

MAKING A LIVING AS A POET

Wednesday 26 October 2016
Helen Shay



Julia Bird, Tom Chivers (photo credit: Nick Murray), and Tamar Yoseloff

The Poetry and Spoken Word Group's first event on **Making a Living as a Poet** proved to be a vibrant evening. 'Making a living' and 'poet' are not words that often appear in the same clause, so carried a certain amount of intrigue from the outset. This no doubt contributed to it being well-attended – that and the nibbles and wine (including my favourite Marlborough) plus some lively networking.

The evening was introduced and facilitated by the Chair of the PSWG Committee, well-known professional poet Tamar Yoseloff. The two speakers were Julia Bird, Creative Director at the Poetry School, and Tom Chivers, Director of Penned in the Margins. Both are renowned published poets in their own right, with Julia also devising and touring poetry shows and Tom having won several prestigious awards. To address the subject properly, both speakers explained their individual career paths, which included much more than concentration on writing poetry. One theme to emerge from the evening was that this 'multi-functional' approach is to some extent a 'needs must' for poets these days.

Julia had initially gone into art administration at a theatre on leaving university, and subsequent work had involved her with many other creatives, including potters! She then began writing poetry and obtained a job at the Poetry Book Society, which converged her professional and personal interests. She later freelanced, combining this with part-time work for the Poetry School, and also formed Jaybird Live Literature, a London-based company working with writers, venues, festivals, promoters and educators.

Tom had written poetry from an early age, often experimental. Pivotal in his development was meeting Dave Caddy, an editor who took him on as an associate editor at a magazine. He served on the board of Oxford University Poetry Society and worked for an arts consultancy after graduation. He launched Penned in the Margins and later started a small agency for poetry. It is through work with

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the company that he essentially makes a living, but his work is still focused on poetry.

Tamar commented on how both speakers had in effect 'taken the leap', especially when going freelance and setting up their own companies. Julia endorsed this by saying that she definitely felt she kept two sides of her brain working in tandem, the organisational and the creative. She had made a calculated risk-aware decision, treating herself as a business. If she had had to worry too much about paying bills etc., the creative side of her brain would have been detrimentally affected, so it had been important to feel that, whilst she was taking a risk, it was a calculated risk. Tom acknowledged that his Arts Council funding gave him a base. Before this, for his indie publishing service to survive, he had had to rely on producing a lot of live events and a certain amount of cross-subsidy. He readily acknowledged that there was no real money from publishing and he is unable to make enough income purely from book sales through Penned in the Margins, even though it is a respected publisher known for the quality of its poets and books. His main reasons for continuing with it are to do with valuing the relationship with poets and been able to get work out to an audience. Both Julia and Tom acknowledged how social media has helped and given new opportunities for poetry promotion.

Tamar raised the issue of how to counter a lack of professionalism amongst some poetry publishers. (This is one of the issues we are trying to look into on the PSWG Committee.) Anecdotally, there are stories of bullying, lack of royalty payments, etc. Julia made the point that the massive explosion in DIY publishing via the Internet had given the means to bypass the main six gateway poetry publishers (Bloodaxe, Faber, etc.) who often have funding assistance but can only publish a selected few (and even with these, it seems poets do not get a lot of money, with very few selling over 1000 books). Tom felt that poets need to ask themselves what they want and make decisions accordingly. As a publisher, he is ultimately sale-driven to some extent but wants to get seriously good talent, for which he felt there can often be some competition.

The conversation turned to venues. Whilst bars and pubs etc. can be great and are appreciated, many poets are interested in moving from usual venues to broaden their audience. To do this, Julia takes poetry into theatres which can provide comfortable seats, set, light design, etc., feeling this reaches out to more people. Tom felt that such as YouTube videos can enable poets to do something new and reach a wider audience.

We then came to the crunch – number-crunching, in fact. Julia bravely admitted she made only 4% of her income as a poet. Her advice was not really to give up the day job but perhaps to work only four days and be strict about writing on the fifth. Tamar also commented that she mainly makes her living as a teacher of creative writing. Tom also acknowledged that it is hard to make much money purely out of poetry and advises that writers look for commission opportunities, just as artists do, and also try to obtain residences (although it was acknowledged that the latter do not always fit in with ordinary life, particularly if the poet has young children).

To sum up, it was a very useful talk given by two excellent speakers, both dedicated to developing good and innovative poetry, who gave much insight into ways to make a career through it. However, it was clear that actually to make a living as a poet, many poets may find they need to wear several hats (not just a jaunty little number that might look good at readings)! A professional, business-like approach can make all the difference.

Helen Shay
Poetry and Spoken Word Group committee member