

MY WRITING LIFE WITH FRAN HARVEY: KATE FOX

Fran Harvey: Hi, I'm Fran Harvey, and I'm a writer and musician who loves talking to other writers about their writing life. Today, I'm really pleased to be talking to writer, broadcaster and performer Kate Fox. Kate is a stand-up poet who created the incredible stage show *Where There's Muck There's Bras*, which celebrates the achievements of forgotten Northern women. She has now expanded the show into a book, which comes out on March 17, and you can read an interview with her about that in the March issue of NARC. She's also had poetry collections published - most recently *The Oscillations*, which came out with Nine Arches Press in 2021. Today, we're going to chat about how she actually gets all these things written.

So Kate, thank you so much for talking to me today. Um, where am I talking to you from, by the way? Because we're doing this via Zoom.

Kate Fox: Indeed, yeah. So I'm in my flat in Whitley Bay, so I'm not very far away from the sea. And I'm in my living room, having organically developed this thing, where Zooms that feel a bit more informal, I do in my living room and Zooms where it might be for a live thing, or a recorded thing, I do in my office. So I didn't know that distinction, it just happened. And that will probably come up again, because it's similar to that thing of 'where is my writing space?'.

FH: I was literally about to ask that, because that seemed like a very good lead into that question! Where is your writing space?

KF: Well, that also - you see, it should be my office. I've set up my office with a desk, and a chair and writing implements. But I basically never write in my office. I move between - so I have two settees in the living room, and a dining table and two chairs. And I seem to just sort of move about between them. And I suspect there is some sort of internal logic to it. And it might even be, if ever I were to analyse it, that I do hard things at the table. And, you know, just tidying up things on the settee. And 'we need to wake my brain up' things on the other settee, something like that. I wish I could, I feel like I should be sitting in an office. I've set up this whole room, literally for me to write in. And I don't write in it. I think it's time for me to come to terms with that.

FH: Well, if it makes you feel any better, I don't - I don't really have an office space in my house, but I have a fold-out desk that I use. But I do create a little office space in the other room - and then I go and sit on the sofa and work.

KF: It's funny, isn't it? I mean, then what - I wonder if there's something about, presumably, because you know, being on the settee's often more comfy, isn't it? But also maybe you do feel more, in yourself, relaxed and cosy and or cocooned or something. But actually, I also - I mean, back in the day, and a little bit now, a little bit, I used to love writing in cafes. And I have, depending on how COVID-confident I'm feeling at any given moment, which really seems to oscillate a lot, I have done a little bit of writing in cafes. I like the noise, the background noise of that, and of course, that's the chair and the table and...

FH: Yeah, cafes are good for the ambience aren't. They're very handy. Because you used the words 'back in the day': I read that you started writing poems while you were a radio journalist in the early 2000s. And I was wondering, can you remember what prompted you to start writing poetry?

KF: Yeah, well, in a way, it was something I'd always done. So when I was little, I would make up daft rhymes. I, at school for the school magazine, which I started, would write these rhyming funny topical poems, and that was just a thing I did, a thing I enjoy doing. And at university I wrote some, I would say, compulsorily bad, angsty poems. So I had the sense of it as a thing I did. But it wasn't until I went to a writing workshop at the Cumberland Arms in Newcastle, run by Ellen Phethean and Lizzie Whyman, when I was about 28 - a long time ago now, 18 years ago - then I started learning maybe what contemporary poetry was, and could be. Maybe what prompted that, I don't know, there was probably a very strong internal sense of 'I have a lot to express, and I'm not expressing it'. And this was in the context of my life as a radio journalist, a news reader, where I was able to be quite creative and quite playful, and do research. But I was aware that there was some other part of me that was not involved in that. And so I'm so glad I found those poetry workshops, actually.

FH: Brilliant. Thank you. Can you remember - I'm just interested to see if people do remember this - can you remember like, your first sort of significant piece of writing that made you go, 'I want to do stuff with words'. Can you remember what it was?

KF: Yeah, well again, if we maybe discount childhood and teenage stuff, which we either should or shouldn't, but it was in that poetry workshop where - the exercise was pick an object and describe that object. And I wrote about my dad's trilby hat. And my dad had died when I was 17. And I'd only met him and found him when I was 17. So we just knew each other for three months, so, and that was a kind of grief and a story that I hadn't processed. And yet, in that narrative poem - I got kind of the helpful tips that writers always get, as do more showing and less telling - I was able to tell the story, process some of the emotion. Then, when I started performing that

poem onstage, to actually share that story and that emotion, that - wow, that was, that was mind blowing. So that hooked me in, I think, and that makes me think that's very different to how I feel about more factual writing. So having just written this book about Northern women, *Where There's Muck There's Bras*, maybe that part of my writing brain is a little bit more closely related to my writing essays, that school brain, and that part of my brain was always quite rebellious and didn't want to fit the format and didn't want to do exactly what I was told to do, because it was quite boring. So I had to play with it. And I did the same with my PhD. My PhD, I was determined, would be funny, because it was about comedy. And it was quite funny. I'm not saying like, it wasn't a great alternative to watching *Live At The Apollo*, not saying that. But I did, I think I genuinely got some comedy in there. Whereas the poetry, I don't have as much to rebel against, cause it's just a different voice, different part of my brain. So yeah, for me, whenever I'm asked about my writing, I suppose there's not such a global thing as 'my writing', it's almost like, oh, well, which type of writing? And then the only type, in performance, I sometimes get to bring them all together and be a poet and a journalist and a performer and a fact-giver and a presenter all at the same time. And that's really satisfying, when that can happen.

FH: Talking about sort of the various different writings that you do, you also mentioned on your website that you have different writing techniques for when you're doing performance than when you're doing page.

KF: Yeah.

FH: Can you mention a couple of those? Like, how do you - can you even tell, when you're starting to write something like, obviously, if you're doing radio journalism, that's its own beast. And obviously, the book is its own beast, but, say, for the poems, do you know when you're starting to write one, whether this is going to be one that you perform? Or whether it's one that needs to have like that white space around it?

KF: Oh, yeah, actually. Okay. So I think a really good example of that, quite recently, my boyfriend had likely had COVID, because his daughters had it, but he didn't have a positive test and, to cut a long story short, he came to my house on the day of a negative lateral flow. We went for a walk on the beach, and we kissed on the beach, how romantic. And then he got a text saying his eldest daughter had tested positive, and I knew he'd been in a car with her two days before. And I was basically like, 'oh, you should go,' and I ended up, because that was quite a charged event, I ended up writing two poems about it. But one was very much a poem with the white space. And it had space for my feelings of kind of fear, and anger, and confusion, and all

that. And it wasn't funny, I don't think, at all. And then there was this other poem that popped into head, full of rhythm and rhyme, that was called 'I Snogged Someone With COVID'. [zoom echoes disrupt voice slightly] and, you know, it was funny, it was funny, like, it was annoying and awful and funny. And those parts of me split out, and one went into the performance poem, and one became this, probably, I would say, a bit more truthful piece. Well, there again, who's to say that 'I Snogged Someone with COVID' isn't actually the more truthful piece, ultimately. But yeah, that's a good example of the differences.

FH: Do you have any poets that you count as sort of big influences, for both styles?

KF: Yeah, although not always in obvious ways. I think - so, not a poet, but I think Victoria Wood was a great influence on me with her word play, for the funny poems. And also almost like the nonsense poets, like Lewis Carroll, and the poems that I heard growing up, which were rhythmic poems, and then John Cooper Clarke, of course, I think some of his rhythms are in my head, probably. And for the other type of stuff, I've always been a bit obsessed with Leonard Cohen, and kind of obsessed with the story of Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath, which has sometimes led me into their actual poems, and not just their lives. What an awful cliché I am! I'm like, 'Yes, their true romantic love story, slash terrible tragedy slash awful misogynistic thing. Ooh, also, they wrote some poems!'. I have more and more come to connect with the poems. I think their poems were very ahead of where I was as a poet for a very long time, and I've gradually come to know them in a different way, like I say. And DH Lawrence, actually, also, as a poet. He has this particular voice, he's not as known as a poet as he is as a novelist. And actually, probably it was my interest in Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath that led me to the DH Lawrence - he was quite totemic for them. But there's this particular curmudgeonly, honest voice he has, and I love it. And it's probably a voice that is quite similar to confessional American poets and the New York poets. But there was something in hearing it in the voice of a - I'm going to talk about class, I think - working class miner's son that maybe connected more with me, actually. So yeah, a whole hodgepodge of influences.

FH: I hadn't realised that DH Lawrence was a poet - that's bypassed me as a piece of information. I was wondering what themes kind of crop up in your work. Obviously, I know, your more formal writing, your nonfiction writing, obviously, northernness, class, gender, those are all strong things that come through. But when it comes to your poetry, your more personal poetry and your performance poetry, are there any other themes that tend to crop up time and again - like, even if you feel like you're battling against actually putting them in there, do they just kind of sneak up anyway?

KF: Yeah, a lot of relationship poems actually, about the mismatch in communication between people who are in intimate relationships or in more public relationships, and I love, I love the quirky mismatches, the little quirky differences in how people think and see the world. That will keep cropping up.

FH: That's, um, sorry to interrupt there. But one of the things you do as well is you're - I don't know, do you use the word activist for this? - an activist for like neurodiversity, trying to just make that make people more aware of neurodiversity as a whole. So is that connected in part to that? And did you realise that that was something that you were being an activist about, prior to that appearing a lot in your poems? Or had that been in your poems for a while, and then you kind of had a light bulb moment?

KF: Yeah. So I think it's always been in my poems, that kind of mismatch of communication styles between people. And I think that's an expression of my being autistic. But I wasn't diagnosed as autistic till I was 42, four years ago, and then decided gradually that it was important to talk about it and be open about it, and to be quite casual about it, even though it is still not quite a thing that people casually go, 'and I'm autistic and northern...'. I do try and do that though, even though I'm aware people don't receive it casually. Um, so yes, it was in my poems before. I think now it's more in my poems, and I was just talking the other week to a friend, a poet, who also has a recent autism diagnosis in her 40s. And also recognises that her poems, for many years, have reflected this, but she just didn't see it as part of her neurodiversity, because she wasn't aware of that. So, I mean, I have a theory that poets - I always want to say this - I think most poets, so I'm going to say over 50%, are neurodivergent in some way, because by definition, to be that bothered about the precision of words; to be as obsessed as you kind of have to be to be a poet... There's something - in a Yorkshire way, I want to say there's something not right about you, clearly, in the most right possible way. You know, in a brilliant way. 'Course you're not right, if you're a poet. Good, in your not rightness, and your quirkiness! So yes. And the activism part of that, I think I've realised that probably it is sufficient to be open about it, because whenever I am, someone, somewhere will say, 'Oh, thank goodness, you just talked about that openly'. It does mean that a lot of people who read my work or hear me eventually recognise that they themselves are neurodivergent in some way and set off down that path. I think one of the criterion, one of the diagnostic criterion could be, 'Have you ever identified with the work of Kate Fox, or really like poems a lot?' Yes? You're definitely neurodivergent. That's a bit narcissistic of me - other people are available. But yes.

FH: Oh I love that though. We've been talking about the importance of people having something to hook their imagination on and hook their understanding of their world

on in *Where There's Muck There's Brass*, and like how important that is. I keep saying *There's Muck There's Brass* - it's *Where There's Muck There's Brass*, I've got to get that right. But yes, listeners, listeners, please go and check out that interview [in *NARC*] and pre-order the book and read the book, because it's really good. Anyway, back to this podcast. Any other themes? Because I interrupted you to talk about neurodiversity.

KF: Ummm, mmm, you know I used to, I mean, I, I suppose *The Now* is a theme. I mean, that's quite a big theme, isn't it? *The Now*. Like everything in the world. But specifically everything in the world that is of the now. I am perennially interested in the present, in what's right up against me, in me, next to me, around me or in the news and the mood. That's why I couldn't not write about the pandemic, particularly that first lockdown, which I was aware was a time that we would hopefully never feel or experience the like of again, but I suspected that we would forget it. And we would want to forget it. And I didn't want us to. I knew lots of other writers will be working as well to make sure that we don't forget it. And I joined in and hopefully was one of them.

FH: I think, I've - so I've read a lot of poetry. And I've sifted a fair number of poetry competitions. And I actually I love *The Now* as a theme, because I think actually a surprisingly high percentage of poets tend to look at *The Then*. Because a lot of the time, people are just processing stuff that has happened to them in the past, like, even if you're like, actually I'm writing about that rock, you're writing about how that rock makes you think of the way this person made you feel at this time. And that kind of tends to come through, and the idea of like taking poetry and just being like 'Now, right now, this moment - not in five years time after I've had a really long time to think about how I felt during the pandemic - this is definitely how I felt now because it's on the page...' I love that. I think that's a thing that I think more people could stand to do, to be honest. And I'm saying that very hypocritically, because I'm terrible at writing, myself, about stuff that's happening now. Like, I write a lot of short stories, and I tend to write about places that I've moved on from rather than writing about where I am at this precise moment, because I'm just like, if I start doing it. I'm just like, 'Eh, I'm not really feeling it. I'd rather like write about that time that I saw a leaf on a hedge five years ago.'

KF: And of course that's equally valid, isn't it? But actually, I do think that culturally, we tend to privilege writing *The Then*, because we say, 'Ah, well, if you write in *The Now* you can't properly have thought about it. You've not properly processed it.' And actually, that, I think, is a neurodiversity issue, because we're privileging a particular way of processing and being in the world, at a particular speed. And I was - I

interviewed the writer Sarah Moss, who has written a brilliant novel called *Fell* which is in the pandemic--

FH: I'm looking forward to reading that so much, because *Summerwater* was incredible. I can't wait for this one--

KF: Yeah, and I think *Fell* is a brilliant companion piece, actually, to *Summerwater*. And it's so lucid, and so clear, and so sharp. And she has had criticism in some of the reviews that were basically saying, 'Well, it's too soon, too soon for a lockdown novel'. And she said, as I knew she would, that she reads really, really, really, really quickly. And she obviously processes words and narratives really quickly, like probably hyper quickly, compared to a lot of people. Therefore, in her version of time, and how she lives time, it is absolutely not too soon. She has processed this stuff. She's just done it dead quick. And so I'm really interested in that cultural privileging of the slow road, rather than the fast road. And it's something I've begun to- I've started running some workshops for neurodivergent writers, just any writer who identifies as neurodivergent in some way. And I suppose it's because I'm really interested in the question of, well, what is it to be a neurodivergent writer? And of course, it's multiple things. There's lots of things, but I suspect that we will find as we go along that some of us think about time and experience time a bit differently to lots of other people around us. And that impacts on how and what we write and we might not always find full acceptance of our way of being and processing and writing about time, and maybe if we're together in a group going, 'Oooh, this is about our weird brains'. Then we will accept ourselves more as writers. So that's something, I suppose that's another level of writerly activism, on my part, just asking the question together with others.

FH: I think that's brilliant. I think as well, because part of neurodiversity is that you're seen as not fitting in with the status quo of how things are supposed to be. And I do think that part of the focus on Then writing rather than Now writing is, as a society - and I can see people are going to listen to this and be like, No - but I do think that as a society, we do have a tendency to be like, 'Oh, it's too soon' - and when we say, 'Oh, it's too soon', sometimes, yes, it's a grief issue, something like that. But often, especially when, say, the government or something says it's too soon to be discussing this, it's too soon to be doing that, it's because we don't want to look at it head-on, because that is when the truth of it is. If you leave the gap, you can put your layers of your own interpretations over it. But if you look at it head-on, that's really uncomfortable for people. And that's, um, it's preferable for a lot of various establishments, that people don't look at things head-on, because then, for

example... I don't know London stays in charge. The North stays down. So yeah, I think it's ... I would say it's activism.

It's also well past the time when I was supposed to hit stop on this podcast. It's only supposed to be about 15 minutes long, and I think it's going to be longer. So I'm going to finish with the last question: what would be your top tip for anybody who is just getting into writing of any kind or just trying to find their way back into their writing?

KF: Ah, yeah, actually, that's easy. Advice that I don't follow, though, except when I run workshops, and then I have to follow it because I set it as an exercise, is to do some free writing. That thing where you set a timer for three minutes - I mean, Julia Cameron talks about it in her books *The Artist's Way* and *The Writer's Way* - yes, set a timer. Just write or maybe have a prompt like, today is don't censor yourself; accept that, you know, the detritus at the top of your brain is going to come out and it's not going to be pretty. But do that, because it's a brilliant way to free your writerly self. You might find that you get pieces of work out of it. You might get nothing out of it other than reducing the fear of the blank page and warming yourself up. So yeah, that's definitely my top tip.

FH: Brilliant. Thank you so much. Thank you for taking the time to talk to me. Listeners please don't forget to check out the accompanying interview in NARC's March issue where Kate discusses her new book *Where There's Muck There's Bras*. Thank you very much, and come and listen again next month.