

# A POET'S TALE

## Audio Transcript

**Rebecca:** Hi, I'm Rebecca Bullard from the online course: 'Unseen Poetry and the Creative Process'. I'm here with Peter Robinson, an award winning poet, translator and novelist, and Professor of creative writing here at the University of Reading.

**Peter's** been publishing poetry for about five decades, and his collected poems came out in 2017. His next book is called 'Bonjour Mr Inshaw' and it's a collaboration with a painter, David Inshaw. Today, Peter's going to talk to us about his work as a writer, and also as a teacher of creative writing.

**So Peter, talk to me a little bit about your method when you are writing poetry. Where do you get your inspiration, your motivation? Do you have particular routines? How do you write?**

Peter: By trying not to. I think mainly I don't go looking for it very much. I just, sort of, live and wonder around – and see the moon, still above the administrative building this morning and all that kind of stuff. I just sort of pick stuff up as I'm going along. And eventually an idea comes up or a thought comes up, or some words come into my head and join together, and they sort of... I might just spot a rhyme or something like that, and think that... And a little light bulb goes off and I think 'oh there might be a poem there', and I might scribble down a few phrases, and then go back to it later, and eventually something will come out.

**Rebecca: And do you tend to think with paper in front of you? Do you play around with words in your mind and then put them down?**

Peter: Well I don't write – some people I know, a bit like Wordsworth, go for a walk and they kind of write the poem while they're walking. And then they go back and write it out, as it were – and I don't do that. I usually have something which is kind of given, you know, some sort of moment where I think 'oh there's some words there' or 'there's a visual image there'. I'm very much visual driven.

But sometimes people will say something very weird or telling, or interesting and I'll think 'oh I can go somewhere with that'. And I'll write that down in the notebook and it will sit there for a bit, and eventually – it will be sort of humming around in my mind – and eventually, I'll see some way to take it somewhere. And then I'll try to write it, and usually I fail, then I go back to it later and have another go and have about five or six goes on average, I would have thought. And eventually, if it's working, it comes out as a poem, I hope.

**Rebecca: And when you're talking to your students here at Reading about writing, do you have advice for them about when to write? How to write? Or do you feel that it's important they find their own way? What kind of advice do you give them?**

Peter: I don't think that I do give them very much advice about actually how to write. I mean, I just asked nearly 60 students to write a piece which had the words 'my first day' somewhere or other in it, as a sort of opening gambit for their first workshop. And so I got a tsunami of nearly 60 poems, it didn't seem to be a problem, they just did it.

So I kind of imagine that people some how or other know how to – well they know how to go about it in the sense that they know how to get words on paper. And then my job, that's where my job sort of starts I think – how to get better words on the paper.

**Rebecca: How do you get better words on the paper? What kinds of advice do you give your students? What do you ask them to look for in their own work and in other people's work?**

Peter: Well we work shop them. We go around the room, I usually go round and ask everybody to say something, try to get them to say something constructively critical, because just saying you like it isn't much help the poet. And then I usually put my bit in at the end, and I usually limit myself to one or two things because the idea of, sort of, demolishing these early efforts is foolish I think, so I just say you know 'you might improve the punctuation on this one' or 'had you noticed that the rhythms are not quite right in line seven?' or 'do you think it really works to rhyme singulars with plurals?' that sort of thing. You know, just really little technical things.

**Rebecca: Great. Tell me a little bit about how you improve your own work. So when you've got a draft of something and you're looking through it. What kind of things do you like about your own work? And what kind of things do you feel that you want to improve on? What's that process?**

Peter: It's related to the idea, I think in my case anyway – of – a sort of, internal cohesion. And I lecture about Dylan Thomas' poem 'The Hunchback in the Park', and he wrote a draft of this poem, an untitled draft, when he was 18 years old. And then went back to it nine years later and rewrote it. So I think this is quite a good things for students to see – that he actually wrote the first three lines when he was 18 and didn't change them at all. But then the fourth line, kind of breaks the rhythm and goes off in a way and gets cut when he rewrites it.

And so I think that one of the things is just reading it out loud and feeling that something's not working. And probably the first thing that I'm thinking is not working is the rhythm, but then quite often I'll think that something is not working like the, somehow or other, the sort of the motional logic of it is not connecting up properly. So that it's got a beginning, middle and end but they're not talking to each other, or something like that. So that might be part of what I'm worried about.

Another thing is actually I'm very, very, very fussy about articles and determiners. So, if you look at the drafts, you can see that I'm mucking about with 'a' and 'the' and 'some' and 'these' and 'those', and all that sort of stuff.

**Rebecca: So, it's the teeny weeny words that sometimes it's easy to overlook, but actually can make a big difference?**

Peter: Well actually those are the ones that I look at most in a way, because quite often the phrases, the sort of, the resonant phrases are things that will come to mind, and you'll think 'oh, I like that', 'I want that'. But then making that phrase, really sort of be glued properly into the poem and to work and be integrated into all the other bits, that often involved 'what's the tense?', 'what's the subject?', 'what kind of articles am I going to use?', 'shall I cut the adjective in front of it?', that kind of thing.

**Rebecca: And tell me about the relationship between your reading and your writing. So, as you're writing, are you reading other people's work? What's the connection between what you read and what you write?**

Peter: Well, some times it's actually direct, but again, not planned. I was just reading a – the most recent book by one of my favourite poets, the New Zealand poet, Bill Manhire, and he's got a poem in that book called 'Surveillance', which has got the phrase in it 'Italy was something else again'. And my wife is Italian, and we were in Italy in the summer, I was experiencing things and then I remembered Bill's line and thought, I could do a sort of variation on that – so I did. So it ends: 'Italy is something else, and something else again', and that sort of thing. And of course, before that it was 'Italy is' lots of thing things.

So sometimes there's a very direct reference, sometimes there's – I'm writing something and I remember phrases, or I can't – I'm full of words. Obviously I've read - I've been writing for 50 years, I've been reading poetry for even longer.

I don't really know poems off-by-heart very much, I mean, I could recite you 'A Slumber did my Spirit Seal', but it's only eight lines. But lots and lots of little phrases from poems have stuck, so I've got a, sort of, great repertoire, of just bits that I remember from innumerable people, and they sometimes come to my rescue, as it were, as I'm writing.

But I'm just reading and studying all the time, because I'm a Professor of Literature and all that, so I've got to keep reading, other wise I'll get behind, won't I. So I'm always studying something and that's obviously just feeding... I like art actually, so I'm often reading art books.

**Rebecca: So if we think about students then, who might be thinking about embarking on this journey of writing for the first time, possibly. What kind of advice could you offer them, do you think?**

Peter: To relax, mainly to relax. And to listen to yourself. I don't know about you, but there's a sort of little voice going on in my head all the time, actually sometimes in the middle of the night it's just lines of pop songs going around in my head. But, you know, there's just a voice going on all the time, saying things and noticing things, and commenting on things almost. Barely even vocalising them, but just like it's sort of commenting.

And, I think, listening in to your inner story, as it were. To what's going on inside your head all the time. And being reflective on that, and thinking that you can – not that you can just copy it down – because you don't do that I think, but that you can just hear yourself saying interesting things occasionally (one hopes), and then develop them, and use the art of whatever you're doing – whether it's short stories, or drama, or poetry – to develop it and to push it into something that is sharable and that other people could be interested in. Or indeed, after all, the meaning of ones own writings is what other people understand by them.

**Rebecca: Peter, thank you very much.**