

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

Niall Munro I thought I might start just by asking you about the PhD you've been doing, and what's in that, what it contains, how much is creative, critical, and what you've been... what kind of focus you've had for it?

Jo Young The PhD output is a long one, one long poem, about 2000 lines long, in which I started out trying to generate a female response, a female soldier's poetic response, to war. Not just war but combat, conflict, and the preparedness for war. And it sort of almost runs chronologically, starting with being a teenager and being interested in joining the army all the way through to becoming a mother, and that's fifteen, twenty years later. There are four voices in the poem, little bit sort of influenced by *Grief is a Thing with Feathers*, and tackling something quite big, not necessarily being able to sustain one narrative voice throughout. You wouldn't probably see that influence but it was an... I came up with the idea that way. There is a storyteller, and I was very interested in, you know, the idea of story, and who owns a story, who owns a narrative, which has been quite important to me as I've wrestled with the various types of censorship I've felt upon me which I can mention that again in a minute. There is a scribe, specifically a female scribe, and I've done some research into the history of female scribes. It was very much a male pursuit and, sort of, it's been interesting to learn about that. There is a voice that I call the sister, and she's kind of supportive of the soldier woman in the poem but has a sort of more sarcastic edge, a little bit critical edge. And there is a scrapbook element, a scrapbook voice if you like. And in there, it's quite interesting what we were doing today, in some of the exercises. I've drawn on letters, I've taken diary entries, bits and pieces out of some of the publications that we had to take to Afghanistan, phrase books, Dari, Pashto phrase books, that sort of thing, so there's like a magpie element to that, lots of lists in those sections, list poems and things. The start of the poem now is not where the start was. The original start is about four or five pages in. And then I kept finding myself wanting to put another frame round it and another frame round it. I found myself trying to build in quite a lot of distance and I think that's part of some self-censorship I've put on. But I've you know, used quite a lot of imagery of film-making, casting couch type imagery to sort of pull myself away and then go "Right, OK, now the poem's starting, oh hang on, just another little meeting before you can get into the poem". So I've found that quite interesting. So talking about censorship, I've found... I've sort of investigated three types of censorship. The censorship I've put on myself, not wanting to expose myself, don't want it to be autobiographical so some of it is things that have happened some things that have happened to other people and some of it, as David Jones says in his introduction, they are just imagined from a very real possibility of things that can happen. There is the sort of censorship, the fact that I'm still serving in the reserves, there are things that I'm supposed to... not in a kind of sinister way but the idea being that I was being paid to do a job that I volunteered to do so you therefore can't be seen to profit from it. Not that there's money in it or anything. But I mean I was never sort of in the part of the army that has access to secret codes or technologies or anything so it's not that I would reveal something but it's just what is my information to share and what is sort of the crown's information if you like. So there's that. And then there's the sort of, I found like the censorship of the form. I was writing a long poem and I had to sort of really get my head around what writing a long poem was. Did it have to be in four line stanzas? Or did it all have to look the same on the page? Or could it

be a bit more unruly and a little bit more...? So as the poem progressed, it started off quite uniform and regimented if you like but then as it goes on, there are bits that you could just pull out as individual poems almost. And it kind of breaks down a bit towards the end into what perhaps more like unitary poems but they are all connected as one poem. I don't know. I've just described it really badly. My viva's going to be a disaster.

NM No, that's really interesting. That sounds really clear. So do those different voices that you've described, do they represent parts of society, different parts of experience?

JY Yes, that and different parts of me. The sister voice is everything I think in my head, maybe a bit rebellious, anti-authority voice. And the storyteller is concerned with being quite reasonably factual, reasonably chronological, and also looks at the sort of overall story arc if you like, teenage girl to woman to mother.

NM So like a kind of chorus I guess, commenting?

JY Yes. Yeah, I think that's possibly the tone. And the scribe widens the picture out. So the scribe will look at female warriors in Arabic literature, or from Medieval literature, or from Greek and Roman. So a widening out of the idea of being a soldier, being a woman soldier and tries to draw a bigger picture, if you like.

NM Does it matter to you that those cohere into some--I mean it's going to be one text.. Does it matter to you that they interlink or is part of the point that they are different voices working in different realms?

JY So each time a new voice comes it is labeled. It will say "scribe", "storyteller", "sister", or "scrapbook". And then sometimes there are some other random-ish titles but there's not really any consistency to that. But the speakers are always signposted and sometimes they're in a little bit of dialogue with each other.

NM So I'm really fascinated by this idea as well and you get that I suppose through having different speakers by this kind of distance that you are talking about. So what are they distant from? What if you like is... if you think about it as being, I don't know, throwing a stone in the water or something and seeing the ripples push out, what's right in the middle? What's the kind of starting point that then you're trying to distance yourself or the reader from?

JY Yeah, I think it's born from an initial resistance to even writing this at all. When I first started my creative writing journey which was straight after leaving the army, going onto a masters programme, it was very much treating it as a hobby activity, something that I wanted to do for a long time. It was just a purely personal thing for myself. And I thought I'd come out of the end of that year having written most of a novel that was nothing to do about military. And it was only because I'd written... For one of the workshops, I wrote a couple of poems that had service as the subject matter. And everyone was really interested in them. The tutor really enjoyed them. Then there was a general encouragement, write more of that stuff, write more, write more. Then so when it came time to decide whether to do a PhD, I was sort of almost persuaded to do poetry about that subject matter. So right from the word go, I was... it wasn't something that I was desperate to write. I kind of had to force myself to

find a way to do it. It wasn't like I had some burning message or I wanted to bridge the gap between me and the rest of society. I kind of felt like who wants to hear this? Nobody. How am I going to make it interesting? How am I going to make it relevant? Accessible? And I think everyone gets this with their PhD but the number of times I just wanted to not write it anymore. And then as it grew, I came to love the four characters. I felt quite sad when I finished it and thought "Oh that's it, those four voices have gone now". So it sort of grew on me, but yeah, that sort of finding it hard to get a way in was sort of born out of a reluctance to get it going in lots of ways.

NM Yes, and one of the things that you're saying is there's not kind of an overarching message. It seems to be you're kind of responding to history of war literature which has by and large been written by men. You're creating, very deliberately, a female voice, soldier voice.

JY Yes. That has become important to me. And lots of the themes... It sort of really has taken two and a half years to write so I have changed in that time. And my motherhood style has changed in that time. And my soldiering has changed in that time. But there are just themes that just stayed with it: the effects on the body, the body being a sort of part of the front line itself, becoming fit and strong, becoming less fit and less strong, yeah, sculpture imagery, lots of craft and handiwork imagery, and lots of stuff about sort of the tension between gender especially in a very masculine environment.

NM So did you think there was a necessity for, not to be too grand about it I guess, but a necessity for somebody to write that kind of voice because it wasn't really there?

JY Yes. I think in terms of when you are writing a PhD and you are expected to contribute something new to knowledge, I think I would argue that I have done that in this. I think it is something that hadn't been said or hadn't been said in this particular way and I have explored how poetry can do that I think.

NM And is some of this in the pamphlet?

JY There are a couple of sections of the big poem that have emerged as individual poems that are in the pamphlet. Four poems or something like that.

NM So when that's published in November--it's a bit difficult question to answer--but what do you think the reception might be amongst, let's say, general readers and let's also think about readers that know about military life?

JY I almost don't want to think about it because it's really terrifying. Sometimes I think I imagine the women I know in the army being very encouraging. Other times I imagine people reading it and going "Who the hell does she think she is?", you know.

NM Why because you're kind of speaking on their behalf?

JY Well, yeah, I think so. But I would never think that about somebody else doing the same thing so it sort of may be a bit of paranoia, but yeah. And I think sort of people who aren't in the military, the general public, I think hopefully it's fresh enough as poetry, stands on its

own two feet as poetry, and is just something, a bit of subject matter, that's a bit intriguing and... But then here, hopefully just drawing those comparisons saying womanhood is womanhood, motherhood is motherhood, being in love and falling out of love and battling your body, all of those things. They're the same whatever uniform you're wearing.

NM Yes because I was quite struck by your comment, just yesterday I guess, when you said "Well, is it our job as ex-military or when you're in the reserve to try to portray some of our experiences to civilians. Do we really need to do that? Is that important? Do civilians care?". I mean I would argue that civilians do care and, in fact, it's largely through, I guess in some cases, a kind of ignorance, I suppose, not necessarily a deliberate ignorance, but just not knowing. Because they don't know somebody's been in the army for instance, they've not had it in the family, all those myths and ideas about first, second world war in their minds, that they should have an understanding, or at least the beginning of an understanding about it. And I guess in some ways your pamphlet and your PhD could contribute to some of that better understanding.

JY Yeah and I'd like to but I really feel strongly that it needs to be done in a neutral way. I don't want to be an ambassador for the British army. I'm very proud of the British army. I would happily talk to people why it's a good career or the joyfulness of being a soldier. But I don't necessarily want to be an ambassador but I also don't certainly want to be a bitter critic because I don't feel like that either. So it's much more... I really do just want the poems, and I've tried to take out any hyperbole or any kind of overt... because I don't feel critical so there's no kind of ranting or 'The Pity of War' stuff. It's like this has been a very interesting job that has been very fulfilling and, at times, very boring and, at times, a bit stressful or, very few occasions for me, a bit frightening and it is what it is. And specifically for women, we have boyfriends or girlfriends, and we diet, and we fall out with each other and we forget to call our mums on a Sunday. And you know, it's part of womanhood as well as part of the soldiering fraternity. That was important to me, I think, just kind of reclaiming my place in a wider sisterhood. Not being quite separate. You spend a lot of time on your own as a woman in the army because, you know, the mess is full of men and they're doing their manly stuff at the bar and you join in with that up to a point and then you think that's not me. And then you go home to your girlfriends back at your hometown or your university friends and they're all becoming teachers and running businesses and their experiences are so different. So yeah, just kind of, staking that claim of a bit of space with the rest of the sisterhood.

NM That's a great way to think about it. Thank you very much, Jo. Thanks, I really appreciate it.

JY OK.