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[Episode 50: Lewis G Parker, Morbid Books](#) – (January 2016)

Transcribed by Tiegan Hall-Turner – 27/03/2017

Host: David Turner - **DT**

Guest: [Lewis G Parker](#) - **LP**

Conversation:

DT: My name is David Turner, this is another Lunar Poetry Short. Today I am on the South Bank in London outside the Tate. It's a Christmas Fair. We should play a drinking game- every time you hear Mariah Carey, do a shot- and I'm with Lewis Parker. We're going to start with a poem.

LP:

Garden of the winter moon

Icicles home from the statues, And sleep was locked into the moon. 18 hours
of darkness veiled us like a trance, Hollywood moonlight tantric hand holding.
You and I.

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DT: So, cheers Lewis. So, what are you doing on the South Bank?

LP: Prostituting myself to members of the public with my typewriter.

DT: So, I'm crouched down, poised. Like any good poet ready to go. Lewis is sipping coffee. We've got a little fold- fold up and down table and an Olivetti typewriter. So, you just come down here, to this busking spot, and write poems to order.

LP: Yeah basically.

DT: How long have you been doing that?

LP: About a year. There's not really much more to it than that. I'm surprised it isn't more popular. It's remarkably easy.

DT: Yeah. So why is it poetry and not flash fiction? I mean I know a lot of stuff you write is often prose but why specifically are you here writing poetry?

LP: Well, I think a lot of my poetry is prose-like in the syntax. I write things that some people would regard as flash fiction. I don't like that title, I think it's pointless because a short story can be any length. If you wanted to call these prose poems short stories you're welcome to do that, the label's kind of irrelevant to me.

DT: Yeah, I suppose that question wasn't really intended to find out how you label your own work. But I am more interested in why you've got the word 'poetry' written on a chalkboard. Is it more to- are you trying to connect deliberately poetically with the public as they're walking past, no matter in what style you write, you know?

LP: Yeah. Well I put "poetry, prose, suicide notes, and more." So, there is a slightly wider menu.

DT: Yeah, you can get a suicide note which is um... must be really popular at Christmas.

LP: Well, yeah, they say it's the saddest time of the year.

DT: It's rife, yeah.

LP: Why- why do I put poetry on there? I guess because that's the nearest approximation of what it is. And I think people have a certain idea about poetry or certain

expectations that are probably rooted in their poetry syllabus at GCSE or A Level which gives quite an archaic taste of poetry. And people often stop their reading of poetry at that age.

And that's- that's kind of their expectation, it's going to be something usually that rhymes, that's devotional, mushy. And I like to confound those expectations because it's a lot harder to please people when they're expecting it to rhyme. And to give them a non-rhyming poem that they still think is powerful or has meaning or makes them laugh... It really puts more emphasis on the meaning, and doing something that's immediate.

DT: And that poem you just read at the start, that was written about, well, two minutes before we started recording, for an American guy was just passing. Maybe for the second reading we can have a few more examples of what you've been writing today.

LP: Yeah. I've just given- I've given them all away so I don't have any at the moment, but... Oh, actually, I've got one about Jamie Oliver. I should read that just because I like it. This is;

Haemorrhoid Haiku 21

Jamie Oliver's
new glazed Anusol doughnut
fronts Krispy Kreme range.
©Lewis G Parker

DT: Perfect. And I think unfortunately now Jamie Oliver does sort of represent Christmas in this country.

LP: He does.

DT: He's superseded Delia Smith and now it's that... arsehole. [LAUGHTER]

LP: It's funny how the subconscious works. Because I was looking for one, a Christmas one, then I saw that and I just thought it was appropriate somehow. And I hadn't made the link between Jamie Oliver and Christmas but that's how advertising works subconsciously. I've just had Christmas and then my next thought was, you know, Jamie Oliver. It's somehow linked to, you know, those horrible jumpers, you know, mixing custard in his helmet or whatever.

DT: Well, the thing is he sort of represents city workers going out in hilarious festive jumpers on their Christmas dos now, doesn't he? Because that's become the fucking... oh, it's horrible. Makes me sick.

LP: Yeah, he's the-

DT: I think he's the perfect subject for a haemorrhoid cream haiku.

LP: Yeah. Maybe I'll send it to him.

DT: We should tweet it to him today.

LP: Should I do these two?

DT: Yeah.

LP: They come as a pair. Called 'Woman' and 'Man'. The woman first.

Woman

There was a woman in our village.
Everybody wanted to talk to her. Their wanting
to talk was only increased by her disinterest.
All villages are small, but ours was tiny.
One post box. One house. Two people.
She writes me the most wonderful letters.

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Man

The man came by in his vehicle. He'd told us
the week before, when he came by at the same time,
that he'd built it himself. This is the highlight
of our week. Standing by the window,
waiting to see if he'll come.
Two weeks in a row, then three years
with nothing. We still love him –
we haven't given up hope.

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DT: Cheers, man. So, you just read those two poems, the woman and man one come from your latest publication, 'Suicide Notes'. And that's through your own- that's through Morbid Books your own, uh-

LP: Yeah.

DT: Your own affair.

LP: My own affair.

DT: Tell us a bit about Morbid Books.

LP: Well, it's a vehicle that I'll use to publish poetry and other esoteric materials that other publishers wouldn't publish. So, I have the 'Suicide Notes' which is hand-typed. I did them for a gallery in France. I foolishly volunteered to hand-type the books because they needed something to sell. I didn't realise how much work that would be. I've only done 35 so far but I'm hoping to do a hundred. A hundred max anyway. And then, that book we launched the other night, '100 Haikus About Haemorrhoid Cream', which, you know... publishers wouldn't do that for obvious reasons.

DT: Yeah. It must be quite nice having your own vehicle to put out ideas. How did that- I'm assuming that idea didn't start as a book idea, was it just a challenge to people to write haikus about haemorrhoid cream?

LP: I think I wrote one on the South Bank here. That was a haiku that had the word 'haemorrhoid cream' in it. And then I thought... I think I just posted something on Facebook that I was going to do-

DT: Is that how I got involved, was it through Facebook?

LP: Yeah. I was going to put- jokingly, I said this is from the forthcoming book '100 Haikus About Haemorrhoid Cream'. And the- just the excessive nature of it appealed to me. Totally arbitrary but it also scans well. Some people would probably object that 'haiku' - the plural of haiku - doesn't have an 's'. But I didn't think it scanned as well if it- '100 haiku about'... I think you needed the consonant in between them.

DT: I agree actually, yeah. And it looks better on the- the layout of the book looks better for it as well, I think. It looks more balanced. I know 'haiku' without the 's' is probably appropriate but it doesn't look right.

LP: No.

DT: And if you're going to decide to do a book of a hundred haiku about haemorrhoid cream, you should be allowed to put an 's' in there, shouldn't you? Do what the fuck you want, you know.

LP: I've already debased it. I'm sure there's somebody somewhere who thinks that I've offended the entire Japanese culture, which wasn't my intention.

DT: I mean, haikus don't really work in English anyway, do they? They become a completely different thing. It's not really about the limitations of the syllables.

LP: No. Although I thought with doing something that was obviously not orthodox in one sense, I had to stick to the orthodoxy of the syllables. Just so that there was some semblance of tradition in there.

DT: Yeah. I've been reading some haikus by William Wantling recently and I love them because they don't follow any- any rules at all, they just seem to be completely random.

LP: So, there's no syllable count?

DT: I think he just calls them haikus, I think maybe just to wind people up.

LP: I mean people started, you know, taking the mickey in the 60s and 70s when, you know, all the rules of form broke down and people were publishing supposedly, haikus that were just one word. I mean, to my mind that renders the whole thing meaningless. It's like those super abstract artists who create- well, supposedly create work that's all in their mind. And that's a funny Stephen Wright joke. But as an actual project that you're going to sell to people, I think...

Also, there is a tendency in art and literature that- well not literature so much, but art- and I would regard this as straddling the line between literary and visual art. I think there's a tendency, for artists in particular, to kind of critique the vapid pointlessness of the world and art itself by doing things that are vapid and pointless. And that's a really easy, facile thing to do. I think if you're going to... if you're going to just resort to that, then you may as well become an accountant or something.

DT: Yeah, no one seems to be trying to address the issue of what you should be doing instead, do they? Surely, yeah, it's one thing just-

LP: That reflects them.

DT: Surely, critiquing- the ultimate goal is to come up with some sort of alternative, isn't it?

LP: Yeah. I think David Foster Wallace was right when he said that it's- and we're still living in times when the overhang of the 1980s is when, kind of, popular culture and even mainstream industrial complexes like advertising started to use irony in self-awareness. And, that- and then you have people like Jeff Koons who, you know, is a stockbroker, isn't he, making art and then you- I think you've essentially got art and advertising using the same techniques.

DT: But there's far too much of an overreliance on irony and sarcasm, isn't there, just in what people claim to be creative pursuits, whether that's... I don't know, there's too much of a link, I think, with that kind, that brand of stand-up comedy in poetry. And I'm sure I

must be guilty of it slightly myself but it's just... yeah, I don't know if it necessarily makes for very good art. Well, sorry, I say that... Definitely no it doesn't.

LP: Well it might seem weird, somebody who's just published a book of 100 haikus about haemorrhoid cream, criticising, you know, facile artistic statements. But when I create something I don't want to just create something that reflects how, kind of, trite popular expression has become. I want to create something that's better than that. I want to create something that's spectacular.

DT: Yeah, but your- the outcome of your project there wasn't a joke about 100 haikus about haemorrhoid cream, was it? You put a book out with 100 haikus about haemorrhoid cream and it became a proper thing, you know? And it can stand up and be judged and critiqued in its own way. You know, it is poetry and no one can deny that.

LP: Some people would try. Let them, that's fine. I think all art, all of the best art has to strangle- well, struggle with accusations and if] it isn't art or isn't poetry, and that's usually the most pioneering stuff. So, I welcome that, when a certain sector of the population doesn't regard it as art or poetry. It needs that; if you're appealing to everybody then you're not doing a very good job, I don't think. Universalism in art is not what should be aspired to. There's about five people, there's about five people whose opinion I respect on these matters and if they like what I'm doing I don't care what anyone else thinks.

DT: Yeah, I think it's very dangerous as a... I think it's very important as an artist to allow people's opinions to form your work and shape your work, but you've got to be very careful about who you choose to allow to do that. And, absolutely, I think if you're trying to appeal to everyone, eventually it's just going to water down what you're trying to do.

LP: Exactly. My mates are in a band and they were- you know, they put things on Facebook. And they say outrageous things in interviews. One thing they said was, you know, whenever they put something about Israel and Palestine on Facebook, or they put something about Christmas, just as a bit of a provocative joke... you know, there's always someone who takes offence to whatever statement they make, and they said if we stopped or censored ourselves every time somebody got offended, we would just be making the most bland, anodyne rubbish.

LP: And essentially, that- that's the kind of complex- the psychological complex that's at work that determines mainstream culture, in subtle, hidden ways. Those are the filtering processes that you have to go through, in order to get to a certain level of public broadcast, whether it be on the radio, whether it's in the mainstream press, so to aim for that level of popularity is to definitely do a bargain with the devil in that you are essentially agreeing to censor yourself, whether you like it or not.

Because it's very, very rare do you find someone doing something that is pure and unfiltered that becomes mass entertainment at the same time. The two things just aren't mutually possible anymore, I don't think.

DT: That's why I often get questioned about whether [I actually mean it] when I say that I really dislike poetry. And I think that- what you were just saying there is really an explanation of what I mean. I do really dislike this idea that there is a... poetry in some ways is a universal term, and that you can love all of it, you know? That is not how the world works. You don't like the whole of an art form.

Individual pieces of art will touch you and move you in the way that other things rarely do in your life, you know? And you have an emotional connection - well I do, certainly - with certain poems. But that doesn't mean I have an emotional connection to poetry.

LP: It's like when- well, a lot of people say they don't like poetry and I would just say that's because they've probably only read about ten poems on their GCSE syllabus. They just haven't found any poetry that they like, because poetry is as varied as music, and you don't hear anyone saying, "I don't like music." You know, you don't like certain types of music, nobody likes ALL music, and I would say-

DT: I was going to say, my nan said she didn't like music but she did like Max Bygraves, so there was something that got to her.

LP: There are these rare people who do say they don't like music, but it's not as many people as who say they don't like poetry. What they mean is, they're just not interested in poetry and haven't found anything that they like.

DT: I suppose that's sort of what I meant about- is that- perhaps is this why, then, you put the word poetry on your blackboard? And is that why you're trying to sort of- I don't mean it as patronising as this, I don't mean 'to educate people', but to just maybe open their eyes up to the fact that there are so many different voices within poetry?

LP: Yeah, that is a good point, and I do like to do that, and yeah, I like confounding people's expectations by giving them something- giving them something that, yeah, like I said, probably isn't going to rhyme, it's not going to be devotional.

DT: Is that maybe even an ultimate goal of Morbid Books, as well, to just highlight how... because, obviously, what you do has got a particular style, an overarching style, but it does seem like you're trying to just highlight to people that poetry isn't what you see in schools, it isn't what BBC 4 deem to show you on a Sunday night, or whatever.

LP: That's exactly it, I mean I don't- not everything I write is going to be published by Morbid Books, this is just a vehicle for-

DT: No no, I don't even mean just your work, but with the, with the haemorrhoid cream obviously other people's- you know, it's not just your writing, it's other people's writing as well.

LP: But I mean, I'll publish stuff in more mainstream channels, in more popular channels as well, but this in particular is to do stuff that is definitely left-field and changes- might change people's minds about the possibilities of what you can do with poetry or visual art,

and how linked they are. Because it's important to make things that look good at the end of the day: if you're spending a lot of time and money putting it out there, you want it to be decent. You know, and I think- I agree with you, a lot of poetry, I don't like it. And also, poetry books, I don't like them either.

A lot of the time they look absolutely disgraceful. I can't believe that, you know, several people in a publishing house have all collectively let this get to the shelves, like, has no one gone, "look, this looks terrible!" Yeah, and if a major publishing house wanted to put my work out, I mean, I would- I'm not saying I would turn it down, but I'm not saying that I would definitely agree to it either, but because- I would seriously contemplate turning it down if they, you know, showed me a book version of it and it looked like some of the poetry books I see on the shelves, like, I wouldn't want anything to do with that.

DT: I think I would be very, very torn if, for instance, I was offered the chance to be part of the Faber New Writers collection because I personally think those small booklets look awful, and I wouldn't want my work presented in that way. I think it would just be- I think it would be a real shame for me to finally have something put out to a wide audience like that and looking, frankly, like shit. Or like- [INAUDIBLE]

LP: That's the deal you have to do, whatever you do.

DT: But that's why I would be conflicted, because obviously, if you're going to get your work out you need to maybe...

LP: Yeah. I mean, you hear it all the time, of novelists maybe more so than poets- 'cause that is, there is more of a commercial emphasis on the novel, people can actually make money out of it, and you know, they are trying to, and they need to make money out of it. Poetry not so much, that's pretty much run at a loss, I think.

But you hear about novelists in particular being told by Waterstones that, "we're not going to stock your book unless you change your name," or, "you've got to change the title of the novel," so these... so if you are going to publish something and your aim is to get it to a mass audience, you've- you're preparing yourself, essentially, to be having a discussion with Waterstones, you know, the head of marketing at Waterstones, some suit, and having to argue with him about the title of your book. I mean, that shouldn't be- that's not a discussion that any artist should have to have. But if you want to do that, then you've got to be prepared for it now. Either have a really good argument lined up, or be prepared to sell out.

DT: I've got a feeling we could probably talk about these things for a long time, and maybe early next year we'll probably sit down and have a longer chat, but for now, we might finish up with another reading, do you want to read some more "Suicide Notes" or...?

LP: Oh, yeah, I can do.

DT: And I've got to say, because I don't think Lewis will do himself justice, really, but these books are beautiful. They've all been- each poem's been hand-typed and they've all been bound together. How many books did you produce in total?

LP: I've done about 35 at the moment.

DT: And how many poems are in each?

LP: 20 poems in each. And each book has got a different arrangement of stuff in it as well, so they're all different, and that's why they're so ludicrously expensive. And I gave myself mild RSI in my wrist so I've obviously had to stop typing, I... you can't do it for that long, I've realised, in one go.

The Neighbours

The midget couple who moved in next door
make the most beautiful lovemaking sounds.
We cancel our evenings to stay in and to listen to them.
They can go for hours. It sounds like an orchestra
when they orgasm. We're thinking of embedding
microphones in the walls, pressing vinyl,
then having the records moulded onto our bodies
and cutting along the grooves with a stylus.

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DT: Thanks very much Lewis. And if anyone wants to check out Morbid Books, it's morbidbooks.net, isn't it?

LP: Yep.

DT: And the link will be under this video... Yeah. I recommend that you check out what Lewis is doing. There will be more stuff happening in the new year, and I'm going to be tweeting about it and putting it on Facebook, and I don't know if I ever mentioned it, but my Twitter account is [@silent_tongue](#). Cheers... Who's singing now? This isn't Mariah. You can't do a shot. Don't recognise it, is that Whitney? It's Whitney, do a shot anyway. Alright, cheers Lewis.

End of transcript