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Highland Flings and CAN CANs: Dances with Recommendation
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Highland Flings and CAN CANs: Dances with Recommendation Culture

Abstract

This article is built upon the unusual conceit of reading books, novellas and short stories with the same title: *Highland Fling*. Within the history of reading as well as studies of current readership, the cultural, sociological and economic practices of how readers discover, are recommended, and consume their next title have received much attention. This article records an autoethnographic adventure of choosing to repeatedly read books with the same title. It unfolds aspects of twenty-first century reading, publishing (including self-publishing) and bookselling practices, as well as addressing constructions of Scottishness within a series of texts and genres. Reading *Highland Flings* – a dance with recommendation culture – has been an exercise in both randomised and over-directed reading, a foray into Scottishness, genre and cliché, and an exploration of originality, authenticity, and stereotype. The article also proposes a conceptual approach to repeated reading of the same title (CAN CAN), and the (COVID-19 generated) method of the Ullapoolist *research fling*.

‘it had all started as a kind of joke, an experiment’
– *The Gift* by Barbara Browning (2017)¹

The origins of this project lie in a drunken conversation, towards the end of the Christmas 2020 meeting of my Glasgow-based book group – held on Zoom, of course.² Every Christmas, we read a book which is a little more mass-market and/or light-hearted than our normal fare. In 2020, a couple of the group members – big fans of the *Outlander* book and TV series – persuaded the rest of the group that it was time for us to read Diana Gabaldon’s first book in the series (1991).³ We duly did, discussed all aspects of the title, including its

constructions of Jacobite history, the attractions of Scottish masculinity, and its usage of Gaelic. I recounted that the sculpture outside my office window at the University of Stirling (affectionately dubbed #StirWilly for its phallic dimensions) had appeared in one of the episodes when the University was masquerading as Inverness College, based in the Highlands city.⁴ Then Emma Baird, a member of my book group and one of the initial Gabaldon fans, detailed how *Outlander* contributed to the characterisation of her own self-published chick-lit novel, *Highland Fling* (2019):⁵ the love interest in the novel is the spitting image of Sam Heughan, the actor who plays the love interest Jamie in the TV adaptation of *Outlander*.

Over the Christmas holidays, having enjoyed my foray into *Outlander* (I share the heroine's name and liked her acerbic first-person commentary as well as the galloping plot and racy scenes) and – to be candid – at a bit of a loss what to do under renewed COVID-19 lockdown circumstances – I decided to read my friend's *Highland Fling*. I logged into the Kobo site to search for the title, to find to my great delight a whole troupe of *Highland Fling* titles dancing alongside my friend's. One of these was another book written by someone I know from the Scottish writing community: Sara Sheridan's *Highland Fling* (2020).⁶ Amused by this conjunction, I paid for and downloaded Emma's version, and ordered a print copy of Sara's to read subsequently.

The article that follows thus details what happened when, in the depths of the second COVID-19 lockdown, I began reading books, novellas and short stories all with the same title: *Highland Fling*. In choosing to repeatedly read books with the same title, I took an autoethnographic adventure into aspects of twenty-first century reading, publishing (including self-publishing) and bookselling practices, as well as constructions and clichés of Scottishness. My *Highland Fling* project is also – quite candidly – an example of 'very bad research'⁷ and dodgy method, but I also make the argument over the course of this article that they represent a *research fling*, a general reader and academic crossover project that aligns with the Ullapoolism manifesto principles of 'PLAYFULISM', 'AMATEURISM RAPIDISM' and 'SATIRE'.⁸

As such, my Highland Flings reading is autoethnographic in approach, drawing on the previous work of scholars of reading such as Janice A. Radway who, in her introduction to *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-*

Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire (1997), discusses how the ‘original impulse behind [the] book [...] had something to do with my own imperfect conversion to the secular religion of great literature’. She continues:

My conversion was imperfect, I suspect, not only because I selected popular culture as my area of specialization but also because I continued to harbor a secret but suppressed desire to read in a less cerebral, less aesthetically focused way than the one I was taught in graduate school.⁹

Radway discusses her memories of reading a particular tranche of Book-of-the-Month club books as a child with a serious illness, constrained to:

that bed with its hospital bars [...] a way to dissolve the plaster, to shatter its inflexible solidity, to fight back against its imprisonment, and to breathe the airs of other worlds because I could not expand my own lungs deeply enough to take in my own.¹⁰

Radway’s prompt to non-professionalised reading, and as the imprisoned childhood reader, has its resonances for my project. The bars of COVID-19 have been a little more metaphorical, but the possibilities for reading as escape, for the ‘airs of other worlds’, just as strongly felt. The research which led to this article meant putting myself in the position of a reader, although that position is then scaffolded via the scholarly approaches of Ullapoolism.

‘Ullapoolism’ is the conceptual school I have established with my research partner Beth Driscoll. Named after the site of our earliest fieldwork in the north-west of Scotland (i.e. the Highlands), Ullapoolism is, as we unfold in ‘The Epistemology of Ullapoolism: Making Mischief from Within Contemporary Book Cultures’ (2020), a ‘post-data, activist, autoethnographic epistemology’. Its creative critique, satirical approach and playful experimentalism produces situated knowledge, which we have thus far applied principally to contemporary book cultures, our home discipline, though we believe it has wider resonance. We identified a ‘rigidity [...] limit[ing] existing theoretical frameworks for the study of book cultures, and a paucity in existing research modes – including

those from literary sociology, the digital humanities and cultural analytics – that collect, count and model book cultures.’¹¹ This identification, and a literal autoethnographic road trip to Ullapool, led us to a series of ‘Make-and-Do’ experiments, including the creation of board and card games based on book festivals; a series of meditations on print and digital materiality (which also involved bespoke pyjamas); and various explorations of the Frankfurt Book Fair, the publishing industry’s biggest trade event.¹² Ullapoolism’s manifesto principles animate the research approach and intervention of this article, and of my *Highland Flings* project. I argue that this Ullapoolist approach is particularly apposite for both reading and research in the time of COVID-19.

The conditions of COVID-19 have impeded research in multiple ways. Access to archival collections, libraries, fieldwork sites, and events has been curtailed. The closure of schools and nurseries has meant extended periods of childcare have impacted upon the time many scholars could devote to research, with women and early career researchers being disproportionately affected.¹³ Furthermore, the transition to online teaching created additional workload and related pressures. These conditions made the years of 2020 and 2021 a period in which any expectations of or possibilities for advancing research projects extremely challenging, if not impossible, to fulfil for many.

Although my own personal circumstances were not as challenging as those confronting many colleagues, my normal modes of working through social research methods were disrupted. Alongside the autoethnographic positioning as a reader, then, this article also records a turn to alternate modes of research under duress; in this instance, the circumstances of COVID-19.

From my perspective, this turn is one which – at least initially – might seem to be a redirection from scholarly rigour. My *Highland Flings* are an unintentional project, which, as the creation of The Highland Fling-O-Meter detailed below indicates, satirises some of the more over-determined aspects of social research methods. Moreover, my reading was undertaken during leisure time; my play only eventually turning into work. My dodgy methods developed at least in part because this project was never intended to become work. Yet – as this article articulates – playfulness and non-typical methodologies can be generative of new approaches to research and scholarship. A co-opting

of enforced spare time, and a call to imaginative inner resources, are also an important aspect of the reading, and eventually writing, method that this recommendation project drew upon.

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Within the history of reading as well as studies of current readership, the cultural, sociological and economic practices of how readers discover, are recommended, and consume their next title have been given much attention.¹⁴ In an era of lower barriers to entry to publishing (desk-top publishing packages; print on demand; self-publishing services and platforms),¹⁵ the number of titles produced annually in the UK – which had already increased exponentially since the years of paper-rationing during the Second World War – has grown and grown.¹⁶ Even before the rapid increase of title generation in the digital age, readers already turned to various agents and methods for book recommendations within a crowded market, including literary prizes, ‘word-of-mouth’, bookshop displays and promotions and, indeed, book groups, alongside more traditional recommendation sources such as literary reviews.¹⁷ The dawn of digital platforms has introduced algorithmically-driven recommendations into the mix, with their reliance on the products’ metadata as well as the purchasing decisions of other consumers, building on classificatory systems such as BISAC codes and Amazon’s own subject and genre metadata. Shared reading platforms including Goodreads have enabled readers to create reading lists and recommendations (as well as be mined for reader behaviour data, once the company was purchased by Amazon).¹⁸

During the period of UK lockdown in 2020, according to Nielsen Book, factors which particularly drove purchase of Adult Fiction were, in order, Author, Subject/Genre, Series, Blurb, and Price (with the Cover and the capacity to look inside being less important).¹⁹ As I have discussed elsewhere, consumer and academic research have also evidenced how cultural activities have provided us a ‘means of succour, escapism and time filler’, with books and reading:

prominent among the ways in which we have occupied our lockdown hours (Bakshi 2020), with one survey reporting the doubling of reading time (Flood 2020b). Certain genres, publishers, and platforms

benefited more than others: classic literature, crime and thrillers, self-help, cookbooks, hobby and activity books (Flood 2020c; Moss 2020; The Reading Agency 2020). Indeed, some publishers, particularly the larger conglomerate groups, saw turnover and profits increase over the course of the first lockdown (Chandler 2020; Jones 2020).²⁰

In the context of enforced stay-at-home measures due to COVID-19, however, rather than using some of these other reader recommendation or purchase factors, I decided to take the route of reading books with the title *Highland Fling* and seeing where it would take me. Although based in Scotland's Central Belt and therefore closer to the Highlands than some readers, my travel was still constrained and – like many others – I had turned heavily to reading during this period. It was time to head further north ...

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I started, then, with Baird's *Highland Fling*, in which graphic designer Gaby moves to a Highlands village to catsit. There, she encounters hunky Jack, who – as detailed earlier – is the spitting image of (TV) *Outlander*'s Jamie. He also bakes delicious shortbread. Her love rival is the cat's owner, a dating guru. The plot culminates at the village Highland Games, at which Jack tosses the caber and loses his title, while Gaby's client – a social media star – launches her beauty line. Gaby persuades Jack to make the most of his *Outlander* looks in the marketing of his Highland tours, ordering a life-size cardboard cut-out of him to accompany his stand at the Games.

A fun start to my reading project, I thought. I set up a Google Sheet – my 'Highland Fling-O-Meter' – to record data relating to the books I had read (see Figure 1), with column headers reading Author, Title (which amused me each time I filled it in; although see subsequent comments about the purity of the title), Publisher, Date of Publication, Genre, Period, Location, Plot Summary, Clichés, Additional Notes, and Enjoyability Factor, plus a series of tick boxes: Actual Flinging, Throwing Things,²¹ a free-text box for If things thrown, what?, Brief Romantic Liaison, Dancing, Whisky, Shortbread, Kilts, Bagpipes and Stags. The final column was Date Completed. I also added Bagpipes and Stags tick boxes five and six books in.

McGregor), but a thriller in which the glamorous sometime sleuth Mirabelle and her detective fiancé are immediately embroiled in a murder on their arrival in the Highlands. A Russian/American cashmere buyer is strangled in the Orangery (shades of Cluedo, intensified by a number of hidden tunnels and passageways), against the backdrop of the Cold War. Reading it in the dark days of January 2021, I enjoyed its extremely pleasing number of elegant frocks, cocktails and tumblers of whisky, as well as the dig at the right-wing Lady they visit who inhospitably serves them only one bannock each (the fulfilment of appetite, along with other bodily pleasures, figures large within *Highland Flings*). Sheridan's plot is also populated – alongside the continuing series characters – with a tweed collective, gays, lesbians and characters of colour: an overtly twenty-first century sensibility brought to the traditional country house party, which Nancy Mitford's *Highland Fling* (1931), discussed later, also depicts.²⁴

After reading Sheridan's book, I added to my Twitter thread, including a line about Red and White Russians. The author replied, clearly enjoying the game I had created through my reading project. That I knew personally the first two *Highland Fling* authors made me mindful of my tone when reporting my reading: while I would anyway not normally go on social media to criticise an author's work written in good faith and within its genre, I was also aware the project in and of itself could potentially land as critique. Emphasising the repetition of the title *Highland Fling* might, after all, suggest I thought the books showed a lack of imagination. Indeed, when working as an editorial assistant for a large trade publishing house in London in the 1990s, before we had access to the internet and online book catalogue systems, my fellow assistants and I were often tasked with checking whether a proposed book title had already been used elsewhere (this was thought to be bad marketing). Hence, we would search for books of the same name via the antiquated microfiche system that sat behind the reception desk at our otherwise fancy sixteen-floor building, where we had to crouch down to view the book information, or head off to Dillons on Gower Street to do the same task (where we also browsed cover design ideas), or phone up the premium rate Book Trust phone line, whose staff had access to a database where they could search for this information. Because of the usage of this premium rate phone number, I was once visited at my open plan office booth by a never-seen-before company accountant, who quizzed me about the costs I had generated. I explained how if we had the internet on

our computers, we might be able to undertake this important research work ourselves, leading to me becoming one of the first few staff members to get the internet on my computer (and yet with not much idea of how to use it, or quite how important it would become to the book publishing industry and reading practices).²⁵

Anecdotes from the pre-digital days of conglomerate publishing aside (with which I occasionally bore students on the University of Stirling's MLitt in Publishing Studies, to demonstrate how different – and difficult – book searches were pre-internet), the question remains as to whether it is a good or bad act of market positioning to have a book titled the same as another. The conventional understanding in the company I worked for in the 1990s was that it was not good, but perhaps less in terms of differentiation than in terms of a deemed lack of imagination, and therefore originality. However, digitally-enabled searching might actually mean that books occasionally benefit from bearing similar titles.²⁶ In the admittedly unusual reading project of my *Highland Flings*, that was certainly the case.

In Barbara Browning's conceptual autobiographical novel *The Gift*, in which she creates and sends people ukulele cover versions of songs as acts of 'inappropriate intimacy', the author reflects on her intentional repetition of her book title:

after Mauss, and Lewis Hyde's reading of Mauss, and Graeber's, and mine. It was meant to be funny, the title, because it's been regifted so many times. Seriously, type in 'The Gift' on the Amazon Books page. You won't believe how many people have used that title. And it had all started as a kind of joke, an experiment to see if I could produce a ridiculous surplus of unoriginal gifts of sentimental value.²⁷

After some workshopping of this phenomenon of repeated titling and its affordances, it is suggested that its study be termed 'Akin-tertextuality', or CAN CAN (Comparative Aesthetic Nominalism, repeated, and – pleasingly – a French dance).²⁸ The suggestion of a new conceptual school is, in the spirit of Ullapoolism, intentionally jokey. However, there is also potential value in applying the approach more broadly in terms of cross-cutting sampling which – under scrutiny – has the potential to offer revealing analysis on the basis of

genre, intentional and unintentional referencing of preceding texts (of various cultural forms), aesthetic affinity and patterning.

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By now thoroughly immersed in my CAN CAN project, I read more titles – sixteen in total. These Highland Flings included mainstream and self-published works of chick lit and erotica (straight, gay and lesbian), time travel (frequently back to the Jacobite period, or in one instance to the time of William Wallace and Robert the Bruce), and some occasionally quite loose geography. Jennifer LaBrecque's *Highland Fling* (2006) sees reverse time travel, as Jacobite Darach MacTavish travels forward to twenty-first century Atlanta, Georgia, where he acquires a taste for cheese toasties, learns about Culloden through the internet, and it is noted that life in contemporary America is more comfortable than an eighteenth-century Highlands castle, notwithstanding 'global warming and hip-hop'.²⁹

The majority of the titles I read played in some way with the double entendre (discussed shortly) of 'Highland Fling' in their depiction of brief romantic and/or sexual encounters. Beyond Sheridan's title, three more varied from a typical structure. The first is Nancy Mitford's. Mitford is the most famous author of the *Highland Flings*, and also wrote the earliest published. Her title, the first of her novels, is set in both London and the Highlands, with the latter section seeing the up-and-coming artist and Bright Young Thing Albert Memorial Gates joining his friends Sally and Walter when they are asked to look after Dalloch Castle during shooting season by Sally's aunt: 'two months of potted hell'.³⁰ They are also accompanied by Jane, who falls for Albert, and a cast of comic and decrepit characters who enliven when the shooting starts. Cocktails and grouse are in abundance, and the shooting party also takes a trip to the local Highland Games before a catastrophic event at the castle forces them all back south.

The further two books which differed from this pattern were by Kathleen Ernst (2006) and Jack Davidson (2009).³¹ Ernst's title is a Young Adult novel set not in Scotland but in North Carolina among the Scottish diaspora communities, featuring scenes at Highland Games. The teen protagonist, Tanya Macdonald, has aspirations to become a videographer, preferring to film the

Games than to be on stage dancing the Highland Fling and embracing her heritage. Nonetheless, a strange ancestral memory makes her instinctively hate the star dancer Christina Campbell (linking to the slaughter of the Macdonalds by the Campbells at Culloden, Christina learns; Campbell nemeses feature in other *Highland Flings*, including LaBrecque and Amanda Scott's). Tanya also meets a Puerto Rican bagpiper Miguel, and gets footage of female 'heavies' tossing the caber; a recent innovation to the US Highland Games scene and its traditionally gendered events. Davidson's *Highland Fling* also focuses on the Highland Games, but as non-fiction. His title is a biography of the World Champion Scottish 'heavy' Bill Anderson, an Aberdeenshire farm boy and world-class athlete in the Highland Games heavy events: the hammer, stone and caber tossing (thereby meriting a very definite tick in the 'Actual Flinging' box on my Highland Fling-O-Meter).³²

Despite these more literal and dance-based interpretations, though, the predominant meaning of 'Highland Fling' in the set of novels I read was romantic or sexual, and while cabers often feature in their literal manifestation, as an object to be competitively flung at Highland Games, they serve double time as a metaphor for a large, and very eager, penis – perhaps nowhere more so than in Jane Justine's *Highland Fling*, a book in Mills & Boon's explicit Black Lace series.³³

Tantalisingly, while the Oxford English Dictionary definition of 'fling' makes reference to the action of throwing and of sexual/romantic encounters (as part of 'A fit or spell of unrestrained indulgence of one's impulses'), the sub-definition of 'Highland fling' remains remarkably chaste, and while referring to 'A flinging about of the body or limbs' does so solely in reference to frenetic dance moves. A fling in this sense is 'A dance in which the arms and legs are moved with great vigour, esp. in *the Highland fling*'. Early examples given include Patrick Neill's *Tour of Orkney & Shetland* (1806), 'We saw the Highlanders – dancing the fling to the music of the bagpipe', and Walter Scott's mention in *St Ronan's Well* (1823) of 'Dancing the highest Highland Fling'. Thomas Hood's 'The Last Man' (1845) hints at more of a double entendre, but divorced from the Highlands, in detailing that '[he] danc'd me a saucy fling!'.³⁴ Jennifer McQuiston determinedly brings the definitions together in her epigraph to *Her Highland Fling* (2015), using the Online Etymology Dictionary:

'Fling (n.): "Vigorous dance" (associated with the Scottish Highlands), from 1806. "Period of indulgence on the eve of responsibilities," first attested 1827.'³⁵

As indicated in Scott's usage, the Highland Fling as a dance form can be contextualised within the gentrification of traditional Scottish dancing in the nineteenth century. The potential for 'Highland Fling' as a site of romantic and erotic imaginaries emerged in the same period; the Highlander with his kilt, revealing attractively muscled bare legs and knees, is discussed by Maureen M. Martin in her study *The Mighty Scot: Nation, Gender, and the Nineteenth-Century Mystique of Scottish Masculinity* (2009). As Martin argues, in cultural representations Scotland came to be 'narrated as Britain's masculine heartland', with a 'supposed wealth of primal masculinity' in the 'brawny kilted Highlander', including in descriptions of both 'the Jacobite rebellion and Highland landscape'.³⁶ Such depictions of Highland masculinity were heterosexually constructed, but with a 'frequent undercurrent of homoerotic desire and homophobia', often through Scotland's subaltern relationship to England and within the United Kingdom.³⁷

A broader context for Martin's discussion of Highland masculinity and my *Highland Flings* is in Murray Pittock's formulation of the 'invention of Scotland', presaged on constructions of the Jacobites and the 'legend' of the Highlanders as 'the true patriot', 'Wild and free [...] the kind of hero all Scots used to be (so the story went)'.³⁸ Pittock hints at the potential for popular uses of Jacobitism, but from the standpoint of 1991 could hardly have guessed at the worldwide popularity of *Outlander* and its multiple imitators:

Predicting the future for this epic story is difficult. The history of Jacobitism, while still a major field of study, may be increasingly outside the direct interests of a younger generation of Scots [...] Yet folk-song, and even pop such as the Proclaimers' 'Letter from America', show the power of the Jacobite experience and the experiences it spawned. Books on more well-worn Jacobite topics continue to sell. The Sunday papers can still refer to Charles as an unsuccessful hero who nearly delivered his country; Jacobite cruises ply Loch Ness, and 'Jacobite clansmen' stage mock battles. On a more commercial note, the shortbread tin and whisky bottle display the major adherents to the Cause in every delicatessen or off-licence.³⁹

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What relationship does this overview of romantic and popular constructions of the Highlander, and of the Highlands, have to the set of *Highland Flings* I read? Of the sixteen titles, twelve played with concepts of the rugged Highlander, and frequently the sexually charged, and clichéd, question of what a Scot wears under his kilt (Emma Karenò opens her version with exactly this conversation).⁴⁰ These depictions were predominantly heterosexual (albeit often with a male-to-male rivalry for the female protagonist, sometimes with homosocial overtones), although I also read one gay erotic novella by Derek Adams and one lesbian romance by Anna Larnèr.⁴¹ In the former, Californian Randy inherits a Scottish castle, becoming Laird. Persuading his friend Frank to travel with him, they arrive to find the castle falling down. Frank wishes he were on a beach holiday, but then he claps his eyes on a tapestry of the kilted former Laird, and meets him as a very bodily ghost. In Larnèr's book, Leicester-based Eve meets Moira, the personification of her ideal woman, while on holiday with her family in the Highlands. The scenery works its magic on Eve, as her attraction for Moira grows, but Moira's complex past relationships stand in the way of true love. Larnèr's novel gives more pause for thought in terms of straying from the standard tropes of 'brawny kilted' masculinity, but the wild romantic beauty of the Highlands performs a similar role for Eve as it does in several of the other books, as she is entranced by both landscape and Moira's custodianship of it. Notably, in these books the protagonist – whether straight or lesbian woman, or gay male – is the character who travels, sometimes from trauma or danger, and always to a relationship, the 'Highland Fling'. The sexual partner that the protagonist travels towards is always Scottish and based in Scotland, often with a symbiotic relationship to the landscape and built heritage.⁴² More specifically, the Scottish object of romantic or erotic affection is sometimes very integrally related to Scottish land (as Laird, for example) or forms of independence/pro-Scottish politics (whether during the first War of Independence, the Jacobite Rebellion, or late twentieth and early twenty-first century independence debates). The narrative perspective is from outside of Scotland, seen through a visitor's, or tourist's, eye. Of the *Highland Flings* of this formulation, only one (Baird's) was written by a Scot.

An exception to this narrative perspective, and to Scottish men being the love interest in straight representations, is Amanda Scott's historical romance

Highland Fling (1995), a novel which engages with Jacobite gender politics.⁴³ Within the story, the English Earl of Rothwell and his half-brother are bewitched by two Scottish women, leading their dowager mother to ‘clasp [...] a hand to her heart and sa[y] in failing accents, “Not another Scotswoman!”’.⁴⁴ Nonetheless, with the Scottish protagonist Maggie MacDrumin, the fling is constructed both ways: first with Maggie travelling to London with secret Jacobite documents hidden in her bodice; but then with the Earl travelling to Scotland, where he is as enamoured of the Scottish landscape and clan way of life as he is with Maggie, to the extent that he does not condemn the illicit whisky-distilling practices of her father. This plotline is still, however, strongly grounded in the narrative of the Jacobite struggle. Indeed, for Martin in *The Mighty Scot*, the narrativisation of the (lack of) statehood feeds the tropes of writing:

With no independent state and no desire for an independent state, [post-1707] Scotland existed only as the past, only as narrative. One reason that readers, art lovers, and visitors experienced Scotland as uniquely romantic was because it was, in the most literal sense, a storybook land.⁴⁵

This narrative catalyst is evident in Scott’s *Highland Fling*.

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The storybook land of constructed Scottish identity inter-relates to the role of cultural production and consumption for diasporic audiences, of the type depicted in Ernst’s North Carolinian *Highland Fling*. Rachel Noorda, in analysing the role of books in such communities, details that ‘diasporic Scots assert particular types of Scottish identity through consumption of books’.⁴⁶ This consumption operates alongside other forms of cultural activity such as playing traditional Scottish music, in particular the bagpipes, learning Highland dances, and participating in Highland Games. Noorda’s diasporic interviewees discussed a range of different books from or about Scotland, and her analysis references the participants’ perceptions of works which might be thought of as more or less ‘authentic’ in their depiction of Scottish identity: ‘This discussion of authentic versus inauthentic representations of Scotland by interviewees,’ argues Noorda, ‘illustrates an awareness of Scottish national identity and the changing nature of reinterpretations of national myths and symbols in the

homeland'. A perceived 'hierarchy of Scottish literature' emerged from the interviewees, with some books considered as having 'more literary capital than others'.⁴⁷ As Noorda continues:

In the case of the mass-market, kilted Highlander romance novels, the perpetuation is of an image of Scotland focused on the Highlands and traditions reminiscent of a Scottish past. This is not to say that more valued literary sources did not romanticize Scotland, but that these sources are perhaps perceived as more authentic for various reasons: historical 'accuracy', prestige, or acclaim of the author, etc.⁴⁸

The *Outlander* series figured frequently in such discussions of authenticity, accuracy and prestige. Stephenie McGucken, in examining the impact of the *Outlander* TV series upon tourism and heritage sites (the 'Outlander effect'), further summons debate about authenticity in constructions of Scotland.⁴⁹ Moreover, as Valerie Frankel argues, *Outlander's* 'genre fluidity' across historical fiction, sci-fi/fantasy and romance also contribute both to the series' marketability (with multiple readership niches) and also its knowing reconstructions of historical contexts through the medium of time travel.⁵⁰ The latter, as detailed earlier, also figures in the *Highland Flings*. As the checkboxes on the Highland Fling-O-Meter indicated, the titles I read also displayed many repeated tropes of Scottishness and Scottish identity: the playing of bagpipes; the wearing of kilts; the drinking of whisky; attendance at Highland Games; and the performance of the Highland Fling (or other Scottish dance). The sometimes knowing discussions of cliché and stereotype within the texts (such as that quoted from Sheridan's novel) indicates that many of the authors understand themselves to be playing with and negotiating cliché, if not necessarily inauthenticity. To intentionally turn Pittock's words, the *Highland Flings* are a playfully fictionalised Scotland invented through 'tartan, whisky, [and ...] biscuit-tin depiction'; sometimes of the Stuarts, and nearly always with a romantic fascination at their heart.

What, after all, would a 'true' or wholly 'authentic' representation of Scotland be? Tartan, whisky and shortbread (as well as Highland Games) all exist in Scotland, and are readily consumed by many Scots as well as tourists and incomers. Nonetheless, in the largely stereotyped constructions of heterosexual

Highland Flings, both the mainstream publishing industry and self-publishing practitioners have – as my reading revealed – a tendency towards certain patterns: Scottish masculinity as love object, with the protagonist from outside of Scotland. Beyond Amanda Scott’s character of Maggie MacDrumin (and Moira in Anna Larner’s lesbian novel), Scottish female characters are not substantially depicted, and rarely have any agency in the novels. As well as the majority of the authors of the *Highland Flings* being neither Scottish nor based in Scotland, most of the books were also produced by publishing companies outside of the country, either from London or North America. Publishing frequently works along stereotyping and exoticising lines, as revealed, for example, in studies of the production of work by British South Asian and Muslim authors.⁵¹ The repeated tropes of Scottish masculinity – as brought to international prominence by Gabaldon through her *Outlander* series – are one pattern of frequently published texts ‘about’ Scotland; two others being Scottish crime novels (Tartan Noir); and hard-hitting narratives of masculine urban working-class life (e.g. James Kelman, Irvine Welsh, and 2020’s Booker Prize winner Douglas Stuart for *Shuggie Bain*, though the latter’s gay protagonist drew a different portrayal of masculinity).⁵²

These three key story types – the romance (often historical), the crime novel, and the contemporary urban depiction – inevitably draw on accepted and shorthand versions of Scottishness which are configured through design and copywriting decisions, and which arguably place a limiting effect on literary production. And yet – in line with my argument about the positive benefits of the repetition of titles, the CAN CAN of my *Highland Flings* – I return to these books to examine their romantic fascination, and their *light*-heartedness even, or perhaps especially, when related to affairs of the heart, which – in addition to being a welcome distraction for me in the dark days of COVID-19 lockdown – are also revealing of publishing trends.

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What, then, does the conceit of reading books with the same title allow me to unfold in terms of twenty-first century reading, publishing, self-publishing and bookselling practices, and of genre?

Of the sixteen *Highland Flings* I read, twelve were works with a romantic and/or erotic plot at their heart; and five were self-published (all of which had

romance/erotic plotlines). Romance and erotica, as genres, are intentionally repetitive, with joyfully anticipated tropes of attraction and repulsion, obstacles to true love, and eventual unions. Romance authorship and publishing is big business, and its reading forms a key proportion of economic and cultural book consumption (as well as being substantially studied within academia).⁵³ While published by mainstream publishers around the world, romance's allyship with self-publishing platforms is a logical coupling both in terms of business, but also in the ways in which self-publishing represents a serious disruptor to traditional, mainstream publishing business patterns. Self-published romance authors have found a welcome home in the world of digital platforms; the findability of multiple sub-genres is enabled by classification systems and algorithmic recommendations that such platforms offer, and which authors can analyse to increase their chances of success.⁵⁴ Romance is also a genre which – while taking love seriously – is frequently playful, intentionally lacks seriousness, and thus spurns the claims to originality of more literary writing; the hierarchies and semblance of 'authenticity' that Noorda's interviewees discussed, and the seeming lack of originality a repeated title might imply. Romance and erotic stories – and the large proportion of my *Highland Flings* – refuse tendentious hierarchising and power structures of traditional patterns of business and of literary criticism.

In addition, self-publishing – both through its authors and readers – does not concern itself unduly that the title *Highland Fling* is a repetition, whether its genres are deemed to be lesser in cultural hierarchies, and with the gatekeeping practices of traditional publishing. Yet received opinions relating to both romance and self-publishing abound. On the day I began my *Highland Flings* Twitter thread, someone replied to offer me advice:

I foresee your immersion in the genre that is my particular bête noire, the Highland historical romance. If you value your sanity, add a rider to your resolution to the effect that everything on your list must be traditionally published, not self-published.⁵⁵

I responded to the effect that I am 'a big fan of self-publishing'⁵⁶ – and that I had already broken any such rule with my very first *Highland Fling*, as Baird had published her own book. Indeed, I am more than a 'fan' of self-publishing;

I am a practitioner. One output of the conceptual school Ullapoolism is the self-published novella *The Frankfurt Kabuff* (written under the pseudonym Blaire Squisroll, originally published on Wattpad in 2018, and by our press Kabuff Books in 2019).⁵⁷ The novella is an intentional and jokey mash-up of genres – a comic erotic thriller – which both parodies and celebrates book cultures and the buzz of book promotion at Frankfurt Book Fair.⁵⁸ As my prior experience showed me, self-publishing enables play: with genre; with making writing available; with being a publisher.⁵⁹ While self-publishing can develop as a very serious business proposition and a form of cultural expression, it also offers the very immediate possibility of a fling: a *publishing fling*, in this instance. For my research partner and I, *The Frankfurt Kabuff*, rapidly written and quickly published, might also be thought of as a *research fling*, in this case an experiment with method by doing.⁶⁰

The *Highland Fling* research project detailed in this article represents another such *research fling*. Beginning in the dark days of January 2021, under yet another COVID-19 induced lockdown, deriving from a discussion at my book group, it grew through the enabling powers of online book sales platforms, to become an experiment in reading that lasted until May 2021. I never intended it to become an academic research project; it started, in the words of Barbara Browning, as a joke, but then became an experiment, and culminates in this article.

Along my *Highland Fling* journey, I developed an intentionally sketchy set of research methods, analytical tools and even (via my Twitter thread) a knowledge exchange process, with which other readers and some of the writers engaged, and as a result of which I was invited to speak about my reading on BBC Radio Scotland. There were many holes in my methods: the late addition to the Highland Fling-O-Meter of some categories (bagpipes, stags) and the complete omission of others (tartan); the lapse in purity of the project when I read some titles which added words to *Highland Fling* (for example, *Her Highland Fling*, *A Highland Fling*). My search for the titles used only commercial and social reading platforms such as Amazon, Hive, Kobo and Goodreads. I did one day think to use the National Library of Scotland catalogue, which revealed some interesting additional possibilities. However, these titles were not ones that I could get hold of under lockdown. The books contributing to this reading project were all ones I could access online (either as ebooks

or by ordering print books to be delivered); my reading intentionally constrained by the circumstances, and therefore emblematic of reading (and research) under lockdown.

*

After reading sixteen *Highland Flings*, I decided to draw a halt to my reading, although more were available, including one forthcoming in August 2021.⁶¹ I had decided, in research methods terminology, that my sample set was saturated, and that I had learned all I needed. A further prompt to completion came from a final title I read, McQuiston's *Her Highland Fling*, in which protagonist Pen(elope), the London *Times*' first female journalist, visits the Highlands to cover the Highland Games newly set up by the Earl's son, and turns her 'research' (scribbling in her notebook for copy) to something a little more... experiential ('*maybe ... just maybe, there was more to research than whisky on this trip*').⁶²

The conceit of reading multiple *Highland Flings* – the CAN CAN of my COVID reading – and turning it into a research article, is, then, intentionally 'very bad research'. My trip into the secondary literature regarding the cultural and literary constructions of Scottish and Highland identity is similarly a flirtation. This 'very bad research' is – I would argue – entirely justified and indeed required by the conditions of COVID-19, when fieldwork practices, archival resources, and research libraries were closed; a *détournement* (using the Situationists' term) of research practices.⁶³

And yet, I would argue, this intentionally light-hearted *research fling* – incorporating the Ullapoolism Manifesto principles of PLAYFULISM, AMATEURISM RAPIDISM and SATIRE – has not only offered me enjoyable distraction during the challenging (if first-world comfortable) conditions of the second lockdown. The conceit of reading sixteen books with the same title forced my reading in unanticipated directions (or, more consensually, created a CAN CAN dance with recommendation); reading across a range of genres (although frequently settling on romance/erotica, both gay and straight), and acquiring mainstream and self-published titles I would never have consumed without the spur of the title. While the project might – to paraphrase Barbara Browning – initially seem to have drawn on 'a ridiculous surplus of unoriginal' books 'of sentimental value', in the end it provided me with a pattern of recommendation which took me to places I would never otherwise have visited. My

Highland Flings have been an exercise in both randomised and over-directed reading, a foray into Scottishness, genre and cliché, and an exploration of originality, authenticity, and stereotype.

Perhaps all that remains for me – or anyone else inspired by this article – is to pick up the pen and write yet another *Highland Fling*. But perhaps, as the possibilities for travel open up once more, not before a reconnaissance trip to the Highlands themselves ...

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Notes

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- 2 Thanks for this article go firstly to the members of my book group, and particularly Emma Baird, for initial inspiration, and then – for discussion of research methods, workshoping of nomenclature, general encouragement and Highland Fling cocktails – to Geraldine Parsons, Beth Driscoll, Mark Banks, Danielle Fuller, Doris Ruth Eikhof, Scott Hames, Kelsey Jackson Williams, and Katie Halsey. Thanks also to the staff, students and attendees (including *Highland Fling* author Sara Sheridan) of an invited talk at the Centre for British Studies, Humboldt University, Berlin for their questions and comments which helped develop this article, as did a discussion on BBC Radio Scotland's Afternoon Show with Nicola Meighan, and the comments of the anonymous peer reviewer. A recipe for the Highland Fling cocktail (to be recommended while reading this article) is available from www.diffordsguide.com/cocktails/recipe/4867/highland-fling, and a soundtrack via Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers' 'My One and Only Highland Fling' from *The Barkleys of Broadway*, www.youtube.com/watch?v=fLIozBVyOIE.
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