dunbar — raised three children single-handedly and understood the meaning of hardship. It poignantly brings to a close the narrative begun by Beyond the Silver Pit, Stripe's epic tone poem meditation on Mary's husband Matthew, lost to a storm at sea in 1894.

"It's a lament, halfway between poetry and prose," Stripe explains. "I was interested in the resilience of women in the 19th century. Not only did they have to cope with grief but they also had to support the family. I'd like to think the defiant spirit of Hull women began here."

Stripe travelled to Iceland to work with Smarason, who had previously transposed Beyond the Silver Pit's words into music.

At Sigulfjordur's Herring Era Museum near the Arctic Circle, she learned to gut fish, experiencing first-hand women's working conditions at the time. She became fascinated by traditional Icelandic jerseys, known as ganseys.

"Each village along the coast has its own unique motif, used to identify men who have fallen overboard. One particular gansey pattern, The Humber Star, resonated with me."

Stripe's formidable grandmother, a devout Jehovah's Witness, provided the link. A champion knitter in her youth, she was also the catalyst to Stripe's fascination with Matthew and Mary whose names stood out on a framed family tree.

As a child, Stripe trailed after her grandmother round record offices, historical archives and libraries across east Yorkshire. "She had two interests," laughs Stripe, "God and genealogy."

The Humber Star was a way for Stripe to channel her grief at the death of her mother. "She suggested I write it," says Stripe, "nursing the memory. "When she died, it got to be a relief to escape into that world."

With its Nordic resonances, the piece is a key part of musician John Grant's North Atlantic Flux festival for Hull UK City of Culture 2017. Local poet Vicky Foster will read Mary's words when The Humber Star is performed at Jubilee Church in Hull.

"It feels right to be hearing a woman say those words," says Stripe. "After all, I'm drawn to strong women."

The Humber Star will be performed by Sinfonia UK Collective at John Grant's North Atlantic Flux festival on Saturday April 29 at Jubilee Church in Hull. Details: hull2017.co.uk. Black Teeth and a Brilliant Smile is being wreathched by Wrecking Ball Press in July.