

# MAKING A LIVING AS A POET

Wednesday 26 October 2016



## Julia Bird and Tom Chivers in conversation with Tamar Yoseloff

### TIPS

#### TREAT YOURSELF AS A BUSINESS

If you're lurching from job-to-job and worrying about bills, your creative brain will be distracted. Be 'risk aware' and make sure you have a plan. When Julia 'took the leap' and went freelance, she worked out as precisely as possible how much time she would have to spend working in order to earn enough to live on. Having to work more than 60% of her time per week was unrealistic; only working 3% wouldn't pay the rent.

#### CHOOSE YOUR CAREER WISELY

Contacts made in a professional context (for example, through working in arts administration) often help get your poetry seen and heard.

#### USE SOCIAL MEDIA

It gives individuals and organisations the ability to talk directly to an audience – and it's free.

#### ASK YOURSELF WHAT YOU WANT FROM A PUBLISHER

Could you self-publish? Do you want the validation of a badge, or are you looking for strong sales, or would you benefit from an editorial relationship? Tom says, don't do it just for the badge. For readers and sales, you'll want to aim for one of the major poetry publishers. But for an editorial relationship you might well be better off sending your work to a smaller company like Penned in the Margins.

#### BORROW FROM OTHER ART FORMS

Think visually, think about reader/listener experience; try creating and sharing your poems using other media like audio-recording or video (and uploading them to YouTube or SoundCloud).

#### TAKE COMMISSIONS AND APPLY FOR RESIDENCIES

Why shouldn't poets work in traditionally 'non-poetry' spaces? Be a poet in the world, not a garret.

#### THINK BEYOND PUBLISHING POEMS IN MAGAZINES

Tom doesn't think poetry magazines are the future. Penned in the Margins submissions guidelines state that "a track-record of magazine or pamphlet publication, readings, residencies and/or creative projects is desirable."

#### SAY YOU 'WORK IN POETRY'

It can feel awkward describing yourself as 'a poet', especially when you don't spend all your time writing. But there is a productive tension between 'being a poet' and 'writing poems'. Your work as a poet might involve teaching, producing and administration as well as writing and performing. Julia's short scan of the list of Poetry School tutors' day jobs revealed a speechwriter, an architect, a lecturer, a psychoanalyst and a librarian. They all still 'work in poetry'.

#### JOIN THE SOCIETY OF AUTHORS

It's very hard to make a living as a poet. You've got to be your own manager a lot of the time, and you've got to look outside the world you are comfortable in. Joining a union gives you a collective voice and professional status. The Society of Authors is the largest trade union for authors in the UK, providing support and advice to anyone trying to make a living from their writing. The SoA Poetry and Spoken Word Group is committed to campaigning for the fair valuation of poets' work. Find out more at: [www.societyofauthors.org](http://www.societyofauthors.org).

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## PRODUCING AND PERFORMING

### PRIVILEGE THE AUDIENCE EXPERIENCE

Julia imagines a 'non-poetry' audience for her shows. Make them feel welcomed and wooed. Contextualise your poems, explain the format of the evening, make it visually interesting. Know how to use your microphone, stick to time, and iron your trousers!

### LOOK BEYOND LONDON

Regional arts centres and theatres are often the perfect size for a performing arts or poetry show (60-200 seats), and you're more likely to get funding to produce a tour outside London. Apply to local councils as well as the Arts Council. Regional audiences trust the programming of their local venues, so you don't need to worry too much if they've never heard of you.

### HONE YOUR PITCH

Have a theme for your show. People are drawn to ideas, not art forms – choose something that will appeal beyond a 'poetry audience', like Love or Power. Let your venue know that you have a plan to make money. Work out ticket costs, budget for marketing and tech. An hour is a good length of time for a performance. See more tips from Julia here: <http://ypn.poetrysociety.org.uk/features/top-tips-for-producing-a-live-literature-show/>.

## CAREERS

JULIA	TOM
Work experience while at university tailored towards arts administration.	Mid-teens: became interested in experimental poetry.
First job: Education Officer in a multidisciplinary arts centre in Gloucestershire.	Late-teens/early-twenties: met David Caddy when he came to speak at school, became associate editor of <i>Tears in the Fence</i> .
Early-twenties: began to write and take poetry seriously, working towards getting a poem in a magazine.	Studied English Literature at university and started writing poetry seriously; sat on board of Oxford University Poetry Society.
c.1997: began working at the Poetry Book Society.	First post-university job at an arts consultancy (worked there for 2 years). Learnt how to fundraise, how to market, how to programme.
While working at the PBS, began doing some freelance work to improve CV – running author tours with the British Council; programming Richmond Book Festival.	2004: while there, started a poetry night in South London called 'Penned in the Margins'. Also continued magazine work.
Started working 3 days per week at the Poetry School, 2 days per week freelancing.	Saw potential for a poetry agency that worked with mainstream lyric poetry and experimental work and performance.
2006: established Jaybird Live Literature.	Went freelance. Now makes money from running Penned in the Margins as a company.
Now runs Jaybird Live Literature and works as Creative Director at the Poetry School. <i>Now You Can Look</i> will be published by The Emma Press in 2017.	2016: <i>Cain</i> by Luke Kennard wins the Literature category at the British Book Design & Production Awards.