

INTERVIEW

'I'm drawn to strong women'

Writer ADELLE 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-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, prone to seizing 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 biography, 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 cursive scrawl.

Her school report comes from the time when teachers said what they meant and meant what they said: "Andrea is not God!" wrote one. "She will have to deal with this fact."

Wandering Bradford's once-notori-

ous Buttershaw estate — the loam for Dunbar's fraught narratives — and talking with people who knew her best, Stripe realised that her intended biography was in fact a novel.

"I love Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* and Gordon Burn's book about the Yorkshire Ripper is one of my favourite books of all time," she tells me. It's a cruel twist that the book should share its DNA with such celebrated accounts of the male propensity for brutality.

"Andrea suffered appalling domestic violence," Stripe explains. "But it was when she turned up at the women's refuge, with only her baby and a plastic bag containing a handwritten version of her play *The Arbor*, that her life began to change. That's the story I wanted to tell."

Petitioned by actress Liane Aukin, alerted to Dunbar via radical feminist networks existing in Bradford at the time, 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 touting Thatcherite class separatism. The fall-out was poisonous.

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

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

Both feted 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 interweave *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 Siglufjordur'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 in Hull.

"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



Pic: Dave Lindsay

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," she says, 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 published by Wrecking Ball Press in July.

ALBUM ROUND-UP WITH IAN SINCLAIR

Craig Finn
We All Want the Same Things
(Partisan Records)
★★★★☆



THE THIRD solo album from Craig Finn, frontman of US rock'n'roll heroes The Hold Steady, is arguably his best yet.

Finn has written 10 beautifully crafted short stories dealing with the mysteries of love, drug deals and the struggle just to get by in 21st-century America — think Bruce Springsteen singing the Richmond Fontaine song-book.

With its catchy-as-hell flute riff, lead single *Preludes* is an enthralling tale of returning to your hometown after college where "things had progressed and got strange."

Jester & June, equally as compelling, opens with squealing brass.

Best of all, though, is the record's centrepiece, the spoken-word *God in Chicago*.

With shades of Van Morrison's *Coney Island*, Finn tells a heartbreaking tale of a dead friend and unfinished business "roughly the size of a baseball."

Staggeringly good.

Sodastream
Little by Little
(Sodastream Music)
★★★★☆



ACTIVE from 1996-2007, Australian indie-folk duo Sodastream released four albums, were endorsed by John Peel and toured Europe, the United States and Japan.

Ten years later and they are back with *Little by Little*, a classy set of literate pop songs that make their home somewhere between the work of their fellow critically acclaimed countrymen the Go-Betweens and indie darlings Belle and Sebastian.

With the core of the music created by Pete Cohen's double bass and Karl Smith's lead vocals and acoustic guitar, *Moving* and the Mountain Goats-sounding single *Three*

Sins — apparently about paedophilic Catholic priests — add some stirring strings to the mix.

Elsewhere, the first couple of minutes of the electrified *Tyre Iron* sound like an orchestra tuning up before the track leaps into gear and builds a memorable momentum.

Infused with some beautiful melodies, these are songs to fall in love with.

sir Was
Digging a Tunnel
(City Slang)
★★★★☆



THE DEBUT album from producer Joel Westberg, *Digging a Tunnel* is a superior slice of laid-back hip-hop-influenced electronica.

Having studied jazz saxophone in his native Sweden and played in Mali and South Africa, Westberg plays nearly every instrument except for Bompom's woozy harmonica and the bagpipes on the blissful *A Minor Life*.

He cites a bewildering range of influences, including My Bloody Valentine, The Beatles, Sly and the Family Stone, Thomas Mapfumo and the jazz-fusion group Mahavishnu Orchestra.

The songs, full of immersive

noises and layers, sound great.

There are field recordings of maracas playing in Mexico and flutes and birdsong on the organic closer *Sunsets* *Sunrises*.

But, like much of the glut of indietronica music overrunning Bandcamp right now, while the record is clearly the work of a talented individual it won't set the world of popular music on fire.