

## Out of Chaos Came You

An interview with Joelle Taylor

Acclaimed poet and founder of the UK national young poetry championships, SLAMBassadors, Joelle Taylor, was recently awarded the T. S. Eliot Prize for her collection *C+nto*. 'It was a moment of absolute catharsis, I think. I know this sounds pretentious but it felt like it wasn't about just the book or me, but about a new performance being seen as a poetic and being taken seriously.'

'There are some really interesting radical-thinking independent publishers around at the moment and they're not necessarily all poetry publishers. Saqi have this imprint, Westbourne Press, which allows them to be really maverick. And there is that sense of excitement from them when they get behind your work.'

'My earliest memories are of sitting on the stairs when I was very young, listening to my father and mother fight, very physical, very loud. And there being books around, sci-fi or horror stories, and writing my own versions of them when I was around eight or nine. I guess what I was doing was learning how to piece stories and ideas together.'

'And then of course adolescence hit and I decided I wanted to be a rock star instead, and so I started writing songs and performing in a post-punk band. We had a little bit of a drum beat and me just talking over the top. Eventually, I was offered a gig supporting The Pogues and it just took off from there.'

'Apart from Joolz, there were no women to identify with in the poetry performance scene. There were certainly no dykes, lesbians. It was all very male, white and working-class. On the other hand, you had Benjamin Zephaniah and Linton Kwesi Johnson and the punks and the reggae heads, all mixed together in this great big leftwing love orgy. But still, it was a very misogynist scene. And it took a long time for us to build enough status. I feel very passionately that I built the stage I stand on, and I know many poets of my age across the world who have done the same thing. They've taken a punk ethic or a hip-hop ethic and bypassed the literary gatekeepers, to make their own gates leading somewhere else.'

'I didn't read an actual poem until I was about 18. Wilfred Owen's 'Anthem for a Doomed Youth'. I remember suddenly it clicking with me and feeling like I was feeling his grief. By the time I got home from school, I'd decided to get a Wilfred Owen book out of the library. And then one poem leads to another, it's all breadcrumbs, isn't it. So, you walk around the war poets and eventually you find yourself with Adrienne Rich somehow.'

'I'm the first to get O-Levels in my family and the first to do A-Levels, but I was homeless during a lot of that and I didn't have the money to go to university. But I



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still went, because I'm stubborn. I ended up sleeping on people's floors. I existed by shoplifting.

'I wanted to be the person creating. I think that's partly from coming from a working-class background and distinctly feeling that I didn't want to study anyone, I wanted to get on and do it. Which is ridiculous, I know. But that was where I was coming from. I started off doing a film degree but I wrote music for the drama department and eventually realised that if I switched I'd get to write and I'd get to put on shows and I'd get to read. I wish I'd done English literature now, you know, but I think it taught me something else, approaching literature from a performative aspect.'

'Slam is all about stating something very clearly because people only hear it in that moment. But because of the revolution in publishing, the spoken word artists have migrated to the page and through that I've begun to learn about its parameters and its possibilities, and to play with it a little bit more. But equally, people who would normally stand and read without applause, you know, for 30 minutes, are beginning to understand that there's more they can do in that space if they want to. I don't mean flapping your arms around, I mean allowing the body to remember the poem.'

'After university I formed a theatre company with Vanessa Lee, called Spinster. I'd written a play for the

Sphinx Theatre Company. They paid me to do it, it was amazing. But when they got it, they were like, we can't put this on, because it wasn't agitprop any more. I was much more poetically based. And so, my friend, another theatre director said, 'Come on, let's put it on together.' And then that led to another one being commissioned. Until we kind of ran out of energy. A year to write something, a year to raise the money and then it's on for three weeks ... Whereas I found if I cut up the plays, they became poems and I could go off by myself and do them infinitely.'

'You'd have a bunch of artists together in a squat and you'd all pull your giro and you'd put stuff on. We learned our practice thanks to the government. It's a thing that doesn't exist any more for young people. We had no contacts in the BBC or the film industry like lots of middle-class students. What we had was a disregard for authority, an absolute burning passion for art and a real curiosity about life and alternative ways of living. And the sense, as well, that, as queer people, we were really exiled and disliked, and that created a community.'

'I didn't really enter gainful employment until I was about 32, when I went to work at the Poetry Society. I'd won the UK Slam Championship so that's how they kind of knew of me. I found it very difficult to adapt to being in an office, with very middle-class people, all of whom were heterosexual. I left after about two years but went back as a freelancer a little bit later, stayed there 18 years. I was drunk, I couldn't get out ... I stayed because of SLAMBassadors. The Poetry Society wasn't necessarily the natural home for it but they were giving me space to run this very maverick project, which is of course not about being on stage at all, it's about the community backstage and the networking and young people learning their craft – people like Anthony Anaxagorou and Jay Bernard.'

'I started to get other spoken word artists involved, people like Dizraeli and Hollie McNish and a lot of the people who are considered pretty established now were just coming up and they were running clubs. I trained them to lead workshops in schools. They're people who run nights, know how to get people excited and know how to perform. It was really trying to engage the disengaged, to get those lesser known narratives out there. And so, there's quite a lot of star-jumping going on, a horrific amount of beatbox from me. I'm not proud.'

'With Out-Spoken (the UK's premier poetry and music club), we've graduated from the back room of a pub to the Purcell Room at the Southbank Centre, and in fact we're moving on to Queen Elizabeth Hall later in the year, just for a couple of big events.'

'The idea is you have three minutes. If you've got three minutes to say anything at all, what would you say? And because it's the poetry of the marginalised, whatever that means in all of its diversity, that means that everybody is talking about very political things. Everything you say is

political because to say it is political. To even be standing on that stage is a political act, to think you have a right to speak to a room of people, it's political.'

'When you're actually in the space, the amount of love is insane, and a lot of those kids have never experienced getting something completely right before. Suddenly you have a space where they are recognised and appreciated and understood.'

'One of the things I'm proudest of is watching some of them turn into winners of the Dylan Thomas Prize, you know. Shortlisted for the Elliot, that kind of thing. Winning the Ted Hughes Award.'

'It's interesting to wonder if the two worlds could create a third one which is a bit more, you know, loving to all of us.'

'I love poetry that's fixed on the page as well. For example, Bhanu Kapil's *How to Wash a Heart*, these beautiful moments, *boom*. It's not messy. It's all very clear. It's very worked. It's very like that.'

'But there is also room for chaos. We've really upheld the standard of the poem that says the most in the least lines, which is absolutely commendable and really interesting. But in doing so, we've forgotten chaos, and out of chaos came planets, out of chaos came you. So what I'd like to get people to do is to embrace that a little bit more and to embrace the uncertainty, the fluidity.'



The prize is for an unpublished poem  
written by an adult for children aged 7–11

**JUDGED BY NAOMI SHIBAB NYE**

**CLOSING 31 MARCH 2022**

The winning poem will appear in  
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