

Interviewee: Jackie Kay
Dates: 1978 - 1982
Role(s): Undergraduate
Honorary doctorate 2000



Interview summary:

Summary of content; with time (min:secs)

00:32 JK chose to study at Stirling because she liked the semester system; the fact that no early decision had to be taken about the degree programme and it was possible to study English with other subjects; there were courses in American poetry and novels. Compared to other universities there was freedom of choice. Stirling was close enough to her home in Glasgow and had a beautiful campus. She was only 17; she liked the sense of family provided by the University and the English Department. She took a course on the Indian novel in English and discovered that she could travel while sitting still.

02:30 She found her first year exciting; she was invited to select a poem for a tutorial and chose one about adoption by Anne Sexton. She valued the individual attention she was given; Rebecca and Russell Dobash in the Sociology Department tried to persuade her to focus on Sociology and she also studied History and Spanish but eventually took a single honours degree in English.

04:15 JK became aware of her multiple personalities and a widening of the self. She became politically active, joining the Gay Society, the Women's Collective, Rock against Racism and the Anti-Nazi League. She formed lifelong friendships. She met other black people for almost the first time. There were 40 black students in a student population of 3000 at the University; they shared a camaraderie, acknowledging each other when they met on campus.

06:00 JK lived for a while in Andrew Stewart Hall and then with other students in John Harrison's flat in Abercrombie Place, Stirling. There was a Fascist element among the students that targeted JK; they put up abusive posters about her with razors hidden behind them to injure people who were trying to take them down. Gay friends of hers such as Alastair Cameron were also targeted. Staff were not supportive. JK called a public meeting about it; the Principal was anxious about bad publicity in newspapers and JK agreed not to take it any further though she later regretted the decision. The police offered protection but JK didn't take it. One day at this time when she was alone, feeling vulnerable in the flat in Stirling, a large parcel wrapped in tinfoil was delivered, addressed to her. She was afraid that it was a bomb but it proved to be a food parcel.

09:48 She had been writing since she was 12; she kept a separate notebook for her poems to keep her writing distinct from her academic work. When she was 16 she was sent to see Alasdair Gray who assured her that she was a writer. In vacations she went to London and worked as a hospital porter; she cleaned John le Carré's house and he let her live in it rent-free for four months. She found the different dimensions of her life as a cleaner and as a student widened her sense of identity. When she left Stirling she worked in a children's

centre, for a feminist publisher, and for the Arts Council where she organised writers' tours.

12:48 JK valued the visits of writers to the English Department; she heard Iain Crichton Smith, Edwin Morgan and Norman MacCaig among others. She joined bus trips to plays such as *Equus* (by Peter Shaffer), and to agitprop theatre groups like 7:84 and Gay Sweatshop. She went to Jean Redpath's singing workshops. She often did these things on her own as other students didn't take advantage of the opportunities offered to them.

14:30 JK saved £1000 and gave up her job with the Arts Council in order to write full-time. *The Adoption Papers* was published in 1991 and she wrote plays and presented radio programmes. The germ of the idea for *The Adoption Papers* came when JK was pregnant at 26 and realized that she didn't know her genetic inheritance as she was adopted. She thought about her birth mother awaiting her arrival and her adoptive mother waiting for a baby. She wrote Mother Poems 1 and 2; the response to them at a conference was so positive that she pursued the themes of adoption and identity at greater length. Her adoptive father thought it a massive self-indulgence on her part. JK worried about whether writing on the borders of her own experience would mean that readers couldn't engage with it, but that proved not to be the case.

20:00 She is interested in form and finds that an idea comes already embodied in a form even if she hasn't used that form before. It's a risk but she likes experimenting and finding the right register. For memoirs the focus is on tone, tense and time. The National Theatre of Scotland's stage version of *Red Dust Road* disappointed JK as it didn't capture the spirit of the book though the cast was excellent; it was adapted by Tanika Gupta and directed by Dawn Walton. Usually JK is open to having her writing interpreted but it didn't work with this director. JK herself will write the screenplay for the film of the memoir as the director, Chris Young, wants her to do.

23:45 JK received a phone call from the First Minister inviting her to become the Makar for 5 years. She has travelled all over Scotland including the islands, giving readings and taking poetry to unexpected places where she receives a warm welcome. Poetry matters in Scotland. She commented on the number of lesbians in the audience in Uist and her driver said, 'We managed to hang on to our lesbians'. JK observed how the attitude to gay people has changed in her lifetime; she was ill-treated and beaten up at school but being the country's national poet is legitimizing and makes her feel she belongs. Being the Makar has been good for her in a deep psychological way. Attitudes to race have not changed so much in Scotland; it's not like Manchester where a Mancunian might be as likely to be assumed to be black as white. Scotland hasn't confronted its relationship with the Slave Trade as cities like Liverpool, Bristol and London have.


29:35: JK always visits schools when she goes to remote places. Children are responsive to poetry and keen to write it themselves, making up characters. They discuss their worries, such as moving from primary school on Eigg to a secondary school in Mallaig. They are open about their anxieties, perhaps because JK is in the school for a one-off visit, like talking to a stranger on a train.

32:55 JK's visit to Nigeria to meet her birth father led to an extended family. Her African half-brother, a GP in Kent, came to her adoptive father's funeral in November 2019 and met her adoptive mother for the first time. Her birth father only wanted to meet JK once, wishing to conceal her existence from his Nigerian family. JK was pleased to discover that he was a tree botanist as she had been a writer in residence in the Forest of Burnley, and was exploring her family tree. Her father was charismatic, colourful and hypocritical. The adoption story has many shoots, suggested by JK's adoptive mother weeping over the death of her birth mother, whom she had never met: 'My daughter's mother has died'. JK describes this as a rich sentence in a life full of doubles.

36:45 JK's son makes documentary films about identity and injustice. Her many roles, writer, Chancellor, professor, daughter, mother, Makar, mean that she has a lot of balls to juggle and feels that one part is always missing. She thinks of her varied use of literary forms as crop rotation, and her personal life has similar shifts.

39:06 JK was offered places to read English at Aberdeen, St Andrews, Edinburgh and Stirling and has never regretted choosing Stirling. Friends who went elsewhere felt that their courses were much more prescriptive. Committed, intelligent people working together allowed her to be grown up; they were halcyon days. The characters of the people who taught her with their wide range of interests had a major impact on her life. They taught her how to write as well as how to read, and gave her freedom of choice, autonomy and

independence.
Ends

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