

A BRIEF INTERVIEW WITH [JAN ZWICKY](#)

INTERVIEWER: MAT LAPORTE

Jan Zwicky is a Canadian philosopher and poet, who has taught both subjects as well as interdisciplinary humanities at a number of North American universities. She has served as a faculty member at the Banff Centre Writing Studio, has conducted numerous writing workshops, and edits regularly for Brick Books. Jan Zwicky was the winner of the 2009 Governor General's Award for Poetry, the 2005 Dorothy Livesay Poetry Prize (BC Book Prizes), and was shortlisted for the 2004 Governor General's award for Poetry and the 2004 Governor General's Award for Non-Fiction. Her books include Wittgenstein Elegies, The New Room, Lyric Philosophy, Songs for Relinquishing the Earth, Wisdom & Metaphor, Robinson's Crossing, Thirty-seven Small Songs & Thirteen Silences, and Plato as Artist.

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Mat Laporte: Your first book [Where We Have Been](#) (Brick Books 1982) is written in a singular, recognizable voice—a voice that has been more or less prevalent in your more recent books, as well. The most striking difference, however, between *Where We Have Been* and your later works seems to be the less abundant use of narrative. Can you describe why you've come to reject a more straightforward narrative voice in recent years?

Jan Zwicky: This question surprised me because I think there's a strong narrative element in all my work, just as there's a strong lyric element. But then I realized that, of course, [Thirty-seven Small Songs & Thirteen Silences](#) (Gaspereau 2005) is indeed a collection of short lyric poems, without a lot of explicit narrative, and this must be what prompted your question. The thing is, I've been writing these poems for years, and it just seemed time to bring some of them together in a book. But they were written right alongside narrative pieces that were published separately. So there was never a decision to work exclusively in a lyric mode or to 'reject narrative'. It's just that the narrative stuff, composed at the same time, got published in a different venue.

ML: What was your reading process like while composing [Wisdom and Metaphor](#) (Gaspereau 2003)? Are you frequently transcribing excerpts from books? Is this something you do as a regular practice

(in other words, is this the way that you read and write normally), or was the reading and collecting of excerpts for *Wisdom and Metaphor* more strategically organized and apart from your regular activities as a writer?

JZ: I don't keep a journal and never have. But neither did I organize the compositional process for *Wisdom & Metaphor* in a particular way. For both [Lyric Philosophy](#) (University of Toronto Press 1992) and *Wisdom & Metaphor*, I relied on my memory. As I worked on the left hand text, I would remember having read something relevant and would then go and look it up.

ML: The visual formatting of *Wisdom and Metaphor* contributes substantially to its reception as poetry. The often short aphorisms on the left margin surrounded by white space allow the reader multiple angles of perception. What was your thought process while arranging your writing in such a deliberate manner?

JZ: This one I can't answer except to say that the book itself is the record and transcription of my thinking.

ML: One of the first associations I remember making when I first read [Twenty-one Small Songs](#) (Barbarian Press 2000) was between your work and haiku and zen koans, not so much in terms of form but in the treatment of the senses. After hearing you speak of your other influences—[Ponge's](#) 'thing' poems, in particular—it struck me that all seem related to what I often ascribe to zen philosophy. How much does Eastern (and specifically zen) teachings inform your works?

JZ: This is a very interesting question. I can't claim to be a student of any Eastern philosophies because I have none of the languages. But what I have read in translation has led me to think that I'm more interested in Taoism, as represented by the figures of [Lǎo Zi](#) and [Zhuāng Zi](#), than in Zen. I believe that I hear, in many translations of these works, echoes of things I think the world has taught me. So perhaps there is an affinity in that sense. But there is not, I think, anything like 'influence'. I simply don't know the tradition well enough.

ML: I grew up in rural Ontario and have since resided in Toronto, the prairies, and the west coast. I'm interested to know if you perceive any significant differences in your writing practice in relation

to where you live. Do you find it easier to write on Quadra Island, for example, then in Toronto?

JZ: Yes! I find it easier to write when it's quiet, when I am alone, and when my days are made up of a mixture of desk work (usually in the morning) and time outside, either working or walking (usually in the afternoon). Sometimes poems visit me in the city or on airplanes. But when I need to *work* on them, I'm more likely to be successful if I'm in the country.

ML: You have expressed some hesitation about the pervasive use of computers. I am wondering—do you do most of your writing in longhand or with a typewriter?

JZ: I write everything longhand—even the answers to these questions—and then, after editing and rewriting, transcribe the result.

ML: Is it true that you are on sabbatical from your teaching position at University of Victoria? What are you working on now? Are you able to talk about it?

JZ: Yes, I'm on sabbatical at the moment. I'm currently at work on a new poetry manuscript and a foreword to the new edition of *Lyric Philosophy* that Gaspereau Press is bringing out next year.

ML: Are poetry readings important for you and do you regularly give or attend readings?

JZ: Yes, readings are important to me! Hearing the work in the composer's own voice can be a revelation: I often feel I *understand* the work more deeply than when I simply encounter it on the page. Also, and just in general, I love to hear good lyric poetry read well in a quiet meditative setting. And I also enjoy strong performances of dramatic and epic poetry on stage. But I find I'm easily distracted by the welter of sounds in many bars and coffeehouses, and find it more difficult to listen or read in such contexts. So the setting will sometimes make a difference to my willingness to go to or to give a reading.

ML: What inspires you presently? What are you currently reading?

JZ: These days I'm listening to a lot of [Schubert](#) and [Haydn](#), and I just went through a period where

I was listening to a lot of [John Lewis riffing on Bach](#). I'm learning the violin parts to [Schumann's E♭ Piano Quartet](#) and Mozart's [Piano Quartet in G Minor](#), and I think I'll have a look at [Bartók's Roumanian Dances](#) again. I've been reading some essays on mathematics written for a general audience, and the recent issue of [Grain](#) with poems by Xi Chuan, Tim Lilburn, and Warren Heiti. I've been working my way through a book of photographs by Dorothea Lange called [Daring to Look](#) (University of Chicago Press 2008), a brilliant new manuscript by [Sue Goyette](#) that I have the privilege of editing for Brick Books, and re-reading Ellen Bryant Voigt's [Messenger](#) (Norton 2007) and Adam Zagajewski's [Eternal Enemies](#) (FSG 2009). These are all things I'm thinking about at the moment. I'm not sure it's right to say that they 'inspire' me, though. There's no particular sort of experience that makes me 'want to write'. For me, writing is a response to insight — and insight can come, or fail to come, at any moment and in relation to any situation. And writing isn't the only response to insight! One can also try to become a better person, or can be launched on a path of exploration, or any number of other things. Response to insight can take many forms. I listen, read, and think not to 'get ideas' but because they are activities enjoyable in themselves; and because they are as necessary to health—to living a good life—as physical exercise, fresh air, and good food.

ML: You co-edited a collection entitled [Why I Sing the Blues](#) (Arsenal Pulp Press 2001). What other works of music have informed/continue to inform your work?

JZ: As my books attest, I've been deeply engaged with the Western European classical tradition in music for a long time; and I also love jazz and the blues. And I've never met a folksong from any culture that I didn't like. I listen to classical Indian and Japanese music with great enjoyment; but I'm sure my appreciation is not as deep as it could be because I lack training. Perhaps this should go on the ever-growing list of future projects!