



Inspiration

Zoë Howe

THE WRITER IS A MAGPIE when it comes to inspiration; we pick out jewels dismissed as dust, find dazzling colour where others see shades of grey, and the sound of a distant cough in the darkness can inspire an entire novel. Writers know things are rarely as they seem, and even if they are...well, that doesn't mean they can't spark something more intriguing.

My books are mostly nonfiction, and I say that with the acknowledgement that there is always plenty of fact in fiction, and vice versa. I generally write and collate biographies of artists from the field of rock 'n' roll, and I always look for certain qualities: I want to write about people who are creative, courageous, eccentric, mystical. They have to have a less appreciated side that deserves attention. They have to be absolutely themselves. What could be more inspiring?

My first book, published in 2009, was the authorised biography of maverick punk group The Slits, and is a case in point. These pioneering women are now far more widely celebrated, but at the time, most people didn't talk about them in any great depth. They'd been undermined for years, their bold creativity pushed aside and their musical experimentation dismissed as a footnote in history. Even The Slits themselves were surprised that anyone wanted to write a book about them. While I'd been developing a portfolio of music writing, personally I didn't think I had the chops to write a book about anything, let alone them. But I believed they deserved one, and, in DIY punk spirit, I went for it.



An unlikely inspiration for me at this time was reading another book on a related subject, but it was not inspiring because of its brilliance — quite the opposite. Essentially, someone else's bad writing gave me the confidence to venture forth. I relate this to the story of Mark E Smith seeing the Sex Pistols for the first time. The experience inspired him to form The Fall, not because the Pistols had impressed him, but because he knew he could do better.

Contrary to popular belief, you don't have to 'be a fan' of the artist to write their biography. In fact, it's better if you aren't. It's important to have a respectful appreciation, but awe is not helpful. To have a writer pouring time and energy into such a project is, of course, a compliment, but balance, honesty and even a little affectionate irreverence are vital. We are writing about humans. Extraordinary humans, but humans nonetheless, and I find more inspiration in flawed but spirited people who do incredible things, make mistakes and keep evolving than 'godlike' figures with an unreachable image of perfection.

Like the punks who unwittingly kickstarted my writing career, I'm not too interested in heroes. I'm spurred on by figures who aren't perfect but do it anyway, people who prompt us to think *I can do that too...or, at least, I can try it my way and see what happens.*