



## THE POETRY INTERVIEW

*Poetry Editor Hezekiah with James Murdoch*

*My Dearest Jim. I am enamoured with your poetry! I don't say that lightly because I just learned how to spell 'enamoured' last week (prior to which I debased myself employing the tiresomely popular 'cool'). So I am as a tickled as a finch to spent some quality time with you! The only outcome I can predict from our exchange is an oversized, multicultural legion stampeding toward your house waving flags freely donated by an exhausted Victorian Snuff Takers Club (which has just last week filed for protection under Chapter 11!!!) and shouting "More! Murdoch! More!" Now. Enough preamble. I intend to cut to the bone in this interview which explains the bottle of iodine beside the bottle of single malt.*

*In order for our readers to learn a little more about ‘the man behind the muse’ I thought I’d get a tad personal and inveigh upon you to indulge me. What’s that? No, no, not about your sex life. We’ve all seen the videos!! What comes to mind is much more presbyterian.. For example...*

**HS:** *Could you recommend a favorite book, movie (film sounds so pretentious) and song that has, perhaps, inspired you?*

**JM:** I’ve never really got the whole inspiration thing. I’m not sure I’d like to have a muse to be honest, to be dependent, indebted. In the past I’ve been very flippant when answering the question “What is inspiration?” Inspiration is nothing more than a good idea is usually my pat answer; you don’t have to wait for a good idea to start writing, any old idea will do and maybe you can turn it into a good idea or at least a workable idea. I discuss the matter at some length if you’re interested in an old blog post: *Inspiration is a good idea*.

As for recommendations? Book: *Billy Liar* by Keith Waterhouse; Film: *Blade Runner* (sorry, but it’s simply a work of genius); Song: *Freaks* by Marillion.

**HS:** *Do you have any heroes?*

**JM:** I go with *The Strangers*: “*No more heroes anymore*” and to be honest that could be included in my list of recommendations above. That said there have been major influences in my life like Philip Larkin, Samuel Beckett, René Magritte, Woody Allen, Philip Glass, none of whom I’d describe as a hero. (Yes, I know there’re no women there. It bothers me especially since my wife and daughter once described me as “an honorary woman” but no creative woman’s output has been a *major* influence although I cannot read anything by Jeanette Winterson without it making me want to write.)

**HS:** *What was the spur that originally started you writing? And what kind of horse were you riding at the time?*

**JM:** I grew up in the heart of Burns Country in Scotland. In fact, my first poem was in butchered Scots. Poetry, for me growing up, was about irrelevance—daffodils, vagabonds and babbling brooks—until one day in secondary school our teacher handed out roneoed copies of Larkin’s ‘*Mr Bleaney*’. I felt as if the proverbial scales had fallen from my eyes. How could something so... so unpoetic as far as I could tell be poetry? I aimed to find out.

<https://www.woorillacaught.com/roneo-machines>

**HS:** *Do you write every day? Do you write in between bowel movements?*

**JM:** It depends what you mean my writing: there’s writing and there’s writing *down*. I’ve actually gone *years* without committing anything to paper. For the longest time I felt like I wasn’t a real writer because I didn’t need to write constantly but, as the years turned into decades, I realised I worked in phases. After a three-year gap (between 1991 and 1993) I sat down and wrote two novels back-to-back in a matter of a few months and then I went back to the poetry and then half a novel, a ton of short stories, the rest of the novel, more poetry, a novel, a

play, more poetry, another novel, two novellas, more poetry and then even more poetry; my output over the last three years has been phenomenal.

**HS:** *So, do you think of yourself as more of a writer than a poet?*

**JM:** It wouldn't bother me if I never wrote another line of prose but if I couldn't write another poem that would be a different matter. I am a poet, first and foremost, but not everything fits neatly in a poem.

**HS:** *Can we go back to that period of writer's block for a second? As a rampant campaigner in the crusade for Poets' Mental Health Stability, could you describe the experience? How you fell into it and what brought you out? (AJSYK, all the good writers experience occasional writer's block. I'm still waiting for mine.)*

**JM:** I have another blog where I talk about writer's block if you're readers are interested: [Five . . . sorry, six . . . things to do when you have writers block and one thing not to do.](#) In the article I mention that time:

A lot of time worry comes out of ignorance. If you've never had writer's block before then the first time can be a bitch: What if I never write again? Then you never write again. You can be unhappy about that. That would be acceptable and expected behaviour. It still wouldn't solve the problem but unhappiness is a reaction to knowing there is no solution. Worry is not.

I had a bad bout of writer's block in the nineties. It lasted three years and I honestly thought I was done. I'd moved on. But it came back and with a vengeance too. All I had to do was relax. It's like trying to force your way out of a Chinese finger puzzle. It's not going to happen. And worrying about being stuck is counterproductive too.

One of the worst things you can do is compare yourself to other people. Some people (e.g. Bukowski) are prolific; others (e.g. Elizabeth Bishop) are not. Sometimes you have nothing to say. Or what you *do* have to say is still percolating. Those two novels I wrote in 1993 and 1994 didn't come out of thin air.

**HS:** *Whimsey and a love for all things incidental appears to be a recurring theme in you work. Would you mind briefly blathering on about your process?*

**JM:** I honestly don't have anything one could describe as a process or a set routine or a lucky fountain pen or anything. Poems arrive in my head pretty much fully formed. Sure, I fiddle with them afterwards, clean up the grammar and punctuation, swap out words and then swap them back but the bulk of the work is done by my subconscious; I'm merely a scribe. This's why I made the distinction between writing and writing down. As I said in that blog:

*I have ideas running though my head all the time. To suggest that I'm in a constant state of inspiration sounds preposterous but I don't think that it is. [...] We talk rather glibly, at least I do, about poets as being sensitive souls. I don't think poets or even artists are unique to this kind of sensitivity; what they do when affected is. Everyone gets inspired from time to time. Creative*

*people, because of their nature, get inspired to do. I've said before that I believe a writer is a person whose natural response to life is to write about it.*

**HS:** *Tennessee Williams once said 'I write because I find life unsatisfactory.' Do you identify with this remark?*

**JM:** In part, yes, I suppose. The unsatisfactoriness of life is a rich seam and I'm nowhere near finished mining it but my writing doesn't provide any answers and little or no comfort.

**HS:** *'Poetsplaining' is a most endearing piece. In your devotion to ars poetica, what is it you have come to discover that makes poetry tick?*

**JM:** A while back I ran across (and subsequently lost, found and lost again) a video where a load of famous and not-so-famous writers tried to answer that question; some of their responses were hysterical, many nonsensical. Joyce Carol Oates was about the most level-headed as you might expect. If I could provide a definitive answer to that question, I wouldn't need to keep writing damn poems trying to explain it. At its simplest poetry is metaphor even if the poem doesn't have a metaphor or a simile in it. Again, I've written about this at length and there're no less than three blog posts discussing aspects of the nature of poetry: *Poetic energy*, *Interrogating poetry* and *It's a poem because I say it is*.

**HS:** *Your poem 'The Death of the Poet' is a lovely homage to Roland Barthes' essay. Could you expand on how he has influenced you?*

**JM:** I have to fess up here. I really only know him from his essay. His perspective is a fascinating one, however, and something I've mulled over for years, that, alongside the Samuel Johnson quote: "A writer only begins a book. A reader finishes it." I have a poem called '*You and I: A Poem About Identity*' which will forever be "the Barry poem." I let my boss, a lovely lady called Jane, read the poem and she wanted to know how I'd got into her head, how I'd managed to express in a handful of words what she felt for this guy Barry. What could I say? She made the poem her own. I was inconsequential.

**HS:** *I am drawn to your line "hard truths prefer gentler tones." Can one distinguish between the aesthetic and the empathic?*

**JM:** Aesthetic experiences are focused on the appreciation of beauty, harmony, and form. Empathic experiences are focused on understanding and sharing the feelings of others. Both are subjective and can easily overlap. For example, we may be moved by a piece of art that depicts human suffering (can there be a better example than *The Garden of Earthly Delights* by Hieronymus Bosch?) or by a poet's use of beautiful language to describe an ugly event as exemplified by the poetry of First World War poet Wilfred Owen.

**HS:** *Summing up, for our records, what breed is next door's cat and would you describe any tattoos you have and list preferred pronouns?*

**JM:** Next door's cat has no breeding whatsoever, no savoir-faire either and very little patience. I have no tattoos and never had any inclination in that direction. No piercings either. Preferred pronouns? He/him.

**HS:** *Lastly, is there a question we haven't asked to which you would like to respond?*

**JM:** What regrets do you have? A: More than a few. I've always felt my *Sliding Doors* moment was not going to university where I could've mingled with like-minded souls and maybe ended up forming a comedy troupe and taken my writing in a whole different direction. Instead, I plodded away in isolation and never (knowingly) met another writer in the flesh until I married my most recent wife twenty-six-ish years ago. I did hope that the Internet would be my salvation—especially in the early days when literary blogs proliferated—but that died a sorry death. The same with e-books. I wasted years banging my head against that brick wall. Probably my biggest regret is not being born twenty-one years earlier when I would've had Alan Bennett, Angela Carter and Clive James as peers and might've actually had a small shot at fame or at least a readership. (Why twenty-one years? Because that's how long my parents waited for me.)

**HS:** *Thank you, my dear Jim! I'm a better man for having known you—though the reverse is not necessarily true!*