

Jacob Polley interviewed by Scottish Poetry Library Programme Manager Jennifer Williams

1. Opening

[Jacob Polley reads excerpt of 'Folk Tale']

[Musical introduction]

You're listening to a Scottish Poetry Library podcast.

2. Introducing Jacob Polley

Jennifer Williams: Hello, this is Jennifer Williams, programme manager at the Scottish Poetry Library, and this podcast is being recorded at the StAnza International Poetry International Festival 2014. I'm so delighted to be sitting here in the Byre theatre with the poet Jacob Polley, who I saw read many years ago in Edinburgh. He was fabulous, so it's been really wonderful to see him progress in his career. Jacob has had three books of poetry out, all with Picador. *The Brink*, *Little Gods* and *The Havocs*, and he has also written a novel, *Talk of the Town*, which came out in 2009. He's won many, many awards. We're going to get to hear from him about his poetry now. So we'll start with the first poem.

3. Reading and Discussion of 'Smoke'

[Jacob Polley reads 'Smoke']

Jennifer Williams: I feel like one of the amazing things about that poem is that it seems like it's going along one track, and then there's this shift. [It] feels like an exciting change of gear, and the images at the end are very potent. They almost explode out of the poem. I'm also curious about this being...

Jacob Polley: Oh, you're not going to ask me to remember how I wrote it...

Jennifer Williams: Is it a true story?

Jacob Polley: It's one of those things and I think the poem acknowledges it too. It feels like a memory, but it might not be. It's part of a memory that also becomes part of a personal legend, so I don't know whether it's true or not. It doesn't seem terribly important.

Jennifer Williams: Poets are allowed to make things up.

Jacob Polley: Yes. It's that old thing: tell a lie to get to a deeper truth, I suppose. It was a poem I wrote many, many years ago now. It's funny 'cause you don't really remember the contents of the poem, when you look back. You remember the furious intricate struggle to get the lines right and to find a form for it. To get those three-line verses, it took me a long time to get that three-line form for it – and to feel alright about it, that there were short lines and long lines and that it worked. The poem should be written for breath really, for speaking, as of course many poems are. They're not written according to some cookie-cutter shape. They're written according to how it feels they might be spoken. There's something important about that poem for me in my writing life. I came to it through that poem. I came to that feeling about how the poem should be arranged through writing that poem.

4. Discussing the process of writing a poem.

Jennifer Williams: It's one of the noticeable aspects about these poems. They feel very crafted. They feel very honed and crafted and formed. There's been very careful attention to the breaks of the line. You can feel the space around the poem holding it on the page. What is your practice like? Do you take time? Do you edit over a period of time? Do you read them out loud to yourself?

Jacob Polley: I hope or I think that my practice changes. I'm trying to find a metaphor for it. You know when you see lava fields: you see a volcano and you see a lava field. You see the lava right at its edge is still moving, but behind it's hardening and the crust is formed. I feel a bit like that. Certainly line endings or line breaks, or however you want to put it.

There's a life-long engagement with where one line ends and another begins. It just seems endlessly fascinating, interesting and a source of little perceptual shifts and jumps. There's a whole system of comprehending and paying attention to the world in the line-ending. So I feel like that's what I'm doing really or that's what I'm trying to do – keep live that sense of exploring and pushing but in terms of writing, I try to write quite quickly.

I write drafts of poems quite quickly. I like to have a sense that it's all there; it's all been expressed; it's all got out onto the page. Then I leave it and then I go

back. I try to leave it for as long as possible and then go back very ruthlessly and begin the real work of rearranging and moving things. I try to keep it very fluid, as I tell my students. Keep everything very fluid and jelly-like. Don't set anything too quickly. Be prepared to move something right from the very end right to the beginning. Be absolutely open to that possibility.

So my initial process is I try to write a draft quite quickly because that's the best bit, it's the most fun. You feel like you're improvising. You have a really improvisatory practice. There's something thrilling and exciting about that, about casting something onto the page and getting to the end of it. Like a gesture that a visual artist makes with a brush, a broad stroke that comes out of the body, and I like to feel the poems come out of the body, the mouth and the breath and the fingers on the keyboard or the fingers around the pen, as well. So I like that, but I'll spend loads of time just trying to get whatever it is right.

I'll find often if something isn't – there's also quite a ruthless motive for doing that. In that I think if I write something from the beginning to the end, I can usually tell if it's any good, if it's still crackly and if it's not I can get rid of it, there's not much lost. I've not spend that long getting it out onto the page. So there's no loss. It's not like I've spend six months writing this thing line by line and then I've got to the end and realised. In order for it to pass that test, it has to still be vibrating with life, with liveness. It has to have not quite captured everything. It has to have been written in a way that's not too mechanistic. It's like when you play hopscotch and you jump from square to square. It's got to not feel like that, like you've jumped from one to two, to one to two, and you've got to the end. It's got to feel the opposite of that, like there were jumps that you didn't make, or that you might still make. I may still write a new middle section or a new beginning or a new whatever. I've got to have made the initial gesture, I think.

5. Rhyming as a technique used to surprise the reader

Jennifer Williams: The American poet, Marie Howe, that I met a couple of years ago – her brother told her that the next line should be a surprise to her and I thought that was a lovely of thinking about it. It sounds similar to what you're talking about. The next step isn't completely obvious before you've got

there. I think from when the father breaks the book in this poem, it feels very unexpected to me everything that happens from then on. I think it's interesting that the rhymes, you really feel them ringing at the end, but then actually there's quite a lot of rhyme right through it, but it's quieter somehow. Do you enjoy using rhyme? Is that something you would do consciously or does again that happen quite instinctively depending on the poem?

Jacob Polley: It's partly to do with that lovely idea that you've just mentioned about each line being a surprise to the writer and then it can be a surprise for the reader. I tend to think of rhyme that way too: it's both a surprise and obviously the fact that the third line rhymes with the first comes both as a surprise to the reader and a comfort or the fulfilment of an expectation that you didn't really realise was there, you didn't realise you were expecting it, but your expectation is met. I like that. There's something very interesting there. I tend to use rhyme during my writing process in order to find the next line, in a very opportunistic way. Certainly in my earlier work it's much more opportunistic – the rhyme scheme's much less tied up. There isn't a kind of scheme there that I'm working to or to make the work fit. It's very much an opportunistic process. That's got to be part of being a poet, really – having that ear for chimes and echoes and the sense that the aural matter of the poem is intimately related to its imagistic content as well. You're trying to weld sound to objects and events and people and things happening.

6. Jacob Polley's favourite poets and poems

Jennifer Williams: Do you have poems that you would cite, that you love, that make you read and write poems?

Jacob Polley: Yes. I've got that probably shifting carousel of poets. I'm always on the lookout for new poets and that doesn't necessarily mean new as in young poets or poets that have just published a book. I'm looking for poets from history or from thirty years ago that I haven't come across. I'm always on the lookout for new inspirations – I was going to say sources, which makes it sound like you're using other people's work. I very much feel that the history of poetry and the poetry of other people should be a source to any writer's work. I've got that same flipping carousel or roster of poets.

Probably like many people I started off loving people like Wilfred Owen. His poetry made a big impact when I was a boy at school, along with Shakespeare's plays. Who else? I was intrigued with people like John Berryman, when I got a little bit older. I read his *Dream Songs*. They were intoxicating, partly because I didn't really understand them. I didn't think that was any impediment really to me enjoying them and imbibing something of that uncanny and strange atmosphere. I was aware that they were American and he was an American poet and so there were lots of things about America that I didn't really understand. When people refer to the sea as a Roebuck catalogue and things like that in an America poem. I'm still not quite sure what that means. [Jennifer Williams: laughs] I'm not thinking of Berryman there. I'm thinking of another poem. I can't remember who it was by.

So there was that sense that it was very exciting for me to read. There's something really basic about that – that you're reading vocabulary that you're not quite familiar with or brand names that you don't really know. Their poems are containers for those as well and that comes as an interesting surprise and a thrill. Then there were people like Elizabeth Bishop and after Berryman people like Richard Wilbur and James Wright and Emily Dickinson and Adrienne Rich and that whole American – W. S. Merwin and people like that.

It wasn't like I was absorbed in poetry from a young age. I went to a smallish secondary school. I didn't know poets were alive still. There are many people that say that – and this was before, believe it or not, before the internet. So you couldn't just look things up, so I was dependent on my school library and public library in Carlisle and that's where I went for books. My mum took me to the public library from a very young age. I've stumbled my way towards reading and towards poems particularly.

7. Jacob Polley's early life

Jennifer Williams: When did you first start writing poems? Can you remember?

Jacob Polley: I was a teenager. When any teenagers want that short, brief, expressive power of the tiny poem and the sense that it's something that springs out of emotion. I think that's what it is for teenagers, isn't it? Slightly romantic as well. So I started writing then, probably along with every teenager

ever. There were other personal reasons too, I think, for me writing points. It came right at the point when you're fourteen, fifteen, and you're becoming a little more fluent. You begin to look at Shakespeare at school: you're in that year at school. Well, when I was in school, you were in sets – set one, or two, or three – depending on your ability. Maths, you know. I was good at English, so all of a sudden there's a bit more time and you're looking at bigger books, more difficult, in inverted commas, books. There were difficult things happening for me personally, so I was looking for a way to voice those things. Or actually, not voice those things, but actually externalise them and have some control over how I felt.

Maybe that's it with teenagers as well – that's what you're looking to do. You're looking to be out of the great cyclonic love and varied romantic life of the teenager [Jennifer Williams: (laughs) maelstrom?] – maybe some of that whirl and cyclone – you desire to have that out of the self and into something. And I thought I would go to art college, painting and drawing were what I would always thought I'd do. . [Jennifer Williams: I didn't know that.] There's too much stuff. There are too many brushes to clean. Writing was immediately... much more portable. I was also lazy, I think. So the idea that you could just open a notebook and [hold] a pen, that was really good for me at the time. All painting and drawing kind of fell by the wayside. It was writing, really, that took off for me.

8. Reading and discussion of 'Folk Tale'

Jennifer Williams: Shall we have another poem?

[Jacob Polley reads 'Folk Tale']

Jennifer Williams: It's really got that ending, like a fable.

Jacob Polley: I don't know why I wrote it. That seems quite important in some ways. I think I'd started to write something else. It's often the way, with me anyway. I try to talk to my students about this too. You must begin. You must put down some things on the page, because even if what you're putting down seems unpromising, it might provide the trampoline surface, the leap that lets you find something else. You won't find that something else unless you go through the crust, the other stuff that you've been labouring to get out and

not really enjoying very much, wondering where's it going. I think I was writing something else. I wish I'd brought a notebook, but I don't think I've even got a notebook with this stuff in.

Jennifer Williams: We were just doing some work in the library around Paul Muldoon – some reading groups with Paul's poems. I thought I better try and understand what's going on here. So I read a great interview with him and I was relieved. He spoke a lot in a very beautiful way about the fact that he doesn't know anything, which obviously is not true, but it is his way of saying the more he learns, the more he realises that knowing is not something you can ever really do on some level. We have a lot of systems where we convince ourselves we understand everything that's going on – science, mathematics, and even language. We have all these signs pointing to everything, but is that really knowing? What this table is? So he was talking about trying to find a way to become more comfortable with not knowing and with a way of writing from an unconscious place rather than having to start with an idea. Even with an image, maybe? Maybe it's a sound. Maybe it's that gesture, that breath coming out of you. I find that as well – that's it when I can turn off the grocery-list part of my brain that you access something that's much more in your centre and much more original.

Jacob Polley: Intention, as well. I think intention is tricky when it comes to writing poems, but maybe not so much with prose. It's dangerous, for me anyway. It's dangerous for my poems, for the poems I haven't written, to have an intention. It's almost impossible then to write something that lives and contains a kind of weirdness or a rattle of unexpectedness. So, I'm trying to cultivate that in my practice as well: a lack of intention, which allows you to do something that isn't what you always do. You're not writing out of what you know but you're writing out of and towards what you don't know.

Jennifer Williams: I love this turning-point and surprise in the poem: 'there are bones in everything.' Somehow, at that point I'm still thinking about soup and cooking and especially the women whose hands were full and then there's this completely startling going-into the interior of someone's body. I don't know if it's because it's called 'Folk Tale', but I was suddenly in a fairy-tale world almost, where things are very much not what they seem. How do you choose your titles? Do they come after?

Jacob Polley: Yes. They come afterwards and they change. A title has to do something very odd. I was talking to someone the other day and I was just groping towards the idea, perhaps, that the poem hangs like an amulet or a pendant off this title. So it's the thing, it's the artefact. It's the object infused with significance that is hanging from this title. So the title is so important, rather like the chain or the setting itself of the amulet. It seems very important that you get the title right so it has the right kind of relationship, which might not be direct. It's not of the same material, necessarily. It's not telling the reader how to read the poem, it's just showing relationships or it's choreographing, as much as it can, significance. I think that's what we're doing when we're writing poems: we're choreographing; we're trying to adjust and change significances. We're working with language, of course, but we're working with significances. The title is this big significance that you're adjusting and changing and trying to get right. 'Folk Tale' seemed to be what the poem was, so it seemed right and it seemed to have a distance that I wanted too. I didn't want it to be called 'Bread' or something like that. I wanted it to be almost like a wood-block print. They're very beautiful and can be very complex, but for me that kind of black-and-white, bold, straight lines, dark forest. I wanted it to have that sense. So it's like a kind of wood-block poem.

9. Discussion of StAnza Festival 2016 theme, 'home'

Jennifer Williams: Yes, I think you get that sense. One of the themes of this year's StAnza Festival is home. So there have been many discussions forming about the idea of home journeys. It was making me think about our conversation and your poems. I was joking about it earlier, but being from Carlisle and living here, what does home mean to you now? Would you qualify yourself as a poet from one place or another and writing from a tradition that is associated with that?

Jacob Polley: No, I don't think I would. I would be resistant to ideas like that. I very much write out of the landscape of my childhood, which is where it was. It was beside the Solway Firth and Cumbria. It's a landscape that's inside me, really. It's a landscape that's both external that is there and anybody can go and see it and lots of people know more about it than I do, but it's also an internal landscape that will always be laid down—the Firth will always be

running in and out of me. It will always be there as a symbol and a significance that I draw on.

I'm resistant to 'where,' like English, Scottish, and that's partly to do with where I grew up. I grew up in a great border city, as it's called. That's a strange place to grow up. The kind of 'starkening' that happens in a border city, the stark divide between English and Scottish in my case, the fact that you would be identified as one or the other and get grief depending on which side. I don't like borders and divisions, especially when you're right up against them. It makes people irrational and violent.

Jennifer Williams: There's something we put on a place, but they're an invention, aren't they? I've been thinking a lot about time, and that time is something we take as a real thing that exists in the world, but if there weren't people looking at watches, there wouldn't be time. It's something we've invented in order to be able to make arrangements with one another. It's nothing that exists outside of our imagining. Borders are like that as well, aren't they. Can you read me another poem?

10. Reading and discussion of 'Keepers'

[Jacob Polley reads 'Keepers']

Jennifer Williams: I was talking to some flower artists recently, Pyrus, these wonderful flower artists, and they were talking about bees and apparently they sometimes have a relationship with the keeper. There's a story about them coming to the keeper's funeral and things like that.

Jacob Polley: Yes, there's all kind of things like that, like if someone dies in the house you're supposed go tell the hive, tell the bees.

11. Discussion of *Talk of the Town*, and the differences between poetry and prose

Jennifer Williams: So, you've written a novel. Do you feel like they're very different activities, writing poetry and writing prose?

Jacob Polley: Yes, I do.

Jennifer Williams: Do you feel more or less comfortable with one or the other?

Jacob Polley: It's hard for me to say in what way exactly they're different—it's quite tricky. It's something to do with the actual labour involved. I was joking about this the other day with some students; if you go in to write prose, if you go in to write a short story or a novel, it just takes a long time to actually just write it down, or type it out. And you have to do that really, you have to do that first of all, you have to produce 8,000 words or 25,000 or 120,000. And that's very different labour to writing one poem and the way you gather and accumulate poems for a collection. That's very different from the way that you would intentionally generate words for a book of prose.

Jennifer Williams: When you're putting a collection together, have you ever said, 'I'm going to write a collection of poetry about...' Or is it something that happens after you've written a number of poems and you think those will work together?

Jacob Polley: A year or so ago I would have said never, I've never done that. But this is the lovely and the wonderful thing about the writing life—someone's writing life, not necessarily mine—nothing's really set or fixed. I've stopped saying to my students, 'don't do this,' or 'don't do that.' I've started to say 'be wary of doing that or doing this,' because there's always a piece of writing that does exactly what you've said, 'I wouldn't do that,' and it's wonderful for it. It just shows how naïve and silly I am but it's probably taken me too long to think the best advice is be wary, rather than outright admonishment and banning. I suppose things will always come along and surprise.

I've now written a longer piece, all poems around a single character. I've found—and this is maybe the great difference between poetry and prose—that as soon as they become a demand, a chore, as soon as I start saying to myself, 'you must write that,' 'you must write that one there,' I will never do it, it will never be alive, it will never work. I've found that within that intention to write a single sequence I still have to maintain a sense that I don't really know where it's going, what's going to happen, and I just have to allow... 'Allow' sounds too passive, the idea that you might allow a poem through. I think you have to make your psyche, or soul, or your brain, or the page inhabitable for this thing you're going to invite in. But you still have to maintain an element of surprise about that. I'm not going to finish this long sequence of poems by will,

it will be by exploration and experiment and improvisation and *then* arrangement. Rather than [saying], 'hey I've got an arrangement, I'm going to write things to fit it.' It's not going to work. It has to come out and some shape has to be found in all that stuff.

12. Closing remarks and reading of 'The Weasel'

Jennifer Williams: Jacob, it has been such a delight and an inspiration to get to talk to you. This idea of being open and being attuned to what's inside and being less controlling about it is something that people should try. It's very exciting to think about working in that way.

Jacob Polley: Thank you. 'The Weasel.' This has an epigraph from the traditional song, 'Pop Goes the Weasel.'

[Jacob Polley reads 'The Weasel']