



Interview with Rachel Rooney

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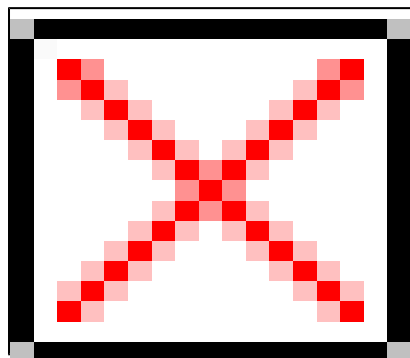
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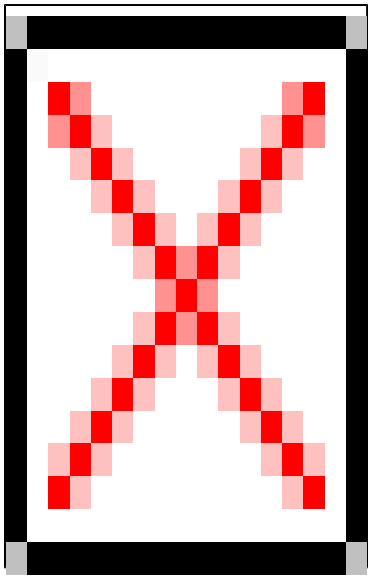
Nicholas Tucker interviews award winning poet **Rachel Rooney** on **National Poetry Day**.

Rachel Rooney's first poetry book for children, **The Language of Cat**, was long-listed for the **Carnegie Medal** and won the **2012 CLPE Poetry Prize**. Not bad going for an author who had written poems up to the age of thirteen and then stopped for the next twenty-seven years. Nicholas Tucker interviewed her for Books for Keeps.



Rachel Rooney's second collection **My Life as a Goldfish**, just out, is just as good as her first. Short, often rhyming, faintly quizzical and playing affectionate games with language, the poems roam over a wide selection of moods and insights while always remaining ever so slightly detached at the same time. Reading them is like watching butterflies in flight; here one moment, all shapes and colours, but difficult to pin down and quick to fly away. So what made her decide to direct her poetry specifically at children? This was the first question I put to her in her Brighton home while her two yapping dogs struggled to break through the door outside which they had initially been firmly placed (They were let in later).

?Well, **The Language of Cat** was quite autobiographical, as I was writing it very much for myself when young. That's why many of the poems refer to what children feel and think about before they become adults. And I have always worked with children ? I'm also a teacher ? so that's another influence too. But when I was young poetry was such a significant part of my life. So I sort of went back where I had broken off, very much regretting having stopped writing for so long but more than happy to start up again. What I am most interested in now is poems that are neither for adults nor children but for both. Because the core emotions children and adults experience are basically the same. Jealousy, anger, fear, yearning, puzzlement, we all have such feelings at whatever age.?



But children know less than adults. There is surely more to wonder at as they try to make sense of the world. Is that state of wonder something your poems set out to describe?

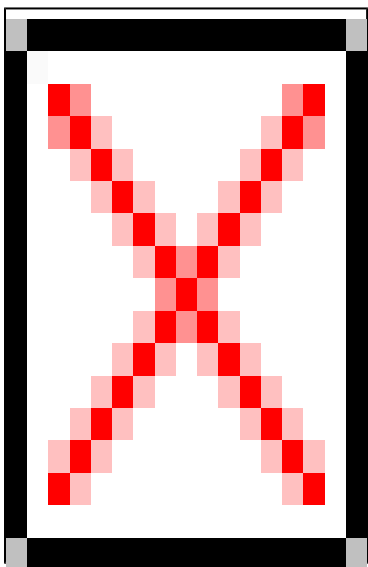
?I'm not sure children ever realise how little they do know. When I was about seven I remember being in the back garden and thinking that because I now understood the laws of addition, subtraction, multiplication and division that I therefore knew everything there was to know. But then I looked at a bush and realised that I would never know how many cherry stones there were in the world, and that I therefore didn't know everything after all.?

There's a moment in one of your poems when a mother empties a dish of stewed greengages over her husband's head at table. You describe this as a true story.

?Yes, it did happen. Aspects of my childhood were good. My father was an English teacher who loved poetry all his life. He died last year but not before my first book came out, which pleased him greatly. But with six children born over a ten year span to cope with and a wife who never really felt very maternal, there were tensions and this poem recalls one of those moments. My own chief nurturance always came not from my mother but from literature and my father.'

You write quite a lot about poetry itself in your poems.

?As a late convert to poetry I remain amazed by all that it can do. That's probably why there are so many self-referential poems especially in the first book.?



And the poems are still coming thick and fast?

?Ideally I would like to be a full-time poet. But I have to live, and when I am teaching I don't write at the same time.

But I then save up to have a year off during which I can really let the poems flow. ?

There is one poem in your second collection, *The 20a Bus*, written when you were only ten. It's extraordinarily accomplished for a child. So where did your gift come from?

?I think I am a natural-born poet, to be quite honest. And although when I was little I never showed my poems to anyone I also wanted to be heard, even if it was only the paper I was writing on that heard me. And later on, when I was an adult and going through a difficult period of my life, that desire to be heard for what I was and still am, became more important to me than ever.?

There aren't many dogs in your poems even though you are an obvious dog-lover?

?Yes, that's odd, isn't it? But they help me because I am always walking them and thinking while I am doing this over and over again about a poem I am trying to finish. I only work at one poem at a time, so can't get on to another one until the last one is safely packed up and finished. But that can only happen when I feel there is a truth to what I am composing, and that the poem is in that sense being honest to itself. I don't have a note- book and I don't worry about writer's block. What I wait for is a build-up of urgency and then the poem usually comes out.

So is one building up now?

?Not really ? life has been too busy recently. But give me a couple of weeks when other work is a dim and distant thing and something will surely happen.?

Do you ever fear you might lose your gift?

?No. I think it is always going to be there now. And I have written adult poems too which I haven't shown anyone as yet but perhaps they will come more into play in the years to come.?

It is a beautiful Autumn day outside, and if I go now Rachel might have the time to start thinking about another of her gossamer-light creations. Some have found her poems too quiet, lacking big effects. But for me this is a precious quality beautifully expressed in the gently inspired word-play characteristic of all her poetry. Long may she go on writing.

Nicholas Tucker is honorary senior lecturer in Cultural and Community Studies at Sussex University.

My Life as a Goldfish and Other Poems, Rachel Rooney, Frances Lincoln Children's Books, 978-1847804822, £6.99 pbk

[The Language of Cat](#) [3], Rachel Rooney, Frances Lincoln Children's Books, 978-1847801678, £6.99 pbk

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