

Jason Whittaker, who has previously worked at Falmouth University, is now Head of the School of English and Journalism at the University of Lincoln and teaches on the MA Creative Writing and Publishing programme which is run by Lincoln and *The Guardian*.

Rupert Loydell: Hi Jason, thanks for agreeing to answer some questions. I'm very excited to have a chapter of mine in *Bodies, Noise and Power in Industrial Music* (Palgrave Macmillan) which you co-edited. It's a wide-ranging anthology. I wondered where the idea of 'the body' came from in relation to Industrial music, and also what you see academic writing about music achieving?

Jason Whitaker: The idea of doing a book on industrial music was, for me, always going to involve something to do with bodies. My own early encounters with the genre and scene very quickly became involved with body modification and different ways of thinking about the body, such as posthumanism or transhumanism. Industrial gigs and events were always great places to meet like-minded people who engaged in tattooing, body piercing or other weird and wonderful ways of changing our physical selves. In addition, like a lot of post-punk scenes industrial music was especially concerned with the physicality of dance – not just in the mosh pit, but for what would become EBM, or electronic body music.

More intellectually, this was also a period in my life when I was becoming more interested in thinkers such as Deleuze and Guattari and their notion of a body without organs. For the past thirty years or so, I've been obsessed with that concept, which has its origins in the work of Antonin Artaud. I have no real idea what it is – which is part of the point: once it can be defined, it's no longer a body without organs. I just know that I want one.

RL: You have always combined a love of William Blake with the development of the internet and technology, but was Industrial music always in the mix for you? How does all of that link to journalism and creative writing?

JW: I have actually been into industrial music for a longer period than I've been into Blake – which may shock some people who know me very well. I was listening to Test Dept, Swans and Throbbing Gristle before I went to university, which is where I became seriously interested in Blake. My work on technology came even later and was driven as much as anything by the need to find a job that paid (teaching William Blake having singularly failed to provide me with that kind of employment!) In many respects, however, my interest in electronic music and its means of production had primed me to be technologically minded.

There was also a very sweet spot where my love of Blake – especially his mantra 'I must create a system or be enslaved by another man's' – combined with a fascination with industrial and post-punk music scenes and technology. My partner and I were, for a few years, involved with Thee Temple Ov Psychick Youth (TOPY), a cult that had its origins in the music and art of Genesis P. Orridge – one of the founders of Throbbing Gristle and Psychic TV as well as the performance art duo, Coum Transmissions. As I would later discover, it was all a bit more cult-like at the group's headquarters in Brighton, but we were based in Birmingham and had a whale of a time writing and self-publishing weird and wonderful booklets or making our own music. I still have a very soft spot for TOPY, which is where I first

found an audience for my more esoteric writing, and which gave me a lot of confidence to pursue a later journalistic and creative writing career.

RL: Was there a lightbulb moment for you when you realised you could combine academic research with your love of music? I ask as it was certainly the case for me writing about Brian Eno and post-punk music!

JW: I actually shied away from writing about music both as an academic and as a journalist for the first decade of my academic career. To be honest, I was slightly hidebound by the notion that professional writing should be directed by either the area for which I'd been trained academically (Blake and the Romantics) or where I had worked as a journalist (digital technologies). Music had been a passion, but was also very much a hobby, one for which I felt I hadn't done the work to justify publishing.

What changed this was when my work on William Blake began to move into areas of his reception, how other writers, artists, film makers – and musicians – were inspired by him. Blake's poems are some of the most widely set to music, and I found myself increasingly talking to and writing about artists such as Julian Cope and Billy Bragg who brought the Romantic poet into their music. At the same time, two friends of mine realised that increasingly we were writing about music and so we approached Palgrave with the idea for a new book series, Pop Culture, Music and Identity. This was established in 2014 and over the past seven years we've published nearly 30 titles in the series.

RL: How has the internet changed how we write and publish work? Why do you think people still want books anyway?

JW: This is a huge question and so my answer can only briefly touch upon some main points. I spend quite a lot of time teaching journalism and the internet has completely revolutionised publication: the trend towards digital rather than print began in the late 1990s and while many have been predicting the end of print for the past two decades, the pandemic hastened a longstanding trend. For journalism, to all intents and purposes people no longer want print although some publishers still tend the corpses because they want to extract as much life as possible from print advertising.

For books, the answer is more nuanced. Over the past decade, I've been tracking some of the trends between ebooks and physical books, and sometimes ebooks appear to have the upper hand, at other times it is physical copies. However, if you look at the segmentation of the publishing market, you see some very interesting long-term trends. After the 2008 economic crash, sales of pretty much every category of publishing declined as people had less spare cash, and it took almost a decade for the market to recover. In some areas, such as genre publishing (think crime, science fiction, romance and so on), all or nearly all the growth was in electronic publishing. People *wanted* to read this kind of fiction, but they didn't necessarily want it in paperback form. For non fiction or literary fiction, by contrast, we've seen a return of the hardback: these are the kind of book you want other people to see on your shelves or to give to other people as gifts, for example. Unlike in journalism, the book is a format that will be around for a very long time, although a lot of what we actually *read* will be in electronic form.

RL: What's your core belief regarding teaching people to write, and how has that changed over the years?

JW: I think that my slightly joking answer to this would be that no one knows anything. What I mean by this is that no one can really tell which books will or will not be a success: my favourite recent examples are Gail Honeyman's *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine*, which is about a lonely protagonist who has to camouflage herself 'as a human woman' and which became a huge hit through word of mouth, versus Jeanine Cummins' *American Dirt* which was engineered to be a massive success and was set on that path via Oprah's Book Club, before causing immense controversy because so many of its readers thought it stereotypical. As such, my firmly held belief is that trying to write for a market is a mistake – or, rather, requires considerable experience before you can hope to do it well. As such, I spend a lot of time working with students to discover what they really *want* to write rather than what they *think* they should write to impress me or a putative publisher.

Where my attitudes have changed, however, is in terms of becoming increasingly intolerant of sloppiness. This was always the case when it came to teaching journalism: if your work is littered with typos or grammatical errors, no one will employ you as a professional writer. I did, however, think that the 'creative process' of writing stories or poetry was somehow more forgiving. I no longer believe that. Writing is very much a craft, like fashioning a piece of furniture or print making. If you cannot be bothered to improve the technicalities of your craft, then you probably are not going to care very much about issues of characterisation, plot or the nuances of figures of speech. They occur at different stages in the process, but a good writer, I think, always wants to write a perfect sentence as well as devise a perfect structure for their book.