

Helen Mort, interviewed by Scottish Poetry Library Communications Manager Colin Waters.

1. Opening words

You're listening to a Scottish Poetry Library podcast.

[gentle guitar music by Will Campbell]

Helen Mort: So, this is a poem that has an epigraph from the AskMen.com guide [**Colin Waters:** laughs] to why men date difficult women:

[Helen Mort reads the epigraph from her collection, *No Map Could Show Them*]

2. Introducing Helen Mort

Colin Waters: Hello and welcome to another edition of the SPL podcast. My name is Colin Waters and it's my pleasure this week to introduce an interview with the poet Helen Mort.

Helen came to the library on a somewhat grey summer morning in August while in Edinburgh for the book festival, and it was a real pleasure to meet her and to talk about her new collection, *No Map Could Show Them*, which was published by Chatto & Windus earlier this year. Helen was born in 1985 and she gave plenty of notice from an early age that she was going to be a writer to watch. She was a five times winner of the Foyle Young Poets award; she received an Eric Gregory Award in 2007 and she won the Manchester Poetry Young Writer of the Year Award in 2008. Her debut collection, *Division Street*, was published in 2013 and it was shortlisted for the Costa Book Awards and the T. S. Eliot Prize. Her interests, as you'll hear during the course of this podcast, include rock climbing and running, both of which inspire poems in her new collection.

3. The theme of climbing in *No Map Could Show Them*

Helen, I wanted to start by asking you about the theme of the new collection *No Map Could Show Them*. Is it fair to say a large number of the poems are about reclaiming the history of women climbers?

Helen Mort: I think I'm just very interested in, not just women necessarily, but people whose stories who haven't been celebrated enough: un-sung heroes for want of a better term. I've mostly been focusing on women's stories in the climbing world, thinking about how all the narratives that I grew up with when I started reading climbing literature as a child were very much male heroics: *The White Spider* and *Touching the Void* and things like that. Having got interested in some of the slightly lesser known stories that are starting to come to the fore now, people like Dorothy Pilley and some of the climbers of her era, I wanted to – celebrate is the wrong word – explore them again.

Colin Waters: I'm someone who gets out of puff climbing up the stairs to my flat. So, what is the appeal in mountaineering? What is it about it that inspires you?

Helen Mort: I should start by saying that I'm not a very good climber. I'm certainly not a mountaineer, really; I'm more of a hill walker and rock climber. So, I'm mostly climbing single pitch rock climbs in the Peak District where I grew up. But I've always been really drawn to the focus that climbing gives to you; the intense concentration that I get when I'm on a route, where I can't think about anything but the next foothold, or the next handhold, or the next ledge, or trying to 'read the route.' I think 'reading the route' is an interesting way of putting it because it does remind me of the focus I get while I'm either absorbed in poems as a reader or as a writer. There's something about that intense focus or that way of being immersed in what you're doing that reminds me of what I love about poetry and why the act of writing is so all-consuming as well. It's something that I think through and those landscapes I think through as well. Stanage Edge, and that particular part of Derbyshire, the Hope

Valley, has always felt like my writing landscape: a place I go to clarify my thoughts. It's not just about the physicality of it.

Colin Waters: So, you also do a lot of running, and I was going to ask if running and climbing are to you what walking was to Wordsworth and Coleridge?

Helen Mort: Yeah, definitely. Some people talk about getting inspiration when they're running for a bus, or anything that sort of side-tracks you just enough to let the unconscious ideas filter through. Particularly with running, I think that having the rhythm of your footsteps, that kind of sense of progress, brings out lines. I like to write by ear, really, by sound. So, I'll get a rhythm and try and build up the lines from that, which I guess is similar to walking, meditation, or the kind of thing that Wordsworth would have done. Sometimes the trouble is if you're not quite finished the poem and you've finished your run, you have to go and do an extra lap [**Colin Waters:** laughs]. So when I lived in Grasmere (thinking about Wordsworth and some of his walks) I had to do an extra loop of Grasmere lake until I'd got the couplet and sonnet or the turn or whatever it was.

Colin Waters: Shall we read a poem? What about the very, very first poem. The one that's almost like a prologue, isn't it. It doesn't actually have a title unless the title is the title of the collection?

Helen Mort: Yeah. The poem was originally called 'No Map' I think, but I like the idea of starting with a poem unbidden, almost like it is a preface, or a way into the book. I wanted to set the theme for the collection, thinking not just about hidden stories, but things that the landscape holds for you that it might not hold for someone else. I think a poem that's been *hugely* influential for me is Eavan Boland's 'That the Science of Cartography is Limited'. I guess if this book has a guiding presence or a poem that's behind it, it's that one. It's the idea that landscapes remember, and people remember through them, but you couldn't chart it, whether that's a story or a feeling that you get from somewhere: kind of psycho-geography.

[Helen Mort reads 'Mountain']

Helen Mort: I guess I was also interested in that idea that comes out in the end: that sometimes you can both know something incredibly well and feel like you're distanced. I always get that with familiar landscapes. You feel like you've mapped every bit of it but at the same time it's utterly mysterious to you. Kind of like people [laughs saying people] **[Colin Waters: yeah]** you know well as well. There's always something to find out, I guess.

4. Stories of women climbers

Colin Waters: So, one of the many interesting things I found with the collection was stories of women mountaineers and even beyond the stories, the conditions under which they had to climb. And so, one of the early poems, 'An Easy Day for a Lady' is sort of hilarious in an awful way. There's a quote, a really great quote, at the start of it about how basically there's a mountain that official climbers are no longer considering a mountain because two women [laughs] climbed it.

Helen Mort: Yeah, it's a really interesting idea that if a woman is capable of doing something, that diminishes the achievement [says this laughing]. Yeah, I think you almost have to laugh at some of those attitudes. You almost have to send them up. And I think I've tried to do that in this book. Often when things might be angry, humour is the best consolation as far as I'm concerned. You can just point out the ridiculousness of it. Things have changed a lot for the better. But there can be still, especially in sport, an undercurrent. I see it as a competitive long distance runner. I did a fell race recently where somebody talked about how humiliating it was to be what he called 'chicked', **[Colin Waters: laughs]** which is where you're overtaken by some of the leading women in the race as a male runner.

Colin Waters: There's an actual term for this? [laughs]

Helen Mort: Yes, 'to be chicked'. He said this to myself and one of the other women who were leading in the women's race, and we were overtaking some

of the men. And, you know, that's not far away from this idea of 'now the mountain's been climbed by two women it's not worth doing'. And obviously those things are hilarious [laughs], but they still happen. I think humour is our best defence against the utter ridiculousness.

Colin Waters: Yes, I think so. I mean the other thing that's hilarious-stroke-awful is the fact that women climbers in the nineteenth century were expected to climb in crinolines and full Victorian lady garb?

Helen Mort: Yeah, there's a great story about one woman, I forget which climber it was now, who used to wear crinolines but she'd have a pair of trousers underneath. So, she'd take off the crinoline at the foot of the mountain, climb in her trousers, but put the crinoline back on again [**Colin Waters:** laughs] so she could return to the town with her modesty and her reputation intact. Apparently, once she got all the way back to the town of Zermatt [in Switzerland], only to realise that she'd left [her crinoline behind].

Colin Waters: Oh dear. [laughs]

Helen Mort: She was probably so excited by the climb she'd just done [that] her mind was still in the mountains. [When] she realised she'd left the crinoline behind, [she] had to go all the way back, just for the sake of reputation.

There's something very interesting about presentation and outward appearance for women then, and perhaps to some extent now, to be much more about how you are seen and how you appear visually. And I thought that [story] was a very interesting metaphor for that.

Colin Waters: For these early women climbers, was it just purely the passion of climbing that was drawing them in, or was there a sense that they were pushing at boundaries, that they were challenging? Were they like forerunners for the suffragettes? Was there much crossover?

Helen Mort: Yeah, there was quite a bit of crossover. There's a woman who was mentioned in a book. She's called Fanny Bullock Workman and she was very vocal about her feminist politics and she thought that mountaineering was an act of feminism and it was a statement. I think other people just really love the hills. That's what interests me. Whatever your motivation for doing it, it's believing that you just wanted to spend time in the landscapes that you loved, and there shouldn't be anything that would stop you from doing that. Or whether it's making a statement to reach the summit. It's still a political act anyway [**Colin Waters: yeah**], I think, no matter what the reason for climbing was.

And there's a lot of speculation. One of the things that comes up a lot in the literature around that time is people interested in *why* [women climbed]. Sometimes people wondered, if women are climbing these mountains, perhaps they're missing something in their lives. [**Colin Waters: laughs**]. There's this implication: what did they need from the mountains that they weren't getting elsewhere? I think that's a really fascinating kind of idea [**Colin Waters: laughs**]. What's driving people? That obsession continues now. People are always interested in what drives climbers and that strange obsessive nature. There's always the implication there might be something a bit wrong with them, that they want to keep going back and risking their lives in that way. But I think it's even more acute for women, even so. I've written quite a lot about the contemporary mountaineer Alison Hargreaves in this collection. There's a lot of speculation about Alison Hargreaves and what made her want to take the risks that she did as a pioneering mountaineer.

5. Contemporary climber, Alison Hargreaves

Colin Waters: You've written a sequence of poems about Alison Hargreaves in this collection. When you started out, what was it that drew you: was it the fact her life represented something for you?

Helen Mort: I've always been absolutely fascinated with her as a figure, which seems strange in some ways because, as I said before, I'm a really amateur

climber. I'm not somebody who's out there taking huge risks. I risk injury possibly: a bad fall could have serious implications. But it's not the same stakes as the stakes of high altitude mountaineering. It's not even remotely the same world. So, it might seem strange to be so obsessed with her life in that way.

It's partly because she learnt to climb in Derbyshire, which is my imaginative landscape, but also the place that I learnt to climb. But it was more reading her biography and feeling this strange sense of kinship or empathy, in a way that you can with people you've never met, and people that are no longer alive, through their words, or through their achievements. And funnily enough, I think it was partly because of Alison's obsession with mountains and the way she felt that she could express herself, and the way she felt she was only truly herself when she was in those particular landscapes or when she was immersed in the activity of climbing.

It reminds me of how I feel as a writer, and how I've always felt about putting poetry at the centre of your life. This might seem like a strange comparison, but I think anything that's so all-consuming for you, or anything that you decide to put at the heart of your life, [it] can seem selfish, exclude other things and [it] can be sometimes even a damaging focus. It can also give your life meaning, and makes you feel that you're able to express yourself in a way that you're unable to in so much of the rest of life. I really identify with that as a writer, as much as with the climbing itself, and with the way she talks about it. It's actually very moving reading how, especially as a teenager, when she was starting to climb, how she becomes herself through the mountains, and how it's a way of stepping back from some of the other difficulties of her personal life and interactions with other people. I think it's very moving to read about her. *Regions of the Heart* by Ed Douglas and Dave Rose is a fantastic, compelling biography.

Colin Waters: The funny thing is that, when I was reading that sequence of poems, because I'm not a big mountaineering fan, I was reading it and thinking 'oh, I recognise this name. Where do I recognise this from?' And I remember it because, after she died - what year did she die, was it **[Helen Mort: 1995]** '95 – there was such a huge furore in the press. The press, if I remember rightly, they seemed to be quite angry about the fact that she was a *mother* who died, and this was a really reckless thing. In fact, I think you maybe mentioned it earlier, was it K2 she climbed?

Helen Mort: She climbed the north face of the Eiger when she was 6 months pregnant.

Colin Waters: Wow! [laughs]

Helen Mort: She had two children. And it's interesting because nobody would particularly be aware that George Mallory was a father of three. That's not something that really enters the narrative, whereas everyone knows that Alison Hargreave was a mother. The debate after her death was around this issue: should mothers climb mountains? But no one asked 'should fathers climb mountains', and I'm very interested in that.

I think there are bigger questions to be asked, and I have tried to write elsewhere in this book to think about Everest and the symbol that Everest has become for risk and entitlement in some ways: the entitlement to climb and conquest. I think there are interesting questions to be asked about responsibility and climbing and people who are left behind.

There's a fantastic book by Maria Coffey, I think it's called *Where the Mountain Casts its Shadow*; it's about the relatives of climbers. It's about people who are left at home, and what it's like for them. And it's a fantastic thing to write about because it's a narrative that's overlooked. I think there are big questions about that but they're not gender-specific. They became so in the wake of Alison Hargreaves. She was a symbol of that idea of the selfishness and irresponsibility in pursuing your goals at the expense of everything else. But the interesting thing about her story is that as a mother who's climbing, if that's your career, you're also partly climbing to support your family as well [Colin Waters: right, yeah] in the way that anyone in any risky line of work would be partly doing that work to support their children as well, so there are very complicated questions to be asked. And it just became quite a sensationalist thing in the media.

Colin Waters: It did, I remember it. Very much so. The sequence is called 'Black Rocks', isn't it?

Helen Mort: I'll read one of the last ones in the sequence because, even although I'm fascinated by Alison Hargreaves, I didn't want to write in her voice, especially as she died so recently. It felt like a real responsibility to be writing about her. And I didn't want people to think that I was trying to ventriloquise or take her voice on. So I wrote in the 'you' form, the second person, and decided that I was almost writing letters to her, or postcards, or something like that, however daft that sounds. So maybe I'll read a poem called 'Dear Alison' because it brings out that feeling of address, of feeling like you're writing to someone who understands the same landscapes as you.

[Helen Mort reads 'Dear Alison']

Colin Waters: And another one?

Helen Mort: I'll read the one about the North Face of the Eiger. So the Eiger, the north face is called the Nordwand, but it's been nicknamed the Mordwand to indicate how dangerous it is. But this poem's just called The Nordwand. I mentioned that she climbed the Eiger when she was pregnant.

[Helen Mort reads 'The Nordwand']

Colin Waters: I learned from reading her entry on Wikipedia that her son Tom Ballard, the one that she carried [when] climbing [the Eiger whilst pregnant], is now himself a mountaineer.

Helen Mort: Yes, and a very good one! He's [followed in his mother's footsteps].

Colin Waters: Exactly! So, that's fascinating, that idea of passing it on for the next generation and legacy.

Helen Mort: Well, I believe her children did come with her to base camp actually, on quite a few trips. It was a family thing. They were part of the journey as well. And I think you pick up on that sense of being most yourself or most at home in the mountains. That's how I feel, on a much, much smaller scale, about rock climbing, and about hill walking, and all the things that I get inspiration from and in some cases get whole poems from in Derbyshire. That very much comes from my Dad and from family and from being exposed to that from an early age as well. Almost like muscle memory, isn't it?

6. **Beyond mountaineering: other female characters in *No Map Can Show Them***

Colin Waters: Yeah. As you say, a lot of the poems deal with mountaineering, and female mountaineers of the past and recent past. But not the entire collection; there are many other aspects. There's a role-call of female characters that have been blotted out a little bit. There's Catherine Switzer. She's a really fascinating character. She ran the Boston marathon in the 1960s when women weren't allowed.

Helen Mort: That's right, and they tried to man-handle her (that's the appropriate phrase, isn't it? [laughs] [**Colin Waters:** yes!]) to get her out of the race. Again, that's one of those things of being taken by the ridiculousness of it. As somebody who runs marathons myself, as a woman, when you go to vote, it's feeling this sense of what other people have gone through to enable you to do that: I get that with marathon running too, [a sense of] the things that people have done to give me the right and the ability to run this particular race. I always think of Catherine Switzer then. Again, it's another one of those things that you have to laugh.

They used to say that before women were allowed to run marathon distances, there were some who were worried that, if a woman took part in marathons, her uterus might fall out! [**Colin Waters:** laughs]. So, I decided at that point to try and take that ridiculous conceit to its illogical conclusion. Play around with the ridiculousness of it. Even, I remember, in my lifetime as a runner, there

have been milestones. While I was a teenager, I remember women were allowed to run steeple chase at competitive events. For the first time, you saw all the steeple chase records for long distance [events] being broken by women, because it was a new event for them, it was another event that it had been thought that women probably shouldn't run, or it's inadvisable for them to run.

Colin Waters: But you wonder what offended the chap who tried to man-handle her off the course. What is it that's so *terrible* about this, you know? What is it that really aggravated them?

Helen Mort: I suppose some of it is the idea that you're protecting someone from something. But maybe there's also an element of *how dare she* [an idea], I tried to suggest in the poem ['What Will Happen' in *No Map Could Show Them*]. An element of fear perhaps from feeling threatened, which may underlie some of these things. There's a role-call of people like that in the book.

Colin Waters: There's Lillian Belloca, which is Italian sounding. It's just as well we didn't have media [when Switzer and Belloca were alive] because they'd have been trolled something terrible. In fact, in the absence of social media, what there was was...media. You explain who she was [and] why she incurred such a terrible reaction from the media.

Helen Mort: Yeah. Lillian Belloca is an Italian name – her husband Charlie had Italian ancestry. She was a fish wife in Hull. And in the late 60s, after the old Triple Trawler Disaster, when three ships sank in really close succession, Lill decided to campaign for better safety legislation on the trawlers.

She gathered some support from other women, but it started just her on her own, going out to protest and trying to stop ships from leaving without adequate equipment. She went all the way to Downing Street. She met Harold Wilson. She did succeed in getting the legislation changed. It was a victory in that way. But she received a lot of opposition both from the community in Hull (she got death threats – people thought she was meddling), and from the

media, who ridiculed her. She was quite a large woman; she was 17 stone. That was a way of getting at her, to belittle her. I'll read two poems about Lill and the Triple Trawler disaster. They're set in Hull. The first one's called 'Lil's Dream'.

[Helen Mort reads 'Lil's Dream']

Helen Mort: And the second long poem is written as a kind of response. It's in couplets. I was thinking about some of the things people might have said to Lil, and how she might have answered them, if she chose to speak in rhyme. It's called 'Lil's Answer'.

[Helen Mort reads 'Lil's Answer']

7. Reflections on writing

Colin Waters: So, is it easier to write about characters from history that you feel a connection with, instead of writing about people you know in real life, or even yourself?

Helen Mort: It's probably a bit less risky!

Colin Waters: Yeah! [laughs]

Helen Mort: Yeah, in some sense, I've written quite a lot of mountaineering and climbing poetry. And why it seems easier to write about mountains as symbols, and how it's very different to write about the act of climbing – something that's very difficult to paraphrase. I always think of climbs like a set of instructions for the body. You have to do it to really understand it. So I think it can be easier to imagine other people in the landscape that you love than it

can be to think about yourself. Think about all those things again, going full circle: those things that aren't on the map, those emotional connections with place. I often struggle to do anything other than feel them. You go to the place and experience it. But whenever I try to put it into words, there's a gap between what I experience and what I can say about it. So, sometimes, I think the distance between trying to imagine someone else, in another era even, or Alison Hargreaves, a really talented climber in those landscapes instead, gives you the distance from which to observe them properly, rather than being so emotionally connected to the space you can't describe it. So, yeah, I do find it easier I think. But also, of course, you're always writing about yourself and your own experiences as well, even when you're writing about others, even if it's another era or time.

8. Helen's PhD on metaphor, contemporary poetry and neuroscience

Colin Waters: I wanted to finish by asking you about your PhD, which is on metaphor, contemporary poetry and neuroscience: that's a nice trio. And I wanted to ask, because I've read another interview with you in which you said that part of it, at least, is based on your response to the work of the great Scottish poet, Norman MacCaig. So, you know, [this is] the Scottish Poetry Library – it would be remiss not to ask you about that.

Helen Mort: I've been in love with Norman MacCaig's poetry ever since I started to read poetry. My dad introduced me to his work. And I just think he's – well he is, isn't he - one of the greatest poets of all time. I never tire of reading MacCaig and his acute landscape imagery, his way of... [doing] that thing that I can't do! Capturing a landscape and what it signifies to people who love it. He's so good at that.

So, I kind of wanted an excuse to write about him. And I thought metaphor is a really interesting thing to look at in his work. He's often proclaiming that he doesn't trust metaphors: he thinks they're inadequate, particularly metaphors about the natural world. They're a human presumption. They're almost projecting things onto the natural world, and anthropomorphising everything. And yet, he's so good at them – he has these amazing acute visual images in a

poem. Like movements: every animal's movement is so brilliantly captured in metaphor. I got very interested in the idea of having this facility for something that you also mistrust. The idea of language's inadequacy. So, that led me to reading a lot of popular neuroscience.

Thinking about how neuroscientists have tried to approach the mysteries of metaphor, and locate what happens in your brain when you read a particular kind of metaphor, whether it's what we call a dead metaphor – something that's used so much that we don't really treat it as if it's a novel thing anymore. Like broken heart: that's a dead metaphor. We don't think of it as metaphorical so much because it's such a turn of phrase, compared to a really novel, unusual metaphor that you might get in a poem. And that just lead me to broader questions about whether poets and neuroscientists are essentially concerned with the same fundamental mysteries about consciousness and what makes us human. And whether scientists – and this sounds like a very simple question – scientists and poets might be looking at the same kind of issues, just from different standpoints. And that sounds very obvious now that I say it, [Colin Waters: laughs] but I've spent three years thinking about it. It was an absolute joy to spend that much time on those questions, not least because I got to spend three years re-reading MacCaig.

9. Closing words

Colin Waters: And that's that for another episode of the SPL's podcast series. Time for some thank yous. Thank you number one goes to Helen Mort for coming in and talking to us: thank you Helen. Thank you number two goes to my dear friend and musician Will Campbell who does the music at the start and end of the show. And thank you number three goes to you for listening to this podcast.

If you're interested in what the SPL gets up to between podcasts you can always check out our website for our latest news. The website address, if you don't know it is www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk. We do social media. We do Twitter. We have a Twitter account @byleaveswelve. We have a Facebook page. I'm sure you know how to find that: going on Facebook and type in SPL – you'll end up at our Facebook page. And we do Instagram as well. And our Instagram handle is SPL Scotland. So we'll be back in a fortnight with another

podcast. And, in time honoured tradition, it would be nice to finish with a last poem by Helen Mort. So here she is introducing it:

Helen Mort: I mentioned that I get my love of landscape from my dad. I'll read a poem I wrote for him. It's about a heart operation he's had a few times called an ablation, which is spelt with an 'a'. When I first heard the word, I thought it was spelt with an 'o'. But it turns out that word means something else. I'm always interested in those things in poems as well. Those words that echo other ones, that have the ghost of another word in them.

[Helen Mort reads 'Ablation']