Lizzie Lovejoy 0:20

Hello, everybody, welcome to the change of perspective podcast where we look at the world of creativity and art from many different perspectives. I'm your host, Lizzie Lovejoy, artist of change for ARC creating work to celebrate the Northeast. Today our topic is disability arts and I'll be talking to Paula Knight.

Now I've been a big fan of Paula for many years. When I was in a level, I looked at a lot of her work and found it very inspiring. Over the course of the last few years, Paul has had a disability called ME, also known as CFS, this condition has significantly affected Paula, and what she is able to do what she was able to create, and even generally her ability to speak.

That is why this specific episode is going to be recorded a little bit differently. What we did is that I had a list of questions for Paula, that I sent to her over social media. And she responded with written answers to these questions. Now, this podcast is still being recorded over zoom, but this time, everything is being read by my Mum, Jo. So it won't be as conversational as it usually is. But all of this information I feel is really important. And as this week is ME Awareness Week, it seems really important that this podcast to go up at the time that it does. So I'm going to go right into the interview.

Hi, Paula, it is fantastic to meet you. I've been a longtime fan. So I guess I wanted to start with asking what led you to begin your work as an illustrator, and what led you to develop such powerful poetry.

Jo 2:04

As a teenager, I thought illustration ment drawing in heavy metal album covers. I'm originally from Darlington, and had my foundation year at Cleveland College of Art and Design, which is now called the northern School of Art. I took a degree at Bristol Polytechnic, which is now UWE in graphic design specializing in illustration, and started out making handmade cards selling face to face and through a distributor. This led to publish an interest from a greetings card company, which led to my getting an agent. The agent then began to get my children's illustration work.

 I illustrated over 300 cards and over 60 children's books. As for poetry, in my 20s I was in a band writing lyrics and music. Some of those songs were played on national radio, that gave me the confidence to start writing children's books as well as illustrating them. And in 2018, I became bed bound and unable to draw, I was left with only the words in my head is my creative outlet.

My brain can only deal with small tracts of writing without being able to put pen to paper or type. So my writing seems to naturally occur in a poetic form. In my situation, thoughts became very concentrated and distilled. They seem to take over the space where physical activity once was. My main source of grief was my dislocation from the natural world. And so there's a strong focus on that. My existential pain seems to manifest in collections of words, it feels as if I'm trying to embody the outside world in my brain.

So how is your chronic condition impacted what you write, and your creativity or just how you think creatively in general?

Lizzie Lovejoy 3:55

I've been bed bound for around three years, and at some point became unable to draw due to weakness and muscle pain in my arms and hands. This left me with words alone, there was a lot of time to think when being so disabled, and I can't use a computer, put pen to paper or do personal care. When there's a lot of pain, it's very difficult to think in a creative way at all. having severe ME necessitates rest, including refraining from too much cognitive activity. So anything creative has to be paced and often simply just isn't possible.

Jo 4:32

When I'm able to think creatively, I have to be able to hold the work in my head until my husband or my carer can make notes for me. My husband when he's able, then writes it onto a document that I can see on the screen in order for me to mentally edit it. I still have ideas for graphic novels and comics. But at the moment, I can't see a time ahead when I would be able to carry them out. Poetry and diary writing are ideal mediums for me now, because there are fewer words requiring more thought, at least when compared into writing essays, short stories or fiction.

Lizzie Lovejoy 5:09

There is one window that I've been looking out of for three years. So much of my poetry is about what I see outside of it. I'm still on a big poetry learning curve. So I use the word poetry lightly.

Jo 5:24

The Facts of Life is a really powerful and brilliant illustrated story. There are so many aspects to it that I and so many other people really relate to. Why did you decide to share your memoirs, and why did you decide to tell it visually.

Lizzie Lovejoy 5:40

I wanted to write from personal experience in the hope that it might break down the shroud of silence and stigma around miscarriage and childlessness. I also wanted to raise awareness about the illness ME, which is still poorly understood by both the medical profession and the public. I hoped it would foster some empathy and understanding, or at least express some things that others feel unable to. I don't want to pressure people into talking about miscarriage. Rather, I hope my book along with others who open up will help pave the way for people to feel more comfortable doing so if they wish to.

The same goes for talking about ME to an extent, which is sometimes met with a wall of silence, misunderstanding and at worst ignorant comments. This is possibly due to years of stigma induced by irresponsible media reporting of the patient group, and a lack of biomedical research. I think people who work in the arts are well placed to express human experience in a way that others can relate to and understand. If this raises awareness, then it can result in action somewhere down the line, such as support for related charities.

pictures are very immediate, and I found that I could write with pictures far more succinctly than words alone. They can say something difficult easily without explicitly spelling it out. So I think this lends itself to introduce in gnarly or stigmatized subject matter, which is historically unexpressed in words. human communication is a symbiotic dance between the visual and the verbal. And so is comics.

pictures are also revealing, perhaps appealing to the voyer airiness. We all love to look into those houses with the curtains open when it's dark, comic panels or windows into the lived human experience of others, only where the artist curates which bits to reveal. In this respect, it feels a safe way in which to share a personal story that might have a positive impact on others.

Jo 7:47

Back in 2017, you started your pain diary. It's beautiful and brutally honest. And I wanted to know what was the process like of creating that?

Lizzie Lovejoy 8:00

forgive the pun, but it's a bit of a sore point. At the time, I was beginning to get more pain in my arms and hands, but also thinking that despite my illness, at least I could still draw. And I was trying to make the most of it within limitations. I started to use my non dominant hand so that I could spread the load. But not long afterwards, that arm became much more painful as well. I can no longer draw at all now. My non dominant hand is as stiff as a tree trunk and I cannot close my fist properly. Unfortunately, it's an interesting project that never had the chance to fledge before things went badly wrong.

Jo 8:37

So recently you began collaborating with a musician using your poetic work. What led you to do this and start this and how are you finding the whole thing?

Lizzie Lovejoy 8:49

I wrote a poem for winter solstice 2020 and sent it to a friend after finding out that he'd been in hospital. He's been making music under the name of Jesse Franklin. And a few days later, he sent me back a sound file of some music they had written for it. We knew each other from the Bristol indie music scene in the 1990s. He played bass on one of my band's albums. When I was unable to do in one of the first episodes of muscle pain in my arms. He has online access to my poetry file, and hopefully we will be swapping sound and Word files as a means of collaboration. Not an easy feat when one of us is disabled and bed bound, but we'll see how it pans out.

We are called Hell's kettles named after two legendary bottomless pools near her with where I grew up. Maybe keep an eye out on my social media in a year's time, which will probably be how long it will take us to get an EPS worth of songs together.

Jo 9:46

There's never going to be a tour but maybe a live stream from my bedroom one day. It's nice to have a project and a goal. Three years stuck in one room is a tough deal. My mind needs to wander elsewhere, even if the project doesn't work. I am enjoying the process.

Music appears to have been really influential for you. How has it affected you creatively?

Lizzie Lovejoy 10:11

I've been playing music with other people since I was eight years old. So until I became unable to play an instrument, it had always been part of my life. In my 20s, I started playing in bands and eventually started songwriting. It was exciting to have some of them played on national radio. It was a hobby and I think this is when I discovered a love of writing for the first time. Although it would be many years until I considered that I might be able to write books.

No school teacher told me that I could be a writer, but music led me there. I've never been able to listen to music while writing. Well, I listened to it constantly while doing the artwork for the facts of life. I found it helped me to focus and not stray from the drawing board the kitchen for snacks.

Listening to music for my formative years helped revive memories, and think about issues that were pertinent to the book. Also, having a musical background probably helped to enhance my sense of rhythm, which is of course important for writing children's picture books and for poetry.

Jo 11:17

You've been very active online discussing your condition. Do you consider yourself to be an activist? And what advice would you give to other creatives struggling with similar conditions?

I consider myself to be a bed bound activist. armchair activists used to be a disparaging term for people who didn't get out in protest. The modern terms would be clicktivism and slacktivism. When considered in a disability framework, the terms are very ablest. Every act counts, however small. Unfortunately, the word activist has been boomeranged at people with ME in an accusatory way, as if speaking about the lack of funding for biomedical research, and flawed research is a bad thing. In the dictionary, the word activists has no negative connotations. And all civil and human rights movements have made positive gains through activism. I don't see why we should stay quiet about our illnesses, disabilities and the lack of medical care available, especially when our friends are dying. And some of us are trapped in a kind of living death with no help coming.

Unknown Speaker 12:27

The neglect of people with ME is a human rights and health equality issue. With no equivalent sense of urgency, it seems there is no need for activists to be a dirty word, and is only used in this way to try to silence us and portray us as unreasonable in some way, when all we're doing is asking for appropriate research and help for our disease. However, we need more allies and healthy people to advocate for us. Because we're suffering from energy impairment, disability, and trying to advocate for ourselves is making us more ill. My advice to others would be to resist by whatever means is comfortable. If you're able to use creativity, do so without making your illness worse, then it can certainly be a very powerful thing.

Lizzie Lovejoy 13:16

Thank you so much Paula for being part of this podcast and being on this interview. You've been a really important and inspiring artist for me personally for so long. And I think it's fantastic that you're sharing all of this information. And we get to hear a bit more about your creativity, the way that you work and what you're planning on, as well as the impact of ME on your life and everything else.

I look forward to hearing about how your creative work progresses. And hopefully one day seeing that live stream come to life. But until then, I'll still be following you on Twitter and Instagram. We've left links for polars social media and website. Please go and check her out. And thank you to my mum Jo Lovejoy as well for reading Paula's words.

But for now that is the end of the episode. Thank you all so much for listening. Speak to you guys later. Bye.

Transcribed by https://otter.ai