

LETTING THE LIGHT IN SUSAN JANE SIMS INTERVIEWS ROSIE JACKSON



“I want to write from a deep place, a spiritual place...I want to find the form that’s right for the meaning.”

The Light Box published by Cultured Llama

Rosie Jackson has been widely published. Her books include *The Glass Mother* (memoir), *Mothers Who Leave* (non-fiction), *What the Ground Holds* (poetry pamphlet) and *The Light Box* (poetry collection). In 2017, Rosie won 1st prize in the Cookham Festival Stanley Spencer Competition, 1st and 2nd second prize in the Berkshire Competition, 3rd Prize in The Hippocrates Open Competition and was a Hawthornden Fellow. She believes passionately in the power of the arts to heal and transform. www.rosiejackson.org.uk

I interviewed Rosie Jackson in her lovely Somerset cottage, a few miles outside Frome.

SJS: How would you say you learned your craft as a poet?

RJ: I had always secretly wanted to become a writer, from being a child. Having studied and then taught literature, I began by writing academic books – my first book *Fantasy* came out when I was teaching at the University of East Anglia. It grew out of my Ph.D. on the Gothic. Then, after leaving full-time academia, my life started going in strange directions, and when I began training in counselling and psychotherapy, I began using writing as a form of therapy for myself. I wrote a book of short stories *The Eye of the Buddha*, and when they were published very easily, by the Women’s Press, I took this as a sign and encouragement that I could be a writer. But it was only after moving to Frome in 2000, and then again after spending several years writing two novels that were never published, that I turned to poetry. I started by going to Frome Poetry Café, then to Sue Boyle’s Poetry Café in Bath. I would say I’ve been writing poetry in a focussed way since about 2010.

SJS: Who are your influences in poetry?

RJ: I have a strong spiritual path and love the Sufi mystics – Rumi, Hafiz, Kabir – and metaphysical poets – John Donne, George Herbert. I love writers who wrestle with their beliefs, like Gerard Manley Hopkins and R.S. Thomas. One American poet who particularly inspires me is Jack Gilbert. I read him constantly. As you will know, Sue, from reading my memoir, I was out of the world for many years. I had two failed marriages, I was estranged from my son, I suffered from severe depression. And when I emerged out of that period, I discovered many amazing female poets I’d never read before. Mary Oliver, Alice Oswald, Jane Hirshfield, Eavan Boland, Sharon Olds, Penelope Shuttle, Carol Ann Duffy, Naomi Shihab Nye, Pascale Petit, Selima Hill, Denise Riley, to name a few. I read the Bloodaxe anthologies, *Staying Alive*, *Being Alive*, *Being Human*, and they were a revelation to me. All this fantastic contemporary poetry, so much to catch up on. It was like coming into a land of milk and honey. I had a parallel experience recently reading the wonderful *#Me Too* anthology edited by Deborah Alma – it was the same kind of shock, to realise there are all these women with a similar voice and a similar experience. Women’s poetry has really come into its own in the last twenty or so years.

SJS: Do women write poetry differently from men, would you say?

RJ: I think men do have a different sensibility from women. The *#Me Too* anthology, for example, could not have been written by men, not just because of the experience but because of the voice.

SJS: Would you call yourself a feminist poet?

RJ: I am a feminist and a lot of it comes out in my poems. I have had a lot of difficult female experiences. So yes, I would say I am a feminist poet.

SJS: I noticed a lot of women's voices in your latest collection, *The Light Box*. The voice of Mary Shelley, for example. I was particularly struck by that poem.

RJ: Mary Shelley is the one strong female voice in the whole of the Romantic period. One lone voice demonstrating – in *Frankenstein*, for example – what happens when male ideology dominates everything, including creativity. The last line of that poem – “This is how it is when the world has no mother”, highlights this loss of the feminine in our culture. Definitely a feminist poem and a crucial one in the collection. I write about other women too: artists such as Barbara Hepworth, the mystics Marjorie Kemp, Hazrat Babajan, and a recent one about Rabia of Basra, the first Muslim saint.

SJS: Tell me about your interest in Stanley Spencer.

RJ: I had a short residency at Cheltenham Art Gallery in 2011. It was focussed around a Spencer painting called *Village Life*. I ran some workshops, began researching his life and got hooked. There's something about his art and his relationship with his first wife, Hilda, that fascinates me. What happened between them seemed to exemplify what happens in the gender split between male artists and their wives, even when the wife is an artist herself, as Hilda was. She trained at the Slade, had two daughters with Spencer, then her work tailed off. When Spencer developed a passion for another woman, Hilda had a breakdown. I have always wanted to paint, but never let myself do it. So, part of their story mirrored my own and in writing in Hilda's voice, I was able to write indirectly about myself. But I like Spencer's vision of the world: he too was a mystic in his way and found the divine in everything. There are several Spencer poems in my collection *The Light Box*. But the real coup for me was winning first prize – £2.5K! – in the Stanley Spencer Poetry Competition with my poem: *The Heaven that Runs Through Everything*. Around this time, I met Graham Burchell, a Devon poet who was also working on Spencer poems, and he suggested we collaborate on a book. So, for the past year, Graham and I have been working together on a collection of seventy poems about Spencer and Hilda. It's currently with prospective publishers. We called it *Two Girls and a Beehive*, the title of Spencer's first oil painting but also an allegory of his divided life. Our poems complement each other well, I think. Graham writes more about the impact of war and social subjects; I focus on Hilda, her breakdown and Spencer's spirituality. Writing about Spencer has been something of an obsession and I've now written it out, come to the end of it.

SJS: What about India? I know you go regularly on retreat there.

RJ: For my next collection, I want to explore mystics and spirituality, some English some not. George Fox, for example, John Bunyan, Julian of Norwich, anchorites. This is because I want to find a way of writing about spirituality that isn't just my story. I want to come at it obliquely. India has been integral to my spiritual path. I've been going every couple of years, since I first went in 1980. I follow Meher Baba, an Indian teacher, and this is the central compass of my life. At some stage, I'd like to write a book based around my spiritual life, but again not directly. Like Emily Dickinson said, “Tell all the truth, but tell it slant.” That's what I hope to do.

SJS: Having read your memoir *The Glass Mother*, I was not surprised to see the theme of absent mothers featuring in *The Light Box*. Is there more you would like to say on this?

RJ: I think it was Michèle Roberts who once said that poetry, or writing, is triggered by loss. When you have a major loss through bereavement, or, in my case, losing my son through distance and not death, there's a way in which language tries to fill the gap. Writing about loss through poetry is important to me. I understood this when I read Winnicott, and the idea that we all need 'good enough' mothering to function as sane human beings. I didn't have this 'good enough' mothering. What I had instead was words. Ironically, it was my mother who gave me this, as she taught me to read before I started school. Words became my mother, my nurturing. So, the theme of absent mothers is a crucial one to me. I read masses as a child, and when I have been at my most broken, I have turned to words. A poem fills me up again. I read for love. I read to have my heart filled.

SJS: I particularly like the poem about your mum, when you say you wanted a different ending for her.

RJ: Yes. *Having it All*. "How I want for you a different ending / to see you rise like yeast in the bread you used to knead, / jump with both feet and claim it all: the radiance, / the stars, / the full-fat light" Sadly, she didn't have that ending. She didn't have that life. If she had been able to claim anything resembling a 'full-fat' life, then things would have been different. For her. For me. The sad thing was neither of my parents was emotionally responsive. But I feel fortunate to have had language and a first-class education paid for by the state. It nurtured me. Without it, I would not have survived.

SJS: Is that the reason you run your writing groups, to nurture others?

RJ: Not consciously, but I love facilitating people's creativity. It's a privilege to witness it emerging. Something magic happens in these writing groups and running them means I give something back. I can share what I've learned. Also, as I've had a difficult personal life, I can relate to the pain of others.

SJS: Is there a natural form you fall into when writing?

RJ: Shakespearean. I fall naturally into iambic pentameters. I write blank verse all the time. In *The Light Box*, I tried to introduce other forms, but it was a conscious effort. My natural form is solid blocks of blank verse. Happily, working with Graham Burchell inspired some changes too. I took more risks and stopped milking the subject for meaning in the way I used to. What I love most is metaphor. I could live on it. My poetry is full of symbols and metaphors. I was brought up on the Bible – ours was a strongly Christian household, Church twice each Sunday, so I read the Bible a lot and draw on it, not just in references, but in Biblical language. I like going deep into the imagination. I feel an affinity with Jung in many ways. I write about art, love, loss, the psyche, relationships. But I have yet to write any poems about my son, other than a heavily disguised one in *The Light Box*.

SJS: I think you're now reunited with your son?

RJ: Yes, happily I am, since he read my memoir and got it fully. So, I think, now, my poems will become more optimistic. Not that they lack light – one reviewer found that the word 'light' appears in 35 out of the 69 poems in *The Light Box*! But yes, from now on, I want to focus more on the light. On joy. On the divine. I want to write from a deep place, a spiritual place. I know that can be at odds with some contemporary voices, the experimental and the street-wise. But that's not me. I'm not an urban writer. I'm not avant-garde. Old-fashioned though it sounds, I don't want to experiment with form for its own sake. I want to find the form that's right for the meaning.



Susan Jane Sims is a poet and publisher. She founded Poetry Space, a publishing organisation with a mission to widen participation in poetry in 2010. She had her first full collection published by Indigo Dreams Publishing in 2015. Her poems have appeared in a variety of journals and anthologies. She is a Hawthornden Fellow 2018.