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## James Matthews: The Stories Behind The Dissident Poet

*WritingThreeSixty* met with renowned poet, James Matthews, on Thursday, 6 August 2015, to discuss his most recent publication, his past collections of poetry, as well as his time spent in prison.

**WritingThreeSixty:** Your most recent collection is titled *Gently Stirs My Soul*. Where does this title come from? What is the inspiration behind the title? And tell us about the book.

**James:** Well, actually, it is not my title; it is the publisher's. I gave them the manuscript, and they came up with the title [that is taken from the first poem], but I like the title.

The poetry is of a nature that I have never done before. All my poetry had a theme. Let me give you my feeling about poetry. I wish I could write a poem about a bird in flight. Then I look at people, shackled, and chained. The meaning is now clear. I shall write a poem about beauty and a bird in flight.

I could not comprehend what was happening to us because of the apartheid government. I saw myself as a dissident poet. And the role of a dissident poet is to fight an oppressive government, like [Pablo] Neruda. This is how I see what a poet should be. My thoughts and verses are like a gun that shoots at the oppressors. With my mental amnesia, it took me 18 months to write this collection. I had no conception of how this book would turn out. It was not planned; it just worked out. I do not know if I would ever bring out another collection similar to this. Now that I have reached a certain stage, I do not know exactly where I am going. I did an experiment with my book *Flames & Flowers*, where there is a love poem on page one and a political poem on the opposite page. I just wanted to see if I could pull this off. It also confused people, because things should be normal, the poetry should run in a certain way. I do not need a structure [for my poetry].

I have noticed that people seem to appreciate this book. I am not into degrading women or swearing that does not make sense. We hope what we write can be role models for younger poets.

**WritingThreeSixty:** You mentioned that your environment and corrupt Members of Parliament inspire your writing. Is there any literature that also inspires you?

**James:** Well, firstly, I was not caught up much by literature. For instance, I could never get into the Brontë sisters, but I really like Dickens. Particularly *Oliver Twist*. And when I speak about writers who were politically minded, I think of John Dos Passos, an American writer, and [Pablo] Neruda, a Chilean writer. There were also times I would read Langston Hughes and Maya Angelou. I was drawn to Maya Angelou.

**WritingThreeSixty:** Were you angry when they banned your poem? How did you feel?

**James:** Well, all I could say was, “Shit on you, baby.” Anger would be futile, just write some more. When they ban your books, you know you are winning!

**WritingThreeSixty:** Do you think that South African writers today place more value on being published than they do on the work they produce?

**James:** If they are, then they’re on the wrong track. I write for people to appreciate that age is a beautiful phase. I read for senior citizens and at church halls. Three weeks ago, I read to about thirty-five serious senior citizens at a house in Bokmakierie, and they appreciated me. So when I walk in the streets, they would come up to me and embrace me and say, “James, thank you very much for writing such beautiful lines for us.” They make me feel very humble.

**WritingThreeSixty:** You mention that “age is a beautiful phase”.

**James:** Yes, just to give a line from a love poem: “I am flushed with the lushness of love.”

**WritingThreeSixty:** What does this line mean to you?

**James:** The line itself explains. Well, let me read it to you:

“Each poem connects with each other.  
I am flushed with the lushness of love  
embracing me as I sit in the cold heart of loneliness  
loneliness masquerading as exuberance  
shield from my pain images in my eyes are dead dreams  
and engraved in my heart dead dreams now ...”

I do not take myself seriously. I take my work seriously.

*Cry Rage!* (1972) was the first book of poetry read in Parliament. And after reading it, they could not decide if it was a book of poetry or a petrol bomb, so they banned it. Three or four of my books were banned, [including] one book that I edited, *Black Voices Shout! [An Anthology of Poetry]* - was another way of showing how black poets fought against apartheid.

**WritingThreeSixty:** You seem to place more emphasis on “wanting to be read” by ordinary people than on wanting to make money from your writing.

**James:** It’s funny that you say money. I was reading at the big library in Cape Town and there were students from Washington and local students. One local student asked me a very stupid question: Do you make a lot of money writing poetry?” I said no, I do not have a Mercedes Benz. And no, poets do not really make money.

*James shares a story about the time he spent in prison.*

**James:** *Cry Rage!* came out in 1972. Now younger people - well, I am older than most people - but younger people who are in their sixties, they still talk about *Cry Rage!* I can remember coming here [UWC] and stopping at a robot and this guy rolled down his window and recited three verses from my prison poetry. A lot of students from here were taken to Victor Verster [now Drakenstein Correctional Centre], Peter Jones included. There were about four or five. I was taken because of my writing. I was working at *Muslim News* as a journalist. These two cops came while we were getting the paper ready.

We were there for about six months. We were each assigned a cell, and I really appreciated solitary confinement. What happens when you are four in a cell? And you do not like each other? You are there for twenty-three hours a day!

I wrote my poetry, and my daughter would come with my grandson. He was a baby. And I would get some of my friends to speak Xhosa to distract the cops. And while they were doing that, I would take my finished poems and put them in my grandson’s nappy. My daughter would keep the poems, so when I got out, I could publish them. When you sent out letters, they would censor the letters, so I could not send them to her. I named that book *Pass Me a Meatball Jones*. Much later, when the book was no longer banned, I called it *Poems from a Prison Cell*.

**WritingThreeSixty:** Did all the work you wrote in prison get to your daughter, or was any lost? And with your “mental amnesia”, do you feel at times that you lose some of your work?

**James:** Most of the poetry I wrote in jail I got out to my daughter. Now I have a computer. One good thing is I lie in bed, and I write one or two lines on my computer. The other day I was at the shop and I thought up this poem: “Gauges of bool, spilled from my mouth, an open wound, to smear the faces in senses of the corruptors in parliament.” It is the beginning of a poem I am working on.

**WritingThreeSixty:** You do not use much punctuation. E.E. Cummings used this style as well. Is there a particular reason for this?

**James:** You are quite right; I got that from E.E. Cummings. There are also no titles – because you are intelligent. I do not need a title and I suspect that readers are intelligent enough to understand [my poetry], so they do not need titles.

**WritingThreeSixty:** The theme of butterflies appears throughout *Gently Stirs my Soul*. Why do butterflies have such a significant presence in your book of poetry?

**James:** Butterflies are my totem. Let me explain why. I was standing outside my front door and a butterfly circled my head and it settled on my shoulder. Then it descended to rest between my feet. The butterfly looked at me and I looked at the butterfly; there was a lengthy silence and we bonded. Then the butterfly flew away, and I was released from my enchantment. So this is how I feel about butterflies. There are a lot of times I use butterflies in my poems. When I write, it's as if it came into the light, into the verse.

**WritingThreeSixty:** What advice do you have for aspiring poets?

**James:** I once conducted a class of poetry at an underprivileged school in Lotus River. It had about thirty youngsters who were divided into groups of about ten. I told the teacher to take a hike! So I told the students: “Each one of you is going to write a poem of twenty lines. It must not be done by three or four. Everyone must write. And when it's complete, you can decide which poem is the best.” The poem that was decided on was “Gardens of Love”. This youngster wrote: “When I am in my garden, I am filled with love.” I showed it to the teacher and she said: “James, this young boy often comes to school angry, and his anger spills onto those around him.” That line, I assumed, was therapy. In that moment, he was so calm.

So to come back to poetry, there are three things you need to know: Imagination, creativity and discipline. Use your creativity to make beautiful things with your imagination. But then you need discipline to pull it together. My advice would be to “pull it together”. If you have those three things going, you can make sense, beautiful sense, with what you are writing.

**WritingThreeSixty:** What are you working on now? What is your next project?

**James:** I am working on a novella, possibly titled *Hope House*. I must always have a project to focus upon.

For more information on *Gently Stirs my Soul* (2015) published by Rhodes University, visit <http://www.ru.ac.za/corylibrary/latestnews/gentlystirmsoul.html>.

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Interview with photos available on our WordPress site: <https://uwcjournal.wordpress.com/interviews/>