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## Episode 49: Tangerine Press

Host: David Turner – **DT**

Guest: Michael Curran – **MC**

Transcript edited by Melissa Lee-Houghton – 24/01/2017

**Conversation:**

**DT:** My name is David Turner and this is another Lunar Poetry Short. Today I'm joined by Michael Curran of Tangerine Press. Hello Michael.

**MC:** Hello there David.

**DT:** We are in Tooting.

**MC:** We are indeed.

**DT:** I keep calling it Wimbledon but it's because the dog track's next door.

**MC:** Yes very close to the dog track, yeah.

**DT:** We're going to start with Michael giving us a brief history of the press.

**MC:** Ok, well I started Tangerine Press, well it'll actually be 10 years ago, as of next year; I'll be celebrating 10 years in 2016. And the idea was to publish what I would call for want of a better term, underground poetry prose. And then I moved into photography as well. But I was more interested in hand-bound limited editions; hardcover with acid-free free papers all the rest of it.

And so, I was doing that for about seven or eight years in my own time, sort of as a full time self-employed carpenter for many years, and then my circumstances changed a couple years ago and I thought well just go full time into the press and see what happens. So, with that sort of major change in my life I got a full workshop now as my front room, which I was doing for many years as I've said.

So now I've got a proper workshop in an industrial estate in Tooting as you said and you know along with the hand-bound editions, I've started doing high-quality paperbacks as well; they get full distribution into the book shops across the country, across the world. Just to sort of prop up what I'm trying to do with the limited editions as well. I just get a broader appeal, get more collectors, and get more people interested in poetry in particular, and also prose and photo books and generally other unusual projects that I get involved in.

**DT:** I'm going to ask a heavily leading question now but why would you start a small press of this nature?

**MC:** Well it's you know, it's two factors because like I said I was a carpenter for many years; 16 years or whatever and so I was always making things which most of the time I enjoyed, but I also read a lot. And I wanted to combine the two so I learnt how to book-bind. And then I was stuck for a couple of years because I didn't know who to publish.

And then that sort of led me into sort of you know, obviously I always enjoy reading poetry in particular, but I started reading these poets dead and alive and you know, new and not known or lost to the past and looking at them in a different way in terms of could I publish these people? Is there anything there that stirs me enough to want to commit, you know, time and money to these writers and getting their work out there, and that's really what I wanted to do.

**DT:** I was going to talk a little about the subject of publishing poetry in a bit but since you brought it up I may as well ask the question now, so, one it's why would you start a press

like this, which is quite a lot of work for financially it wouldn't be as much gain, I assume. And two, why would you then double your hassle by printing fucking poetry?

**MC:** Yeah, I'm sort of not making it easy for myself. I mean it's you know, just like I say, I enjoy making books and publishing poetry that I love and I have to be sort of committed to it, and you know, really enjoy it to sort of want to, you know, use all that time and money in my own time as it was for many years, just to get that work out there. So, that's really what I was doing there.

**DT:** I mean I definitely understand the link between... I got my background in carpentry as well and served an apprenticeship, and I still find it really hard to... I can't draft poems on an iPad or anything I have to have a pen I'm comfortable with. I have to have paper that I'm comfortable with writing on with that pen. Do you think there's a general resurgence in interest in craft in that way and using the appropriate tool for the project?

**MC:** I think there is yes, there certainly is and, I think in terms just a broad out of other publishers I mean even the big publishers are doing limited editions hand-bound, like Faber have started doing it this year I think, which is interesting you know. I think there really is a resurgence of it. I was in Foyle's on Charing Cross Road the other day and there's... I saw an advert for a book-binding course that they're running there.

And yeah I think there is but it's a very sort of murky, muddy waters for publishing and writing at the moment because everyone's banging on about e-books and Kindles and now we're reading that the sales are dramatically dropping off and of all things, paperback sales have gone up, which is that that was the whole idea of e-books was to supersede paperbacks. But I think everyone... it's still a physical world people still want tactile objects you know that they can read from as opposed to just a dull flat screen, that you know, is with no personality to it.

**DT:** You know because Waterstones recently stopped selling Kindles, now they don't stock them at all now.

**MC:** Oh I didn't know that.

**DT:** I suppose it may just be that the people that are comfortable with reading Kindles perhaps have Kindles and tablets so they don't need to keep restocking that, and that's maybe if there has been a resurgence in paperback books it might be that Kindles have just reached a plateau rather than fallen out of favour, now it's reached its natural level.

**MC:** Well this is it's all about getting the levels like you say, and it is all about coexistence. You know people assume, because I'm a book-binder and I sort of publish sort of niche writers and poetry and all the rest of it that I'm sort of anti all that; I'm not. It's all about coexistence, it's what suits you because the bottom line is you know writing whatever form that you do on a piece of toilet paper or on a Kindle on a hand-bound limited edition that cost 500 pounds you know but the important thing is the writing comes through in any format.

It doesn't really matter, it's really what suits you, I'm not at all slamming down any other formats or any other publishers or anything like that. This is what I'm interested in therefore I do it.

**DT:** Just a note to the listeners, we're in a proper factory so you might be able to hear water running through a pipe, we're not in any danger. So it's fine.

**MC:** I've got used to that noise, that's why I didn't say anything.

**DT:** It's the kind of thing that really sounds, you pick it up on the mic, but that doesn't matter.

**MC:** Well we're very close to the river Wandle they'll say. It's not the river Wandle leaking through.

**DT:** Yes so where we are is based on Garratt Lane Industrial Estate.

**MC:** Yes Garratt Business Park of Garratt Lane in Tooting.

**DT:** Which is where Wimbledon Art Studios are and they have open days and it's probably worth everyone coming down to check out - there's a lot of great little businesses down here.

**MC:** Yeah there is I mean it's got Wimbledon Arts Studios just up the road and yes it's you know because my workshop is actually inside a printer's warehouse. I rent space at the back but there's just all sorts along here, just a sort of traditional industrial estate.

**DT:** In general, what do you think the health of small presses like this is in the country? I mean it's a very broad question but just compared to how you started, perhaps?

**MC:** And it's always been a very strong sort of loyal following. I've been really lucky more or less from day one. I have regular collectors who are just buying up two copies of everything because that's what a lot of collectors do. They buy one to stash and one a reading copy. So yeah; I think small presses, I mean there's the variations within that isn't there?

Because you've got small presses that do things like I do which is the book-binding and all the rest of it in addition to just bringing out new writing or lost classics or whatever you want to call them. But there's the other publishers that are more sort of commercially minded that don't do the sort of artisan side of things. But then you know that's also you know changing as well because I know we're going to talk about this a bit later but with commissions I do get a lot of other publishers come to me because they want to do limited editions of successful books or books they're particularly keen on.

**DT:** Yeah. Actually, we could talk about that, just quickly. Is that becoming more common that larger publishers will use smaller presses for limited editions, is it much outsourcing in that way?

**MC:** Not really. It's hard to say because like the only other strong example I can think of is Faber because they're still independent but they're very big aren't they? But yeah they just started doing limited editions themselves but as far as I can make out they're publishing them themselves once they have a book-binding firm to put the books together for them. But, yeah I think that's... But it's all just constantly moving and muddling around with all publishers, even the huge publishers like I've said, they'd started doing limited editions, signed, just suddenly in the last year or two.

They've... I mean you know it's good for them because they don't have to wait for a distributor to pay for paperback sales because sometimes you have to wait a few months for that. Whereas with the hand-bound editions they're generally direct from the publisher which is what Tangerine does.

**MC:** And you know you're getting your sort of investment back straight away or pretty much straight away.

**DT:** Next, I'd like to talk about previous projects you've completed at Tangerine and if there's any in particular that you're really proud of.

**MC:** Yeah, I mean, well the one I've just finished... I mean I'm proud of all of the books I've published because there would be no point in me getting involved in any project if I was not a hundred percent committed to what if I was in, you know, definitely enjoying what I was reading and believed in the work.

But yeah, the book I've just done 'Seeing Richard' which is a collection of photos by Eric Weber that he took of Richard Brautigan from 1963 to 1978. They just, you know, most of the pictures have never been seen before. And it was introduced by William Hjortsberg who wrote a huge Brautigan biography Jubilee Hitchhiker which is an amazing book. He wrote the introduction, and also Jarvis Cocker's a big fan of Richard Brautigan, regularly promoting him on his BBC 6 Music Show and he wrote the foreword for it. So I'm really chuffed that that came together.

But again, you know, these things, you know I originally started talking about that a year and a half ago. It's a relatively long time... that's what I mean about I have to be believing in the work because the amount of time sometimes is a lot longer. You know, when you're trying to get rights for an author that's deceased or something and you have to go through the estate and all the rest of it, it can drag on quite a long time so you have to be really into it to want to publish it.

But, yeah, I suppose that the most important books for me and at Tangerine is the William Wantling collections that I've done and the one in particular this year 'In The Enemy Camp'... William Wantling was maybe familiar to some people as a contemporary poet of Charles Bukowski and they had a really peculiar friendship that sort of went on through the mail, through letters, and they did eventually meet but it was an absolute disaster.

But yeah Wantling was born in 1933 in a small town in Illinois and you know quite a regular upbringing. He joined the Marines at 17, went to the Korean War for a one year where he apparently got injured and was treated with morphine and he was honourably discharged after getting to the rank of sergeant when he was 20, I think, and he still had a craving for morphine, it triggered something in him; so he was in the mid '50s in California where he was dropped off and he immediately going into heroin. And his soon to be first wife was an addict as well and they used to, it's kind of, I don't want to romanticise it, but they had a kind of Bonnie and Clyde relationship. They'd sort of rob convenience stores and mug people. This is all pretty nasty but it is... that's how they lived. They were addicted.

But Wantling eventually got caught and then ended up in San Quentin prison for five years for forging 'scripts and possession. And it was in prison that he started to write. And so by this time he's in his early 30s I think. And then he was released from prison, returned to a small town in Illinois. He was divorced while he was in prison and had a son that he never saw from that first marriage, and he married again to Ruthie Wantling who I'm in touch with who's an amazing woman. She's still around, I mean I went to see her earlier this year in Illinois.

And he became an English lecturer, but he still had a lot of addiction problems. He was still really into his booze and was smoking a lot of marijuana and all that kind of stuff. And so he was lecturing but he died because he had, you know, just a really bad lifestyle, really unhealthy, and he died when he was forty in nineteen-seventy-four.

But his writing is extraordinary I think he does... he gets unfairly compared to the Bukowski but he's got a broader scope because you know he talks about Korea, talks about addiction and prison all that kind of stuff. So it's quite raw and he's nowhere near as prolific as Bukowski, but what work he has produced is just as on an equal standing, I think. And I did a definitive collection called In The Enemy Camp. And that was introduced by foreword by Thurston Moore who's a big fan of Wantling's work, so that was a great bonus to get him involved.

**DT:** So I guess the whole point with businesses like this, and no matter how much hard work is involved, or how much time... how time consuming they are, you do get to work on projects that you're passionate about and you're clearly very enthusiastic about.

**MC:** Oh yeah.

**DT:** It must be quite a big pleasure to be able to put together a really nice edition of his work.

**MC:** Well this is it, it's the whole process. You know because like, because you know we do everything from... obviously not the writing, but you know, sort of go through a design, the books themselves, choose all the papers.

**DT:** Actually, since we were talking about like the process and yeah how long that can take, maybe we could talk a little bit more generally about not so much... I think that calling

it a commissioning process is probably a bit misleading but if anyone was to approach Tangerine Press and wanted to put together a submission what would be involved?

**MC:** Yeah well generally the situation is either a gallery or a publisher or even occasion, very occasionally individuals come to me to produce a book so it's just a case of giving them the options... there's... you go full on with a hardcover hand-bound edition limited and signed, all the rest of it which is the most expensive books we do, slick cases and clamshell boxes and all the rest of it whatever they want.

And then it goes right through to chapbooks, which if people aren't familiar with that term it's if you can imagine a pamphlet, you know like a... but a hand-sewn version of a pamphlet but a chapbook is a stiff card cover instead of a pamphlet being all the same paper all the way through. The type is the same.

**DT:** Kind of like a really good quality 'zine with a card cover.

**MC:** Yeah, but it's hand-sewn together with nice papers and I can emboss the covers; I've got an embosser here, we've got... I'm just looking at it now, it's a half ton of 1960s cast-iron, Martial embosser which is a wonderful bit of equipment that's been refurbished by a friend of mine and I've got numerous presses here you know to snipping presses, finishing presses, hand tools. So yeah, with the commission, it can go from a very simple chapbook right the way through to you know, a full-on edition.

**DT:** Yeah but I suppose the benefit of coming to press like this is that you know you're available to talk. The whole process through.

**MC:** Yes exactly.

**DT:** If people don't know about weights of paper, you know, methods of binding, at least they can come and get advice right the way through, as well as just approaching you and asking you to put something together.

**MC:** Yeah exactly, I can go through the whole process with them and then come and visit me in my workshop.

**DT:** You recently put together a pamphlet for Jody Porter at Well Versed?

**MC:** Yes.

**DT:** And how did that... what sort of process... did Jody just entrust you with putting something together or?

**MC:** Pretty much, yeah. I mean it was... in that instance I actually... he was doing a Well Versed event for the Peckham Literary Festival at the Review Bookshop and I saw he was doing that and there was a, you know, really great list of poets he had lined up, and I got in touch with him, you know, which is quite unusual and I said, 'look, do you want to do a

limited edition free chapbook for, you know, for the people reading and also for any people who came along to sort of listen.

Yeah that was a very simple process. He said 'yeah let's do it', and he gave me the manuscripts... there's one poem from each of the nine poets reading that night. So, he just sent them over to me, said what order they wanted them in. And I just designed everything and sent over a proof. And that was essentially it, you know, he sort of left me to it. And it was great fun; it was really good to be involved in something like that because it's the local thing and Jody's, you know, got very good taste in poetry.

**DT:** So just in case anyone doesn't know, Well Versed is the poetry section in the Morning Star, which is the only Socialist publication in the world, possibly. They publish some really good poetry in there.

**MC:** Yeah they do.

**DT:** So the event is now attached to some sort of printed version of.

**MC:** Yeah, exactly that's what I wanted to do, because I did something similar in Leicester last year.

**DT:** I thought they could only get about four people in the audience. The Review Bookshop's tiny!

**MC:** But yeah it was really well attended. It was good, sort of, good amount of people, I was quite impressed. But yeah, I only suggested that, just to go back to it a little bit, because I was involved in a festival last year up in Leicester. And again, actually someone asked me to do a little gratis chapbook for that and I was happy to do it. And then that's what made me think of approaching Jody for this.

**DT:** And what does the future hold for Tangerine Press? You mentioned the 10-year anniversary.

**MC:** Yeah well next year I'm going to do... I always find, this is the one thing I find hard to get time for is to organise events: book launches, which is terrible because I should be doing more of them. But yeah next year is 10 years of Tangerine Press so I'm intending to celebrate quite a lot and I've already been going out meeting people and going to nice independent bookshops and talking about launching books there and doing readings and just trying to get out there a bit more and so that's sort of launch an event type of thing, it'll be updated on the website.

But in terms of publications I'll be doing more books with Billy Childish who I've done quite a lot of work with, in the past, so that's more poetry collections from him. Also, I'll be doing later in the year... there'll be a collection of essays by Iain Sinclair who actually wrote the introduction for a re-issue of Jack London's The People of The Abyss that we published last year, so I'm really excited about that because I think Iain's a fascinating man and he's got

such an amazing outlook on London and the way he looks at things so I'm really excited about that.

But now there's new writers coming out. A fellow called Chris Wilson. He's writes... he's done a few poems but he's more short stories and he's an artist as well, a painter, so that'll be a very interesting book later in the year from him, like a proper full collection of short stories. Yes that's essentially everything that's coming up that I can tell you about, there's other books I've got lined up that I can't talk about because I'm still looking for rights because they're sort of lost in the ether of the 1970s and I'm really excited about them because they're just genuinely lost classics and everyone's forgotten about them and I think they're equal to...

There's one book in particular that I'm really keen on, it's along the lines of John Healy's The Grass Arena; I don't know if you know that, it was sort of quite raw sort of homeless autobiographical novel. I think it's just as good as that if not better and everyone's forgotten about it. And there's a fascinating publication story behind it as well, as well as being an amazing piece of writing. So yeah, there's a lot going on.

**DT:** Oh great. I'll be tweeting and putting stuff on Facebook as Tangerine Press events happen as well.

**MC:** Maybe I should say the website as well.

**DT:** Well yeah if anyone wants to get hold of you to check out what you're doing, what you binding, and also if they want to get anything bound themselves and they can get you at.

**MC:** eatmytangerine dot com.

**DT:** And you're on Twitter.

**MC:** I am @TangerinePress.

**DT:** And yes, but all those things will be under this video.

**MC:** Have we said enough about poetry; do you want to talk a bit more about that?

**DT:** No, I've had enough of poetry. Everyone knows that. No, listen, I think it's actually... it's good to also remember that poets have other projects, you know, and even though this podcast is aimed at poets, people who you know... most people are writing prose as well; most people are putting together things... a lot of people are working as editors and hopefully we'll find.

**MC:** There's a broader appeal.

**DT:** Yeah so get in touch with Tangerine. Alright, thank you Michael.

**MC:** Lovely stuff.

**DT:** We're shaking hands now. You can't see it. Go away.

**End of transcript.**