

Jo Young (JY) talks to Niall Munro (NM) - first interview

Niall Munro So thank you so much Jo, for agreeing to have a chat with me. I wonder if I might start by, or you might start by just telling me a bit about just your military background and also your background as a writer.

Jo Young I joined the army straight from university, so I was in the Officer Training Corps at St Andrews Uni, went straight into Sandhurst from finishing my degree and joined the Royal Logistic Corps as a second lieutenant and worked my way up through the ranks, served in Afghanistan, did trips out to Canada and other overseas exercises, specialised for a while in food services, managing the chefs of the army, was an adjutant in Afghanistan, and was an OC, an Officer Command, in charge of a squadron. That sort of really was my final job before I left the regular army. I had my two sons and while they were still very young, because my husband was also serving, we made the decision that we wouldn't be a dual serving couple. And I retired thinking that was it, thinking that was me dying my hair pink, and tattooing my neck, and all that sort of thing. But I joined the reserves almost straight away and that really was part of facing the cliff edge of a loss of identity from leaving the army. I was very aware that you know you are a teacher or a vet or a doctor, medical doctor, and you stop working for some reason, you still call yourself doctor or lawyer or teacher, but when you stop being an army officer, you stop being an army officer, and there was nothing, I really felt that, so I just joined the reserves as a way of weaning myself off but actually it grew ahead of steam, I enjoyed it. I enjoyed the added flexibility that working part time gave me. They promoted me. And so I've been doing a job with the army reserve where I'm the army's arts engagement officer which dovetails really nicely what I've done otherwise since leaving the regulars which was to go straight on to a creative writing masters at Glasgow which has transitioned into a PhD. I always wrote. I wrote at university. I won the short story prize up there at St Andrews, and did bits of writing throughout my military career. But I never did it very seriously and when I look at it now it's all... it's without merit. But I've really sort of concentrated on it since leaving the regular army. And yeah, I have bits and pieces published in magazines and online and what-have-you and have no intention of stopping really.

NM And is your writing dominated by your experience in the army?

JY It is at the moment simply because that's what we've decided to focus on in the PhD, and so subject matter wise almost everything is at the moment. But I'm really... I have a second pamphlet-length collection in my mind that I've started working on, that is not connected, not overtly connected to the military.

NM So not overtly but there's...?

JY Well I think it's part of your personality, so I.. I'm to write poetry about the dynamics of introverts in extrovert roles which I think is something I've experienced as an introvert in the army. So I guess it's connected but it's not sort of writing about military hardware or activities or anything -- only inasmuch as it's part of my personality is it about that. And I've written a novel which is in the bottom drawer, so I'd like to take that out, give that a scrub.

NM That's on a different subject?

JY Yeah, it is. That's more sort of typical women's literature, relationship-driven form.

NM So you're writing about army experience. Are you reflecting quite a lot on gender in military environments?

JY Yes, I think almost entirely. I write about the female experience of combat, the female experience of war, gender politics in the armed forces. It's still quite a sexist place. It's getting a lot better. And I write about sort of women's body issues, I write about abortion, pregnancy, sort of injuries and things that we carry that aren't necessarily carried by other people. So yeah. I write about make-up, where to get your eyebrows waxed in Kandahar. So yeah.

NM So it's a kind of a tourist guide actually as well?

JY Yeah, I think it's very much unique to a female soldier's voice and that's what I'm aiming for.

NM So you don't think there's anyone else really writing about that at the moment? Maybe not in the UK?

JY Maybe not in the UK, no. There are a few female soldier poets in the US I think. But it's not really... it's not really happening in the UK.

NM We have been talking about this difference between the US/UK treatment in the military, and you were saying that veteran as an idea, as a concept, as a term, is not something you welcome really, as an idea, as a term?

JY No, I don't. I find it's a masculine word. It's a word about old people. It's a word that describes you of a particular campaign or conflict. It doesn't work for people who have been to lots of different war zones, which I haven't actually, just Afghanistan for me. And I do think it's a term that we've inherited from the Americans, and for me, you know ex-service woman or ex-service person does absolutely fine, or retired officer is absolutely fine.

NM And last question, I think. In terms of the way you use poetry -- do you think that poetry can help to bring together the kind of civilian-military divide, or bridge that civilian-military divide. Is there something that poetry can do perhaps that fiction doesn't do as well?

JY I think possibly it can in that, you know, I could write a novel about what it's like to be a woman in the army and throw in some surprising and interesting things, but you're asking a reader for a lot of investment if you're going to ask them to read 350 pages. You ask them to read forty lines, that can be done several times in a coffee break. And a couple of the poems that I've had published have been about that, really lighthearted subject matter: putting make-up on, having fairy lights in your tent in the desert, as a way in, as a sort of soft opening into maybe thinking about women or British soldiers in those scenarios. So I think it can. I hope it does. I've had people come up to me and say I didn't know you could be a mum in the army, and it's been twenty-five years since that rule was changed, so... It's quite

important to me individually that the small army we have represents our society and is understood by our society because this army belongs to society.

NM It is the British army.

JY Yeah.

NM Wonderful, that's been a real insight. Thank you so much.

JY Thank you for having me. It's been a really good day.