

PROFESSOR MEG HARPER: So, welcome, everyone, to the first in a series of interviews with writers, called How I Write. My name's Meg Harper and I'm the Glucksman Professor of Contemporary Writing in English here at UL, and em, I would like to first introduce Lawrence Cleary, who will talk to us all a little bit about what this series is, and what we are all going to be involved in, because you need to get ready all of you, you are going to be involved – you are already involved! [laughter] So, and then, em, in a minute I'll introduce Jo Slade, the writer who's on the hot seat today. [laughter]

Lawrence Cleary is a writing consultant for the Regional Writing Centre at the University of Limerick. Lawrence studied literature and writing as an undergraduate at Illinois State University, and English Language Teaching at the University of Limerick, earning his MA here in 2003. He worked for the University of Limerick Language Centre from 2003 - 2007, teaching general English, and designing and teaching foundation studies and preparation for University courses for international student candidates. In 2007, Lawrence and Dr Idé O'Sullivan were selected to cultivate a research-informed, cross-disciplinary, systematic approach to academic writing development, through the formation of Ireland's very first writing centre. This year he's worked with the new MA students (we have a brand new MA in English) to develop the first online literary journal at the University of Limerick, and he has facilitated a time and a space for creative writing at the Regional Writing Centre. Jo Slade is kicking off what we hope will be a series of interviews here, about how the art of writing is, uh, done. So Lawrence, would you like to maybe talk a little bit about things?

LAWRENCE CLEARY: Sure. First of all, thank you. Thank you for that great introduction. Em, it's marvellous. You make me sound good. [laughter] Em, I guess the How I Write is an inspiration that comes from my experience of the Stanford programme. The Hume Writing Centre in Stanford actually does a How I Write series. They do, uhm, they film a lot of the interviews. Most of the interviews are done with academics, and that's, so we are in a kind of unique position here because Jo is a creative writer, or at least that's the way we think of her. I don't know how she thinks of herself, so we'll ask her that. But, em, and what they do is they ask people about the process that they go through when they try to attain towards their writing goals. Everybody has a writing goal: some people achieve it, some people don't. And, em, usually, the ones that don't probably are trying things that don't work, and do not know what their other options are.

Jo is a writer that we value. She has a writing process that works. We know that, because we have her books, we have her literature to, um, to peruse, and so we know that she has a process that works and so the interview is to find out what that process is. In some cases, Jo before we started was saying that, you know, she is not sure if she can say with clarity what her process is. But you know, that's actually part of this whole interview process, is to maybe for – not just for us – but for Jo to discover what her process is. And so, it's learning for her, it's learning for us, it's learning for everybody. But for the National Digital Learning Resource, on which this film will be posted, it'll be used as a learning resource for teachers. Jo will be a model. She is going to present us with a process that works, and people who are watching it will be able to see some of the things that Jo does, some of the things that she does in order to overcome, maybe, writer's block, or, you know, if she's having difficulty getting started or whatever, all of those things that she does, uh, they'll be strategies that other people will be able to try. It may not work for them, it may work for them. But it's something that they may not have thought of. So, Jo is a resource. Her products are a resource, but her processes are a resource as well. And so the interviews are focused on the process. And that's what we hope to do, is to help people write, become better writers by modelling ourselves after people like Jo. We wanna be like you! [laughter]

JO SLADE: I wouldn't advise that! [more laughter] Be like yourselves.

LAWRENCE: OK, Sure. I'll try that too. [laughter] Did you want to introduce Jo?

MEG: Yeah, well let me introduce Jo.

LAWRENCE: OK.

MEG: Jo Slade lives and works in Limerick. She is a poet. She is also a painter. She studied at the Limerick School of Art and Design, the National College of Art and the University of Limerick. She is the author of four collections of poetry, as well as a chatbook of poems called *The Artist's Room* about the painter Gwenn John – well, not about, but in conversation with, maybe?

JO: Yes, that's good.

MEG: In *Fields, I Hear them Sing* was published in 1989; *The Vigilant One* was published in 1994 – it was nominated for the Irish Times/ Aer Lingus Literature Prize; *Certain Octobers* was published in 1997, in a dual language English and French edition – it received a publication bursary from the Centre de Livres in Paris; *City of Bridges* was published in 2005 and *The Artist's Room* was published in 2010. Jo was nominated in 2003 for the Prix Evelyne Encelot Ecriture Prize, Paris. She has been a poet in residence for Limerick County Council, 2002 - 2003 – this is a long list! – and in 2007 she was poet in residence at the Centre Culturel Irlandais in Paris. She has exhibited paintings widely, and her poetry is elegant and beautiful and challenging and I'm thrilled to hear how she does it.

JO: Thank you Meg, so much.

LAWRENCE: That's great.

JO: Thank you for that very flattering list of things. It makes it seem as though I've been working very hard.

LAWRENCE: She does a great job, doesn't she?

JO: She does, she sure does. Yeah. [laughter]

LAWRENCE: I feel better already. [more laughter]

If it's OK, we'll get started.

JO: Please do.

LAWRENCE: I kind of want to set the tone, set the pace etc., in this process, in this interview process, the way that we'll do it, we'll start out with the introductions (which we've already done) and then I will spend, probably – it's quarter after now, so probably another 35 minutes or so just asking questions of Jo. At which point I will stop and I will open it up to people in the audience to ask questions.

I'm sure there's a million questions that I want to ask, and I'm not going to be able to ask them all, and it would be selfish of me to keep on asking questions when I know that you feel exactly the same way. So at that point, I'll allow the floor to take over. The one thing that – at that point, my job will be to facilitate that part of the interview and just keep it focused on process instead of on product. So, uhm, I guess I'll just get started.

I guess that one of the places that I wanted to start with, ah, was the fact that you're a creative writer and we're in an academic setting, and most of the people that will be looking at this resource through the NDLR [National Digital Learning Resource] will be students in an academic setting, and one of the things that I'm aware of is that you have quite a bit of academic experience, actually, and...I'm wondering about your thoughts on how creative writing – your experience of writing creatively, would...if you were to be in an academic situation again – how has that informed how you would write as an academic. Would you write differently now possibly than you did when you first started out as an academic?

JO: I think I started out first as a creative writer. That was my first impulse. So, it wasn't that my first introduction to writing, serious writing, was within academia, it was actually within the creative field. So, my worry, when I tried to apply that to academic writing was, would it be sort of all over the place? You know, very...very creative, but really not...it wouldn't have the rigour and the clarity that is required of academic writing. So how I got over that was, ehm – with help of course from my very experienced tutors here at the university – the way I got over that was to write creatively first. And then actually to edit it into an academic – into the academic form. So, that I wasn't being untrue to myself initially. I was being true to my own form, but then I realised that there were structures in which you have to work, and the main structures, it seemed to me, in academic writing were clarity and rigour. And that I had to bring as a new, almost, content to the writing.

LAWRENCE: Out of curiosity, one of the things that I know from my own experience of academic writing is that sometimes I write for quite a while before I understand what it is I'm trying to say. If you go through this process where you start out expressing yourself creatively and being true to yourself and then you transform it into an academic context and change the form to suit that purpose, is there a rediscovery when you go through that second process, do you remember, thinking back, did that allow you to revise twice?

JO: Yeah, I think, my main fear was that, actually, I would lose...I would lose something of the creative writing in, in the academic form. I was afraid of that initially. I was afraid that I would become frustrated by having to put a very strict structure on what I was doing. And, at times, it did. But, actually, to resolve the arguments that I had premised in the academic writing, I, actually,...it was necessary for me to, to adhere to the structure of academic writing. And yes, it did make things very clear to me when I read through the work afterwards. I felt, for me, that it was clear.

LAWRENCE: Did you ever feel like you could play with some of the academic forms, and actually get away with it?

JO: Yes. Yes, but it depends, I think, too, probably, on who your supervisors are and who your tutors are and who, you know, your external advisors are on these things. It depends on their willingness to go that road with you.

LAWRENCE: Yeah, yeah. Very good, sure. I've experienced that too. (laughs)

JO: That was my experience. And in my thesis for the Master's, I actually found somebody who was very deeply steeped in her knowledge of history of art and had a great love of poetry. And she suggested ways in which I could actually bring my poetry into the thesis. And that began to open it up for me. You know? So that was helpful, yeah.

LAWRENCE: Did you do any teaching as well, or is it...?

JO: No. I taught Art as a secondary school subject for years. That was my initial day job.

LAWRENCE: Not at third level though?

JO: No. Not at third level. No.

LAWRENCE: I didn't know if you had done that or not.

JO: No. I've done a block from time to time at the Limerick School of Art – many years ago – but it was, ah, on ideas really. That was what I was talking about, you know. On ideas. You know, how you bring, how you develop, how you get ideas.

LAWRENCE: Well, this idea, this, this idea, you know, this idea, there's, we think about a writing process and we think about a creative process, and I'm sure that they're tied together pretty closely, it's very difficult to separate them out, but I'll probably keep coming back to that, partly because, ah, uhm – well, I'll just keep coming back to it. That's as much as I'll say at this point.

I want to move a little bit into a kind of more structured questioning because I'd like to cover certain things within the parameters of the interview so that students who are availing of this will be able to look at different stages of their own writing. So if it's, eh...what I'd like to do is start at the beginning, and um, because I have more questions about that than I think I have about anything, any other part of the writing process, when, when I think about poetry and I think about what's involved. Uhm, ah, one of the things that kept coming into my head was, I was wondering like, when do you know you have a poem to write?

JO: Gee. That's a mystery.

LAWRENCE: When does that happen? How do you know it's happening?

JO: When do I know it's happening? Well, I guess, you know, ah, years ago, my father, who was a writer as well, told me, you know, you have to keep your tools sharp, and you have to keep your pencils sharpened, and even if it isn't in use for ages and ages, it has to be sharp because, of course, you might be visited, as he would say. And I understand now what he means. And of course there's a whole –inspiration rarely comes, I think, in a flash, like a eureka moment, there's usually a build up to it, and you've probably been building up to it yourself, by the manner of your reading, by the manner of your attention, really. I think it's attention, actually, probably, ehm, by the depth of your...by the depth of your seeing...and hearing. I think in all these ways, and of course you keep your tools sharpened by actually exercising your hand, your fingers and wrist every day. So I really didn't understand that when I was younger because I think it likes sleep. It comes in a much more natural way when you're young, but as you get older, you must actually keep the practice going, you know. So, I was probably writing a lot when I was younger, but wouldn't have thought of it as writing a lot. Do you understand what I mean? But later on, I now recognise as something that I do every day and first thing every day, but that's my personal habit.

LAWRENCE: That's brilliant.

JO: Yeah, you see, when you have children and a job, and a family and everything else in life – because life is terribly, terribly busy – there's a kind of commitment at some point in writing poetry that you must make to yourself, to, to some outside force, you know, and once you make that commitment, I think, then, that you, you focus, a bit like academic writing, and when you've got your subject, you really are focused on it, and then you just have to maintain a kind of...habit, and the habit eventually, of course, turns into an obsession because that's what happens with habits. And they turn

into obsessions, and, you know – say, for instance, my babies years ago would wake up at half-six in the morning for their half-six feed, six o'clock feed I think it was, and the first fellow, thanks be to God, was a great sleeper. So he'd wake up about six and he'd feed for about a quarter of an hour and then he'd go off to sleep and I'd be there, sitting there, you know, and I thought, well, I'm going to be knackered by four o'clock in the afternoon, you know? So I thought I'd better make use of this time, before my partner gets up, before, you know, other children get up, etc. etc. So I formed the habit of getting up at that time with him, and then I would work solidly through from quarter past six to quarter past eight. And then I would be exhausted...

LAWRENCE: Right. I guess that's kind of a, that, that addresses one of those issues of beginning. It's like, you actually planned. You actually made a plan. Uhm. In the Writing Centre, when we talk to people about their writing, we talk about, ah, you know, this prewriting stage that you go through, and of course this is, we tend to, we tend to present this as a very linear process, and we know that it's not, and I would say that it's definitely not when you're writing poetry – I'm guessing –because of all that is involved, especially with you writing in two languages.

JO: I don't write in French...

LAWRENCE: ...do you not?

JO: Oh, no, I don't. I only write in English.

LAWRENCE: oh, okay, I'm sorry. All right. All right. I thought...Who does the translations?

JO: The translations are done by, well, it was a French poet who did the translations. La Bey was his name.

LAWRENCE: Okay. Very good. But even without writing in two languages, it's still a very complicated thing writing poetry, and you, one of the things that we look at is we look at what people do when we write, and one of the things that you did was that you mapped out a period of time, and you had a particular space that you worked in?

JO: Eh, no, because we just lived in a three bedroom – still do – semi-detached house, so it wasn't, I couldn't really say that I'd lots of space. However, I hasten to add, I have always had a room of my own. So, yes, of course I have, that's the thing, and then later on I converted the attic and that became my space. I couldn't work, anyway, with my husband. He's too neurotic...I couldn't really... (laughter)

LAWRENCE: Sure. Yeah, yeah. Well, there...I mean, everyone's different. Some people can...I've heard of people being able to, like, sit in front of a television in the middle of a movie and, you know, write away, and the middle of a party or whatever, but...and other people not being able to write unless there's, you can hear a pin drop, so everyone has their own process, and in this case you needed to...

JO: I needed silence in the early in the morning before anybody got up. That's to really connect, of course, with something. It's not necessarily that you're writing a poem at that time. That's not what I mean. It's that you're actually engaging with the process, in some form. Like, I would say, maybe a useful demonstration, you spoke about writer's block, you know, when I went to Paris first for three months, and Geraldine (points) was there, and she would know this – at the College Irlandais – I was so kind of in awe of being give three months without any family, friend or anything around that, that I didn't have to think about anyone else or anything else for that three months was just a gift, and I got totally overawed by it that first day (laughs), and I thought, what am I going to do now, I'm

supposed be here to write. (laughs) And I had turned this wonderful proposal in, it was all there and what am I going to do and now I know it's not going to happen, I'm just going to be here like a lunatic. (laughs) And on the second day, I came up to the room and I set my laptop up, and I said, all I can do really is type rubbish. Just start writing rubbish. Okay? And I'll see where that takes me. And I just sat at the laptop and I wrote. I wrote one sentence. And I thought I can't write any more now. That's it. One sentence. So I thought, okay, here's the deal, I'll write that sentence, for as long as I have to write that sentence. Okay? (laughs) And when I no longer have to write that sentence, something else will occur. And I wrote it, I would say, maybe two A4 size pages as they floated on, covered with one sentence, and then suddenly another sentence came in, and then another one. And I thought, gee, I read that somewhere, that this is a good method to stop, you know, to move yourself along, but I never believed it, but here I am in Paris, and I better do something, and now I'm forced to use any mechanism that arrives in my mind, and this one did, and it worked!

LAWRENCE: That's very reminiscent of Peter Elbow's, uhm, you know, free-writing process. Just keep writing it until you have something else to say and continue to write, and eventually, you'll be writing what you want to write. Yeah, and that worked.

JO: And that worked. And that one sentence seemed to work, and then I, later, a year later, have turned that one sentence into a long prose poem, which is called *Canticle*, which is little song. The sentence was: "removed moves me from estrangements I thought I knew".

LAWRENCE: Wow. That's such a challenge to say!

JO: And so I just kept writing that, you know. And, of course it was true, really. I had been removed and that was the truth of my situation.

LAWRENCE: That's a brilliant story.

JO: That was one way of overcoming an experience of the wall.

LAWRENCE: That's great. Yes, and it is one of the things we encounter most in the Writing Centre, for instance, is that people have, uhm, all kinds of thought processes and emotional processes that interfere with their writing, and in the case, in your case, here, it was more just being in awe of this freedom.

JO: This freedom to write.

LAWRENCE: Amazing.

JO: Every minute of the day to write. I mean, it was just incredible.

LAWRENCE: That's a great story. That's brilliant. Ah, I was thinking about how you said, you called it writing rubbish, and I thought that would be a great title for a workshop: *Writing Rubbish*. We're going to have to take you up on that. (Laughter) That's great. That's brilliant. Uhm. One of the, ah...continuing with this idea of getting started with poetry. One of the things that went through my mind also was...when, this is actually how you started a poem, and you talked about how, on a day to day basis, you're probably doing things, and you're not even aware of it, and you're actually working toward a poem. When does it occur to you that you're working toward a book of poems?

JO: Ah. Well, that comes after, for me, it's purely, at least for me, that's all, you know. Other people I don't know about, I don't have a book in mind, but I am accumulating poems. I have very small

notebooks. So, as a working process, it's very good. You carry them around with you everywhere, you know, little moleskin notebooks, so I'm writing stuff down in those all the time. So, regularly, I treat myself to a coffee on my own in a café, anywhere, in any city, in Limerick even, you know, and I can sit there, then, and I can write because I'm free from everything. And I take notes in those little notebooks all the time, and very often I don't use those notes, whatsoever, but they seem to form, ahm, like, a little paper trail...that leads into a poem. And in the same way the poems seem to form, after a year or two, maybe three, or five, sometimes even five or six years; they form into a kind of paper trails of poems. Maybe it's all one long poem.

LAWRENCE: Sure. Right.

JO: And maybe, you're just interrupting the process and carrying on the conversation, and at the end of eight or maybe ten years, if I think the work is good, I think, oh, well, maybe I can make a collection of this, and then, the real job of work begins.

LAWRENCE: And is that trying to understand the coherence of the unit?

JO: Yes. That's trying to understand the coherence of the unit, but it's also trying to get to the words behind the words, and to make sure that, at least to the best of your ability and knowledge, the poems are as good as they can be, you know, and that takes work.

LAWRENCE: Right.

JO: And you have to apply something that you use in academic writing, clarity and rigour, then, at that point.

LAWRENCE: Right. And do you – I know that it's not a good, it's probably not good to study poetry, to study poems and try to understand their meaning, so much as what they, whatever it is that they evoke. Whatever it is that they... whatever it is that response to it is probably what the poem is trying to do in the first place, I'm guessing – I'm sure that some of them have meaning as well, but we try not to limit it to a meaning, that kind of thing, at least that's the way I would approach the study of poetry. Uhm, are there often times, or ever, when you've written a poem, and you know it's brilliant, but you're not sure exactly what it's trying to say?

JO: Ah, yeah. Yeah. Absolutely. Sometimes poems are published and taken in book form and it could be years later and I'm reading through, and I could think, oh my goodness, I really understand that now, ahm, or I could say well, that was not really up to scratch. I should not have let that go, you know? It just wasn't the right time.

LAWRENCE: That's brilliant, looking back like that and seeing that because I'm sure that everyone faces that. This is much later in the process. You're actually ready to submit it, and you do. I'm sure that most people are pretty reluctant to let it go for fear that it's not ready. Do you let it go not really feeling comfortable?

JO: You only realise it many, many years later, you see, when you do look back on the work. You do really try, if you're honest, to be sincere as you can in your approach to the final version of the poems, but you see, you change yourself. Your opinions change, your feelings change, your world changes around you, so of course your approach to a subject will change as well, you know, ahm, there's no doubt about it. I mean, for instance, when my father and mother first died, I mean, the, what I was left with, the residue from my father was of an authoritarian, uhm, man in a male world, a writer, and a business man, you know? And of the limitations that put on me growing up in that environment. But

in actual fact now, twelve years on, I see it in a much more compassionate way, you know, and I understand, you know, I understand him and I understand myself in relation to him. So those poems that I wrote at that period have a different meaning for me now.

LAWRENCE: In a way, that allows you, knowing that, allows you to accept that sometimes you do let things go when they're not ready or you're not ready for them to be let go, that kind of thing...and that might be...

JO: There's a nervousness, you know, about that all the time.

LAWRENCE CLEARY: Right.

JO SLADE: It's the thing of, is this, you know, will someone understand this? Will they get what I'm really trying to get at here? You know...if I failed to make that contact, that's the disappointment.

LAWRENCE: Right. Right. I guess, that goes back to the beginning again, in a sense. A lot of times when we write academic papers, we have a purpose, and I'm, kind of, that's another question that I had, it's like, when you start a poem, do you have a purpose? Or do you discover purposes as you go? Or do you have a purpose right before you let it go? Is that purpose an issue, for you, you know, when you're writing your poetry?

JO: Ah, the purpose behind my own poetry? I think there is a focus all the time, yeah. I absolutely believe in my own engagement with the natural world, you know? And...the whole of the natural world, including, you know, us, humans in that as well. So I do have that focus, and I do think, for me, at least, there is a spiritual element to it as well. Call it spiritual – I don't know, maybe it's magical. I don't know, maybe it's something about – well, I call it spiritual. That is really the focus, you know. That is really the focus. And I don't sit down or intend to write a poem about a particular subject or anything like that. It is all one long conversation with...what? The transcendental, the veil through to understanding.

LAWRENCE: Sure. The product and the process are they both an experience of that transcendence?

JO: Yeah, they are. Yeah.

LAWRENCE: Mmn. Mmn. That's great. (laughs) It would make you want to write more poetry, wouldn't it? I mean, you'd be constantly thinking, oh, Jeez, I need another trip. (laughter) You would, wouldn't you? Brilliant. Brilliant. That's great. Wow. That's incredible.

JO: Yeah. I wish I could write very light poetry, you know, funny poetry, because I think that that would be entertaining. I always feel that (laughing) if you're giving a reading, it should be entertaining, you know. Maybe I should sing or dance or something like that. It's just that...

LAWRENCE: But you said that you wanted other people to get it, and it's like if you're enjoying this trip, why shouldn't you let other people enjoy it? You just assumed that they would, because my experience of watching you read was that people were enjoying...your trip. They were listening, and they were going with you. That's my experience. I mean, ...I'm, I'm going to get together with Meg and we're going to make you feel good. (Laughter) That's the idea, right? Right? But, no, but seriously, that was my experience, so...

JO: Well, you never know. It's a very, it's a very unsure kind of thing because, I mean, any form or art is purely subjective. We know this about painting, about colours, everything. It's very subjective. So,

one person hears or reads what you're writing, you know, and is totally nonplussed about it; another person would think, gee, that's really good, I like that, so you can't, you can't manufacture it, you know, you can't – this is the way we are, subjective people.

LAWRENCE: Well, uhm, let me ask you this: once, one of the things that went through my mind as well was that you, you do write in form, and, at least that was my experience, reading what you had written, the form – maybe I couldn't have identified what the form was, if it had a name, I wouldn't have known, but it was definitely a form, even if it was kind of a free form, it was still a form. And I'm wondering, like, which comes, do you see the form at the same time that you see the words, or how are, how do these things come together, do, do all of these things when they're coming, when, they're issues right at the beginning of writing. You're not sure what the poem is going to look like at first, or maybe you do, uhm, or maybe it's not cooperating. It wants to go into a different direction than you're either allowing it to or not allowing it to, and I guess this is another question about, ehm...possibly a block in a sense, it's like, are you ever overwhelmed by all the choices you have to make when you're starting out to write a poem?

JO: No, never.

LAWRENCE: No? (laughs) Great.

JO: No. I think what happens is very often I write in prose form first into larger notebooks – these aren't the notebooks I carry around with me, these would be larger notebooks – and it seems to be important to write with my hand, and I would write long-hand into these large notebooks, and sometimes I might do a little drawing to the side or might have a little symbol, or something like that, but I will write long-hand, and at the time when I'm doing it, sometimes, it seems like it's really very un – you know – thought out, rubbish. And then, those long notebooks are important to me because I go back to those, and I think, hey, hey. There's four lines in there. I'm on to something here.

LAWRENCE: Sure.

JO: So, then, I take out the laptop at that point.

LAWRENCE: ah-hah! (laughs)

JO: And then I put them up on computer, and once I put them up on computer, they begin, the form is much more easy, it comes more easily, then, you know. So very often there's two or three pages of prose that ends up as a ten line poem.

LAWRENCE: It becomes a selection process it sounds like. It sounds like the form actually establishes itself.

JO: Yeah.

LAWRENCE: Very organic.

JO: Yes it is.

LAWRENCE: Right. And that's probably why it isn't an imposition, like, if you were to choose a sonnet form, or something like that, where it's already there before you. It doesn't really establish itself. It's there and you have to kind of like work your way into it. Maybe that would be more of an imposition.

JO: Yes, it is.

LAWRENCE: More of, ah, a difficulty. Do you write in those kinds of forms, more established forms?

JO: No. I have done, but I don't. And I have a kind of resistance, which is purely personal, because my father said to me when I was twelve, "Unless you can write a sonnet properly, you really can't be a poet."

LAWRENCE: (Laughs)

JO: So, of course, I've been ever-since resistant. (Laughter) Sounds terrible.

LAWRENCE: He was a sonnet theorist, was he?

JO: Yeah. And a classicist, you see, so I mean, really, his expectations were ginormous, and so, you know, I kind of have resisted, resisted that really, yeah, but I will come around to it, I'm sure, again, and could do at one stage, but, ah yeah, like I say, it's kind of like a personal protest, you know.

LAWRENCE: Very much. I found that trying to work into those forms is actually, actually makes me work out of those forms. I end up writing poems that have no such form, but they end up being better than if they had been tried to adhere to that particular form, but at least they become catalysts. You know, the challenges the catalyst presents...

JO: ...yeah, resistance. That's very important. I remember when David was doing his Master's, his Master's thesis, one of my sons. He said to me: "You know, what am I going to do? What am I going to do? I can't get started." (laughs) "And I have to write in a specific form" and everything, and it was, ah, a serious subject matter that he was dealing with. And I said to him: Well look, I think you, a thing you better do, you better go up to your room and you better just start writing. Just get going. You know? Just get up on that horse and get going. Write anything that comes into your head, but get your hand moving, you know? And he came down about an hour later, and he said: "Well, I've just written everything that has nothing to do with what I'm supposed to be writing." I said, just hang on in there, it will come. It will happen for you, you know? So he wrote like maybe ten pages that day. But out of that ten pages, when he put them up on a computer, he got the first page of his thesis going. Now, I felt, if I had said to him, "you better go up and get that first page exactly right", okay, "and you better start as you're going to finish", all of these old things that we've heard, you know, 'start as you intend to finish' and 'keep strictly to the form'. I feel, for him, it would have taken an awful lot of effort. You know? So the thing was to clear the way, I thought, first, would be best.

LAWRENCE: You actually gave him your method, which is to just write. Just start writing. So, you've already done it here for us...

JO: You get so nervous about what you're going to write...

LAWRENCE: ...and you've done it for your son as well. That's great.

JO: Sorry. You get so nervous. You're so nervous about what you're going to write about, your subject matter, you know, and you think, where am I going to begin, and you've read so much research and people all seem to write better than you. (laughs) You know? They seem to be clearer about everything and how did they get going? So I just think to start...oh boy, it's so good to start.

LAWRENCE: I'm going to ask just two more questions and then I'm going to open it up to everybody else. One of the questions I wanted to ask was once you've started to write, once you've started the poem, ah, ah, I guess there's two things that happen: the poem develops, but also, the subject develops, like, you know, what you're talking about develops as well. How does that happen for you? Is, is there a process that you go through to develop your ideas? Do you have certain strategies that you use to expand on what you've begun to bring it to the place where you want it to be?

JO: Uhm, I think it's probably very organic for me, Lawrence, I really think that, you know. You're constantly reading, and, I mean, my reading material would be a huge mix of philosophy, theology, novels, other poetry. All of the time I read other people's poetry, as well, on a daily basis. So, I think if you're doing that, you see, tsk, you know, you just can't avoid then, there is a train, there is, there is a system being set up unbeknownst to you. You are bringing the thread through, you see. Like, for instance, if you listen to Bach every day, I believe, even for a half hour, it is an entirely different experience than listening to, you know...U2. Nothing's better, now, that's not what I'm saying. It's just different, you know? And I think if you read poetry every day – someone else's poetry, ahm, you know – it, you can't, and if you're reading the material that you're discussing, your philosophy, whatever it is, you know? I think you can't, it all feeds in to the poem.

LAWRENCE: Sure. It sounds like, ehm, you describe it as organic, and it is, but it's a lesson for other people too, sometimes you surrender to what's happening. You just let it happen, and that's...possibly people are very insecure with that, in a sense that they would probably feel like, oh, I can't do that, I don't have control over this, and in a sense, you do because you allowed it to happen, and that is your control is to allow it to happen.

JO: Yes. It is. Yeah, yeah.

LAWRENCE: And there's a lesson in that as well because sometimes that's all it is, just allowing it to happen. It's like, oh! That worked. Why fight it.

JO: Yes, exactly. And you have to do specific research for certain subject matter, and I mean, that goes without saying.

LAWRENCE: I was going to ask about that, is there a lot of research?

JO: You have to do specific research, and, of course you do, but that also feeds in, but uhm it doesn't feel like work to me, poetry.

LAWRENCE: Oh, yeah. And that's probably why you're prolific. I mean, that's why you keep producing poetry because it isn't something that's painful. It's something you love to do. It's something that's easy for you to do, it sounds like.

JO: I don't know if it's so much easy, I don't even know that I enjoy it all the time, but I don't know, anymore, really, how not to do it in a kind of a way. That doesn't mean whether it's good or bad. Right? (laughs) It's just that I'm in the habit of it, the obsession of it, and now I just do it. And if it stops? What can I do about that? It just stops. And every time you write, well, I think I may never write another one.

LAWRENCE: Well, it's great that you are not worried about it though. In a sense, that's probably what keeps it going too. It's a pressure you've taken off of yourself. Uhm, I'm thinking about the research, and I'm thinking of it – and this is a side question, but I'm sure you do a lot of reading...uhm, and I'm sure that you probably talk to people. I'm thinking about what kind of

research you have to do. Is there also a lot of self-exploration or experiential exploration, you know, exploring your own experiences of things?

JO: Hmn, there is, and of course, then, the people that you have relationships with and what kind of dialogue goes on with those people, it really feeds into it as well, you know. And a lot of the people I'm closest to, the people who are interested in the same subject matter, so we would have discussions, you know? And they would read things, and I would then read them, or we would feed each other ideas, and stuff like that, and I have met maybe a handful of people in my life that have been hugely influential in opening up a whole new avenue for me, you know? And they were gifts and still are to me, you know. I mean, everyone I meet has something to say to you or to give you or you have to them. It's kind of an exchange.

LAWRENCE: I guess the proof of the relationship is the fact that they're in the poetry somewhere or somehow.

JO: yeah.

LAWRENCE: yeah. Brilliant. That's nice. In a way, it's kind of family.

JO: Well, that's where it started. It started with my parents. So, my father was a writer, and my mother was a wonderful singer, and they both lived, most of their lives, in Europe and in England, and so they have wonderful stories. So that's where it all began. It's not unnatural or abnormal or different in the house for me to write or for my brother to write or for me to paint or for my sister to paint. That was what my father wanted and my mother wanted. He had an idea of a Renaissance person, and he wanted us (laughing) to be able to do those things.

LAWRENCE: Great. Great.

JO: Yeah. So that, that, it was, it's always been there like.

LAWRENCE: In a way, though, that's really brilliant that you're allowed a really broad view of the world. I mean, you get to just dabble in everything, you get to play...

JO: Yeah, you do. Yeah.

LAWRENCE: That's great. (deep breath) My last question, I, I, I'm thinking back to the wisest words I'd ever heard, which was "Grammar is hard." It's like, they're right. (laughs) But, I was thinking about punctuation. Does punctuation, is that an important aspect of your writing? Do you look at punctuation as being extremely important? Or something that is not as important as other things, or...

JO: Sometimes I would like it if there were no such thing.

LAWRENCE: Ok. (laughs) I think in some poetry there is no punct-

JO: ...yeah. I really would like it if there was no such thing as punctuation. (laughs)

LAWRENCE: Does it ever work for you...

JO: I like end lines, yeah I do. I like to cut a line, but that to me is a type of punctuation. I love the dash. I've never gotten over Emily Dickenson's dash.

LAWRENCE: Right. Yeah. Everyone loves her dash.

JO: Yes! (Smiles) and I love, you know, capitalising an important word. I think she was a genius at that, and I'd love, you know, if I had invented it and not her, but there you go (laughter). So, you know, I love those kinds of punctuations, and I often like a long line with the end of the line starting with the end of the top line if you know what I mean (explaining with her hands) so you have a kind of sh-sh-e-sh (making a zig-zag with her hands and arms), you know, and then you run back, like a sort of, it's like a bow on a cello or something, do you know?

LAWRENCE: Sure. Oh, that's great. You have those visuals like that. (laughter) It is though, because I can see you structuring. That's your structure. You're sitting there, and you're visualising this (making the motion of a cellist moving his bow across the strings of his cello). It looks like that, and it feels like that.

JO: Yeah. I have a friend –

Lawrence Cleary: And when people read your poems do you hope that they get that?

JO: Yeah. I hope they do, but it makes it awful difficult. I have a friend who's a poet, and she's been a very close friend for years, and she edits some of the work in the sense that she's always ringing me telling me "your punctuation is dreadful!" (laughter). Yeah. And she's been an English teacher for years. (much more laughter)

LAWRENCE: (laughing) Oh, they're the worst!

JO: So I really feel bad, like, you know? (laughter throughout the room) It makes me sort of (groans).

LAWRENCE: (to Meg Harper) We've talked about this, actually, English teacher, oh, uh oh – the English teacher –

MEG: English teacher, yeah!

JO: And she would say to me, you know, and yap, yap, yap. "How do you expect people to read this?" and all the rest of it. You know? And I'm trying to explain my artistic approach (laughing) or *artisan* approach to it, let's say. You know? And she would be very dreadful, she would reprimand me, you know, and then I would say, that's it. (claps) I'm finished with punctuation, so I'm leaving it out of all poems in future! (laughter) So sometimes I get it right, and sometimes I get it wrong, and I know this because I read, myself, in public, and I always read my poems out loud, always, I know most of them by heart, you know? From reading them aloud. And it's, you see, it's the sound, it's the music end of it that I'm reading out loud, pacing up and down, and it's to transfer those starts and stops and...and...gaps into something legible for people. And I understand how important it is because I've taught poetry and know the importance of putting all commas and full stops and all the rest in, so *you* would read it with your two breaths, your four breaths.

LAWRENCE: Okay. Right. Fair enough. Yeah. I would think that that would be the case, but I had to ask. (laughs) Uhm, I want to open up the floor to other people. I would just like to let other people ask Jo questions. Is there anybody else who has a question they would like to ask? (someone motions for a biscuit) I know that question was "may I have a biscuit?" (laughter) Naturally!

DR. GERALDINE SHERIDAN: I have a question if I can.

LAWRENCE: (motions) Sure.

GERALDINE: I was interested, Jo, when you were talking about writing while the baby was asleep in the morning, and I've heard so many women poets talk about very similar experiences, you know? Obviously, Sylvia Plath among many others, and Irish women writers of that particular time and space, when you have a small baby and, ah, I know that you know all the debates over the years about writing in the feminine, etc., and I was wondering if you see yourself as writing out a feminist space in any way, or do you see yourself as a poet, that's enough, full stop?

JO: I think, now, I see myself as a poet full stop, you know? I tend not to make the distinction. But I do think that when, for many years, for the first, say, fifteen, twenty years, those active kind of mid – late eighties, well, middle eighties right up to the middle nineties, I would have seen myself very, very much as a feminist writer, yeah. And that has lessened, and lessened. Maybe it just happens naturally as you get older, you know, that you lose that kind of energy, that urgency that I had as a younger woman, and now I see myself as a poet, really. Yeah. Now, I don't really see – I can't be anything other than a woman poet. That is what I am. And I write out of the female experience. So, yes, I'm a female poet, but I see myself as a poet. I don't feel that I need to qualify, anymore, that I'm a woman, and that I'm writing out of a woman's experience. That is obvious, and I just carry on with being a poet then. I read more male poets now, ah, in the last five years, than I've ever read. There was a whole twenty year period where I refused to, you know, read male poets – I felt so strongly about it. Having been reared on Eliot and Yeats and all the rest. But I, uhm, I just left them go. I didn't feel that they had any regard for women, and I felt that a woman should possibly just not bother reading them. (laughs) But then, after a number of years, that, that kind of...that has, that has reached some kind of resolution in myself. I don't feel the necessity anymore, you know? And I understand men much better now and male poetry, so...

DR. PATRICIA LYNCH: Okay. Just a quick question. Your bigger notebooks, you know, where you just write ideas as they come to you, ah, do you see poetic prose as an end in itself or as raw material for poetry?

JO: Ah, I see it really as raw material for poetry. Yeah, I do. I see it as raw material for poetry, although I have to say I've been working for the last two years on prose poems, which are very long, you know...but it's actually hard to define a prose poem. You know? Is it prose? Is it a poem? Is it poetic prose? So, but I have been writing, ahm, for the last two years, much longer pieces, mostly in prose, yeah. I'm trying to develop a kind of a...I suppose a, a way of using prose as well. It's lovely for your thought process, prose, you know? But mostly it has been raw material for poetry.

PROFESSOR SARAH MOORE: Jo, it's been so fascinating listening to you, and, you know, I, one of the things that has driven what Lawrence and Íde are doing in the Writing Centre is so many of us are deathly silent about our writing processes of writing, and we really, it really helps to talk about it. And I found that's true of listening to you. And one of the things you mentioned was, really, a kind of handful of very influential people that have assisted you, or helped you. I'm just wondering. Do you, or have you ever shown work in progress to other people? And if so, what are your experiences or advice around, around that – whether we should or we shouldn't, or are there times when it's useful, or times when it's actually dangerous, and what your views about that are?

JO: Yeah. That's a really very sensitive area, actually. Uhm, I would consider myself maybe more than others to be a kind of hermetic poet, so I would guard the, the poems when they're in process. You know, like a sort of valiant soldier, you know, until they come into some sort of resolution where I feel that I can show them, you know? They take a long – I mean, some of them take five or six years, you know, to materialise. I, I have a poem that I resolved in 2007, *In a Church in Lorenzo*, it's called. I

read it for the first time, recently. Now, I resolved it I know in 2007, but I actually had been writing it since 2000.

LAWRENCE: That's very interesting, because that's, my experience with a lot of poems that I write, they take forever. And I didn't realise that. I thought it was because I was...a bit slow. (laughs)

JO: (laughing) Well, maybe I am.

LAWRENCE: I'd say there are a lot of people, though, that are thinking: I wish I could take that long with my academic papers. (laughter) Patricia will tell you, I almost took that long with my Master's.

JO: But then there are other poems that come in an instant, you know, and you have to, when you know that's complete, (motions affirmation) that's complete, and you just, you have it, just taken no time at all. Those are really gifts, you know? I don't know where they come from. Something opens in your head, you know? Patung! And it happens. The creative impulse is so strong like at that point, you know? But showing work to people...well, you know, I made this silly mistake, I thought, at the time, when I was twelve, of showing my father the poems I'd written. And he said, "Well, well, well." And I said, "I think I'll be a poet," and he said, "I think you better think of being something else." (laughter) You know? So, but, unbeknownst to me, he went off and had his secretary type them all up and put them into a little book form for me. That was affirmation, indeed. And then when I got to eighteen, I announced to my parents I was going to be a poet. They said, well how will you make money? And, of course, I hadn't figured that out. So, he recommended that I go to college and get a degree and, you know, teach or whatever. So I did that. And then I showed him poems, and he said these are full of spelling mistakes. And I thought, oh my God. And that was a huge embarrassment to me. So he corrected – before he read the poem, he corrected the mistakes. That was fatal. Because if he had read the poem first, and commented on the poem, I could have taken the correction, if you understand, at that very tender age. But he was very loving, and everything, I'm absolutely, I know where he was coming from. He was afraid I was going to be a poet, I was going to be flabby, as he used to say. You know? So I can see now where he was coming from, and I'm very grateful to him.

Years later, I met a woman, we're still great friends, I told you, she edits some of my work still, and I suddenly felt that she liked what I was doing, and I felt able to read work to her. One night, when we were away together, and we did loads of wine, and she was in the middle of a novel, I decided geez, I'll try here, now, and see what happens. And she was very receptive to the poems, and that then really gave me huge courage. And I sent poems off to the National Writers Workshop in 1987. Eavan Boland was mediating it. I never, ever in my life applied for anything external. Nobody knew I wrote poetry to any degree at all. I knew nothing of the writing community. And she invited me to join the National Writer's Workshop. She selected six men and six women, and on the strength of what I sent her, she invited me. And it was a wonderful experience, in the sense that we were off in (placename) for a week, with several weekends in Galway, all paid for by Galway University, sponsored by them, and I met other writers and other poets, and then, I had to read in the workshops. And I think I nearly died. And you got criticism from people as well, you know? And some of it was crushing. I remember crying one night in bed, absolutely sort of overcome with, sort of, having to do this. But, I did it, and I got through it, and all of those people that I met in that workshop have gone on to publish and become very well known. Jessie Lendennie, among them, was the publisher of Salmon Publishing, you know. So it was an invaluable experience. But I didn't ever read to anyone else, except my husband Richard, and he has heard every poem I have ever written. But I will only bring it to a certain stage. It has to be almost resolved before I'll read it to him. And every sound in the house has to be off. So if there's a rugby match or anything else on, it has to be turned off.

LAWRENCE: How do you contend with a White House reading? It's so noisy.

JO: It's very difficult. It's very difficult.

LAWRENCE: Did you find that frustrating?

JO: I did, yeah, but you know, this is the way things are, like, ah, I went to Canada, to Montreal, to Trois-Rivières to read there, and, I mean you have to give four or five readings a day in all sorts of different venues, restaurants, pubs, everywhere, you know? It was tough going, but at that stage, you're, you're delivering a product, you know what I mean? You're, you're coming from banging them out, and you're just, all the poets are doing it, and you're doing it with them. Kind of hard on you, you know, in a way, not to be quite so sensitive, but to get back to your original question, to chose the person who you trust...most...to hear what you're writing if you're writing poetry. Because at a particular stage of your development, if you present it to a person who isn't receptive and honest and open, you know, who you don't feel loves you – but I don't mean in a particularly intense, personal way – just don't feel that receptivity, don't do it. It's not good for you.

DR. TINA O'TOOLE: I keep picking up on, ah, your use of the word 'resolved', the idea of a resolution; it's kind of interesting, and I wondered if you want to talk a little bit about that. Obviously, you have a point where you see it as a poem being resolved, which as a literary critic I would probably want to use the word 'finished', but you're not using the word 'finished'. Do you want to just...talk about that?

JO: No, I don't believe it is finished. The resolution, I believe, comes from, uhm, uhm...Years ago, when I was started my first year at Art College, and I was painting, the painting tutor came around, and there were twenty of us in the room, and he rarely came around, and he rarely said very much, and, ahm, he's a well known Limerick painter now, and he looked at what I was doing, and he said, "You know, every painting has to have harmony and beauty" – so it has to be harmonious and beautiful. And I didn't understand that for a long, long time. So, harmony, beauty and balance, and when I feel that – I can't tell you how I feel it, but I know I do – and when I feel that in a poem, I think...(under her breath) oh, God. It's like, you know, a lego, and suddenly it all fits, and you get that feeling of it fitting, and you think, Ah! That's it. No, it doesn't finish because the poem goes on, you know? But just with the form you're working, it resolves. Something is balanced and harmonious about it.

TINA: Thanks.

LAWRENCE CLEARY: Good question.

MEG: So can I ask a question? Tina, pointing to phrases that you used, a phrase that you used – I think with reference to revising – was figuring out when a group of poems are becoming a book of poems. You talked about the words behind the words. Could you elaborate on that? What are the words behind the words?

JO: Well, the words behind the words. We use words, and we use them so, you know, fluently, and now all our use of words is changing with multimedia and all their forms and texting and all the rest of it. I hope that all of that kind of language doesn't make all our feelings, in the end, banal, you know? Doesn't leave us with a language of the banal. That's what I hope, but so, now, more than ever, I think I'm trying to get to, as I said, the words behind the words. Because words on the surface mean one thing, but when you put them into a form...how will I explain this?...when you put them into a form, and you experience harmony and balance, something else is going on behind the words. Mmmn. There's another word behind the word...

MEG: Okay.

JO: ...that has an even deeper meaning. I'm at a loss to explain. I can understand it myself, but I seem to, unable to explain it very clearly. But there's like a layer, there's layers of words, and the top layer is all we're getting sometimes. And there are other layers underneath that.

LAWRENCE: I think that a lot of times, when, when we think about literature and what separates literature from other writing, we tend to think of the fact that whatever it is that's written when it's literature, what we value as literature, we tend to think of it as having this...it's just so rich with meaning, by comparison with, let's say, something more utilitarian or commercial or something like that – it's so rich with meaning – and I know that I'm not addressing what you're talking about, I understand that, but in some senses I do think it does address it. In the sense that, we – I – can spend a lot of time with words and looking at not just what they mean now, but what they meant, all kinds of resonances with other words and what resonances they have with certain situations, like, you know, you use some words in some situations, it has a different meaning than in other situations, and I don't know if that's kind of addressing it in some sense, because I think it's more just the places you can go when you put these things together, not just the one place on the surface, like you say, it's all these places...

JO: All these other places.

LAWRENCE: All these emotional places...

JO: Yeah. All these other layers.

LAWRENCE: ...experiential places...these dream places, those spiritual places...

JO: Yes. All the layers that really come into the meaning of a word and the way we use them so easily and fluently, and then when you get to a poem, you want, you want to actually not use them in that way. You want to get under to the next layer, where the meaning is maybe more difficult, but as you go down you begin to get closer to something that you feel is a really ancient sound or something.

MEG: I'm interested that the meaning behind the words is more words. You didn't say the images between the words or the line of feeling behind the words would be –

JO: You see we don't have words behind words. We have silence. And silence, then, is...silence – in a kind of way, silence is death. So, what you really, what I really want to say, I suppose, is to get to the words, to keep the dialogue going, you know, to try to understand...through the dialogue, through the youth of words, to get to a deeper meaning.

MEG: That reminds me of another thing that you said that I was very struck by – one of the things I was very struck by! – about it being a conversation, uhm, about this intensely private business of writing a poem being an inherently, somehow, social activity. For though there are no people in the room, and you're not showing people your poems until you're nearly done, that you, you know, regarded them as...

JO: Yes, you want to share them. It gets to the point where you want to share them, you know? You want people to, because you're a human and your experiences are so, all of our experiences are the same really, in a way, I mean our personal uniqueness brings a different way of seeing or understanding our experience, but our day to day experiences are very similar, you know, so we

know we can communicate to each other about those things and we can feel community through each other, you know, but you don't want to be, uhm, I have no wish to be in an ivory tower or something writing precious poetry, but I have a deep understanding in myself of the need to, ah, perfect the words, each word, you know, like shining a, shining a glass thing (making a polishing motion) to make it shine, each individual one if I can. We hope the work is read in that way, where each word is considered, you know, as well as the whole sentence. It's words you're using, and words are only a way of expressing, verbally, to share in all ourselves, our understanding of the world, the metaphysical world.

I think, maybe, music is the most direct...ah, communication, with that, but I think that poetry comes a very close second.

UNIDENTIFIED AUDIENCE MEMBER: Ehm, you mentioned that your father had said, keep your tools sharp, in case you're visited. And, and then I think it was when you were answering Sarah's question that you mentioned, sometimes a poem does come fully formed. And I wondered what your thoughts were on the muse, or on your relationship, how you relate to that?

JO: I guess, some poems do come very quickly, and I've had a few over the last thirty-six years or more, that come very quickly, have come very quickly, and I think it's probably a rush of emotion, you know, that creative impulse. It could be a reaction to something. It could even be anger that produces it, and it produces it very, very quickly. But I consider that a gift, now, you know? I don't consider that I've really had very much to do with that. It just happens, you know? It's just one of those things. And I just am so grateful when it happens, and then I let it go. Yeah. But I do believe that if I have to think clearly, you know, to answer your question clearly, I suspect that it has a lot to do with the groundwork you've been doing for a long time. (Smiles broadly)

You know, trying to understand the subject matter you're dealing with. Say you're writing a poem on your child or your father or whatever, you know, you've been doing work on that for a long, time. Unbeknownst. Thankfully, unbeknownst, actually. Because that does come, yeah.

DR PATRICIA LYNCH: I'm still fascinated by what you said before about the words behind the words. I can help wondering is it Jungian or by any chance is it the ponderance of thousands of people who've used those word before back over the centuries.

JO: I think it's both really.

PATRICIA: Oh?

JO: Yeah. I do. I think it is all about the sounds we've used for centuries and centuries, the echo. You know? You can't, eh, none of us are alone in the world, so, and we don't just come here, we come after a long line of people who've come before us, you know, and they say, they say when a bone is found, that it contains the sound, a sound inside it that is hundreds of thousands of years old. If you go to the National History Museum in London, you can hear that sound...in a bone. So, if a bone can hold onto a sound that is hundreds of thousands of years old, we must in some way, since we're organic, humans, we come in an organic way into the world, then I think that those sounds are there. I think they are there. And I think that we tap into something, when we deal with poetry or creativity at any level. We tap into some of that ancient-ness of the species. I think we do. I think we do. And you know the Inuit tribe, for instance, you know, they would go out, and they would, their tribal men would go out and would be gone for months hunting. And the women would stay at home. And the women would learn, in their throats, the sounds of all the animals that their husbands were hunting because it gave them some feeling of connection to their husbands while they were away or their partners while they were away, and they would sit at night, to amuse themselves, and make all these

different sounds, and they'd make them into sound songs, you know? And you see how close we are to all of that still, in a way, you know? And I think that we still do that. We still have all of those sounds. I believe that. Yeah. I do think that. But you have to, I think we have to tap into them. We have to be able to tap into them. Or have regard for them. Maybe having regard for them, and respect for them, is tapping into them actually. So I think we...yes, those sounds are there. I think so.

LAWRENCE: We're getting close on time – I just wanted to see if there's any other questions that anybody else wanted to ask, if anybody else has a question, do you?

UNIDENTIFIED AUDIENCE MEMBER: One quick one maybe, Lawrence.

LAWRENCE: Yep, please, yeah....

UNIDENTIFIED AUDIENCE MEMBER: When we met in Paris, Jo, what I was fascinated with – being an academic doing research and cultural history – I was fascinated when you told me how you had gone there with the idea of retracing Augustus John's sister tragically through Paris, wasn't it? And I wondered – because it's always fascinating to an academic...how does a writer do research and then come out with something creative, you know? I wondered how that spun out for you in the end, starting out as you started out at that point and then ending up with the poems? How does the one relate to the other? Because obviously an academic does research and something completely different comes out the other end...

JO: Yes, yeah, yeah. I think really because she was a creative person herself, of course – you see, she was a painter – and I think that that really meant a lot to me. I wasn't researching, uhm, an academic, for instance, you know. And I didn't want to produce any academic material as a result of it and I was very conscious of that. So...I allowed myself great freedom. Now, I had been reading about Gwen for many many years, right, since I went to art college, so I was very familiar with her. So that was easy. Ehm, I think what I hoped to find by looking at her premises – the different premises she lived in – was not so much anything of her, because of course there was nothing of her there. But I wanted to walk the streets that I felt she'd walked, and touch the sculptures I thought she might have touched, or, ehm, be in the environment that she had been in. And I'm a contemporary painter, so I wanted to just see, if I could, through her eyes, you know. Now I had done all the reading and I still was doing reading while I was in Paris. But I didn't find it at all difficult, and the poems that came out came very easily. Very, very easily, you know. And, ehm, the process for me was just to amble, and to have the time to amble and consider...and that seemed to produce, then, the poems, you know.

UNIDENTIFIED AUDIENCE MEMBER: (laughs) Like a type of magic!

JO: Yes, it is really. In a kind of a way. I don't know what to call it, but it is like that sometimes. It is a kind of a magic. It is, definitely. Yeah.

LAWRENCE: Ehm, I guess, before we close, I'd like to invite you to maybe, just, uh, any kind of advice that you would have for student writers, or people who are... beginning...you know, they're probably transitioning from one form of writing into another form of writing, but they're maturing and possibly don't yet, but may, at some point, think of themselves as writers. Because a lot of times people are students but don't think of themselves as writers, even though they write a lot. Uhm, but what kinds of advice – or what kinds of message would you like to give to students who are becoming writers and want to develop themselves as writers? How...uh, I guess I'll leave it at that, just that question, yeah.

JO: What advice would I give...well, first piece of advice I think I would give is to tell the students to believe in themselves, as they are utterly unique – as I am, and you are, and we all are. So, you do have a unique way of seeing. And, uhm, that is your ace card...you know. And believing in yourself is probably the most important thing.

LAWRENCE: Right. Good. Excellent.

JO: And be open to learning. And tutors are good to teach you and guide you and things like that, and be open to that. But mostly, I think, to consider yourself at all times a wholly unique person on this earth.

LAWRENCE: Fitting advice, yeah. I mean, on all counts. Just the idea that, knowing that you are unique.

JO: Unique.

LAWRENCE: Knowing that...you know...that you are worthy, and that you should have faith in yourself...

JO: Yes, absolutely. And that you do see differently, you see, that is it. You do see differently to others, you know. And, uhm....

LAWRENCE: And you called that...that was the ace in the hole, right, that was, yeah...

JO: Yeah, that was it – the ace card. And writing is all about the doing. It is not about thinking. I'm sorry, it is not, you know. I have a son and for years, he would come to me and say, "I have a great idea for a novel," and he'd tell me the whole idea, the whole novel! (laughter). And I would say, "Jeez, Dave – that's fantastic!" and then he would say, you know, "yeah, it's brilliant, isn't it?" And I said to him once, I said, "just go away and write it," you know. And he said, "Well, you know, I kinda feel I have written it..." (laughter). You see?

LAWRENCE: So you have to listen to his bones! (laughter)

JO: So, you have to write! It's in the doing word, it's the verb, you know. You have to do it. It's the only thing, ultimately...that teaches you how to do it is the doing of it.

LAWRENCE: Very good. Right. Excellent.

JO: I think.

LAWRENCE: Great. Jo, thank you very, very much. This has been brilliant, I'm sure for everyone here – certainly for me, and thank you, Meg, for introducing it. Thank you, I appreciate it very much.

[Applause]