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[Episode 25: Janine Booth](#) – (April 2015)

Transcribed by David Turner – (20/07/2017)

Host: David Turner – **DT**

Guest: Janine Booth – **JB**

Conversation:

DT: Hello my name is David Turner and this is another episode of Lunar Poetry Shorts. Today I'm in Hackney in London and I'm joined by Janine Booth. Hello Janine.

JB: Hello.

DT: As always we're going to start off with a poem.

JB: Mostly Hating Tories

What shall I do on this fine day?
There's so much on my list
A mix of work and rest and play
I'm sure you get the gist
And maybe I will write a rhyme
But my unwritten law is
Every day I'll spend my time
Mostly hating Tories.

I'll go to work, some bills I'll pay
That's if I'm feeling rash,
To see her through to payment day
I'll lend my friend some cash,
I'll probably make my kids some tea
And read them bedtime stories
Of homeless piggies one, two, three
And why they hate the Tories.

I'll hate them for the bedroom tax
I'll hate them for the cuts,
For living off the workers' backs
I'll hate their very guts,
Look, see the depths to which they'll sink,
They don't know where the floor is,
That's why I'll spend today, I think,
Mostly hating Tories.

What's that you say? That hate's not nice?
Please love thine enemy?
Well yeah, I tried that once or twice
It doesn't work for me,
And if you think that's not fair play
Remember this, you must:
The Tories, they will spend their day
Mostly hating us.

A history of evil done
Will justify my hate,
I still detest the Tory scum
For Section Twenty Eight,
Nye Bevan built the NHS
So he knows what the score is:

And he said vermin come off best
Compared with bloody Tories.

I'm sure I'll find time to revile
That UKIP and its drivel
And I'll locate a little while
To loathe a lonesome Liberal,
I'll maybe pause to show regret
For Labour's missing glories
But save my fiercest fury yet
For mostly hating Tories.

For generations and hereon
Our class and those before us
Grew up to know which side we're on:
The side that's not the Tories,
So when I die, do this for me –
Inscribe and sing in chorus
Here lies Janine, her life spent she
Mostly hating Tories,.

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DT: Thank you very much, that poem reminds me of my dad. Or at least the lines 'mostly hating us' and 'the side that's not the Tories'. Welcome Janine, thank you for talking to me. The first question is always; why poetry?

JB: Because I'm no good at music. [LAUGHTER] Sorry, that would be the facile answer, I think. For me, it's about having something to say and if you've got something to say then I guess it's up to you, your choice of medium through which you say it. I've got something to say because I've always felt very much at odds with the world and very much at odds with the values around me.

I remember very much a turning point in my youth was in April 1980 when I was 13 years old and I heard Going Underground by The Jam for the first time. Because that's a song about being at odds with the world and for the first time I realised there were other people who felt the same way. An anger while looking at society around us, seeing inequality, seeing injustice and discrimination, seeing the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer and wanting to say something about it.

I probably differ from a lot of people in this, to me the medium through which it said is secondary. It just happened to be poetry for a few years in the 80s and now it happens to be poetry again, it's been a lot of other things in between.

DT: Since you make that point... You took a 25-year break, didn't you?

JB: Just a brief respite, yeah! [LAUGHTER] I started, I think, in 1985, I'd started a fanzine in 1983 when I was 16 and met various Ranting poets. In the late 1980s we had a movement called Ranting poetry, now Ranting poetry was, kind of... If you think about what punk did to pop music in 1977 Ranting did to poetry four or five years later. We held 'normal' poets as it were in absolute contempt, we thought they were all boring old gits and poetry readings in those days were, from our probably very biased point of view; boring readings by boring people in as boring a tone of voice as possible in the boring local library.

Whereas we were jumping on stage between bands at punk gigs and having to win over a loud and boozy audience. So that was the movement I was part of then, I started in '85 and I'd stopped by the end of the decade. I'd stopped, not because I'd run out of things to say but because I'd found new platforms to say it on. By then I'd gone to university which involved moving from a smaller city to a bigger city.

I grew up in Peterborough but then I went to Manchester where there was more political activism to get involved and I found myself doing speeches in meetings of hundreds of people, moving resolutions, giving talks on political subjects, that kind of thing. So, though I stopped doing poetry I was still ranting, I just wasn't ranting in rhyme or verse. I was ranting at demonstrations rather than at gigs, I was ranting through megaphones rather than microphones.

DT: Do you feel that it was necessary to move away from poetry to make more of an impact?

JB: I'm not sure it was as conscious decision as that or that there was just so much political activism to be involved in that the poetry dropped away. You've also got to bear in mind that you're asking me to remember things from nearly 30 years ago here and, you know, an awful lot of alcohol has been consumed in the intervening period which dulls the memory. I don't actually remember making a conscious decision to stop doing the poetry but my friend Jean remembers me saying that I didn't think people would take me seriously in politics while I carried on getting on stage doing 'silly poems'.

So, I've talked about my poetry so far in terms of an angry lefty political ranting poet, which is what I'll always be. I'm never going to tone down, that's not me really, but a lot of it's funny as well. I hope that poem, Mostly Hating Tories, tickles people's funny bones as well as their brains. So, apparently I said that to Jean that I didn't think people would take my politics seriously while I carried on getting on stage making people laugh.

Now, I think that says something quite bad about politics, including the left of politics which I would want to expect better of. I think it also speaks to the struggle that lots of political women have to be taken seriously, I think it can be difficult for political women to be taken seriously anyway and if you get on stage and tell 'knob' jokes as well it probably makes it harder.

DT: Yeah. Did you feel you under more pressure to be serious, being a woman or do you feel could have carried on more making jokes?

JB: Yes, it's more the latter. It was very interesting being a woman in Ranting poetry because there were hardly any of us. It was very very male dominated, which on one level I didn't have a problem with for two reasons; one, it meant I got loads of gigs because lots of people tried to be 'right-on' thought, "oh, we're having a Ranting poetry evening, we need to have a woman on the bill". But also because most of the blokes, although they were numerically dominant, most of them were actually quite feminist, they were quite progressive.

I've been involved in a lot of male dominated cultures, arenas if you like, through my life. So, for the last 17 years I've worked on the railways and that's very male dominated and the trade unions are very male dominated and that's been very difficult. I think there's a responsibility on men who are trade unionists or left wing or progressive or political or whatever. If they are a numerical majority they should really do better than they do in a lot of political movements to tackle sexism and to make pro-active efforts to encourage women to get involved.

DT: I think that's a good point about the Ranting scene. I don't want to make you feel old but a lot of these stories and poems are from the year I was born or before but meeting these guys now it was obviously very male dominated but it seems it wasn't the fault of the men within it because they do seem very progressive.

JB: Yeah. I can't think of a single episode in which a male Ranting poet said or did anything that would be excluding to women. So, I think you need to look beyond that for the real reasons and the root. The big picture really is simply about men being brought up to be more confident to speak their minds than the women, particularly young working class women.

DT: I suppose at the point in the early 80s the scene was about jumping up on stage between bands and I assume that there would have been far more men doing that.

JB: It's not very feminine is it! [LAUGHTER]

DT: I hadn't really considered before that you may have felt under pressure to move away from poetry to be taken more seriously politically. I've spoken to poets, in particular Chip Grim and Tim Wells, about the perceived lack of political engagement by poets now. I've talked to my peers, as it were, and I think a lot of them feel that they don't want to talk too politically because it's seen as a joke.

JB: I think there are a number of factors at work here. One is, we are still in pretty much every aspect of working class life live under the shadow of the defeat of the miners' strike. Ranting poetry burst on the scene just before the miners' strike, most of us did benefit gigs for the miners and supported the miners in whatever way we could. The defeat of that strike has just thrown the workers' movement into an era where most of our fights now are defensive rather than for positive demands. People are demoralised, people talk about trade unions being old fashioned.

Now you might be think, "what's that got to do with poetry? We're talking about poetry, not about trade unions", but it's interesting to see how culture changes as political balance of force changes. When you have a confident assertive winning workers' movement then you tend to get more working class voices in politics, more political working class voices in politics. People able to get up say their piece, know there's an audience for them and that there's a movement to be part of, as well.

One of the important things about a lot of the Ranting poets, myself included... It wasn't like there was campaigns over here and then there was poetry over here. We were actually engaged with each other, so yeah, we'd do gigs that were just gigs with people paying on the door and the money would be split between the artists and the promoter but we'd also do loads of gigs that were benefit gigs or were just awareness raising gigs or poetry turns at political rallies.

I remember doing a poem called The Truth where the chorus line is, "it must be the truth I read it in The Sun", and I actually performed that at a strike rally at Wapping of striking printers. It was only after I finished the poem and thousands of people were there cheering that I just realised that the big bulk of the audience that was cheering was people who a couple months earlier were printing The Sun. That interface between poetry and workers' struggles was incredibly important.

Now, the fewer pro-active struggles there are, the less that interface is going to happen and there's a lot less of that now the Labour Party has moved away from its working-class roots and become more right-wing. I'm hoping that process is slowing down or going into slow reverse now. Possibly. At least Blair's off the scene.

I go to a lot of gigs now and there are some very interesting changes. First of all, loads more women. Great. Second of all, loads more poetry. You can go to a poetry gig every night in London, in fact if you've got a very fast means of transport you can go to several. I think that wasn't the case before, you've got remember that I didn't live in London in the '80s I lived in Peterborough where there was, like, one event of any interest every decade but there's loads and loads of poets which is great.

The average poetry gig you go to now on the London spoken word scene, you've got men, you've got women, young people, old people, disabled people, non-disabled people, gay people, straight people and yet none of them have got a huge banner over the door saying, "hey aren't we really diverse". No one's having to make an issue of it and that's one of the this goes back to your very first question I think, 'why poetry', it's because it's incredibly accessible and democratic.

Open-mic is actually like... a poetry night where you have a feature artist opening up and then you have an open-mic is almost like a political meeting where you have someone do a talk and then anyone from the audience can chip in. Punk Rock said that you don't need expensive clothes or expensive equipment to play you just need some crappy old guitar, performance poetry says you don't even need the crappy old guitar you can just get up and say your thing.

I do a lot of gigs where there are loads of brilliantly talented people who get up and do really good poetry and a lot of it isn't explicitly political, it's about working class life so it is political. Maybe it's political with a small 'p' but, you know, when some black guy gets up and does a poem about the police bothering all the time or a black woman gets up and does a poem about her experience of both sexism and racism, that's political. It is it's political. A couple of months ago I saw a guy do a great poem about a 'zero-hours' contract low paid job he'd just being sacked from and how much he hated it.

But politics with a capital 'P', there's a lot less of it and I find that whenever I perform, I can't be on other than myself, I'll do political things. I have got one about dogs! [LAUGHTER] I've got one or two that aren't about politics but most are in some way or another and there'll always be someone who comes up to me afterwards and says, "I really like your stuff and it needed somebody political".

DT: And talking about your other poems, we'll take another reading please.

JB: Okay. I'll do it one called Real Rape which I hope speaks for itself.

Real Rape

If she's drunk or she's flirty
Or a boozy young floozy
If she likes talking dirty
If she isn't that choosy
If she touched him or kissed him
And she then changed her mind
If she's scared to resist him
If she liked it last time
If most everyone knows
That she usually says yes
If she shows of her toes
If she wears a tight dress
If she's not in great shape
Then it's not really rape
- Is it?

If the guy is her boyfriend
If they're out on a date
If they shared some enjoyment
If they stayed up quite late
If he's rich or he's famous
Or a top football star
Well that's not quite the same, that's
Just going too far
If the man is convicted
But he keeps on denying
Says it's wrongly depicted

And his girlfriend stands by him
If his name's in the paper
Then he didn't really rape her
- Did he?

If the girl never fought it
Or she lay still and covered
If she didn't report it
Until after she'd showered
If she didn't speak out
Until months or years later
Then there's reasonable doubt
About this perpetrator
And if nobody heard
Then you need something more
Than just that woman's word
With no videotape
Then it's not really rape
- Is it?

If it gets to a court
We'll explain to the jury
That we all know her sort
You know, hell hath no fury
She's just angry and bitter
Cos he's dumped her and left
And it's not like he hit her
She's just sad and bereft
If she's mentally ill
Then you cannot believe her
She's forgotten her Pill
She is scared that he'll leave her
It's a trick, lie or jape
But it's not really rape
- Is it?

It's not really rape
It's just bad bedroom manners
It's not really rape
She's just trying to scam us
'It's not rape', says a shirt
'It's a snuggle with a struggle'
She is not really hurt
She's just trying to cause trouble
It's not really a crime
It's another blurred line
You know men don't have time

To decode every sign
on the sexual landscape
So it's not really rape
- Is it?

Real rape takes place
In a poorly-lit lane
with a mask on a face
Of a man who's insane
Real rape's committed
By sick monsters with knives
And by psychos and rippers
Not by ordinary guys
Real rape victims are angels
They're sober and chaste
They're jumped on by strangers
They report it post haste
And they try to escape
We accept That's real rape

Please let's stop making out
There are some rapes worth less
Or they somehow don't count
As the slogans will stress
That wherever we go
And however we dress
The word 'no' still means no
Only 'yes' can mean yes
If she says neither word
Or you can't really tell
Then she hasn't concurred
And so that's 'no' as well
It's consent seals the deal –
And without it, rape's real.

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DT: Thank you. That one always gets to me, what with having a couple of sisters.

A lot of poems that you wrote in the '80s could be relevant now, especially Mostly Hating Tories, you could have written that recently.

To give a bit of context to the people listening, you're going to be performing a couple of gigs for Tim Wells' Stand Up and Spit tour which is a retrospective of Ranting poetry. He's putting together an archive of what happened and what went on in the '80s. But do you think part of the point of the retrospective is this fact that some of the poems written in the

80s could have been written now and not much has changed. Maybe part of this retrospective is to highlight to people that this shit has happened before?

JB: I'm hoping the retrospective turns into a revival. It certainly has for me, personally, I would definitely, to give Tim his credit, give him at least some credit for the fact I've started performing again because when he asked me if he could interview me I started thinking back to that and thinking... it wasn't the only reason there was other reasons as well. That's one of the things that got me back on the stage.

We are trying to change the world here and if we keep on reinventing the wheel and standing on the ground rather than on the shoulders of people who have come before us then it's going to be an awful lot harder to do it. If we keep going back to the starting line and keep running a race against the other side and losing and going back to the starting line, we're going to go on forever.

There's a thing we Marxists say is something like, "those who do not learn the lessons of history are doomed to repeat its mistakes", or something like that. Anyway, the point about studying history, and this is one of the things that Karl Marx brought to socialism, not being utopian about it. Don't just dream about what better world you want but study how society changes, have a look at how things change over time, what drives that change. Whether we've been here before, what was done there, what worked, what didn't work, how can we do it better? I don't see why that shouldn't be just as true about poetry and culture as it is about the more industrial forms of struggle. Poetry is a way of articulating demands and views.

DT: We touched on briefly, the view that maybe the current open-mic scene and the way it's set-up in London is perhaps not as politically engaged, are there any other differences that you've seen since coming back?

JB: Yeah, a lot of them are quite good differences, like there are just a load more young people involved and a much bigger diversity of people involved. I think the spoken word scene is great, I really do. Last night I was at a poetry LGBT gig in Dalston and I took two of my friends along, Clive and Paul, who aren't spoken word scene regulars at all and they were blown over by how much they enjoyed it, they really were. They're going to be coming back because that particular gig is going to start being monthly from June first Sunday every month. Poetry LGBT, first Sunday of every month at Topsy's Bar in Dalston [east London].

DT: It's still not even a year ago since I read for the first time and I hadn't heard of a single open-mic night and now you can't move for them. As you said, you can do something every night and the quality is very high. Maybe we could have a third and final poem?

JB: Okay, well I'm going to take you back to the '80s. This is actually one that I probably couldn't write these days because, although a lot of things are still as bad as they were, the Tories etc. I have to say I think washing powder adverts have become marginally less sexist since the 1980s. Those of you listening who are old enough to remember the 1980s may well remember some of the appalling, cringe-worthy advert slogans that are mentioned in the first part of this poem. Those of you who are not old enough to remember the 1980s

will just have to hang on and wait for the swearing and gratuitous violence and the second part of a poem.

So, this poem is about a housewife who quite justifiably in my opinion takes her revenge on the washing powder salesman using various items of laundrette equipment. As a result of which she ends up in court. It's called;

The Housewife's Trial

Your Honour. I'm only a poor housewife
And the one great joy in my boring life
Is to get my laundry white and clean
The light of my life is my washing machine

So this morning I had a terrible shock
'Cos the dirt said hot but the label said not
With the stains on his undies and the dirt on his vest
They'll never pass the window test
It really did come as a terrible fright
I'll never get them bluey-white
My powder's so crap I'm sure that it won't
Shift those stubborn stains that ordinary non-biological powders don't

Then all of a sudden, to ally my fears
A man in a long white coat appeared
He said 'It's new, improved, it's the best you can buy
It's fucking amazing, why not give it a try?'"
Then more appeared and very soon
Washing powder salesmen filled up the room
But under all that pressure my patience snapped
And in the soap powder advert, the housewife strikes back!

I attacked 'em all with piano wire
Put their heads in the machine and their bodies in the drier
I grabbed 'em by the willies and pulled 'em through the mangle
I spun 'em and wrung 'em until they were strangled
Then I washed 'em and rinsed 'em a couple more times
Hung 'em up by the bollocks from the washing line
I took 'em down and shook 'em to get rid of their crinkles
Put 'em on the ironing board and ironed out their wrinkles

I didn't mean to kill 'em – it was out of frustration
I was sick of being subjected to their patronisation
So I stand accused Your Honour of this terrible offence
And the one thing I can say is – it was in self defence!

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DT: Thank you, that's it. As a last question; is there anything that you would recommend to our listeners to go and see or check out? It doesn't have to be poetry related.

JB: Oh absolutely. So, first of all I recommend that you go and vote to kick the Tories out, a week on Thursday. I'm involved in a campaign called Socialist Campaign for a Labour Victory, we're trying to get Tories out and Labour in but we're also trying to push the Labour Party in a more Socialist direction. I have my own personal website, www.janinebooth.com and on that you can read all my poetry but you can see the other stuff I do.

I do a lot of work on the issue of autism, I do training for trade union representatives about autism and I do lots of socialist feminist campaigning, disability rights campaigning and trade unionism. I had a couple of books published over the last couple years as well, one on the Poplar Council Rates Rebellion of 1921 and one on Privatisation on London Underground.

And of course there's my new-ish poetry book called Mostly Hating Tory. Which David highly recommend having read it on public transport on the way home.

DT: On the Northern Line in fact and so does my mate Mishi and he read it on the number 78.

JB: On the bus, yes absolutely, it's perfect for reading on public transport and alarming the person sitting opposite you. And it's only three quid for 33 poems, that's less than 10p per poem, what a bargain! You can buy that direct from my website all of my gigs they're all listed on the website. Check out, if you want to, some of my political writing, some of it's linked to from the website. I also write regularly for a newspaper called Solidarity which is published by Workers' Liberty which is the small Marxist group that I'm a member of.

But don't just listen to and read my stuff, engage with it, come and have an argument with me if you think what I'm saying is wrong. Discuss things, it's only by discussing things that we can get the right policies and strategies to go forward. And if you're going to argue with me you have to do it rhyme! [LAUGHTER]

DT: Thank you Janine.

JB: Thank you very much.

End of transcript.