



James Rice – ‘A writer is a thing you can actually be.’

In Leaf on Bold Street Jon Roberts met James Rice to discuss his first novel *Alice and the Fly*, genres, sticking it to the people you used to know, and how nerdy football is.

Jon Paul Roberts: Young adult fiction is a very lucrative genre, but it’s also one with a lot of stigma attached, especially when you’re on a creative writing course. [James Rice completed his MA in Creative Writing at LJMU] Where do you think that stigma comes from, and why did you decide to write a young adult novel?

James Rice: When I started [*Alice and the Fly*] I wasn’t thinking of it as a young adult novel. I’d just finished university and was reflecting on the period of my life at school. I was thinking about it more as an adult novel, and it is sold as an adult novel, but it’s one of those kind of crossover ones. I don’t really know where

the stigma comes from. It might be a kind of snobbery I guess? That it’s going to be not as good because it’s aimed at a younger audience. I don’t think that’s true particularly. My flatmate reads loads of young adult novels and he loves them. I read a couple for research, for getting that teen voice, and there’s nothing wrong with them. It’s just the way they’re marketed I think. It’s the publishers trying to think of a way to sell it. It’s interesting because the British version [of *Alice and the Fly*] is sold as an adult book, in the adult section, but for the American version they’ve decided to market it as young adult fiction. Which is interesting because they think that’s the best way to go.

JPR: The book has quite strong themes varying from class issues to mental illness and lad culture. Was it a conscious decision to write about those topics?

JR: It wasn't a conscious decision to put them in. It was just a reflection of what it's like growing up. I actually took more things out than I put in. I had some other things going on that I took out because they weren't working. Also, when you write your first book it's a chance for you to kind of 'stick it' to all the people that have given you grief over the years. It's a kind of therapy. I'm finally given a voice where I'm able to say that football is quite boring, and quite nerdy. Football is so nerdy I think. I'll never get over when my mates talk about all the stats and stuff. I'm thinking 'this is because society has said this is okay but if I was telling you all the dates of every Star Trek film it'd be different.'

JPR: It's like that football manager game.

JR: Oh my God, yeah. My brother spends hours of his life watching words appear on the screen. It's like coding but because it's football related it's okay. So yeah, all [the themes] was just me kind of fighting back at the world and putting my take on it.

'Write what you know. I don't think you can really do anything else.'

JPR: There's a small anecdote in the novel, about not being able to have long hair in The Pit, that reminded me of something you'd said in class about where you grew up. It made me wonder how much of the novel was inspired by your own life? Especially the setting, and the characters Greg goes to school with?

JR: Yeah, it's like a fictionalised version of where I grew up. It's a lot more middle class. I've exaggerated it. It's geographically the same, and when my friends read it they recognise all the places.

JPR: Do you think if you hadn't had that outside encouragement you would have continued with it?

JR: I don't think that I would have. It was validation, which I think you need sometimes. Especially if you're like me. My whole thing is just constant self-deprecation, all the time, just flowing through my body. I just walk round cringing about everything I've ever done. So, I needed that [validation]. Now I've had that I think I can go forward.

JPR: Was there anything that surprised you about the writing process, or the publishing process? Was there anything that was quicker than you thought, or maybe took longer than you thought?

JR: None of it was quicker than I thought. It surprised me that I actually did it. I think the MA helped a lot with that because it gives you those deadlines. It did surprise me how long it took. Maybe that's just me? I know people that have written novels in a shorter amount of time. My process was just to constantly pore over it. Also, I was learning how to do it, which you don't really realise is part of doing your [first novel]. I remember something David Sedaris said, when I went to see him. His advice to young writers was 'ignore the world.' When you're writing your first thing you're nobody yet. You might take years to write this thing, but to everyone else you're just wasting your time. It's only you that knows that you've got something. Then when it's published everyone is like 'Ahhh'. For years after I finished my degree and my MA I was just a bum, living in my parents' house, working a

job, and just writing as much as I could. It was all worth it in the end. You've just got to ignore the outside world. Don't think about anything else, just concentrate on the writing.

JPR: What is it that you're working on now?

JR: I'm working on my second novel. Which was due, originally, last January... but they gave me a year to write it. Which they knew wasn't going to happen because the first one took years to write. I've written quite a chunk of it. It's just trying to find time to get into it again. So this summer I'm going to get into it again. It's a completely different novel. It's about two friends on a walking holiday. It's about their relationship. It's always just hovering over my head, waiting to fall on me. I'm hoping that soon, it's going to fall on me and consume me in the same way the first one did. I'm sure it will in the summer, when I've got nothing to do but write.

JPR: When they asked you to write a second book was there any kind of pressure to write something similar to *Alice and the Fly*?

JR: Well, they've never really asked what it's about... They've started asking now and I haven't replied yet. I'm not very good at writing pitches and describing what something's about until it's done. So I'm holding off on telling them. They offered me a two-book deal straight away. My editor's really nice and she just trusted me to do another one. Which is really nice, and a really fortunate position to be in. I just really hope that it works.

JPR: Are there any other areas of writing you'd love to have a go at?

JR: I made a short film once. I really enjoyed that. So, maybe writing a script but I was never very good at writing scripts and that's why I kind of shied away from that. I was thinking

about plays. I was thinking about my next novel and a lot of it is dialogue, and thought 'maybe I could make this into a play?'. I wouldn't mind going down a drama route. I would love to write poetry but I don't know if I'll ever be

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there with poetry. I think I think too much and don't feel enough... I still write music with my friend but, even though I'm a writer, he's so much better at writing lyrics than I am. It's hard though, because the thing I like about short stories and novels is you get complete control over what it is. Whereas, if you write a script you have to pass it over, which I'd find hard. Imagine if they ruined it? Or didn't get it.

JPR: You're still a young writer, but what advice would you give to young writers or new writers?

JR: It's always a hard one that. I always say the same thing. When I decided to write I always thought of it as 'a writer is a thing you can actually be.' There are writers. There are loads of them out there, making a living out of it. So it's not like you're aiming to be something impossible. My kind of whimsical way of

saying it is, 'you're not trying to be a unicorn!' You're trying to be something that is real and if you bear that in mind while you're working then it's a very achievable aim. Another thing, would just to be the nicest person you can ever be. I think that's a big part of it. Also, just have hope, like I said, there is a world out there looking for writers. Oh, and read loads! And write! I think that's the only way you can do it. Read twice as much as you write, but still write loads!

JPR: If you weren't a writer what job would you like to do?

JR: Rock Star maybe? I don't know. Anything creative. I thought when I was younger, 'if I can do anything creative that'd do me.' I didn't want to end up in an office or something like that. However, now I'm kind of jealous of my mate who's an engineer because he goes to work, earns more money than I do, and he comes home of a night and he's got nothing to do. It's the life you choose I guess? But I guess dream job... I don't know.... Musician maybe?

Alice and the Fly is available in all good bookstores now.
