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[Episode 52: Amy K Blakemore](#) - (January 2016)

Transcript edited by: Harriet Foyster 25/07/17

Host: David Turner - **DT**

Guest: Amy Blakemore - **AB**

**Conversation:**

**DT:** Hello my name is David Turner and this is another Lunar Poetry Short. And today I'm just off the Old Kent Road in South London and I'm joined by Amy Blakemore. Amy's debut collection [Humbert Summer](#) was recently published by [Eyewear](#) so I'm sure we'll hear some of that during the chat. Hello Amy.

**AB:** Hello.

**DT:** We'll start with a reading.

**AB:** Okay. This is a pretty new poem I'm reading first called Teeth Dreams and it's sort of about pain and murderers. So Teeth Dreams.

**[The author has not approved this poem for transcription.]**

**[00:02:28]**

**AB:** And the next poem I'm going to read is the title poem of my collection Humbert Summer, might as well.

Humbert Summer:

subtly dirtied  
by four-day drinking in a basement flat i feel like bunting, a paisley tie,  
and private wasp stings  
on a powder-blue day –

you're old, you won't get it.

i want an epic landscape  
sick of pushing syllables  
down the stairwell  
on some middle-class Beasley Street.

a callow retro-maniac  
i idolise violence and Duran Duran: but i don't want either  
to happen to

me. my first world problems: intertextuality, shit MD, and the inevitable  
death  
of David Bowie.

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**DT:** Thank you very much Amy, hello.

**AB:** Thank you.

**DT:** How are you?

**AB:** A bit hungover, but good!

**DT:** I just wanna say to start yeah teeth are really odd aren't they? I'm glad you said that because I just... Sometimes when I'm talking to people I can't believe that we can talk about anything other than the fact that we've got rows of exposed teeth in our faces, it's really odd.

**AB:** It's actually... That poem, starting from about a year ago my boyfriend started having weird psychosomatic pain in his teeth. His teeth are perfect, he's been to every dentist going. So they've concluded it must be a psychological thing but it doesn't seem to be going. I'm sure he wouldn't mind me talking about this, he tells everyone. So that poem is sort of about that. I was quite fascinated by the idea of sort of psychosomatic toothache and how you explain that to people without sounding like a complete nutter.

**DT:** Yeah but I suppose the amount of nerves you got around that part of your body I suppose it makes sense that if you're going to have psychosomatic pain anywhere...

**AB:** Yeah, teeth.

**DT:** And there's such a link with anxiety.

**AB:** Apparently a usual one to get kind of you know psychosomatic.

**DT:** I had four teeth removed recently, the late part of 2015 was just a toothy nightmare.

**AB:** I started looking into kind of the significance of teeth as well though and what they mean in dreams. And there's all these different... You know having dreams about your teeth falling out or exploding is apparently a very common thing.

**DT:** Exploding teeth?!

**AB:** Exploding teeth. I had one once, an exploding teeth dream, and there's all these different... It's a big thing in the Bible and it denotes all sorts of different weird stuff apparently, having dreams about your teeth falling out or hurting. So there we go.

**DT:** Crazy. Well I suppose we'd better talk about some poetry now.

**AB:** Okay.

**DT:** First question is always why poetry?

**AB:** I think, well I started off trying to write prose and I enjoyed it but I don't think I was very good at it. And I suppose on a basic level this sounds like super mundane, poetry fits quite well around my life at the moment, I work full time and I do various different jobs. So it's something that fits quite well around that, which makes it sound like I don't like poetry but I suppose I mean if I had all day to write perhaps I would experiment more with different forms and blah and prose. But as it is poetry feels like something I can do justice to in the time I have available.

**DT:** I think it's nice when poets talk about the realities of their life because even for someone that's just had a collection come out it doesn't mean that it changes your life at all, it doesn't give you any more... It probably means you've got less time to actually write poetry what with promoting and doing readings and stuff.

**AB:** Yeah.

**DT:** And the reality for most poets is that the writing, the act of writing, fits in around paying the rent.

**AB:** Completely. I'm lucky if I can find you know... I try and write at least a little bit most days but the reality is I'm lucky if I can find maybe ten solid hours a week in which I can actually write, which wouldn't really be compatible with, I don't know, epic verse or you know trying to get a spy novel out. But aside from that I like the fact that you can do, particularly now, the boundaries have shifted, you can do kind of whatever you want with poetry. There are lots of people doing really experimental stuff.

**DT:** Obviously there were some quite dark elements, obvious elements to the first two things you read there, but do you find it easier to write about pain in shorter bursts like that?

**AB:** Erm yes. I suppose the novelistic equivalent of the sort of poetry I write would be incredibly, unremittingly dark and probably not have much of an audience. So in that sense I think I'm very interested in short poetry, shorter poetry. And that's something I'm working on at the moment, a series or collection of really, really short poems, like six lines a pop sort of thing. I'm interested in the almost sort of monumental or monolithic quality of very short poems. I'll probably read some of those as we carry on. There's something about the form, particularly short poetry. I'm very interested in trying to sort of make something that small as perfect as possible, kind of like haiku or fragments of Sappho, I think it's a [James Baldwin quote](#); "you just want to get that bone dry sentence," that's what I'm really interested in doing.

**DT:** And so what have been your main influences as a writer?

**AB:** I think I started out having really, really kind of narrow horizons and I still do in some ways. I'm always finding new stuff and that's really exciting to do. But I think in that sort of very depressed, anxious teenager way it was probably the lyricism of bands like Suede and Placebo and Morrissey obviously. But I was very interested in that kind of angst.

**DT:** One of those kids hey!

**AB:** One of those kids yeah. Absolutely, teenage goth. So I suppose I kind of was a frustrated rock star because I never had the patience for learning an instrument and I can't sing, so writing songs became writing poems and then I studied Ted Hughes at school but obviously became more interested in Plath as any sensible girl would. And then Emily Dickinson, the short poems thing, I think that comes from my slightly later teenage obsession with her. And now there are a lot of particularly female poets doing such amazing

stuff. I love at the moment [Anne Carson](#), [Rebecca Perry](#). And yeah, I'm interested in very experimental work I guess.

**DT:** And on that note perhaps we'll take another reading?

**AB:** Okay.

**DT:** Thank you.

**AB:** Right. I think I'll read you some more... These ones are a bit silly, but very short. Introversion Forum.

**[The author has not approved this poem for transcription.]**

**[00:10:29]**

**AB:** And this is called My Pale Pink Bedspread, which is a real bedspread that I actually own, and I wrote a poem about it.

My Pale Pink Bedspread

my pale pink bedspread is edged with glass beads so that i feel like i have  
lined my chamber with the skins of the thousand  
high-status sateen rag dolls  
i have slain.

i am a tiny soft-lipped khan -  
scratching my tongue with a flamingo bone!

it almost makes me feel  
the smartly-trousered knee of the hetero Kray twin pressing hard between  
my breasts.

and when i roll over in the night  
it makes a sound like  
duchess duchess duchess -

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**AB:** And one more. This is called Our Town and it's about where I live in Deptford.

Our Town

the dead rat was uninjured.  
rigor mortis had set in, freezing the tail to a loop about

the circumference of my forearm.  
probably

it had eaten poison. when it rains (which it sometimes does for days) the  
snails  
come out, in liquid  
eye-tiaras and

at night i saw a car with blue  
under-lights parked  
outside the restaurant. another place sells fruit loaves and secondhand  
bridesmaid's dresses.

i don't know where to buy khat yet. salvia  
i do. ask me about my tattoos.  
red-and-white striped

tube top. heart-shaped padlock.  
i didn't notice him putting his hand  
there. it was raining.

but hold me  
like something that shakes  
when it goes unheld. you've trained  
your body not to take up the space  
it ought to take -

and everyone else we've ever met  
would die if they came to this place.

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**DT:** Thank you very much. And no matter the theme it's nice to have poetry about south east London on the podcast.

**AB:** South east London.

**DT:** As Lunar Poetry Podcasts is very much a south east London entity.

**AB:** All the best things are.

**DT:** All the best poetry is coming out of south east London I think.

**AB:** And the best grime.

**DT:** Yep. It's where it's at. I'm not even going to tell people how to get here because I don't want people to spoil it all.

[Laughter.]

**AB:** To come and ruin it.

**DT:** How important are open mic slots and public readings in the development of your writing?

**AB:** It's interesting actually because I really like using, it's probably a slightly risky strategy, I really like using... I haven't been to an open mic in ages. I used to all the time when I was a teenager with a bunch of friends of mine who were also [Foyle Young Poets](#) because that was the first prize I won. We'd go to the open mic at the [Poetry Cafe](#) every Tuesday and stay out 'til like two in the morning. But I really like using them now as a way of trying out new material because I don't tend to show people or really kind of workshop my poems, I just sort of work on them on my own and then debut them at readings. It's quite a nice way I find of assessing people's reaction because you can't really hide whether or not you're enjoying a poem at a reading. You kind of find there's an energy between you and an audience. So in that sense I read stuff and then afterwards if it doesn't maybe quite get the reaction I hoped for I rework or scrap it all. And sometimes if you're not sure about something you read it at a reading and you get that kind of thoughtful "hmmm" or "ahhh." And that's when you know 'yeah maybe this is alright.'

**DT:** Yeah I definitely agree. A lot of my stuff has changed dependent on audience reaction. There is obviously the reality though that you can't legislate for people not listening to you. Do you know what I mean?

**AB:** Yes.

**DT:** And you can't always trust people to be listening, and that's not really knocking people. Often you read at events where people have read before and people are just tired or have switched off for a second.

**AB:** Absolutely. And I do it at readings as well sometimes you just phase out.

**DT:** So I suppose I'm assuming it's just a part of how the editing process goes?

**AB:** Oh definitely.

**DT:** So it's just about... Is it more about assessing how the pace of the poem feels to you and the energy?

**AB:** I think so. And also sometimes I find I'm reading something new and it's never a good feeling when you're about to start a poem and you realise 'crap I'm a bit embarrassed by this poem but I'm going to read it.' Like that sort of feeling which is something I only really get at readings when you think 'uhh am I going to read it? I'm probably going to read it' probably means you shouldn't read it ever again.

**DT:** Yeah. It's always a terrifying feeling when you're two lines in and you think 'this doesn't work at all.'

**AB:** No. No. And I think also because sometimes a lot of my poems deal with themes like you know female sexuality or whatever and sometimes I just think... You know I have a poem called Three Abduction Fantasies which is about abduction fantasies. And I just think some of my work is quite sort of problematic or you know I think if a guy had written these poems people would maybe rightly not be very happy. And I find readings are quite a good way of sort testing out how far I feel like I can push things in that sense if that makes sense?

**DT:** Absolutely. I mean I've read... I had an experience early last year where I read a couple of poems where the content material could be misread or misinterpreted. And in my head I thought 'that's fine because I'll just explain in the introduction.'

**AB:** Yeah, in your preamble.

**DT:** But people don't listen to that and all of a sudden they've got free reign to misinterpret what you're reading. Yeah so I've been very wary about... Yeah you've got to be very careful with some things. So I've only seen you read once in public at that was at the [Betsey Trotwood](#) at [Tim Wells'](#) all-dayer recently.

**AB:** It was good fun.

**DT:** It was good fun. And it was my first one that I've ever attended completely sober so it was interesting to actually remember all the poetry from the whole day.

**AB:** Yeah I was wasted by the time it came round to the best of British poetry reading.

**DT:** You seem to be the kind of performer the likes to add a lot of energy or pace to certain poems, not all your readings, but in certain poems you tend to pick up the pace. How difficult is it for you to hand over the control over the pace of reading to people reading you book after you've been published?

**AB:** Yeah I think in some ways, I mean I kind of hate the distinction and think it's a bit useless, but in some ways I consider myself more of a page than a performance poet. And I think that's just because I've seen so many great performers, like [Kate Tempest](#) at [Latitude](#) was performing the same year as me and I was watching from backstage and it was just "woah." She had 300 completely wasted guys just absolutely in the palm of the hand staring up in awe at her and I was among them. And I don't think I'm... I can be quite shy and coy and I don't really think I can compare to performance poets who really, really hone their craft like that. But certain of my poems, an example is my poem about [Valerie Solanas](#) which I read quite often, which I pick up the pace for I just don't know in some ways if they work on the page quite as well as when I read them. But I don't mind kind of handing it... I'm always interested to see how people react to my stuff without the context of seeing me or hearing me read. I'm quite interested in poetry removed from whatever sort of baggage or misconceptions can come with actually seeing or knowing who a poet is. I'm quite interested in that.

**DT:** Actually I think I maybe loaded that question a bit there because I wasn't suggesting that it should be a difficult process to give over your work, I just think it's an interesting point to talk about because not only... I think a lot of people assume when you become published that the main fear would be people judging your work as to whether it's any good or not, but you know a big part of that is whether you trust people to... And actually you're not in fact mistrusting the reader to understand your work, what you're doing is mistrusting yourself to write clearly enough to suggest... Would you agree with that?

**AB:** I think having a book out, particularly because I'm probably pretty young for having a first collection, there were certain things people could misread. I mean I suppose like we were talking about earlier some of it's not necessarily you know... It's not poems about larks or mountains. I was quite anxious about certain things being misread when I kind of wasn't there. I think you know hearing me read a poem about three abduction fantasies and seeing me and knowing sort of what kind of person I am or that you know it's all a bit tongue in cheek, and reading it on the page and not having that context for it could be a very different experience and I think I was slightly worried about that. But I've been very lucky in that people who have reviewed or responded to it so far have done so very thoughtfully and kindly. So I think there's a tendency sometimes in poetry to patronise the reader or audience, so I think I tried not to do that.

**DT:** It's a very good point about not patronising people too much because you... And this is what I mean about it is patronising to suggest that you don't trust the reader. Because people are not idiots and people will get things. And I think it seems often that what is claimed as mistrust for the reader is just a lack of confidence in the writer's own ability to get their point across.

**AB:** I think also it's a slight offshoot of the fact that you know the audience for poetry is allegedly shrinking and blah blah blah. I think there's a tendency to kind of think 'well the audience for poetry is shrinking because people just don't get it anymore. People just don't understand my special little thoughts.' And I actually think well perhaps there's a reason and perhaps it's to do with poetry and I've always wanted to write poetry for people who don't necessarily read poetry, poetry with a sense of humour and poetry that you can appreciate without having a Masters. So that's something I'm quite conscious of. And for me, after a reading, one of the best things is when someone's boyfriend has been dragged along or you know they've come with one of their mates and they're not really sure what to expect and someone comes up to me after a reading and says "I've never been to a reading before, I don't usually read poetry but your stuff was great." That's for me a lot nicer.

**DT:** It's one reason I started making these podcasts. The greatest praise I'd get is from people who have no interest in poetry but have started listening regularly to the podcast because they feel like they have a connection to the writers. But I was about to ask how much of your writing then is an act of communication, in that do you write first and foremost for yourself and hope people like it or do you actually write with a reader in mind?

**AB:** I think that's changed actually since Humbert Summer came out. I'm now conscious of the fact I'm kind of writing with, god this sounds so presumptuous, but like a next book in

mind, which I don't think I was before. Like I think, I mean I might be wrong here, but I think most poets just start out kind of ' throw some shit at the walls see if any of it sticks.' And once it starts to I think it does change how you write and it changes what you write. I'm maybe not sure exactly how, but I think that's something I'm conscious of happening in my own writing. I suppose I'm more kind of consciously experimental. I think it's become more of an act of communication, probably you know like in the last year.

**DT:** I suppose that's a natural progression isn't it? If you start writing I suppose it would be odd if the first thing you ever wrote was for an audience. It seems much more natural that you would write for yourself but then with more exposure then you know... Especially if you are doing public readings, it's impossible to not notice what the connection is with people.

**AB:** Yeah I think it's interesting because I mean the main times poetry, I know this is such a sort of trite thing to say, but the main times poetry enters into people's lives are things like weddings and funerals and blah blah blah. So I think it's perhaps one of the problems with the way poetry is taught and the way people begin writing poetry is that yeah they start writing as an act of kind of communication sort of speech-ifying ideas about what poetry is, rather than viewing it first and foremost as quite an intimate thing. I kind of think about more like pillow talk.

**DT:** Actually it's a really good point. I don't know why I can't think of what the context is but you're the second voice that I've heard this week mentioned the place of poetry within funerals and weddings, and it takes poetry which is often not written at a time of importance, most people after school only come across poetry in these really sort of very emotional events. And then what happens is that poetry doesn't exist in the everyday does it? It only exists at these very extremes of someone coming into the world or leaving the world, or this union.

**AB:** Or in adverts now!

**DT:** Awful.

**AB:** Very pompous ones!

**DT:** Perhaps on that note of poetry being read publicly we should have our final reading?

**AB:** Okay. Since I mentioned it earlier I will read Valerie Solanas, and dear listener you may know who she is. She shot Andy Warhol, didn't kill him obviously, and was the writer of the [SCUM Manifesto](#), which is brilliant.

Valerie Solanas

dis-cretion is the better part  
of not an act -ress, insult riter  
for a dime uncharacteristic  
thirty-tu automatic, that

on the day she wore make-up

Billy says the whole  
the sorry show made him  
made Andy unlovable un  
lovely as a slice of  
peanut brittle spunked  
snag-hag up the walls in hotels  
Chelsea / Bristol / Bellevue  
these traditional structures  
- of Leonard Cohen songs abt fellatio  
satin sheets in – th bourgeois theatre

like last days all  
pneumonic –matic misery

her mother burned all her belongings posthumously

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**AB:** And for my last poem I'm going to read a poem called Patterns, if I can find it which I'm sure I will eventually, which is a break up poem, lol.

### Patterns

I.

every morning and without screaming, in yellow habit  
birds wit and champion the Guiltless Waking, threaded on temperate radar  
and the drear wing of summer rain - do you remember the dream? of going  
back to blue eyes... beautiful, he's the best fuck in the business.

this is why i'm not allowed nice things -  
and more's the pity that the body of a boy like a country will not commit  
to memory further than the smell of city, a soft grey t-shirt and well-formed  
mouth -  
of course, these were the always,

the parts that killed and touched you most.

II.

buy the milk. make the bed. knowing where to find and how best  
hurt each other - it's what grown-ups do -

it's how your parents met. forget  
the cemetery, and all the red beatitude of sun cracking the ice in his heart

as if on floating pains of lead - it was joy, but never unalloyed - sending nudes  
in tiny games and variations

of bloody murder. just the same  
these feelings feed on death in as much as death means

the re-ordering of personality, the correction  
of what seemed defective anyway -

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**AB:** Thank you.

**DT:** Thank you Amy. It's always a really good sign when I wish I hadn't set an arbitrary time for these short podcasts of around a half hour because we've come to the end of our time. But it's been really nice, I'm sure we'll have the chance to talk again on perhaps a more specific subject. I'd like that very much.

**AB:** I'd like that.

**DT:** Finally where can people check out your work? Blogs or...?

**AB:** Yes I have a Twitter [@AKBlakemore](#). And I don't really have a website at the moment I'm afraid. But I tend to post when stuff goes up online on my Twitter, so that's probably a good place to start. My book is available from the website of my publisher Eyewear, and also on Amazon but don't buy it there, and in the London Review of Books bookshop in central London and Foyles and large Waterstones. There you go. Please do buy it I'm very poor.

**DT:** Yeah buy some poetry for Christ sake instead of downloading it, listen to it for free from me! Crikey. No no don't listen to it! This is just an introduction to buying books. Also you've had some work on [Tom Bland's Blue of Noon](#)?

**AB:** Blog?

**DT:** Yeah.

**AB:** I believe so.

**DT:** Yes. So have I, a few of my guests recently have. Check out on Tom Bland.

**AB:** Yeah Tom Bland.

**DT:** I don't like to promote Tom Bland too much.

**AB:** He doesn't need it.

**DT:** He doesn't. He's very good at self promotion. But check out Blue of Noon because there's some interesting stuff on there and all the links to all these blogs and that will be in the description of this video. Thank you, Amy, so much.

**AB:** Thank you very much.

**DT:** Goodbye from south east London.

**AB:** Good bye.

**End of transcript.**