

BEGINS

Could becoming a man for a day inject something new into your writing?

As female authors and poets how might becoming a man for a day affect our writing, poetry, character development and performance? Juliet Platt joined a Drag King workshop and poetry event to find out.

Google 'women writing men' and there is a flurry of commentary about how successfully women writers have got under the skin of their male characters. Heathcliff, Mr Darcy and John Thornton all trip off the tongue as literary men powerfully and expertly drawn by their female creators.

Less clear is exactly how these characters were conceived and crafted in the first place. The consensus seems to be that 'women writing men' (or 'men writing women') is simply a matter for the imagination. Of course strong observational skills are required, as well as a preparedness to walk a figurative mile in someone else's shoes, and the ability to portray essential and convincing characteristic details.

But what if there is a more experiential, less intellectual, way for writers to access characters of the opposite gender? Men playing women (and women playing men) in a dramatic context, either by necessity or as a theatrical device, is nothing new. So it's interesting that this doesn't appear to be a practice with which writers experiment more widely in order to identify voices of the opposite gender in their work.

In response to this curiously ill-defined and possibly deficient aspect of the writer's process I joined six other female writers and poets to put our inner men to the test at the Swindon Festival of Poetry Be a Man for the Day workshop. Explaining her reasoning behind including this in the Festival schedule Director Hilda Sheehan said: "I wanted to explore something new and think about how gender plays a huge part in our lives and performances."

The workshop was led by performance artist, author and male impersonator Diane Torr, who has been leading Drag King and Be a Man for the Day workshops all over the world since 1990. We were going to spend the day being transformed into men, including facial air, fake penises and men's clothing, while later that evening the poets amongst us would perform their work as men to a live audience. The giddy excitement was palpable.

As we settled down to introduce ourselves the air was full of rationalisations and sage assumptions about how to interpret gender. Describing her own relationship with gender Bloodaxe poet Clare Shaw (Edward) said: "As a mother and a lesbian I identify with having a female body, but I live androgynously. Gender is a form of expression, but also of restriction. In my poetry I can occupy lots of characters that are male, but also that are beyond gender. That's one of the greatest gifts that poetry offers us."

Poet Myfanwy Fox said: "As a biologist I don't see males and females as a binary black and white separation but as individuals with mostly the same drives." We could have been reading straight off the googled pages, with a resounding agreement, still in our heads, that gender occupies a layer above the fact of our being human.

Explaining the process of the day Diane was very clear that this was to be a respectful event. She said: “Once you have all the make-up on you will be someone else. You need to think carefully about the male character you are becoming. You need to allow him to be revealed and get to know who he is. Don’t think in stereotype.”

This was an important message, and it addressed an uncomfortable truth that all writers have to tackle: that accessing a different gender is fraught with the real possibility of rehashing cliché. Perhaps stereotypes provide us with an easy sanctuary as we try to avoid portraying raw versions of men we would deem unpleasant or edgy. But they make for one-dimensional writing.

Gradually the giggles gave way to puzzlement and wary reflection. Festival Chronicler Louisa Davison (Jamie) expressed her concerns about becoming a man she might hate. Poet Hannah Linden (Ron Smith) explained a childhood devoid of positive male role models and Jill Abram (Jack) reflected on how un-feminine she has felt in her life, but has still not been able to make herself heard. It began to feel like we were getting to the real meat of enquiry about gender differences.

Diane’s book, *Sex, Drag and Male Roles*, co-authored with performance critic Stephen Bottoms, explores the cultural, political and personal implications of drag performance, cross-dressing and trans-gender curiosity. It includes a Do-it-Yourself section on becoming a man for the day. In it Diane describes how to bind the breasts, and how to create a penis at rest by stuffing a condom with cotton wool. She also explains how to apply make-up and facial hair, how to choose clothing, and adopt the correct body language. Here are her main tips:

- Learn to be direct and use gestures to emphasise points
- Take up space and claim a three feet perimeter around your body as your territory
- Jut your feet out to the side when you walk. Let your arms hang down, maintaining a semi-clenched fist
- When you sit put the whole of your bottom on the chair. Never sit on the edge of your seat.
- Speak slowly and present information as if the words themselves are concrete
- Look through rather than at people, imagining that your eyes begin further back in your head.
- When you eat or smoke a cigarette make it purposeful and functional

Having such a laser focus on the physicality of men, and a real embodied experience of how that feels gives us the tools to make our writing and our portrayal of men more convincing.

Commenting on her determination for women to pass as men in public Diane said: “There are still so many more experiences it is easier to have as a man than as a woman. It is very liberating.” For female writers this has got to be a tempting avenue to explore for inspiration and ideas.

During the workshop Diane showed us how to deepen our voice using aikido breathing exercises. She also demonstrated the deliberate movements men make when they walk, sit, and introduce themselves. Personally I felt a rising aggression. When it was time for me to enter the room and introduce myself as my character Chris Stone I almost slammed the door behind me and forcefully dragged my chair across the floor.

There were more unsettling things to come. Diane told us that men don't smile as much as women and this translated into an inhibition about forming relationships with each other. It was humbling and deeply affecting to confront the reality that men occupy rather lonely self-contained worlds, and there was an immediate sense that our writing might take on a greater degree of compassion and empathy for the male voice.

The evening performance proved revelatory. Diane encouragingly reminded us that as men fewer things can go wrong. Male authority means no apology, and less judgement, just because of gender. She said: "Everyone will love us because we're men!"

Poet, psychotherapist and former actor Rachael Clyne (Nat) modified her poem Indoor Sport from the third into the first person for the performance. She said: "Delivering a poem about domestic violence as the perpetrator rather than the victim accessed a sense of power I never felt at the time of writing it. Changing my voice had quite an impact."

So what will be the full effects on our writing of being a man for the day? Certainly the experience gave us all pause for thought. It triggered a deeper enquiry into ourselves, which will naturally find expression in our work at some point.

Perhaps our sentences will become even more direct, displaying more poignant details. Drawing an analogy between the writing process and that of gender transformation Clare said: "I was going to be clean shaven, but then facial hair is such a straightforward signifier of being male, so I chose a moustache. Similarly writing is a process of choosing details that mean things to other people in order to evoke a sense of character. Every detail we choose has to be meaningful."

Maybe, now we have experienced the inhibitions of men to reach out emotionally, our male characters will be more fully developed and more sympathetic. Hannah is already contemplating a new form of writing: a blog to record her upbringing and the strange coincidental circumstances surrounding three generations of men in her family.

It's possible that our work will be broader in scope and address more adventurous themes, while our poetry performances take on a new power and authority as we embrace our inner bloke.

In *Wuthering Heights* Catherine Earnshaw proclaims "I am Heathcliff". Who's to say that these weren't the words of the author herself? That Emily Bronte hadn't already donned the shirt sleeves, breeches and sideburns before looking in the mirror?

Give it a go.

ENDS

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Poets' and performers' links and publications

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Myfanwy Fox – myfanwyfox.wordpress.com

Hannah Linden - Domestic Cherry 4 published by Swindon Artswords

Rachael Clyne – rachaelclyne.com

(Rachael has two collections She who walks with Stones and Singing at the Bone Tree available from her website)

Jill Abram – ariadnethread.net and poetrypulse.com

Clare Shaw – clareshaw.co.uk.

(Clare has two collections Straight Ahead and Head On published by Bloodaxe.)

Festival Chronicle by Louisa Davison – festivalchronicle.com

Diane Torr – dianetorr.com

(Diane's book Sex, Drag and Male Roles: Investigating Gender as Performance is published by The University of Michigan Press.)

Swindon Festival of Poetry – swindonfestivalofpoetry.co.uk

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