



Emma Jane Unsworth – ‘Why do we do the things we do to each other?’

At a fancy café in the heart of Manchester University editor Jon Roberts sat down with Emma Jane Unsworth to discuss writing comedy, feminism, the art of screenplays, and her second novel *Animals*.

Jonathon Roberts: I’ve recently read your second book and it’s getting so much attention. It’s on Lena Dunham’s feminist newsletter, Caitlin Moran is on the front cover, and the *Guardian* called you a ‘tremendous talent’. How does that feel? What is it like, especially when you work on something for as long as you do on a novel, to get that kind of response back?

Emma Jane Unsworth: I do feel blindsided by how well the book’s done to be honest with you. I couldn’t have anticipated it and couldn’t have hoped for it really, and especially because

my first book was such a small project. We literally just printed a few hundred, and that was great and it was a lovely way to ease into the publishing world. With this one I didn’t really have super high expectations. I just kind of hoped I’d find a publisher and it would get out there. I thought it probably would, but didn’t think it would get a great deal of attention. Also, the subject matter is so risky in so many ways. So, I really tussled with this book, personally, in the creation. But you know what? I’d wussed out with my first book so I was really determined not to with this one. By wuss out I mean, with my first book I took

all the sex scenes out at the eleventh hour. Literally just as we were making the final edits I had one of those times in bed where you sit bolt upright and think ‘Oh my God no! I have to change this!’ So, I spoke to my editor and said, ‘Hey can we cut these scenes?’ and she was totally fine with that. She didn’t feel like they were intrinsic. I always felt like I’d sort of betrayed myself or betrayed my book somehow. I hated myself for wussing out and not seeing that through. Sex is just part of life, and I don’t get why more people don’t write about it. To me it’s just realistic, and those scenes did make sense in the book and I didn’t write them gratuitously. So, I guess with [*Animals*] you could say I over compensated! That brought with it its own world of worry, about whether I’d written those things well, the sex and drugs scenes, and also what people close to me might think. Really, my expectations and my fears before publication for this one were much more to do with the content than they were to do with any sense of success. I had a lot of feelings whirring around my head. I had to say to my mum ‘you can read it but I don’t want to talk about it with you afterwards,’ you know? So she did, but my Dad still hasn’t read it and he never will. He’s not a big reader so it’s not like I’m depriving him, but I think he’s only read *A Christmas Carol* in his life and I think he’s very proud of that.

JR: I do feel like the sex scenes are done really well. I’ve always felt like sex is a hard thing to write but in *Animals*, I felt like when the sex scenes came along it was the right time for them to be there, and they never overstayed their welcome...

EJU: Thank you! I think it’s easier to write about bad sex than it is good sex. I think awkward sex is easier to write about than something that was meant to be tender and good.

JR: I imagine it’s hard to avoid clichés

when writing sex scenes?

EJU: Yeah, exactly! I interviewed Val McDermot years ago, and she said ‘when you write about sex it’s so easy to slip into one of two camps. To either write very technically about the nuts and bolts of it or it’ll be like waves crashing on the beach’. So I think striking that balance is difficult.

JR: Well, I think you’ve found that balance in *Animals*.

EJU: Thank you. The book’s so much about the sensory or sensual, I always get those two mixed up, but it’s all about that stuff. It’s about the body and physicality. It had to have sex in it for that reason, I think. These girls are aware of their physical states and what various intoxicants do to those, and sex, and love, and romance. They’re intoxicating too. So I wanted to show the parallels between those experiences and then things like alcohol and drugs that you put in your system and give you, probably, quite similar brain chemical experiences.

JR: Yeah, definitely. You’ve said you wanted to write about how friendships can be a bigger love story in your life than traditional romances. What is it about friendship, and in particular female friendship, that you’re drawn to?

EJU: I think female friendship for me is where I’m naturally drawn because I don’t tend to write from the viewpoint of a man. It’s always been from a female perspective. Whether that will ever change I don’t know. The female friendship in this book is where the whole idea came from. The initial kind of kernel was these two characters bantering with a hangover. The very first conversation I wrote, the very first scene of the book if you like, was Laura and Tyler having a hung-over conversation. Where they were just riffing and bantering. Trying to make each other laugh by

being awful, and raucous, and rude. I liked it so much that it just grew and grew, then it just kind of mushroomed. It was those two. It was never just Laura at the heart of this book. It was always Laura and Tyler as a female double act. A kind of comedy duo. Then from that, to give the novel an arc and to get the story there, there had to be a Jim. There had to be that threat to the duo. He had to come in, and that's where all that grew from. Then, actually, I did believe that Laura actually did love Jim and would love Jim and that he seemed like a valid part and not an add on. It all just grew, felt right, and held firm. Then generally, I've been thinking about what I think about friendship because really I'm writing to figure out what I think about things. You know? Whatever that may be. Friendship, love, and human relationships. Why we do the things we do to each other? These are the kind of things most novels explore. What I was trying to explore in [*Animals*] was why do some relationships break down when you reach a certain age? Why do some relationships break and not bend? Why do some withstand? Some friendships just don't allow the people within them to operate as individuals. They're all about the friendship locking them down and that's actually where this friendship [in the book] has gone. It's gone stale. I wanted very much to explore that and then putting the threat of Jim in there as the kind of 'natural progression'. Traditionally, you leave your friends and your family, you make a new family with a person, and you have children. We're conditioned to think that's the norm and I just thought, why? It's just crazy to think why do we do this? Why do we stop living with our friends and live with our romantic partner instead? That just seems archaic. It's strange and not necessarily where your heart truly is, or where you have the most fun, or where you really want to live. You have sex with them I'm sure, but then you could always then go back home and live with your friend again. Why do you have to like move in with this person? I know when families come

along it's different but I just wanted to kind of question all these set-ups that we've got about the way we should live and also about the way friendship isn't given then same status in society as marriage. There isn't something like marriage or engagement for friendship yet often our friendships are the most durable, the most enduring, the deepest, and the most complex relationships of our lives. So I wanted to explore all of that, and platonic female friendship was writhing with possibility, complexity, danger, and thrills.

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JR: What I really liked about the book, and didn't realise I'd missed, were chapter titles! They're very common in children's books but then as you grow up they

disappear. So I really liked that, and didn't realise how much I'd missed that...

EJU: I love them! I really really love them because they're fun to think of. They're a nod to novels of old, like *Don Quixote*. I think I just wanted to write an adventure story that had two female leads because it felt like the world was so lacking in them. Also, Laura and her sidekick Tyler in many ways are 'rogues'. This book was originally called *The Rogue* when I first wrote it, and rogues are like the main stars of the picaresque novels, but nobody thought it was right other than me. Everybody hated it. They said it was too 'boyish' and I was like 'No, it isn't. What are you talking about?' I actually do prefer *Animals* and I think that was the right choice.

JR: I've been looking on your website and I've seen all the different covers for *Animals*, internationally, I think my favourite so far is the one with the two deer. What's it like seeing your book with all these different covers, and how does it feel having your work translated?

EJU: It's great. The first time you see your book it's kind of freaky. The first time you get sent a pdf or a jpeg or whatever of the cover it's weird because it's been just a thing in your head, and words on your computer for years. Then when you see someone else's idea of the package of the book or how it's going to appear as an object, as a thing it's really unnerving. I don't know many authors who are comfortable with it. Most authors I know hate the covers that they're shown. Luckily, I really loved the one we ended up with for the hardback and the paperback. It's just really strange. Something that has been abstract then it's realised as an object means you have to relinquish control over this thing that you've grown. It's not your baby anymore. Suddenly you've got to just hand it over to be marketed and all these evil things. It is like leaving your

kid in nursery... I imagine. You've got to do that handover and relinquish some control which is very hard. Especially for novelists because we're all control freaks who want to control everything. You think you know what the best cover would be, and why wouldn't you? It's your book, but you don't. I was very happy to trust the publishers that I've worked with and I've been happy with [all the covers]. My favourite is the French one too. I love that because it's just so weird and rude, but quite classily rude. That's a point, publishers have asked [that photographer] to release pictures before and that's the first one he said yes to. I think he just liked the sound of it. It sounded filthy probably. I loved the Canadian one too where they're just fagging it against a wall because it looks like a seventies film or something.

JR: In terms of giving it away to the publishers there is also that sense of giving it away to a reader and it becoming theirs. How did you deal with that? I imagine at a point you'd have to let go, in a sense, and the book becomes other people's? How was that for you?

EJU: I love the thought of other people reading it. Of course, because I guess that's what we all want. I love it when readers get in touch and say what they thought about certain parts of it. I don't know what I really think about the fact you ever really give your book up entirely. You know, the whole 'death of the author' Roland Barthes thing. I'm not sure I believe that. Whether that's just because the kind of fiction I write almost sometimes feels like it's verging on auto-fiction or semi-autobiographical fiction. Which might not be fiction? I don't know. Boundaries are blurring in a really interesting way at the moment and we've seen lots of genres coming together. I think there's a huge trend for semi-autobiographical fiction and there are lots of big questions being asked about

what constitutes fiction and what constitutes non-fiction. I think things are changing on that front. I think that I don't ever quite hand over [my book]. I do a bit but I've still got my fingernails on the edge. Whoever's reading it, wherever you are, feel my fingernails on the edge, tugging.

JR: As writers we often choose to tell a story in a certain way. Whether that's as a novel, short story, screenplay etc. Earlier you said that the original idea came from these two girls sparring. When that idea came to you, did you instantly think 'this is my next novel that I'm going to devote my time to' or did you think about it as any other form? Or was it always a novel to you?

EJU: I did know it was a novel when I got that conversation with Laura and Tyler. I thought 'Yes, there's a story there. This can go and go.' The words just came, I was filling my phone with notes, and it was just pouring out of me. I just thought 'right okay this is going to work.' I could just see it. I think I just knew it would be a book. It was a book I really wanted to write and I thought it would be a book people wanted to read. It wasn't actually what I thought my second book was going to be. I'd written two drafts of another novel that's never seen the light of day. It was called *The Museum of the Heart* very loftily. It was about a boy that becomes fascinated with an orphan he meets at university. It's a really bleak book. She was orphaned at the age of 13 and they grew up in Paris. She's very gothic and he's very interested because he's been through family trauma with an alcoholic father. It was just a really bleak book and my agent was trying to be very tactful about it like 'maybe put a few more LOL's in there,' and I was like 'No! It's not that kind of story!' I eventually said 'Yeah, I agree. It's far too bleak as it is.' Luckily, by then [*Animals*] had started to happen so I was quite happy to shelve it. I think I'm just a person who always needs to be writing something. Usually, a book.

They might not all make it but I need to be constantly processing the world in that way. Every now and then they will take shape and hold. That's when they'll get published but otherwise I'm writing every day. I fill notepads and my phone. If I'm working on 'a thing' that feels like it's a book then I'll just channel it all towards that. I never really know if it's going to make it or not. It's just that world processing that I do.

JR: You've recently adapted *Animals* into a screenplay. How did you find that? You had this story in your head, that you wrote as a novel, then you have to rewrite that story in a different form?

EJU: It was a complete rewrite and I had to stop thinking of it as an adaptation. As first, I was thinking it's just going to be the book on screen. It's not. It's a completely new and different thing. I had to really appreciate screenplays as an art form of their own. I'd never really done that before. I think because I'd never read one. I'd seen loads of films, but I'd never read a screenplay. I didn't really have enough respect for them I don't think. I just thought it's dialogue and a bit of action but now the way they hold together, the formula of them, the maths of them is amazing. It's been a really steep learning curve but one that I'm glad that I've done. It's been a very interesting process. Breaking the book down to nothing and then a few of the fragments gathered and made it into the film. The central story arc has remained the same. It's about a woman who wants something and gets it at the end. The friendship is the central relationship throughout. Subplots have gone, some characters have gone, some characters have been melded into one. Everything in the middle was this big swirling mass that was all up for grabs and it's reformed. I'm really pleased with it. We're going to second draft now, and we've got a director involved. So, hopefully it will get made.

JR: Are you interested in writing more scripts?

EJU: Yeah! I've just written a TV pilot that was a commission. The producers came to me with a concept. Which is a different way of working; being given an idea and writing it down. It'll be interesting to see which ideas come through as screenplays. At the moment I just think as a novelist. It'll be interesting if an idea comes knocking and goes 'hello I'm a screenplay.' And I'll be like 'oh right, wow!' Then I'll be able to tell you why but I don't know right now. All the ideas I have for stories are prose right now, novels usually. Short stories I do write a lot of. Maybe a screenplay will come knocking one day... an original one.

JR: I'm subscribed to the Lenny Letter, and over Christmas their 'Winter Fiction' edition came though and there was your name. As a drunk texter myself I really enjoyed your story 'Field Studies in Digital Love'. It made me feel less alone, and like the mistakes I was making weren't just me. I thought the idea of a story in text messages and emails was a great way to do it. It reminded me of sitting with your friends and saying 'read this', 'look what he said,' or 'can you believe what I said?' I'm interested to know if that began as you wanting to write a story in texts and emails, or did it come as an idea of these two characters meeting and this is the best way to tell their story?

EJU: It actually came about as wanting to write something via texts and emails. I wanted to think about the way we miscommunicate so easily with technology. A lot of it comes from personal experience and from feeling quite maddened about how easy it is to communicate, yet how easy it is to get things wrong. It just seems so easy to fuck up! I wrote that story in the hope that we'd all be a bit more forgiving of each other's bad

communications until we get breathalysers fitted on phones. I wanted to write something like a madcap comedy. Something very fast paced, very back and forth, very farcical, ridiculous, overblown, and melodramatic. Funnily enough, I'm just about to finish a whole novel that's told like that. My next novel, I think, is going to be a story told in text messages, emails, social media posts, and then an anonymous blog. That all started because I wrote that story in the middle of last year. I then thought, I want to write something longer that's told in this way. It felt like there was so much more to do in terms of exploring a person. You can get a three-sixty view of someone by the way they communicate with the people around them. One of my favourite bits of [Field Studies in 'Digital Love'] is when she sends the text message to her friend and the way her friend deals with her. We all communicate slightly differently with the different people in our lives. I wanted that kind of deception, but also honesty and everything in-between. I just thought I want to explore that over a big period. So, that's what I've done. I've written a book that isn't just told with text messages but various short forms of communication like that, which aren't just straight prose.

JR: What was it like to have that story included on the Lenny Letter? On something that gets sent out to so many people all over the world?

EJU: It was amazing! It was scary actually. It felt like such a huge opportunity and such a huge privilege. I've always loved Lena Dunham. I loved *Girls* and always had those bath time fantasies, you know? Do you think she knows who I am? I love her stuff so much maybe she'll love mine? And then she did?! That was surreal. Then I was terrified. I felt like I was on some kind of precipice of judgement. It could go one way or the other. I thought if it goes down really well then that'd be amazing

but if it doesn't and no-one gets it then... it felt like a big chance and me, the catastrophist, thought I'd probably screw it up. I'd have done something wrong. I'd have copied a bit of something from somewhere else by accident. I'd have submitted the wrong version; you know? Something would've gone wrong so I was terrified, but then it was great when it went out I got lots of nice feedback. I think Lenny Letter is a brilliant thing. Do you like it?

JR: Yeah, I'm subscribed to it. I think it's great.

EJU: I think that it's doing pioneering things at the moment. It's really exciting. I think that there are quite a few great newsletters that I've seen springing up. There's a real groundswell and online seems to be the place where it's very easy to find that sort of fiery informed community and you have to be interactive like that.

JR: In your pieces for the *Guardian*, your other journalistic work, your novel, and your short stories you have a real way with humour. Do you go into a piece thinking 'this is going to be funny' or do you realise it along the way?

EJU: I normally do know because everything I write like that is pretty light-hearted. Writing comedy is my favourite way to write, and my favourite thing to read. Then I write these really dark short stories sometimes, so I go from one extreme to the other. I don't think I could write a very dark novel, maybe that's why the other one didn't work? I think over the long form I do need the comedy there for my stuff to work. I think certainly for journalism, I always want to be funny, because I don't feel like a journalist. I always feel like I'm having a chat with the reader about something, telling them what I think about something, exploring what I think about something, or telling them some daft anecdotes from my life. Hopefully

being entertaining with a bit of information in there but generally just chattier. I tend to write for magazines more than newspapers so that just seems to fit that environment. I would say that I always try to be funny but I also know how excruciating it can be when you can see someone trying to be funny. I think that it's a fine line. You've got to be careful not to try too hard with comedy. I think the guide pieces, the 'How-To' things, I write suit that. They're like like bullet points, little nuggets, that you can write. Then you can mix it up and have some slightly more serious ones and then some really silly ones.

'Whoever's reading it, wherever you are, feel my fingernails on the edge, tugging.'

JR: From meeting you briefly before, and talking to you now, I can see especially in your non-fiction stuff that it is you on the page. You come across really well, and there isn't a difference between reading you and talking to you. If that makes sense? How difficult is it for you to get that tone across?

EJU: I just write like I talk. I think that each one of those pieces is like an act of translation. The 'thinking' is the start and then you go from there. Talking like that is easier because you do it without thinking, especially in my case. The writing is just trying to hone that down even more. I went to Edinburgh festival last year and I heard Will Self talking about his aims as a writer. He said one of them was 'to capture how people think'. To be able to represent, with words, the thought processes of humans. I get that and I think that's very much what I'd like to do. I tend to do lots of brackets, lots of punctuation, it fires all over the place. I think

that's just because it's what my brain is doing and I'm putting it down on the page. It isn't hard to get that tone because I feel like I'm being honest in my brain, but it's hard to lay that out in language because your brain isn't laid out like that and there is that filter.

JR: I read 'How to: Cohabit (and live to tell the tale), and what I found so brilliant about it was it had that level of humour, that you're so good at, but also came off knowledgeable in many ways. You blend the humour and the knowledge seamlessly. Is that hard for you to do?

EJU: Well, I'd hope that it's not all taken as serious advice because I'd never want to be thought of as a person who either wants to tell other people what to do or is pretending she knows what the hell she's doing because I don't. I'd hope it's all taken in light hearted spirit and I don't really know how to live with other people or how to talk to kids, which is one that just went in. It's just trying to be entertaining, funny, and to call on some kind of home truths that we already know. I think the best sort of advice keys into something that you already know yourself but just haven't been able to articulate it yet. I'm just articulating what everyone else has in their heads and that's why it goes down well.

JR: What are you working on now?

EJU: I'm just in the process of finishing the novel told in text messages, emails, and various other bits and bobs. I've just written a pilot of a TV series and hopefully that will go to series. We'll find out this year. It's for America. Then, the *Animals* screenplay is going to second draft with a director attached in a couple of weeks. Hopefully later this year we'll start shooting that. We're going to go finding locations around Manchester to shoot the film, which is really exciting. It'll be a proper location scout. I'm wondering how much we can use the ones

that are mentioned in the novel. Hopefully we can use quite a few of the real ones. What else? I'm writing a short story about two women who meet on a plane. Then, I've been writing another novel and I don't know whether this is going to be another one of those ones that gets shelved. I've been writing a novel about a school girl who runs away with her teacher. Do you remember that story? It's kind of based on that. I just tried to think about her. The news stories were all focusing on him and, obviously, her identity was protected for various reasons. I just thought I'd love to try and write about what's gone on there or a similar situation. I've written almost all of the novel but it's not quite working right now and maybe it never will. Maybe I'll make it into something else. This other one just started coming through stronger and faster. So that's what I worked on, the 'social media and texts' novel, but I might go back to the other at some point because the central story really interests me. Teenage girls are so often misrepresented. I think that people at both ends of the feminism spectrum are ignored, and many in between, but mostly very old or very young women. They're offered no agency. They're either invisible or completely powerless. I think so often teenage girls are represented as either being victims or as fantasists and actually that doesn't do them a great deal of service. I know we've got to try to protect and empower these young women at the same time. That's the hard thing. How do you protect and help someone at the same time? I think by just saying they're always victims if they have sex under the age of 16, there is something wrong with that. There's something that then instantly makes all women feel powerless from then on. That's what I'm worried about. So, that's what I've been trying to explore, issues around consent and around when people are ready to do certain things. Where those decisions come from and whether it's a gender thing that we've got to worry about.

JR: That sounds really interesting. Are there any aspects or areas of writing that you'd like to have a go at, but it seems you have most of them covered already?

EJU: I'd love to try and write a play one day. Either a radio play or a theatre play. Maybe that will be a natural progression from screenplay, slightly more natural one than from novels to plays. So, I'd like to have a go at that. I've tried and failed so many times to write poetry. If I could be anything I'd be a poet but I'm not and I never will be. I'm slowly making peace with that. That's the one that's always eluded me.

JR: What did you read as a child or as a teen that you think has influenced you?

EJU: I read a lot of poetry, like Yeats, who plays a big part in [*Animals*], and the Romantics. I was obsessed with the Romantics. Then I got into Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, and a lot of female poets. Poetry was huge for me. I liked Gothic Victorian novels, those high Victorian novels, loved all of those. I loved the richness and darkness of them. The Brontës because they were Northern as well.

JR: What are you reading right now?

EJU: I'm re-reading *Postcards from the Edge* by Carrie Fisher because it's so funny, and is kind of an inspiration for what I'm writing now. I'm reading *The Faraway Nearby* by Rebecca Solnit which a friend recommended. I've just read a brilliant book of essays by Melissa Broder, she runs a twitter account about depression called 'So Sad Today'.

JR: Do you have any advice for young writers?

EJU: I would say finish what you're working on. By that I mean, get to the end of it. In a very fast crap draft and just get to where you think the end is. Then, redraft, redraft, redraft, redraft. There's a great Capote quote 'writing is rewriting' and I really think that's true. I think you've got to get to the end of something before you even know what you're writing about. Certainly before you know what the shape of it might be. Whether it's a novel, short story, novella, or whatever just try and get to the end of it. Then go back and hone it. That would be my best piece of advice. Then read constantly and widely. Go to book clubs and take recommendations from people you might not think to. I've read, and loved, so many books that have been handed to me that, at first, I thought 'Oh God, I'm never going to get on with this.' Then they've become my favourite books. So, do that and write every day! Even if it's just a few hundred words just try and write a little something every single day. Writing is a craft more than it's an art, you will get better the more you do it. That's a fact.

JR: If you weren't a writer, what job would you like to have?

EJU: I always wanted to be a marine biologist when I was growing up, or an archaeologist. Something sciencey, exciting, and on the boundaries of discovery. More realistically perhaps a teacher. I've just started doing a fellowship here [at Manchester University] and that involves not teaching as such but just being around for students and talking to them about their work and I'm enjoying that. I know how much that meant to me when I was doing my MA here. So, that feels like a good healthy cycle. So, a teacher... but probably a marine biologist more!