



WRITERS IN CONVERSATION

B.S. Johnson and Maureen Duffy: Aspiring Writers: A Conversation with Maureen Duffy

Melanie Seddon

Maureen Duffy and B.S. Johnson met at King's College London in 1956 when they both enrolled to read for a degree in English Literature. They became friends and colleagues through their contributions to Lucifer, the college literary magazine and the wider University of London poetry scene. They later joined forces in the Writers' Action Group (WAG) and campaigned for public lending rights for authors. Maureen kindly agreed to be interviewed about her relationship with Johnson, but in addition to this her interview sheds light on the socio-political context of British post-war writing.

*Maureen was born in 1933 in Worthing, Sussex and came to prominence in 1962 with the autobiographical novel *That's How It Was*. Although mainly known for her poetry, her prose work has received critical and popular acclaim. *Gor Saga* (1981) was dramatised and broadcast by the BBC in 1988 as *First Born*, a three-part mini-series vehicle for Charles Dance. She is also the author of 16 plays for stage, television and radio. Maureen is well known as a humanist and gay rights activist and for her work championing the financial and legal interests of writers. She is currently the President of the Authors Licensing and Copyright Society, and a Fellow and Vice President of the Royal Society of Literature.*

This interview took place in London in July 2013 and first appeared in the inaugural edition of B.S.J: The B. S. Johnson Journal.

MS: In Jonathan Coe's biography of B.S. Johnson there is a reference to you and Bryan as being the only 'serious' students of literature amongst your contemporaries at King's College London in the 50s.¹ Does this match your recollection of that time?

MD: Absolutely. We both saw ourselves as being writers, or at that stage, both poets. I don't know whether Bryan had considered writing novels at that stage. I was more interested in the theatre. But we both firmly saw ourselves as poets and I have to say there was a great deal of rivalry between us because we were the two, as you mention, that were absolutely serious about it. It was our lives, our passions and so inevitably, in a way, it made a kind of rivalry out of it. I have to admit that I was a bit miffed that Jonathan never asked me for my

¹ Jonathan Coe, *Like A Fiery Elephant: The B. S. Johnson Story* (London: Picador, 2005) 77.

comments etc. I was very surprised that he didn't contact me. In the little bits on the Internet that I have read about Bryan it says he was from a working class background. What exactly does that mean? Because Bryan didn't talk about his background. So what exactly did that mean?

MS: I think there's some dispute about that. At the round table discussion hosted by Will Self last year the issue of class came up. Somebody in the audience spoke up and flatly denied that fact saying, 'A load of rubbish. B.S. Johnson wasn't working class in any way whatsoever and would be laughing at you all here debating it.' So it is clearly a point of contention. It was very surprising, I had never heard anybody challenge that assumption before. It's interesting that you say he didn't speak about his background.

MD: No. And Jonathan Coe doesn't deal with it in the book.

MS: Well, I think there's a lot about his close relationship with his mother, but the issue of class maybe isn't dwelt upon. I suppose it is something that people have drawn out from the novels themselves.

MD: And also the fact that he left school at 16 you know and didn't go on to university until later.

MS: There is a sense of you both having to fight quite hard to get to that place at King's and it meaning a lot to you. And also afterwards, the sense of it being very difficult to be a writer in London in the early 60s – a struggle due to the financial hardships. Is that something that you think united you?

MD: I think we certainly both felt it. And we were both interested in pushing the bounds of literature. Unfortunately both Eva Figs and Christine Brooke-Rose, who were part of the same wave, as it were, died last year so you can't get their thoughts on it. But I think we both felt that the post-war novel had gone back to being middle-brow, middle-class, and it certainly didn't express my experience and didn't interest me. I think both Bryan and I harked back to the days of Woolf and Joyce. It was the time of the so-called 'Hampstead Novel', ably written by people like Iris Murdoch and Margaret Drabble. I just felt that had absolutely nothing to say to me and I had nothing to say to it. I'm sure Bryan felt the same. We were part of a wave that was, in my case, partly inspired by continental theatre, people like Beckett and Genet, Sartre and Ionesco who were all doing something different, so called 'experimental'. Every work of art, of literature in a way is experimental. You really don't know where you are going half of the time. I'm sure Bryan felt the same. That was the way we wanted to go – we wanted to jump backwards and then jump forward and fortunately for us there was this feeling at the time, but then of course in the early seventies that all changed again. I had forgotten when Bryan died so I looked it up and it was 1973. In the seventies there was an economic crisis and publishers told those of us who were writing

novels (as they often do) that the novel was dead and we should write non-fiction. I did write some non-fiction and Bryan had moved into film, but the nature of film itself became less experimental, less interesting. The mainstream reverted to a much more conventional model and I think that Bryan would have found that very inimical. I wasn't actually personally in touch with him at that time because one of the things that I must say about Bryan is that he really was an old-fashioned misogynist.

MS: Yes, I am a huge admirer of his work, but the one thing that jars for me and the one thing that is hard to reconcile is that slight seam of misogyny running through his work. You could excuse it, I suppose, by seeing him as a 'man of his time' or in some ways a man of an earlier time because he seemed deeply old-fashioned in many ways. It's there and you can't overlook it in his work. Did it come out on a personal level?

MD: Yes, it was part of why we were sort of in contest. Because I don't think that Bryan thought that women could write seriously and there were occasions when he would come out with something so old-fashioned: a 'bloke-ishness.' So in that sense although we were together we were certainly not in sympathy with each another. Except in the literary sense where we were both looking to expand and break away from the fifties. And also our political views were both left wing. We were both involved to some extent though the fact that I'm still alive and Bryan isn't means that I've been much more involved. But he was involved in the initial campaign for public lending rights, but I think he found it quite difficult that it was basically being run by a coven of women. It could be seen as a limitation on his work. As much as anything I like *Trawl*, I thought it was a great achievement. But it's interesting that as much as anything he drew on characters at King's for his early novels. *The Raven* was based on a lecturer we had – John Crow; Albert Angelo was based to some extent on a fellow student, Gianni Zambardi whom Jonathan Coe did interview. Quite where Christie Malry came from I'm not sure. Maybe Bryan himself!

MS: Were you surprised by his initial critical success? He did certainly have his moment. There is a line in your novel *Londoners* where it states that everyone wants to be 'fashion's child'. Was that surprising for you or did you see it coming?

MD: This is going to sound a bit harsh. Bryan worked very hard at promoting his work and himself. We used to laugh about it at King's because we had the English Society which invited poets down to read and so on and we used to laugh amongst ourselves and say 'At what point is Bryan going to buttonhole the celebrity?' Bryan would sidle up and introduce himself and in a way it's understandable because he came from the sort of background, as indeed I did, where you simply did not meet literary celebrities. If you go to boarding school and mix in that particular milieu it is much easier for you to be in contact with media people and the whole literary world. Whereas if you come from another background where none of that pertains you have to decide how to make it yourself or to reject it. Be very determined and bolshie on your own. There was not that kind of immersion in what is now called,

charmingly, the 'creative industries'. And so you had to compensate and in some cases you maybe overcompensated in some ways. Otherwise you were simply not noticed. And I have to say that there is always male prejudice, Bryan got much more attention than Christine Brooke-Rose, who got a certain amount, and Eva in her turn. I had a brief flurry of notoriety by publishing works that one critic said were, 'scraping the bottom of the barrel' and 'willfully experimental.' And then came the seventies and that was really the end of Bryan. A combination of circumstances was really too much for him. I wrote a poem as I think I told you.² I don't know what had happened in Bryan's childhood. As you say he was devoted to his mother. I don't know whether there was a conflict with his father, but he was a very angry personality. The manner of his death was horrific and it was really the act of someone who is deeply angry and depressed. I mean, really in some ways he was like a sort of caged animal and I am quite sure there is much more in his background, his early days, that would have helped occasion that but of course in those days the British as a whole rejected Freudianism and psychotherapy. It was still sort of, 'pull yourself together!' And so there was no way in which he could access any help or kind of understanding for his difficulties. Many of our contemporaries in one way or another suffered through a lack of understanding of the human psyche and its groundings, needs and problems and so on.

MS: Your poem 'Suicide' is very moving and like other pieces written after the death of Bryan there is a lot of anger directed at what was seen as, I suppose, a waste or a very selfish act.

MD: A bit of both, but definitely a waste. We both had that experience of being wrenched away from our mothers. My mother was always having to be sent away to a sanatorium³ to recover and he was evacuated. I don't know about his relationship with his father. And I, of course, didn't have a father except of course in the technical sense. It's a pity really that we had to be rivals. But maybe that provoked the best in us. Who knows?

MS: Both of you seem to have seen yourselves as poets primarily and for Johnson there seems to be a real divide between his approaches to these different written forms. Poetry is from the Muse, the Goddess, a romantic spontaneous overflowing of emotion. But the novel, prose is for truth. It's where you put your own version of reality. We seem to be left with two very different vehicles.

MD: Yes, I would say there are two different kinds of truth. One is perhaps a very kind of emotional truth, or an attempt to express an emotional truth – this is of course poetry. In the seventeenth century we would just have called ourselves poets, the term 'writer' didn't exist at all. One thing we do share is that we both attempted different media. It's still often unusual. There was this feeling that you couldn't do them all, but it was another way in

² Maureen Duffy, 'Suicide' in *Collected Poems* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1985) 224.

³ Maureen's mother died from TB when she was 15. Her childhood experiences are recounted in her first autobiographical novel *That's How It Was* (1963).

which Bryan and I rejected literary straight-jackets. And Bryan going into film was a great adventure and yet again, one feels, ‘what a waste’.

MS: You speak about the group of avant-garde writers that included Bryan and others such as Christine Brooke-Rose and Eva Figs. Did you have the sense of being a group at the time or is this a label that has been imposed retrospectively?

MD: No, no we were absolutely trying to do something different as a group, something which had more of its roots on the continent. There was an extremely lively atmosphere at King’s and in London University itself of people striving to write. And part of it was fuelled by those of us who were from working-class backgrounds. We were the first generation of free secondary education and probably the first in our families ever to go to university. I think that fuels the class-based interest in my work and his work and others of that time.

MS: Another interesting point of comparison between you is how you both obviously wanted to be writers but you had to hide that fact and instead say that you would go to university and become teachers. There was almost a drawing of the veil over the real dream.

MD: Absolutely. And Bryan leaving school at 16, he would have had to. I took the first year of ‘A’ levels, Bryan probably missed that and that was why he had to make up, going to Birkbeck and doing Latin because of course in those days you could not read English at somewhere like King’s without Latin. Bryan would have had to have done that. But we were both intellectually non-conformist and that was why we got 2:2s. As well as the fact that we were intent on being writers and going our own way. We needed to find our own voices.

MS: He seems to have been noted for his speech and presence. In your novel *Londoners* you make reference to a character that is ‘Johnsonian in girth, and by extension in his speech’.⁴ This must be a reference to Bryan?

MD: Yes, it was a sort of combination of Bryan and John Crow. He was hefty and we tended not to be. Remember we had grown up in wartime. He was physically bigger than most of us and like me, a couple of years older than our contemporaries. He was a man of presence!

Melanie Seddon took her Master's degree in Contemporary Literature, Culture and Thought at Sussex University and is currently a third year PhD candidate at the University of Portsmouth in the UK. Her research interests are centred round spatial theory and British Post-War culture and literature and her thesis is titled ‘B. S. Johnson: the Novel as Process.’ She is co-editor of B.S.J:

⁴ Maureen Duffy, *Londoners* (Methuen: London, 1983) 50.

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