

Claire Askew interviewed by Scottish Poetry Library Communications Manager Colin Waters.

1. Opening words

You're listening to a Scottish Poetry Library Podcast

[Gentle guitar music – Will Campbell]

[Claire Askew reads 'Bad Moon']

2. Introducing Claire Askew

Colin Waters: And so dear friends, welcome once more to another award winning episode of the SPL's podcast series. Ok, we haven't actually won any awards, but this week we have an interview with Claire Askew who was judged the runner up at the inaugural Edwin Morgan Poetry Award back in 2014 and is on the shortlist for the second Edwin Morgan Poetry Award [in 2016].

Last month, Claire came into the library for a chat about her debut collection *This Changes Things* which is published by Bloodaxe. The poem you heard at the top of the show, 'Bad Moon', appears in that collection. Now, some background about Claire before we get into the interview itself:

Claire Askew was born in 1986. She grew up in the Scottish Borders and has lived in Edinburgh since 2004. In 2012, she won the inaugural International Salt Prize for poetry, and in 2013 she completed a PhD in creative writing and contemporary women's poetry [at] the University of Edinburgh. Her poetry has appeared in many magazines and several anthologies including *Be the First to Like This: New Scottish Poetry* published by Vagabond Voices in 2014. She has also been selected three times to appear in the highly prestigious online anthology, *Best Scottish Poems of the Year*, published by us, the Scottish Poetry Library.

3. Discussion of Claire Askew's nominations for the Edwin Morgan Poetry Award

Colin Waters: So, let's start by saying congratulations for being shortlisted for the Edwin Morgan Poetry Award for a second time.

Claire Askew: Thank you very much.

Colin Waters: Now, it was your appearance in the first shortlist, am I right in saying that led to the publication of your debut poetry collection?

Claire Askew: Not quite right.

Colin Waters: Set me right!

Claire Askew: I like people to know that the manuscript had actually been accepted before the shortlisting, although it was literally a matter of days before that I'd got the email from Neil Astley to say yes, they wanted to go for it. Then he and I were both really chuffed when a week later or so I was able to email him and say, by the way, it's been shortlisted for something. So yes, one did come before the other.

Colin Waters: It must have been a heady few days.

Claire Askew: It really was, it was frightening!

Colin Waters: I don't often say this when I'm interviewing people, but what an interesting blurb!

Claire Askew: [laughter] Yes!

4. Marginalised and privileged women's voices in poetry

Colin Waters: Yes it is a very interesting blurb. For those who haven't read it, basically it talks about the collection's focus on the lives and experiences of women, especially women who are socially and economically marginalised. Now, a lot of poets are very socially minded; they try and reach out and talk about different groups. But I think what you do with your poems is quite

interesting: you tend to complicate the point of view so that even if you are talking about different groups who, as you say, are marginalised, you also bring your own baggage to the table as well. So how does that work?

Claire Askew: Well, first of all, on the blurb, I really need to thank Dave Coates, because he wrote it for me. Bloodaxe asked me to write my own blurb, and I floundered around for months trying to write it, and I just really struggled. In the end, I sent the book in a Word document to Dave and said 'you write really well critically, help me!' He wrote this fantastic blurb which I think captures what I'm trying to do... so, thank you to Dave!

Yes, [writing about marginalised groups] is interesting. I'm very keen to write about people who don't get written about in poetry. But I'm also aware that I am exactly the sort of person who usually writes poetry. I'm a white, middle-class, college-educated, cisgender, heterosexual woman, writing about women whose lives exist at intersections of oppression that I've never experienced. So to write in a way that doesn't acknowledge I'm incredibly privileged while writing about people who are *not* incredibly privileged, it would be very naïve of me to think that I could do that successfully. I'm aware that sometimes I think I do still step over the boundary into a place that's not really my business to write about. I'm still learning how to make sure that I don't speak over people whose voices should be amplified above mine, rather than me trying to talk about their points of view.

An example of where I think I've [achieved this] is the poem 'Big Heat', which is about a real experience I had on holiday in a place where I couldn't speak the language. I was in a place where the locals live very frugally and don't have a lot of money, while the tourists, overwhelmingly white tourists, swan around spending loads of money and staying in fancy hotels. I got lost in this place where I couldn't speak the language and nobody locally spoke English. I needed to throw myself on the mercy of this family whose daughter fortunately spoke some English and helped us out. And I thought, what a ridiculous person I must have seemed to those people, this ridiculously wealthy white tourist showing up crying on the doorstep because she couldn't find her hotel, [with] my huge backpack full of crap. So I thought, well, let's write me as a ridiculous fool. So I did! And actually, it was incredibly cathartic, I started to think, well I kind of *am* a ridiculous fool, but that's quite a powerful position to start from.

Colin Waters: Why don't we hear that poem?

Claire Askew: It starts with a little quote from Adrienne Rich, which goes: 'If I move now, the sun, naked between the trees, will melt me as I lie'. [This] poem's called 'Big Heat'.

[Claire Askew reads 'Big Heat']

Colin Waters: Do you think there's a dominant narrative of poems by women in the UK today, or is there a wide variety of voices being heard and recognised?

Claire Askew: I think there are a wide variety of voices out there, certainly, but I [do] think there is always a problem that some voices are more heard than others. But I think that slowly, the balance is being righted and it's especially being righted by performance poetry. I feel like the world of performance poetry has a much more diverse collection of women within it, speaking. Or at least that women with different and more unusual things to say are more welcomed in performance poetry or maybe feel more confident there. I just know that when I go to performance nights, I feel that I hear a greater variety of women's voices than if I go to a traditional-style reading. But that's not to say that I don't think there are interesting dominant narratives within women's poetry. I'm really interested by the reclamation of women's voices from the past, like Carol Ann Duffy's *The World's Wife*. I think that was the first example of that in a collection. And then I think a lot of other female poets have taken up that gauntlet and started to reclaim the voices of women, whose stories they think are interesting but maybe haven't been told; they've been lost in history. So that's quite an interesting strain in contemporary poetry that I quite like.

5. Witchcraft and family ancestry

Colin Waters: Talking of past voices, I read that you're quite interested in witches.

Claire Askew: Yes! [laughs]

Colin Waters: That's interesting.

[Laughter]

Claire Askew: I mention this particular strain in poetry because it's one that I feel I've been sucked into and [that] I've started to write [about]. I'm very interested in women who were accused of witchcraft, some of whom have absolutely devastating stories. Most of them were either imprisoned for their entire lives, or executed. Some of them had dementia we reckon now. People who study these things realise that these women who heard voices and spoke in tongues actually had dementia or other mental health problems, and that was why they were accused of witchcraft. So those are voices that I'm really interested in trying to channel, if that doesn't sound too new-agey?

Colin Waters: Or supernatural?

Claire Askew: Yes, it feels a little bit supernatural, but that's kind of fitting. So I'm writing a bit about women I come across who have interesting stories like that. And part of that is because of my 'probably' ancestor Anne Askew who was burned at the stake in 1546, not for witchcraft, but for heresy against church and crown.

Colin Waters: [ironically] We've all had *that* [problem]...

Claire Askew: Basically, she refused to give up the names of women who were believed to be Protestants, which at the time was apparently punishable by death. I started writing about Anne Askew and then [became] interested in other women who suffered the same fate.

6. Poetry and its role in community work

Colin Waters: So you do a lot of community work as well, Claire. How do people react to poetry being introduced to community groups? Is it something

they welcome? The dominant narrative, of course, is that poetry is very precious: it's kept in an ivory tower, it's for academics, it's only ever read by people who write poetry themselves. But you're going out there and taking it out to various kinds of groups. How did they react?

Claire Askew: Usually, when I say, right, next week I'm going to bring some poems in, there's a collective 'oh no, not poems, we hate poetry' [or] 'oh I hate poetry I don't read poetry, I'm not going to come next week,' that kind of thing. But then almost always, they are really pleasantly surprised by how much they like it. So, an example would be, I went into a group who were really adamantly against poetry; hadn't read it since school [and] really, really didn't like the idea. I took in a flip-chart stand with a big printed out poster-size copy of Edwin Morgan's 'Chaffinch Map of Scotland', covered over with one of the flip chart sheets. Then I said, 'right, we're going to look at a poem now.' And I flipped over the sheet, and they all went 'what is that?' [laughs] And because it was so not what they expected, a poem to look like and sound like, they were suddenly a bit more like; 'oh, ok, right, let's give this a chance.'

We [then] all sat around trying to do bird noises, doing chaffinch noises. Then one of them realised 'it's in the shape of Scotland, it's a map of Scotland, that's really clever!' So I think as long as you avoid the things that people have always done with poetry in school, which is having to read it out loud, having to memorise it, having to talk about what's the symbolism, and pick it apart (which, as a poetry geek, I like doing!) most people actually just want to read a poem and talk about how it makes them *feel*. And when they realise that's allowed, that's enough, then suddenly they go 'oh, it's not so bad, is it?'

7. The theme of Buddhism in *This Changes Things*

Colin Waters: Returning to the collection, the first poem in the collection, I know I'm going to mispronounce this: 'Dooka'? 'Ducka'? [Dukkha]

Claire Askew: I would say 'Ducka'. I don't know if that's right?

Colin Waters: I have a lack of Buddhists in my life to give me a correct pronunciation of their terms. It is a Buddhist term, isn't it?

Claire Askew: Yes.

Colin Waters: [It's a Buddhist term] for suffering or for pain. Now that poem, I think it's not less than an indictment for civilisation itself. That's a pretty big theme to start your collection with, isn't it?

Claire Askew: Well, I'm interested in [this concept] because it's not just about suffering, it's about the idea that all suffering comes from wanting stuff. And the more stuff we have, the more stuff we want. And I think Buddhists are really on to something with that idea: that we all have this thing of 'oh I'll be happy once I manage to get on the property ladder, or once I get my own car, or once I get a job that pays X. And yet, we're not happy when that happens [because] we want the next thing. It's really true, that; I think that's at the root of our entire problem as a species, [laughing] if that doesn't sound too melodramatic!

Colin Waters: If I can put it in a word for wanting more. At the same time, if you don't want more, you just end up living in a mud hut, don't you?

Claire Askew: But then I think a lot of Buddhists would say that's what we should all be aiming for: mud hut, no electricity, no Wi-Fi, no books. Let's just get back to basics.

Colin Waters: I knew there was a reason I'm not a Buddhist!

Claire Askew: [laughs]

Colin Waters: Let's hear this poem and people can decide for themselves.

Claire Askew: Ok.

[Claire Askew reads 'Dukkha']

8. The role of grandparents in Askew's poetry

Colin Waters: What I want [laughs] is to ask about the fact quite a few poems in the collection are about grandparents. Why? Why grandparents?

Claire Askew: I think I just had four grandparents who had really strong, interesting personalities, and really interesting stories that I felt needed to be recorded somewhere. And possibly, I'm just the sort of person who is very

interested in hearing stories of elderly people. I've also got a poem about my neighbour Frank who is 84. He's a real person; it's a true story. I really like older people and I like working with them. A lot of the community work I do is with older people, and a lot of the time, those people that I meet have never had a chance to tell their own stories, and they have fascinating stories. So, it's just such good fodder for poetry. Grandparents make for great material, I think! In particular, my maternal grandmother was this Cumbrian battleaxe who was just completely mad in a brilliant way. And she's just given me so much material to work from. There are loads of poems about her that haven't made it into the collection [but] I write about her all the time.

Colin Waters: It's not even stories as such, it's the language, isn't it? The way she expressed herself is very ... idiosyncratic?

Claire Askew: Yes, when you've got someone who stormed round the house, fag in her mouth, shouting 'you could ride bare arsed to London on them scissors!' She's just such a character; she just needed to be written down.

Colin Waters: Why don't we hear that poem as well?

[Claire Askew reads 'Catalogue of my Grandmother's Sayings']

Claire Askew: That was my gran. [laughs].

9. Conflict between Scottish and English identities

Colin Waters: You raised the fact you've got at least one grandparent who is Cumbrian?

Claire Askew: Yes.

Colin Waters: And you were born outside Scotland. But you've basically lived in Scotland most of your life, haven't you?

Claire Askew: Yes.

Colin Waters: So where do you stand on the whole nationality thing? You are a Scottish poet, aren't you? You would describe yourself as a Scottish poet?

Claire Askew: I think so, yes.

Colin Waters: Has there been some push back occasionally...?

Claire Askew: It's a very fraught question for me because I'm 50% Scottish, 50% English, literally. My paternal grandparents, certainly my paternal grandmother, is definitely Scottish, and my maternal grandparents, my mother's family, are way, way back, ancient Cumbrians. They've lived in Cumbria since Cumbria ever existed. [laughter]

It's really tricky, I've spent a long time trying to figure out which side of that Scotland-England fence I want to be on. But I've never ever felt English: that *word*, and that identity is something that I just do not identify with at all. It's a word that I've occasionally had thrown at me as [in] 'you English people', and I always think 'that's not me', I don't feel like that at all, but I have this pesky English accent that I've never managed to get rid off.

I feel Scottish, I love Scotland, I've lived here since I was eight. And actually, given recent political events... [low undertone] I am speaking of Brexit, I feel much prouder than ever to be Scottish and to live in Scotland than I ever have before. England is becoming quite a shadow, a frightening place in my imagination. I know that's not really very fair, but when I think about the political situation in England I feel like, 'oh I'm glad I'm on this side of the border.' I feel there are more options here. So I'm suddenly even more Scottish than I was, I think, in my head, but there is sometimes an issue convincing other people of that fact. I think it's just because of the accent; people hear the accent and go 'well, you're English'.

10. Scottish Independence

Colin Waters: And that's that! It's interesting because there's a poem towards the end of the collection about the Royal Mile. It's called 'Day after the vote.'

Claire Askew: Yes.

Colin Waters: I'm assuming that's about after the Scottish independence referendum?

Claire Askew: Yes.

Colin Waters: But having read it, I feel that it's very relevant, this poem (we're recording this in July 2016, about a week or so after the Brexit referendum). Maybe every few years as we descend into [being ruled by referendums], this poem will continue to float to the surface?

[Laughter]

Claire Askew: Yes, it was an interesting one because in the run-up to the independence referendum I was aware that all the poets I knew were writing their independence referendum poems, and I was thinking, I don't want a piece of that, I don't want to write a poem about that. I'm absolutely fine with not having an independence referendum poem. And then the day after, when the result was announced, I was walking to work (I was working at the Scottish Book Trust at the time). I was walking down the Royal Mile past St Giles' Cathedral, in the thickest haar I have ever seen in my life and it was just so fitting for that day. Where we'd all (those who didn't stay up all night) got up really early and stumbled out of our beds to find out what the result was, there was a real feeling of being very subdued. The city just felt really subdued; it was under this white blanket. We couldn't properly see each other as we walked down the street. And I just thought [sighs] I'm going to have to write a poem about it, dammit! So...

Colin Waters: Can we hear this poem?

Claire Askew: Yes.

Colin Waters: I think it would exercise some ghosts. An incantation is what we need right now...

Claire Askew: The interesting thing about it is that people from both sides of the debate, 'yes' voters and 'no' voters, have both said that they felt like it chimed with them. So, I feel like that means it's a success. It's called 'Royal Mile, The Day after the Vote.'

[Claire Askew reads 'Royal Mile, the Day After the Vote']

11. Future Plans

Colin Waters: You've got the first collection out now, you're nominated for another collection for the Edwin Morgan Poetry Award. What are your future plans Claire?

Claire Askew: Well, the first priority is to get that second collection, which is called *How to Burn a Woman* out in the world, somehow. It's gone to the lovely people at Bloodaxe, and I'm giving them time to read it and come back to me and tell me what they think. But I'm also just keen to keep writing. I think being told that I was allowed to enter the Edwin Morgan Poetry Award again in 2016 with a completely new collection, was great because it gave this deadline to work towards and I wrote loads and loads and loads. So I'm going to try and replicate that again, even though I cannot enter again next time, because I'll be far too old by then! I'm going to try and keep up that momentum of keeping writing going. The main thing in my future is writing furiously, I think.

I'll read this poem which features as a character from *This Changes Things*. [It's about] my neighbour Frank, who is this lovely 84 year old, possibly 85 year old now bloke who lives across the road from me and never seems to do very much but always has interesting stories to tell me whenever I see him in the street. He's back in [poetry] collection number two. This poem's called 'Frank's Crow'.

[Claire Askew reads 'Frank's Crow']

12. Closing Words

Colin Waters: Well, that's it for another podcast. We've got one last poem by Claire, called 'Frank', which we'll play at the end of the show, which is merely a minute away. Before then, I've got to thank some people. Claire Askew, obviously, thank you Claire for coming in to do the podcast, much appreciated. I'd also like to thank Will Campbell who wrote, recorded and produced the

music that you hear at the start and the end of the show. And of course, thank you for tuning in and listening to our podcast, very much appreciated.

If you're interested in all things Scottish-Poetry-Library-esque, there's a number of ways you can keep in touch with us between podcasts. We have a website www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk, or just Google search us. We do Twitter: our Twitter tag or handle is @byleaveswelve. We have a Facebook page: just type our name and you'll find us. And we have an Instagram account now. So, if you like things poetry-wise and visual-wise, that's the place to go. I've also tried to explore SnapChat, but I don't really understand it, so maybe in a future podcast I'll have more information about that, we'll see.

Here is that last poem I promised you by Claire Askew. Hope to hear you at our next podcast, which will be on in a couple of weeks' time and be hosted by my colleague, the fantastic Jennifer Williams.

Here's Claire.

[[Claire Askew reads 'Frank'](#)]