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[Episode 34: Cheryl Mclennan](#) – (June 2015)

Transcript edited by David Turner – 13/03/2017

Host: David Turner – **DT**

Guest: Cheryl Mclennan – **CM**

Conversation:

DT: Hello, my name is David Turner and this is another episode of Lunar Poetry Shorts. Today I'm joined by Cheryl Mclennan. Hello Cheryl.

CM: Hello David.

DT: How are you?

CM: Very well thank you.

DT: As normal we will start with a poem.

CM: Okay.

DT: Or a couple, possibly?

CM: Okay, I've got two short poems here. The first one is about the;

Silverback Gorilla

He sat staring at us whilst chomping on a handful of leaves.
It was 30 degrees, not even a gentle breeze stirred through the trees.
The guide waffled on in the scorching heat
about the demise gorillas will eventually meet.
The silverback stood up and lobbed a banana at the guide.
It hit him on the back of his head
and attached to it was a handwritten note that read;
"Piss off will you? I'm depressed enough as it is."

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CM: Can't blame him, really can you?

DT: No. I think I'd do the same.

CM: Me and you both. And this is a poem about a tiny little toad it's the Colorado River Toad. Anyway, this is he.

The Colorado River Toad

I sat, happily, snacking out on insects. That is until you came along.
You grabbed me unceremoniously, plopped me on a glass plate
and rubbed vigorously underneath my chin.
I became agitated and aroused and had no choice
other than to secrete my milky, magic fluid.
I watched as you waited for your illegal prize to crystallise.
You then scraped up my very essence, loaded it into a pipe
and smoked it, you crazy bastard.

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CM: Can you imagine being that poor little toad? How awful is that?

DT: I don't know what image I have in my head when I think of someone smoking my 'very essence'. We best move on I think. Erm, hello Cheryl, thanks for joining us.

CM: Yes nice to be here, thank you.

DT: As always, the first question is; Why poetry?

CM: Well I think... Why poetry? It, kind of, helped me to find you know my own voice and my own rhythm and it's a way of writing that I like. I can be quite kind of, succinct and I first... I suppose I came to this quite late really, 10 years ago I met Murray Shelmerdine on a creative writing course at a Jackson's Lane Community Centre. And when we finished the course, you know, Murray who's got a community cafe and gardens and they do a poetry and music night there once a month on a Thursday. So, Murray said that we could, kind of, meet there each Monday so we did that for eight years.

DT: Was that something you got into deliberately? Were you writing before and you wanted get involved with a group or was it just by chance and you wanted to try something out?

CM: No, I mean, I've always written, you know. I've written short stories and I just thought that it would be good to be in a group of people to get ideas and be able to share ideas really. So, we produced several anthologies of short stories and then about five years ago I went to Bang Said the Gun, over in south London and I won the Raw Meat Stew, tequila shots. So, the performing started from there really.

DT: Yeah. What have been your main influences as a writer or performer and are they the same thing?

CM: I suppose because I was, you know, born in the 50s so I like a lot of the comedic performers, especially women like Thora Hird, Dora Brian, Hilde Baker. And there was lots of really good stuff on the radio like Around the Horn and Kenneth Williams all that type. Then, of course, the influences of, you know, music in the 60s like Arlo Guthrie and Woody Guthrie these people. Poets and musicians like Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell, Leonard Cohen and Frank Zappa and all the different types of sounds. I did particularly like Richard Brautigan's Watermelon Sugar. I was inspired by different writers like Lessing, Steinbeck. Morrison et al.

DT: I have to agree with you there, I'm always saying to people that they should check out a lot of older radio because of the way that performers had to use their voices in order to be understood by radio audiences. And it's amazing that you can download, if you wish to, a lot of these old programmes. Recently I bought a lot of old cassette tapes of, Around the Horn amongst a few other things though I don't have a cassette player. You can buy old cassette tapes but I can't seem to find a tape player anywhere.

CM: I think, actually, I might have an old cassette player you could have in my cupboard at home.

DT: Well, I'd be most appreciative of that. Maybe we should take another poem or two?

CM: This is erm... I always, kind of, think why have sex when you've got a bag of Sherbet Lemons, basically. Because I haven't had a lot of good sex, I have to say and this is the nearest that I've ever come so S&M. Anyway, this is called;

Sherbet Lemon

You lie there seductively on my bed.
I pick you up and remove you from your wrapper
and pop you inside my mouth where you rest ever so briefly.
Sliding you from side to side, I suck and caress you slowly
with my tongue, pushing you gently in and out.
I lick your sticky sweetness from my lips
and bite into your crystallised case. Your harshness fills my senses.
From sharp and back to sweet again and again and again and again...
A bitter and almost pleasurable pain.
Oh my, you gorgeous yellow sweetie, how I adore you.

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CM: This is about... I don't cook really, you know, for anyone because people have become very fussy really about food, it's not as easy as it used to be really. You could just a smoke a spliff and, you know, have crisps on toast and everybody was happy but now things have changed.

DT: I think our listeners may have to Google that because I don't think anyone knows what a spliff is anymore. It's all designer drugs now. right now and there's nobody. Nobody seems to know what cannabis is anymore, it's just silver canisters laying everywhere.

CM: Laughing gas and legal highs? Okay, this is;

Fruit Teas

I don't cook for anyone anymore because it has become far too complicated.
Because there are always at least two vegetarians who eat fish,
but not with the head on. A vegan who wears leather shoes
and a lapsed macrobiotic maniac who eats everything
but in a somewhat guilty fashion. And people demand to know
if the food has been baked or roasted, boiled or toasted,
and then that dreadful voice asks in a challenging way,
"Do you have any fruit or herbal teas?" Yes I do, I say,
I have blackberry, cranberry, orange, Echinacea,
bilberry, blueberry, peppermint, cardamom, camomile,
elderflower and hibiscus. And a satisfied smile spreads across his face,
"Ah, but do you have any Gyokuro tea? Because I'm just back from Japan
and that tea is fantastic. It's light and aromatic!" No, I reply,
but what I do have is a garden full of Japanese Knotweed
so go and fucking suck on that!

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CM: So if you come to see me in my flat you have to bring your own tea.

DT: Yes. The next question is regarding how you now critique your own work. That, you might not do and that's a fair answer as well. But, do you have anybody that you share your work with?

CM: Yes, well, yes Murray Shelmerdine and also Charlotte Stubbs. Charlotte and I have done quite a bit of writing together so I'll often read stuff to her and then she gives me feedback. You know, I spend a lot of time writing than chucking it in the bin sometimes it seems to take forever.

DT: Do you edit your poetry a lot? Does it change a lot between drafts?

CM: Oh yes, I do. I can get stuck on a sentence, you know, for days sometimes actually.

DT: I can imagine that. The way you write, the way each sentence often stands out it seems like you might have spent a lot of time getting it right. Especially with the rhythms that you play with, it has to be spot on.

CM: Yes yes. I have to be able to, kind of, feel that rhythm really.

DT: Do you think that comes from listening to radio when you were younger?

CM: Yes, I think, yes it was always influential.

DT: There seems a similar rhythm, I think.

CM: Yeah because of course there were only like a couple of stations on TV and, you know, the radio choice was also quite limited so I did listen to a lot of radio as a kid.

DT: Having talked about how you critique your work. Is there any direction you'd like to see your writing travel in?

CM: Well, I think at the moment, I'm quite interested in writing monologues. You know, there are quite a few things that I'm interested in and concerned about and one is becoming old in society and globally how people are treated. It's like they're, kind of, like airbrushed out. There are a lot of issues around elder abuse so this is something that I'll be working on. Also, I'm getting my book of poetry together, I've already got a CD, so yes that's what I'm doing.

DT: And why does that form of writing appeal to you? Is it just in terms of being able to tell more of a story.

CM: It's because it needs to be out there really and I think it's not something that's really talked about. I think there are so many, sort of, negative images now around older people and issues. Also, with cutbacks in quality of care.

DT: And quite often... Also, when those stories are told, they're not told by people of that age or close that age. Quite often they're written by younger writers, aren't they?

CM: Indeed.

DT: Perhaps they have been part of a community group, meeting people in that position but often it's written by younger people instead.

CM: Because I kind think, you know, now I don't know what it's going to be like in twenty-years, time. We're all heading in the same direction, you know, and I think that the quality of care needs to be you looked at.

DT: Yeah.

CM: And the availability of care and price.

DT: So, not so much regarding the theme that you're writing about but the writing style, writing monologues or writing maybe a short play or short stories. Why does that appeal to you, writing in the way?

CM: I think because I can use a different voice.

DT: You feel like you can develop a voice that's different from yours?

CM: Yes, it's almost like a different sort of representation really.

DT: Do you, certainly the poems that you've read so far have been quite funny or very funny. Did that sound sarcastic? I genuinely wasn't being, people will have heard me laughing. I always find that when I'm giving praise it always sounds really sarcastic. My question was going to be; Is that a deliberate choice or would you find it hard to not write humorously in poetry?

CM: I mean, I think that most of the time I do, sort of, put a comedic slant on my poetry and writing.

DT: So, do you think we have the slightly longer form of writing and with the short stories and possibly monologues it's easier for you to move away from that comedic style and write maybe more seriously?

CM: Oh yes definitely. I get into a much deeper and darker place.

DT: Actually, something I was thinking... Because we were, just as a clarification for the listeners, we were chatting before we started recording about this idea of, sort of, working class guilt. You moved down to London from Stockport. How long ago?

CM: Well I've been in London now for thirty years. I think that, you know, growing up in the 1950s, you know, in a working-class family... There was a terrible, sort of, deference that was everywhere really and you weren't, or I personally wasn't encouraged to find my own voice. The expectations were very low really said. In actual fact, I've come to this quite late in life really.

DT: But do you think maybe your comedic style comes from that feeling of poetry was never something for you?

CM: Oh yes! Absolutely yeah.

DT: I've found it a lot with poets who would identify themselves as heavily working class, there's a lot of humour in their work and it seems to come from that idea that you were trying to... If you make a joke out of it, you can't really be judged. Though, you've perhaps passed that point which is just 'limited' to humour.

CM: Yes. You know, many other people that I've spoken to also, you know... It's like 'playing the clown' a little bit and that covers up really for so much. Any feelings of inadequacy or the fact that as a working-class woman, you know, you had no right to have a voice. So, that's important really.

DT: So, do you think with the short stories and the monologues it's easier to be serious because it's a different form? Because it's a different form you can, sort of... It's not a new start but you've developed enough of your own writing that you can now start writing seriously?

CM: Yes.

DT: Yes. I sort of answered that for you! That wasn't a question, was it? I stated something toward you. We'll take a third and final poem.

CM: Okay. Well this is... Unfortunately, there is some truth in this poem and I think that, you know, how we deal with death is, you know, quite ridiculous. I think that people can be extremely insensitive around people that are dying. So, this is called;

Catherine

Catherine, lying almost dead, could hear all the conversations taking place near her bed. The district nurse who complained and said it was Harold-bloody-Shipman's fault that they had so much extra paperwork. And upon hearing this I saw Catherine's eyelashes briefly flutter when her partner of forty years mused, in an audible mutter, "D'you know what? I've always fancied a bungalow in Brighton,

nothing too big mind, smallish garden with a good sized shed. Well, you know..." Raises eyebrows and indicated toward the bed, assuming she could not hear what was being said. She then had to listen to the tales of people who had died where, when and from what. Including someone-or-other's Uncle Stanley who died whilst on the loo and wasn't found for three hours. Well, I thought it could have been far worse than that, Joyce Carol Vincent wasn't found for three years in her Wood Green flat. Then she had to listen to them ordering a carry-out, "Go on then, get us fish and chips." "Get me chips and peas, a couple of meat and potato pies and a saveloy sausage." And later when scoffing their food, her funeral arrangements were discussed. It was noted she didn't really want a fuss and someone suggested organic Orbital's. Only cost two grand but there's no titivation, once the lid's on that's that. Catherine suddenly yelled, "Oh shut up the lot of yer!" and staring, stoically, facing the wall she died. Probably giving up from the sheer boredom and ultimately the meaningless total banality of life and them all.

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DT: Thank you very much. Okay, final question; What would you recommend to our listeners to go out and see and read or watch?

CM: Well, I just think that, you know, being in London there's so much stuff out there, just go and see loads of films, read loads of poetry, go to loads of spoken word nights. Yeah, we're lucky to be here.

DT: Yeah. And as we were talking before, the last thing you want to do is go out and look at any pretty landscapes, no hills or trees. Keep in amongst it. Keep your mind busy.

CM: Yeah. It's strange that, isn't it? You would think that if you get out, you know, by the sea.

DT: Yeah, because as we were talking before, I think we both find inspiration in busy urban environments and both find it really difficult to write when there's peace and quiet.

CM: Yeah it just, kind of, frees your mind up too much.

DT: Yeah. Nothing worse than a blank page and the English Riviera! Thank you so much Cheryl.

CM: No, thank you David.

DT: I think I nearly wet myself at one point, it was hilarious.

CM: Oh well, I've got a bag of Sherbert Lemons in my bag you can have a suck on one of those later!

DT: Okay, thank you very much and you lot, clear off.

End of transcript.