# Event transcript: Writing . . . Trumpet with Jackie Kay

[Music playing]

So I was a great blues lover from when I was twelve and my dad bought me my first double album of the great blues singer Bessie Smith. And I remember looking at that album cover and seeing her face and seeing something of my own face in hers. Then after from about the age of twelve I kind of developed this imaginary extended black jazz family. Because I grew up in an all white area in an all white part of Glasgow, Bishopbriggs in North Glasgow, and I didn't have any teachers that were black, you hardly saw anyone on television that was black, so there was nobody at all and my mum and dad were both white. And so I found that I took a lot of my identity from jazz musicians. I kind of put things together and pieced myself together. I liked this extended black family. I liked the idea of it. I kind of immersed myself in music outside of my time. [Music playing] It's interesting you know, I think what prompted me to write Trumpet was coming across a tiny little piece in the Guardian newspaper about a jazz musician called Billy Tipton. And it was really a tiny little bit but I cut it out and it said that Billy Tipton had died, and on dying it was discovered that 'he' was a woman, and that his three adopted sons hadn't known that their father was a woman. And one of them in this little article, at the end of the article, said "He'll always be Daddy to me". I find that incredibly moving. It made me think that identity was about a kind of belief. If you love somebody enough, you believe them. I because quite fascinated in Billy Tipton and I kind of found out everything that I could find out. Then I stopped reading about him because Joss Moody the character started to kind of form and I didn't want to - Billy Tipton was white American jazz musician - I wanted to create a black Scottish jazz musician and I didn't want it to be too close. I didn't want it to be a kind of biography-fuelled novel. But yes, that was the initial thing. I just found it extraordinary. With Trumpet the idea came to me and it had to be a novel. I couldn't think how I could write that as a series of poems and I couldn't think how I could write it as a play. So it came to me as a novel when I had the idea. But I also was, because I'd been asked to write a novel, I was kind of trying to think novelistically. The trouble for me is that novel ideas, or ideas for novels, only come along every so often. I'm much more likely to have ideas for short stories or for poems or for plays. Trumpet was definitely a novel to me, but it was kind of a case of "Well how do I write a novel? I haven't written a novel before... How do I structure it? What do I do? I've got the starting off point. I've got the ideas. I've got the characters now, but how do I do it?" And so that was the challenge for me.

[Reading] We go for a drink in Lauder's bar. He tells me his name is Joss Moody and I ask him if that is his real name. He is offended. I see a look cross his face that I haven't seen before. Of course it is his real name, what am I talking about. I tell him it sounds like a stage name, like a name that someone would make up in anticipation of being famous. He laughs at that and tells me he is going to be famous. I laugh too, nervously. I know he is s going to be famous also. I could have noticed then, I suppose. The way he was so irritated with me asking him about his name. I say 'My name is Millie MacFarlane,' as if I'd just heard it for the first time, as if my own name was miles away from who I am. I say 'Millicent MacFarlane, but my friends call me Millie,' suddenly shy. We talk about anything. He tells me he plays the trumpet. He is so pleased with himself for playing the trumpet I can see that. He says the word, 'trumpet,' and his eyes shine. 'Would you like one for the road, Millie?' he asks. Him saying my name makes me weak. I hold onto the table and watch him go to the bar for his whisky and my gin.

Glasgow appears in the novel in lots of different ways and I mean I love Glasgow as a city and I grew up in Glasgow and it's a great city to write about, in the kind of tangible way. And because you know you had a great dancing hall scene in Glasgow. You've got an amazing central station where lots of Highlanders used to come down and they called it The Hielanman's Umbrella. You've got all these different names for arts of Glasgow. In Glasgow over a hundred years ago Gaelic was spoken more than Glaswegian so it's a city that has gone through a lot of changes. It's fascinating to me, endlessly fascinating to me to try and find different ways to write about Glasgow. So I wanted to place Joss Moody and Millie in Glasgow where they meet and Millie has a flat in Rose Street, just near where the GFT is, just near the art college. I quite liked the idea of her living in a steep street like that. I like how hilly Glasgow is, how San Francisco Glasgow is. And then all of the dance halls in Glasgow, I got information about all of them from my dad. He was a great dancer and he loved going to the dance halls in that time - as obviously the novel is set in a time that I didn't live in so I had to rely on my encyclopaedia, walking encyclopaedia, human encyclopaedia of a dad to recreate the dance halls. But the Barrowlands and places like that that I also write about in the novel I did go to a lot when I was a kid, and I did get a sense of Glasgow as a changing city. Because so much of it is on the water and because there is the UCS and the Upper Clyde ship builders. That industrial identity that was given to Glasgow and kind of changed and changed into Finnieston today. It's practically unrecognisable from the Finnieston of the 60s. I was quite interested in Glasgow as a transformative place when I was writing Trumpet.

Trumpet took me five years to write which I feel a bit embarrassed, you know, telling you that because it's not a long novel. I meet people that read Trumpet in six hours and I think "What?! You read it in six hours and it took me five years to write, are you joking?!" I think really, basically, I'm not a natural novelist. When I first started writing Trumpet I was actually in Cornwall and I think that the cliffs and the clifftop walk that Millie has was influenced by being there. Although when I tired to transport that to Scotland it was more difficult because we don't really have cliffs in that exact way in the part of Scotland that I wanted to put her in. So that's why some parts of Trumpet are actually made up with a mixture of somewhere like Crovie in the north east of Scotland, somewhere like Cornwall and somewhere like Pittenweem. I tried to put all of these places together in this made up place that she goes to which I think was inspired by just walking along those cliffs in Cornwall and starting to come to terms with this book. I started writing it there. I then went and got a six month job as a visiting Josephine Miles professor in Berkley, California, so I wrote the majority of Trumpet there. That was quite interesting because I was far away from anywhere that I was really creating and it made it in some ways easier. I understand writers like James Baldwin or James Joyce who go to France or- and find the distance away from the place that they are brought up in actually gives them a clearer sight of it. So yes the majority of Trumpet was really written in those six months. Then I kind of got struck structurally and this man called Nick Drake wrote to me and asked me if I could pick a gay icon to write about for a series that he was doing. I said "I can't really because I'm writing this novel" and he said "But this could take you six months, I urge you to stop writing the novel and write this other book". So I did. Because I was stuck anyway. So I stopped writing Trumpet and wrote Bessie about Bessie Smith the blues singer which was kind of a mixture of memoir and biography. It's a kind of curious format, but I decided to try and write it about her life and write about my own life at the same time. I stopped and wrote that and something about returning to blues and jazz and immersing myself in jazz and blues biographies and in the blues themselves... something clicked then and then I was able to finish Trumpet. So I do think of the two books as being twinned and therefore it not really being five years that it took me to write Trumpet because I wrote two books in that period. [Laughs]

[Reading] So when he takes off he is a whole centaury galloping to its close. The wide moors. The big mouth. Scotland. Africa. Slavery. Freedom. He is a girl. A man. Everything, nothing. He is sickness, health. The sun. The moon. Black, white. Nothing weighs him down. Not the past or the future. He hangs onto the high sea and then he lets it go. Screams. Lets it go. Bends his notes and bends his body. His whole body is bent over double. His trumpet pointing down at the floor then up to the sky. He plays another high C. He holds on. He just keeps blowing. He is blowing his story. His story is blowing in the wind. He lets it rip. He tears himself apart. He explodes. Then he brings himself back. Slowly, slowly, piecing himself together.

The secret to Trumpet was to give the entire book a musical structure. That there needed to be other people telling Joss' story. That he needed to be seen from more points of view than just his wife and his son. I started to think who else would be able to tell this story and how this story would have affected other people. It became then like a piece of jazz with solo moments. People appearing and then disappearing like a solo and then returning to the main riff. Once I got that kind of musical structure the book was really a joy to finish. It was quite a hard time to get that. It didn't just come to me in the beginning. I know that there are certain novelists that plan their entire books out before they even start and I didn't do that. I did plan certain things, do big wallcharts and things and do lots of colouring in to console myself that I couldn't write [laughs] you know to get to the stationary shop. But I felt like... I have to surprise myself when I write and if I surprise myself hopefully I will surprise my reader. I was presented with a problem in writing the novel which was if Millie is being hounded by journalists all the time in London, then am I going to have the whole book with her being hounded? I wanted her to go somewhere remote where everyone wasn't reading and obsessed with the papers all of the time. Although it maybe stretches the reader's credulity to think that the people that live in Torr haven't read the main papers and it probably is the biggest flaw in the novel! But I needed her to go somewhere where everybody wasn't talking about Joss Moody. That was quite a practical problem. I needed Millie to be somewhere remote and so I brought her back to Scotland. But I also wanted to bring her somewhere where she felt safe because she had come to Kepper all the time, to Torr for her family holidays since she'd been a girl and she first took Joss there. It kind of reminded me of different places that we went to on family holidays. That way that if you haven't seen the place for a year... the things that are almost like time capsules. You come back to find yourself a year ago in the form of whatever - a shell or a pebble that you find on the beach. I wanted a place that she could almost be looking at the 'museum of me', the archive of herself that she could be thinking... because she also loses a sense of herself when Joss dies... and people often lose or question who they are when they lose a loved one - because they've died or because they've broken up. You often then have to look at yourself in quite a deep way and say "Who am I if I'm not This Person's love? What does my life really mean?". She's doing that in this place. I had to have her just in a wee cottage with a log fire and very little else.

[Reading] The woman sitting quietly in Mr Sharif's office had come on time with all the correct documents, with even more documents than she actually needed. She had a birth certificate for the deceased bearing the name Josephine Moore. A medical card for the diseased that was fifty-two years out of date under the name of Josephine Moore, registered with one Doctor Miller in Greenock, Scotland. No pension book. Three rather lucrative insurance policies. A marriage certificate for the diseased bearing the name Joss Moody. It was all fascinating stuff for Nassar Sharif. She didn't say a word. She handed the documents over. Mr Sharif looked up at her from behind his half moon spectacles. He couldn't read her face. He couldn't tell if she was embarrassed or not. She looked just like a widow to him. She had the widow's sad skin. A widow that had come to get the piece of paper to tell her, because she still didn't believe it, that her husband had really died.

I remember when I got to certain characters Like Albert Holding who is the undertaker. I wrote that character, completely made him up, and I had intended to go then afterwards to undertakers, you know traipse myself about the place, and ask to interview them to find out how accurate Albert Holding was. But I didn't do that in the end because to me he felt fictionally real. To me there is a difference between someone feeling fictionally real and actually real. Interestingly the least successful character in Trumpet is Sophie Stones the journalist, and that's because she's almost too close to what the reality would be as a journalist, so I couldn't find a way of breathing enough fictional life into her for her to have a 'life' in the reader's mind. It often fascinates me. It's a real conundrum what makes a character fictionally real and what makes them really real. There's all sorts of different things we could talk about... But Albert Holding the undertaker I think is perfectly believable and I didn't want to get too bogged down in things. The same with Nassar Sharif as a registrar. He's perfectly believable so I didn't go out and interview lots of registrars. I did take lots of things that I'd learned in my life from various different jobs and they actually helped me to create some of these characters like I worked as a hospital porter, I cleaned a mortuary. I was a porter in 1981. Brixton was burning, I was in London, there was a lot of terrible racism. And I would go to take somebody who was dying of cancer, whose skin was bright yellow from the jaundice that you get for late life cancer, I would go to pick them up to take them to radiology and they'd say "I'm not having her, get me somebody white." And I'd think "Oh my God." I didn't think that racism would still be in you as you were dying. I don't know why I thought that, I just didn't think it, and I found it profoundly upsetting. Not really for me but for the person. I found it upsetting that for that dying person that they should be going to death with the toxicity and the poison of racism still in them, and would refuse me. And I had loads of experiences like that as a hospital porter. So there was that on the one hand which made me think very deeply about racism and what it is and then on the other hand there was the experience of actually cleaning a mortuary with a mop. One time I was actually in the mortuary and somebody said to me that when we bring bodies in they can actually even dead sit straight up and burp, because the body is still releasing gases, and then lie back down again. So I remember one day I was just in there on my own and you know that everyone is in their shelves and stuff and it's, it was frightening to me at the time. I was mopping away on the floor and I was quite sure that I heard this [burp sound] and so I went rushing out! I'm quite prone to being imaginative so I don't know if that was me or that was them. I think being there for somebody when they're dying is the most intimate thing that you can do and it says such a lot about your relationship. Millie understands that her husband doesn't want to see a doctor. That he's phobic about doctors because doctors would discover that when he was born he was a girl. He doesn't want to compromise and that's more important to him than dying. He's quite prepared to die but he's not prepared to have to change his identity.

[Reading] The trip shakes him up. It is painful. But there is nothing like that pain. That pain in the sweetest, most beautiful pain in the world. Better than sex. Sore or shuffle along, wing or glide, trudge or gallop, kicking out, mugging heavy, light, licking, breaking, skrew-balling. Out of this world. He could be the fourth horseman, the messenger, the sender. He could be the ferryman. The migrant. The dispossessed. He can't stop himself changing. Running changes. Changes running. He is changing all the time. It all falls off - bandages, braces, cufflinks, watches, hair grease, suits, buttons, ties. He is himself again, years ago, skipping along the railway line with a long chord, his mother had made into a rope. In a red dress. It is liberating to be a girl. To be a man.

I think that dance music, of all music, is the most fluid and it seemed to me that to create a jazz musician could also be a way of writing about that kind of fluidity. Not just gender fluidity but all kinds. The way that music itself changes from the blues into jazz and on. I wanted to write about that. That Joss is born Josephine Moore. He doesn't have lots of things available to him then that would be available to people now. He doesn't actually 'transform' himself into a man, but he does believe himself to be a man and is kind of horrified of the idea of his girlhood and hides his past... and liberates himself. People often say to me "Did he do this because he wanted to play the trumpet? Did he want to be a jazz musician and there weren't many jazz women trumpet players?" But I don't think that's the answer. I tend to resist answering questions that reduce people's identity because I think when we ask complex questions of our characters we keep on asking these questions, and that's what keeps them alive. If you just say "Joss Moody did this because he wanted to do that" then that's so reductive. Explanations about things are reductive generally. There's no life in them. I like that the mystery is sill there and there's lots of questions that you still have to ask. I would never attempt to ask these questions myself. I write in order to ask questions, not to answer them.