

J. Robin Whitely (JRW) talks to Niall Munro (NM)

Niall Munro Well Robin, thank you so much for taking the time to have a chat to me about your experiences. I wanted to start by maybe if you could say a little bit of your own experiences in the military and also as a writer.

J. Robin Whitely Sure. The basic story is I went into the Marine Corps in 2005. I grew up in Seattle, Washington which is a very liberal town. I come from a very liberal background. I was first deployed to Iraq in 2006. I was stationed outside of Fallujah, about forty miles outside of Fallujah, where we primarily did vehicular patrols. That was one of my many tasks while I was there. But as far as mission oriented stuff that's pretty much what it was. I got out in 2008 after one deployment. I did a little bit of writing in Iraq but I didn't know I wanted to be a writer. I knew I wanted to go to school pretty much when I got to Iraq. Why that happened then I don't know. But you know in the United States we have the Montgomery GI Bill so I was able to go to school a little bit after that. When I got out, when I finally got out, I actually didn't really want to do anything because I think it was you know there's the adjustment time, going from military life, active duty military life, to effing freedom, is a strange thing. And I don't think I necessarily dealt with it in the best way. I spent about nine months not really doing anything. But I ended up going to school. And I took some writing classes and sort of fell into writing again which I had started in high school. I took creative writing very seriously. I started my university time after the community college at Southern Oregon University, where one of the poet teachers there in residence was a Flarfist, Kasey Mohammad. And he sort of opened my eyes to conceptual literature and I began just getting really excited about literature, text, art, all of it, and I ended transferring, finishing my degree at Seattle University. I did my emphasis in fiction but I pretty much took as many poetry classes as I did fiction. I was always interested in both genres.

NM And you're currently writing two novels and working on poetry at the same time? How do you find that? Can you switch from one to the other easily?

JRW Yes, I can. I read them both pretty often as well, so it's never been a problem for me. But my prose is very lyrical so I think poetry does have a sort of heavy influence on me.

NM Are there certain writers in the U.S. who... not writing about the military necessarily but I don't know writing about ideas relating to conflict, something more abstract perhaps. Are there writers you admire who you'd like to write like or write in the same kind of vein as?

JRW I don't think so. I think I want to pave my own way. I think that's what a lot of us are trying to think about right now. I've been around military writing for quite a while in the workshop environment and you know a few established ideas on how to write these kinds of things have emerged in the United States and one of the pieces of feedback I find myself giving most is OK, how is this different than this? What is it you're going to say that hasn't been said? And I think it's an important question. It's not always the question people want to hear but, yeah, I don't... the things I'm trying to write are a little bit different. One of the novels that I'm working on is not about the war *per se*, it's about coming back from war, it's about readjusting, it's about two issues that have just been themes for me. It's about survivor's syndrome and while it's hard to sort of describe it but it's about recklessness.

While I don't have suicidal ideation, I haven't seriously had those ideations, I have noticed that I will indulge in reckless behaviour and I think that that is related to my military experience and I'm trying to explore why and how that is. Because I know it's something that other veterans do.

NM Why is writing good for... because one of the words we've used a bit in this workshop is 'cathartic'. Is it cathartic? Is that partly why you do it?

JRW You know, I suppose it. The workshop environment that I come from is so heavily craft oriented. We don't like to think of ourselves as art therapy and that doesn't mean that I have a position positive or negative on art therapy. But I think it must be cathartic but at the same time there is a reason why I still haven't really written about the war. I wrote about the war when I first got out [of the military] for a little while and then I pretty much abruptly stopped. And I remember as I said I was writing in Iraq. I was keeping a journal of war events that had happened to me but I was also writing about back home. I wanted to get away. I wanted to cast myself back to high school, to love, to all these things that I didn't have access to when I was overseas. And when I got out, when I was trying to write about war writing and I think I quickly sort of just backed off from that and wanted writing again to be this escape for me. And that doesn't mean I'm a genre fiction writer or something like that, it just...

NM Is there something that poetry can do then which the fiction doesn't do in terms of communicating your experience?

JRW I mean to me poetry exists without the notions of genre that fiction does. Poetry to me is more freeing and that's why I like the genre. I'm not necessarily concerned with producing something marketable. I never really have been. And as I said, I had a conceptual teacher as a first primary major and influence at the university level. Fiction is such a mainstay in our cultural discourse. Most people that read literature read fiction. Most people that buy literature buy fiction. One of the things I go back and forth with is: as a veteran am I responsible? Is it my duty to write veterans' poetry, veterans' fiction, veterans' work? Does the duty continue? I signed up, I raised my hand, I signed the contract, right? I am a veteran for life but I don't want being a veteran to necessarily define me all the time.

NM Is there pressure on you, do you think, coming from somewhere?

JRW I think it's pressure that I place on myself and it's pressure that I go back and forth on. Most of the feedback I get, most people tend to like my more war oriented writing. When I was in graduate school and I was working on these two novels that I'm still working on, I got good feedback from both of them, but a lot of people really wanted to read the war literature. And I still don't know how I feel about that.

NM Why did they? Just because you were amongst veterans?

JRW No, I was not amongst them. It was university students.

NM Was it the opposite? It was just kind of I'm interested in that because I don't know about that? I'm interested in that experience?

JRW I think it's that and it's also this role of the veteran as victim that well educated white people like. And there are truths to it, there are injustices, there are... you know. But I don't know. It's complicated.

NM Thinking about that audience that you've got there. Their perception of the veteran is someone who is victimised or a victim -- is that broadly how you'd say the U.S. population looks at veterans or thinks about veterans?

JRW No. The U.S. population is very diverse and divided especially right now. I think in my environment amongst well-educated New Yorkers, I think that is the perception. There are also, while they'll go out and they'll read a Phil Cly book, they're not necessarily, maybe they are but, I don't get the sense that they're interested in getting deep with me. And I feel like I'm willing to get deep and talk about my own experiences. For instance at work none of my coworkers are veterans, I'm pretty much the only one, and we'll touch on the fact that I served overseas and that I'm a veteran from time-to-time but it doesn't really go past that. It's just oh you know, he's a hero and, of course, I don't feel like a hero. No veteran really does. But it doesn't go deep. I don't know if they want to hear about the trauma. I don't know if it's the time and place anyway.

NM Do you also, this is maybe the last question, but do you also feel pushed to write about the trauma as well?

JRW I think in my mind that's what people want to read so I feel like that's what I'm supposed to write, but I also want to subvert that in my work in whatever way I can because I feel like that's the next step in veterans' writing and I know from the workshop that there are other veteran writers that are interested in doing it as well. We all have our own take on it. Whether that's the idea of showing the ways in which we're complicit and we're not necessarily just victims which is I think a really important thing to raise.

NM Well it's been so fascinating and interesting. Thank you so much.

JRW Of course! Of course.