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[Episode 3: Helen Mort \(December 2014\)](#)

Host: David Turner – **DT**

Guest: Helen Mort – **HM**

Transcript edited by [Martin Pettitt](#) – 23/04/2017

Conversation

DT: Hello this is the Lunar Poetry Podcast, I'm David Turner, and this month I'm in Sheffield with the wonderful Helen Mort. Just as a quick side note, because of time restrictions in the podcast my questions regarding Helen's poetry will mainly focus on her book [Division Street](#) published by Chatto & Windus. We're going to kick off with Helen giving us a short introduction into her work and background.

HM: Yeah. My name's Helen. I was born in Sheffield and then I grew up in Chesterfield, just down the road. So, I suppose growing up Sheffield was always a bit like the glamorous older sister to Chesterfield. It was a place where you went out and... Or where you were able to go on the bus on your own when you are old enough, that can place. It's always the bright lights really. And now I live back in Sheffield again after spells being in different places, including in a year when I was poet-in-residence at the Wordsworth Trust in Cumbria and Grassmere. And where I wrote quite a lot of the poems that became my collection Division Street.

So, it's quite interesting because I was living up in the lakes but writing all these poems about Sheffield and South Yorkshire, and Derbyshire. So, my work has always been quite informed by this particular bit of the world. So, I think it's quite nice that we're doing this interview in rainy Sheffield today.

DT: It's pretty wet, isn't it? It does look really Northern outside.

HM: It does, yeah.

DT: Oh, and on that note, we've got a whippet in the room. Charley the whippet. It's raining, we're drinking tea and there's a whippet on the sofa. I just mention that just because if you hear any strange licking noises or growling, it's not... It's not us. He might introduce himself.

OK, I'm going to begin with a really needlessly long anecdote about a guy I met recently in a pub in Kennington in South London. As I looked across the bar I noticed a guy wearing a t-shirt which had 'Orgreave 84' across the top of it. And... I don't know, maybe he was in his 50s or 60s this guy. So, I went over to him and asked him about the t-shirt, if could I have a closer look. It was like one of those sort of graffiti style hooded figure who was throwing the stone which was quite apt. But... We ended up chatting about your work and your poem 'Scab' in particular, and [Jeremy Deller](#)'s re-enactment, which we'll come to you later. And he was surprised and pleased that people like us, and by that I mean people too young to have any living memory of what happened at Orgreave and other pickets, but he was pleased and surprised we still know what went on.

What I'm wondering is how much influence does your wider family's working class background and roots have on your work, and also do you write about these subjects, I was mentioning 'Scab', in order to educate the unfamiliar or rather to reassure those that were involved in the picketing that those events haven't been forgotten?

HM: Yeah, I think it's a bit of both and especially... That's a really good point which is made, this idea about wanting to reassure people that things haven't been forgotten. I'd say that's probably the main reason, or one of the main inspirations, behind writing 'Scab'. I actually wanted to write about it for quite a long time and everything that sort of happened to me just confirmed that. And I remember reading David Peace's amazing book GB84 at the time when I was thinking of writing about it and I thought: Wow, he's written about the miner's strike brilliantly, I'd love to be able to write something myself. But I put it off for ages, I really hesitated because I felt like, as somebody that hadn't lived through the strike

myself, and as someone that didn't have immediate family members involved in the strike, I felt like a bit of a fraud or like I didn't have a right to write about it.

I know that there are other poets, who were involved in various ways in the strike in the 80s, that have tried to write about it and it took me ages to recognise that: Hang on a minute, that's exactly why I should. Because I wanted to show that growing up in a bit of North East Derbyshire that was physically and... More than physically scarred by the impact of the pit closure... I remember as a kid never really understanding what all these weird land masses were just down the road from where we lived. And the words that my parents would use to describe them, I didn't really understand it. It's like that's a land-fill site and that's open casting and I'm like: What's open casting? And it was actually very close to the village Arkwright that they moved across the road to make way for open casting after the pits had been closed. There was quite a lot of controversy about that when I was growing up.

So, all those things I wanted to show, I suppose, that the legacy lives on. And that it's important to me just growing up with the aftermath. It's important to lots of people, as you say, of our generation and that it's not being forgotten at all. And it may be the fact that I wasn't there could in some ways be a virtue and it could provide a way of writing about it that had a different perspective, and actually a bit of distance because you do get that problem sometimes don't you that things are... And I, you know... I can't imagine if I'd been there in some way or witnessed it first hand, I almost don't know how you would begin to put it into words because it's too terrible. So, in some ways I thought I'll try.

DT: Yeah, I suppose there's that side of it, isn't there? It may be it is, actually once you start, easier to write about it if you haven't been there. Because what you're doing is retelling stories you've heard, or... Not editing out things but you're putting... It's easier for you to put the worst things together, in a poem, because it's not as emotional for you, whereas for a lot of people there would have...

I mean, actually going back to this guy in the pub, Johnny Eagles I think his name was, which is an amazing name. He immediately started having a blazing row with this guy who sat next to him, who was a Tory. And they... I think they had known each other for years and years but just by me mentioning Orgreave, I mean he had the t shirt on, but by me mentioning the fact to him, they immediately went back to that argument. Which they had probably had 30 years ago, you know? And it was as bitter then, so you can understand why people haven't let go.

HM: I think in... I've heard various people say to me that they don't like the cover of my book because... I should probably describe this for the benefit of the podcasts because you can't see it, but the book cover uses a really famous image by a wonderful photographer called Don McPhee, which is taken from the battle Orgreave. And it's got two policemen in their hats face to face with a miner who's got a fake a policeman's hat on with his NUM stickers on it and they're squaring up to each other. And to me that epitomizes this, yeah, huge divide and the rift that's never really been healed since that civil war in the 80s. And... Yeah, I was told it's a bad cover because it's going to divide people and it's going to polarize people. I thought: Well, that's may be appropriate in some way, I'm not sure I mind that.

DT: But I think it's appropriate but I also think one of the messages from that image is that image could be flipped, if you switch the hats around, if it wasn't for his sideburns, the miner...

HM: Yeah.

DT: You wouldn't nec[essarily]... You know they could be on either side, they were all men, they were probably all from the same region. They have been divided by decisions above them, haven't they? And...

HM: And I think that was one of the things that I find most poignant about... Or upsetting about the strike, that the communities got ripped apart by... Yeah, by things that were beyond their control in some way. Yeah, I always like that image for that reason but also because there's something a little bit playful about it as well.

DT: It's quite funny as well, isn't it?

HM: It's a moment that's quite funny as well as very sad, so...

DT: Right, so we'll get into your other work in a moment but I'd like to focus though on this poem 'Scab'. In the poem, you talk about going off to study at Cambridge University and the crossing of a personal picket line for you. How much of a personal conflict was your move to Cambridge from Derbyshire? And how much guilt did you feel at the time regarding the issue of cutting your roots, whether that was real or not.

HM: I think it was... So, it's interesting in terms of the poem that when I first started to write it none of that stuff was in there. I was just trying to write about Orgreave. And then later, because I think you mentioned [Inaudible] Jeremy Deller's film about Orgreave, so I was trying to write about those things. It just felt like something was lacking. And it took me a while to work out what that was and I realised, it's like well, what makes you uncomfortable about this? Why do you want to write about it?

I think often poetry does come from a sense of discomfort or an itch that you can't scratch or just something like that. And it just came to me at one point, I'm not sure when, there wasn't like a massive thunderbolt revelation but this realisation crept up that it was to do with my feelings of, not so much guilt maybe, but alienation and isolation that I felt when I was at university.

DT: The word guilt is too strong.

HM: Yeah, although maybe it isn't. I don't know actually, it's certainly a kind of guilt. Because maybe the reason that guilt does strike me as an apt word is that I've got this really clear memory of when I found out I'd got my offer to go to Cambridge. It was close to New Year's Eve and I was spending New Year's Eve in [INAUDIBLE] Working Men's Club, which is now being knocked down and they haven't cleared the rubble away so it's really surreal

when you walk past. For a while I was living... Recently I was living quite close to it. Every day I'd walk past the rubble of this building, it was really strange.

Anyway... I was there with my friends from school and I didn't tell anybody, I didn't mention it to anybody, that I got this offer and that I was probably going to go to Cambridge University. And I thought I should surely... I should be really excited about that and I should be really proud about that, or something, but I wasn't in some way. I think because I felt like in some way the people I was with were going to think that I was better than them because of that. So, I suppose there is a guilt in that way. And then when I was there, which I think is reflected in the poem, I knew it was a great opportunity for me and I really enjoyed some aspects of it. But I did feel quite... At times, quite socially isolated in a like I didn't fit in.

And actually, it was really weird for me because I was used to... At home in Chesterfield, I was used to people at school calling me posh, and stuff like that, because I did my work and I got on with things and whatever. And then suddenly when I went away from them, I went to university I felt the opposite and I felt like I didn't fit in with the rituals and things.

DT: I think that's quite a good point actually, I suppose. I mean, I'm a few years older than you but we're the same generation as such. I found that a lot of people, of our age, that have grown up in a very working class family, feel slightly guilty maybe because we grew up in a time when you're really not working class, even if you have that working-class background, you've grown up in, what essentially 20 years ago, 30 years ago, would have been a really middle class upbringing. you had plenty of toys when you were a kid and you got good education, you could go to the doctors whenever you wanted.

So, that guilt you're being forced to leave your roots, as such, because you're never going to be as working class as your parents. If you, you know... But if you... At the same time, you go to university you're never going to fit into that traditional middle class or upper middle class setting either. So, you're left flowing between and you do have that, I suppose it takes a while, to gauge what identity you've got. I think most people just reconcile that they are still working class in attitude and outlook on life. It might take a while to get there and I suppose as artists, whichever way you choose to work, it's a natural process to go through to try and...

HM: And you use your art because I suppose that's one of the things I was trying to do in that poem in some ways. I suppose the poem's about lots of things, but it was this sense you think: Well, what is class really and what do I feel about that? And it's very complicated. And so the poem's a way of saying: Well, perhaps it's just sometimes you don't feel like you particularly belong anywhere. but you can't win you are sort of on both sides that in turn made me think back to, yeah, maybe more political situations and things where you also can't win. And it's all kind of like that, so... I don't know that poetry ever helps you to resolve anything or get to the bottom of it. But it certainly helps you express the questions if not the answers.

DT: Yeah, I don't think I have ever answered anything with poetry, only confuse myself.

HM: I do have a poem in which some students in Sheffield thought that they could work out the answers to a pub quiz from the questions in my poem. And they were really upset when they found out I've made up this pub quiz question, 'We wanted the answer', gutted.

DT: Actually that... If we've got time you could go into that. I quite like that issue of truth in poetry and whether we need to tell the truth, I suppose, because I've noticed a lot of people get upset if they find out you've lied to them. A poem, which is ridiculous because if you were writing flash fiction or a novel there's no expectation to be honest.

HM: Absolutely and 90 percent of the time you are... you're not lying to them, but you're not saying exactly what happened, it's a dramatised version of it in some ways.

DT: Our lives are boring that's why we write poetry.

HM: Exactly.

DT: Anything else other than talk about our life. Actually, that was an unintentional link into this next one. There's a real sense of storytelling from your work. It's almost as though with a few minor changes to the wording you could, and I mean it as a compliment, you could just be chatting in the corner of a local somewhere. I'm thinking in particular of 'Stainless Steel'... 'Stainless Stephen', sorry, poem. Where there's a blurring of the line between story and myth, quite common after a few beers. How do you feel about that assertion?

HM: I really like that you've picked up on that, that's... Because you're never sure if people get things from your work or not. And that's it, there's something that I'd quite like if people did in one way. I always think... I'm very interested in pubs as... not just in general, well, I am... As a place where things happen and where everything happens. And, you know, it's no coincidence, is it? If you watch Eastenders, or whatever, stuff always happens in the pub.

Definitely, and it really got brought home to me when I spent a year living in Grassmere in the Lake District, which is a very small village, and the pub was... If you wanted to find out anything, if you wanted to see someone, bump into them, if you wanted to know the gossip, you just went to the local pub because there's just one really. And I suppose I have always liked the way that people do tell each other stories at the bar, and you can get talking to anyone, like you say like the guy you met in the Orgreave t-shirt.

And I actually wrote a pamphlet a few years ago called [Pint for the Ghost](#) and the idea of this pamphlet was that all the poems in it could be things... Stories that people might tell you in a pub after hours and that's where 'Stainless Stephen' comes from. It's from that in that particular pamphlet. So yeah, I think I'm interested in that because I think people's throwaway stories are things that they say after they've had a few pints or whatever are really important and they're really interesting. Sometimes more interesting than more crafted storytelling.

DT: Yeah, but do you... Actually, going back to what we were talking about before, do you feel like you have an obligation to carry on that kind of storytelling in order to keep contact with, you know, your friends and family from your childhood. Is there a link in that way of writing that connects you?

HM: I don't think it's conscious but I think it's ingrained. Maybe I've just spent too much time in the pub, that's obviously... But no, I think maybe it is on some level. Maybe you want to... I think there's always part of you that's trying to write poems that people that you know, perhaps all people that you care about, would understand or would be able to relate to them in some way.

DT: I mean, I certainly feel in my writing that if, for instance, I go to the pub whenever I can on a Sunday, my uncle and his dad go religiously every Sunday and I sort of have a feeling that if they... I mean, they have no interest in reading my poetry but if they did, I would expect my writing to be clear enough for them to understand. Or to be written in a manner, not that I consciously try and change anything, but it's just because it's ingrained anyway it's coming out in style.

HM: Definitely. You get it writing... I think writing habits probably get formed quite early on, probably before you know that they have done in some ways.

DT: I suppose once you become more comfortable with writing, I suppose then it just becomes your language anyway.

HM: Yeah.

DT: And you're just speaking through the paper anyway, aren't you? It probably comes back to how you learn to speak and talk.

HM: This is;

Stainless Stephen

He haunts the chippies mostly,
nodding his approval
at the puns: *A Salt & Battery,*
In Cod We Trust.

He's dressed up to the nines
in stainless shoes, a plated vest,
two spoons for a bow tie. A fork
to comb his sleek, black hair.

He says: *I'm aimless comma*
brainless comma Stainless Stephen
semi-colon semi-conscious
ordering my chips full stop

And when the shop lads
shove him out into the cold,
he knows a pub across the river
where the doors will never shut,

a shell between the empty works,
where brambles twine around the pumps
and ever glass is draped
with webs. Where men stride in

still sweating from the braziers
that vanished thirty years ago
and tug their collars,
loosening the noose of heat.

The jukebox hasn't changed its tune
since '71. The landlord stands,
a statue at the bar, as Stainless
saunters in and tips his silver hat,

surveys his audience –
the roughed-up chairs, the yawning
window panes, the shabby walls
that echo back each joke

as if they know them off by heart.
Semi-quaver, semi-frantic,
Stainless croons the golden oldies,
sing-alongs to sway to,

here in Sheffield
where they drink till dawn
and beg for encores, know
there's no such thing as *Time*

©Helen Mort, *Division Street*, Chatto & Windus (2013)

DT: You've got a really... A great efficiency of language, if I can put it like that. One example I'd like to give for the listeners for context is from your poem 'Other People's Dreams'. You... I'll try and do this justice, 'Your hair is jet black for disguise. You are the photographer in your mother's nightmare angling the camera at a door.' And I don't think anyone reading that could fail to connect with this simple description of the idea that one can appear in someone else's dreams as well, inhabiting a different physical form. I suppose it comes back to what we were just talking about there, has that style of writing developed consciously? We may have just answered that actually, but...

HM: No, I do think that's a different question. Thinking about efficiency or paring things back. I suppose you could say that I'm really lazy as why use 3 words when you could use 1. No, I think it's probably to do with a lot of the writers that... I suppose that I first read people like... Seamus Heaney actually was one of the first writers that I read. And then maybe later on people... I admire a lot of poets who write very differently to me, that might sound odd, so for example Raymond Carver and his poems or Bukowski, I have always really admired Bukowski. And they might sound like weird models because I don't write anything like that in some ways. But when I think about a lot of the writers that I admire they are often quite striped back and quite, sort of...

And again, maybe it's sort of related to trying to... Trying to be poetic of course and say things the way that sounds nice, hopefully. Whether I succeed or not is a different matter but to pay attention to sound and rhythm but also to use natural patterns of speech as much as possible. And again, you know, I can think of poems in Division Street that definitely don't do that and they sound overly poetic. But sometimes I think, yeah, you feel like... I sort of feel like I've achieved what I wanted to when I've written something that's conversational but also musical. That's the ultimate aim I think for me. So, maybe it comes from the writers that I like to read and that kind of thing.

DT: I didn't study literature so I'm not really sure how the whole process works. But did you have any strong influences from teachers or tutors or any kind of mentors in terms of how you use your language, in the way you're talking about now or is it just from what you were reading.

HM: I have never really studied English either, I did psychology when I was at uni and before that my school didn't really... I don't mean this in a way to bad mouth it because doesn't mean that the teaching wasn't good but they just didn't the scope really to focus that much on poetry. I think the poems that we used look at in school were really really old, I remember looking at Christina Rossetti and all these ballads and things like that. And Tennyson and things like that. And maybe that had some influence on me because it's quite musical again and I've always been interested in music but...

Yeah, I'm not really sure. I often feel quite an impostor as a writer because I feel like having not studied English at university or anything like that, there's all these gaps in my knowledge. there's all these great poets that I've just read a bit of because I've tried to fill in the gaps later, or I've read them and frankly haven't understood them or there's writers I've still not made a proper effort with because it's easier to read, you know, whoever it is whose work you really love and you admire and that you get that instant gratification from. So, I sometimes feel like I have not worked hard enough at reading the canon if you like. So, I suppose I couldn't really pick out one moment from school or from higher education or anything like that that switched me on to poetry. But now have lots of helpful poet mentors who have taken me under their wing, I suppose.

There was a fantastic writer who's just published a book called [Michael Bailey](#) who I met when I lived in Cambridge and he used to do these little workshops in his house. I would be just a couple of people that knew and him sitting round and he would just read you poems that he thought were really good. And talk about why they were really good. And a lot of

that would be quite pared back, imagistic sort of short lined stuff because that's the style that he writes in. And so maybe that some kind of influence in the kind of thing I like.

DT: Yeah, I often feel a little bit of a fraud myself because I'm doing a poetry podcast and I got a D at English... U at English Lit, D in English Language, I haven't studied anything, but...

HM: That surely makes you better qualified to judge it properly.

DT: Maybe, yeah, but I think what you're saying... I think a lot people find quite refreshing anyway because, you know, it's... Poetry like all literature and all art... You should take it as you'd find it anyway. And if you like parts of it you should enjoy it and shouldn't be forced to... I'm quite uncomfortable with this idea that you should have been well-read. About a lot of things, you know, it just to enjoy poetry because it doesn't work you wouldn't say to someone you must have seen every style of painting to enjoy it pointillism, or something like that. Actually, so while we are talking about education. Education or lack of or whatever, I was thinking that you work on a regular fairly or regular basis with education projects in local schools. I've got some questions about that but maybe you could tell us a little bit about the projects and how you got involved in them.

HM: Well, I do all sorts really and I've sort of fallen into all of it by accident. I always knew from when I started writing a bit more seriously that I wanted to teach in some way, and I wanted to share my enthusiasm for poetry with other people. So, the first thing I did was I volunteered to work, no, I didn't volunteer, I persuaded them to employ me, that's right. Probably by pretending I knew what I was doing when I didn't. There was a charity in Cambridge that used to work with trying to provide creative workshops for people that didn't have access to them that often. So, I ended up working... That was my first proper job doing any kind of teaching, I was working on an estate in Huntington with a group, every week, and usually just one person turned up so it was quite dispiriting but it was a good introduction.

So, I suppose I first did adult education and then later worked for the Open University, and taught on one of their online courses. So, I've always done a lot of online teaching and still do. And then the schools work has happened more recently because I was lucky enough to... I applied for this great role called Derbyshire Poet Laureate which happens every two years in Derbyshire they get a new person to do it. And one of the reasons I wanted to do that was I knew it would involve a lot of schools work and I really wanted to work with primary and secondary schools, and partly because I would have loved that when I was a kid. We never had a writer come into our school and work with us. And I just thought what a great thing to do and I also thought it would be good for me and I'd learn a lot from the kids and I have so it's worked.

DT: Yeah. And actually, on that point, I mean, do you think that enough poets get involved with educational programs and if there aren't why do you think that is?

HM: I think I could imagine them being put off. I don't know how many do. I seem to know a lot of people that work in schools with that could be the people that I know.

DT: I guess once you start then you...

HM: Yeah, you know more and more people that do. And it can be daunting because you do... I've had this feeling loads of times where you go into a school and you just think: Oh god, what... You know, they're going to be bored by me, they're going to hate this. Especially, I have to say, older kids and teenagers. I Really like working with 10, 11 year olds that are really responsive. It's sometimes a bit more of a challenge when you get older. But I think everybody should because it's such a gift to you as well as hopefully to the kids. People always get more from it than you think. You know, even the kids, especially sometimes, the kids that don't want to join in at first and that are really put off by it.

So, that's why I'm really interested in, I don't work for them myself, but initiatives like First Story. That have relationships with schools and build on that and try and get a program going year on year and they take the schools on residential courses as well. I think stuff like that's brilliant. And the other thing I found interesting since I've been working in schools round Derbyshire is that often it's not the... This isn't a surprising thing in a way really, it's not the schools that are supposedly the best academically that are the best to work in. In fact, often it's quite the opposite.

And I... My favourite workshop I've done in the last few years was in Shire Brook Academy down the road from where my mum and dad live. And I was talking to the students there about memories of mining and Shire Brook as a mining community. I was just staggered by some of the things that they wrote about what's happened to Shire Brook over the past 30 years. And it's lost a lot of aspects of heritage; what it's like now what it used to be and how much these students of 12, 13 knew about their history and about where they came from. It was really inspiring.

DT: I suppose that goes back to this whole idea of storytelling then, doesn't it? If you can open kids minds to the fact that it is just a form of storytelling, they can do that anyway, you know. They are probably perfectly placed to do that. If you just allowed them to have a voice. Do you find you have to... Actually, [INAUDIBLE]. Do you find you have to stay away initially from any form of structure or meter or... And just to get the interest first.

HM: Yeah, I don't tend to get and I could be wrong in this, I don't know if it's the best approach, but I don't tend to get too hung up on, even, making sure that they're writing what might be generally considered poetry. I'm more interested in storytelling, I suppose, so just what they want to say about, for example, in that case where you come from or whatever it happens to be.

But actually, you kind of find the reverse as well, I go into a lot of schools where the students actively want to write in meter or in rhyme because they think that's what poetry is or they don't like poetry. I've had people say to me: 'Oh I don't like poetry that doesn't rhyme, it's rubbish.' They're sort of seeking that out. And I suppose in those cases I always just try and say: 'Well, yes that works for you and it's the best way to express yourself, brilliant. If it's holding you back from saying what you want to say then maybe for now you should forget about that structure. And maybe think about it at a later stage when you're editing your poem.'

DT: I mean, I don't know how much you've seen of the sort of regular teaching of poetry at sort of GCSE level but do you think anything in particular could be done to improve the teaching. I mean, not from poets visiting, I mean, from the teachers point of view.

HM: I don't know, I do think it's good that they get to... As far as I know, a lot of schools now take their students to a kind of road show with some of the poets whose work is in the anthology that they study at GCSE, and they get to do things like that. I think encouraging people to listen to more poetry, resources like the Poetry Archive is a really good thing, just because, as we all know, sometimes poems just make more sense when you hear the poet reading them and you hear them explaining them.

I think anything that can enable people to relate to them in that way, it's got to be good. So, things like that and like... That's why I quite like the [Poetry by Heart](#) competition they have now where they get people to learn poems and then say them. Because I do think there can be an enjoyment in that if you're not just being forced to all learn the same poem by rote. If you're being encouraged to choose a poem that you've got a connection with, for whatever reason it speaks to you and it engages with you or it says something about you and your life and you want to internalise it and remember it and then, you know, possibly keep that poem forever. I think that's got to be a really interesting thing.

DT: And I think that's a good point actually about once you know the thinking behind a poem or what the poet trying to achieve... The main reason behind the podcast actually is because I think if we can get enough poets to talk about what they're trying to do...

HM: Yeah.

DT: It's much easier to understand work then because you've got a connection with them, you know, and if you hear them maybe read a couple of poems, it's easier to access the rest of their work. I think and even more complicated stuff. I think there's a real lack of... Because I come from a fine art background, I only started writing recently and performing, but it's much more common within fine art, it's expected of artists to explain and engage in conversation. Not all do it, some of them think of the people, you know, they're not... It doesn't seem to exist as much with poetry.

HM: Yeah, there's always more mystery around the process, isn't there? I suppose the thing that springs to mind when you say that about art and things, is that... Someone whose work I love as a whole, not just be the artwork but the process around, it is all the stuff that Grayson Perry does for TV. Where you see... I love seeing how he turns his ideas about something into this artwork. I think it's magic. And you see him getting false starts sometimes or getting frustrated about the process but then somehow, he finds the right form for whatever idea he is trying to express, in his case it's a physical form. But I always watch things like that and I think well there's not that dissimilar from what you do with a poem sometimes.

I mean, some poems do just arrive actually. Sometimes I don't know I'm going to write something until I do. But others like the example we talked about with 'Scab' at the

beginning, sometimes it is a long process of working out how you are going to put something into words and what things are going to come together and what you want to express. So, I always think wouldn't it be great if you could do something... Yeah, a documentary like that but with poetry, wouldn't be as visually appealing though would it? Yeah. Also, I don't think poetry's got a Grayson Perry really, so. [INAUDIBLE]

DT: Maybe I should start recording the podcast in a dress. Possibly. We'll move on from that, I think, that image. So, you were inspired or maybe you said you were enabled to write 'Scab' after seeing Jeremy Deller's video piece called The Battle of Orgreave in which he re-enacts running battles between police officers and striking miners in Orgreave South Yorkshire in 1984. Without stating the obvious, I mean, what was it about that work that inspired you or allowed you to...

HM: This links nicely back to what we talked about at the very start which is, I was struggling to work out how was going to try and write about these things that I care very passionately about. But also felt a bit anxious trying to write about. And about the same time when I was mulling all these ideas over, I went to the BFI Archives in London and it just so happened that they'd got a mining special in the archive and I must have sat there for about eight hours watching mining film after mining film. And right at the end I found Jeremy Deller's The Battle of Orgreave and it was brilliant not just because it's such a powerful film anyway and because what he's doing is totally bizarre. He's going to re-create this very emotive battle in the place where it happened with people who were involved. I mean, that's crazy, isn't it?

But also, because it is tied into this idea of mine that we... When terrible things happen to communities they do get re-enacted over and over and over in the memories of the people that were affected in future generations. Like those kids from Shire Brook, I was mentioning, that still knew everything thing about the strike even though, you know, they're the generation on from us, they're further away from it in some ways. So, yeah, I wanted to show how conflict never gets forgotten and it gets played out in other ways as well. It gets recycled and the anger gets bottled up and then the anger gets turned into something else. And I thought that Jeremy Deller's film is a really good, sort of, motif for that in some ways.

DT: Yeah, no I, it was... No, I was really glad when I heard you read 'Scab' for the first time because Jeremy Deller is one of my favourite artists anyway and the re-enactment is... Here's just a little bit of background in case anyone's listening and doesn't know what it is. It involved miners that were in the original strike and civil war re-enactment enthusiasts. And he got them to re-enact these running battles across fields, and it was crazy. And it was quite brutal and it's... And you can see the anger still... The emotions still run high for the people that were there. And there were a couple of points where you could see the guys that were just for re-enacting aren't really sure they want to get involved.

HM: That's my favourite bit, when they say: 'Well, it's a bit different from wielding an antique sword in a castle somewhere in Doncaster.' They were a bit nervous and that really comes across. I actually met Jeremy Deller at... The most intimidating time I've read a poem I think was in Chesterfield Winding Wheel. At an event to mark 30 years since the strike with lots of ex miners there and they ask me to read 'Scab'. And they also have Jeremy Deller

there talking about his film and I just thought: Oh no, they're going to crucify me, they're going to think it's a liberty and... How dare you, it wasn't like that. And actually, that wasn't the case. People were just happy that, as you said at the start, that somebody was still talking... Yeah. And Jerry Deller was lovely because I also got worried that he might not like the portrayal of his film in the poem or he might disagree with it but no he was fantastic.

DT: I get the impression... I have only seen interviews with him but I get the impression that you spoke about the film in a way that he would want it to be spoken about that.

HM: That's good.

HM: Actually, while we're talking about art and Jeremy Deller and such. I mean this is a personal gripe for me, I mean, I find it... It comes to a surprise that more poets and artists don't collaborate, more often than... Take the work of the other person as a starting point and then how do you... I mean you might not really have an opinion on this but how do you feel about that?

HM: I really like... I've not had that much opportunity to work with artists but there's a poem in Division Street called 'Seven Decapitations'. And that was written in response to the work of a brilliant painter called [Tom de Fresten](#). And he's brilliant because he's very active in approaching writers and saying look... He is prolific he produces new work all the time. I've got these paintings why don't you respond to one or... And his latest project that he did called [The Charnel House](#). It was great because he did a bit of both. So, he'd approached quite a lot of writers and got them to respond to some of his artwork. And then he'd also then himself picked out lines from the poems and incorporated those into the book. So, it was a two-way process of collaboration. And I really enjoyed working like that because I think you find very often at the beginning you're really not sure what's going to happen. And I think that's good because if you already knew how are you going to respond there'd be no discovery in it.

DT: Absolutely.

HM: And very often it prompts you to write something that you just wouldn't otherwise have done.

DT: Do you feel that the writers or poets are maybe a bit guarded about giving their work to someone to mess about with?

HM: Yeah, maybe but I've never minded that because once you've written it and published it then it's kind of not yours anyway. You know, the reader can misinterpret it and then it's partly your fault if they have because it's ambiguous and... Or they can mistake your motives. They can assume things, like we said earlier on, that they're autobiographical, which they aren't. And so, in some ways, it's no different to that, this process of collaboration. And it would be just as bad for the artist because surely they don't know how are you are going to respond to their work and you might imply things about them, terrifying.

DT: I think it comes back to that point where maybe within the fine arts it's just a bit the more expected... Accepted, sorry, that people will do that to your work because you're putting it in galleries. It's actually one reason that I moved away from fine arts and went more into writing because there's a bit more immediate, especially when you're reading live. Putting stuff in galleries is quite... You have this disconnect with your audience. You put it up, you have an opening evening, you meet people and... But then you walk away and it's there for two months and you never hear again, unless there's a review. You never hear what people think. Whereas with live poetry, I'm not talking about publishing books, but live poetry you do get an immediate feedback.

HM: I find it strange as well, as a visual artist, you could effectively lose bits of your work forever. If you sell a painting to somebody it is then their painting, isn't it? You haven't actually got it anymore. That must be really weird

DT: And I think that's... It's actually what I like about my writing. It doesn't matter what anybody thinks it's always mine. You do have... You really have the ability to do it, which is maybe why you are able to remain guarded as a poet because it's always your child. It's always your creation and it's always personal. It doesn't matter how many books you sell, the poem still exists in your head.

HM: This is a poem called;

Other People's Dreams

The lives you have in other people's dreams
are lives no less. Tonight, for instance,
you are kissing the proprietor of SPAR

in a store room full of oranges. A school friend
has you kneeling in a layby of a mountain pass,
grappling with the front tyre of a truck,

and though your hair is jet black for disguise,
you are the photographer in your mother's
nightmare, angling the camera at her door.

Each morning, you must gather up these lives
and hold them tight, walk carefully downstairs,
slow as the girl in your own brief dream

who clutched a dozen long-stemmed roses
to her dress, until they merged
into a bloodstain on her ruined breast.

©Helen Mort, *Division Street*, Chatto & Windus (2013)

DT: You spoke in an interview with Granta back in 2013 about the idea of poetry haunting you, about being visited by the idea for a poem that won't leave you. Try and give our listeners an insight into the creative process. I'm not asking you to tell people how to write poetry. Just a brief description of the development of an idea into...

HM: It's a good job you're not asking me how to write poetry because I don't know. If I did know that I would just try and write brilliant poems all the time. For me a lot of my beginnings for poems do come from sound, almost like an ear worm or something, something that won't go away. So, it does sound like a cliché but quite often I'll be doing something else, I'll either be walking or maybe running or out somewhere or sometimes it happens, which is a bit embarrassing, when I'm listening to somebody else read another writer or somebody talk.

I'll get this thing in my head and have to sort of run the lines over and over in my head until I settle into a pattern. It is almost as if I can see them in my mind's eye, kind of, slotting into place, a bit like some kind of Tetris type thing. I'll often not write it down for a long time. I kind of repeat the lines over and over in the hope that when I do finally come to write it down, I'll have forgotten the weaker stuff, the stuff that's stuck will be the good stuff, or the better stuff anyway. But sometimes you do just have to try and write it down as soon as possible. And it's terrible when you're at an event and there's lots of people around, I just need to write this line or I'm going to forget it. So, often it's quite a stressful process.

DT: I was going to say actually I didn't know whether it was just the way it was put up on the Granta website or whether... I got the impression that inspiration wasn't necessarily a very pleasant thing all the time.

HM: I think it is tied up with... I don't know if you find this as well but it's also sometimes, it's tied up with a bit of anxiety about... I always think that poems are better before you've written them. When the poem just exists in your head as this idea of the poem you're going to write, you think, wow I'll say all this in it. And obviously, the real thing's always going to be a bit of a disappointment, you don't quite express yourself properly. You don't feel like you've done it justice. There's this horrible gap, isn't there, between what you understand and what you see and what you're able to express to other people. It's just a continual, sort of, stress.

DT: And I suppose that once you get into writing regularly, as well, having an initial idea will just bring back that memory of knowing that you're not going to be able to do a very good job of it. It brings that... That anxiety is coming up immediately whether you try to realise it or not, you still get that pang of...

HM: And yet depressingly I think that if you are somebody that loves to write, the reason that you're doing it as well is because you still feel that that's your best way of getting close to saying what you mean. Because you feel like you really bad in conversation, you're really bad at talking to people and saying what you mean, verbally perhaps. So, it's kind of you're one chance to get it right, so if you screw that up then that's it.

DT: Quite often people will say to me: 'What have you been doing today?' 'I've been writing.' 'Oh, that's nice.' 'No, you don't understand.'

HM: It's not that easy.

DT: Yeah, talking about thought processes and stuff, on your blog Poetry on the Brain, and with your background studying psychology, you talk a lot about neuroscience and the study of writer's brains a lot. I'm not going to pretend that I've read too much about that but if you've got anything you'd like to say about that. How much does that influence your... Does it influence your writing at all or is it just a side interest?

HM: It is just a side interest, really. I've got a bit worried when I started studying... When I say studying neuroscience this makes me sound like I've been in the lab cutting up brains, definitely not. It's purely from a theoretical perspective. I've just been reading other people's papers or people's work and I find it really interesting... The attempts that are being made to understand things about what happens in our brains when we write, I think that's great. I think we should never forget that correlation doesn't always mean causation, just because two things are going on doesn't mean one's making the other happen. Otherwise you could be very reductive about writing processes, which are still really mysterious.

And I did get worried at first that if I read about these things I'd become too self-conscious myself, when I'm thinking and when I'm writing. But that doesn't seem to have happened really, I still forget it all when I'm in the process of writing a poem. Maybe because, as you sort of implied talking about your own writing, it's really all-consuming when you're trying to write something, you don't have room for all these side thoughts and... So, I just find it fascinating. It's as much of a mystery to me as what happens when a poem's being written. Literature and neuroscience are both really mysterious things. And the more you read just the more questions you get about it.

DT: I mean, the reason I brought it up was 1. to mention the blog because I think a lot of people would be really interested in it and 2. to highlight this idea that this... There's a quote, I can't remember who the quote's by, but this idea that Stephen Hawking had A Brief History of Time, which is probably one of the most complicated books you could ever try and read, was a huge bestseller. People are not scared of big ideas. They are not scared of complicated ideas yet they're scared of poetry.

HM: Yeah.

DT: And all it is that we haven't... The argument is, in this quote, that artists, all artists, haven't thought about what they do enough in order to explain it to the general public. Because I... This is just a personal feeling I've got and I've got no evidence. I would say that most people would be happier trying to understand your blog, Poetry on the Brain, than read your poetry.

HM: My poetry. Yeah, definitely.

DT: And the neuroscience is probably far more complicated. But for some reason people are less scared about these and it might just be because we have some sort of basis of knowledge regarding our science education at school.

HM: Yeah.

DT: And biology, we sort of know what the brain looks like and there's electricity running through it, even if we don't understand how that works. There's a basis there.

HM: Yeah. And it links back to what you mentioned earlier on I think about terms of engagement in poetry and education and things like that and hearing... I said about hearing people read their poems. It is very often you do just need to give people a bit of a hand, a way into stuff. I remember working with a book group in Chesterfield not that long ago and none of them had ever read poetry before. They were really worried about discussing it and trying to... And at the end of it I just went in and talked about where a few of my poems had come from and a bit of context and why I'd wanted to write about those things. And I think to some of them it suddenly made a bit more sense. And I'm sure that all poets can... Do do things like that and... You're completely right it's just about finding the right way in.

DT: Yes. Final question. Who or what has been the biggest influence on your writing and who would you recommend to our listeners to check out? It could be any... We're not talking about writers here it could be any artist.

HM: That's such a difficult question because there's probably so many. Really strangely, I think one of the people who's had the biggest influence on my writing is not a poet at all, it's probably the folk musician [Richard Thompson](#). Whose music I really love and I just love the way he puts difficult things, and also stories, into a form, musical form in his case. Rather than this sort of just... Although his lyrics are brilliant and really really good as well. And I guess I've always grown up with that because My dad loves his music, he was always playing folk music when I was a kid and it filters into your head. And then as I got older I found his music just a real sort of reinvigoration, an inspiration when... Those times when you're not really sure what you're doing and what you're about and what you want to say. I often end up going back to him as a kind of touchstone in some way. So, yeah, maybe I'll say it's him.

In terms of people that I'd recommend to listeners to check out. Wow, there's so many. If they're interested... They may have been listening to this podcast because they're interested in things to do with the miners' strike, if so, I really recommend a pamphlet by someone called [Paul Bentley](#) called [Largo](#) which is about his experiences of the strike. And he intersperses it with things about music that was out at the time. So, that's really really interesting.

If they're interested in the brain and the mind but it's relevance to culture and art then I recommend a book by Ian McGilchrist called the [The Master and his Emissary](#), which I write about a heck of a lot on my blog. Which is a really interesting theory on society as much as the brain. And other things that I've been reading recently... I do tend to read more non-fiction and fiction than I do poetry, but the last couple of collections I read was Kate

Tempest's [Hold your Own](#), I really enjoyed that. And thought the poems left me quite enthusiastic about what you can do in poetry, so I got very absorbed in that.

And also, a collection by an American poet called [Joshua Mehigan](#), who I think is just brilliant. He does amazing things with form and language and he's just clever without showing off about it, which I always think is the best thing for a poet to do. So, they're my current... That's my current reading list and a couple of older things, I guess.

DT: Interesting. That's it, just... Well, thank you again Helen Mort and Charley the whippet who was really well behaved, he's just asleep on the sofa there. He did have a little scratch around at one point, which you might have heard. I suppose... Yeah, just a few plugs, you can check out... It's www.helenmort.com, isn't it? The website? And then Poetry on the Brain is the blog and, like I mentioned at the beginning, you can get Helen's book Division Street through Chatto and Windus, it's on sale in a lot of bookshops and through evil Amazon. Yeah, and this has been poetry... Lunar Poetry Podcast.

End of transcript.