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[Episode 4: Michelle Madsen \(January 2015\)](#)

Host: David Turner – **DT**

Guests: [Michelle Madsen](#) – **MM**

Transcript edited by [Martin Pettitt](#) – 28/03/2017

Conversation.

DT: Hello, my name is David Turner and this is the first in a new series of shorter podcasts, tentatively titled Lunar Poetry Shorts, so it might change but stick with it. Tonight... These podcasts are intended to compliment the longer ones, they won't replace them in anyway. They're just... The idea is to give you more of an insight into the poetry of certain poets. And for the first episode we're joined by the wonderful Michelle Madsen who

is the host of [Hammer and Tongue](#) up in Camden and... Usually in the podcast we start off with an introduction from the poet but instead of that we are going to begin with a poem.

MM: This is called:

Not The Right Season For Nisse

I hate to say she's managed to land in
The wrong country, that as the crow flies
She's about 30,000 Nisse hours away from
Anyone who believes she exists, so I just sit
And watch her try to push unspeakable gifts
On unsuspecting children in the playground.
One well-fed looking kid, with meaty fists for hands
Grabs her red hat and dumps it on his blond
Head. Hey! I watch her mouth say, but her voice is
Very small and never mind that it's hot even for July
And the hat is a huge woolly hive which would make
You sweat, even in Lapland. I shake my head
And concentrate on swinging higher, high
Enough to touch the sun with my feet. When
I land on shaky legs and get over the dizziness,
The sun blindness, my little pal is gone.
I see the blond kid with the red hat in his hand
And use my superior height to wrest it from him.
I sit on the park bench on a pile of newspapers
And try to ignore the sticky layers that
Want to cling to me. I could have kept my
Eyes open and told her that some of us are grateful
In the end, but I'm sure she'll have guessed the same
So I sit back and let the heat wash over me,
Let the red of my sweat cool my cheeks.

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DT: Thank you very much and hello Michelle.

MM: Hello David.

DT: Just a quick point for listeners, if you hear any creaking we're on a bloody houseboat, which is amazing. It's not my knees creaking. Thank you, that was really good. My first question is, why poetry?

MM: I actually took a long time to come to poetry. I'm not one of these people who was sort of scribbling down poems as a 10-year-old. I always read books. I love stories. I loved sitting on a windowsill and delving into these pages and literally leaping into another world. My imagination was always firing but poems always left me a bit cold.

I even studied English at university and really struggled to kind of understand what was going on. But I did really love the rhythm and the pace of the poetry, and the one thing I really did like was Old English poetry. I didn't understand what was going on, I had to learn an entire language in about three weeks. I had no idea what's happening. But there are these constructs in an Old or Middle English poetry called kennings: two words that go together like a two word metaphors. Like "wind-sweeper" which is a type of bird or something like that. And that sort of stuff stuck with me. Couldn't really get [INAUDIBLE] that sort of stuff.

But it was really when I went to a gig in... I think just after I finished university and it was a four nations slam and it was at a club called The Zodiac. And I saw the [Queen Sheba](#), who's an American slam poet, stand up and perform. And I was completely and utterly blown away. Poetry to me had been something kind of a bit dead, and then to suddenly see it happen on a stage where this kind of magic summoning almost... The summoning of everyone's attention. You're not dancing, you can dance, but it's a different thing. It's kind of the words filled every crack in the room and I was like, argh, okay. And then after that I started writing some of my own stuff and they sort of spun up from there.

DT: So it was... Yeah... It was inspiration found in a live performance? More than through a book, love of words through the written [INAUDIBLE].

MM: Yeah. Yeah.

DT: Yeah, the reason I ask that is... The next question was going to be, how often do you read your poetry in public and how important is that side of your poetry practice?

MM: It's... I probably... I gig probably on average twice a week. It really depends on the time of the year. If I've got some big projects on then I'll try not to do so much but generally around that many times. Always up for doing more gigs, however, so do get in touch. But it's a really important side to me. I mean, I love the theatricality of it. I like.... I think that poetry does amazing things when it's something that is lifted from the page because that's one thing there. But when you suddenly... It's an oral tradition, it's about like sharing the sounds and your expression, and loving it and enjoying it.

And I love the wide gamut of the different things that people do when they perform. I like the different style of their interpretation of their own words. Actually, when I was doing the gig in Putney and I saw you for the first time I think it was one of the least word-filled performances I've ever seen. I was absolutely transfixed and I was like... Do you know I mean? If you had looked at it on the page there would be quite a lot of gaps and whilst you could...

DT: There would be a lot of gaps.

MM: Yeah, but whilst you could get a lot from that, maybe. It's just so amazing to see it onstage, and one of the things I'd like to move into is writing using my experience of writing poetry for the stage. To turn that into something more kind of halfway between poetry and halfway a play because it's not too much of a leap from that, I don't think.

DT: No, actually we can come onto that in a couple of questions time but maybe we should have another poem.

MM: Another poem? Okay. This is called:

How Real Models Lose Weight

I'd like to go in at the waist instead of out.
I've seen how good other girls look
With fake gems glimmering in their flat bellies
I watch them in magazines
They glitter on the page
Their thin brittle limbs are shiny trim
Clutched possessively by interchangeable Adonises
Torsos carved out of pixelated marble
Seen through a grainy telephoto lens.
I'd like to be one of them.

Unlike them, I'm not fragile
I wouldn't break if you dropped me
I'd bounce. The oodles of bulk under my skin
Might bruise but I would be intact
Protected by the layers which pad and fill the whole
Of my fat inside and out.

My problem is I see food everywhere. It litters the fridge
And on the street outside my door
It's advertised in glowing letters.
Night beacons and day sirens
Alert it to me. I want to be able to
See through it, shed all of its constituent bits
And be wraithlike. A string of cells
Built on air and a hopeful scaffold of bones.

I'm in the thrall to the flaking layers,
The pulps, mulched tendons and muscles.
Stripped of skin, I dissolve into spots
In the unguents and emulsions. The foams
Mount, we urge it all out in bitter founts
Again and again and again. But I remain
Wide and heavy as an army of lead cadavers, heaped in a lime pit.

So I weigh up the issue and sew my lips together
With a knitting needle I find in
The drawer where the freezer bags are kept.
I stab at them all, they wheeze release.

I use a sanitised butcher's string
It stings when it goes in and out
As my lips draw together
Into a bloody permakiss.

It takes a while but the pounds start to go
And I glow with quiet pride from the creaking
Desert of my empty insides.
I've eaten my all my words, they sustain me
Jostling for space in my shrinking belly.

It's been a long time since I had a conversation
But I don't doubt that reduced
And silent I am a better table companion than before.
I watch you eat, I smile. You don't see it.
The caked blood turns black
My lips fuse into a rosebud of promise
Which cracks when you touch it.
I will use it to address the letter
To the glimmering magazine editor
When I am as flat as a page.

I'll have shelved that hefty third dimension
And those pesky other selves
And I will package myself in a box
Snugly held in place by handfuls of scented sawdust
Perfumed with sachets of free cologne samples.
Poster rolled, I'll be their centrefold darling
Unfurled, no curves, just a smile pulled taut
Around my golden skinned mates
And a steely diadem in the middle
Of my fleshless model self.
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DT: Thank you. I was desperately trying not to cough then.

MM: Cough away. Cough away.

DT: I'd like to ask how you critique your own work. Do you have any particular people you share your writing with or do you look for feedback from audiences?

MM: I definitely do look for feedback from audiences but there are some poems, for instance like the one that you just heard, which is really not something I perform very often. But actually I had that... I told you, that was a something I wrote quite long time ago, that was worked and worked and worked and worked. And actually... So, the way I usually work

is I'll write something and if I like it I get excited about it. I'm like, I have to tell people about it so get up on stage and I'll shout it.

And I usually respond quite quickly to how, you know, the response of the audience. So, if they're like "yay", I'm like yeah this is a set piece. And if it's not then I usually... If there's a kind of stunned silence or like people just look a bit horrified then I usually go back and I look at it and think, do I like it? Do I... Why did I write this, who have I written for, am I my doing anything interesting with language, am I right, have I got a message? Does this need to be told to an audience of people in front of a stage or can I just get on with it and write it for me? And that's usually the process that I go through and I do share it with friends as well. I've got some... There's some poets who I work quite closely with, for instance with Hammer and Tongue and stuff, that I will share things with, but I usually share it with the audience.

DT: And, we sort of touched on this, or you did, a little bit earlier so you might have already answered this question, but you might also want to go more into it. I wondered how you would like to see your own writing progress, and I had actually put in brackets maybe some sort of Edinburgh style show. Something you mentioned about writing longer, more like a play.

MM: Well, I suppose... So, there are a few things I'd like to do. I'm writing a novel which is something I'm finding very difficult because I have been much more... I'm a journalist as well so I am a prose writer but I write short pieces get published that day and that's a very different discipline. With poetry I'd just like it to get better and be more honest and write more. But with the theatre piece I've been watching a lot of theatre which has been devised recently, devised with a bunch of people.

There's a great theatre company called [1927](#), which actually based here in Hackney Wick, which put on a fantastic show called Golem, and quite a lot of that was in verse. And there's a theatre maker called [Caroline Horton](#) who's doing some very clowny things. I like the... I'd like to bring together the very... The form of poetry with something that's with... Audio visual stuff and also this kind of like very exaggerated physical theatre. Because I think that they're kind of all like polar opposites almost, I'd be interested to see what happens.

DT: Maybe a third and final poem, and then we'll get on to the last couple of questions.

MM: Okay. This is called:

We'd All Melt

The night you said beautiful,
I laughed my ribs out
In great bowers of bent roped bone,
Which broke from me
Choking my fears with calcified smiles
Beaching at last on the ashen fireside tiles.
I thought it was all a tremendous joke.

That night,
We built a table from the marble arcs,
Dressed it in the lace of ancient brides
And the pink silk of pig's ears,
Which pricked up to hear you laugh.
That thick, rich mirth
Stopped all my wounds
With a liniment of tumbling decibels.

That night,
Your generosity could have tempted retiring icebergs
Into the sweltering gulf,
Eased them into the shallows
Where mottled starfish
Would petrify in the aching melt-water

That night,
Your generosity could have begged a pause from
A determined coal train's heaving snort and mass
Better than a horizon of red flags
Held up by the hands of twenty-nine boiler-suited protestors.

Tonight,
You wear your generosity stitched around your neck
In a cravat of courtesy.
I search for a caveat of infidelity
In the arrows of the print
Pointing to me.

But you,
You smooth the edges of her sadness.
Her night fears balk at you.
They bolt with the tight-sprung release of so many spring lambs,
Those boundless leaping mutes bleating soundlessly into the dawn

And I, I breathe alone,
And leave you
With a gift of seven lemons.
Strung up to dry in the August heat,
They have lost their bitterness,
Tanned by the sun
They are almost sweet.

You palm the fruits carefully,
As if their blanched skin

Would bleach the humanity from your fingers
But the fruit is innocent
And I,
I will wait for years
For the ears of your eyes to awake and
The eyes of your ears to open.

Until then,
I am forbidden.
I will malign the feast,
And, as an un-bloodied Banquo,
I will sit between you,
Freezing the air.
I will make time still.
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DT: Thank you very much. What's that line: "laughed my ribs out in great..."

MM: Bowers of bent rope bone..."

DT: I really like that, yeah, I think that was the first poem I saw you do at [Bang](#) [Said the Gun].

MM: Yeah that's... that one always goes [INAUDIBLE], you know when you write something and it still sticks with you.

DT: Just so I don't forget, so the poems that Michelle's been reading... They are from a book called [Alternative Beach Sports](#) and that's through [Burning Eye](#). And we'll try and, whenever this goes out, I'll try and put a link to that as well. So, final couple of questions, what have been the main influences of your development as a writer and performer?

MM: In terms of other writers, I've been very influenced by a number of writers who are connected to a publishing house called [Write Bloody](#) in the United States. Write Bloody was set up by a poet called [Derrick Brown](#) who came on the Hammer and Tongue tour, a few years ago and that was my introduction to this rock and roll, glittery bloody bunch of amazing, kind of like, you know, crazy American poets. And they're really... Some have become quite good friends and it's there... It's a very different package almost that you get. But, you know, in fact right in front of us here I've got the book by one of them, it's a poet called Mindy Nettifee and it's a great book called *Glitter in the Blood*. And it's about writing with honesty and vim, and that's great.

I mean... And then there's [INAUDIBLE] it's a bit of a corny thing to say but, the greatest poet, one of the greatest poets... The two greatest poets I have... Was introduced to at an early stage was Shakespeare and John Donne. And John Donne has just sat with me for many many years, this kind of very English very clever word play and turning words in on themselves and it's something that Shakespeare does as well to great effect. And you kind of go, is this a play or is this poetry, kind of being played with all the time. And I think for me

language is a game. If you've got conceit which is overplayed, not honest, then it's a bit of a crap game.

DT: Yeah.

MM: But if it is done well, you have... You can create incredible words... Worlds rather, which can have so many different meanings. It's like looking into a tunnel of mirrors and it's really powerful. So, yeah those are the two biggest influences I think.

DT: Okay. Whenever anyone mentions John Donne I have to fight the urge to... It's a really terrible joke... Say it's pronounced John "did", not John Donne.

MM: He has actually a really good joke that he wrote about himself because he married... I think he married the daughter of his family friend or something like that who's called Anne. And I think she was... I don't know whether there was a religious problem or something like that, she was like 10 and he was 70, whatever was going on it was bad. So his little epitaph for their relationship was, "John Donne, Anne Donne, undone". Which I thought was great.

DT: Yep, poetry bants.

MM: Wohoo, 60 percent true.

DT: We haven't got enough time to go into this now... It's continued to surprise me, and more podcasts I do, whenever people mention poets who have influenced them from before the 20th century they are sort of apologizing for it, which is crazy. But we haven't got enough time to go into that anyway. Yes, so final question, is there anything that you'd recommend to your listeners to go out and see or read or watch or it could be anything, it doesn't have to be poetry.

MM: Yeah definitely. So, if you want to go and see some very interesting... Well, have a very fun night go to Bang Said the Gun, come to Hammer and Tongue. London is awash with poetry nights. There's about seven for every day of the week. You don't need to stay at home. [Write Out Loud](#) has got a really good compendium on everything that's going on, it's great.

I'm involved in the Book Club Boutique which is a fantastic unique and completely crazy night which is run by one of the most... She's definitely an influence on me, the fantastic [Salena Godden](#), she's like the Mae West of the London literary salon and she's quite special. And one of the great things that happens at a Book Club Boutique is that it attracts a very sort of Soho feeling crowd of writers, artists, general bohemians, people about town, you kind of... It's very special. And there's also room for people to write their own work it's usually themed so you can write to a theme and that really helped me when I started writing.

I used to go to those nights on a weekly basis and write to theme and it was a really eye-opening thing. So on March the 7th the Book Club Boutique is going back to Selena

Godden's home town to a new venue on the road that she grew up on called Springfield Road, which is the name of her memoir, and everyone's invited.

DT: That was the last question, so thank you very much Michelle. Just wrapping up what we should do is a... I probably should have done this earlier but, do you have any blogs or websites you'd like to mention, Twitter accounts, or?

DT: Yeah, my... You can reach me on Twitter [@Mishmaddsen](#). My Web site is [Michelle Madson Poet](#). You can Skype me at Michelle Madsen Poet, don't know if you want to do that. I post loads of stuff about what we're doing on the general Twittershpere. And please to say hello. I'm happy to not just have a chat with you about my stuff but also to hook you up to other people. It's all good.

DT: So, I'm going to invisibly point down with my pen when I say all of those links will be in the description below the video. So, you know, because people don't always click on them automatically. So, if you... We will list those underneath. That was it... That is it. Thank you very much Michelle, it's been great and we're on a... Like I said, we're on a boat. This is the first water-bound podcast I've done, it's been really good. That was Lunar Poetry Shorts, go away.

End of transcript.