

Making Hay

*'Now you know I'm the Queen of Miami,
all loud talking, lyin' save that shit for your mammy.'*

Fat bitch has herself down as the queen of rap. All night and now all morning. With a click tap, heel kick, nail scratch, teeth suck, bed creak. Louder each time. And always, always the sweatsmell. The girl looks out of the window. Soon. She'll do it soon.

The reader pauses. Susannah's neighbour whispers: "That voice, pure Peckham. A friend heard her at Cheltenham and thought Brixton, but surely a little further east?"

'I wouldn't know. I'm from Chalfont St Giles.' She smiles at the aspiring Henry Higgins in his miraculously unrumpled linen suit. Interesting that she has registered with him as worthy of dialogue. Last year at Hay no-one registered her existence. What a difference a well-cut dress and an expensive hairdresser make.

The reader resumes. Charlene Johnstone, author of debut novel *Taking the Rap*, this year's literary poster girls: new, black and street savvy. Extraordinarily marketable. Susannah examines the audience: younger than the usual crowd. All feeling the pull of the hateful rhythm, all, whether they have enjoyed or never heard of rap before, surreptitiously swaying their white bodies to the beat. No, there is one black couple sitting resolutely still.

She reads well, Charlene, making them feel it: the growing fury of the girl at the window, the crazy joy of the big, fat rapping woman and the stink of their shared cell. And the added frisson of Charlene herself in tight, torn jeans and glossy purple shirt, the real thing: she has been there, in a cell like that. There is a suspicion, often voiced by her interviewers, that she is indeed the girl at the window.

The tapping gets faster, the rapping gets louder. Teethsuck, taptap.

'Just shut the fuck up.'

The girl walks to the bed, gaffer tape in hand. Tears off a long strip, sticks it across the rapmouth, hard. Ties it round the wrists. Tapes the wrists to the rungs of the bunk bed. She's kicking her fat ankles now. Tapes the swollen, jelly rapping body, to the bed. Deodorant, two cans. Sprays: bed, face, eyes, everywhere. Three bottles of fabric conditioner. Rips the tape from the mouth and pours down the throat. Tape back and another piece on top.

The girl walks back to the window. She takes a deep, happy breath of this new, sweet smell. She smiles.

'And thank you Charlene. Ladies and gentlemen, you're familiar with the format. I shall discuss her work with Charlene for about thirty minutes and then you will have the opportunity to ask her your questions.'

The interviewer is a doyenne of the literary festival circuit and late-night arts programmes. She will ask Charlene if she is the girl at the window. Charlene will parry, she has to protect the girls whose stories she has, yeah, kind of adapted for the novel. Susannah has heard this exchange before, in Bath, in Cambridge and in the gardens at Charleston. Here we go.

'What of course has caught the imagination is the energy of your prose, its authenticity...'

Susannah heard a great deal about authenticity from Leo, her creative writing tutor. Authenticity and marketability. His gaze sweeping over the mostly ageing, mostly female aspirants, he declaimed: 'The trouble with your writing is that it's so fucking timid. Vicars and tea parties and never a semi-colon out of place. Come on, some of you must have been wild children in the 60s? Pulled up paving stones in Paris? Got

out of your head and worn flowers in your hair? But when you do give me a break from those curates, you give me stuff that's way out of your experience – serial murderers in Bangkok, paedophile rings in the Wye Valley – nil authenticity. No gut feeling.'

Leo would love Charlene who always makes sure that no-one can be quite certain who she is in this story, what it is that she did. How much is truth, how much the girls exculpating their crimes, how much claiming status by exaggerating them? Is Charlene the girl at the window who, driven mad by the noise of the sweaty rapper, inflicts such torture? But while no-one can be sure what Charlene did, they can be sure that she was there. She is the real thing.

'We all know that the novel is the fruit, the very exotic fruit, of experience' purrs the interviewer. 'But have there been any texts that have influenced you?'

She has done her homework. She, Susannah, and probably most of the audience, know the answer to this one, but still it will sound audacious in the context of the protocols of the literary festival. The answer: no-one, ain't read nothing. School? Bunked off all the the time.

Charlene smiles ever more brilliantly. 'Keep being asked that,' she confides. 'Been thinking about it. Thinking maybe James Kelman?'

A ripple of shock runs through the audience. All know the name, of course, but few were able to finish the 1994 Booker prize winner with its, to them impenetrable, Glaswegian dialect.

'Maybe Lynda la Plante?'

This is a citation more appropriate for Charlene, a popular writer with form on police and prisons. Audience and interviewer relax.

Susannah's neighbour whispers: 'Her voice – it's not quite the same as it was when I heard her on television. A bit less –'

"Street?' suggests Susannah. 'I expect it's the experience of talking to people on television arts programmes.'

'I know,' continues the interviewer, 'that you must get bored with being asked about the relation of the novel to your own experience -'

'Yeah, too right I get bored. What gets me is that tall you people who interview me, or write about me in the papers, you're all so clever and go on in your books about what they call 'the author function' and yet with me it's only about whether I did actually traffic drugs, or sleep with twelve men a day. Bet they never ask Ian McEwan if he really got into sado-masochism in Venice or cut bodies up in Berlin.'

Author function? She said 'author function'?' This concept is surely alien to Charlene?

'I can't believe,' says Charlene, and now it does not take Henry Higgins to hear a voice closer to Chalfont St Giles than to Peckham or Brixton, 'that you're not familiar with Michel Foucault's concept of the author as a function of discourse?' Looking directly into the audience she sees a number nodding vigorously. Yes, their nods reassure her, they're with her. They've read their critical theory. 'I know that Foucault is perhaps now less fashionable than he was, but his argument that questions such as 'who is the real author? do we have proof of his authenticity and originality?' are supremely unhelpful remains valid.'

A hiss of whispers runs through the audience. Where is their Charlene? Who is articulating these subversive ideas? Articulating them in a different voice?

“While texts by more established authors are interrogated as sites of contention, the approach to my work assumes the simplistic concept of a unitary truth. I, or the woman I’ve performed, has been consistently patronised.’

Rising from her chair, she saunters to the front of the stage. ‘Let me tell you a story. Once upon a time there was a woman who, when she was younger, worked as a forensic psychologist in women’s prisons. She heard those women’s stories, believed some, felt compassion for most of them. She could have written an academic textbook, but thought that a novel was the better way to get those voices heard. So, she went to creative writing classes and learned about techniques like interior monologue. She was ready to go. Then, in the final class, there was a visit from a literary agent. And he said: what we are interested in isn’t literary value, it’s a product, a marketable product. And that means not just the words on the page but the author too. Frankly, if you’re middle-aged and not good at putting yourself about on social media, not cute and photogenic and with an interesting biography, sorry, but you’ve no chance. The forensic psychologist listened and knew she had to play the system. She invented Charlene. black sister with a solid, sordid back story. And they all wanted a piece of Charlene, the authentic bad girl. For television. For festivals.’ She pauses and laughs. ‘The Hay organisers were mad for her. What could she do, our forensic psychologist? She found me. Me, an impoverished post-grad with acting aspirations. We both got lucky. She gets the stories out there, I’ve had a great few months playing the fabulous Charlene and you’ve all had the chance to hear those stories. Win win, I say. And now will the real author of *Taking the Rap* please stand?’

Susannah gets to her feet, smoothing down her elegant skirt, and the man in the linen suit leads the applause.