

TESTING IDEAS, MAKING DISCOVERIES JEMMA BORG INTERVIEWED BY SARAH WESTCOTT



Jemma Borg's *Wilder* (Pavilion, 2022) is longlisted for the Laurel Prize. She won the inaugural Ginkgo Prize in 2018 and *The Rialto/RSPB Nature and Place Competition* in 2017. Her first collection, *The illuminated world* (Eyewear, 2014), won the Fledgling Award and the New Writing Ventures Award for Poetry. She has a doctorate in evolutionary genetics.

The interview was conducted with questions put at intervals over the summer and with the invitation to consider and give more expansive answers than a one-off overall response might permit.

SW *Wilder* is your second full collection and opens with some definitions of 'wild' including the obsolete verb 'to wilder' or lose one's way. Can you say a little about why you chose this title, its etymology and how the concept of 'wild' relates to the poems?

JB I'd been thinking for a while about nomenclature – 'nature', 'wildness', 'world', 'Earth' and so on. Terms used with subtle differences and implications, but also terms, 'nature' in particular, which perhaps are suspect, reinforcing underlying notions of separateness or superiority. In the American poet Gary Snyder's book *The Practice of the Wild*, he makes a distinction between the terms 'nature' and 'wild'. While nature is the subject of science, the wild cannot be considered an object or subject in the same way, but must be 'admitted from within, as a quality intrinsic to who we are' (my emphasis). Wilderness, which Snyder is so familiar with, is formed now of places set aside such as national parks, places which still nevertheless can teach us about "the etiquette of freedom" – the ethics of living in a way that isn't primarily led by the ego – and this is contrasted with the wild, which is not a place, but the inner quality, a source of authenticity, which springs up everywhere, between the cracks in the pavement and also in us. This is what I wanted to locate – what is wild in us, what that might mean – and I'm interested in thinking about the wildness of language and whether a poem can be wild. The quest for this source of authenticity is what *Wilder* is all about.

As regards the etymology, I always find that fascinating. Old English words, like great oak trees, seem to have a sturdiness, solidity and geographical belonging. 'Wild' goes back ultimately to roots related to woodland, and is sistered by the word 'weald' which is also the name of the area in East Sussex where I live, which is a fairly generously wooded place. But what I also was particularly interested in was this shadowing of meaning – the 'wilder' that goes with bewildering, the idea that losing your way is part of this path towards authenticity – the flaws necessary for the growth of the pearl perhaps, or the carving off of some civilised parts of ourselves that we could do without – Snyder says civilisation is "the ego gone to seed".

SW As an evolutionary geneticist and poet you have a unique perspective on the world. Are there specific 'tools' from your scientific background you have carried into your practice? Or is it a more organic synthesis?

JB The idea of doing experiments is perhaps what I've brought over to my writing from science. Experiments are how you test ideas, make discoveries. To undertake experiments with DNA in the lab is to use the imagination (as DNA is not visible directly) and to experience the world defining itself, speaking almost, under your hands: you ask the material world a question, and see how it answers. The work towards a poem can be like that – to work with language (and language behaves like a material too) until something unfolds out of it, previously unseen, sometimes surprising, a formed expression

that can feel more authentic in its condensation than the unworked life. This process can require a lot of excavation – and time – and is when I’m working most happily – the end not yet in sight. Later comes the grittier work of bringing across what is discovered into a completed poem – almost a process of translation.

SW You have talked of the ‘painful process of reinventing myself’ when writing a new book. Many of the poems in *Wilder* reach beyond the dominant sense of the ‘visible’ to explore deeper entanglement with the more-than-human such as the extraordinary long poem *San Pedro and the bee* – a boundary-dissolving encounter with a psychedelic cactus. Was this mode a conscious approach to breaking new ground for your second full collection?

JB *San Pedro and the bee* is a long, narrative poem and one where life followed writing as I began writing about ‘San Pedro’ before I actually knew what it was and then had to go and find out about it. The narrative of the poem permits distance from the self (it’s also written in the second person) – the point being that the experience is not strictly personal, not limited in that way, but so much more immersive. The desire for immersion, has become much stronger and that’s not only the drawing out of an ecological awareness, but also part of becoming a mother which is a time when you’re called on to become very porous.

SW How do you view *Wilder* in relation to your assured first collection *The illuminated world*, in terms of your development as a poet? (I sometimes feel my two collections are ‘sisters’.) Does your development as a poet feel linear and/or more ‘mycelial’ and organic?

JB Mimi Khalvati has said you proceed from one book to another by working out from your dissatisfactions. After the first book, I became interested in the short poem and in ways of working with complexity that involved how you place phrases together (or in juxtaposition) rather than working complexity through the syntax or conceit of the poem. *The illuminated world* is probably more metaphysical, reflecting on science as a way of looking and thinking, whereas *Wilder* is more about the loosening of boundaries, and I was interested in writing that felt more fluid or responsive in its form. But there’s still plenty of overlap between them – they both have these two contrasting modes, the more epigrammatic or crystalline and the more metaphysical, and both contain short and long poems. And there are poems I began writing while working on the first book that didn’t end up there but in *Wilder* instead. I commit to a very long writing process – it’s not unusual for me to take years over a poem. Sometimes time has to pass before a poem can be completed – or seen clearly enough to work with – maybe because I don’t have the tools I need to write it yet or a certain experience in life is needed that enables the poem to shift. I’d say it’s definitely a branching, wildering, wandering process rather than a linear development and how lucky we are if we are able to follow it, as that’s how life and writing become completely entwined.

SW *Wilder* contains several tender and powerful poems drawing on experiences and states of motherhood. In the poem *Food* “...I break the bread of me against your mouth / and you fill like a vase” while in *White gold* “My son plays me like an instrument”. How does the experience of motherhood charge you as a poet and inform your work?

JB I love that you use the word *charge*. There’s something very ‘sparking’, electric, about certain times in our lives, when the borders between what we like to think of as our coherent selves become much more porous to what surrounds us, in a taking on of identity with non-self or a realisation that we are also ‘other’. The experience of early motherhood was like that, a kind of re-wiring, but I think it’s true of any intense experience and of course it’s a tendency we can also cultivate – which is what it is to read and experience poetry too, I think: a slowing down along with an opening out of attention. So much of the experience of having a baby is, early on (and continuing for a good few years in our case), about being nocturnal, awake at times of the night when the world takes on a very different character, quieter, stranger, less clear in its categories of ideas, objects, certainties. And it’s a very physical, corporeal experience – I felt strongly the identity of my baby (and myself) as an animal and also then, in reflection, I felt the humanness of animals and a natural broad extension of affection. My

son seemed to grow not only from the milk I gave him, but with the alternations of light and dark, with the sensations of touch, with silence and with sound, and the boundaries between us seemed to waver, as did those between life and death – I definitely felt that death was part of the shadow around us, not in a frightening way, but as a natural consequence of this bodily awareness that I felt saturated with and in the sense of existing within a chain of beings. It was in a way quite a psychedelic experience.

SW *Wilder* ends, quite literally, on a note of “hope”. What are your hopes for your own poetry, going forward, but also the genre as a whole? Do you hold out hope for poetry’s role in the climate crisis?

JB Ah, that “hope” – thanks for picking up on it. *Unripe*, the last poem in the book, was not an easy one to write, as is often the case – it took a long time to find its form, its exact expression and its focus. So much of the work of writing, if it’s to be a process of discovery, seems to involve working away at intentions until what the poem wants to say can be found, the bare bones of it excavated from beneath the more trivial details of life. And this seems to be very dependent on the act of listening I find – being led by musicality and its marriage with meaning. Sometimes, lines do suddenly slot into place, fully themselves, in form and meaning, and that’s what I’m always waiting for, and working towards. The last line of *Unripe* was one such line and it does indeed end with the word hope. But it is a question, albeit a rhetorical one, and I did feel it’s a kind of challenge – what kind of hope is it that has found its way into the poem and into the book?

I’d been reading *The Hidden Life of Trees* by Peter Wohlleben. Deciduous trees make calculations, best guesses, about future water availability in order to decide when to put out their leaves. I saw the pine trees in the poem as making this kind of calculation in putting out their cones, their seeds. Plants and animals often produce many offspring or seeds in the hope they can beat the odds against each individual one surviving. This kind of hope is a calculated risk then, but there’s a sense in which this is what life is doing all the time – it’s the strong imperative of life – to grow, to propagate itself, despite of and in sympathy with the conditions it finds itself in. In the context of poetry and activism, hope is the idea of not giving up, I suppose, rather than optimism per se. Rebecca Solnit has been good at delineating this kind of hope – to do the work anyway, regardless of the chances of success, to resist despair and apathy as an ethical requirement because nothing is lost until it’s lost. Hope as a necessary attempt to deal with the likelihood of failure.

In *Wilder*, I wanted to think about the forces that operate against change, against doing what needs to be done – strong forces that are internal, not only external. The climate emergency is such a huge challenge to everything we do and the way we do things, it requires large systematic change. If the personal is political, we have to change ourselves to see change in the way the human world is run around us, but what kinds of change are needed? Much of modern ecopoetry I think is about re-sensitisation to the world of which we are part and finding ways of expressing that sensitivity – and this is one of the interesting ways in which poetry is responding to the need for change because these poems almost seem to want to rewire us, which is perhaps what all good poetry has always done. It makes me think of Geoffrey Hill who said it was revolting to merely express ourselves – that instead the aim is “to make glorious the art of expressiveness”. What does loss require if not an attentive witness?



Sarah Westcott has published a pamphlet and two collections with Pavilion Poetry. She was a news journalist for twenty years and works as a freelance tutor, writer and editor. Poems have appeared on beer mats, billboards and buses, been baked into bread and installed in a nature reserve, triggered by footsteps. Sarah lives in Kent and has a lifelong interest in the natural world.