

Date:

Author/Interview subject: Jackie Kay

Interviewed by: Janice Forsyth

Other speakers: Miko Berry

Jenny Lindsay

JF: Hello there, I am Janice Forsyth. A huge, massive welcome to Authors Live, which is always a fun and special event, but particularly so today. It's a very, very special day today; National Poetry Day. I'm really delighted. I'm not just here on my own. In the studio with me today are some very gorgeous and talented pupils from Forrester High School in Edinburgh and Stewarton Academy in East Ayrshire. Have a look at them while they applaud. Yeah! [applause] Coolest audience ever.

Now, I should tell you, you might notice there are a lot of lights around. I mean it looks really great on this set. There is a reason for that though. This is the UN International Year of Light, and for that reason the theme of National Poetry Day today is light. So there, that's your explanation for all of these lights, which also look very beautiful.

Now, she always lights up a room, we're really delighted to be joined today by one of Scotland's best loved poets and authors, please give a massive welcome wherever you're listening and watching out there, and here, to the marvellous Jackie Kay. [applause]

Now, Jackie, lovely to have you here.

JK: Yes, it's great to be here.

JF: Do you like all the lights?

JK: I like the lights, they're lovely, yes.

JF: We're not going to forget what the theme of National Poetry Day is.

JK: Yes, well, happy National Poetry Day everybody.

JF: Yeah, Happy National Poetry wherever you're watching and listening. Now, lots of people will be watching today who are very familiar with your poetry. They might read it in their spare time, but also folk who studying National 5 English. So

you're that important, you're on the curriculum. The great news is Jackie will be reading for us later on, along with another couple of poets who've written poems inspired by your work, Jackie. And I guess the whole point of National Poetry Day today for you guys and wherever you're listening and watching is to inspire people. So what about you? What was the beginning of your journey into poetry? Was there one moment? Was there a particular example?

JK: I got brought up going to Burns Supper, so I used to really love going to the Burns Suppers and seeing the address to the haggis, it was all very dramatic to me. Fair fa' your honest, sonsie face, great chieftain o' the pudding-race! Aboon them a' yet tak your place...

JF: Painch, tripe, or thairm. [laughs]

JK: Yeah. Weel are ye wordy o'a grace, as lang's my arm. And the haggis would...

JF: Never forget it.

JK: ...burst open and I thought it was really exciting. I thought it was exciting that a piece of food had a poem. I was trying to think what other piece of food has a poem to it. A poem to Yorkshire pudding...

JF: Yeah, or a baked potato.

JK: And I suppose I started writing poems because poetry was a sanctuary for me. It was a place to go. So if you were getting bullied at school or if people were saying unpleasant things to you, you could go away and there was this den really, and the den was poetry. And it was somewhere...a safe place really, a companion. Another side of you, a side that you could write about and not necessarily show to everybody. A bit like a diary. So there was something secretive and imaginative about poetry, but also something performative about it.

And the first poem that I remember reading out loud was a poem that I wrote for my mum, which was about being adopted. And it went my mammy bought my out a shop, my mammy says I was a lovely baby. Your mammy had to take you, she'd no choice! [laughter] My mammy's the best mammy in the world, okay? It ends like that. So my mum used to get me to read that poem out at parties.

JF: And that's a great example though of how poetry...yes, you can just sit and read it, but it is actually brilliant to read it out loud, if you're reading someone else's. And when you're writing, do you read it out loud as you're writing it?

JK: Yeah, well, I write it several times first and then I read it out loud when I'm nearly there. I don't read it out loud too soon, because I might get too fond of something too quickly. So I read it out loud after I'm about on draft 12 or something.

JF: And do you think that those early days of the whole Burns thing, where it's all about a performance, and also the idea of writing about something very personal early on about being adopted. Did that set the tone for you in a way about looking deep within and writing about yourself and people you knew?

JK: That's an interesting way of putting it, yeah. I think so because I think the first book that I wrote was the Adoption Papers, and it had characters in it. The character of the adopted mother and the character of the birth mother, and the character of the daughter. And they were made up, the birth mother was made up and the adopted mother was based on my own mum. But it was a mixture of reality and imagination.

And I suppose I really like fusing those two things; reality and imagination and trying to see what you can get out of it. Because I think if you sail close to the wind like that, sometimes interesting things come out. And the birth mother was really a creation of my own. So in a funny I was doing the reverse, instead of her giving birth to me, I was giving birth to her in my imagination. And I think when you're adopted or when there's somebody in your family that you'd like to know a lot about but that you don't know a lot about, you already are introduced to something imaginative if your parents have split up or if you've got different aspects of your family. If you've lost somebody, you've already got an imaginary relationship with what could've been.

And I think writers write about what could've been. Robert Frost's famous The Path Not Taken, we're always thinking of path splitting. And I suppose sliding doors of what the other life would've been like. And when you get some idea of double time, it's immediately interesting to you.

JF: You can have such fun with that. Now, clearly Jackie's so interesting talking about poetry, I've got lots of questions, we've got some that have already come in online; thank you for those. And I'll try to get through as many of those later. But you can actually ask Jackie questions as we go along, because there's a hashtag. So if your classroom or school has its own Twitter feed, all you have to do to ask a question of Jackie, which will be relayed to me, is use the hashtag #askjackiekay. There you go. It's that straightforward. #askjackiekay.

You mentioned Robert Frost there, you've mentioned Robert Burns. Are there any particular poets still with us or no longer with us who are particular favourites of yours?

JK: Yeah, I mean there's lots of poets that I really love living and dead. I think if you're a writer you need to be a reader, they're opposite sides of the same coin. Toss one up and you get writer and toss the other and you get reader. It's as important to me as it is to write, and I exist to be a reader as much as I exist to be a writer. So in Scotland we have great living poets and great dead poets. The great dead poets we have, Norman MacCaig, Edwin Morgan, Hugh MacDiarmid, Robert Burns; they're some of my favourites. And living poets, some of my favourites are Don Paterson, Tom Leonard, Kathleen Jamie, Liz Lochhead, Robert Crawford. But we have riches of writers in Scotland.

And then outside of Scotland there's all sorts of writers that I really love, like the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda or the Nigerian poet and writer Chinua Achebe who's written wonderful things, or Willy [inaudible 7:26]. And in the Caribbean I love poets like John Agard, Fred D'Aguiar. And in England I like poets like Carol Ann Duffy, Jo Shapcott. So these are living poets, a lot of them are living poets that I'm really fascinated with. And in America I like the African America poet Audre Lorde and Langston Hughes and Rita Dove, Gwendolyn Brooks. So yeah, I think there's poets everywhere.

But one of the really interesting ways to approach poetry is to get little poetry pamphlets, [inaudible favour new poets 7:56], six little favour pamphlets, and they're really a great way to get into poetry or Mariscat Press do great pamphlets, they've just done one of mine called the empathetic store. But it's quite nice because you've got a wee jotter basically. A wee jotter of poems and you can have a taster or somebody and decide if you like them.

And the same, anthologies are great. Staying Alive is a great anthology, or the Rattle Bag that Seamus Heaney did with Ted Hughes, just to dip in and out of an anthology and decide by poems which poet you like and then follow poets around like that.

JF: That's so important because sometimes I think a great big book of poetry and can be a wee bit intimidating, and you might think you have to start at the beginning and go to the end. But absolutely what you're talking about there just opens it up, which is what it's all about.

JK: Exactly. And poetry pamphlets are really back, there's so many exciting and classy and wonderful publishers of poetry pamphlets. Candlesticks, tall

lighthouse, there's just a lot of them and they're all quite beautiful looking. And they're handy and you can put them in your pocket, take them away on the tube. They're just nice and light and handy they give you a lot of deep thought.

JF: Jackie Kay is so blooming inspiring, isn't she? All this information, I'm really glad. The great thing for the audience here and for everybody watching is of course this session will be online, so you can go back and sit down and make a note of that very lengthy list of...

JK: Sorry.

JF: No, it's brilliant! Inspiring poets and the pamphlets and all the rest of it. It's just such brilliant information. Thank you very much. Don't forget the hashtag, #askjackiekay.

Well, the whole idea, Jackie, of being inspired by other poets brings us neatly to the next part of what we're going to do today. I'd like you to welcome two very, very exciting, really talented new voices in Scottish poetry. Please give a huge round of applause, even if you're out there, that's fine, you can do it, to Miko Berry and Jenny Lindsay. [applause]

Hi. Hi.

JL: Hello.

JK: In case there's any confusion, that's Miki, and that's Jenny, in case you were wondering. [laughs] Now, I've seen these guys perform before. You're in for a treat, just such brilliant, brilliant poetry and things that they make you think about in their work. And Miko, you were Scottish slam champion 2014. I've got to have this written down because there's so much going on here. Current European slam champion and you came fourth in the World Slam Final in Paris. I think that deserves a woo, people here. [applause] Yeah, that's a big woo.

Just in case people don't know, poetry slam; what is it?

MB: Oh, well, big question. So poetry slam is a competition, like a rat battle where you wear cardigans. So in a rat battle your bars are against someone else, whereas in a poetry slam you just do your poem, it's not about the other poets. You could write one if you wanted to. And everyone gets up, they do their own poems in a certain amount of time, it gets judged and then if you win you get to call yourself a slam champion and pretend that you're like a wrestler or something like that.

JF: You're not a wrestler, no.

MB: No.

JF: I last saw Miko when he was at the Edinburgh Fringe with your show. Tell us a wee bit about that.

MB: I did all sorts of stuff during the Fringe. It was a mad month...

JF: That's right, there was more than one, yeah.

MB: Mad, mad month. But I was part of a show called Loud Poets, which was on at the Storytelling Centre and it was a collection of different slam poets from around the UK and beyond, all set to live music. So yeah, it was a lot of fun, very exhausting. I think a lot of performers come September have a wee nap / hibernation period.

JF: But you were up for it because actually Miko came on a show that I was doing which we didn't have an audience and you were great. In fact, Jenny, you were on another version of that. And then afterwards you just did a spontaneous to camera rap poem about our programme, which was the highlight of our year I have to tell you.

MB: You took advantage of my adrenaline.

JF: We did, he was on a roll. Thinking of roll, Jenny, lovely to speak to you and you're another incredibly busy person, constantly curating events, doing your own poetry, part of a dual called Rally and Broad. There's that old cliché about is something the new rock and roll? But just hearing about Miko saying there about mixing it up with music. Where do you think poetry's at, at the moment, the performance side of it?

JL: Yeah, performance poetry and spoken words. I mean it's called lots and lots of different things. I've been involved for about 13 years and I must say when I started out there were very, very, few young people who were actually getting up on stage and doing the kind of thing that Miko and Loud Poets and the like are doing. And yeah, I was one of the young ones back then! Back then... [laughs]

JF: You still are!

JL: And yeah, the way that performance poetry and live poetry, and the way people are experiencing poetry has really, really changed. And that's really exciting. I run a live literature...live literature...cabaret called Rally and Broad with Rachel McCrum who I'm sure you will all hear a lot from over the next few months. And we get poets and authors and musicians all on stage on a Friday night and entertain an audience with it. So if you told me when I was at school that poetry

would be something I did for entertainment I probably wouldn't have believed you to be honest.

JF: And I'm just looking at this lovely audience here and thinking of people out there, how many potential poets there are, they may be already doing it. And you mentioned Rachel McCrum.

JK: Yes.

JF: Just to say today, National Poetry Day, we're launching the fact that Rachel McCrum is the very first BBC Scotland poet in residence. It's really, really exciting. She's going to be popping up in all sorts of shows and spreading the word about poetry.

So today's event, what's happened is that both Jenny and Miko have chosen each one of Jackie's poems and they've written a personal response to each poem. And Jenny, you chose Jackie's poem Gap Year. So first of all, Jackie, will you share Gap Year with us?

JK: Yeah.

JF: And then after that we shall hear Jenny's response to it. Do you want to say anything about why you wrote this poem? I'm reaching for hankie immediately.

JK: Gap Year is really what it says on the tin. My son went on a Gap Year, but it made me really think about seeing his face, and I supposed what sparked the poem off is saying his face on the webcam, and it was all fussy and it made me remember or think about the face that I saw on the scan, on a fussy screen as well. And it made me think of simultaneous time and how your memory works. Your memory's not linear; things can happen years apart and yet be exactly together. So I was really fascinated in that, in their being a gap of time. But also in there being no gap at all of time. And also of him being six foot two and things being reversed. And he said to me mum, if I stand at my full height and give you a hug, I feel like I'm consoling a small child. And so I was thinking of how things get turned around and things get quickly reversed in life. So that's another kind of gap.

JF: Great, so thank you.

JK: So... I remember your moses basket before you were born. I'd stare at the fleecy white sheet for days, weeks, willing you to arrive, hardly able to believe I would ever have a real baby to put in the basket. I'd feel the mound of my tight tub of a stomach, and you moving there, foot against my heart, and you moving there, foot against my heart, elbow in my ribcage, turning, burping, awake, asleep.

One time I imagined I felt you laugh. I'd play you Handel's Water Music or Emma Kirkby singing Pergolesi. I'd talk to you, my close stranger, call you Tumshie, ask when you were coming to meet me. You arrived late, the very hot summer of eighty-eight. You had passed the due date string of eights and were pulled out with forceps, blue, floury, on the fourteenth of August on Sunday afternoon. I took you home on Monday and lay you in your basket.

Now, I peek in your room and stare at your bed hardly able to imagine you back in there sleeping, your handsome face soft, open. Now you're eighteen, six foot two, away in Costa Rica, Peru, Bolivia. I follow your trails on my Times Atlas, from the Caribbean side of Costa Rica to the Pacific, the baby turtles to the massive leatherbacks. Then on to Lima, to Cuzco. Your grandfather rings, have you considered altitude sickness, Christ, he's 16,000 feet above sea level!

Then to the lost city of the Incas, Macchu Picchu, where you take a photograph of yourself with the statue of the original Tupac. You are wearing a Peruvian hat. Yesterday in Puno before catching the bus for Copacabana, you suddenly appear on a webcam and blow me a kiss. You have a new haircut. Your face is grainy, blurry. Seeing you shy, smiling, on the webcam reminds me of the second scan at 20 weeks, how at that fuzzy moment back then you were lying cross-legged with an index finger resting sophisticatedly on one cheek.

You started the Inca trail in Arctic conditions and ended up in subtropical. Now you plan the Amazon in Bolivia. Your grandfather rings again to say there's three warring factions in Bolivia, warn him against it! He can't see everything. Tell him to come home! But you say all the travellers you meet rave about Bolivia. You want to see the Salar de Uyuni, the world's largest salt-flats, the Amazonian rainforest.

And now you are not coming home till four weeks after your due date. After Bolivia you plan to stay with a friend's auntie in Argentina. Then to Chile where you'll stay with friends of Diane's. And maybe work for the Victor Jara Foundation. I feel like a home alone mother. All the lights have gone out in the hall, and now I am wearing your large black slippers, flip-flopping into your empty bedroom, trying to imagine you in your bed.

I stare at the photos you send by messenger, you on the top of the world, arms outstretched, eager. Blue sky, white snow. You by Lake Tararhua, beaming. My heart soars like the birds in your bright blue skies. My love glows like the sunrise over the lost city. I sing along to Ella Fitzgerald, a tisket a tasket. I have a son out in the big wide world. A flip and a skip ago, you were dreaming in your basket.
[applause]

JF: Love that poem, it's just amazing to hear you do it. It's just fantastic.

JK: Thank you.

JF: Thank you so much. So Jenny, what was it about Gap Year that attracted you?

JL: Lots of things. Recently I've been trying to write a bit more about family and I've been thinking a lot about the differences between the generations as well. At my age my mum had had three children, she was married, she had a mortgage, all of those kind of things. And I have none of those things. So I've been thinking about writing about that for a wee while, so I was attracted to that poem because of it.

But also the way that time passes so quickly. I don't know if it is something about getting older, but actually it feels like time does pass really quickly now. And then actually I was going to write something for my mum, but actually I spent a day with my grandmother recently, and she has dementia. And the way that time and memory works for her was something that I thought I would try and write in response to your poem. So my poem's called the Gap.

JF: Fantastic. Well, do you want to share it with our audience now?

JK: Yes.

JF: Thank you very much.

JK: I'll do my best. The Gap, part one. I write these first words at the last goodbye we've had. I've just boarded the train, you and mum have waved me off from the platform. You always get so upset at goodbyes these days. Each brings tears and wishes for a swift return. My papa jokes that you forget the goodbyes you've said within two minutes, that your conversations are repetitions that your absence of time is ever present. But that you still laugh together and rib each other constantly. That there's plenty of food in the fridge, but not to let you near the cooker.

Me and my mother say goodbye to you swiftly when the time comes, though papa is taking his time to prolong the leaving, till the last minute he could feasibly get away with, though my mother and I offer platitudes and reassurances. We'll be fine. It's just for a few hours. You won't be apart for too long.

I remember elaborate Christmas dinners, your house scented with plumpness, ripe with profiteroles and ham hock, alcohol a pleasure, and flowing constantly. All that richness, such a contrast to my immediate familiar surroundings. Your love was eternal. It swift through every interaction, every pass the salt, Jean,

every Archie, it's five thirty, is it gin o'clock now? And through every single one of your sixty anniversaries.

Dates are now largely forgotten. My papa gestures to the calendar on the window sill that he tries to direct you to each morning and says I don't know if what day it is matters really. She doesn't know or forgets. Perhaps it doesn't matter. And now today. I'm here not to look after you, more look out for you as your thoughts and actions have become impulsive. As we wander the garden I decide to confide in you how my brother and sister and I used to scale your shed roof and how small it now looks. But what a mission it had seemed then, the bravery of impulse.

For four hours we wander between inside and outside, mango juice, cheese sandwiches, bourbon biscuits, two full teapots of tea. We talk about the same things from different angles. I ask about your schooldays, you ask how many studies are going, though I finished them eight years ago. We talk about writing and teaching and how I'm a bonny lass really, not to worry about my non-existent husband, and if I'll stay for tea.

At one point you go upstairs to the bathroom. I hover uncertainly at the bottom of the stairs for five minutes before ascending. I find you sitting in front of the mirror brushing your hair with a different sweater on that before. A logical impulse, it was getting cold. Your reflection says hello and asks if I know where papa is. I reassure you, and we descend together and go back to the garden.

Part two. I don't know where Archie's got to today. He's gone to the theatre, Gran, with mum, he'll be back at six. Oh yes, I remember. Well, what can I say? I'm such a forgetter, you know, these days, it comes with age I suppose, nothing sticks. I don't know where Archie's got today. He's gone to see Lanark with mum, you know, the play. It's a great one, a sell-out, but mum managed to get two tickets. Oh yes, I remember. Well, what can I say? I'd forget my head if it wasn't... Here now, will you stay for your tea tonight? One more is easy to fix.

I don't know where Archie's got to today. Archie, where is he? I'll just check with him it's okay. Gran, it's okay, he'll be in the door at six. Oh yes, I remember. Well, what can I say? Shall we go inside now, the sky's getting grey. Outside or in, you take your pick. I don't know where Archie's got to today. Oh yes, I remember. Well, what can I say?

Part three. His absence was so present throughout the day. I realised why he'd been so reluctant to leave for so long, three acts. Why my mother had forewarned that this being the longest he'd ever left her alone, that she might get distraught. But actually it served as a reminder that neither was ever gone from

either of their minds for long. What love this is. Their bond, no gaps in that yet fond. But the saddest of goodbyes. A gap forms between where you stand on the platform and a train that pulls away so gradually. [applause]

JF: Oh, I thought I was going to start crying during that.

JL: Are you okay? Are you okay, Jackie?

JK: Yes, very moving.

JF: Just tell me what you think of that. I mean it's so moving in its own right and then the whole idea of a response to your poem too.

JK: I love that interpretation of the gap because there is that gap with dementia and because with dementia you live every moment on repeat, and every moment is fresh to you. A very, very fresh present tense, and so that can present tense that you have in the poem, but this real strong hunting really of the past. But then when you have dementia the past isn't properly making sense to you. So things come in shards and broken ways. So I find that really moving in that poem, the way that you've captured. And that last image of the train and the pulling away and that gap, because you hear always on sub ways; mind the gap, mind the gap. And that idea that there's a gap somewhere really in all of our lives in different ways.

And I think it'd be fascinating just for people to maybe take the notion or the theme of the gap and all write your own story, poem or piece of writing, whatever it was, journalism, just about gap and what a gap means to you. A gap in your understanding or a gap in love or a gap in your heart, whatever way we choose to interpret gap. But I think that's a wonderful interpretation of gap.

JF: And I think everything you're saying, reinforcing the idea that writing poetry, you don't need to start from a blank, which can be intimidating.

JK: Yes, exactly.

JF: As you said, you don't separate reading poetry from writing it and being inspired. It's so wonderful. Well, let's continue that process, because Miko, who chose... Tell us the title of the Jackie Kay poem that you chose to be inspired by?

MB: I chose a poem called Lucozade.

JF: Yes, a well-known drink. Jackie is going to share that with us now. Anything you want to say about Lucozade? The poem.

JK: Well, it feels very strangely bizarre to me at the moment, Lucozade, because my mum's in hospital in Gartnavel at the moment and the business of taking things to hospital and them always being the wrong things in a sense because everybody's wrong for somebody in hospital because somebody in hospital can never have anything that's right really. Because being in hospital, if you're in for a prolonged period of time is wrong. And so this poem just feels very strange, because it almost could work for today.

And that business of when you visit somebody in hospital, that then becomes your life and the stories that you get from other people, the little moments in the lift. I suppose you develop a huge sense of empathy really with other people and that's I suppose what a writer needs more than anything else to writer, is empathy, putting yourself in someone else's shoes.

I used to be a hospital porter when I was 19, 20, 21. I was a hospital porter for three months of the year as a student. And I found just the whole business of being in hospital from that end is really, really illuminating. And you take people to the x-ray and cardiology department and people will be in all sorts of different states. Back then there was a real racism in the 80s and so some people would refuse to be pushed by me. And they'd say things like I'm not being pushed by a darkie, whatever.

JF: Oh.

JK: And you think goodness, if someone's dying and they've got green skin, that they still have decided that they don't want to be pushed by me. So that was a strange experience. But I digress.

So the whole experience, hospitals are other worlds, underworlds. I even had to clean a mortuary once which is quite scary, because a dead body sat up and burped and lay back down! Apparently, they say, that's quite common of dead bodies, but I didn't know at the time.

JF: This was a whole other event.

MB: There were some faces in the audience when you said that.

JK: I know. I've freaked out my friends, but anyway. [laughs] I digress.

JF: Lucozade.

JK: Lucozade. My mum is on a high bed next to sad chrysanthemums. Don't bring flowers, they only wilt and die. I am scared my mum is going to die on the bed next to the sad chrysanthemums. She nods off and her eyes go back in her head.

Next to her bed is a bottle of Lucozade. Orange nostalgia, that's what that is, she says. Don't bring Lucozade either, then fades.

The whole day was a blur, a swarm of eyes. Those doctors with their white lies. Did you think you could cheer me up with a Woman's Own? Don't bring magazines, too much about size. My mum wakes up, groggy and low. What I want to know, she says, is this. Where's the big brandy, the generous gin, the Bloody Mary, the biscuit tin, the chocolate gingers, the dirty big meringue?

I am 16, I've never tasted a Bloody Mary. Tell your father to bring a luxury, says she. Grapes have no imagination, they're just green. Tell him stop the neighbours coming. I clear her cupboard in Ward 10B, Stobhill Hospital. I leave, bags full, Lucozade, grapes, oranges, sad chrysanthemums under my arms, weighted down. I turn round, wave with her flowers. My mother, on her high hospital bed, waves back. Her face is light and radiant, dandelion hours.

Her sheets billow and whirl. She is beautiful. Next to her the empty table is divine. I carry the orange nostalgia home singing an old song.

JF: Thank you very much. A round of applause I think. [applause]

JK: Thank you.

JF: Why that poem, Miko?

MB: Oh man, so many reasons! First of all I wasn't expecting it to be about the experience of hospitals when I say the title Lucozade. I expected it to be more specifically about that. So that caught me off guard. And I have a very sassy grandmother, and I always find that I've got a lot...I don't enjoy hospitals and it is strange to go here's some grapes, I hope you're better now. It's a really strange approach.

And also the use of dirty big meringue. I could just hear that in such a Scottish accent, like dirty isn't used by any other culture in that way, like yes, it's a dirty big meringue, that's what I want! [laughter] And I just thought there was a lot of hope there mixed in with a lot of sadness and I thought it was a really beautiful poem and I could potentially bring my style to that.

JF: Brilliant. Well, do you want to do your poem now?

MB: Yeah. I wrote a poem in response to that called I'm Sorry.

When I was three years old I saw my mum redecorating and I decided to help. So I went into the other room and I painted a wall a shade I like to call all of my

crayons. My mum understandably got upset and I started to cry. I said I'm sorry! I don't know how to paint! My mum said it's okay, the fact that you wanted to help is all that really matters anyway.

Then when I was four I decided to make my mum breakfast in bed but I couldn't reach the stove. So instead I cracked an egg on the floor and I poured yoghurt over the top. My mum understandably got upset and I started to cry. I said I'm sorry! I don't know how to cook! My mum said it's okay. The fact that you wanted to help I guess is all that really matters anyway. She had to be patient with me. Because I was a reckless kid, I broke stuff, I lost stuff and I hurt myself all the time because I always climbing things I shouldn't climb and falling off things I shouldn't climb. I spent way too much time in A&E.

The first time I stayed overnight in hospital I was 15. And it wasn't scrapes and bruises. I remember noticing how clean and white all the ways appeared, like nothing bad ever happens here! Of course even then I knew that quite a lot of bad things happen there. At some point or another we all sit in a chair next to a bed we wish was empty and instead we see loved ones at their weakest. Hanging onto life when life is long let go of them.

I remember when my mum saw me at my weakest. She brought me a Lucozade. She drank coffee, said we could both use the energy, see. I'd gone and hurt myself again, but this time, this time it wasn't an accident. My mum looked like she had a thousand words to say but only room in her mouth for a few. She asked if I was okay. I told her I was exhausted. See, for me, that was a good thing. It meant there were finally no more voices left to sing misery into my head. I didn't have this social anxiety questioning every tiny little bit of conversation. It might not be typical relaxation, but there was a relief involved in being too exhausted to think for once.

She asked me if it hurt. I told her I couldn't tell, because what's a little burn when you're living in hell and I could see her eyes swelling up, and I knew then that I had no good way to explain that there's agony coursing through every bit of my veins, that I was in pain all the time. And that's why, that's why there's razor lines on the insides of my thighs. That's why I hurt myself.

Sometimes it's not about adding to the pain, it's about trying to find a release for what's already there. I told her I didn't think you'd care. And she gave me a look that let me know she cared enough to kill me if I ever dared question that again. I told her I was sorry. And I saw my mum cry for the very first time. She said I don't know how to help. I said it's okay. The fact that you want to is all I really need anyway. [applause]

JF: Oh, thank you. That can't be a particular easy one to do. It's absolutely superb. I just want to say also if there's anything there in the poem that's particularly touched you, you want to explore further any of the issues, support information, there is a link at the Authors Live website.

Five minutes left. Right, we are going to whiz through this. Just your response to that.

JK: I think it's incredibly powerful and also it has that amazing turn in it, because you start off being a child and being sorry, and then the way in which you can be sorry and all the different ways that we're sorry is very moving. But that thing that just knowing that somebody cares, just being acknowledged in some way in the poem, to the speaker in the poem is a massive thing.

And I don't necessarily assume when I heard it...I didn't necessarily assume it was completely autobiographical. I don't know if it is or not. But I was thinking that it packs a really powerful punch. And the way that hurt, if you like, that people...there's so many different ways that people can be hurt and for some people self-harming is a way of not hurting, which I think the poem explores. And I think that's quite an interesting contradiction and a very moving and touching one, and a difficult thing to explore. But it also makes me think gosh, you can explore poetry, you can explore anything really in a poem as long as you make your listener safe in some way, which you do.

JF: Wow, there's just so much to think about. We want some questions from... We've got a couple of questions from our audience here, so if we can get a microphone over to our first questioners as quickly as possible, that'd be fabulous. Put your hand up. Yeah? Thank you very much. Here comes your microphone. Maybe say who you are, thank you.

Boy: Hi, I'm Hajar[37:10], and I was wondering did you enjoy English at school?

JF: Is that for Jackie?

Aud: Jackie.

JF: Thank you.

JK: Yes, I did enjoy English at school. I mean I had some great English teachers, one that I'm still in touch with, Mrs Hughes. And I had an Irish English teacher, Mrs Beattie. And yeah, I remember the names of my English teachers, Mrs Cameron, and the English teachers in my school. I did enjoy English at school, I did enjoy reading and analysing things. And then I got a shock when you went to university, and I did English because we might study a book for a whole term at

school, and then at university you've only got a week! It was quite a shock and quite a change.

I suppose what I'd say is that at school there were a lot of writers that I didn't get to come across, and there was a lot of black writers for instance, I never came across any black writers at school at all apart from Willy [inaudible 38:01]'s telephone conversation. And so the scope of the curriculum felt very narrow to me at school, and we never had live poets come into the class. Like we all go into schools at different times, but we never had that.

JF: Thank you very much, great question. Thank you, Jackie. And we have another question from just the other side of the aisle, if you put your hand up. Oh, over here. Ah, we've got the mic, thank you.

Girl: Hi.

JF: What's your name?

Girl: Holly.

JF: Great, Holly, and your question for Jackie?

Girl: Have you ever tried to answer the National 5 exam questions on your poems.

JK: [laughs] That's a very good question. Actually, I must do that. What fun that might be. I should try it. I do know of a poet that will remain nameless that went back to study and his own poem came up on the A-level, and he failed! [laughter] And he actually failed answering questions about his own poem which is interesting, and shows you that in some ways there is no right answer for a poem. You've got to find your own answer within it and justify it. But I couldn't necessarily tell you...talking to me wouldn't necessarily help you get a really good mark in your exam, because of the way that things are weighted. And I think that's interesting in itself.

I remember going to a school once where they were studying my poems, The Adoption Poems. And they asked me did you use the word cherry blossom because it's the Japanese sign of regeneration? And I said no, it's the only tree I know the name of! [laughs] And that day I had to borrow the teacher's book, and there were all these wee notes down the side. It was a bit like reading gossip about yourself! And I got to one and it said punctuation seems all wrong. [laughs] So I read it out to the class and the teacher blushed a pleasing red.

JF: How brilliant. I'm going to ask the headteacher in my ear, do we have time for some more questions?

- JK: Oh yeah, we've got to take a couple more.
- JF: We do, lovely. We have a tweet from Amy from Stranraer Academy saying what's the favourite poem you ever wrote, Jackie?
- JK: Well, my own favourite poem I ever wrote? Oh, it's really hard to pick. Maybe *Pride*, a poem called *Pride*, yes. It's hard to pick. It's a bit like picking children if you've got a large family.
- JF: Yeah, you don't want to be doing that.
- JK: *Pride*.
- JF: And you've been very good, you've been succinct in answers. Coran asks, your *Grandpa Soup* poem moved me. Do you feel the emotions you evoke as you create your poems?
- JK: Well, that's a really interesting question and that's fantastic. Because the idea that emotion is recollected in some words worthy in a way is interesting. But yeah, I think I do feel the emotion. But in order for it to translate as emotion it's almost like you need to not feel it for a moment. It needs to be something...I don't know, it's a bit like baking or something. It goes through a process and it goes into the oven and it has to rise. And if you've thrown too much emotion at it at the beginning then your reader won't feel the emotion. So I suppose there has to be some control or some craft that goes into it as well as feeling the emotions...
- JF: Well, that was a good question because it's also reflecting questions that have come in for Barrhead High School in East Renfrewshire. Hello Barrhead High School. Thank you for all your questions. Somebody had said do you ever get emotional writing a poem? How do you feel when you're writing the poems? Ryan from Barrhead High School says Jackie Kay, do you not mind that other people know about your personal life? That's a good one.
- JK: That's a good question, Ryan. No, I don't really mind because you choose to let people know what you want to let them know. And your poems might appear to be more personal than they are, and sometimes they might appear to be more autobiographical than they are. You mix things in.
- JF: Yes.
- JK: I think I found it exposing when I wrote a memoir, *Red Dust Road*, I found that exposing to write. But I think when you write you're exposed, you put yourself out there and you may as well just stand out with the wind blowing and go argh!

[laughs] That's just it. I think there really isn't a hiding place, and if you're trying to look for a hiding place you're probably in the wrong vocation.

JF: We've had some questions, I'll just give you one from Broxburn Academy in West Lothian, and there are lots, so if I don't read them all out, a lot of you are asking the same kind of questions and you're answering them so brilliantly.

JK: I'm trying to speak really fast so as we can get them in.

JF: **Murhan[42:03]**, do you plan ahead when writing poetry and do you complete several drafts?

JK: This is from Murhan?

JF: Murhan in Broxburn Academy.

JK: Do I plan ahead? I don't plan ahead but I do write several, several drafts. And it's something like when you're going to school kids don't like to write loads of drafts. They like to write the thing and go that's it, and maybe once again neatly in their other jotter. But they don't like working and working and working on things. And yet editing and being able to rework and rework is as important as the writing itself. And that's the bit that I really love. I love the editing. I love the fine tuning and the trying to get it write. And even once a poem's published you're looking thinking there's always things that you could still be changing when you're a poet. So I think you have to rewrite. Rewriting is writing.

JF: Wonderful. Well look, we're going to have to leave it there. Thank you for all your questions. Thank you for your two questions here today. And also I think just the whole process for you guys has been lovely and really powerful for us.

JK: I would've liked to get to hear their answers to those questions as well.

JF: Well...

JK: Because it was like ask Jackie Kay...

JF: I know...

JK: ...but I feel like it was a bit selfish somehow. **[voices overlap 43:03]** It's not my fault because it's you guys...

JF: It wasn't anything to do with you, we made that happen. [laughs]

JK: You made that happen. Just so you know, I wasn't **[voices overlap 43:08]**.

JF: I know, that's fine.

JK: Can we have another programme now?

JF: We'll have another programme; we'll make that happen. But the great thing is of course this is all going out live, but clearly...

JK: Oh sorry, I forgot about that.

JF: But you can watch it again. And I think I was talking about everything that you said, people will want to pause and make notes, and I think people will certainly want to be able to experience your poems again, because they were just fantastic.

JK: Can I just say...

JF: Yes?

JK: ...it's a big honour for me. It's a big honour for me that these guys wrote a poem in response to a poem, and they chose which poems out of the ones that are studied in the national curriculum to write about. But it's really lovely that they chose to do that. And in the range, it's given you a complete range.

JF: I can see lots of happy, smiley faces, and I presume out there, wherever you're watching. Thank you so much. Get on with it, reading, writing. I'm not bossing you, but I'm saying it'd be a lovely thing if you do that. It'd be terrific. I'm sure there's lots of great poetry ready to be written out there.

Don't forget, so you can watch this again, you go to the Scottish Book Trust website, scottishbooktrust.com/authorslive. And you can watch all the other ones, we've had amazing people. Well, maybe not as good as these three. Thank you and please join me in thanking...huge whoops, cheers, wherever you are, here for Miko Berry and Jenny Lindsay and Jackie Kay. [applause]

JK: Thank you to you!

JF: Thank you.