**Carcanet Oral History Interview [11 February 2020]**

**Respondent: Mimi Khalvati (MK)**

**Interviewer: Vanessa Millar (VM)**

VM: The first question is about your relationship with Carcanet Press – when did you first meet Michael Schmidt and when did you first send him poems for publication?

MK: Well it was a wonderfully happy, unlooked for event really. I entered, in 1989, the Smith/Doorstop pamphlet competition – and I had not been writing very long – maybe two or three years. And to my amazement I won it, along with David Morley and we had our two pamphlets jointly published and Michael was the judge! He wrote to me and asked if I had a *First Collection* and that he would love to publish it and that was fantastic! So of course, I said yes I would be absolutely thrilled. I can’t remember how much of a collection I had at the time, but I furiously wrote to complete one, sent it to him and then in 1991 – so nearly thirty years ago I can’t believe it – he published my first book. So that’s how it started and then I remember going to Manchester and having a pizza with him and looking at the poems and manuscript together which is to this day the only time I have actually done that with him in person. It was really lovely, and he was so helpful. I was so green, I really did not have a clue what I was doing, and he was just incredibly helpful in what to put in, what to leave out. I do remember being startled when we were looking at the order of poems because he took a rather longer poem and said, ‘Why don’t you start with this?.’ And it had never entered my mind so of course I just went along with whatever he suggested because he knew better.

VM: So your experience as a poet published by [Carcanet] was quite an enjoyable one would you say?

MK: Oh, I think it’s been absolutely marvellous, honestly, it’s been a bedrock of my life, my writing life it really has. I live in permanent dread of Michael retiring. I don’t know where I would be without him. And the extraordinary thing is I have not seen that much of Michael in ‘flesh and blood’ so we’ve had this long and lovely relationship but mostly at a distance: letters and emails and phone-calls. He’s wonderfully approachable on the phone I find which is a relief to me because I don’t much like communicating through emails and things, so I do phone him up sometimes. So yes, it’s been fantastic, he’s been so supportive obviously but also while being published I’ve had to learn about poetry as I went along so a lot of what I’ve learnt has been from Michael himself from his comments on manuscripts and so on. And from reading the marvellous poets on the Carcanet list and from *PN Review* as well. So yes, he’s published nine of my books now!

VM And what about promoting books, have you had much support to promote books from Carcanet?

MK: I don’t know how much support one should expect for promotion. It’s something I’m personally terribly bad at, also slightly paranoid about. So, I pretty much left myself in their hands which I’m very grateful for. They’ve never actually complained that I’m not on social media and they’ve never complained – ‘Why don’t you do this and why don’t you do that?’ So it’s been fine. I think mostly the readings that I’ve had have not necessarily been through Carcanet. I’ve been lucky just to have been offered readings. The whole business of promotion and publicity to be honest is a side of writing and having books out that I shy away from so even your question makes me feel anxious! My mind just sort of shies away from it.

VM: Some people are good at it and others are just not so comfortable . . .

MK: Yes, some people are brilliant, especially nowadays with social media and twitter. Some poets are so good at engaging with all that. I’m just completely hopeless, I’m just incredible grateful to Carcanet for actually just putting up with me.

VM: So how would you describe your relationship with other poets and writers published by Carcanet? Would you say that they share common characteristics, and could you describe a typical Carcanet poet? Is there such a thing?

MK: Oh my goodness, well it’s such a huge list. I’ve never thought about it in that way. I mean generally I think they’re rather marvellous. I think it’s a fantastic list. The poets seem to me all rather dauntingly intelligent and knowledgeable and erudite, many of them, which I don’t identify with. But I have learnt a lot from them. I remember my second book – most of my books have just been attempts to deal with one or other inadequacy – I’m not being falsely modest here. It’s just that I started writing rather late - I had no academic background – I went to drama school – so I actually didn’t know the first thing about poetry. So I was very much self-taught and I remember for example thinking in my second book – ‘well I don’t really understand free verse and I don’t know what I’m doing.’ So I went to Jorie Graham who I think is brilliant, apart from the poetry but also brilliant with lineation and knowing what she’s doing with free verse. And I learnt a lot from her, particularly from her early work.

And I remember when Louise Glück brought out *The Wild Iris* which is still to this day, I think, one of my favourite collections. I was amazed at her authority, especially as a woman poet and her quality of coldness and hardness which I found very unusual and rare and admirable. And I loved that, I’ve never been able to adopt it myself, but I think every now and then it’s made me a little less fluffy round the edges! Eavan Boland I remember reading early on and I felt encouraged to write domestic poems because of her really and Sujata Bhatt who Michael always mentioned in connection with me almost to the point that I felt somewhat like an understudy! I loved her poetry and her use of foreign words and her mingling of cultures. I think I learnt from that. It was almost like being given permission by these various poets to try various things or being made aware of possibilities ‘Oh you can do this, or you can do that’. Elaine Feinstein also, I loved her, her simplicity, the plainness of her speech, her honesty. And the list is very long. And Marilyn Hacker of course who’s now a very good friend of mine who I’ve always admired for her formal skills and particularly with sonnets. I’ve now just published a book of sonnets. I can’t say they are influenced by Marilyn, but I have studied the way she works with forms. Of those Marilyn is a close friend, and Elaine of course and Sujata I’ve met and I’m always on friendly terms with. Elaine’s loss was terrible. But I don’t know that I identify, in the way that you asked. Its more that I read many of the Carcanet poets and mostly I sort of try and even subconsciously learn things as well as of course enjoying it. I mean Kei Miller’s work I love, and I had a launch for my new book, and he read with me at the launch and that was just wonderful. So, I think it’s a very inspiring list. I feel hugely privileged and blessed to be on it

VM: My next question carries on from what you have been saying and is about women and Carcanet. What was your experience as a woman published by Carcanet?

MK: Of the women poets?

VM: No, your experience as a woman. Do you feel that women have been marginalised on the Carcanet list?

MK: I suppose it’s not just a straight-forward answer because I’m stopping to think for so long about that one. Obviously I don’t feel that, or I would have said so straight away.so it’s not something I’ve consciously thought and felt. I do sometimes go to Carcanet events and see a preponderance of – I was going to say ‘elderly men’ - but of course they’re my age! So there always seem to be a lot more men than women in the room but that’s only at events you know.

So, no, even the poets that I’ve just mentioned are all women so I’m actually more aware of the wonderful women poets on the list. I mean Brigit Pegeen Kelly for example who died a few years ago and Carcanet published *Song* and *The Orchard*, two books in one. It’s one of my favourite ever collections, an American poet. So, my feeling when I think of Carcanet women poets is ‘Wow, there have been some marvellous ones’. But really I feel I would have to do a study to answer that question. It’s not a feeling I go around carrying with me. But I think obviously in later years there have been more women published than in earlier years, I think that’s generally true.

VM: So, my next question is about the Arts Council. Carcanet has been supported by the Arts Council since its creation. Are you able to say anything about the relationship between Carcanet and the Arts Council?

MK: I’m afraid I can’t. I know very little about it. I just think it’s wonderful that they are still supported by them, but I don’t actually know very much about that.

VM: Next, we’ll go on to talking about the Poetry School which you founded in the late 1990s. At that time creative writing was not often taught in the UK within or outside academia. Can you tell me a bit about what you wanted the Poetry School to achieve and what gap did it address?

MK: Well it certainly addressed a gap. And this came from my own experience. As I said I came to writing poetry relatively late without knowing anything about it. At the time there were creative writing MAs but I don’t think any of them were focusing on poetry as such. And I’d been to drama school and actually I was appalled at the difficulty of trying to learn about poetry without any kind of formal structure there. I can remember thinking they’ve got drama schools and dance schools and music schools and all sorts of schools but there’s nothing there for poetry. ‘How am I supposed to go about this?’ And I went around it in an extremely ad-hoc way, I just went to hundreds of workshops and read handbooks and of course read poetry itself and so on. But I did find it very unsatisfying. And really the Poetry School developed organically. I’d been running some Saturday poetry workshops with my poetry friend Jane Duran. And because we were dissatisfied with the workshops we were going to we set up our own and they grew very rapidly. We started with just one a month and then it was four a month and then Pascale Petit also ran one with us. And then people were saying ‘they don’t know about metre’, ‘they don’t know about scansion’. And so, I started running a course called ‘Versification’ which I was learning myself whilst I was teaching it. Learning and practising myself. That became massively popular.

Then I think we decided to apply for funding and at that time the name and the idea of Poetry School came into being. Jane hated the name I remember. But I stuck with it, I said ‘It will do what it says on the tin.’ And offer a kind of apprenticeship for poets outside of the academy and be open to anyone without any kind of formal requirements or qualifications and so on.

VM: So is that why you decided to do it outside of the university system, you know instead of being in an English department . . .

MK: Absolutely, I myself did not want to work in the academy at all. But also, we wanted it to be available to anybody and everybody. So we applied for funding to what was then the London Arts Board and they were massively supportive and gave us grants and as the years went on in fact the Arts Council’s relationship with us was absolutely incredible particularly with Nick McDowell when it became Arts Council England who encouraged us to go national at that point. By then we had a base in London, we were peripatetic, we had an office in Walthamstow – but all our courses were elsewhere – after very few years it grew so rapidly. Not just workshops but a lecture series and in fact Michael did one of the lectures on modernism.

And we had a special events series with poets from abroad, mostly America. You know, poets like Jorie Graham, Sharon Olds, Les Murray, Mark Doty, big names. They would come and do masterclasses for us or give workshops or talks. And we held all our events at different venues and had partnerships across London and the Arts Council encourage us to go national so we could become a regularly funded client and up our grant by a considerable amount. And so, the first thing we did was open the Poetry School in Manchester with Linda Chase and Michael was very supportive of that. And then it had centres all over the country. So that’s how it grew but the basic idea was to give an apprenticeship where it wasn’t just a straightforward writing workshop where you would just get prompts and exercises to generate new work and then get feedback. We had a structured programme where you could study different poetry in different eras. We had reading courses; we had the formal course and the lecture series and so on.

It wasn’t as though I sat there one day and had this vision of ‘Oh we’re going to have this huge organisation’. It just grew in response to demand and also because I did the programming for the first several years a lot of it was determined by my own needs. I would think ‘Oh I don’t really understand modernism so let’s have a series of lectures on modernism’. And I found that my needs echoed many other people’s needs and gaps.

VM: And what about recruiting instructors, how did you do that?

MK: Well we had a core group of tutors, some of whom were friends for example Myra Schneider, she was very instrumental in helping and she still tutors at the school thirty years later. We were limited for the tutors in London to having poets who were based in London and we were looking for people who were not just good poets but good tutors and teachers. So, we had Graham Fawcett who did many of our reading courses, Carole Satyamurti, Tammy Yoseloff, Roddy Lumsden, Robert Vas Dias, Stephen Knight, and so on.

VM: And did you face many challenges setting up the Poetry School?

MK: Well this was the remarkable thing – it happened so smoothly and easily. There weren’t particular difficulties. I think the difficulties were practical in the sense of keeping up with the demand. Because obviously that then engendered a huge amount of administrative work and financial side of things. But these weren’t really insuperable differences. They were just part of the natural growth of the organisation. I think the difficulties came later possibly but by then I’d left. So that was canny. But on the whole it was a very happy organisation and we had some very good partnerships with the South Bank Centre, The Poetry Society and other organisations as well. On a kind of mutually beneficial level. It was joyful really and a massive amount of work. I think the difficulty for me was to find writing time because it took over. Which is why after about ten years I thought ’Right, I’ve done my bit.’

VM: Recently creative writing programmes have become more and more abundant. I just wondered what your opinion was on the rise of programmes in the UK and elsewhere?

MK: There is a massive proliferation isn’t there, its extraordinary. What is my opinion? I think its very hard for me to say as I myself haven’t been on any of these courses or workshops and so on. So, it’s only a general impression that I think there is too much emphasis on generating poems rather quickly and getting published and winning prizes perhaps at the expense of greater emphasis on reading. Especially . . . not contemporary poets but more classical poets from different centuries. And doing close reading, attentive reading and also I think there is very little focus on formal poetry or even on the formal aspects of poetry in free verse. What people call ‘craft’, rather dismissively which really irritates me, as though craft was something separate from the act of writing poetry, and somewhat suspect. So that would be my negative response. And also, the great power of the prize culture. I still teach and I’m fairly appalled that some groups I work with who are very bright, talented young writers, maybe not so young but new writers, and all they seem to be reading are the books on various prize lists. And I think this is sad. But on the other hand, I think there are wonderful things happening. There is greater diversity which I think is fantastic, there is much more poetry in translation being read and appreciated. I think these are the exciting things that are happening, and I think there are more influences coming into English poetry from other cultures as well. I think that is something to celebrate. And there is a massive amount of exciting talent as well. So that’s the upside.

[Pleasantries, interview ends]