

# 1 ON 1: JOANNA KUROWSKA

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By Alice Saunders

Joanna Kurowska's poems and fiction stories have appeared in *Ancient Paths*, *Apple Valley Review*, *Atticus*, *Bateau*, *Christianity and Literature*, *Illuminations*, *International Poetry Review*, *Off The Coast*, *Room*, *Solo Novo*, *Tipton*, *Vineyards*, and elsewhere. She is the author of five books of poetry, most recently *The Wall & Beyond* (eLectio Publishing 2013), *Inclusions* (Cervena Barva Press 2014) and *The Butterfly's Choice* (forthcoming 2015 from Broadstone Media). Kurowska's critical works have appeared in *The Conradian* (UK), *Slavic and East European Journal*, *Religion And The Arts*, *Southern Quarterly*, and elsewhere.

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## Can you tell us a little bit about yourself?

Born and raised in Poland, I have lived in the US since December 1988. This means I am bi-cultural and bi-lingual, which of course becomes reflected in my writing. While I have written poetry since I was very young, throughout most of my professional life I have taught Polish as a foreign language, at the college level. With regards to research, I have written a doctoral thesis on Joseph Conrad's European identity, and published essays and reviews on literature, religion, and education. As a creative writer—now full time—I have written seven volumes of poetry, five of which have been published as books, the other two awaiting publishers' decisions. A num-

ber of my poems have appeared in periodicals in print and/or online, including—I am proud to say—*Torrid Literature Journal*.

## At what point did you realize this was something you wanted to do?

My desire to write started to crystallize during my early adolescence but, due especially to my emigrating from Poland and the ensuing language transition, only recently was I able to determine that writing is—or, better, has always been—my foremost pursuit. It became clear to me some several years ago, when English being my second language no longer felt as an insurmountable obstacle with regards to creative writing.

## When did you first consider yourself a writer?

Being a writer and considering oneself a writer are two different things. Some define themselves as writers early in life, for example Tennessee Williams, who—after working briefly in a shoe company, then doing odd jobs in order to survive—started to write full time. Others go into writing later in life, as was the case with Joseph Conrad, who first pursued the career of a sailor (in which he achieved the rank of captain). After working for the British navy for sixteen years—during which time he learned English—Conrad switched to writing fiction in the language (English in fact was his third language, Polish being his native, and French acquired in early

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boyhood). So both life circumstances and the change of language determined Conrad's development as a writer.

As for me, notwithstanding various big changes occurring in my life, I have been writing since youth; but again, only recently did I start to define myself a "writer"—which entails a significant switch in perspective, in that whatever I may be doing for living, I do it in order to write.

**Is there any particular author or book that influenced you in any way either growing up or as an adult?**

There are many books, so it is difficult to pick a particular one, but I would like to mention Jan Parandowski's *Mitologia* (Mythology). Beautifully illustrated (mostly with BW photographs of the ancient Greek art), the book was in my parents' library. I read it often, feeling absolutely fascinated by the adventures of Jason, Hercules's struggles, the intrigues among the Olympian gods, and so on. I should also mention *The Odyssey* in Jan Parandowski's translation—a book that made me particularly aware of there being a way of looking at the world different from the reductive empiricism following the Enlightenment and (equally reductive) nineteenth-century rationalism. Later, Bulgakov's *Master and Margarita* had a similar effect had on me—the realization that there is more to "reality" than the physical eye or—to paraphrase the Polish romanticist poet Adam Mickiewicz—the lens of a scholar can grasp.

Other significant books that I read in my early years include Hermann Hesse's *Steppenwolf*, Thomas Mann's *The Holy Sinner*, Alejo Carpentier's *The Lost Steps*, Andrejev's *Judas Iscariot*; on the Polish side, Karol H. Rostworowski's *Judas z Kariotu* (Judas Iscariot) and the poetry by Bolesław Leśmian. Later, the works by

Joseph Conrad, especially his *Under Western Eyes* and *Heart of Darkness*. More recently, Carl G. Jung's *Undiscovered Self* and *The Red Book*.

**What's a typical working day like for you? When and where do you write? Do you set a daily writing goal?**

I have always had to do many things other than writing, but kept writing nevertheless. Not teaching full time during the last four years, I have been able to devote more time to writing. I have recently prepared five poetry collections and worked on several other projects, some nearing completion, others already published. On average, I spend about six to eight hours every day working on some writing project; but I can work only on one thing at a time. In fact, I believe multi-tasking is the enemy of good writing. So if I decide to clean my closets, for the duration of that activity (which may last a day or a week), I am unable to focus on writing. On the other hand, while writing I am likely not to notice that the closets are a mess or the bed not made. If I don't write for more than three days, it feels like time is wasted, even if I have been doing other work (of which there is always a full plate). Gradually, I become restless, until I have made some progress writing-wise. This polarity—life's demands against the necessity of seclusion to be able to write, have been always a source of great tension to me.

I should add, I am not a "typical" writer in one aspect, namely that I currently write in a language I did not even speak in my early 30s. Back then I was working on some literary and/or research projects (while doing other things for a living). Then I engaged myself in a doctoral research—a blessing, since it has taught me English but also an obstacle, as it forced me to postpone my other projects. During the last few years I have had the time to return to

those projects, some of them being in English, others in Polish. This means I need to work incrementally on several major projects; something I would not recommend under normal circumstances. The bright side of this situation is that I can't complain on the lack of ideas, for the next ten years or so!

**How do you deal with writer's block? What is your advice?**

The best advice I can think of is the one given by Laura Oliver in her book *The Story Within*, "Even bad writing is better than no writing." I find novel writing to be the most difficult, simply because the one I work on is my first. It entails broad research and a good deal of learning about writing itself. I have benefited from reading books about writing, some of which I find particularly helpful, like Oliver's. With regards to poetry, my best learning experience and advice is to read and "digest" a lot of poetry.

With some caution, alternating one's primary pursuit with one or two minor projects can help to overcome a writer's block. Joseph Conrad, for whom writing was torture, did exactly that. At times, when working on a novel, he would "escape" into something less daunting—a short story or novella, finish it, and then go back to the novel.

I often feel not satisfied at all with what I see on the page. Due to its brevity, a poem can be relatively quickly polished into the final "gem," but with regards to the longer narratives, I have the tendency to edit them endlessly. However, it's better to leave editing for the end. "Perfection is the enemy of completion," my academic advisor once told me. Accordingly, my advice is to just keep on writing, no matter how slow and imperfect.

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**You have participated in quite a few poetry readings and workshops. Were you ever hesitant when it came to writing or sharing a specific poem? Why?**

Occasionally, poems can be strongly contextual. For example, a series of my poems tackle religious paradoxes and the nature of spiritual knowledge. Those poems are questions-probes rather than "answers" but, taken out of context, they may appear more definitely "religious" or "anti-religious" than I would want them to be, so I try to provide my listeners with some larger context or read them together with other poems. After all, in a poetry book, every poem is a part of a larger fabric, and taking it out can limit or alter its overall significance.

**You wrote a book titled *Inclusions*. What is this book about?**

I'd say *Inclusions* depict my attempts to understand the world as I find it—absurd, lovely, incomprehensible, full of promise but also of decay. At the "mystical" level, I feel much "included" in this amazing world. It's hard not to notice, however, that in nature "everything eats everything," while humanity professes exclusions based on prejudice and stupidity. While "understandable," greed is stupid, violence is stupid. Sadly, entire institutions and discourses "sanctify," with all seriousness, various forms of stupidity. For example, over the last ten years or so, we have undergone an ever-increasing bureaucratization of our social life. Institutions traditionally use bureaucracy as the means of social control, but I cannot help thinking that, in long term, it is just stupid (stupidity being our most serious threat). What worries me is that small social units—even individuals!—follow that unfortunate pattern, while in reality they *do not have to*. But they do choose to multiply papers, forms,

circulars, directives... Anyway, *Inclusions* is my poetic attempt to look—and marvel—at this paradoxical world of ours.

**How did you come up with the title?**

One of the poems in the book is titled "Inclusion." The poem itself is about the yearning and will to be included; to overcome the artificial barriers we create. Again, it's a strong theme for me. I must emphasize, however, that the credit for suggesting the title goes to my husband, John Brownell, who has been inexhaustible support and help in my creative endeavors. It was his idea to put the word *inclusion* in plural and use it for the entire collection. I loved the suggestion and gladly followed.

**What was your favorite poem to write and why?**

I consider the poem "Nothing" to be my favorite because it addresses exactly my greatest moral/epistemological concern, that we tend to "lock" reality (or what we imagine to be "truth") within our cognitive prejudices—be they scientific, religious, or personal. We have every right to think a tomato is red—but please, do not force that idea onto others! (who are very likely to come to a similar conclusion, anyway. But please, let them do it on their own!) We often take enormous, abstract ideas—such as God, Universe, Life, Origin—and build or adopt some ready-made systems, around them. Then we feel insecure and often turn into aggression, when others choose not to conform. So my poem "Nothing" is a survey of such "systems," with my ultimate choice of depicting the "truth" as Nothing. This draws from Master Eckhardt's idea that "God is Nothing"—because the moment we name God as "something," what we have named is

no longer God. In other words, what I think God is, is merely something I think, nothing more. One would have to be God, to be able to cross that epistemological barrier!

**What's different about this book?**

The greatest difference is that it is my first collection of originally English-language poems. Otherwise, it continues to probe the matters that have always intrigued me: the mystical aspects of the world; the symbolic significance of the "ordinary"; the absurdity of hierarchies in human society; the mystery of existence. Also, some readers told me that *Inclusions* reads more mellow than my previous collections.

**What advice would you give to writers who are contemplating writing their first book?**

Read, read, read. Besides enjoying a story or poem, try to learn from it, spy how the others did it! Talk to other writers, meet with them. Listen to their advice. Watch the world, avoid judging anything, forever wonder!

**How do you market your work? What avenues have you found to work best for your genre?**

I am eternally in the process of learning about "marketing". I use social platforms on the Internet, such as LinkedIn, Facebook, WordPress, Twitter. While selling books is important (obviously), the whole process is about relationships. For example, a number of people bought my books simply because I had engaged in some conversation with them (including people I have never met in person but simply exchanged a few lines with them on Twitter or Facebook). It is an incredible

joy to me to read or hear my readers' comments. I value them very much and always respond. In the end, however, I find face-to-face meetings with readers to be most enjoyable, rewarding experiences—and I think they work best for poetry.

**What has influenced your development as a writer?**

I always try to respond constructively to life's turns. It may take me a long while to "digest" the meaning of a given experience, but eventually it becomes "digested" in a creative way. Simply put, I write about life, as I experience it. Writing is an attempt to understand life. I should add that my *rendez-vous* with "transcendence" or the never-ending evolutions of my faith, have been a core factor.

**What is the hardest part of writing for you?**

The number and variety of projects I have been working on, for years now, against the pressures of life. It is really an impossible task to prioritize among several projects that are very different from one another but equally important: from a number of poetry collections still to be written, to the editing of the memoirs left by my deceased father, to a language manual, to Conrad research, to the novel, to a collection of short stories, etc. The hardest part is having to choose between all those equally important projects, against the limits of time and, frankly, resources. Yet choose I must; and sometimes—or should I say, always? the very life helps. Sooner or later something happens, that suggests "follow this path, not another." While waiting, I always try to work on one of my projects.

**What's the best thing about being an author?**

Freedom.

**If you were writing a book about your life, what would the title be?**

I have recently finished a semi-biographical poetry collection titled *Stained Glass* and including poems drafted in Polish during the 1990s, then fully developed in English. Since that collection deals conspicuously with my life story, I would use its title, *Stained Glass*, for my biographical book. Taken apart, pieces

of stained glass seem pointless. Put together, they can be arranged into a coherent, possibly beautiful composition. I feel it is up to me to arrange the scattered pieces of life into a sensible whole.

**Have you written a book you love that you have not been able to get published?**

Well, my language book has been extremely enthusiastically considered by a publishing house in the US; then the same house fell completely silent, leaving all my e-mail/snail-mail queries unanswered. This is really the only example that comes to my mind. Other than this, I have currently two poetry manuscripts submitted to publishers, for whose decisions I have been waiting. I hope they will get published, eventually. So, the language book apart, it's too early to talk about a book I haven't been able to get published. I have had some rejections of course, that's normal, but so far my poetry manuscripts have been accepted for publication faster than I had anticipated.

**What book are you currently reading?**

Charles Bukowski's *The Roominghouse Madrigals*, *Habry* by Helen Degen Cohen, and *The Gnostic Jung* by Stephan Hoeller.

**If you couldn't be an author, what would your ideal career be?**

I would love to be a ranger or a naturalist. But I would still try to write!

**What motto, quote, or saying do you live by? Why?**

I would like to quote Joseph Conrad's novella "Youth": Do or Die. I always feel action is the only sensible response to life's challenges. I once wrote a poem titled "the wind," which depicts the wind as blowing regardless of whether a feather, a pebble, or a wall stands in its way. Even a wall cannot stop the wind. I like to think of myself as the wind. Especially when I feel scared or overwhelmed, this idea of being "the wind" triggers my will to act, to make things happen. If the wall is large, the wind may need to change its direction, but eventually, it will either turn the wall down or go around it, usque ad finem—to the very end (another quotation from Conrad).

**Do you have any upcoming projects, tours, events, or announcements that you would like to share with our readers?**

As I said, there are several projects. Poetry-wise, I'd like to mention a collection that deals with the Nazi/Soviet occupation of Poland during the second world war. This project is based on papers and the memoirs left by my father, who passed away five years ago. While focusing on the experiences of individuals—citizens of Poland during the wartime (deprived of their property, they were in hundreds of thousands forcefully deported, as a compulsory labor-force eventually to be destroyed, to the Soviet Union or to Nazi Germany), this collection aims at exposing political violence and manipulation as parts of human experience.

**Can you tell us where people can find you? Website, social media, blog, etc.**

Anyone interested is welcome to visit me on my website <http://joanna-kurowska.com> for information about my recent publications, readings, interviews, or to order a signed copy of any one of my books. I also have two parallel Facebook pages:

in English: <http://www.facebook.com/JoannaKurowskapoetry>

in Polish: <http://www.facebook.com/PoezjaJoannyKurowskiej>

My Twitter name is [@JoannaEKurowska](#)

**Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview. What final thought and/or message would you like to leave with our readers?**

I would like to express my gratitude to *Torrid Literature Journal* for publishing my poems in one of your past issues, as well as for inviting me to this interview. Thank you very much!

And to my fellow writers: HAPPY WRITING!