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### [Episode 122 – Steven J Fowler](#)

Transcript by Christabel Smith

Guest: Steven J Fowler — **SJF**

Host: David Turner — **DT**

#### **Intro:**

**DT:** Hello, welcome to Episode 122 of Lunar Poetry Podcasts. I'm David Turner. All right? It's been three months since I last released an episode and you might imagine there would be some news or updates for me to give, but no. Nothing has really been happening. I'm still in the process of finishing what will be my first full-length book of poems. The word 'poems' there has enormous air quotes around it as they're just getting weirder every time I work on them. It will be out through

Hesterglock Press in 2020. If you're listening, Paul, my editor at Hesterglock, the manuscript will be with you soon, I promise.

What else? I'm learning to play the piano, so lots of practising scales and trying to teach myself how to play Moondog's 'Elf Dance'. I've been making a prototype of a chair this week, so I'm fighting the urge to tell you how annoying that has been and I've been dreaming about how to make the underframe. The life of a joiner, eh? Oh yeah, I or we or Lunar Poetry Podcasts no longer uses Instagram as it bores me, so in terms of social media, you can find us at Lunar Poetry Podcasts on Facebook and @Silent\_Tongue on Twitter. You can of course find lots more information over at [lunarpoetrypodcasts.com](http://lunarpoetrypodcasts.com), where you will also find a full transcript of today's episode.

This week's guest is Steven J Fowler. Steven is a multidisciplinary artist that works in the muddied waters between poetry, theatre, film-making, visual arts and performance. He's also the curator of hundreds of live literature events around the UK and Europe. Steven appeared in episode 33 of our companion podcast series, A Poem A Week, hosted by my wife Lizzy. In that, Steven reads his poem 'Old Time Wrestles New Time', which doesn't feature in today's episode and you should definitely check out that recording and the other 70 poets that are on Lizzy's series. Links in the episode description line.

Steven and I met up at his studio round the back of St Pancras station in a very busy part of London, so apologies in advance about the traffic. I don't think the noises are that intrusive. Also, it gives you an insight to the soundtrack of Steven's creative process. Imagine him sat at a paint-spattered table as the black cabs pass slowly below. We discuss whether work is ever really finished, or is it just published, so beyond our grasp. Whether or not there is any benefit to just being ignored as a writer and being content with the way you work, regardless of the advice of others.

We also get round to briefly discussing the [Nordic Poetry Festival](#) that Steven is organising this year in the UK and will take place 11-17 October at various venues. It's going to be fantastic and I'm lucky enough to be reading in collaboration with Bård Torgersen at Rich Mix East London, 12 October. Maybe I'll see you there. If you enjoy this episode or any other, please do help us out by telling friends, family members, work colleagues and squidgy cats.

Word of mouth is the best form of advertising for podcasts, especially this one, and this is not for my benefit, but for the wonderful guests I've had on the series. They deserve to be heard by as many people as possible, right? I'll be back at the end of the episode with an outro and obviously all the way through, but for the moment, here's Steven J Fowler.

## Conversation:

### Stalker

*Release: May 25, 1979*

*Director: Andrei Tarkovsky*

Unnerving areas of Europe into the possession of mother Russia,  
smuggling arguments better in than out.

You are in the future with Porcupine and the Monkey.

Those animals, they were men.

They were novel time, the Strugatsky brothers,  
who predicted this age of moaning conquered by quiet.

At the end of the graphs with their constant upward line,  
Vast shrunken numbers of human heads, ea bobbing,  
with each enough breath for sentiments.

With each not quite enough to hear the other.

A trickle from the Stalker's ears brings attention to the plug  
that blocks out the sounds you're making  
until you're living the first day of your life offline, in the zone.

©SJ Fowler, *I Stand Alone By The Devils, And Other Poems On Film*, Broken Sleep Books, 2019

**DT:** Thank you very much, Steven. Welcome to Lunar Poetry Podcasts. Thank you for joining me and all the listeners, wherever they are, if indeed they are. Starting interviews is always the most difficult bit. Often I don't know people at all and this is the first time I'm meeting them, but I know you a little bit now, and it's always a little bit of a worry, the initial questions that always flash through my head first seem a bit inappropriate for people you don't know.

**SJF:** Please ask me inappropriate questions.

**DT:** Not even inappropriate. I know you well enough to feel you are resilient to any of these questions anyway. My question, I wanted it to be: Why all the nonsense?

**SJF:** That's a good question. Yeah, I mean I can't help but feel that that question is not really about poetry, it's about something wider.

**DT:** Possibly, but I felt it was a good inroad into the wider aspects of your work.

**SJF:** That's true, yeah. I suppose my instinct that might answer the actual question that you've posed would be to ask why *you* would ask that question, not to say that I can psychologically analyse why you did it, because I know you a little bit

too, would imagine it comes from your own sense of intrigue, your own engagement with a notion of a non-sense. But also, any time anyone has ever asked me a question, unfortunately, because I am painfully sober and hyperaware, I tend to think first, why are they asking *me* about the nonsense when they're the ones bringing the nonsense to the table?

Maybe that is the answer to your question, but I think to compress nearly a decade of careful and unfortunate consideration around my work into the answer of a genuinely important and good question that you've just posed me, I think that the brain, where my existence resides, is full of nonsense and that the notion I can control the universe's experience, which is endlessly difficult and confusing, into a kind of sense beyond just the limits of communicating, would be arrogant and maybe stupid, which I am both at times, but try not to be.

And given that I consider poetry to be the language art and we communicate in language, I try to use poetry for something other than communication and it seems like it's probably more useful than to utilise it for things that are not the sense of talking.

**DT:** It's interesting, I think out of the hundreds of people we've had on the podcast now, I would say that by far the majority view is that poetry is an act of communication and it's really interesting to talk to someone that believes the opposite.

**SJF:** I suppose for me, it would depend what we mean by both the word poetry and the word communication, right? It does communicate something, but so does me falling over. All things communicate something. I think this is about the notion of intention for me. All I'm, I suppose, trying to say is if the meaning of a poem can be done in a conversation, it's a failure and most poems are a bit like that, no? Most poems are communicating something similar to a conversation and that to me is valid, if done with great skill or in a certain tradition, I find it fascinating and interesting. Just personally, as a person who makes things, I don't find that very interesting.

**DT:** I feel these kind of qualifications that I always give are a bit redundant now, but just so we feel a bit more relaxed in the conversation, neither of us are projecting our own thoughts onto what other writers should do. I'd like for everyone, I say 'everyone', I'm including the listeners here, to feel like they can talk about their own work without having to- but I don't mean other people should follow these routes, blah blah blah... Because I often find myself talking about my own work and excusing myself in some way. Other people don't have to follow the way I think. Do you feel that's an issue in general around the way poets interact?

**SJF:** I think that's an issue around all human beings and culture in general. For example, a lot of the time when people tell me: 'God, isn't poetry quite competitive or tribal?', I always say: 'Compared to what?' I've never done a job where people

didn't talk shop. I've never done a job where people didn't slight others who do it because they do it slightly different from them. I take it as a human condition.

I don't think the things I think about do put other people down, for a variety of reasons, the main reason being I think my ideas or interests seem to operate on a slightly different, lower level than other people, actually, not higher level. So I think people have a very refined engagement with the idea of literary criticism and how poetry works, whereas I've tried to be a bit less theoretical and more instinctual, so I'm interested in, for example, the idea of authenticity, which is a silly and ambiguous idea, but it's instinctual, so if I see someone who's doing, say, a spoken-word poem, a lot of people have associated me as being against spoken word because there are certain elements around this methodology which are so far away from what I do that they assume so, where actually if someone is authentic in what they're doing, I don't really care if they're doing in spoken word, ballet, cooking, flying a kite.

That's attractive. It's beautiful and it's exciting and it generates things for me to do, but if someone is working in a tradition and it isn't authentic, and I'm just using authentic as one of many criteria, then I just move on immediately to the things that do excite me. I don't spend any time being negative or critical. That is why sometimes, I think, people take certain things I say as critical against other practices because we're working in different conditions.

Also, I do say that a lot, exactly as you described, when I say something positive, I'm not trying to put other people down, it's because I want to be polite. I really, really believe in that. For example, I've always refused criticism. I've never written an article of criticism for money because if I take money and do a job of work and I don't like something, I have to lay into it and I have to do that by mentioning someone's name. Life is short. I have no interest in that at all.

**DT:** I got into making the podcast because I started writing reviews of live events for what was then Lunar Poetry Magazine. I had to stop because I felt if I'm going to be really honest, and it wasn't like I hated everything I saw, but it was like if I'm going to be honest about things, it's going to be too blunt and I didn't see the point in doing that. What I really wanted to do was have a conversation about people and their work instead and meet them face to face and actually talk over ideas.

**SJF:** I think it's a failure in me that I won't do it because I see that negative criticism should be out there, especially at the moment. People need to take responsibility for the space of how things are made, certain trains of thought and critical spaces, so I'm not advocating this as a position. It's actually a very personal thing and it's an enormous failure. I'm a coward because the previous jobs I had before were so combative and so volatile and were constantly engaged in conflict, and I enjoyed them, I'm a conflict-orientated person, whether it's because of something that happened to me or whatever, that's the case.

So I don't want any conflict now. That's my choice. Poetry for me, literature in general, making art and stuff, is a life of putting ideas out that will conflict with other people's ideas. But it's not personal to me, I don't care. So I do think people should be highly critical. I like it when people are critical of my work. I love it, in fact, because I don't really mind. Actually, I take that as a huge compliment, but I don't think my work has become widely understood enough that people can be critical of it. I think they just think 'I don't get it' and then they leave it. That suits me also super fine, because I don't really care.

**DT:** That brings me to two points, actually. If we go back to the point you made about believing your work sort of occupies almost a slightly lower position than more refined taste, one of the reasons I mentioned the word 'nonsense' is because I wanted to get talking about the idea of playing. You mentioned how serious people are about the way they view their work and how it becomes more and more refined, there seems within that process there is less space to play and it seems really important in your work, especially your latest book with Hesterglock Press, 'Unfinished Memmoirs of a Hypocrit'[sic], maybe just talk a bit about how freeing yourself up to work is a starting point.

**SJF:** Yeah, it's something I've thought about so much. Thank you for the generous question. It comes from hopefully not waffling, but from how I got into poetry. I discovered it later than a lot of my peers, in my mid-20s, about 10 years ago, and I discovered everything at the same time. So I did spend a lot of time engaged with the theorising around it and trying to read back, but I was discovering all kinds of poetry immediately. There is a massive absence of, shall we say, certain bands of aesthetics in poetry, for example, genuinely funny poetry is almost impossible.

Comic poetry isn't funny. It's funny in a really unfunny way. Negative aesthetics don't exist in poetry. What's the equivalent of a horror film for poetry? Have you ever got to a poem that's deliberately trying to make you feel upset? Not to inculcate the emotion of sorrow, but make you feel bad, as a pleasure. You never get it. It doesn't make any sense because poetry is just a means, it's a refraction of language, it's a mulching through, just like shooting with a camera or making a sculpture.

I was always intrigued by that. I really think a lot of that is the constipation of theory. There is so much theoretical underpinning that goes around poetry and that's important in many ways, but what I found is it creates a culture of people who are afraid to do certain things. They are afraid to look silly or be silly or play or make mistakes or be rough or messy. My work is engaged fundamentally in ideas that I hope are really complex, but I hope they're complex in a way that everyone can understand because existence is complex for every reflexive mammal.

Every human being, every single animal, lives a complex existence and we can do that without alienating people theoretically. So I think that's how I started to find a road into it. A lot of the things people have done to give their work kind of intelligence stilts, to put it up in the air, had actually put it into a place that most

people couldn't reach. The problem is then people conflate that with accessibility or conflate it with the ivory-tower argument or class and that really frustrates me. It's actually only being a teacher in creative writing and teaching in different institutions where I've realised and formulated an antidote to that, I think.

Trying to teach students who are often from a working-class background why sound poetry or concrete poetry or avant-garde poetry is good, requires you to create arguments of purpose for your own work. So that's given me a great gift, teaching other people why I think the things I do are important, although not ever teaching my own work, of course, because I'm not a dweeb.

**DT:** It resonates that you talk about class and such. When I first got back into writing in my early 30s, having spent 10 to 12 years working with performance and visual artists as a technician but also a producer, I found that suddenly all these barriers I'd broken down as someone from a working-class background and no formal academic qualifications in any subject, as regular listeners will know, I served a joinery apprenticeship, then ended up getting back into the arts that way, it took me a long time within these art settings to shake off a lot of this class bullshit I carry around with me.

It's very real bullshit, but it's bullshit nonetheless. I shook it off and I got to work with some really amazing performance artists and we did some really wild stuff and you realise that those things are for you if you want to go out and take them. But as soon as I started writing again, I felt pressure and I could feel myself moving towards more, like we were saying, more refined types of writing, perhaps subconsciously trying to prove myself in some way. It took a couple of years to think well no, I can play with this writing as much as I did with visual stuff and more physical stuff.

Now, a lot of my focus with the podcast is trying to show people from similar backgrounds as myself that these other, weirder types of poetry, or more odd types of poetry, are equally accessible to anyone. It's just, it seems to be, for a long time, that section of writing has been owned and controlled by people who have been deliberately putting up barriers. You've been around the literary scene longer than I have and you are a bit more knowledgeable of the history of it. I'd be interested to know, if I said to you I felt like there were barriers, class barriers, towards more avant-garde and experimental writing in this country, would you argue that I'm wrong in that?

**SJF:** Yeah, well you know we both share a background that's atypical for people involved, especially in more experimental poetry, but I think fundamentally this is about the level of analysis. What you're saying is practically true, but I don't really think about it. I create things that do the opposite, rather than lamenting situations I've been in where I know people deliberately misunderstand me to further their own agenda, which probably comes from certain class experiences that they've had, so I prefer to talk about life experience or work.

I've definitely been in environments when I've been alienated and ostracised because my concerns and interests, shall we say physical violence, people seem disgusted by the idea it exists. You know, they're more offended by the idea that I might bring up physical fights than the actual fact they are happening down the road from where those people live, just they never see them because they live a different kind of life. Sometimes I've felt people are against me mentioning them because they think the mention of them is an advocacy for them, which is insane, because I've witnessed and been around more violence and seen its terrible consequences.

Or like the constant presence of prisons in my work, things like that. I understand that's probably to do with what you're saying, to do with class and class concerns, but I don't care about that. It don't bother me none. I've had no one against me, no one *really* trying to ostracise me, I've been embraced by 90% of the people I've met and the other 10% have just ignored me, which I take to be quite a nice way to respond to someone you don't like, or whose work you don't like.

Yeah, so it's probably true, but actually, I'm really, really, really engaged with the notion of finding every single person I can who's got an open spirit and soul and creates authentic, interesting work and trying to offer them opportunities and spaces to share what I've found and been part of. Some of those people are from really, really privileged backgrounds and some are from really working-class backgrounds. So yeah, I definitely think you're right and if I was into that kind of discussion, I'd go super deep on that, but I'm not. I'm really not. I refuse all those things. I'm not saying you were saying that, it's definitely been an experience of mine, but it doesn't really matter.

**DT:** Your experience probably echoes with mine as well, but I wonder whether a lot of that is to do with luck. When I first started to really seek out more experimental stuff, Lizzy and I had just moved to Bristol, so I found Anathema and Paul Hawkins in Bristol. Before that, I'd been to a reading and met Isabel Waidner and then came across your work. All of these people couldn't be more welcoming. I'm still examining why I felt like there were barriers because just about all my experiences have proven the concerns weren't as large as they had been in my head.

**SJF:** I think you're right though and you've mentioned two amazing human beings and brilliant writers, Paul Hawkins and Isabel Waidner, both people who are very much concerned with what you're saying and I've learnt a lot from speaking to both of them about their experiences. I suppose, without sounding a bit stupid again, I assume there's always going to be barriers. Like I assume I'm going to have a barrier because there are barriers between humans all the time.

I've never been in any situation, ever, where there hasn't been a barrier if I wanted to find one and at the end of the day, I suppose again, not really about poetry but about life in general, I just want to make things, I just want to do things, because I suppose my first couple of years in poetry were surrounded by people who were massively theoretical, I mean as theoretical as you can get and I found that

fascinating and I learnt a lot. I realised also that it led to a lot of bitterness for some of them and also others never really did anything.

So I suppose my whole events curatorial practice was based around the idea that I was like, oh I see there is an absence of something, how about I do it and then here we go? Then you find out there is some other problem. That's with those people. No disrespect to them, but it's just a way of being in the world and I'm so lucky. My body is healthy, my mind is clear, I'm surrounded by genuine warmth and positivity and I have lots of opportunities. I'm not trying to sound super-positive, I'm not all that positive as a person, but that is a fact. I've got no complaints at all about class boundaries and things like that.

**DT:** You mentioned a couple of times your curatorial practice, we'll come onto that in a minute, because that's vast enough on its own. You've mentioned a couple of times now about people not liking your work and then ignoring you and you actually not minding that. I wanted to ask what are the benefits of being ignored as a writer?

**SJF:** Yes, again, without being too overly analytical, one has to think through what it means to be ignored. Is there some world out there where people aren't being ignored? Everyone, to a certain extent, is being ignored. There are people, I think you've had Raymond Antrobus on your podcast, who's just had an incredible success with *Penned in the Margins*, who published one of my books, back in the day. That is just joy for everyone. A good human being, writing good work. The rising tides lift all people.

So there are examples, like with Raymond, whereby mad success can then be compared to yourself and you're like wow, I'm being ignored. But how many Raymond Antrobus success stories are there? There's like a couple a year. A big thing for me that I learnt this from is prize culture, literary prize culture. I never thought I would ever be up for a prize really, because my work's too strange, so I began from a perspective of well, I will be the first ever who will be successful with prizes writing weird work.

Then I noticed a lot of my peers, who'd maybe started earlier, had different opinions, it would hurt their feelings. Every year they would feel snubbed. I would say: 'There's only one person who gets it. Only one.' Of all the things that could happen, this should not affect you. I mean, I've definitely witnessed it, seen people release less books, do less things, move in a certain way. I understand that, I do understand it. But it's those kind of things that then make me understand a clearer view of what is being ignored and what's not being ignored.

I suppose, if we were being colloquial and generalised, you could say that my work has never really gone into a middle space, a Guardian review page type press. That's my fault. I've published too much, my work is too weird, I probably don't edit my work well enough, blah blah. I probably do too many things at once. I've just come to accept that is an authentic expression and my way of making work. At the same

time, I've made a living from it, I've travelled round the world, I've worked with incredible people, I've gotten on with 90% of the people I've met and I've met a lot of people through it. I have also completely not been ignored, not at all.

What I'm trying to say is, the first thing first about being ignored, not being ignored, it's an ego thing, it's a subjective thing. If you feel bad one day because you got rejected from a thing, you feel like you're not appreciated, again that's a human condition, it can be mastered. So I don't feel that very much, but what I do think is that if you lie in a fallow space, a middle space, where people don't quite know what you're doing, they're not quite sure what you mean, you have the opportunity to constantly reinvent the joy of making things, writing things.

I get enough attention that I'm constantly busy and engaged, doing lovely things like this, thanks again for asking me by the way, but then also, I'm not under brutal scrutiny or the pressure to sell books. Last year alone, I was making a film, I made a feature-length film with my friend Joshua Alexander called 'The Animal Drums'. We've got Iain Sinclair in it. Iain Sinclair is obviously this legend, he kind of invented this geographical writing. Brilliant poet. One of the most important poets of the British poetry revival, he has been incredibly generous to me. An incredibly supportive presence.

We were talking, just offhandedly, before we started filming and he said to me: 'You should always take note of how lucky you are that you can write whatever you like. You're free. You don't have a press telling you "that's too strange, that's too weird".' My editors support my gestures, they help me edit but they give me freedom. So the joy of not being super-commercially successful is that I'm creatively free. That is, if you can appreciate it, an incredible gift.

**DT:** Your point about prize culture, it's very understandable why people would get jealous or bitter for not winning these things. You can see easily why a new writer looking forward might aspire to that as a marker of success, which is a shame because it can only let you down. Like you said, there's only going to be one winner of each prize and who knows how these things are being judged?

Of course then, if you do have that kind of success, what pressure does that then put on you to produce a similar type of work? Does it push you down one avenue? I was hoping for that question to lead in this direction, to talk about freedom within your writing. Again, going back to the opening question about nonsense and leading onto play, and this idea of freedom, you feel like one of the freest writers I know. I think the reason I feel that is because you don't feel tied to writing and so many people are bound not only to writing, but to poetry, which seems like a terrible curse on someone. I know some people are genuinely that focused and that directed, but it seems a very narrow space to live in.

**SJF:** I don't want to get pretentious or too deep, but I understand that if someone is engaged say in the profession of writing – with fiction it makes a lot more sense than poetry – but some of the guidelines would be 'if I get a prize, then I get a better

publisher, sell more books, then I'll be able to write more books, then I won't have to work in a shop'. I think not only does that make sense, because it's brilliant, it's kind of truthful, but again, I know it sounds silly, genuinely, my work is about me finding a path towards contentedness and gentility and decency to other people.

It's not the main reason, it's just a wee part of it. What I eat and how I exercise and how I sleep and the people I spend my time with, these are all nodes in a genuine daily commitment to have a better existence, just because I want to be happy before I die, because I'm going to die really soon, relatively. So if I then only wrote in Times New Roman 12-point font and indented, even though I had the desire to handwrite a book, say, that would be really weird because there's no comeback on that. There's only so much you can get.

To get back to your point, I've known people who've been mad successful, hugely commercially successful, I had the privilege of collaborating with some people who are hugely successful and happiness is relative. I think a lot about the concept of tolerance. I'm writing a book at the moment about prescription drugs and a brain and thinking a lot about the word tolerance. You tolerate joy and it wears off. Your success goes. Everything goes. You get used to everything.

So to a certain extent with me, I just try to keep my guideline as these deeper ideas. Intuition and instinct and exploration and innovation, these silly words that sound like a car advert, they are actually the driving force behind why we start doing all of this. How do we keep that light alive? If that's who we are, if that's what our authentic expression of things is. It is mine, because I'm brutally impatient and I want to discover new things and meet new people and live a good life through this work.

Well, that's going to lead me to do a lot of different kinds of work, as you say, not limit myself and not worry if someone does say in my ear, which they have done pretty consistently: 'Don't publish more than a book a year or you can never be with...meh' Or: 'Don't organise events as well as publish because people will think you're just trying to promote your own... Don't...'

Yeah, all right, I hear what you're saying. You're scared and that's fine. I'm just going to do what I'm going to do. People will either be with it or they won't be with it. I hope they're with it. If someone has a dog, I'd rather have them as a friend than an enemy.

**DT:** That's the perfect time to go into a second reading.

**SJF:** I might read something from my brand-new book that I'm writing at the moment, which is due to come out in 2020, with Dostoevsky Wannabe Press, who publish Isabel Waidner and a lot of amazing people.

**DT:** A fantastic publisher.

**SJF:** Just a brilliant publisher, based in Manchester. They're publishing a book of mine called 'I Will Show You The Life Of The Mind On Prescription Drugs'. That book is a result of a residency I did at the Wellcome Trust and a lot of explorations in a field that I've kind of called the name 'neuropoetics'. So it's like neuroaesthetics, but it's about how language functions in the brain and how we might utilise language arts as a way of exploring brain function.

**We are unable to reproduce this reading at this time. Apologies.**

**DT:** Thank you very much.

**SJF:** Pleasure.

**DT:** Because you've read new work there and you're talking about a book you're working on, which seems like a state you're constantly in anyway, I could probably ask you any day, but what are your feelings around the idea of finishing something?

**SJF:** That's something I've thought about a lot. Thank you again for asking a question that's on my mind often. I think because I like this notion of constant work, like I enjoy the idea of being prolific because it's just the way my brain functions, it's the way that I'm motivated, I have maybe a different relationship to the notion of the finished poem or the finished fiction or the finished anything.

I like it when context decides the content. I like it when the deadline is the time it's finished. I like it when the editor decides. I've had lots of experience with presses and they have been almost 100% positive. I've had great relationships with people I've worked with at presses, even though I've worked with lots of different ones. When an editor comes in and rips things to shreds, they think I'm going to be upset about it, but I love it. I love it.

I mean, I can choose whether to accept or reject, but a lot of the time, I accept because that means it's finished. They've come in and engaged with it in a way that makes it something else.

**DT:** That's a very good way of looking at it.

**SJF:** So for me, the notion of the finished work is maybe slightly different than a lot of people, so I know that a huge part of their poetry is this dichotomy, this split, and again I speak to my students a lot about this, between the draft and the final version and it's something that people tinker with, the capitalisation of certain words and the play of things.

I just had a collaborative poem with Max Porter, who's an amazing writer, taken for Poetry magazine in America. Their editing is incredibly finite, almost to the point where I was laughing really loud, because every single time you sent something back

with their corrections, they said: 'what about this comma? Can we spell it the American way for "labour", without the u?' I was just like 'whatever you like, whatever suits you.'

I don't care. I know it does matter a lot to other poets. I know why it does, but it doesn't matter to me. American or English spelling of labour? I don't care! Why do I care? I mean, that's not why I wrote it and I'm not fussed about that at all, so maybe I have a more transitional view of what finished is than other people. The finished bit is the one in the latest book. It's on the page, I'm not working on it anymore, it's obviously done. What about you, what do you think?

**DT:** It's interesting. I find my writing is a place that exists further from higher standards, so as a furniture maker, I have a very defined idea of what finished means, because finished means a point at which someone is going to enjoy what I've made and they have to live with it. It has to be durable, look right, there are a number of fluctuating criteria, but they are all very high standards, each of these criteria.

People are paying a lot of money for the furniture we make. I've been doing this for 20 years now, I like to think I'm good at it and what I make I'm hoping people can pass down through generations, etc. I don't want that to exist in any other part of my life. Those standards are really exhausting, very tiring and I like that my writing is an escape from that.

I share your view, well, you didn't quite mention it, but I think we're probably going down the same path here, but once something's on a page, I'm free of it and I don't have to go back to it. I find the overwhelming relief that it's gone and done far outweighs if I ever find a mistake in something. If I ever do read over something and think 'Shit, that wasn't right' or 'I should have changed that', the relief that it's gone and out of my mind outweighs any worry I would have about regretting anything that I chose to do.

**SJF:** One of the weirdest things I've found is some of the books I've edited least, I think my favourite book I've ever written is called 'Minimum Security Prison Dentistry', it was published by Anything Anymore Anywhere Press. He asked me do I have a book, it's 2011 and I'd just finished my first year in poetry and I published two other full-length books that year, which ruined me forever, basically, because you shouldn't ever do that. Your debut book should be important.

I was oh yeah whatever, I've got this different stuff and mashed it together and sent it to him. 'I love it, I love it.' Any mistakes of it, the aberrations, it's the best thing I've done and that was a huge lesson to me because the other book I did that year with Knives Forks And Spoons, 'Red Museum', that's one of only two books I've done where I might do another version one day. Or I'll go in and mash it up. I think that's a big thing to me.

I don't have set rules or patterns for things, it's an adaptable process. You finish certain books and whatever the mysterious process is that took you to making them, especially a poetry book or collection, because they're really weirdly constructed when you think about them, the order. People never talk about that. 'I spent weeks on order, that follows that' and what, four people read the book and they don't even read it cover to cover? They pick it up at page 67 and go 'that's good'.

I was like 'yeah, but that follows the poem about the egg and that's the bacon poem', you know what I mean? There's this stupid process that's mystical and strange. I've just learnt to embrace that and as you say, when your book comes out, you've got it on the page, you open it, you don't know how you're going to feel and that changes mood to mood, day to day, year to year. I just reserve the right that I can go back in and meddle with things if I want, but most of the time I don't because I've got a new idea.

**DT:** These things are at the forefront of my mind at the moment because I'm getting to the point where I've finished my first book, which will come out with Hesterglock.

**SJF:** Congratulations and a great press.

**DT:** A really good press. I'm asking myself exactly the same questions. Do I spend endless amounts of evenings after work ordering these poems or do I think well, people probably aren't going to notice? I suppose the question is you've got to do whatever makes you happy in the moment.

**SJF:** Exactly.

**DT:** What I would like to try and achieve is some way of, what I like about shorter projects and pamphlets, I've done a couple with other people, is that they feel like they exist more in the moment, because you can finish them faster and you can get them out more readily. They come out fairly quickly after they've been written, whereas what's coming out for me with Hesterglock has taken a much longer time to write and it spans a longer amount of time. It feels a bit like things are being shoehorned together a little bit. I think that's what those types of books are, often.

**SJF:** I've changed so much about that, but I do think about it a lot. I mean, it's a good time to have good friends. I'm always pitching off stuff to people, especially people who aren't involved in poetry at all, or even literature, and just say 'what do you think of this?' If you get really negative stuff back, you know you're on the right track. I think also this can be expanded metaphorically about the notion of publishing a book in general.

The amount of people I've known also that have said, not to say that all my friends are negative, like I said with the prizes, but who are disappointed by the reception of their book and why maybe it's good to have pamphlets before that. I had that. I had a crisis with a book and what it was and what the point was. I had a really profound

experience with a poet called Anselm Hollo who was like the anti-laureate of America and lived the most amazing life.

He left Finland just after the Second World War to live in Germany, then lived here in the 60s and 70s, then moved to America and I put on the last-ever reading he gave before he died and I read every single one of his published books after he'd died. I felt myself powerfully in them, where he was, what he did. I realised then that his authentic expression of publishing a massive bibliography was, even if it was just me reading it, a profound and powerful physical, ambiguous expression and legacy.

Then I realised 'wait a minute, I want that.' Tomaž Šalamun, another person, has 45 books he published in his life and has his library in Ljubljana. I've been there and looked through his books and spent days reading them. You can read a person's life through their work that way. Then I suddenly realised, lightbulb, it's all right to publish two books a year if you want, every year. I mean yeah, 1000 people won't read them, who cares? You can't be there when they read them anyway.

It's something I say to my students a lot. You're in a job whereby the best moments your work will create for other people, you won't witness them. There'll just be some professional critic in The Guardian with an ideological purpose, writing reviews whether they like you or don't like you as a person or have heard about you and met you, but the actual people who read you, you never know. So do it out of motivation. So yeah, I think about those questions a lot.

**DT:** Since you mentioned putting on Anselm's final reading in this country, this is probably a good opportunity to start talking about your curatorial work and events you put on. Could you give a quick, very brief breakdown of what types of events you run and how they run? I've got a couple of questions to follow on from that.

**SJF:** Sure, no worries. So I basically started about 10 years ago a project called Enemies that was all about collaboration, essentially, but it was also a way to kind of Trojan-horse experimentation into live readings because I found the traditional, salon-orientated reading to be pretty unsatisfying and uninterrogated and I think 90% of people agree and are thinking of their shopping lists. We all know this kind of stuff, I don't need to go on about that.

So really it was about internationalism and collaboration, trying to get people from different countries to come to England, work with British poets, and then that grew and I started doing tours and going to other countries to do collaborations. That was an amazing way to navigate the universe and work with other people. Then I started a project called Poem Brut, maybe two or three years ago, which is about material and a lot of things we've already talked about, context and content, experimentation, mess, things being hand-made, things being physical.

One of the constituent elements of any reading or performance is proximity, physical space, three dimensions. That's what Poem Brut is about, as well as about cognitive differences. Enemies evolved into the European Poetry Festival, which was a

concentration of that collaborative European energy in London. I've done lots of commission events, loads of events where people have asked me to come in to start a series or start themed live-literature things, so yeah, it's been a massive, expansive part of my practice really.

**DT:** What I found interesting about all of these different events you've put on and this is quite a selfish view because I run the podcast, blah blah blah. It's interesting the amount of documentation that goes into it. These are successful and very well-attended live events, but there also seems a real emphasis on filming stuff, recording stuff, getting stuff locked down and preserved in some sort of way. As preserved as digital media can be. We won't get into the nature of all that stuff. I just wanted to ask how important legacy is in your work and if it's different for the curatorial side of your practice and your own writing?

**SJF:** For my own writing, I still think I'm too early into it to understand ideas like that. Maybe I slightly mentioned that with the Anselm Hollo anecdote and why I publish a lot of books. I don't envision a moment when my work will be useful or important to people in the future. I'm pretty sure it resolutely will stay about where it is now. I really try not to care either way.

With the events, actually I document for two reasons. One is because I really, theoretically, want to embrace their transitory nature. I think as you say, by acknowledging the limitations of the documentation, they are fundamentally simulacrous shadows of the live thing. It's more of a way of giving the poets and artists who are engaged with it a note of respect, like here's a thing that has recorded what you've done and you can use it to navigate the modern world of being a poet or an artist.

Also, a kind of engagement with professionalism, but really, the most important thing is because I resist all critical theorisation around my events, like I've turned down conferences on my events, I've turned down reviews, articles. If you scour the internet, the 600-700 events I've done, you won't find many reports because when people ask me, I say no thanks. They're not Utopian. I'm against Utopian ideas, they lead to disappointment.

It's a transitory thing, it's in time. We get together, we have a nice evening, we do some interesting things, we support each other, we do challenging work and then it's Tuesday. I don't care. The videos are precisely there, frozen in time because there is no theoretical underpinning to the events in anything but a more colloquial, professional way.

Also, when I started, I had a couple of experiences with people who told me, for example when I discovered the work of Tom Raworth, who's very important to me, I scoured the internet for videos, for recordings. I didn't find that many, then I'd meet people who knew him very well before he passed away and they'd be like 'yeah, I have got a box of recordings.' Then you'd go and it's disintegrated. So recently, my YouTube archive, which is about 2000 videos, the National Poetry Library are going

to put it in their collection and have it there for the future. That's lovely, that is a legacy. I don't care though. It's just the way it is, I don't think it's that big a deal.

**DT:** Legacy is a bit of a weighted word, I don't really mean that, I'm just really struggling for an alternative. It resides in my mind though, I couldn't really care less where my work sits, but the work I do with the podcast, I'm very, very engaged with preserving it. Perhaps preservation is a better word than legacy, preserving some sort of document of what you've done, primarily the voices of the people who've been involved in the events, rather than yourself, which is what I'm trying to do with the podcast.

**SJF:** I think that's great. When I followed your podcast and congratulations on what you've done with the podcast and the longevity of it, because that's a huge constituent factor. People start them, do 30, then they're like 'I'm not getting any feedback. I'm not getting vibe, I'm going to leave it.' In way that's what I mean by saying I'll take the You Tube videos and I think oh, maybe David will take this as an act of respect, I recorded his work and put it online in a resource he can access and makes him feel good about doing my event or engaging.

That's where I stop thinking because it allows me to keep doing it every time as a practice, whereas if I was thinking I'm going to record the finest voices of my generation and put them on a You Tube channel, I would perhaps be oh, I haven't moved the needle in terms of contemporary literature, why are they not speaking about me on the Bookseller 10 years later? I don't care about that. That's a big part of it, I want my events to be...

There's an ambulance, a London ambulance. Yeah, I want my events to be transitory and engage in that, but I like being seen as a professional as well as an artist, someone who works on what they do and develops it, as I think you do too.

**DT:** I've spent a lot of time trying to shake it off, but I've had to embrace it. I think it's an unnecessary yoke I carry with me, feeling like I need to prove to everyone that I'm working hard and visibly work hard because you can't, unless you're going to sit in a shop window at your desk and write with everyone watching you, people won't...

This is what I find strange about creative pursuits, it's very seldom you're seen to be working. I was very guilty when I first started the podcasts, that I was trying to visibly put out a lot of stuff. Not really for my own promotion, I really wanted to promote other people's work, but I felt like it became exhausting because it was slightly for the wrong reasons. Once I addressed that and rebalanced it, I had a much healthier relationship to the whole thing.

Similarly to what you're saying, I had to set a few ground rules which allowed me to say that's out now, it's gone and done and I can't sit around to see whether I'm increasing the listener figures for this episode and whether I'm making inroads into possibly selling advertising. Once I let go of all of that...

Going back to your earlier point, I wanted to do this to be content. I don't want to do it to be unhappy because I'm striving for things that are unattainable. I want to have the conversation and make it as accessible as possible, with points people can interact with.

**SJF:** I think about this a lot, how do we get this balance? Because there is meaning in work. A lot of people aspire to be free of that kind of stuff and that was my goal. I wanted to use this pursuit to not have to work a 9am to 5pm job, because I was doing that for the first seven years of my writing. It was only three or four years ago I stopped doing that kind of work.

Now I teach, which some people see as a real hard grind, but uni teaching, I've had great joy doing it. It's a great privilege for me to do it. I think about that a lot too. This constant pressure, is that why I do so much? I think about that in my head all the time. Is it that I feel guilty that I get to write a lot? Actually, no, it's not the reason, but I have spent a lot of time thinking about it because there is clearly value and meaning in working hard and having that mentality of grinding.

I love that kind of feeling when you're making something and you're in it, but I've also had brutal suspicion and maybe one or two fallouts with people who perceive their artistic practice as some sort of grind. I'm like it's not a grind! Oh my God, if you think that you're a miner...

**DT:** I used to work in a bronze foundry, I used to pour bronze. Since then, I haven't moaned about any job. That was grafting. It's not to take away from the amount of effort that people put into things, but people definitely have a skewed idea of what some people have to do for a living and the amount it takes out of them.

**SJF:** Yes indeed.

**DT:** There are some poor fuckers who, like you say, are in the ground for their whole working life.

**SJF:** Exactly. My family's family are paramedics, nurses, soldiers, teachers. I've laboured, I've worked on the doors. Everyone has it hard. I think that includes artists and poets because it's all relative, but my feeling is if you're not suspicious about what you do, unless it's really hard, then you miss a trick in your soul. Because if you're a nurse, working double shifts, you don't have to worry about this question because you are just under unbelievable pressure.

But if you've got that mentality and you're a writer, you're like oh no, I'm melancholy because I sit in all day and I don't do anything and I'm writing another book that no one reads, that's a fair suspicion. There's nothing wrong with that, but saying it out loud? Or living that lifestyle, like you've got it tough? I don't know,

maybe because I've done jobs where I felt I was drowning constantly, it makes me feel a bit queasy, I've got to be honest.

I've got a bit of an ethical problem with that. This is a huge constituent of my work, actually, the notion of perspective. I really think about that a lot. That's why I like my work having this strange feeling of kind of menace and confusion because I want people to at least have a moment where, if they don't understand it, it creates a kind of perspective of what they do understand. Maybe that's a good function of my work, I think about it all the time.

If you read a poem that says 'As I floated down the river, I thought of my love', I'm like I get that, you're remembering someone you loved, how sad. Then you read mine and it's just squiggle, squiggle, squiggle, I don't get it, at least then you're creating a notion of perspective because in my lived life, exactly speaking to what you're describing here, that's so important to me. Perspective. We are going to die. That's the only thing that bonds us together, that's a beautiful thing. People in the majority of all time and place have had it 1000 times worse than I have it. How do I deal with that and still express my concerns? That's a huge thing about what my work is about.

**DT:** Let me know when you get the answer.

**SJF:** Never! Exactly. When I'm in the ground. Sorry.

**DT:** No, it's fascinating. I just worry we could really go down a hole.

**SJF:** Let's do it, David, let's turn it into a metaphysical podcast.

**DT:** We'll have to do a part two of the conversation.

**SJF:** Any time.

**DT:** What I'd like to just talk about briefly at the end here...

**SJF:** Are we at the end? You're breaking my heart.

**DT:** We're not at the end of anything, we are purely at the beginning.

**SJF:** The beginning of the end.

**DT:** Yeah. Talking about the live events, it's vital we talk about how underpinning so much of what you do is collaboration and not only collaborating with other people, but you smashing other artists together, mainly around Europe. I know it does go wider than that, but with the European Poetry Festival, maybe we'll talk briefly about the importance you see in collaboration.

Now we've touched on you admitting you've driven yourself into the ground by working too much and trying to prove yourself, this idea of why you feel collaboration is so important to your work and also to avant-garde writing in general...

**SJF:** I suppose I was always confused that I was the only one who was interested in collaboration, in a medium that is inherently based in solitude. But then it's based in solitude in a way I'm confused by the way people speak about it. The problem of other minds and philosophy or whatever, it's the fundamental problem of all existence. I don't know what other people are thinking.

I don't know you're not a robot right now, David. There's no way to be inside other people's... You're nodding because you are an automaton. This is an issue. That's what communication really is. We all know that most of the time when people are communicating, they're not listening to each other. We all know we read body language, blah blah blah, we've read all these articles about this stuff.

The reality is that we're a pack animal. We have a collective mindset. When we're isolated, we feel bad about being alive. Poetry is an engagement with an internal and personal language experience. That's what it fundamentally is. To me, collaboration is a way of mediating that. It's an addition, it's not to replace. Writing is a lonely task, no matter what your writing is, fundamentally. Like existence is. You're born alone, you die alone, you don't share a mind.

To me, collaboration is a way of literally and clumsily overcoming that. What I've learnt through doing it by accident, in these Camarade pairs, where I pair people off who've never met before and ask them to create a work with no criteria apart from a time limit, what I find is the very nature of collaboration removes a tension from the kind of practice that the poets seem to think their work represents who they are, so they write a very certain kind of way, because that's who they are, that's how they see themselves and when they collaborate, they get up and do wacky stuff.

They will go full weird-po, as I like to say, because they're doing it live, it's almost never in print and that's not an accident even though most people think it is and they're sharing responsibility. They can blame the other person. Maybe this is just a personal opinion or cheeky of me, but a lot of people I've invited have very formal print practices and they work they do live with collaborative partners is better, freer, more entertaining, more alive.

Collaboration has a methodological purpose. It's inspiring, it's collective, it's human, it's fun, it's engaged, it changes the tenor of events. It also has a change in the way people write. It's also about responding to how weird it is that poets and writers don't really collaborate when almost every other art form does.

**DT:** It's been nice hearing several poets that you've invited say, almost apologetically, 'I'm really surprised to have been invited to take part'. They probably don't view their own work as being particularly stage-based or with some sort of

performative aspect to their work and it's really nice that the collaborative aspect can draw that out of them or doesn't, just forces them to be part of it and often that's enough. You just need the impetus to get up and perhaps have the shield of someone else standing next to you or perhaps lying on the floor or jumping around on table.

**SJF:** Or crying.

**DT:** Or riding round in one of those scissor lift things that was at Rich Mix last time.

**SJF:** Someone built their own walking poem and walked around with a little castle. That's the thing, it's a protection in a way, but why not? There's no doubt that collaboration has been a gateway to my own and many other people who've been involved in Enemies and the European Poetry Festival towards doing a more engaged version of a live poetry, which we have a responsibility to do, I think. To me, that means something very specific again. It's like a version of what we're doing with the book. It's been an amazing, accidental exploration.

**DT:** How long has the European Poetry Festival been going on for?

**SJF:** We've done two, so the third year will be next April.

**DT:** Coming up very shortly in London is the first Nordic Poetry Festival, which is an extension, is it?

**SJF:** It is. It's an experiment. It's a sister festival because really, I got asked to do that. A lot of the poets who had come from Scandinavia and the Nordic region really enjoyed it and I've been invited to organise similar things across Scandinavia over the last three or four years. I'm really open to doing other kinds of sister festivals like that, with different regional specificities.

**DT:** Just because this particular event is looming, maybe we should break away from having a proper conversation and go into a bit of spiel, dates, venues and stuff.

**SJF:** Thank you. So the festival starts on October 11<sup>th</sup> at Burley Fisher Books, then has a second event in London, October 12<sup>th</sup>, Saturday night at the Rich Mix, the big Camarade, which I'm very happy you'll be involved in, David. It's fantastic, with your experience of living in Norway and so forth.

Then we'll go on a mini tour, Norwich at the National Centre for Writing, who've been an amazing supportive partner of a lot of my events and these festivals, on Monday 14<sup>th</sup> October, then 15<sup>th</sup> we go to York to the Jorvik Centre, which is so funny and so good and I know all the poets probably won't get round to hearing this podcast, so they won't know that it's this giant, beautiful in-joke for me that I bring all these avant-garde Scandinavian poets and take them to the Jorvik Centre, where it smells like sour milk.

I've actually booked the ride. They don't know that when the reading finishes, I put them on the mechanical ride. That makes me glow inside. Then we come back for one last reading in Kingston-upon-Thames, where I teach at the university, so it's part of the Writers' Centre, which I run there too. Yeah, it's short, a burst, like 30 poets coming from all over the Nordic region. There is some incredible work happening up there, it's going to be really fun and all the events are free.

**DT:** I really cannot recommend highly enough that you go and check out some of these events if you can. If not, try and find some of the recordings that will no doubt be made. Links to everything we've been talking about today, including links to Steven's work, which we haven't really touched on in terms of where you can find things, but stick around, it will be in the outro. Possibly. It's weird talking about things I haven't even thought about yet. They will be in the outro, they will exist.

**SJF:** You will make it happen.

**DT:** You can find those links in the episode description, people that are listening. It's the end.

**SJF:** It's the end. Thank God it's the beginning of the end. Thanks again for having me.

**DT:** I've been really looking forward to talking to you properly. We talk fairly often, but that was the whole point of getting the microphone, it was to pin people down for an hour.

**SJF:** I'm glad you're back in London.

**DT:** Me too. We're going to finish with a reading please.

**SJF:** So this is a poem from a book I published this summer, 2019, called 'I Stand Alone By The Devils, And Other Poems On Film', by Broken Sleep books. Thanks to them for suffering under my work.

### American Werewolf in London

*Release: August 21, 1981*

*Director: John Landis*

*As if to signify they were not quite dogs.*

*Czesław Miłosz*

The moon has long been associated with that which can't be had.  
I can assure you this realisation is not the least bit amusing.

You cannot judge the past from present

and the question being asked should  
follow the question of why you are attempting to do so?

The slaughtered lamb is your childhood bedroom,  
where your cousin got fresh with you, and you liked it.

The last watch is American. It has not humour enough  
to see dogs become wolves. Americans won't listen.  
Stay on the road, keep clear of the moors, we said.  
The English wolf treated this way weres.

We cut to David's wolf eyes. He is running the forest floor,  
hunting your deer. Then we cut to Jenny Agutter,  
as all English nurses. She hand feeds. You have to eat.

The bad dreams in hospital cannot hide friends speech as soundless.  
You make Jack share your shame, he keeps saying *limbo*.

Doctor Hirsch is the hero. He says You'll have duelling scars to boast of.  
They say mad men have the strength of ten.  
If I survived Rommel, I am sure I can survive... But you don't listen.

The sad and the wolf lie together like young lovers  
while the young are rubbish lovers, like American tourists.  
Lips seem to shrink, the clouds hold a faint silver smell,  
green bursts patch on the map of London.  
Jenny Agutter is still waiting for your return from work.

Hollow is the moor where there lies the now dead friend,  
half eaten, rotting in the distracted minds of the living.  
Stay on the road, keep clear of the moors, we said.

©SJ Fowler, *I Stand Alone By The Devils, And Other Poems On Film*, Broken Sleep Books, 2019

### **Outro:**

**DT:** Hello. You stuck around. Grab yourself an ice-cold Capri Sun from the fridge as a reward. I hope the traffic noises and squeaky chair didn't annoy you too much. I also hope you enjoyed the conversation. I certainly enjoyed recording it. It's a conversation I've been wanting to record for a while, so I'm glad we both found the time. We're both pretty busy at the moment.

I'm a bit disappointed, looking back, that I let the issue of class slip by. I suppose that's been spoken about enough in the series previously and Steven and I wanted to discuss other things, but I regret not pushing him more on the idea of recognising issues around class and ignoring them, even if ignoring them is based on providing

platforms and spaces that counteract these things. Perhaps we should all be a bit more outspoken about these things, I don't know.

For more from Steven, go over to his website [stevenjfowler.com](http://stevenjfowler.com). If I started now to list all of his work, we'd be here for another hour so I will allow you to go and seek that out for yourselves. One thing I would check out is Steven's appearance on episode 12 of Matthew Blunderfield's Scaffold podcast, in which he talks about a residency he did at an architect's studio and what it means to attempt to write future-facing poetry. It's a really fascinating discussion.

I'll be back before the end of 2019 with episode 123. I still have no idea who will be joining me though. That's a deliberate choice now. I'm trying to not allow the podcast to take control of my life too much, so I'll just be seeing who interests me and who is available nearer the time. That's quite enough for today. Be good to yourselves, I'll speak to you soon.

**End of transcript.**