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## [Episode 28 - Paul McMenemy](#) (May 2015)

Transcript by Christabel Smith

Host: David Turner – **DT**

Guest: Paul McMenemy – **PM**

### **Conversation:**

**DT:** Hello, my name is David Turner and this is another episode of Lunar Poetry Shorts. Today, I am joined by the editor of Lunar Poetry Magazine, Paul McMenemy. Hello, Paul.

**PM:** Hello, David.

**DT:** This is attempt two. We recorded this yesterday and I fucked it up, so we're going to try and not recreate what happened yesterday, as hilarious as it was.

**PM:** It wasn't too bad. I just sounded like a Scottish Dalek.

**DT:** I'm tempted to put it out there now you've cast yourself as a Scottish Dalek. We're going to start with a poem. Once the siren has gone past.

**PM:**

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**DT:** Thank you very much, Paul. Hello. How are you doing? Thanks for coming back and trying again. I say that as if this is some kind of job and as if we weren't going to go and drink cider in the park anyway. First question as always, why poetry?

**PM:** I'll try and answer this better than I did yesterday.

**DT:** Ssh, don't mention yesterday. Unless you're going to do a Dalek impression.

**PM:** This was a joke answer yesterday, but it is pretty much how I started, which was that as a teenager, in order to pass English exams, there was a creative writing element. Being a smart young man, I quickly realised poems were a lot shorter than short stories so I thought I'd just knock up a few of those. I kind of got into it a bit.

I had a very good English teacher, who lent me an anthology of 20<sup>th</sup> century poetry. It was just called English Poetry 1900-1975, edited by George Macbeth, who's quite a good poet in his own right. I read the whole of that and that got me into it. I'm still probably indebted to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century British poets to an unhealthy degree.

What I think is great about poetry is that it is a very effective way of communicating in a way that is at once immediate and also a kind of slow release, if you see what I mean. The way things are phrased, the oral effect and so on, can make something hit immediately, but the beauty of poetry is that it will also linger in the mind.

**DT:** That's a point often missed with spoken word, isn't it? Of course it's a very immediate form of poetry, but some of the richest spoken word will stay with you for the following week or two, or perhaps longer, and it will develop in your mind. Maybe that's more of an obvious point to make about page poetry.

**PM:** Certainly, with page poetry, if a poem tells you everything that it's got to say the first time you read it, there's not much point in it. You may as well write prose, it pays better. Spoken word can be slightly different. You can be more direct, but it still has to have something to it, in order to stick in the mind. Otherwise, it's just someone telling you their opinions for a bit. You can go to any pub and get that.

**DT:** As I said at the start, you are the editor of Lunar Poetry Magazine. When and why did you start the magazine?

**PM:** Right, so a few years ago, when I lived in Glasgow, I wanted to make a magazine. What I wanted was something cheap and regular, because there are lots of poetry magazines about and lots of them are very good, but none of them come out more regularly than about four times a year. Most of them, it's fewer times than that and they tend to be a little bit on the dear side.

The thing is, you can pick up an 800-page paperback novel for not much more than a 50-page poetry magazine featuring people you may never have heard of and that's kind of a problem for poetry in general. So I thought something cheap and regular would be good. I started with a magazine that was basically printed off my computer and it turned into one of these fanzines, which start up for a couple of issues then disappear.

The first one I did in Glasgow was supposed to be monthly, but there was only one. A couple of years later in London, I started a weekly one. We ran for 10 issues before I realised that was an awful idea. So I went away for a bit, came back with the monthly magazine, which was professionally printed, slightly more expensive, but a lot thicker and generally better.

I kind of figured that basically, appearances are important, so people will pay £3 for a small paperback book with a spine and all the rest of it, rather than £1 for something I printed on the computer myself.

**DT:** It's quite a good comparison, Lunar Poetry to Rising, which is Tim Wells' zine-style magazine, which he gives away free now. It's a photocopied, stapled thing, home-made, but it's very high-quality poetry usually. It would be very difficult to charge money for that because it doesn't seem like an object to buy in a way, whereas Lunar Poetry looks like an object people are willing to invest in.

**PM:** This was the thing. Originally, I had the idea, it doesn't really matter what it looks like, it's the content that's important. Of course, that isn't actually true. Unfortunately, the way most people see things...

**DT:** Especially when you're trying to sell the first copy to someone.

**PM:** That's the thing. Something like Rising, which has a reputation, it's been around for 20 years or something, longer, you could probably sell it now if you wanted.

**DT:** Maybe we should take a second poem.

**PM:** OK. I have a poem featured in an upcoming anthology of poems about dance, bizarrely enough. When I told David this yesterday, he laughed. I think I have a natural dancer's physique, but apparently, he doesn't agree. This is the second time I've ever read this out, so I'll try and do a better job than I did last time. It's The Emma Press Anthology of Dance and

it's launching on Thursday at the Rambert Dance Studio. I think that's what it's called. It's in Upper Ground. This is called Scottish Country Dancing.

**[We are unable to reproduce this reading at this time.]**

**DT:** Thank you very much. The latest news for Lunar Poetry is you have a crowdfunding campaign up on Indiegogo to raise funds to open a dedicated poetry bookshop in Waterloo in South London, which would be only the third dedicated poetry bookshop in the country and the only one in London, which seems ridiculous. Maybe you could tell us a bit about that.

**PM:** Sure. As far as I know at the moment, I may hear differently at some point, there are only two poetry bookshops in the whole of the UK, one in Hay on Wye, the UK's dedicated literature ghetto, that is, where the books live, far away from people.

**DT:** Hay on Wye can't be a real place, can it? It's just a marquee with a bench, isn't it, where Irvine Welsh goes to sit occasionally, or JK Rowling, and they have their own poetry bookshop in the marquee.

**PM:** It's a tent city, I think, most of the time. I've recently found out there's a poetry bookshop in Glasgow as well, called Tell it Slant, which if you live round there or are visiting, you should check out. It's on Renfrew Street, I think. But there isn't a poetry bookshop in London and hasn't been for some years. That seems kind of scandalous to me.

Poetry is extremely bad at selling itself, extremely bad at reaching people. There was a big controversy last year when Jeremy Paxman was chairing the Forward Prize. I say a big scandal, I've no idea if anyone not involved in poetry actually noticed, but it was big on the poetry Twitter. Basically, he said something along the lines of he thought poets were only talking to other poets.

In terms of content, I think that's a ludicrous thing to say. However, in terms of how we actually market poetry and see poetry, he's definitely got a point because at the moment, if I had a poetry book published, and I should say there is a certain amount of self-interest in what I'm trying to do here, as far as making poetry more widely available, but if I had a poetry book published, who is going to read it?

A few other poets, baffled family members and a section of the 100 or so people in the UK who actually have the time and money to keep track of what's going on in poetry. The problem is that most poetry in the UK is published by tiny publishers that maybe only do at the most half a dozen books or pamphlets a year.

None of this stuff ends up in bookshops. The stuff that ends up in bookshops is a tiny and frankly, unrepresentative fragment of the British poetry scene as a whole. What gets into bookshops, your poetry section in a bookshop, is generally a shelf of classics, about five shelves of World War One anthologies, a couple of things that have won prizes and a couple of people you may vaguely recognise the names of from turning up on Radio 4 occasionally, all published by the same five big publishers, Faber, Carcanet, Bloodaxe, etc.

Most of the interesting stuff happening in poetry is being published by tiny publishers that aren't in bookshops, often aren't on Amazon either, just because it doesn't seem worthwhile or for ethical reasons, and whose books are only available either through their own websites or at readings, which makes it incredibly difficult to keep track of.

How do you keep track of all these publishers, even if you're interested, as I am? I think I'm reasonably knowledgeable, but I still keep finding things that were published a year or two ago that I had never heard of. For someone just trying to get into poetry, who doesn't already have a reasonable knowledge, it's pretty much impossible.

**DT:** In order to raise the profile in the minds of the public, the books themselves should be more prominent. They shouldn't seem like a bookshop's dirty secret, which they do at the moment. We were in Foyles recently, hanging out in the poetry section, which is relatively large compared to other bookshops, but still pitifully small really and dominated by countless books by Wendy Cope, Carol Ann Duffy, Benjamin Zephaniah and World War One anthologies.

They're good works and stand alone, but you don't need six copies of each book on the shelves, taking up space. Six books by Carol Ann Duffy may be taking the place of 15 pamphlets. It's not about disregarding established poets, just giving room.

**PM:** It's not that the big publishers publish bad poetry, although I would say they do publish a fairly safe kind of section of poetry. Most of the stuff I find most interesting is happening outside the big publishers. That's not the problem. The problem is that they are the only things that get into bookshops. Foyles in London, a big bookshop in the middle of London, has probably the biggest poetry section of any bookshop in the UK, but that's only big as far as size goes. As you say, it just means instead of one or two copies of the latest Simon Armitage, they've got six copies and that's not much use, frankly.

**DT:** Also, this kind of stocking of shelves by bookshops like that only reinforce the public's view of poetry, don't they? If you don't like what's being printed in The Guardian or being read out on Radio 4, your mind is not going to be changed by the poetry section at Foyles, even if they do have new pamphlets and booklets by people like Kate Tempest.

They're all on the bottom shelf, they're not prominent. I will say the smaller Foyles bookshop on the South Bank does a better job of holding up new poets more prominently on the shelves, but it's still only a couple of people. If you have any deeper knowledge of the poetry scene, you know very well that's not what's actually going on.

**PM:** For the last few years, there's been a thing called Free Verse Poetry Book Fair, running in Central London. It's an annual, one day thing. I volunteered at it last year. There were around 60 publishers there, big ones like Faber, Carcanet, and so on and lots of smaller publishers, all having a desk each in a big hall. Hundreds of people came, found lots of really interesting stuff, spent lots of money.

If people see this stuff, they will buy it, or at least read it or be interested. If you have the opportunity, even if you don't care for this stuff, which is generally promoted in the UK, you will find something you will like. It's getting access. This is why we need centres for poetry.

Not centres as in libraries or semi-official academic spaces, but actual shops, performance spaces, things like that.

Places where poetry is treated in the same way as everything else, something to be bought and sold etc, something which, unromantic as it seems, is not in some special part, it's just a thing like any other thing. So somewhere you can go in, have a coffee, have a look at a poetry book without feeling like you need some special password, is something I really think we need.

**DT:** The established places in London now for going and reading poetry and finding poetry books are very stale. You feel like you're in a library. That isn't the way literature is presented a lot of the time. They do exist in those centres as well, but most smaller, independent cafes have reading corner. Not silent reading corners, just somewhere to go and be encouraged to read. It would be a good time now to talk about the venue.

**PM:** Sure, so it's a place called I'klectik Art Lab in Waterloo. That's I'klectik – because it is – and it's an art gallery-come-café-come-performance venue. It's where David, you, and Lizzy Palmer have your monthly spoken-word evenings, Silence Found A Tongue. I tell you this like it's news.

**DT:** It's a week on Tuesday, so I'd better remember.

**PM:** It has lots of other performances and various things, interesting art exhibitions, and during the day, it's a café, bar, does good food, fairly inexpensive, very friendly, with a nice garden. They've given us a corner of that space to set a bookshop up in. The idea is that it's a friendly space where there are poetry books and you can read poetry books, buy poetry books, without feeling that you're in a library or that kind of setting.

**DT:** It's quite nice as well because Eduoard, who runs I'klectik, is very keen on getting artists and writers and performers to write together. There's a lot of collaborative work happening down there. So although we're talking now about having a dedicated centre for poetry, to buy and read poetry, there would also be a chance for collaborative work and workshops. The general space of the venue will encourage and allow cross-over work between different writers and artists as well.

I think it's the perfect setting to highlight to a public that isn't as familiar with poetry, and even those that are, that it's a very flexible form. I think it's a great space. It works very well for art but also for our spoken-word night that Paul just mentioned. I won't waste any time on this recording explaining too much about the Indiegogo campaign.

You can just go to Indigogo.com, search Lunar Poetry Bookshop, and there you find out Paul is trying to raise £5,000 for the initial setting-up costs and running and stocking of the bookshop. Stock mainly. I'm not going to list what your money gets you in terms of perks at Indiegogo. If you donate different amounts of money, you get a different perk, mainly to do with the bookshop and the magazine.

All the information is on the website anyway. I keep getting banned by Facebook for spamming everyone with the link for the website. If everyone just donates some money, £5 each or whatever, I can stop doing that and getting banned from Facebook. I'm such a social-media whore, I won't be able to live my life without Facebook. That's probably it for the bookshop. Maybe we'll take a third and final poem.

**PM:** So this is called It's Not The Economy And Don't Call Me Stupid.

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**DT:** Cheers, Paul. I dunno, we'll have to be careful where we go now because me and Paul are so fucked off after the election, we've done nothing but moan for a few days. Let's try and avoid that bastard bit of news.

**PM:** We shouldn't do that. If Tories want to donate to Indiegogo, it's OK.

**DT:** No, the way I explained it this morning is if you're Left-leaning, it's a great project to get involved in to support the arts and provide a platform.

**PM:** Yes, because the arts are going to be more important than ever now.

**DT:** But if you're a Tory, hopefully one day you will get so rich, you can turn your back on all your friends, only stock Stieg Larsson novels and sell celebrity autobiographies. So there's a silver lining for everyone, win win. When does the Indiegogo thing end?

**PM:** So it's a 30-day campaign. It started last Wednesday, so early in June. There will be a payday between now and then.

**DT:** Do it today, whenever you're listening to this is the appropriate time to do it. There will be a link directly to the Lunar Poetry bookshop campaign page below this video, until the campaign ends. Check out [www.lunarpoeetry.co.uk](http://www.lunarpoeetry.co.uk) to find out what's going on in general with the magazine. You can find out all the reviews, live and print events on the website.

Lunar Poetry focuses a lot on spoken-word events so there's some great stuff on the website about that. Also, come to Silence Found A Tongue on Twitter, @silent\_tongue is what we are on Twitter, you can find out information about when our nights are. Paul attends all of those. Thank you, Paul. There's nothing else, is there?

**PM:** There is nothing else.

**End of transcript.**