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[Episode 08: Rachael Black](#) (February 2015)

Transcript: Christabel Smith

Host: David Turner – **DT**

Guest: Rachael Black – **RB**

Conversation:

DT: Hello, this is another episode of Lunar Poetry Shorts. I'm David Turner and today, I am joined by Rachael Black and we're in South-East London in Lee Green, which is weird,

because I haven't been here since I used to go to primary school around the corner. By way of introduction, we're going to have a poem from Rachael.

RB: Thanks, David. Angel Station.

[we are unable to reproduce this poem at this time]

DT: Thank you, Rachael, and hello.

RB: Hi.

DT: Just a quick one. Why is the Southbound Northern Line's platform at Angel so wide? So much wider than the Northbound!

RB: Researching my poem, obviously, I had to do extensive measuring of platforms.

DT: My first question is: why poetry?

RB: I found out what poetry was when I was at prep school. I was about six or seven and I had a teacher called Mr Walker, who was actually the headmaster of the school and he was an English don, and then got sacked from his university, as I understand it, and went to teach at some tiny prep school.

He was very much into the classical canon. Auden was one of his favourites and when you read Night Mail for example, by WH Auden, when you're a kid, because it's that train, it's that rhythm, the imagery of the moorlands and boulders, all that kind of thing, it's really evocative, particularly for a child, and so I got into it through him.

We had poetry competitions at school and I put myself forward for lots of that sort of stuff. Also, I came from a theatrical background. My dad's an actor, my grandfather was an actor and model and stuff like that, so performance is in the family anyway. So it was something that was an easy route, to do little, short performances, so it started at school when I was very small.

Then I went through and had English ruined by school, I think, as lots of people do. You do GCSEs and it kind of crushes those amazing novels you're forced to read and so I did it for A-level, which was a mistake. I decided to stop there and not go to university and not carry on.

I think poetry for me was something I came back to whenever I felt unfulfilled artistically, because I started on the journey of becoming an actress, which is what I do and did and that was great. I did my training and all that kind of thing and then, in the moments when maybe there wasn't so much acting work around.

Recently, five years ago, I had my daughter and in the last five years, my body changed. I changed. My casting category went from young, nubile type to haggard old mum and there's not so much work for those sorts of roles. The poetry for me, the performance-poetry side,

the stand-up poetry, whatever you want to call it, purely to fill in for the lack of performance work I was getting.

Also, I've always written. I continued to keep writing poetry all the way through my life. I find it cathartic, yes, and of course that kind of stuff doesn't ever make it to an audience or to the page, because that would be terribly wanky. I also wanted to keep it going because it keeps your mind nimble and your thoughts fresh and keeps you creative. It's a nice, easy, short fix. You can knock out a poem in an hour.

You can take days over it, you can also knock it out in a very short space of time, and for me, that is a creative exercise, something very important. Then I found the performance poetry scene through Mark Grist a couple of years ago, when his Girls Who Read, that kind of thing, his work with Mixy and the viral video he did with the kid... they set it up as a rap battle, all that stuff, that caught my attention.

I wrote to Mark and said 'look, I've found this poem you did, it's called Girls Who Read, I really like it, but I think I can do one better', so I rewrote it as A Bloke Who Reads and sent it to him and I said 'what do you think?' He said 'actually, I think it's really good, it is better than mine, but don't tell anyone.' He said 'you should go and do this' so I found Niall O'Sullivan at Poetry Café and went and did my Tuesday night induction, as everybody does, made my introductions.

Then I worked out what the poetry scene wanted and started writing that kind of thing, so I changed my style a lot and went from very pagey stuff to very stagey stuff and that's what really gets me going. I love giving an audience something to laugh about or cry about or think about. I want to change how the audience feel inside, so all of my stuff is geared towards the audience.

DT: Speaking of the audience, it brings us on to how often you read your poetry in public?

RB: When I started off, I found it very easy to pick up gigs because I went to every single gig I could possibly find and that was great. People start booking you for their nights and that's wonderful. Then I got to a point about a year in and thought 'Christ, I'm bored of my own work'. I'd been reading the same 20 poems over and over and I didn't have any real impetus to create anymore, so I put it down for a year and a bit.

Then last year, in the summer, I went back to it and I've picked up a few gigs again. Once you're in it, it's easy to pick up gigs. You talk to people, you go to everyone's nights and perform. So I do it as often as I can, as often as people will allow me to, but it's not something I feel sad and dejected if I haven't been booked for three weeks.

DT: Have you had anything published?

RB: I have, I've had bits and bobs published in various things. When I was seven, in the school magazine, was my first poem and I think my mum and dad have still got a copy somewhere. I've had stuff in The Guardian, which was quite exciting, because my mother

showed everybody and framed it. Then zines, people's blogs. As far as publishing a book is concerned, it's not something I particularly care about at the moment.

DT: There are so few people who actually get to publish.

RB: I think if you want to do it, it's there and you can do it.

DT: You can self-publish anyway. I should maybe reframe that question.

RB: I think it's important though.

DT: Most people, if you are interested in being published, you just go onto the link with Amazon, it's print per order.

RB: Good luck to those who do.

DT: Absolutely. Just don't try to sell me your book for £3 next time. I don't mean it's not good, I just can't afford to keep buying all these books. They should come attached with a half-price Galaxy bar, like in WH Smith.

RB: I was on Twitter the other day, there's a guy called Joseph Clark, who I love and adore and he tweeted something about "my next poetry anthology, I'm going to sell with a free gram of gack cuz that's the only way the fuckers are going to pick it up."

DT: Maybe another poem.

RB: Thank you. This one is called Frustrated.

[we are unable to reproduce this poem at this time]

DT: How do you critique your own work?

RB: Harshly. Generally, to write, I have to be obsessed about a person, place or thing and quite usually, it's a person. I fall in love with people all the time and obsess terribly about them and then create a piece of work. Quite often, I'd like to show it back to them and see what they think and see if they recognise, not for praise-sake, but just to see if they recognise any of themselves in it.

Sometimes, it might be something quite abstract, so if I were to write a poem about you, I wouldn't necessarily mention your name, or anything we've done, it might be in completely abstract terms and yet, I would want you to be able to recognise something of yourself in it. If you couldn't, then I would go back and redraw it and readapt it. I guess that's partly where I go for critique.

Also, my dad is an actor, very classical old school as well, so his appreciation of text and what works in performance, I hold his opinion in high esteem because he knows me very well and he knows how I write very well and what technically works well. I often go to him and say

'Dad, how is this looking? How's this working?' It will usually be from a technical point of view, not so much about content, but about the rhythm, the metre, the pace.

From a literary perspective, I have lots of friends in the game. We all talk about these things. If somebody's got an idea about something I've done, I might go back home and redraft something and think 'ooh, so-and-so said this, maybe I should try it x, y or z way.' But a lot of the time, it's me and my husband sitting on the sofa you're sitting on right now and I'll read something to him and he'll say 'yeah, that's...' If it stops him watching Match of the Day, it's a good poem.

DT: If people can stop me thinking about pie and mash, they've written something really good. It doesn't happen very often.

RB: I'll do my best.

DT: How would you like to see your writing progress? Would you like to write something longer or are you happy improving what you're doing?

RB: For me at the moment, progression would be churning out more of the kind of performance-orientated poetry that I am really enjoying writing at the moment. That's primarily because I'm enjoying it so much. I'm not looking to make a massive career out of this, so there's no plan as far as that will go. Somebody asked to publish some of my work in an anthology recently and it all went south because she wasn't doing what she said she was going to be doing, which is a shame, but I don't really have an eye on being published in a book or anything like that, particularly.

However, if it were to happen, I think it would be an interesting exercise because then it would turn me completely around the other way again and make me write in a very different way, which would again be a good exercise. As far as progression is concerned, no, I just want to carry on doing more of the same really.

DT: Let's have another poem.

RB: OK, I'll try and make it not too samey. Two Minutes, which ironically takes longer than two minutes.

[we are unable to reproduce this poem at this time]

DT: Thank you. Last couple of questions. What have been the main influences over your development as a writer-performer?

RB: I think reading everything that I've ever read, and that goes for the back of a fag packet to Chaucer and Shakespeare and anything in between and around. I think as far as actual people are concerned, it might not necessarily be that apparent in my work, but I listen to a lot of hip hop music and I love a lot of jazz music, so the rhythmical element and internal rhyme element of my work is heavily influenced by that kind of thing.

As far as real people are concerned, I take my influences from everybody I meet. It could be anyone, somebody standing at a bus stop, a best friend, a family member, anything. Then obviously, I put it into a kind of machine that was created at school and by my parents, teaching me how to learn, how to assimilate information, throw that information back out into the world in a different way.

DT: Is there anything you would recommend people to go out and see or read or watch?

RB: Yeah, everything, all of it. I feel as an artist, of any description, whether you're a dancer or a poet or a writer or whatever, I feel you are like a vessel that needs constantly filling up. You need to put as much information in there as possible, whether that's pictorial or it could be going to a concert, and there are many different kinds of concert.

As long as you're constantly doing something to take in some information every day, it doesn't matter where it comes from. It's all useful and it all sticks in there, in your head. It will come out at the right point, when you need to draw on it. It will be there for you. Read as much as you can, listen to as much music as you can, do as many varieties of cultural stuff as you can.

Go to galleries, go and do things you never thought you'd like to do. I remember when I was a kid, my dad would play country music and I'd think 'oh God, this is awful.' Now, I bought a Dwight Yoakam CD the other day.

DT: Is that a real person?

RB: Yeah! Whilst it might not be the number-one album I'd choose at the moment, it's definitely something I found has influenced my work a bit. I think it's really important to throw yourself into situations, either culturally or personally, that challenge you in some way. Do something that frightens you. Do something that makes your heart race. Do something that you feel you automatically wanted to say no to.

DT: I think I'd agree with that. That's it. Thank you very much, Rachael. You can follow Rachael on Twitter.

RB: I'm @rachaelblack.

DT: That link will be on...Again, I'm pointing down on an audio recording to signify that link will be underneath the video, because this will go out on You Tube. You will be currently looking at You Tube, it's below the video. Thank you, Rachael. You lot, clear off.

End of transcript.