

## **SPACE/RETAIL/MAGIC**

Interview with Joanna Blythman, author of **SHOPPED, The Shocking Power of British Supermarkets.**

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**Joanna Blythman** is Britain's leading investigative food journalist and an influential commentator on the British food chain. She has won four prestigious Glenfiddich awards for her writing, including a Glenfiddich Special Award for her first book **The Food We Eat**, a Caroline Walker Media Award for **Improving the Nation's Health by Means of Good Food**, and a Guild of Food Writers Award for **The Food We Eat**. She has also written two other groundbreaking books, **How to Avoid GM Food** and **The Food Our Children Eat**. She writes and broadcasts frequently on food issues.

## Introduction:

The idea for **SPACE/RETAIL/MAGIC** started in Huntly, a small town in the farming country of Aberdeenshire, North East Scotland. The Council wanted to sell off the Market Muir, a rugby and football field, for a supermarket development. Tesco had already put in an offer when local people started protesting against it. A concerned debate went on in the Huntly Express and a petition collected about 4000 signatures (the town has 4000 inhabitants). In the first place this resistance was neglected and Aberdeenshire Council advertised the site publicly. It wasn't until Huntly Community Council invited some councillors to a public consultation that they finally realised that nobody wanted a brand new supermarket on this public site. To the councillors' huge disappointment the development plans had to be cancelled and Market Muir remains the people's green playing field.

Meanwhile I had started photographing, wanting to portray and celebrate Market Muir. I spent 5 days walking the field, photographing grass and trees, benches, rugby posts and the old pavilion. Everything. Then I went to photograph a site in Inverurie, a nearby town, which had a boarded-up Tesco supermarket, abandoned after Tesco had built a much bigger outlet just across the road from the old one. And I went to Elgin to photograph a brand new, 24-hour Tesco Superstore with an incredible car park. Same story, this Superstore had replaced an old Tesco across the road.

I photographed everything I saw, taking approximately 1000 pictures on each site, exploring the space between the buildings thoroughly and trying to create a picture with perspectives true to how we see things when we move in a space. This book is meant to accompany the photographs. So I hope you have seen them because I want to give the experience to you. You must make up your own mind and then, maybe, you will question the managing of our public spaces: the sustainability of large-scale supermarket buildings, knocked-up here, left empty there, and the visual impact they have on our towns and cities, not only through the buildings they create and leave behind

but also the opportunities and spaces they destroy.

While I was focusing on the outside and what it looks like I knew hardly anything about what goes on behind the façade of the supermarkets and why they are so powerful that they can expand and build almost anywhere they want. So, when I had read Joanna Blythman's **SHOPPED, The Shocking Power of British Supermarkets**, I instantly knew that I had to speak to her. She has done a huge amount of research and her book contains scary information about what goes on behind the incredible success of the biggest British supermarkets, from politics and planning permissions to poor food quality and unreasonable manipulation of farmers, growers and suppliers.

The following interview circles around Huntly, a brilliant example of a small rural town which has still got its good independent shops, as well as referring to the concerns Blythman has dealt with in **SHOPPED**.

As it says on the cover:

**“Don't read it and weep. Read it and change the way you shop”**

## INTERVIEW with JOANNA BLYTHMAN

Edinburgh, 22/4 2005

We meet in a fancy café, the only one I know how to find in this beautiful Capital of Scotland. I have already explained to Joanna the background of my project and she has seen the pictures. She agrees to my suggestion that we go through the chapters of her book, picking up on the things that are the most interesting in relation to supermarkets in rural areas, small towns and communities. Then I tell her the whole story about how the people of Huntly got together and won the battle against the supermarket powers, in the first place.

*I just wanted to celebrate! But then I found out that it wasn't so much a matter of people not wanting a supermarket in general. They just didn't want it on the Market Muir. Actually they've already got a smaller Somerfield supermarket. But it seems like people are still welcoming a bigger supermarket, on some other site. So, for me, this interview is about finding some really good reasons for not getting a big supermarket in Huntly. But let me start by asking how your book SHOPPED came about and what started it for you, personally?*

What happened to me was that I lived in France for four years. I had come from a background of supermarket shopping. But in France you don't shop that way. French people don't buy everything in supermarkets. Maybe they go to a Hyper Market on the outskirts of town once a month or every six weeks, but the rest of the time they use small shops, markets, very small branches of local chains and mini markets. So I developed that kind of shopping pattern and that was the way I liked to shop. When I came back to Britain I just automatically went back to doing this whole supermarket thing. I found out that I really hated it and I just couldn't go back to it. When I shopped in the supermarket it was like being a kind of Stepford wife. I wandered in,

got a trolley, walked around almost on autopilot, buying the same things. And supermarkets didn't actually have the kind of food that I wanted to buy, a lot of it wasn't really fresh and it wasn't seasonal. There was no real choice in my terms although there were all these different lines. I also noticed that I kind of lost any creative urge to cook. I would spend lots of money and come back home, unload all the shopping and be standing in the kitchen thinking, "God, what are we going to eat tonight"! And suddenly the penny dropped: I really hate supermarket shopping - and why do I hate it? I began to see what a negative effect supermarket shopping has on Britain and our whole appreciation of food. It seemed to me that the power of supermarkets was a key issue and that their inability to serve society's wider needs and give us good food needed to be confronted.

*In Huntly the latest news is that Asda has bought a private site. In your book you are speaking about "Asda towns" or "Tesco towns" or whatever supermarket sets up on the outskirts of a town and makes all small towns look the same. You are speaking about town planning and how difficult it is for some local councils. Even if they have the will to protect their small communities against big developments they don't have regulations or laws behind them. Could you tell me more about the problems of the whole planning side and why it seems like it's so easy for the supermarkets to come into small communities?*

I think the real problem is that supermarkets are exceptionally wealthy profit machines. They have lots and lots of money and if they want a site they will stop at nothing to get it. They have limitless money to payroll all the things you have to do to get a site. That means paying for reports from traffic consultants showing that it won't cause traffic problems. It includes paying for lawyers that just never lose cases: they hire them knowing they are going to win. They have very deep pockets so they can get what they want. On the other side you've got councils with weak planning laws that don't really favour objectors

terribly strongly. Councillors are scared of turning down a planning proposal from a supermarket because if the supermarket appeals against it and it goes to an appeal, and the supermarket wins, then in theory the supermarket can be awarded costs and that could actually bankrupt a council. Most councils haven't got the budget to fight and take the risk of losing a planning appeal. That's economic reason number one. Another reason is that some misguided councils, in my opinion, think that supermarkets are indicators of economic development. You know, "Oh that would be good for Huntly, now Huntly has got an Asda". That's seen as an improvement and that's kind of retrograde thinking. By now I think the pendulum is turning. People are beginning to say "What a nice place and it doesn't look like everywhere else", precisely because it hasn't got a big supermarket. But still, particularly amongst less sophisticated and less aware councils, there's the feeling that a supermarket is an indicator of development and that it's putting the town on the map. The other thing is the energy side of it. The individual councillors, even if they're prepared for the cost of losing, have to be in for a really big fight because the supermarkets are going to keep coming back and back and back. You know, huge sums of money might be in debt. Anyway, if the supermarkets have a big "stick" they also have a huge "carrot". Agreeing to give a supermarket planning permission allows councils to claim Section 106 payments, which means they can demand that the supermarket does certain other things like rebuilding a road, altering the existing traffic circulation and pay for the priorities there. My research leads me to believe that this is not very carefully monitored. Basically councils are using section 106 payments to get a big pot of money they hadn't expected. They are always desperately looking for cash to put into something else. By saying yes to a supermarket they can get other "housekeeping" things done. So, I think there's a combination of the "carrot and the stick".

*Yeah, which again states how big the power is.*

Yes, people have this sense of futility that, even if you object, sooner or later you are going to get a supermarket, whether you like it or not. And that has proved to be the case in a lot of places. But interestingly now, in the US, some councils are actually saying no to, for example, Wal-Mart and creating sort of Wal-Mart free zones by not giving them planning permission. They are recognising that Wal-Mart moving into an area actually brings down the quality of life and kills off the wider community and so on. So in certain more urban places there's a big anti supermarket movement. But I think quite often here, and in country places particularly, people think that a new anything is fabulous. And they don't really think through what it means. But then again, if you are a cash-strapped council, you might take the very short-term view and it can seem like a good thing to do.

*Effectively, there should almost be regulations on a government level.*

*What do you see as an ideal for planning regulations? Do you have any good ideas, I mean in an ideal world, what could be done?*

I mean that, at the moment, we live in the opposite of an ideal world! Recently I read that the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott is actually going to relax the planning regulations for out-of-town supermarket developments. They are saying that they are too tight and they are going to make them easier, which gives you an idea of the intense lobbying of government by supermarkets. But in an ideal world, I would have a system - my feeling is that we basically have enough supermarkets in Britain - there are very few places where you can really mount a convincing case for a need for a supermarket. And, as your work shows, they are basically leaving behind them a trail of disused supermarkets, which are eyesores and blots on the landscape. So, what I think is that we should work from the position that we don't need any more supermarkets, and have a presumption against supermarket developments enshrined in law. Also I would have an

upper limit on the size that the supermarkets could be: one for country places and one for city places. They have this in the Irish Republic - one size for Dublin and one size for the country - and they are really quite small by British standards. I think, in order to get any future planning permission, supermarkets really should have to make something like a case of proof of need, which must be that there are no other shopping alternatives, either other supermarkets or small shops. Unless they could do that quite convincingly there should be a presumption against supermarket developments. I feel that, at the moment, supermarkets are spreading in Britain like head lice through a nursery. It's almost a joke anytime you get on a bus or a train and you look out the window - there's another Asda and another Tesco - gosh imagine that, another Sainsburys and so it goes on. I think it really has to stop. You can just imagine what kind of landscapes we will have, every town the same, and the loss of green space and land that could be used for something more constructive in the public interest.

*Yeah! Now, let's jump to the farmers. Huntly is based in farming country. When I lived there for four months I went to the sheep auctions every Wednesday and spoke to the farmers. They complained a lot about being constantly pressed down in price, even though they were happy when the supermarkets first came along, offering big business. The evidence in your book shows that farmers are not the only ones being pressed.*

I describe it as a kind of feudal relationship between supermarkets and their suppliers, farmers and growers. Think of the supermarkets as the puppet-masters. The suppliers are down on their knees and jumping to the tune for fear of losing the business. I have spoken to many growers who tell me the same thing. For example, 20 to 30 years' ago a potato grower in Britain might have had 30 or 40 customers all buying significant tonnage of potatoes. Nowadays they are likely to have four or five customers - at best - and they're going to be the major

multiples. So, it's a reflection of the fact that the supermarkets now have 80% of the grocery market. If you want to do any significant amount of business you are almost forced to do business with the supermarkets. Because of their huge buying power they can pick and choose between the different suppliers. So they call the shots and they play them off, one against the other, keeping them in a state of constant insecurity. Doing that means they can grind them down on price. Many farmers, particularly dairy farmers, actually have to sell below the cost of production. It's totally unsustainable in the long-term and the only reason the farmers keep on doing it is that they hope things will get better. But ultimately they are not able to make the whole thing viable. It's really quite serious. I spoke to a lot of producers when I did the research for **SHOPPED** and they all said the same thing. They have this recurrent nightmare where they get a call Friday morning saying they have been delisted and, by the way, they should clear the shelves by Wednesday! That's the sort of thing they dread happening. And it does happen to people. They actually don't sleep at night because of the worry of losing the business. Interestingly, and shocking to me, is that I discovered that supermarkets don't give any contracts to their suppliers. You know, normally in the line of business, you have a contract on both sides. But that's not how supermarkets operate. It's all done by e-mails, faxes, phone calls and text messages. There's nothing written. So there's no security at all. And that's deliberate, there's a climate of fear forced through to keep growers and farmers in a subordinate position. That's the typical modus operandi of the supermarkets. Government and all the investigations of the supermarkets have never really done anything to challenge that, basically because the suppliers are too scared to come out on record and tell them about what's going on.

*In your book you speak about the Competition Commission - has that changed anything?*

No, it hasn't. The Office of Fair Trade and the Competition Commission have shown that they are not going to challenge the supermarkets in any way. I think that's a message that comes from government. You know, supermarkets are big business these days and they make a lot of money, so the government doesn't want to interfere with them too much. So if a whole lot of small farmers and medium sized producers go out of business that's just the way of the world. One of the biggest omissions in the OFT and the Department of Trade and Industry's investigations is that they have never looked at the effect supermarkets have on the independent sector. As far as they are concerned people have a choice of supermarkets. They think that's fine, so the only competition issue for them is that you and I shouldn't be stuck with the choice of one chain. That constitutes the choice. But they never bring into that the small shops. So basically their idea of choice is a choice of supermarkets, rather than a choice of a wide number of different kinds of shops. Therefore it's a very narrow prism through which they are looking at that competition question.

*Choice is very often an argument for wanting a supermarket in the local community. I have spoken to people in Huntly, which has already got a smaller Somerfield supermarket, and it's got three butchers, four bakers, a grocers shop and a delicatessen - unfortunately not a greengrocer. Some nearby towns have quite big supermarkets. So why do people want another supermarket in Huntly? One of the main arguments is always that they want bigger choice of shopping. Now, one of the most scary chapters in SHOPPED is about the so-called category management, where one realises that in the long run there will actually be less choice, and that often what we shop for is being dictated to us because it's all planned out carefully. Could you tell me more about that?*

In supermarket terms I think of choice a bit like having a subscription to endless American or Italian satellite TV stations - you know, there's

lots of choice but it's a quantitative choice, not a qualitative one. Supermarkets, depending on the size, have between 30,000 and 40,000 different lines. But still there are lots and lots of things that you can't get. I think people often mistake size and this kind of illusion of choice for real choice. When supermarkets first became big in Britain - in the seventies and eighties, the rapid growth decades - they seemed to give better choice than the independent sector and we were quite excited about it all. You would go to Safeways or Sainsburys and think "Wow, you can get this or that..." Also, for a lot of medium-sized companies it was a heyday where, for the first time, they could get a nationwide distribution for things that they had never been able to get out to a broader arena. So they were excited about it too. But then gradually through the nineties and into the twenty-first century, as supermarkets have intensified their power and their market control - instead of putting choice on the shelves they put on a carefully managed selection of goods, which are calculated to make the maximum amount of money for them. It's no longer about what you or I might want or about catering for the needs of anyone who prefers say, capers packed in olive oil to capers packed in vinegar. It's not about that any longer. It's about stacking the shelves with the certain lines that sell a lot. Those are the ones they make a lot of money on. So, on the shelves you get the first tier big brands, and then you might get a second choice for that item and then nothing else. It's being rationalised the other way again. All the small and interesting brands are being eliminated because they don't make enough money. The key important shopping spaces are often given either to the supermarket's own label goods where the supermarket makes the most money, or to brands from huge companies who can afford to pay to get their products on the shelves. They are actually buying expensive shelf space on the basis that they can have a big volume turnover. So the net effect of what is called category management is that we've

actually got less diversity on our shelves than we did a decade or two ago. There's less selection. And what's happened now is that most people don't check out the independent sector. They assume that the best choice is in the supermarket. But increasingly, if you do check it out, you will actually find that you have a better selection of many things in the independent sector. If you look at meat, in a place like Huntly for example - the whole area has fabulous, fabulous beef; there are some really good products up there - and you're not going to see them in the local supermarkets. You might see some prime cuts of meat, but if you want shin of beef or lamb shank or belly of pork or cheaper cuts, these won't appear. Or if you are a one-person household you're not really interested in a pack of lamb chops for four people. So actually many people, for one reason or another, are beginning to find that supermarkets are not such handy places to shop and they don't have things that you would be able to get at the local butcher, where you can go in and say that you just want one really nice lamb chop. And that really is a problem in the supermarkets because they are not geared up to that. There are whole categories of produce, like really ripe fruit, that you just don't get any longer in a British supermarket. Which is something your greengrocer used to give you. Fresh raspberries from, say Angus, would be picked the day before, sent to the wholesale market in Dundee or Stirling, then shipped further North and be fresh when you got them. Now they are probably picked some place in England a day to a day and a half before, then refrigerated, picked up the next morning by a refrigerated lorry, trucked to a central distribution depot some place miles and miles away and then sit there for a couple of days before they get shipped out to stores where they will sit on the shelves for another couple of days. Actually the supermarkets have in many ways lengthened the food chain for fresh fruit, rather than shortened it. So, I think that many people are slowly getting disenchanted with supermarkets. You can't get the cuts of

meat you want, you can't get fresh fruit, the vegetables don't seem too fresh, things are never ripe, pears are more like turnips. I think that those sorts of problems show that the supermarkets aren't offering a great choice, particularly in the fresh food sphere - fish, meat, fruit and vegetables. Supermarkets actually perform very badly and I think that people who make independent comparisons, people who go to farmers' markets or good small shops or get local box schemes delivered can see the difference. The worrying thing is that whole generations of people who have only ever had supermarket shopping experiences don't know any different. It does have a very negative effect and now a lot of people don't eat fruit and vegetables. I think the reason for that is that eating fruit and vegetables, if you shop in British supermarkets, is actually quite a challenging thing because so often they make really unrewarding eating. It's the same with meat - it's not properly hung; the cheese is not properly matured and so on. In this respect I think British supermarkets are actually worse than most European supermarkets. I'm sure you know from Denmark, that the supermarkets can do a much better job than that. The French can, the Italians can. They may not be as good as the independent specialists, but still reasonable, whereas in Britain there's still quite a low standard in fresh food. Some of the fish is actually really old and rank and inedible and smelly, you know. Any fishmonger who sold that would soon go out of business, but supermarkets continue to do it. So, for me that's not good choice, that's poor choice.

*Yeah, in the book you have some hilarious quotes from the fish counter in supermarkets. They seem to know nothing!*

Oh yeah, ha-ha...

### **At the supermarket wet fish counter:**

Question: **"What's the best way of cooking this (smoked haddock)?"**

Answer: **“I don’t usually cook fish. My mum does and she microwaves it.”**

(Waitrose, Marlow)

Question: **“Do you sell fresh (unfrozen) whole squid?”**

Answer: **“We don’t do fresh but we do have a stock of frozen which we defrost and sell ready to cook.”**

(Safeway, Inverness)

Question: **“Do you sell bones or trimmings to make a fish stock?”**

Answer: **“No, we don’t sell any of that. You’d need to go to a fish-monger.”**

(Tesco, Eastville, Bristol)

*You are also speaking about the standardisation of fruit and vegetables, which sounds like they are grown to suit packaging rather than being a good sound vegetable.*

Yes, a crass example is leeks. You know what a leek looks like in its natural state with the white head and the long green shoots. You may have noticed that it’s hard, in fact totally impossible, to buy a leek in that form in the supermarkets. There are two reasons for that. One is that, if you don’t cut the green bits – they are called flags – the age of the leek is more obvious. So in order to disguise the freshness they cut off most of the green. Number two reason is that everything has to be in a pack for it to be scanned through a barcode. The pack is a certain size because it’s being given a certain amount of shelf space, which is all carefully calculated. So you can’t have one leek that’s two inches thick and eight inches high and another one that’s three inches thick and seven inches high because they don’t look nice and they don’t fit in the pack. So everything has to be grown to the ridiculous standards just so it will fit into a silly pack and a silly space. And none of this is driven by consumers, you know. It’s not the consumers saying that

they want deflagged leeks in a pack. It's totally to do with the retailing convenience of the supermarkets and, of course, we pay a huge premium for that, getting really expensive vegetables and fruit because of this cosmetic surgery that's being done to them. It goes right back through the food chain. It's not about getting a naturally grown leek and trimming it. It's actually telling people what kind of leeks to grow - ones that only grow to a certain size, and cutting out varieties that are flavoursome but maybe don't look so cosmetically beauty pageant. They all get the chop in favour of standard monotonous global varieties of things with a good shelf life because these are what really fit the supermarket ethos.

*Another thing that really annoys me are these pre-packed mixed salads. It's really difficult to get the individual lettuces, just some nice rocket, and then make the salad yourself. The packaging is ridiculous, it's expensive and it's creating more pollution. It upsets me and I don't want it.*

I completely understand what you're saying. It's interesting to study how many dustbins you fill in your kitchen, if you think about it. If I have a typical week I do a mixture of shopping. I get an organic vegetable box delivered, I go to the farmers' market and I go to small shops. In a week I will probably fill two large bin liners with rubbish - that's a household of three to four people. If I go to the supermarket I can double that. I mean, things like cardboard packaging, ridiculous plastic packaging, and plastic bags... The other day I was writing an article about children's lunch boxes. All supermarkets have sections with children's food which should strike fear in everyone. They have these readymade airline style lunchboxes. I counted the layers of packaging on one lunch box and it had six layers. That's one lunch for one child! That gives you some idea of the amount of packaging we are creating. Supermarkets are major contributors to mountains of unnecessary packaging. But the whole point about a lot of the

packaging is to conceal lack of freshness. All these clear, puffy packs, called pillow packs in the trade, are actually filled with modified air where the oxygen has been taken out. It preserves the life and makes the product look better. But we know that modified atmosphere actually seriously depletes vitamin levels, so although your vegetables look okay they have a lot less nutrients in them. All those chopped-up carrot sticks or shredded runner beans or lettuces or whatever are less nutritious. That's point number one. Point number two is: you often look at these lettuce bags in the supermarket, under the supermarket lights, and think that it looks nice. You go home and put it in the fridge but when you take it out the next time you think it doesn't look as nice as you remembered it when you bought it. Now, that's because of this flattering supermarket light which is designed to bring out certain colours and make the things look good. Another thing is that the minute you open these bags you're meant to use the contents. But if you don't, if you just open the bag and then leave the contents, it's spectacularly obvious how in no time at all they absolutely flag. They become flaccid in a way the fresh equivalent wouldn't. A really fresh rocket, for example, kept in a bag in a fridge, will keep for two or three days. If you buy the same from a supermarket, the minute you take it out of the bag it's more or less fit for the compost heap! And that's a reflection of the fact that it's not very fresh. In the first place it's been sitting around in the ways I've already mentioned, it's been over-handled and it's then been put in this modified air. So, it's a great con but it's also a massively expensive con. I tell people to look very carefully at the contents of these bags. Everything looks better than it actually is.

*Scary! I think the chapter about special food for children is important because they are the next generation.*

Well, supermarkets have helped foster this concept that there is a different category of food, called children's food, which is seen as

different from adults' food. In the past that distinction didn't exist. Basically we were breast-fed and then we gradually got on to eating what the adults were eating. It wasn't separated. But now many British households actually shop three categories of food: adult's food, children's food and pet food. And, of course, the whole concept of children's food has been a fabulous vehicle for the food industry and the supermarkets to make monumental profits out of over-processing food. They are undermining the confidence of parents, particularly mothers, to think they know best what to feed the children, telling them that they need experts and they need special foods, encouraging the idea that children are picky eaters and that you can't expect them to eat the same as everyone else. They make a fortune out of retailing foods for children. You will see these children's sections and ideal-for-lunch-box sections. And, if you look at them, basically anything that's children's in supermarkets generally means crap food. It's poorer quality food than the adult food. It's the opposite of most other cultures, where you give children better food than the adults because they deserve the best and they need it. But in this country, fed by the food industry and the supermarkets, the perverse thing is that the children's food is really scandalous. They make healthy claims and cover things with labels saying "Good source of energy" when it really means loads of sugar and "No artificial colourings" when they don't say that there are lots of preservatives. All these red herring type labels are deliberately there to confuse parents. All these products really corrupt the palate of younger generations. Now you have children who have never tasted any kind of real home-cooked food. They have been brought up on supermarket children's food and have become accustomed to ridiculously high levels of salt, sugar, fat and cheap bulk fillers of starches, everything with additives. They would, if you gave them real food, probably find it unpleasant because it's so different from what they are used to. I think that supermarkets are

culpable because they have really led this whole thing. They have encouraged that sort of mentality towards children's food and in that way they create their customers of the future - customers who wouldn't know how to make a cottage pie, wouldn't see the point of making it and wouldn't know what a good one tastes like. They will buy their overpriced, low-grade, ready-meal cottage pie and it all works very well for the food industry and the supermarkets. It's a license to print money!

*Yeah. I think healthy living really has to do with education and something needs to be done about that... But, first back to Huntly. The chapter New Community, speaking about places where it's impossible today to do a little bit of shopping in the local community, like going to the library, the pharmacy, getting the newspaper and so on. In Huntly you can actually still do those things. The question is what will happen when Huntly gets its big new Asda...*

Well, sadly there are fewer and fewer places left in Britain that are like Huntly because they all have large supermarkets. I have described it as a neutron-bomb effect on all the retail life around. The supermarkets close it down. Although you can have really good and well-liked small shops doing a very good job, they will be negatively affected by the opening of a supermarket. It's a strange dynamic. I think the New Economics Foundation calculated that when a new supermarket opens it only takes 17% of people changing their shopping to the supermarket to alter the dynamic, so the profitability of the small shops takes a nosedive. Then you get this thing that the economists call the tipping point. There is a downturn. Maybe one small shop closes and because that shop isn't there anymore - say the man who cuts the keys and heels the shoes - well then because they can't get their things done any longer people stop going there, which has a knock-on effect on the rest of the small shops nearby. They all support each other, they have strength in numbers, like soldiers. And

when one goes then you get this domino effect. What will more than likely happen in Huntly, unless they stop the supermarket – and I sincerely hope they do – is that you'll have all the small useful shops closing down and you'll start seeing shops opening that aren't really useful in a daily sense, like charity shops, video rental shops and tanning salons...

*Yeah, always a good sign of decline!*

Yes, everywhere. And when you get all these kind of shops it means that, even if you have one really good butcher, people might not go there. That's just too bad for the butcher. So it kills off not only the weak or not very good shops, but also the strong, good independent shops. This is why local councils really need to have a positive policy of supporting the independent sector, not allowing it to be run down and threatened because it is such an unfair competition. And the key reason is that the government favours supermarkets by giving them effectively free parking space, meaning you don't pay when you go to supermarkets and park. When you go to small shops you're dodging a double yellow line, dodging a warden and always looking at your watch... So there's this inbuilt disadvantage for small shops. Really, the only hope for thriving country market towns like Huntly is that they see off the supermarkets and maintain their characters in independent, interesting towns, which are unique and have a portfolio of shops and possibilities and which are not the same as anywhere else in Britain. The depressing thing is that supermarkets turn places into clone towns. Everywhere looks the same and you might as well be in Sheffield, Stirling, Elgin, Peterhead, anywhere. Where you are becomes irrelevant: it's the same shopping experience. So gradually our built environment is beginning to be less and less interesting and we're losing all the landmarks that made it feel like a living and breathing town. Also, there are security issues. Lively clusters of small shops make town centres nice places to be in. You know, children can

be there without feeling threatened and old people don't feel worried and it's not intimidating because there's always someone around. But with supermarkets you make the small town centres into kind of windy corridors where people don't come by. No one's really looking at what's going on and there's a slight alien, brave-new-world feel to it. I think that creates a sad townscape and a downbeat feeling of insecurity. The community is being killed off for a fake ersatz community which is the supermarket community.

*There's this notion of shopping in the supermarket, meeting the neighbours, having a chat and how nice that is. But that has always been going on in the town centre, on the square or in the streets. The so-called new community is nothing compared to that.*

Yes, it's very anonymous. I think particularly for older people. I was speaking to an older person who went shopping every day, and I said "Gosh, that's quite a lot". But she said "Oh no dear, I like to go out and talk to the shop keepers and I like the exercise. When I have a letter to post I will post it that day, I won't wait and I'll maybe write a letter the next day and walk out and post that too. And I buy what I need as when I need it and it gets me out and I see people." There are many good reasons why older people see the benefits of that kind of thing. But younger people are maybe forgetting about that. They might never have had the experience and don't know how nice it can be to shop for food. It's a great tragedy that supermarkets in Britain have made food shopping a really depressing, sort of spirit crushing experience. It's like, you know, going to the toilet, something that you get over and done with as quickly as possible and don't waste any time on. And that's really tragic because food is a nurturing, important thing that makes our lives more pleasant. So it's downgrading the whole experience of shopping, food preparation, cooking and eating. It's taken our pleasure away and it's made it into this big ordeal, whereas if you actually use small shops and farmers' markets - in my case I

have found that I have developed relationships with all these people and I really like meeting them. I trust them. I get excited when I see the seasons coming and going and I get ideas for cooking. I actually like food shopping. I don't find it an arduous chore. In supermarkets it's the opposite. I mean supermarkets are meant to be liberating us from the burden of food shopping. But I actually find the burden of food shopping in the supermarket really spirit-crushing. I think a lot of people, if they allow themselves to think outside their habitual shopping patterns, would agree.

*Yeah, it's about habits and, as they say, it suits the modern lifestyle. Sometimes, when I go to my local butcher, I will ask him what to cook tonight, you know! I think it's great. Some people might find that romanticising it...*

No, it's not!

*I think it's about passion for your food...*

I agree!

*Food is the basic in our lives. I think it should be holy.*

Yes, absolutely!

*In Huntly again there's not only the butchers, the bakers and the great delicatessen. Most of the shops on the square are non-food shops, like the TV and hardware store, a furniture shop, pharmacy and all kind of things. The non-food departments in the supermarkets really upset me because they take away every other business as well. Surely it would be easy to say that supermarkets weren't allowed to go into those sectors as well.*

That's right. Supermarkets are trying to encourage a shopping pattern where you only ever go to one place to buy everything you need. They really don't want you to look elsewhere, they don't want you to compare prices and they don't want you to have a kind of portfolio shopping basket. They want you to do it all under their roof. So the more reasons they can give you the better for them. We are looking at

a life where people buy everything in supermarkets, not just food. It's insurance, holidays, almost everything...

*Yeah, there's an amazingly long list in your book.*

So they create that exclusivity, dedication and dependency. Of course it serves them because they will cream away all the business from the opposition. And when they have monopolised the business they will remain supreme and they can put the prices up and we are all at their mercy because there's no competition left. It's very sinister. I think we are looking at a situation where you might just have a standing order once a month that goes from your account into Tesco's, for example. That might include all your shopping, your non-food, your clothes, your mortgage and so on, all rationalised in one standing order payment for this total service. It's a scary new world.

*I went online just to check out Tesco's books. I searched on your name and I could actually order **SHOPPED!***

I know. It's amazing isn't it? I think that the supplier is having a bit of a laugh there! They have this standard policy that bestselling books can be mail-ordered. They wouldn't have my book in stores, obviously, but someone at Tesco's head office hasn't noticed yet that they are selling it!

*Ha, ha. Now, I don't know if it's because I have been specifically interested in this retail and supermarket development ever since I came to Scotland, but has there actually been more talk about supermarkets during the last year in the media? There have been quite a lot of negative comments on the supermarkets and their incredible power. Is that more than it used be?*

Yes. There is a supermarket backlash now. It's growing all the time and the bigger the supermarkets get the more intense that criticism comes. It's rare now to hear unqualified praise or plaudits for a supermarket. There's always balance, and sometimes the negative stuff actually outweighs the positive. A couple of weeks' ago Tesco

reported unprecedented profits of two billion, more than any British company has ever made before. I think there's a very strong feeling that Tesco has become too big for its boots. There's resentment and I think people are beginning to question how Tesco makes so much money. Are we paying too much for food or what is the price of Tesco's profits? We know that the staff are not particularly well paid, it's just above the legal minimum. So we are beginning to wonder where all that profit's going. If you remember, even only a couple of years ago McDonalds was seen as a huge unassailable global corporation with fabulous products and profits. No one thought there would be any letup. Then all of a sudden there was a kind of strong anti globalisation backlash and surprise, surprise - McDonalds was getting it in the neck, its share-price was going down, the profits were looking poorer and I think the same thing is happening here, in particular with Tesco. But with all the supermarkets, I think there's a feeling that we are just sick of them and their omnipresence, we're sick of the way they dominate things. We know they are calling the shots with suppliers and grinding them down so that farmers and growers can't even make a decent living. And we are getting to be more and more alienated from a lot of what they sell. There has been a series of food scares, for example Sudan 1, the red dye that was in nearly 600 processed foods, all sold through supermarkets. So we begin to realise that supermarkets can't be guaranteed to give us healthy and safe food. As a consequence I think the perception is changing. I still think that supermarkets are here to stay, they are not going away, but the critique is growing more powerful, really quite rapidly, like a snowball, picking up a lot. It's different from just a year ago, certainly different from five years ago. Supermarkets have far more problems encouraging people to think about them positively.

*Which is good. Hopefully that awareness will make people feel a kind of responsibility to change things...*

Right, we made these monsters, so what are we going to do about them? I think we are realising that we have seen phase one of supermarket development, that it's basically taken over the grocery shopping and it's crushing the suppliers. So, they've done that. They've done the grocery thing and now they are moving into non-food where there are even richer pickings. It's an open field with more opportunities to make money, and that's phase two. People are waking up to that, asking "Do we really want everything to come from supermarkets?" No way! You know, we are looking at big high street institutions like W H Smith, Boots and Marks and Spencers. These companies are all struggling and they all blame the supermarkets for the downturn. So it's not only the small shops that are suffering. Even the big and quite established businesses are seeing themselves lose ground over and over again. If supermarkets continue to grow they might take the pharmacies; it's possible that Boots goes out of business. Who would have thought that Marks and Spencers would be seen as an ailing chain? Now it is. And all because of the growth of the few, very big retailers.

*All this media attention plus the fact that your book has sold a lot...*

Yes, what's quite interesting about **SHOPPED** is that it keeps on selling. Usually book sales peak after the launch and then it dies away, but **SHOPPED** is steadily building. I think it's because it resonates with more and more people, and they talk to other people and because these concerns relating to supermarkets are in the media. That's all a good sign of something changing.

*So, that takes us to the future. I have this issue about consumers' responsibility when it comes to good health and keeping farming and small shops alive. But how can I do responsible shopping when my local butcher doesn't sell free-range pigs or eggs? I hate the thought of*

*eating anything from a poor caged animal. In the bigger cities you don't have that problem because you have many more specialist shops, but in smaller places you have to shop for organic in the supermarkets only, almost. What about the shopkeepers? Should they not take more chances and start introducing environmentally friendly food for example?*

Yes, they have to be a bit more innovative. And they should listen when people say that they need to be open for more hours, maybe the odd late night or on a Saturday afternoon, that kind of thing. And, yes, some small shops are still quite traditional. But many aren't. Of course there is an urban / rural thing going on there. But I think, if you are so minded, there are not many places in Scotland where you can't avoid the supermarkets and still manage to get everything you want. For example, with my organic vegetable box I can order organic eggs and organic meat and at the farmers' markets I can get organic everything. So, there are always sources. I do think that there are some older traders perhaps, who are not able to change. But then there are a lot of dynamic people who are doing a good job. For example I was passing through Ballater the other day and there was a fabulous bakery called Crannoch. It makes the most wonderful, mainly organic sourdough breads, lovely, lovely proper bread. They are obviously doing very well and they distribute all around Aberdeen and that area. It's fantastic that someone young and energetic is doing something great. There are lots of people like that and it's good to support them. The feedback I get from good independent shops who have taken on the supermarkets, from farmers' markets, mail order schemes and home deliveries, is that they have never been so buoyant. They are doing very well. Farmers' markets all have waiting lists to get stalls at the moment. Small independent, good shops are doing well. The other day I shopped in a wholefood shop, which is a bit like Camphill, run on Rudolph Steiner principles and many of the people working there have

learning difficulties. I was in at lunchtime, and they do things like soup and really nice rolls with homemade organic bread and so on to take away. And here were all these first year kids from the local school buying food and, you know, they were an age-group where children are not normally interested in food quality, and there they were queuing to get their lentil soup or their brown roll or whatever. I said to the people there that I thought it was fantastic and they replied "Yes, but you know it's a reflection of the fact that we actually offer good value. They know that and they get something much nicer and we are nice to them, we don't treat them like shoplifters!" They also told me that they can't keep up with the demand and literally as soon as they stack the shelves they have to restack them. The stuff is just flying out the door. They have seen a definite lift over the last year. Things are really good for people who decide to give the supermarkets a run for their money.

*It seems like you see the future a bit brighter?*

Yes, I'm quite optimistic. It's a battle. But I think it's a battle that we can win in the sense that there will always be a significant minority of people who just won't warm to the supermarket shopping experience and who resent their way of doing business and who will support the independent sector. I think it's going from strength to strength and that there are more and more people like that. It's quite interesting to go to farmers' markets and study the other people who go. What I find is that, increasingly, there are a lot of young parents, and I think a lot of them just don't want to start their children eating the junk food crap that they would get in the supermarkets. I also see a lot of older people for whom it just makes sense to go back to the rightness in the way of approaching food, which they approve of. It's a real cross-section of people, not necessarily particularly wealthy people, who sooner or later realise that they get good value at farmers' markets or in local shops. So, I think it's looking quite bright, I think we've got a battle, but one that we can really make some good successes with.

*Great! I think we have covered a lot here!*

Yes, I hope Huntly holds out against the supermarket. I really do. It sounds like it's got a wonderful nexus of shops and I think the local consumers need to realise that they have to really actively support the independent shops. People need to realise that it's either the supermarket or the small shops. You can't have both. That's not a possibility now. You have got to decide what kind of world you want to live in and most consumers, if they think about it positively, know intuitively that they will support the small, local shops with distinction and that whole vibrant, real, honest to goodness local community which is Huntly, as opposed to this virtual community of the supermarket. That's really it, I think.

*Totally great, thank you so much.*