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Interview with Jessica L. Wilkinson

Pradeep Trikha

Jessica L. Wilkinson is a Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing at RMIT University in Melbourne, Australia, and the founding editor of *RABBIT: A Journal for Nonfiction Poetry*. She is the recipient of numerous grants and awards, including the Martin Bequest Travelling Scholarship and the 2014 Peter Porter Poetry Prize. Born in 1982 in country Victoria, she holds a PhD in creative writing from the University of Melbourne and has published two books of poetry: *Marionette: A Biography of Miss Marion Davies* (Vagabond Press, 2012), which was shortlisted for the 2014 Kenneth Slessor Prize, and *Suite for Percy Grainger* (Vagabond Press, 2014). She is currently undertaking research for her third full collection, *Music Made Visible: A Biography of George Balanchine*.

*Where are all the peaceful, silent dead?—
scattered refuse and scrap-liberties,
broadcast beyond the cylinder—
fuel to throw the foot sideways, quick*

*escape from the commandment!
Softly, softly in the field, always moving
lightly, with an argument on air—
I'll see you in the faithful pitch of swift
elsewhere—*

“Anarchival” from *Suite for Percy Grainger*

Pradeep Trikha (PT): I think we might start with the tenth Peter Porter Poetry Prize for “Arrival Platform Humlet.” The poem has formal and imaginative qualities. This is clearly a takeoff poem. Would you like to comment on it? Where do we go from here?

Jessica Wilkinson (JW): “Arrival Platform Humlet” has now been published in my second book, *Suite for Percy Grainger*, a poetic biography of the Australian-born composer and musician. That particular poem refers to Grainger’s composition of the same name, which he composed as “the sort of thing one hums to oneself,” pacing up and down the arrival platform at a train station, waiting for one’s lover to arrive. Several phrases in my poem are quotes from Percy’s musical and philosophical writings. I tried to meet that musical composition—and Percy—through the poem, making it playful, rhythmic and cheeky.

PT: Was there much research to do in writing about Percy Grainger and how did you do it?

JW: Both of my books—*Percy* and before it, *marionette: a biography of miss marion davies*—took several years to research, write up and complete. I love archives—it is where I feel most at home, amongst out-of-print books, rare objects and original manuscripts. For *Percy*, of course, I had the Grainger Museum, on the grounds of the University of Melbourne, as a handy resource. There are over 100,000 items in that collection, including correspondence, musical instruments, clothing, manuscripts, photographs, furniture, artworks and so on. The Museum was closed for years, but reopened to the public in 2010, after significant renovations. The exhibitions of artifacts, drawn from the Grainger archive, are always terrific, and usually rotate every six months or so.

I also went to White Plains, New York, and spent some time at Grainger House, which is where Percy lived for the second half of his life (40 years). There are archival materials there, managed by Stewart Manville, who told me many stories about Percy and his wife Ella. It was wonderful to be in Percy's space, to walk through the rooms and up and down the stairs, as he would have done every day. Some of the poems in *Suite for Percy Grainger* are about me wandering through that house.

My experience in these archives influenced the work I wrote in many ways, creating a kind of intimacy between myself and the subject. This was similar to my experience researching Marion Davies, which took me to UCLA's Film and Television repository, and their archive facility in Hollywood. My contact with the 35mm film strips had a direct influence on the presentation of the final book, which is set out like an old film, in 9 separate reels, with deterioration of the document evident in some sections (as I found in the films *and* with accounts of Marion's life, which were permeated by gossip, lies, unsubstantiated rumours and cover ups).

For both of these books I undertook site-based research also, visiting and wandering around different locations associated with Davies and Grainger. For the former, for example, I spent several days doing tours of San Simeon (Hearst Castle) in Cambria, California, and I also saw Marion's Santa Monica Beach House in various stages of redevelopment into what is now a recreation center, with the original guest house renovated and open to the public, as a tribute to her. I also wandered the streets of White Plains, and off the streets of other locations where Percy lived and worked during his international career. What I didn't get to do was walk around Lincolnshire, which inspired Grainger's 'Lincolnshire Posy'. I'd still like to do that one day.

PT: What compelled you to write about Percy Grainger?

JW: With my previous book, *marionette*, I collaborated with composer Simon Charles to produce a performance installation of the poetry, and we were performing it for the first time in 2007 at a festival in Newcastle, Australia. It was during that festival that Simon told me about an ensemble group he was part of called the Free Music ensemble (now defunct), the name of which referred to Percy Grainger's concept of 'Free Music'—with which he wanted to be able to express the irregular sounds of nature, as opposed to the stiff and limited sounds available through traditional western music and notation. I became fascinated with Grainger and set about researching him immediately. Reading about his eclectic and wide-ranging tastes in music, books and fashion, and his philosophical musings, I was intensely drawn to

his eccentricities and his mind—I felt I had met a kindred soul. I knew he was going to be my next subject for a poetic biography. The fact that he was born in Melbourne was also significant to me, close to home.

PT: We can say that a poem about Percy Grainger deserves the label of *tour de force*. What should the readers look forward to in it?

JW: I'm always interested in how others interpret my poems, and delighted when a poem of mine resonates with readers. I suppose that comment makes me feel proud to do the Grainger's work justice!

PT: What do you think of the state of contemporary Australian poetry? To what extent is recent poetry able to sustain or revitalize public interest in the genre?

JW: There does seem to be a kind of revitalization of the poetry community (or communities) in Australia. At least, there is a very vibrant 'scene' in Melbourne. I have been at events in other major cities and the audience is not so reliably large. Nevertheless, I notice many of my students at RMIT University seem interested not only in reading poetry, but in writing it and participating in public events—more so than seemed to be the case when I was a student. I think part of this has to do with the pressure to publish work and become 'known,' perhaps prematurely, before the writer has had a chance to grow and develop and find their voice. There are more opportunities available to young writers to get published now and to win awards, and while on the one hand, this can be a good thing, it is also important that writers focus on the work itself, not on the publication or the award.

PT: What is the functional responsibility of a poet in contemporary Australian society?

JW: That's a tricky question. I think it's up to the poet. For me, I am committed to writing long (book-length) works on historical subjects (Percy, Marion, and for my third book, George Balanchine), and I would say my responsibility is to be true to the subject's voice, whatever that might mean!

I would say that my poetry is feminist in outlook, though the politics in my work is less pronounced than in the work of other Australian poets, such as Jennifer Maiden, for example, who conjures imaginary conversations between Australian politicians and their subject of inspiration, or Ali Alizadeh, whose poetry explores postcolonial themes. Australian poets Dan Disney and Kit Kelen recently compiled an anthology of poems that address the asylum seeker debate in Australia. This makes an interesting artistic and political contribution to what is a rather urgent topic.

PT: When did you first know that you wanted to be a writer? Was it when you were very young or was it later in life?

JW: I wanted to be an actress when I was really little! I was an extrovert until high school and then became extremely shy. Then I wanted to be a marine biologist. After high school I went to Melbourne University and studied Media and Communications—a kind of journalist degree—with a Double Major in Creative Writing. I hated the dry journalism subjects, but *loved* the creative subjects. I had a tutor in first year, Cassandra Atherton, who is a poet and novelist and now one of my close friends, and she introduced me to experimental and innovative contemporary poetry, which opened my young mind (in high school all we were

given in the way of poetry was Lowell, Keats, Auden). Cassandra also encouraged my poetry writing. I suppose it was around that time that I became serious about writing and reading poetry (though looking back at those poems I wrote when I was 18... terrible!!!).

PT: Share something about your childhood leanings for poetry.

JW: As a young child, I wrote rhyming ditties, most of them naughty, to make my older sister laugh. My father found some things I wrote about a teacher I didn't like, and I was punished for being crude. I no longer rhyme, but I guess the cheek is still there!

PT: To what extent are your poems autobiographical in nature?

JW: I can't escape it, even though my books are 'biographies' of other people, I am definitely present, engaging with those characters, as if in an imaginary dialogue with them.

I don't write many lyric poems, or poems that are directly informed by personal experience. I like to hide behind other figures, perhaps!

PT: Your poems have rhyme and rhythm of their own, have you ever been interested in music?

JW: I played piano for about 14 years through childhood and had a love-hate relationship with the discipline of it. I was drawn to making up my own compositions and mucking around that way. But yes, I love music—classical, jazz, experimental.

I spent a few years listening to Grainger's music on an iPod as I walked to and from work. I used to feel the movements of each composition and I tried to channel that movement into my poems.

I also danced for those same 14 years, mostly classical ballet, but some contemporary. I think the rhythm of my poetry draws on that experience also. My third book, which I am currently researching, is on choreographer George Balanchine, and I am compelled to push the concept of 'moving poetry' further.

PT: Should the works of women writers be considered by the critics only in relation to the works of other women?

JW: It's an interesting question, and I think relevant in the context of such things as 'women's writing only' prizes, such as the Stella Prize in Australia. On the one hand, I think that women's writing should not be treated as a separate category as it seems to tiptoe around the issue of equality. On the other hand, it is evident in many cases that decisions are made about 'good writing' according to a set of principles that are masculinist in nature.

PT: Would you differentiate between the two creative processes, i.e. creative writing and critical writing?

JW: For me, one strengthens the other and vice versa. When I'm stuck creatively, I will often try to write about what I'm trying to write, how it is critically relevant, and how it fits within a field of research, as a means to find my way back to that creative motivation. Conversely, if I am struggling through a theoretical concept, my poetry writing—and thinking about the

creative process—will often help me to think about what other writers are doing and how that can be mapped conceptually.

PT: Most women writers of the 1990s were concerned with social welfare; to what extent it has now changed?

JW: The 90s poetry and criticism by women poet-critics that I'm familiar with paved the way for my own feminist politics. I remember reading Rachel Blau du Plessis' *The Pink Guitar* and loving the ficto-critical method she used to write about feminism, art, identity politics and language. Though it is a little dated now, it had a huge impact on my writing and thinking. I think women writers, particularly in the Western world, have a lot more freedom and opportunities to express themselves. Many younger poets are developing their own unique, feminist poetic responses, as strong women, to the world. See, for example, Melinda Bufton's debut collection *Girlery* (Inken Publisich, 2014).

I recently co-edited, with Bonny Cassidy, the *Contemporary Australian Feminist Poetry* anthology (Hunter Publishers, 2016), which demonstrates a plethora of Australian voices engaging in feminist politics. It is an exciting collection in part because the perspectives are so varied and at times seem at cross purposes, reflecting the complexity of the contemporary feminist landscape.

PT: Your poems suggest the secret of survival. What is the history behind such inspiration?

JW: I'm not sure my poems suggest this. I do try to offset the heaviness of some aspects I confront in my poems with playfulness. Perhaps this is how I try to survive as a person. Since my late teens I have suffered severe bouts of depression, which are at times very difficult to get through. A psychologist once told me he'd read a statistical study on depression that stated 95% of poets suffered some form of depression! So I suppose I am not alone at all! But one way I have always countered this is through humor and lightheartedness, both in life, and in my poetry.

PT: What kinds of books did you read when you were growing up?

JW: I was a voracious reader and my tastes were somewhat eclectic. I loved book series like *The Babysitters Club* and *Goosebumps*. I introduced *Are You There God, It's Me, Margaret* to the girls at my primary school and it was all we talked about for a month. I started reading a novel every few days from about the age of 11 and was a regular at my school and local libraries. I also loved reading biographies, dwelling in the realm of the 'factual'. I'm not sure when I started reading poetry, possibly not seriously until my university years.

PT: Who are some of your literary influences?

JW: I wrote a PhD on the poetry of contemporary American poet Susan Howe, who has been a huge influence on my thinking and writing. I was making a case for her work being a new kind of contemporary history, attentive to the gaps and blanks in history, and this led to *marionette* as my own foray into poetic history (or, more specifically, biography) writing. I am uncontrollably drawn to poets who move within and about archives, like Howe. Poets like Charles Reznikoff, Muriel Rukeyser, Rosmarie Waldrop, Lyn Hejinian and so on.

PT: Would you like to say something about the recent Australian poets that have moved you?

JW: Jordie Albiston is a poet I return to all the time—I love to read *The Hanging of Jean Lee* and *Botany Bay Document* to my students. Younger poets: Bella Li, whose first book will appear soon, has an astounding poetic ear and historical focus. I feel an affinity with Kate Middleton, whose ‘Ephemeral Waters’ is playful, historical, interrogative. Stuart Cooke is also a poet I admire; his interests lie in exploring a poetry and poetics of the land.

PT: What are you reading at the moment?

JW: At the moment I am reading *Inflorescence* from Sarah Hannah, a sort of poetic memoir of her deceased mother. I note in the back pages that Hannah took her own life in 2007, which makes the poems even more poignant and haunting.

PT: How do you relate to issues like climate change, environment and Nature?

JW: The rise of ‘ecopoetics’ fascinates me, and there are several Australian poets who address these issues in their poems and critical writings, such as Stuart Cooke, John Kinsella, Bonny Cassidy, Peter Minter, Anne Elvey.

PT: Some of your poems have postmodern sensibilities.

JW: I suppose so. I am interested in challenging concepts of authorship and originality—borrowing bits of text from archival documents and scraps of information, and placing these in new contexts, for example, as a kind of pastiche, to see how they resonate. I suppose there is also a collapse of time and space in imagining myself to be having conversations with the subjects of my work. The absurdist poetic plays in both *marionette* and *Percy* were the most fun to write.

PT: What are the chief characteristics of a successful poem?

JW: For me, a successful poem draws you in initially with its musicality (a sense of rhythm and harmony between the parts); it sparks interest with its immediacy (a sort of surface level of communication) and finally provides further depth through metaphor or layers of meaning. Such a poem stimulates the reader in many different ways, and rewards multiple readings.

PT: What suggestions would you like to make to your contemporary poets?

JW: Read widely, continue reading widely! And this means reading poems by poets from different cultures around the globe. It is a good way to keep you humble as a poet, seeing so much great writing out there. But it’s also a great way to stay in touch with diverse voices and broaden your perspective of this world we live in.