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Author/Interview subject: National Poetry Day: LGBTQ+ Identities in Poetry
Interviewed by: Gray Crosbie
Other speakers: Rachel Plummer, Dean Atta

GC Hello everybody and welcome to Authors Live, thank you so much for joining us here today. My name is Gray Crosbie, I am a poet based here in Glasgow. Joining me in the studio this morning are some pupils from Calderhead High School in North Lanarkshire. They're with us today to celebrate National Poetry Day, and this year we have decided to focus on LGBTQ poetic voices, and we are lucky enough to be joined by some absolutely incredible writers. With us is Rachel Plummer. Rachel is an Edinburgh-based poet. They have been widely published in magazines and anthologies, and in 2016 received a cultural commission from LGBT Youth Scotland and LGBT History Month, funded by Creative Scotland to write a collection of children's poems based around LGBT retellings of traditional Scottish myths and stories. The result of this commission is their absolutely incredible book, *Wain*.

Also, with us is Dean Atta. Dean was named one of the most influential LGBT people by the Independent on Sunday. He has been published in several anthologies, performed his work widely at events and for the BBC and Channel Four. As well as writing and performing his own poetry, he also tutors other writers. His new book is a young adult novel in verse, *The Black Flamingo*, which is also absolutely amazing. If you have any questions that you'd like to ask Dean and Rachel today, you can do so online, you can onto Twitter using the hashtag, #bbcauthorlive.

Yeah, so you can let us know what poetry and spoken word means to you, so please do get in touch, but without further delay, please give a very warm welcome to Dean Atta and Rachel Plummer.

Hi guys, it's so good to be here with you both, I absolutely love both these books so much. Could we start by you introducing your books to us all and give us a wee bit more information about them. Rachel, would you like to go first?

RP Sure, my book is called Wain. It's a book of poems that retell traditional Scottish folk stories and myths from an LGBTQ perspective, so it's things like selkies, giants, wulvers, it tells stories about them, but changing them slightly, maybe gender swapping some of the characters to make it LGBTQ focused.

GC And it's absolutely beautiful, and it's beautifully illustrated as well.

RP Thank you very much. Yeah, it's illustrated by Helene Boppert, she's a German illustrator, she's fantastic.

GC It's just an absolutely lovely book. Dean, could you introduce us to The Black Flamingo.

DA Yeah, so this is The Black Flamingo, it's a YA verse novel, so it's a series of poems that tell you a story, and it's about a boy called Michael. It follows him from the age of six to 19, him growing up, coming out, finding himself, and at the end becoming a drag performer called The Black Flamingo. So it's...yeah, coming of age story with kind of like finding yourself, but also like making mistakes, making friends, having crushes, all the good stuff.

GC I love these books and I'm so excited to chat to you guys about them, but before we do, I think everyone would like to hear a wee bit from each of you. Rachel, you're up first, would you like to share some Wain with us?

SP Sure, yeah.

GC Thank you.

SP Hello. So, I'm going to read two poems. The first one is about a selkie, so you maybe know this already, but a selkie is a mythical creature who is a seal in the sea. When they come up out of the sea, they can take off their seal skin, and underneath there's a human underneath, and when they want to go back into the sea, they put the seal skin back on. So, in this poem, I've imagined the selkie as a young trans man.

Selkie.

The secret me is a boy.

He takes girlness off like a sealskin:
something that never sat right on his shoulders.

The secret me is broad-shouldered;
the sea can't contain him,

the land can't anchor his waves
to its sand.

The secret me swims
with the big fish, brash, he swaggers

like a mermaid, bares teeth
like daggers, barks at the moon when it's thin.

He's whiskered, that boy. Thick-skinned.
Quick-finned, always turning tail.

He wears his own skin like a sail,
lets it carry him to where

salt swallows mouthfuls of air.
Let them find me there by the shore:

the girl-seal with a secret
boy inside. Rough-voiced. Black-eyed.

Washed bare
as the beach by the tide.

The second poem I'm going to read is about the Finfolk, so the Finfolk are Scotland's answer to mermaids, and in this poem, I've imagined a woman who has been married to a human man, but then life moved on, she moved on, and later in her life she fell in love with a mermaid. And it's called Finfolkaheem. Finfolkaheem is the Finfolk's palace under the sea where they live.

Once I loved a human boy.
But that was long ago, before the sea
scattered its silver coins at the coast
at Eynhallow, filling my purse.

Once I loved a finwife
and her love was a transformation.
I grew gills. A shiny tail,
fish-scaled, leafy as a dragon.

That was how much I loved her.
So much that I breathed water
and spoke coral, and swam.

So much that I forsook the land

and went home with her
to the Finfolk's palace on the sea bed:
Finfolkaheem. It glowed with the light
of a thousand phosphorescent creatures.

It swayed like a drowned woman's hair.
It sang like the sea
in an empty conk shell;
I held it to my ear.

Once I loved a human boy,
and loved the land he walked on -
his two feet, his strong legs,
the hill that was our home.

But time came like a tide;
eroding life's bedrock
and flooding me with the possibility
of mermaids.

Thank you.

GC Thank you Rachel, they're so beautiful.

RP Thank you.

GC I think Selkie might be my favourite poem in that book.

RP Thank you so much.

GC Dean, would you like to go next?

DA I'd love to.

GC Read from The Black Flamingo for us, thanks.

DA Thank you. So, I'm going to read from the beginning of the book, starting with the prologue and going into the very start of the first chapter. So, this is The Black Flamingo prologue.

I am the Black Flamingo.
The Black Flamingo is me
trying to find myself.
This book is a fairy tale
in which I am the prince

and the princess, I am
the king and the queen.
I am my own wicked
witch and fairy godmother.

This book is a fairy tale
in which I'm cursed
and blessed by others.

But, finally, I am the fairy
finding my own magic.

When female
flamingos lay eggs in
the zoo, their eggs are taken
from them and put into incubators.
The zookeepers give dummy eggs
to flamingo couples to nest with, while
the zookeepers watch their behaviour
to figure out who will make the best
flamingo parents. When the incubated
eggs are almost ready to hatch they
decide which couple will be given
normal eggs and which will be
left with those that never
contained precious life.

I often feel
like a bad egg that
was not meant to be, like,
a dummy egg cracked open,
an impossible thing, but somehow
living and thriving, defying the
zookeepers' intentions, an experiment,
they watch and patiently wait to see
what might become of me, to see
how I survive without complete
love.

I was born in London,
two months before the end of the world,
on 31st October 1999.

Mummy tells me,
“When we got closer to the millennium,
people thought planes would fall from the sky
and clocks and computers would go back
one hundred years. But time cannot go back.
We can only move forward.”

I am a baby, just hatched.
My only feathers are my tiny eyelashes.

Over my gurgling, I don't hear my father
telling Mummy, “I'm too young to be a dad.”

Mummy tells me all this when I'm old enough.

How six days before the millennium,
she burnt their Christmas dinner
and he shouted, “You're useless!”
before throwing down his plate, turkey
stuck to the kitchen floor, and I cried,
startled by early indoor fireworks.

Mummy tells me all this,
this was the end for them, the beginning
for Mummy and me.

Barbies and belonging.
Today is my sixth birthday
and I'm hiding in my room.

Last year for my birthday,
Uncle B bought me this
Casio watch. *Look* - it lights up
and is water resistant. That means
I can wear it in the bath.

Last night when Mummy was
making dinner, I snuck into
her bedroom and looked inside
her wardrobe, parting the clothes

to see the back where she
always hides my presents.

I picked up the parcel, feeling
the shape of the long, thin box,
inside the silver wrapping paper.

It was definitely the right shape
to be
a Barbie!

I carefully peeled
the Sellotape at one end
and peeked underneath
the wrapping paper
at the top of the box,
to see a green logo:

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles.

I told Mummy two months ago,
“If you only get me one present
this year, please can it be
a Barbie?”

“Michael Brown,”
calls Mummy, “where are you?
Come down and open your birthday present.
Your friends will be arriving soon!”

I stand at the top of our stairs
and shout down,
“Is it a Barbie?”

Mummy comes to the bottom step,
smiling gently.

“No, Michael, I didn’t think you were
serious, but I’ve got you something
that I know you’ll love.”

I watch a tear
land on the wooden floor
between my Turtle slippers –

a gift from Auntie B last Christmas.

Mummy comes upstairs, embracing me
in a soft, warm, mum-smelling hug.

“Oh darling, I can get you a Barbie
for Christmas if you still want one.”

Christmas is ages away.

I’m about to cry again when the doorbell rings.
Emily, Amber, Laura, Toby and Jamal
have all come round for birthday tea
with their mums.

Callum is the last one to arrive.
His dad brings him, but doesn’t stay
like the mums do.

Callum and Emily don’t like each other.

Callum lives in a flat with his dad.
They play video games together
and eat takeaways for dinner,
and sometimes Callum gets to stay up
and watch TV all night if his dad is out;
It must be so much fun.

Callum is mixed the same
way as me, a black dad and a white mummy,
but he doesn’t live with his mummy
and I don’t live with my dad.

Mummy has made stuffed vine leaves,
stuffed peppers and Greek salad.
There’s olives, carrot sticks, pitta bread
and hummus, which I love, and taramasalata,
which I think tastes yucky, but I love the word.

I teach my friends how to pronounce it:
Ta-ra-ma-sa-la-ta. Tarama-salata.

“What is it,” asks Callum, “and why is it pink?”

“It’s fish eggs,” I say proudly, “and Mummy told me it’s dyed pink. I think it looks pretty.”

“But it tastes disgusting!” Callum says, spitting it back out onto his plate. “I *hate* pink.” He scowls, looking straight at Emily.

Later, I blow out six candles on my Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles birthday cake and make my wish for

a Barbie.

Thank you.

GC Thanks so much, Dean. Do you know, I think I’ve read your book maybe two or three times now, I’m not sure, but see now that you’ve started reading it again, I think I’m going to go home and read it another time.

DA That was the goal of the book.

GC It’s just so beautiful. I don’t know about you guys, but I always get so excited when I find another queer book, but I think what’s especially exciting about you guys’ books is that they’re for younger readers, because I don’t think there’s enough of that yet, and I don’t know about you, but do you think it’s important for young queer people especially, to see themselves represented in the books they read?

RP Yeah, absolutely. I started writing this for my kids, my daughter, because we just struggled to find families in books for her age group that reflected our family and us, and we wanted to see people like us in them. So, I think it’s really important.

GC And your book, it says at the back it’s for teens, but it’s also written for younger readers as well, isn’t it?

RP Yeah, it’s accessible for any age group, I hope. It’s written with teens in mind, but there’s nothing in here that’s unsuitable for younger children.

GC And I think that’s important to have it for young readers as well.

RP Absolutely.

- GC And teenagers though, because when you're a queer teenager and you're trying to figure out your identity and how you want to share this with the world or not share this with the world, there isn't masses of books out there that explore that. That's why I think your book was really exciting. It was one of those books I wish that I'd had as a little queer, I wish...this is the kind of book I wish I had to read.
- DA This is definitely for teens though. Like you meet him at six, but he goes all the way up to his teens, and he does things that teenagers do, so I won't give it to a six year old, but it's for like 14 plus, and I feel like I'm at that age, your peers are doing certain things, but outside of the kind of...your friends, you don't see representations of things that you want to be doing, you don't see lifestyles that you could aspire to necessarily in fiction or in the world at large, and I think young people need that representation in books, they need their teachers to be out if they feel comfortable to be out, they need role models on all forms of media, and I just feel like it's just super important to have books for book loving teens and teens that don't know they're going to be book lovers, to have stories that represent them, and they can aspire to those kind of lives, or learn about like different experiences, maybe that they'll never have, but just kind of like as a tool for learning and exploring who they are, who they might be, or who other people are around them in the world.
- GC Yeah, definitely, and I think it is important for all readers to see queer characters and for it to be normalised and not seen as this taboo thing, just to be normal.
- RP Absolutely. When I was writing this book, LBGT Youth Scotland were doing a survey of LGBT young people in Scotland and their experiences, and in all the comments, one thing that coming up was that the queer young people felt that greater representation to straight cis people would help them a lot, so that the first time they're encountering a trans person, a gay person, isn't that kid at school, but they're aware of them as part of the kind of wider culture.
- DA Yeah, like you said you wrote for your daughter, like I wrote for my younger self, kind of thing, this wasn't around when I was a teenager and so...but now I'm actually...and I thought, oh yeah, definitely black, queer kids will love this, but actually it's all sorts of people are telling me that they've learned from it, they understand the feeling different, even if they don't have that specific identity, because everyone's felt othered or different in lots of different ways throughout their lives. So I think teenage...when you're a teenager, there's lots of reasons you could be made to feel different, and books like ours might tell you that's okay to be different, that's something you can celebrate, and I think that's really important as well.

- GC That makes me so happy to know that there is books like this out here now, and that younger readers have these kind of books, it's great. So, Rachel, you chose to reimagine Scottish folklore in your book, can you tell us a bit more about that? Why did you choose to write this way?
- RP Well, just because for my daughter, I was telling her a lot of stories, and I do a lot of storytelling, and I tell a lot of Scottish folk stories, and she loves them, I think because they're a bit grim, they're a bit scary, a lot of them, and that's quite exciting. But I found myself gender swapping the characters as I was telling them, because there weren't any characters, there weren't any families like ours in the stories. So...and after a while of gender swapping these characters and telling these stories, I started to think maybe other people would be interested in hearing these versions. And actually then a lot of people said, well, don't you have to change them an awful lot to make them LGBT inclusive, but no, you don't, and I would say it's all there in the subtext, and I'm just trying to make it the text rather than the subtext.
- GC And I think there's a lot of parallels sometimes in like folklore and mythology with things that queer people struggle with, especially things like identity and this idea of the selkie taking off his skin, and you can choose to wear that or you can take that off, you can choose how you wear your gender, how much you show, how much you hide, and I think that's one of the really exciting things about your book, is finding those wee parallels.
- RP Thank you. There's a poem about Nessie.
- GC Oh, I love the Nessie one, absolutely love the Nessie one.
- RP And I've imagined a non-binary Nessie, because people don't believe that Nessie exists, and people don't believe that non-binary exists.
- GC Exactly, yeah.
- RP So there's lots of parallels, there's lots of things that just fit so perfectly with our experiences.
- DA Which came to you first, like which story or myth?
- RP The selkie was the first one, that poem, I wrote that before I got the grant to write the rest of them, that was my first one.
- GC And you were commissioned by LGBT Youth Scotland, weren't you?
- RP Yeah.

- GC Did that influence the way that you wrote the book then?
- RP It just was a huge validation and a huge help. I was really nervous about it. I submitted the proposal to them and afterwards I just remember feeling stupid, like oh no, they won't go for that, they won't do it, and then when they did and they came back to me and said I'd got the commission, it was a huge boost, a confidence boost, and I think we all need that sometimes, someone to say, no, that is a good idea, go for it, and then I ran with it after that.
- GC And it is quite a different idea, isn't it?
- RP It is, yeah.
- GC I've never seen anything like this before, but it's queer, it's Scottish, it's...
- RP It's very niche.
- GC I love fairy tale retellings, I feel like this is my perfect book, so when I saw this coming out I was like, yes, I need this, it's so great. But I also absolutely love *The Black Flamingo*. I think these could be my favourite two books I've read in the past year, seriously.
- DA You say that to all the authors you speak to.
- GC I say that to all the authors, but yeah, so you...it's a novel in verse. Could you tell us a bit more about that?
- DA Yeah, so you kind of take a poem at a time to tell the story, so you kind of think about, as the page is going to turn, like it's kind of a new part of the story unravelling, and you get to play with the space on the page. We also worked with design and illustration to make the pages look really beautiful as well.
- GC It is beautiful.
- DA Yeah, and so I feel like it was...yeah, an opportunity to use my skill as a poet and kind of really flex a new muscle which is longer form storytelling, and yeah, put those together, and it was really fun. It took about a year, and you can be really painstaking over it, but I had an amazing editor that helped me kind of move the narrative forward and tell a story, because as a poet, you can kind of really focus in on really like minute details, but that's great. But it was really fun, and there's a long tradition of verse novels, so there was lots for me to read to take inspiration from. Like a really recent book I read was *The Poet X* by Elizabeth Acevedo, and that is a really great verse novel and a real page turner as well, and so I kind of wanted that vibe as well.

- GC I think yours is the second verse novel I've ever read. I think all I've ever read was one by...
- DA Sarah Croston?
- GC Yeah, and I loved it, and it was so different. I was like, I've never read anything like this before, so it was really exciting to read yours. One of the questions that I feel comes up whenever I speak about your book to anyone, everyone seems to be wondering this, and I've been wondering this as well, but there was a lot of similarities between yourself and the protagonist Michael.
- DA That's what my mum said as well.
- GC Yeah, so I think everyone's been wondering how much of your own experience is in the book?
- DA Yeah, I took a lot of emotional truth and experiences, but some of the things that happened to Michael as a teenager I didn't kind of experience until I was an adult. Like I did drag for the first time in my thirties, whereas Michael does it at 19. I wish I'd done drag at 19, I might be a completely different person. I might be a fully fledged drag superstar by now, but no, it was just like an experience that really transformed me and I had to write about it, but I wanted to give that experience to someone younger, because I think it's really liberating, and I think a lot of LGBTQ people find their liberation a bit later in life, and I wanted to give a character his kind of freedom and realisation of who he was in his teens, because I just think that was...yeah, it makes it a bit of a fairy tale, it makes it...so I took some of my own life experiences and kind of made like fan fiction of my life, if you want to put it that way.
- GC But I think a lot of time, younger people are coming to terms with their identity earlier, and I hear people saying, oh, young people are coming out earlier and earlier, is this right, and people are questioning this, but I think it's books like these, and with TV changing, people can see what is possible, they have the words to describe themselves. And people are coming out sooner, and I think that's one of the things I really liked about the book as well, it did feel very present day, and this is maybe an experience that young people today might have, and how that is to come out in these current times with the internet and Ru Paul's Drag Race.
- DA I think it's more common to come out in school now than it was when I was at school, and I think there's more support and schools are allowed to do a lot more. When I was in school, we had section 28 which meant schools couldn't promote like these kind of alternative lifestyles, which was just so...you know, it didn't...it

affected my whole generation. I feel like this generation's really lucky to have a more...that teachers have more freedom to really kind of protect and nurture them through these experiences of self-discovery.

GC Yeah, I think we're definitely making progress, and books like yours I think do go a long way to helping that. So, you're both poets. Do you think there's a strong community in the poetry world, and how do you think young people can access it?

DA I think going to open mics is a good way. I think sharing your work online can be really great. I think people are always looking for poetry, whether it's on YouTube or Instagram or whatever kind of medium, so I think if you feel happy with what you've written, share it, and people, you can connect virtually to people, but I think if there's an open mic somewhere near you, go along, even if you're the youngest person there. The open mic community is a really supportive one, so I think you'll find a lot of people that you can relate to from all generations and all walks of life, and I think that's quite unique about that form of writing, that like it attracts people from all walks of life, and there's not many barriers to access. So I think that's one or two things to do, put it online and go to open mics.

GC I think open mics are great for like...you can see people who've been doing it forever, and then there's these young people coming in, or even adults who've never done it before and they're trying it out for the first time. I think that's what makes spoken word so exciting, is it so accessible to everyone, and it is quite a good community, isn't it, like people I feel like are really welcoming and really supportive.

RP Yeah, the poetry community I think is fabulous, and you can be scared to get started, and I think with communities of any kind, if you can't see what you want, if you make it happen, other people will come to that. So if you want there to be a writing group for your age group and there's not one, make one and maybe other people will come to it and it will be a thing that you've made happen.

DA Yeah. Whether you do it in your school at lunchtime or in a community centre, wherever it is...

RP Absolutely, libraries...

DA ...like the people...libraries, use your libraries. Yeah. [laughs]

RP Libraries are fantastic, yeah.

GC Definitely. Do either of you ever work with young writers?

- DA Yeah, I do lots of workshops in schools, writing workshops, mentoring, performance skills, and I love it, it's just...I think it's about being given permission, and I think when you come in as a professional writer and tell these young people, or invite them to write something for themselves, like maybe based on their own life story or maybe their imagination, but just that permission to say, now it's about you and what you want to say. Because school isn't always about that, and so it's nice to give that space and time and permission. I think even like us being commissioned to write our books, like it's permission to tell the stories we've wanted to tell, and it's a similar thing when we do workshops in schools, I think.
- RP Yeah, and I run a writing group for teens at the Scottish Poetry Library in Edinburgh on Saturdays and I love it, because it's very not school, it's very...and what you said about space, giving people a space, giving young people a space to write something, speak it and have everybody listen to it and take it seriously, is a really precious thing in a world where maybe young people aren't being listened to as much as they could be. And to just give them that time to read something, it's a precious thing.
- GC Yeah, definitely. Was there anyone who helped you guys on your journey to become poets?
- RP So many people. I've had some wonderful mentors. When I was young person, teachers at school who really helped me, and then as an adult I've had a few mentors who have really guided me and helped me so much. One of the projects I was involved in recently was the Queer Words project with 404 Ink.
- GC That was a brilliant project, yeah.
- RP Which has been a fantastic thing, and I was able to mentor a young queer poet, and that experience was great, because I feel like I've received so much, it was great to be able to give some mentoring back to somebody and see that passed on, like a chain.
- GC And she's a brilliant poet, isn't she?
- RP She's amazing, she is so good.
- DA And I think, yeah, mentoring, being able to be a mentor has been such...it's kind of a new role for me, because I was like, what can I pass on, yeah, but actually I've started to realise no, I've been around, I've done it a while, I've actually got things to pass forward, so that's been really great. And people like...for me, when I was younger, Benjamin Zephaniah, like I approached him at one of his readings

and said, can I give you some of my poems to read, and he actually responded to that, and I think someone who I'd really looked up to actually reading my work and responding, just gave me that extra boost to think, okay, I'm doing something worth doing.

RP It's huge, isn't it?

DA Yeah, so yeah, definitely, and so when people kind of approach me, I try and be as like open as he was to me, because it's such a beautiful thing to have that response from someone you look up to.

RP And actually there's some creative writing prompts in the back of Wain and an email address, you can send me your work and I will.

DA You're going to be flooded. [laughs]

RP Do, I love it, I will read them, and I will tell you how great you are. [laughs]

GC That's so lovely, and I think I've actually been to one of your workshops, haven't I?

RP You have, yeah.

GC Yeah, and I remember it being so fun, we did loads of like creative things, we coloured things in and there was pastels and watercolours and...

RP Poetry is so visual, I feel like making physical things can be a really good part of the poetic process.

GC Yeah, brilliant.

DA One thing I found really important in workshops is to actually say, you don't have to share this if you don't want to.

RP Yeah, absolutely.

DA So then it feels safe if someone's writing something that actually, it's not to be shared, it's just they needed to write it, and I see people like sigh of relief and shoulders drop when you say, we're going to write this, but you don't have to share it, they're like, ah, wow, yeah.

GC I think that's important, I really need to say...

DA I think that's really important to offer that option as well.

- GC Yeah, definitely. Right, we're almost at the time for questions, so one last thing I wanted to ask you guys is, are there any other LGBTQ poets that you could recommend to our audience?
- DA Oh my goodness, yes, Travis Alabanza, Dennis Smith I think would be like my top two recommendations. Andrew McMillan, Richard Scott for the older teens who are listening and watching. Who would you recommend?
- RP I really love Harry Josephine Giles...
- GC Yeah, I think they would have been one of my recommendations.
- RP ...who has a verse novel coming out soon, which is like sci-fi...amazing, I'm really looking forward to that.
- GC They do some amazing stuff, they really do. They had a brilliant show as well out recently, Drone, which...yeah, definitely second that recommendation. Right, so we have some questions from our studio audience, and I think Chloe has got a question first for Rachel.
- Girl Do you plan to produce any more work on the same theme?
- RP Yeah, I love the theme, I love writing about folklore and I have been working on some queer picture books for younger kids which have folklore elements in them, so I'm loving to work on those, and I'm writing more poems for this age group for kind of the teenage group as well that's more seasonal. Thank you.
- GC And next, Jack, have you got a question for Dean?
- Boy Yeah, will you be writing more novels in verse for young adults?
- DA I really hope to, and I'm just kind of racking my brains for like the right idea, because I feel like this is the book I've been meaning to write all my life, and so like it's the story I've wanted to tell, and felt so close to my own heart, and so now I want to find something I can feel as passionate about writing, but I've been really passionate at the moment, I've become an uncle quite recently, I've got two nieces, and they've inspired me to write about children. So, I've written a children's picture book in verse as well, so that will be coming out sometime soon. So yeah, writing for a younger age group, because I think we need diverse stories across the board. I think children, teenagers and adults need to see themselves represented, and I think if we can provide something for all stages of life, a whole kind of rainbow of books for every age, I think that's the goal, that's what I'm going for.

- GC Thanks so much, guys, for those questions. We have one question from Twitter, and it's, what made you want to become a poet?
- DA For me it was being able to...well, I wrote poetry to kind of like get out these thoughts that I was having that I was trying to figure out, it was so muddled in my head, and once I started putting it down in a poem and had to like craft it in some way, it started to become clearer. And then to be a poet, like as a job or as a thing, it was going to open mics and being inspired by other performers, and trying it myself and getting a good response and saying, well, this is something that makes me feel good, I enjoy, and I'm getting good at, I'll carry on.
- GC And that feedback you get from open mics is brilliant, isn't it, because it's right there, it's immediate.
- DA Exactly.
- GC You can see it on people's faces, a lot of the time people come and speak to you afterwards, and I think helps you develop as well, doesn't it?
- DA Yeah, because if you're doing poetry where you send it off to magazines and competitions and you don't hear back or you get a lot of like no, you know, rejections, that's the only thing to call them, like it can weigh on you, whereas at an open mic, it's slightly different. If you get a softer clap than usual, you don't take it too hard, but they always clap for you usually at an open mic, so that's good.
- GC And different ones are different, isn't it, sometimes a certain audience a poem works brilliantly for, and then there's another audience, oh, that didn't work so well there tonight.
- DA Then you can go find out, like actually chat to people about it.
- GC Yeah, definitely. What about yourself?
- RP When I was quite young, I think I was about eight or nine, at my school I had a fantastic teacher who gave us each a verse of Lochinvar by Sir Walter Scott to learn, and I loved the poem so much that I just memorised the whole thing, and came back the next day and recited it, and this teacher was so great, and he understood that I...there was something there, a spark there, and he gave me then a poem a week, a grown up poem a week to memorise.
- GC Oh wow.

- RP And I still remember them all, and I've just loved poetry since then, and it went from there, from reading it and loving it to writing it, this natural progression.
- GC That's amazing. Right, well, I've got a couple more questions. Dean, can you tell us a bit more about the significance of The Black Flamingo as an image and what it means to you?
- DA In the book it was...it's about being black and queer and kind of standing out from like the crowd, I guess, so it was based on seeing a real black flamingo when I was visiting family in Cyprus, and it was a news feature, like everyone was talking about it because like it was the second sighting ever of a black flamingo, and it felt so rare. But it made me think about when I was younger and I used to go to like gay clubs and be one of the only black people there, and people wanted to touch my hair, and I felt like this novelty to people. But also kind of being black in the UK, which is predominantly a white society, and so like in terms of sexuality and race, it kind of was that intersection of those two things, and it's just the most fabulous image, so then it evolved into being a drag character as well, because drag is so fabulous, you can wear feathers and heels and do like the pose, standing on one leg. I was like, I could just...it kind of almost instantly kind of came together, and it was like, I've been waiting for this metaphor all my life.
- GC And it works so well. It is, it's so perfect, and you look amazing when you're in drag.
- DA Thank you.
- GC Slightly disappointed you aren't in drag today. I was wondering [laughter], I was like...
- DA Next time. [laughs]
- GC Rachel, were there any characters from folklore that you weren't able to include in Wain that you maybe would have liked to or might do in the future?
- RP There were...I mean, there's so many. It could have gone on forever, there's a lot of folklore, but there is especially...there's a lot of stories that are the same as the Irish kind of mythologies, and that involve the same kind of characters, and there's lots and lots of stories, and I weighed up whether to include them, but in the end I thought there was so many, it would have just taken up the whole book with just these stories. So I decided...I've just got one poem that references those, but I really could, I could do a whole book on those. They're such fantastic stories, so those were ones that I would have maybe liked to have included.

- DA Commission this next book. [laughs]
- RP I am available for commission.
- GC Right, one last question for you guys, what piece of poetry or prose do you wish you had written?
- DA You have to go first.
- RP Oh goodness.
- DA [laughs]
- RP So much, so much. I wish I could write prose just full stop, but I can't. One of my favourite poems, I love poems that tell stories, one of my favourite poems that I wish I had written is Goblin Market by Christina Rossetti. I think it's just such a lovely poem that tells such a fantastic story, and it has got a lot of queer themes to it, and it was a really big thing at that time, and I would love to be able to write...maybe not that, but something like that, something that has that much story to it and is so beautifully written.
- GC Good choice.
- DA I think anything by Zadie Smith, like I think in terms of prose, I just love...I love her writing, and I think her characters, they're just...she just puts you right there into it, and you feel like...yeah, you know these people straightaway like, and I recognise them, and she writes so vividly, and I think Zadie Smith's work, all of it. [laughs]
- GC Good choices. Right, well, sadly that is us out of time for today's event. It has been so great speaking to you both, thanks so much for being here. I cannot wait to see what you do next, especially these picture books, that's really exciting. Can everyone please join me in giving a massive round of applause to Dean and Rachel. So, this event will be available to watch again soon online as well as all of our other authors. You can see it at scottishbooktrust.com/authorslive, so look out for that. We're going to leave you now with a video made by the pupils from Calderhead when they took part in BBC Scotland Learnings Lab programme. They have been exploring what identity means to them, so we wish you all an absolutely fantastic National Poetry Day, and we shall see you again for more Authors Live. Goodbye.
- Boy I am a big dreamer with wild aspirations and I stand out from the crowd. I am loud, I am unique and I am proud.

- Boy I am a glacier, boring and slow, but loving and caring once you begin to know me and the landscape I leave behind.
- Girl I am one more quiet person staying up at night and trying to get to the next level of this game we call life.
- Boy I am loud and proud of who I am, especially when I'm wearing pink, blue and purple.
- Girl I am a bright person, even in awkward and hard situations during life.
- Girl I am the sunset shining on plants and loving and protective towards my friends and family.
- Boy I am defensive of my family, but otherwise asleep.
- Boy I am a tomboy and I make close friends' family.
- Girl I am dyslexic, I don't let this define me.
- Girl I am known as the big sister to my family, yet I count myself as a small sapling with my whole life ahead of me.