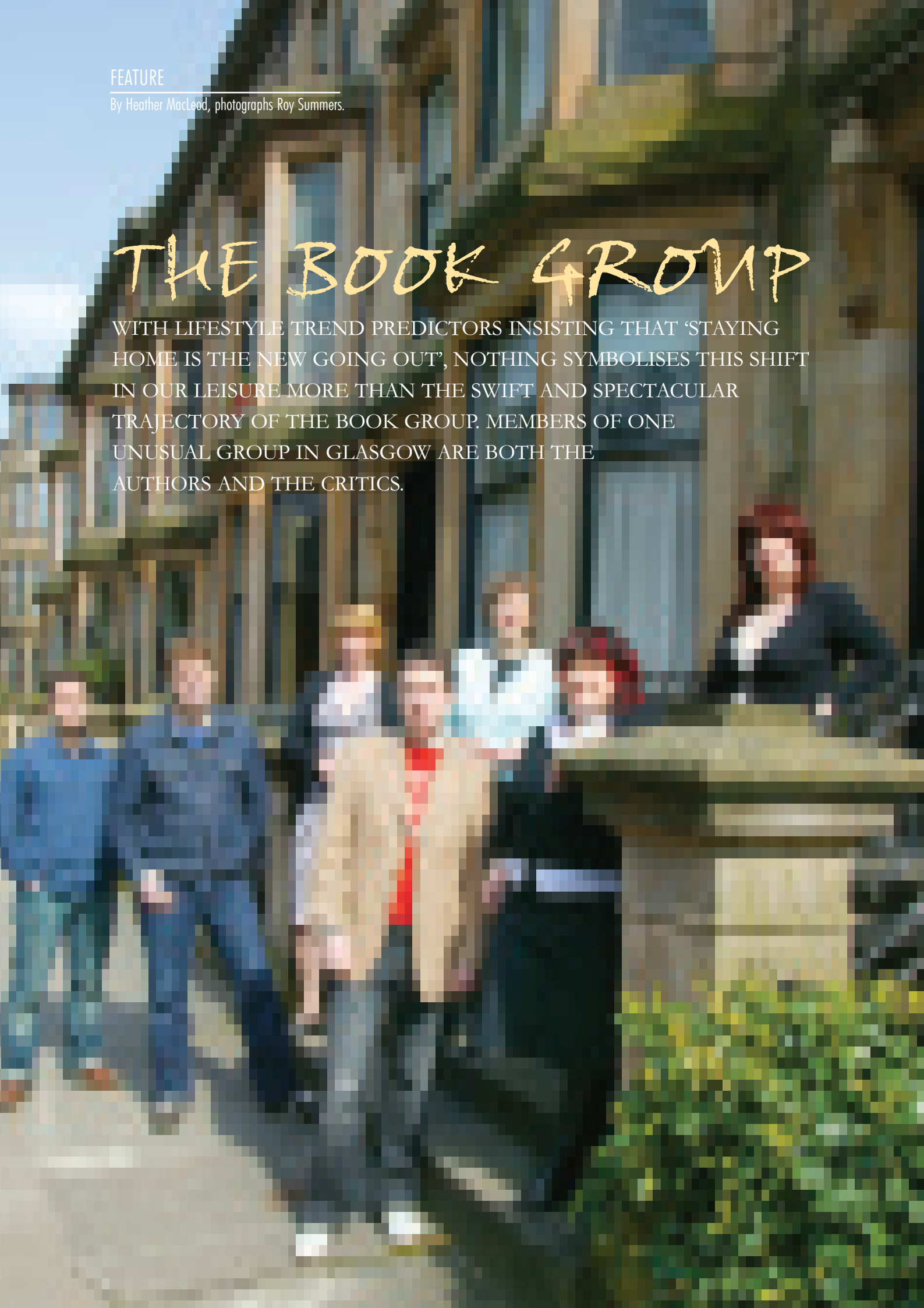


FEATURE

By Heather MacLeod, photographs Roy Summers.

THE BOOK GROUP

WITH LIFESTYLE TREND PREDICTORS INSISTING THAT 'STAYING HOME IS THE NEW GOING OUT', NOTHING SYMBOLISES THIS SHIFT IN OUR LEISURE MORE THAN THE SWIFT AND SPECTACULAR TRAJECTORY OF THE BOOK GROUP. MEMBERS OF ONE UNUSUAL GROUP IN GLASGOW ARE BOTH THE AUTHORS AND THE CRITICS.



Up and down the country, disparate groups of people are meeting up to mull over the delights of the latest required reading, be it the new Ian Rankin or an RL Stevenson classic.

Book groups go with the territory of Glasgow's boho west end, an area with an almost indecent share of Scotland's creative talent pool. Indeed the Channel 4 comedy series *The Book Group* was filmed there.

Humour is one of the key elements of what is arguably one of the west end's most unusual book groups, which members have christened somewhat tongue-in-cheek, the G7 group.

With ages ranging from 27 to 50-something, the seven meet every second Tuesday to muse over who's reading what, alongside sharing opinions on particular novels. But this is no ordinary group, as the members are all published authors and the work scrutinised is usually their own.

The roll call of members reads like a Who's Who of Scottish contemporary literature, Alan Bissett, Nick Brooks, Rodge Glass, Laura Marney, Alison Miller, Zoe Strachan and Louise Welsh. All live within a five-mile radius of one another, and their paths have crossed in a variety of contexts over the years.

With the exception of Alan Bissett, all are graduates of the Universities of Glasgow and Strathclyde MLitt Creative Writing course, which seems to send out its students sprinkled in fairy dust, creating a new wave of Scottish writers.

I was first exposed to the synergy of the collective when they met up in a local cafe following a book festival launch. As a casual observer, I was fascinated by the animated shorthand between them. Convinced that this was more than a few friends chatting over a café latte, when I asked if they met in a more structured context, details of the group tentatively began to emerge.

If anyone has been the catalyst for G7, it is Laura Marney, a one-woman infusion of creative energy. The venue is usually Laura's drawing-room flat, as the others joke that having to tidy their homes on a regular basis is a responsibility too far.

While the mix of red wine, insider gossip and recommended reading can prove a distracting cocktail, when the preliminaries are over, the evening's work is treated with business-like precision.

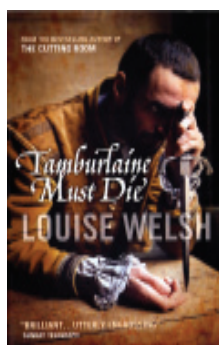
Prior to the meeting, they email work-in-progress with the proviso that it is kept to a maximum of 3000 words. 'It is not thematic, we simply send in what's completed,'

explains Laura. 'We read what's sent in, make notes and discuss it at the meetings; there's always great feedback from everyone.'

'When you're working on something every day,' points out the whipsmart Alan Bissett, 'it's important to have an objective eye as you can get so locked into your work that you don't necessarily see what's good and bad.'

Louise Welsh agrees: 'You may have spent days, weeks on a piece of work but through discussion, you can look at it in a different way. Plot wise, I like to work things out on my own but what I look for from the group is people highlighting anything I didn't get.'

All seven believe that the group provides a practical antidote to working in isolation, offering the semblance



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of an the office environment, from the in jokes to water cooler gossip. Self-confessed social animal and baby of the group, Rodge Glass, says that they are 'normal pals talking about books – their own and others.'

'At least offices have lunch breaks where they can grumble with their colleagues,' says Rodge. 'We all sometimes need somewhere we can talk about things no one else would be interested in.'

'The good thing about it is the social aspect,' adds Laura who emphasises that 'there is nothing cliquy about the group'. 'After all, other professions seek out people who do similar things and talk shop.'

It is this social strand that has foremost appeal for both Zoe Strachan and Nick Brooks.

Describing herself as being on the outskirts in terms of the group, Zoe, who is writing her third novel, says that she is pleased to be included as she is not showing work at the moment.

'I get involved with everyone else's work though, ' she explains, 'and use the group more for moral support. I love the long, predictable conversations over agents, the laughs and the discussions.'

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Nick Brooks says that compared to the outside world, he pays more attention to what the group tells him .

‘As they are used to reading their own work closely, I can guarantee that they will spot things that I have missed in my own work,’ he says.

With her first novel, *Demo*, at the copy editing stage, it is this in-house expertise that Alison Miller appreciates.

‘There are so many elements to writing a novel and it’s good to be able to ask the group – ‘is this normal?’ she

wide horizons, enjoys working when the rest of the world is asleep.

‘In life, I’m quite ego-centric,’ says Rodge, ‘but somehow in writing I find it easier to take on other people’s ideas without being offended by their criticism.

‘At the last meeting, I had chapter two of my second novel ripped to pieces,’ he says good humouredly. ‘You go through the predictable set of emotions – annoyed, upset and then you agree.

‘That chapter was very French existentialist,’ deadpans Alan. ‘Two people talking about their lives. Writing is by necessity a solitary thing so all this feedback is helpful.

‘Because I’m writing from a woman’s point of view in my next novel,’ continues Alan, ‘I’m immersing myself in women’s fiction and have had some great recommendations from the group, particularly *Unless* by Carol Shields.’

Between meetings, G7 catches up with each other in cafes and bars. In working terms, the only drawback of living in the same postcode is that they tend to bump into one another on a regular basis.

‘There are too many people to go to the pub with,’ they chorus.

‘It’s been a terrific year for us,’ concludes Rodge. ‘We’ve all got books out and are friends too. It could be competitive but at the moment there is no rivalry, although you can ask us about that in five years.’

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explains. ‘The others are further down the road in terms of publishing and are full of useful information about the process.’

All have individual approaches to the nuts and bolts of their craft. Louise writes a minimum of five hours a day, mainly at home but occasionally in her favourite café or in Glasgow University library. While Rodge, described by Alan as the Orson Wells of the group because of his

FIELD FACTS

Alan Bissett

It takes a deft hand to make the area around Falkirk feel like the backdrop to an American road movie but Alan Bissett (29) did exactly that with his first novel, *Boyracers*, released three years ago. Alan modestly claims that he’s matured and moved on in terms of the rights of passage storyline but it remains a white-knuckle read. His second novel, *The Incredible Adam Spark* is published this August. Alan tutors on the MPhil Creative Writing course at Glasgow University with Laura Marney and Zoe Strachan and is working on his third novel.

Rodge Glass

Originally from Cheshire where most of his large family still lives, Rodge Glass was snapped up at lightning speed by faber & faber who published his debut novel, *No Fireworks*, in July 2005. It was while Rodge was struggling with a dissertation at Strathclyde University that a tutor suggested he should apply for the MLitt in Creative Writing. Now there are even more busy times ahead for Rodge, who alongside writing his second novel, is also working on the official biography of iconic Scottish writer and artist Alasdair Gray for Bloomsbury.

Nick Brookes

Nick Brookes has lived in Glasgow most of his life, apart from a couple of stints in Spain and Manchester, where ‘I was not successful in studying art’. Although Nick dipped in and out of writing for many years, he didn’t take it up seriously until his final year at Glasgow University where he studied English as a mature student and was invited to apply for the MLitt in Creative Writing. Nick’s first novel, *My Name Is Denise Forrester* was published in May 2005 and he’s currently working on a second, *The Good Death*, which is out next summer.

Laura Marney

Laura Marney claims that it was a desire to live in Spain that spearheaded her first novel, *No Wonder I Take A Drink*, inspired by a weekend in a cottage near Ullapool. The surprise best seller allowed Laura to live in Barcelona for a year and she now divides her time between Spain and Scotland. Adroit at choosing titles, Laura’s second novel, *Nobody Loves a Ginger Baby* is due out in July 2005. In addition to writing and lecturing, Laura runs aerobics classes. Now she is hard at work on her third novel, *Only Strange People Go to Church*.



Zoë Strachan

Zoë Strachan grew up in Kilmarnock, studying Archaeology and Philosophy at Glasgow University before going on to the MLitt in Creative Writing in 1999. She received a Writer's Bursary from the Scottish Arts Council in 1999 and her first novel, *Negative Space*, was published in 2002 and won a Betty Trask Award. Her second, *Spin Cycle*, hit the shelves to critical acclaim last year and Picador have just published it in paperback. Zoe regularly contributes to Radio 4's arts programmes and her first radio play will be broadcast in August 2005.

Louise Welsh

For many years Louise Welsh made her living as a dealer in second-hand books, a world highlighted in her first novel, *The Cutting Room*, which was awarded the CWA John Creasey Memorial Dagger and The Saltire First Book Award. The Guardian selected Louise as one of Britain's Best First Novelists of 2002 and 'a woman to watch' in 2003. A seasoned radio broadcaster, Louise devised, wrote and presented a critically acclaimed series, *A Gothic Quest*, for Radio 4. Her second book, *Tamburlaine Must Die*, was published last year.

Alison Miller

'A stylish, sensual and politically charged novel of our times' is how her publishers are heralding Alison Miller's debut novel, *Demo*, published by Penguin this November. *Demo* is set in Glasgow, London and Italy and explores the lives of four characters mixed up in the anti-globalisation and anti-war movements. Alison grew up in Kirkwall, Orkney but has lived in Glasgow for most of her adult life. It's two years since she graduated with distinction from the MLitt in Creative Writing and Alison also works as an adult educator and counselling supervisor.

Edinburgh International Book Festival

The majority of the group are appearing at the Edinburgh International Book Festival (August 13–29). Visit www.edbookfest.co.uk for details.