

# Scots Warks: Susi Briggs

Author, storyteller and performer

## Why is literacy low amongst Scots speakers?

Well, I think why literacy is low among Scots speakers is down to the fact that we are not taught it formally in school. The only thing that is taught formally in school for reading and writing is English. To paraphrase Michael Dempster's Ted Talk you grow up to the age of about five and you get to know that this is your eye, your mouth, your nose, your ears, your fingers and then you go to school and you get told that's your eye, your nose, your mouth, your ears and so on. They tell you the proper words and by using the word properly it kind of dings down how you feel about your own language and you think, well what is that that I am speaking at home then?

It is less so these days that you hear that kind of narrative in schools, they are a lot more positive about Scots language. Generations and generations of people have come before that have no idea that they are even speaking a language, they just think it's a corrupted English or it's slang or simply an accent. And yet we are expected to celebrate it every January and understand it.

I think it was always considered that Scots is an oral language and it is a dying language. It's not dying. If you open your ears and you listen in doctors waiting rooms, buses, bus stops, cafes. If you actually opened your ears you would hear it all the time. I mean, I've been told by somebody speaking Scots "It's a dead language now, dae ye no ken that?" (Laughs) Really? It is kind of sad but it is down to the fact that they do not have that awareness about their language that it actually exists. It doesn't help that newspapers are still flinging out articles about "Is Scots a language?" It is! It's a fact! It's not even up for debate.

## How did your journey to Scots literacy begin?

My journey to Scots literacy began probably about 2011. I had been writing a lot of stories in English for weans and one of them was called "The Wee Sleepy Sheepy" and the only Scots word in that was the word "Wee" and I thought that was a fairly universal word. I think it is. It is used in a lot of countries the word "wee" to describe something small. So I had sent The Wee Sleepy Sheepy to lots and lots of different publishers and it kept getting rejected. It takes a long time for them to look at and then tell you if they don't want it. One day I got the

story back with a rejection letter that said “We will publish your story if you omit the Scottish flavour.” Something was lit up inside o me that had been lying dormant. It wis always there but it had been lying dormant and I suddenly realised the absolute ignorance that existed aroon the wey I spoke. That wee “Wee” word became muckle important in that moment. I wish I kept the letter but I ripped it up and in sheer defiance I took all o my stories that I had written in English, cos it wis the only language I wis taught tae read and write in. I took oot aw the files and I sat wi a very small English Scots dictionary and started translatin them aw intae Scots. I had no idea if they wid ever get published in that wey. At the time the only Scots language publications I could see fer weans were the ones Itchy Coe were putting oot. They were absolutely braw. The first book I ever saw wis the “Hoose at Poohs Nuek” translation by James Robertson at Itchy Coe books. And I loved that. It meant I could understand the Scots without having tae grab a dictionary every five minutes cos it wis a story I wis familiar with. And it’s the same wi “The Eejits” Roald Dahl wi Matthew Fitt. I absolutely love Roald Dahl. I love The Twits. One o my favourite children’s books and tae read it in the language that I spoke wis an absolute delight.

There wis a reading bus that wis set up in the toon centre and I went there wi my wean. There wis a lady, well, two ladies that were lookin at the books and the lady had said “Oh that’s just gobbledegook, how can anyone ever understand that?” And I realised something had tae change. Why can’t we read oor ain words in books that are fun and engaging and interesting? Why can’t we? Are we tae be consigned tae translations are we no allowed tae write anything original? So that is when I decided I wid try my hand at it.

## **How did Nip Nebs come about?**

Well, my first book Nip Nebs came about through The Wee Sleepy Sheepy which I had mentioned before. So while I wis translating aw those English stories I had written and translatin them intae Scots there wis one story called “The Last Berry”.

An original story and the original character there wis nae Nip Nebs in it. But I wis translatin the “The Last Berry” and the opening lines of “The Last Berry” are “it was a cold frosty morning in Jeannie’s garden.”

And I went lookin for a translation for the words frost and cold. I discovered these beautiful words like Skinklan, and Shockle and Crumshie. Glisk. Aw these beautiful words and they were like treasure in my mooth and I said them. I had never seen these words before and I thought this is my language but I never use them! Why am I no using them? So, I pulled them aw together aw these beautiful words for frost and ice and I wis minded on o my

childhood in my council hoose where the frost wis on the inside o the windaes. Going for frosty walks wi my dad and my dad telling me tae about Jack Frost and ye better put warm socks oan or he will nip yer taes. I wis always fascinated by ice and that skinklan frosty morning ye get, the glisk o forests and ferns on the windaes o the cars. Well no so much these days wi the hooses but back then in the early eighties. I just pulled it aw taegither as a sort o poem. I showed it tae Ruthie Redden my dear dear friend. Scots isnae her first language at all, she didn't fully understand it. She read it, she felt it and she wanted tae paint Nip Nebs. Nip Nebs is Jack Frost cos he nips yer neb, blew ye mind there eh? She did these gorgeous illustrations of Nip Nebs. (Shows a page in the book) There he is strinkling icy draps oan the speeder webs. Isn't he beautiful? And while the words arenae strictly sort of what we say every day I wanted tae put these treasures taegither and create this beautiful book and it's paid off. I am hoping the next generation will take these beautiful treasured words and yaise them.

## How do you inspire young speakers?

I try tae inspire young speakers of Scots and also young speakers of any language that Scots has validity and has beauty and is really worth exploring and owning fer yersel. No matter where ye come fae. Ye can be a New Scot enjoyin it. I've done this through writing ma books and I've done that through going tae schools daein author visits and events. When I dae these events I sometimes dae the Nip Nebs Trail where I bring along Nip Nebs himself and we have a three dimensional trail where we have the Spicket and the Shockles. We have the windaes so we can paint glisks o forests and ferns oan. We have a big muckle speeder web where we can strinkle icy draps oan. Ye will see a lot o that if ye go tae my website. Ye will see pictures o that. The weans just absolutely love it cos they are being taken on a physical adventure. I am no academic masel but I have been telt by folk that when yer holding something and yer learning the word fer it it is mair likely tae gan in and be understood. So a wean haudin a shackle and hingin it aff a spicket they learn that that is an icicle being hung aff a tap. And the other thing I dae as part o the Nip Nebs Trail but also if the Nip Nebs Trail's no happening and it is just me visiting a schuil I bring along my wee Scots Word Pixies and here is a couple o them here. They get hidden aroon the playgrun or the class room and the kids get tae fin them which is really exciting. We aw like tae play hide and seek. They aw have wee tags. These pixies are featured in the illustrations o the books done by Ruthie Redden. So they are keekin in and oot o the bushes and the windaes and the leaves and stuff. They are they're part o the illustrations. So these wee Scots Word Pixies they can hang oan tae things and they have a wee tag and each wee tag, there's a

word on it. So this pixie is cawed Shoogle one o my favourite words. The words tend tae come fae the books so they have got an understandin from the pictures. And I say tae them when they fin the pixie “so what dis the word “Shoogle” mean?” By that time they understand it. They have heard the story, they have seen the pictures and we have had a discussion and they have went off tae fin the pixies and so I say “Whit dis Shoogle mean?” and they know it means “Shake”.

This yin is cawed “Lugs”. Lugs are yer ears. They get tae fin oot these wee hings, and it’s something tangible, it is something tae haud. Usually when I dae an author visit I make ten o them and they get left behin fer the teacher tae yaise again and again.

## **Who has inspired and supported you?**

The people that inspire me are writers like Matthew Fitt, James Roberston, Sheena Blackhall, Hamish Henderson, Billy Kay, Derrick McClure. There’s loads o writers. Ross Sayers, there’s Anne Donovan, there’s loads o writers and I just love aw their work. I drink it aw in an it micht no be in the dialect that I yaise but I enjoy it aw the same. There is a whole range o writers and books that I have and I am collecting them up aw the time. In the early days I wis very inspired by books like Blethertoun Braes and King o the Midden. Absolutely loved them funny wee poems that just fair tickled me. I am a big wean at heart so children’s books are something I love. I think the people that have been very supportive have been people like Dr Michael Dempster from the Scots Language Centre. If I am ever stuck wi something I gie him a shout and he is always very helpful. He has helped me navigate the Scots language world and where tae find the best information. Things like that.

## **How do we deal with dialect differences?**

It exists and it is important tae recognise and celebrate that diversity. If yer daen any writing be it poetry or writing for articles or whatever, find yer voice. Be consistent with yer voice. There is nae point writing in Doric then swippin ower tae Glaswegian because that wid be really difficult tae understand and read. I mean ye could dae it but mibbes it wid be a bit messy. So it is about being consistent and listen tae yer ain voice and gie it a go. I dae want tae cover how you’ve written in your book Callum and the Mountain. It is a very natural organic way. You haven’t deliberately picked something oot the air. If there is a Scottish word that is gonnae express what ye want tae express in yer writing then yaise it. Ye dinna hae tae be exclusively one thing or another so I think that is important tae remember as well.

## Where do you like to see Scots used?

I feel empowered seeing my language used in newspapers, in articles online. I love tae see modern books coming oot that are imaginative like “Daisy on the Outer Line” by Ross Sayers. “Sonny and Me” Books by Alan Bissett “The Moira Monologues” which are absolutely hilarious and his new novella Lazy Susan which is really quite a fascinating ride. And I keep coming back tae the story anthology not necessarily fer children, the book “A Tongue in yer Heid” a book edited by James Robertson. I love reading. I love reading my language in aw it’s forms. The more visibility we have wi Scots, whether it’s in a children’s book. Whether it’s in expressing yerself on social media yaisin yer Scots. Whether it’s articles for Parliament. As long as it visible, wherever it is seen it legitimises and it validates the voice we speak wi. And it is really important cos the voice ye speak with it should be validated so we can clearly communicate wi each other as people and no be dinging each other doon.

I’ve said it before our voice, the wey we write, the wey we read is a beautiful and valid way tae communicate just like any other language oan this bonnie birlin planet.

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