

Deptford Literature Festival Podcast

Episode 3: Helen Howell

Transcript

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Hello and welcome to the third episode of the Deptford Literature Festival podcast. A podcast that features short interviews with artists involved in the festival that celebrates Deptford and Lewisham's diversity and creativity through words, stories and performance. I'm your host Shani Akilah. Book influencer and author of upcoming short story collection *For Such a Time as This*, and today we are joined by Helen Howell. Hey, Helen, great to have you.

Helen Howell

Hey, thanks for having me.

SA

Helen is a poet, producer and editor. Her poems reviews and translations have been published in places such as Bath Magg, Poetry London, and her debut pamphlet *The Barman* was published in 2022 by Bad Betty Press, Helen also co-directs Dead Women's Poets Society, and produces events for Poetry Translation Centre. Helen, you run a really exciting project called Bi+Lines. And you recently edited and published an anthology of contemporary bi+ poets. What was the inspiration for the project? And how did it come about?

HB

Who knows what really happened? Because memories are tricky, but the story that I'm telling myself is that I read an anthology called *Non-Binary*, and it had essays in it and poems in it about non binary people in the non binary experience. And I really enjoyed it. And I finished it. And I was like, where's the equivalent thing for bi people, bisexual people, I can name lesbian poets, gay poets, trans poets, non binary poets, but how many bi poets can I name? And I tweeted out, would anyone be interested if I did something for this subsection of the community? The responses were immediate, and loads of them. So then I sort of just had to do it.

SA

And so when did this happen?

HB

So I specifically remember it because it was a storm and I was on my way up to Birmingham for Verve Poetry Festival. So I was like, stuck on a train and cooking up a poetry project with my hours of delays. So it was February 2022.

SA

So you were essentially inundated. I read in the introduction that you had over 2,800 submissions, how do you then decide who would make it into the anthology? Well, I guess it's the same as all kinds of editing. You try and be as impartial as you can. But it's really just what speaks to you and your own tastes. I wanted to have a real range in terms of

not only what people were writing about, but the ways in which they were writing it. The theme for the anthology was in-betweenness. And that was just a theme that I was particularly interested in myself in sexuality, but also the intersections with different kinds of identities for myself being mixed race, and also thinking about class. But I knew that there'll be lots of interesting things that people had to say about gender, and migration and languages, disability, loads, loads more. So I wanted to get those things in the book. I wanted it to talk about being bisexual or pansexual, or queer, but I didn't want it only to be about relationships or love. I wanted it to be about the whole experience. In terms of that theme of in-betweenness, I was also really interested in how that can be expressed in the form of a poem. Poems I think, are really well suited to explore that kind of theme, because it's really hard to define what a poem is and isn't. So I was excited when I got erasure poems, concrete poems, we have one and a shape of a battery, prose poems and all kinds of different shapes as well. So that that also helped me to choose.

SA

That's really cool. And I think that notion of in-betweenness definitely does come through. I loved the diversity of themes. How has the experience of this project been in terms of building community? Because you mentioned as well, in your introduction that you didn't know of many bi poets, and then you were inundated with 1000s and 1000s, of submissions? How has that been from a kind of community building perspective,

HB

The community side of it is really at the heart of the whole thing. The project started off with some workshops and writing workshops, before submissions were open. You know, you can only publish so many people. So the workshops are really a kind of non-competitive, open to all way to take part and to meet other people, which was really important. And some of those people particularly who came to the online workshops are now setting up their own monthly feedback groups. So that's really lovely to see.

SA

It's really amazing. And how was the launch process? Because I know it was published at the end of last year. I know you've had a few open mics and panel discussions, how's it all been?

HB

Yeah, it's been really nice. It's nice to see people. And it's nice to see how much the book has meant, not only to the contributors, but the people listening and the audiences and those people who do come to the open mic. So it's specifically a bi+ open mic. I mean, the whole project sounds so niche, right. But I think there's a real hunger for it. And we're still doing them. We're still going to Manchester, Brighton, York, Edinburgh, Glasgow, up until sort of the spring.

SA

Amazing. And just for listeners who aren't familiar, what is the distinction between bi as a term and bi+

HB

I'm using the term bi+, because it's really kind of an umbrella term. I think a lot of people who say bisexual probably feel this anyway. But I wanted to include people who maybe they call themselves bisexual, or pansexual, or queer or polysexual, demisexual on the a spectrum. Basically, anyone who feels some kind of attraction some of the time to more than one gender. Anyone whose kind of attraction defies that very binary category of like, straight or gay.

SA

As part of the Deptford Literature Festival, you're going to be facilitating a queer poetry workshop called *Writing the In-Between*. What can participants expect from the session.

HB

So we're going to be thinking about in-betweenness, inspired by the book *Bi+Lines*, we're going to look at a few of the poems in the book, some of my favourite ones. And in the workshop, we will hopefully be writing as Zuihitsu, which is another one of those forms that I mentioned those kind of in between-y forms. A Zuihitsu is a Japanese form that's kind of like taking snippets from all different parts of your life. There might be bits of non-fiction, literally snippets that you find in newspapers or things like that, some poetry, different moments in time, and you kind of arrange it all to create a poem. And the poem in the book is called *On Meeting My Husband's Lovers During a Pandemic*, and it's by Rona Jia Luo. The other big exercise that I want to do with everyone is and I hope this doesn't put anyone off, because this is my little nerdy like fascination, but it's queer quantum mechanics. I find quantum physics really fascinating. So there's a lot of weirdnesses going on at the subatomic particle level, which basically mean that like, the ways that we perceive reality is much more binary basically, and static than actually is. And anything can happen essentially, like the things that feel impossible, are made possible through quantum physics. It is also inspired by one of the poems in the book called *What Schrodinger's Cat and My Bisexuality have in Common* by Freya Bantiff. It's the first poem in the book. And so I just want to think in the workshop a bit about how can we queer reality and see everything as in between and sort of make that foregrounded and not just on the subatomic level.

SA

That sounds amazing? And will participants have the opportunity to kind of share their work? Because I would love to listen to some of these?

HB

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, there'll be time in the workshop to share their work. The part of the project is also I've created these social media profiles, obviously, on Instagram or Twitter. And I really want to use those to sort of promote things that are going on that bi+ pilots can apply for or take part in, but also to share their work. So yeah, people can at me afterwards, and I'll definitely retweet it or put it on stories.

SA

And is the workshop just for bi+ poets? Or is it open to everybody?

HB

So we've pitched it at anyone within the LGBTQ plus umbrella. Anyone who's sort of interested in this theme of in-betweenness, but obviously, bisexual still up front.

SA

Got you got you. And if someone thinks this sounds interesting, but they're not sure, why should they come?

HB

We're just going to do some nice writing, right? We're going to look at some poems and do some writing, which is, you know, one of my favourite things to do. And I think-slash-hope that we'll be talking about some really unusual ideas that you wouldn't just normally get to talk about in your everyday life. And especially, like if any of these thoughts have resonated with you, this will be a space to dive into that a little bit further.

SA

Amazing, amazing. And also just the plug the Deptford Literature Festival are also working to engage queer writers locally, in partnership with Triangle LGBTQ+ Cultural Centre. And will be running a series of workshops that will culminate in a performance and open mic at Triangle on the day. Helen, last question. So you're also going to be producing a resource for the Deptford Literature Festival At Home series, can you tell us a bit about that in terms of accessibility and people who can't join in person.

HB

So this is a nice thing that Deptford Literature Festival do and Spread The Word do more generally, which is to put together a little resource pack that people can go through on their own in their own time, with lots of different activities and things to think about in your writing. So mine will be inspired by exactly the same kind of thing. There will be some quick warm up activities. And then I will include a few more activities that we won't be doing in the in person workshop also inspired by poems in the book.

SA

Helen, it's been so great having you on the podcast today. Thank you so much for coming in. What is the best way for people to keep up to date with the different projects you're working on and also to find out more about Bi+Lines

HB

Everything's listed on my website, which is helenbowell.co.uk and that's Bowell B-O-W-E-L-L. I'm also on Twitter and Instagram. But if you're interested in this project in particular, you can follow it on @Bi_poets on Twitter and Instagram as well.

SA

And just a reminder to our listeners that Helen's workshop, *Writing the In-Between* will be taking place on Saturday the 16th of March from 10am to 11:30am in room one of the Deptford Lounge, it's free to attend and BSL will be provided. On the final episode, I'll be joined by Femi Fadugba, physicist and author of YA sci fi novel *The Upper World*. Thank you so much for tuning in today. Take care and goodbye.