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 NIMBYS

Editorial by Bixby Monk

You'll notice some changes to inc. the logo has changed, the connotations of British only sunk in at the offices when we we're bombarded by right-wing manifestos. It's unusual and often sad how some English words have changed over the years, none more so than a word that identifies a country or nationality. Sadder still that in a recent survey, a majority of people questioned identified their nationality as 'British'. This single word now has such dire political meanings both abroad and at home that inc. have opted for the tag of UK, embracing the United ethos and ignoring the empire connotations of Kingdom. A word yet to be overshadowed by nationalistic rants and the ghost of pink old maps that bite us from beyond the grave.

Maybe we at inc. are idealistic or naïve but we have never understood the 'them and us' mentality of some political and social groups, but it appears that the patterns of history repeat themselves, and this time frighteningly close to home. The 'British' are perceived as a belligerent nation of NIMBY's (Not In My Back Yard) and this must cause havoc for tourism. There are plans to open up theme parks, NIMBYworld®, where you can just stand and stare at things burning and political leaders telling you that its okay to look the other way as long as you buy their blindfolds. This idea will be closely followed up by the suburban NIMBYtakeaway®, a fast food store completely given over to inoffensive food, packaged in inoffensive cartons and served by inoffensive teenagers.

Part of me resists the need to sink into sneering taunts, about how a President and Prime minister are sat in a tree, making overtures of passion, followed by marriage and babies that suck the marrow out of humanity but that would be childish and there's too many of them in power already.

The reviews section of the site is now open and we are interested in hearing off people who would like to be a reviewer. It seems we get more and more books everyday, excellent publications that are being clogged up by manuscripts that we never asked for, will never use and have no interest in. The paper mountain alone keeps the interns busy, they spend hours just shredding them, weaving them into interesting baskets before returning them to the idiots who have yet to grasp that we do not publish fiction, it says so on our front page and just in case you didn't notice, you're being told again, we don't accept fiction, we review it and we promote it. In this issue Anthony Cropper, tells all about the highs and lows of writing a second novel, Paula Brown reveals that running a website can get out of hand, Myra Schneider deals with a heart breaking subject, Rennie Parker's Letter about Poetry Competitions is taken on by Bruce Barnes, and Ian Parks wonders why some poetry promoters still want to torture audiences.

inc. has several new publishers on the site, so take a look around and take advantage of some of the special offers we have on-line. Some of the upcoming interviews for 2004, include Blake Morrison, Roger McGough, Joanne Harris (author of *Chocolat*), Steve Aylett, Michele Roberts and Hilary Mantel, so subscribe for updates or miss out.

inc. has been successful because of your input, you asked for events listings, we gave them you and thanks to William Park; our magazine listings are one of the few in the UK that are up to date. One of you asked for us to shave a pony and a few of you sent in interesting expletives that we still haven't found in the dictionary. So, don't be scared, contact us with listings, ideas and venues. inc. is for your use and benefits only you.

Some great news as well, Peter Lewin who has been on sabbatical from the incwriters list is returning in March 2004, and we've just secured him his first reading in the states at [The Bowery Poetry Club, New York 20th April 2004 6:00PM](#). You can find The Bowery in the links and on the front page, go and take a look at some of the best literary promotion in NY and the man behind the [The Bowery Poetry Club](#), Bob Holman. These are indeed exciting times for incwriters.

I can now settle down to the story about the poet who had to do a writers surgery at a music festival, his 'surgery' was next to the main stage and he spent most of the day yelling praise at startled individuals..

Exclusive Articles to inc. for 2004 include interviews with Joanne Harris (author of *Chocolat*), Anthony Cropper (author of *Weatherman*), Blake Morrison, Steve Aylett, Michele Roberts, Hilary Mantel, Roger McGough and Canadian writer M. Nourbese Philip, to name a few. inc. promotes the best of literature and accepts articles, interviews, reprints, magazines and books for review and events listings. inc. is keen to liase and network with literary organisations, publishers, festivals, venues, promoters and literary development officers.

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 Blake Morrison  
 Interview by Ian Parks

Blake Morrison was born in Skipton, Yorkshire, in 1950. Educated at the University of Nottingham and University College, London. He worked for the *Times Literary Supplement* between 1978 and 1981 and was then literary editor for both *The Observer* and the *Independent on Sunday*. He is Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, a former Chairman of the Poetry Book Society and council member of the Poetry Society, a member of the

Literature Panel of the Arts Council of England and Vice-Chairman of English PEN.

His non-fiction books include And When Did You Last See Your Father? (1993), an honest and moving account of his father's life and death that won the J. R. Ackerley Prize and the Esquire/Volvo/ Waterstone's Non-Fiction Book Award; As If (1997), about the trial of the two young boys convicted of killing the toddler James Bulger in Liverpool in 1993; and Too True (1998), a collection of essays (and stories). His poetry includes the collections Dark Glasses (1984), winner of a Somerset Maugham Award, and The Ballad of the Yorkshire Ripper (and Other Poems) (1987). A selection of his poems, Pendle Witches, was published in a special edition in 1996, illustrated by the artist Paula Rego.

Blake Morrison's first novel, The Justification of Johann Gutenberg, a fictional portrait of the fifteenth-century printer and the inventor of movable type, was published in 2000. His book, Things My Mother Never Told Me, is a memoir of his mother, was published in 2002.

His critical work includes The Movement: English Poetry and Fiction of the 1950s (1980) and Seamus Heaney (1982). He is editor (with Andrew Motion) of The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry (1982) and wrote a book for children, The Yellow House (1987), illustrated by Helen Craig. His play, The Cracked Pot (1996), is an adaptation of Heinrich von Kleist's Der Zerbrochene Krug. Both this and his version of Sophocles's Oedipus (2001) were produced and performed by Barrie Rutter's theatre company Northern Broadsides. He is the author of the screenplay for The Bicycle Thieves, a short film for Channel 4 Television. He also wrote the libretto for the opera Dr Ox's Experiment with music by Gavin Bryars, with whom he has recently collaborated on a second opera, 5. Blake Morrison lives in London.

*IAN: You began as a poet, but you've written in a lot of different forms, poetry, fiction, journalism, memoir, libretti, verse drama. Would you still describe yourself as a poet?*

*BLAKE: Ex-poet, it sometimes feels like. Most days I get up in the morning and write prose. I've certainly written (and read) much less poetry over the last ten years than during the previous ten. I also find that more people know my two memoirs than they do my poetry, and that weighs with me. But the poetry still matters. It's been part of my life since I was about fifteen, and it will always be there. Michael Longley once said to me that poetry gets blocked in mid-life - that poets are either young or old, because life in the middle is too prosaic and worldly, a process of raising children and paying mortgages. On bad days, when the poems won't come, I remember that - and take consolation from the fact that Longley had a long period of not publishing, then came back with a couple of tremendous collections. To be honest, so long as I'm writing something, I'm OK: whether it's a short story or a bit of reportage isn't crucial. It's the not-writing-at-all that's a torment.*

*IAN: Before moving to your poetry, I'd like to ask some questions about your work as an editor and critic. It's over twenty years now since THE PENGUIN BOOK OF BRITISH POETRY was published. In many ways it has become something of a landmark post-war anthologies. Why do you think this is? If you were able to undertake the project again with the benefit of hindsight what changes - if any - would you make?*

*BLAKE: Every generation has its anthology. In the 1950s it was Robert Conquest's New Lines, in the 1960s A. Alvarez's New Poetry, and before that*

you can look back to the Georgian anthologies, the Imagist anthologies, The MacSpaunday generation of the 1930s, the Surrealists and New Apocalyptic of the 1940s and so on. But there was no groundbreaking anthology in the 1970s, and by the end of the decade Andrew Motion and I were very conscious of the gap, and approached Penguin with the idea of filling it. We were young poets at the start of our career, with strong ideas about which kind of poetry worked and which didn't - so there was an element of provocation in the anthology, or at any rate in its introduction. But we also had ambitions to be representative in an impersonal literary-historical way. There were poets who been too young to be included in Alvarez's anthology (Seamus Heaney, Tony Harrison, Douglas Dunn, Derek Mahon) and there was another generation coming up behind them, our own generation (James Fenton, Paul Muldoon, Tom Paulin, Craig Raine, Andrew himself). We were spoilt for choice. But we wanted to make it a trim anthology, with generous selections from a few poets (twenty as it finally turned out) rather than niggardly selections from many. Regrets? I have a few. Not about the anthology itself. But I do regret our failure to expand it two or three or even ten years down the line. It would have been a different beast, but we had ourselves become different beasts, less tight-arsed. Many other poets had come along who deserved inclusion. Michael Hofmann, for example, who in 1981, when we finalised our choices, hadn't yet published his first book. And in his wake Simon Armitage, Carol Ann Duffy, Glynn Maxwell and Wendy Cope - to name just four poets I'd have wanted to put in a baggier anthology. I suppose we also went overboard on the then fashionable Martian school, though I would still include Craig Raine and Christopher Reid if I were doing it all again today. Incidentally, we did propose a revised version to Penguin almost as soon as ours appeared, but they were against the idea, and by the time they'd changed their mind we felt the anthology was better left as a historical monument.

*IAN: Your critical study, THE MOVEMENT, addressed the problems associated with pigeon holing poets into particular categories while, at the same time, offering an appreciation of the poets who were grouped together under that title. I'd be interested to know which of these poets you feel are important to you. Could you say something about Donald Davie?*

BLAKE: Larkin is by far the most important to me - Eliot, Owen, Auden, Hughes and Larkin would be my five desert-island twentieth-century English poets. Thom Gunn isn't quite in the same league, but I admire him greatly. And D. J. Enright, though prosy at times, was a wise and humane talent. I also like some of Kingsley Amis's light verse. But John Wain, Elizabeth Jennings, Robert Conquest, John Holloway - nothing much to get excited about there, I fear. I like Donald Davie's critical books more than I do his poetry - he was a wonderfully provocative essayist (Thomas Hardy and British Poetry is a terrific book), and occasionally a moving poet, but he'd have been the first to admit he was writing poetry against the grain, that his real (cerebral) talent was as a critic.

*IAN: Your book on Seamus Heaney came out at the same time, and in the same series, as Andrew Motion's study of Larkin. Could you say why Heaney was so attractive to you as a poet?*

BLAKE: I was - and still am - attracted to Heaney's willingness to engage with contemporary politics and history without ever compromising himself as a poet. The Anglo-American literary-critical establishment has traditionally been hostile to the idea of poetry as an act of political engagement. But Heaney did engage with the troubles while they were happening - and his arguments with himself about the rights and wrongs of doing so make for some great poetry. I'm also drawn to his poems about

childhood. To the richness of his language. And to his geniality and patience.

*IAN: Moving on to your own work as a poet. You were born in Yorkshire and it seems to me that THE BALLAD OF THE YORKSHIRE RIPPER is an attempt to write seriously in the Yorkshire dialect. It also presents the reader with a heady fusion of narrative and journalistic techniques. How did the poem develop? Why was it important for you to utilise the Yorkshire dialect?*

BLAKE: I grew up in the same part of the world as Peter Sutcliffe and, like many other people, was appalled and fascinated by him. My original draft of the poem was written in standard English, but it didn't work - it seemed (to me) exploitative and voyeuristic. Then I had the idea of introducing a narrator, someone who (unlike me) had stayed in Yorkshire and continued to speak its dialect. Some of the dialect words in the poem are ones I grew up with; others I found in dialect dictionaries. What was remarkable about those dialect dictionaries was how many insult-words for women they contained. My interest in Sutcliffe was his misogyny not his psychopathy - and there was the misogyny embedded in the very language he and I had grown up with. So the theme of the poem and its idiom complemented each other. Is the poem journalistic? I don't know. It recounts events that had been gone over endlessly (and without insight) in the media, events which journalists seemed to think were theirs by right, and which shouldn't be available to art or poetry. I disagreed. I believed (and the poems of Heaney and Harrison had given me the confidence to believe it) that poets should get their hands dirty and explore the mess of the world they inhabit. And violence against women is, sadly, part of that mess.

*IAN: I'd like to ask you a question about translation, as it appears to be such an important factor in your work as a poet. When I saw Northern Broadsides's production of your adaptation of Sophocles' OEDIPUS I was struck by its vitality. Not only did it appear relevant to a contemporary audience, it also had a gripping quality to it which came through the language. How closely did you stick to the original? How does the process of translation effect your practice as a poet?*

BLAKE: I have small Latin and less Greek. The first classic I adapted for Northern Broadsides was German, Kleist's Der Zerbrochene Krug - I did German A-level at school and knew the play well. With Oedipus and Antigone, I had to work with existing translations into English, and keep referring to textual notes about the original Greek - at a later stage; I also consulted a Greek scholar, and asked her to put me straight. In both cases I have tried to stay close to the original. Classics shouldn't be messed with without good cause, and Sophocles isn't easily improved. But there are always going to be changes that come of out sitting through rehearsals and seeing the needs of a particular production. For instance, with Antigone Barrie Rutter, as director, wanted to begin with the Chorus' end-of-war celebrations, which in Sophocles come after the opening dialogue between the two sisters, Antigone and Ismene. That meant tampering with the original. But the change makes for an explosive, upbeat first scene, and as such it's justified. As to vitality - I've simply been lucky with the company. Northern Broadsides productions are nothing if not energetic.

*IAN: Finally, I wonder if you could say a few words about THINGS MY MOTHER NEVER TOLD ME - your memoir of your mother. Family life and childhood recollections are a recurring theme. Alison Brackenbury once said to me that 'poetry goes a long way back'; that its wellsprings begin in childhood. Do you think this is the case?*

BLAKE: Was it Graham Greene who said that nothing really happens after one's first twelve years? There's a lot in that. Aside from Larkin, who called it "a forgotten boredom", childhood is the part of life most people recall best, and in the most sensuous detail. Think of Wordsworth, or Heaney, writing about their childhoods, and the detail they summon up. Perhaps childhood is universal in a way that adulthood is not. Certainly I'm always drawn back to my childhood. And to the landscapes I inhabited then are the ones I carry round in my head, as a poet. In fact, the memoir I wrote about my father, *And When Did You Last See Your Father?*, is much more to do with childhood than my memoir of my mother, most of which is set in the 1940s, before I was born. The emotional focus of *Things My Mother Never Told Me* isn't remembering childhood, but thinking about a period children rarely have access to, the time before our parents had us, the time before they were our parents. I was able to enter that lost domain because my parents had kept the letters they wrote during their courtship, when war kept them apart. I felt hugely privileged in reading their letters about that time. A bit of a voyeur, too, of course. But the trove of letters helped me understand my mother, who was something of an enigma. In a sense, it restored her to life.

*IAN: Thanks for your time*

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 Time & Space: an interview with Joanne Harris  
 Interview by Andrew Oldham

With the arrival of Joanne Harris's new book *Jigs & Reels*, inc. caught up with her to discuss the ramifications of bringing out a short story collection, her inspiration and her blockbuster *Chocolat*

Joanne Harris was born in Yorkshire in 1964, the daughter of a French mother and an English father.

She studied modern and mediaeval languages at Saint Catharine's College, Cambridge, and after a number of heroic career failures (rock musician, herbalist, accountant) she succumbed to genetic pressure and became a French teacher for 12 years at a boys' grammar school in Leeds, having at last reached the conclusion that if you can take this, you can take anything. Her first novel, *The Evil Seed*, was published in 1989, although she strongly advises against reading it.

Since then she has written; *Sleep, Pale Sister* (1993); *Chocolat* (1999); *Blackberry Wine* (2000); *Five Quarters of the Orange* (2001) and *Coastliners* (2002). She gave up teaching four years ago to write full-time, and still lives in Yorkshire with her husband, her nine-year old daughter Anouchka and 2001 invisible rabbits.

*ANDREW: Your novels afford readers the time to get to know your characters, fall in love with them and inevitably miss them when they finish the book. So why did you choose to bring out a collection of short stories where you aren't afforded the luxury of time or pages?*

JOANNE: I enjoy the genre. It may be restrictive in terms of time and space, but there is a special intensity to the short story that gives it, if anything, more impact than the novel. Within the format it is possible to experiment in an indefinite number of different voices and styles, to explore ideas of a wider diversity than usual - even to make jokes. That's very liberating for a writer, and it gives me the chance to spread my wings occasionally without feeling tied down to the same project for 18 months at a time.

*ANDREW: How would you readers like to approach *Jigs & Reels*?*

JOANNE: With curiosity and an open mind.

ANDREW: *Are there any favourite stories you have amongst the collection?*

JOANNE: It's hard to be dispassionate about these things, but I have a special fondness for *Come in Mr Lowry*.. (because of its Magritte-like ending) and *Eau de Toilette*, which is basically a seventeenth-century shaggy dog story.

ANDREW: *Short stories are seen as one of the hardest media to tackle after poetry - what kinds of problems did you face writing the book and what do you feel are its successes?*

JOANNE: I try not to think about the problems; it's hard enough taking each story as it comes! As for its successes, I think that's up to the reader, don't you?

ANDREW: *What do you think makes a good story?*

JOANNE: Impact; reaction; the tendency to provoke thought.

ANDREW: *Why do you think UK readers and critics have a hard time understanding the short story?*

JOANNE: I think you need to distinguish between readers and critics. Their reactions are not always the same. From a critic's point of view, it's sometimes harder to comment on a book of short stories, which are all different, than on a novel with a linear plot and easily-recognizable themes. Besides, if you want to review short stories, you have to read them all very carefully (and some critics are lazy - they can write a review based on nothing but a blurb, a buzz and a press release). As for readers, some people love short stories and others prefer to spend a long time getting into a book. I think it's a question of attitude. Short stories take time to have an effect. You shouldn't try to read too many at once, because it gets confusing and tiring; instead you should give yourself plenty of time to think about each one before moving onto the next. Ideally, I like to read short stories in bed before I go to sleep; they give me such very vivid dreams.

ANDREW: *Why has food played an important role in your work, and your life?*

JOANNE: Food is a very useful shorthand to understanding personality, place and culture. It has been a major theme in literature, legend and folklore for thousands of years, and it has many important associations for all of us. You can tell so much about someone by the way they approach food, and it is something that everyone can recognize and relate to. Besides, I enjoy writing about sensual experiences, and there is a lot of sensuality in food which has not yet been fully explored.

ANDREW: *Chocolat is a very seductive novel, underscored by the grotesque nature of authority out of control. In Blackberry Wine the destruction of the allotment underscores this. Where does this fear of beauty destroyed by officials or bureaucracy come from?*

JOANNE: Yorkshire.

ANDREW: *You're now a household name. How have you responded to this? How has life changed for you?*

JOANNE: It hasn't really changed at all. I don't try to respond, because I'm not sure there is an appropriate response I could have. I just keep doing the things I've always done as best I can.

ANDREW: *Do you have any advice for the next generation of writers?*

JOANNE: Be yourself. Don't be too proud to take advice - but don't be afraid to ignore it, either. Most of all, enjoy what you do.

ANDREW: *Thank you for your time.*

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 A Writer's Landscape: An interview with Anthony Cropper  
 Interview by Bixby Monk

Anthony Cropper has a background that writers salivate over, he is the son of a fisherman, he left school with one O level in Woodwork and ended up doing various jobs, including being a milkman, before becoming a drummer in a rock band. All this ended for Cropper when he was twenty-four, confined to his house through illness led to studying to fill the time. He went onto study at Cantabria in Spain and at Oxford University, several years later and this one time musician ended up teaching in Kenya and travelling the continent of Africa. His debut novel, *Weatherman* (Route ISBN 1 901927 16 4) was published in 2001, a critical success for both the author and the publisher, this endearing and remarkable love story wove weather and the characters in a flowing structure that broke from the generic idea that the novel should have a beginning, middle and end. Can Cropper repeat this in his second novel and draw on his colourful background?

"I never really know what I'm working on when I write. I start what I think are novels and they come out as short stories or scenes. My second book is a collection of short pieces, this seems to be the way I work best".

Second novels are often seen as back breaking after a critical success; many novelists produce great first novels and never write again. How did *Weatherman* match up with your new novel?

"*Weatherman* was easy(ish) to write, taking about a year all in all, but it took a further year to sort out the order, to clear out the clutter etc. That was a good learning experience. I never wanted to go through all that again, so this time the editing has been easier. Writing, I think, stays about the same. I rarely have trouble when I'm sitting at the keyboard, but I do have some difficulty in writing long pieces. So I tend to stay clear of them".

The novel can often be long process, both for writing and editing, writers often find excuses to avoid working, swayed by external influences that eventually become obstacles.

"Self inflicted obstacles, I suppose. When I started *Weatherman* I didn't have any kids. Now I have two boys. Sounds harsh to call them obstacles, they don't get in my way, but having kids does cut down the time I can spend working every day".

There are obstacles though that can kill writing in its tracks.

"Whenever I pass on some material to be read I seem to draw to a stop. I start thinking too much about the work and continuing writing feels like hard work. Other things I make for myself, some feeble excuses, but when I'm in the mood I can write hour after hour, day after day. For me, part of writing is about habit forming".

Many first novels are rarely first novels, they are often the writers second or third attempt to crack it and pull together a coherent piece. You're no different in this; can you share some of your earlier attempts?

"Before *Weatherman* I tried one novel about a milkman who was followed by spacemen, and another about the mathematician Evariste Galois. The first I enjoyed writing, but there was nothing by way of plot, just two spacemen talking about life, and a milkman trying to escape loneliness. With the

second I received a lot of interest from publishers and agents, it was the time when *Longitude* was a big seller, and the story was pretty amazing stuff, being about a twenty year old French man who dies in a duel and who's work is discovered years after his death".

How did this early process of writing match up to your later attempts?

"I found it terrible to write. I managed to get a plan for twenty-four chapters, tried filling in the gaps, but it was incredibly boring, so I gave up. Getting all the interest was a high. I sent off a synopsis and within a couple of days was receiving phone calls from publishers saying they were very interested. I'd lied, told them it was finished, but all I had were a few dodgy chapters. So I never sent them the material. The interest gave me a confidence boost".

Many writers go through peaks and troughs whilst working, output can sometimes fall to zero. Do you have this problem?

"I get highs and lows all the time, day to day, week to week. Sometimes I wonder what I'm doing, sitting around, tapping away. It all seems like a waste of time and effort. It seems false, insincere, trite. Then other times it seems like the best thing in the world. Overall, I get more highs than lows".

The term "writer" doesn't always sit well with most writers and generally, people; have a hard time conceiving what a writer actually does. How do you feel about this?

"I've always had difficulty with anything I've done. I thought I was a fraud in most jobs I've had. Probably stems from some insecurity somewhere. I write every day, doing stuff in the writing world. I get commissions etc so all that makes me think that I must be a writer, whatever one is". The landscape is an important factor in *Weatherman*, how heavily does this affect your work and writing?

"I can't get away from writing about what's around me. Whether it's people, events, TV programmes, the landscape, weather etc. I tried with other stuff, like the mathematician, set in Paris, but it all seemed too much like I was conning people. I've been to Paris, but not 1830 Paris. I kept asking myself what I was doing, writing about maths, science etc. With stuff that's around me I feel much more comfortable. I have my take on events, it's made up, but I know there's some honesty in there, maybe". Inspiration is sometimes built up of a myriad of things that click into place with one defining moment but where did the inspiration come from for your debut novel and how did it lend itself to the final structure?

"From moving to the flatlands. I bought a house south of Goole, in the middle of nowhere. It's really flat, and the flatness struck me. That's what I started writing about. I received a lot of help from Keith Jafrate and Ian Daley. They kept me going; otherwise it would never have seemed to me to have been a novel. There was no overall structure, or idea, until after the writing was complete. It was the year of editing which sorted out the work. I only found the story after it was written. Some people have told me it's too fragmentary for them, but that's the way I like to work, pulling in ideas from a variety of sources. Ken, the main character was based on a silo".

Was there a particular time in your writing career where you felt it was not worth it?

"I have doubts, like most people would, I suppose. I get disappointed if I re-read work and feel there's something missing. Unless you've a two or three book deal, then you never know if the stuff you're doing will be published. But, I still go on. Getting feedback from others is a help. Now and again something will pop up, out of the blue, some comments from someone about the last book or about a short story or something. It helps. I'd still write, I think, if I didn't get that, but it does help". You're working on your next novel *How the Brain Reacts to Romance* (provisional title), is it a departure from the themes in *Weatherman*?

"Yes and no. In this second book there's not much gazing at the horizon. This one is mainly set in a kitchen. There's very few landscape

descriptions, it's more focussed on people. I read somewhere that writers only ever write one book. Even though the slant in this one is different, it strikes me now that the ideas are just the same. It's mainly concerned with how we relate to each other, how people operate, what concerns them, which is basically the same as in weatherman. Loneliness seems to be at the heart of a lot of the stuff I write".

Promotion is the key to a successful book, be it word of mouth or big budget hype, how has your publisher, Route, supported you?

"Route worked wonders with getting the book and me around various places. When it came out there was the trip to Crossing the Border Festival in Amsterdam, a few weeks later they'd arranged a trip to Vaasa Literature Festival in Finland. It was, briefly, a rock and roll lifestyle (minus the groupies). It was just what I needed. It was good seeing the book finished, but it was also good to see that things sprouted from the work. It's helped a lot with getting other literature related work".

What other writers influence you in your work?

"It took a long time for me to come across writers I really liked. Initially it was Hemingway's short stories that attracted me, then Raymond Carver, then Bukowski, Fante and Brautigan. They're by far my biggest influences, each for different reasons".

If you could be remembered in one way, what would it be?

"Still working on it".

If there is one question you'd wish someone has asked you in an interview what would it be and what is your answer?

"Have you ever found a scorpion down your trousers? I was stung by one once in Kenya. A friend whipped my trousers down and threw the scorpion on the fire. I read later that you're meant to save them, so the hospital knows about the type of sting. We were too far from any hospital, so I sweated it out in a tent with a bottle of beer. Hemmingway never did that". Do you have any advice for other writers?

"Write as often as possible. If you can find one, go on a writing course, listen to advice. Keep it simple. Read Carver, Bukowski, Fante and Braugtigan, and Hemingway's short stories".

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A day in the life of...Paula Brown  
Director of [www.thepeoplespoet.com](http://www.thepeoplespoet.com)

Anytime from 4:00am to 6:00am: Alarm shakes me awake and I struggle with varying degrees of success to switch it off. Darling Hubby leaves the bed cold and empty while he starts his day running his own empire.

7:00am: Alarm gets really angry with me and demands my vertical attention or it will play Sophie Ellis Bextor and Justin Timberlake until I scream. Proceed, via bathroom and coffee machine. Assuming that all of the mugs aren't still under the kid's beds.

Wake three, maybe four if the boyfriend stayed over, teenagers and a twelve year old. Let Tigger, a seventy-year old dog that never grew up, out for a walk in the garden. Cope with the fracas that is the morning, one packed lunch, two loads of lunch money and three trips in the car later, one to college, one to High School and one to Middle school.

Around 9:00am: I finally get a whole cup of coffee, if I have managed to force my way into a bedroom and rescued a mug from the depths. Sort the pots for dishwasher, clothes for the washing machine, feed and water the rabbit and generally find the downstairs floor, I have teenagers.

9:30am: work, delete spam from my inbox, deal with anything urgent, check the website over for nocturnal disasters, the day begins again.

9:30am take two: the day consists of the following tasks in any order, usually interspersed with desperate telephone calls faxes and emails about appointments, invoices, homework, proofreading, detentions, my sister's state of pregnancy or childbirth, various GCSE projects or the forthcoming literary festival. Proofread the book in progress, updated the website, open, close or collate results of competitions, package books, Post Office trips, look for the best deals on printing.

Order stock, fax and email, organise slams and exhibitions, apply for funding, order business cards, bookmarks and postcards, liase with other publishers and bookshops stocking our books, plan the next magazine.

Add information about events and launches on to our forum, check the guest book, finally take delivery of the Christmas magazine mid-January and get it immediately back in the post to subscribers.

Plan a launch and some readings, developing our ethos of inclusion for all. Apologise and make allowances for the fact that I am still learning web design and make corrections for yesterdays mistakes, keep a web log.

12:30pm: gasp for air while taking a lunch breaklet and play with the dog. Postie decides to make an appearance, spend half an hour going through bills, take several more phone calls, load the dishwasher and washing machine, get the washing in, hang some more out.

Another trip to the Post Office, remember to buy more stationary, have a look at the accounts, add on the receipts. Discuss a book project with an author, plan the annual launch, plan events for the local literary festival.

Discuss the return of art to the artist from the last exhibition, plan with artists some workshops and travel plans for forthcoming exhibitions and workshops. Add more poetry to the website, update the index, parcel more books for tomorrow's Post Office Run, check them off on the database.

Answer the phone a few more times. Oh God is that the time?

3:00pm: find shoes, keys, check that I am actually wearing clothes, go to the middle school. Come home, via the bank before it closes; pay in cheques and check the zero or minus balance, to the High School.

Chaos in the hallway and attempt to make dinner while planning to get back out for Parent's Evening, make coffee for the builder, reworking the bathroom with my left elbow. Ask the kids to do their one household chore and watch resulting ghost town, not a soul in sight.

Continue to complete the last few online tasks in peace, that is, if the broadband connection or email doesn't suddenly decide to throw a wobbly.

Peace actually means being serenaded by several electric guitars, and let me tell you that level two on the amp is loud.

6:00pm: Complete twelve different kinds of nutritious dinner while simultaneously loading the dishwasher and walking the dog. Squeeze in an opticians or doctors appointment on the way to Parent's Evening and remember to put some petrol in the car, just as it runs out and makes us all late.

9:00pm: Hubby arrives home three hours late having missed parents evening but that's okay because so did I. Darling kids didn't actually bother to make any appointments with teachers.

Snatch over eighteen films out of the grubby mitts of fifteen-year olds, grab a bite to eat with the other hand after loading the dishwasher for the ninety-fifth time and run an iron over tomorrow's uniform and PE kit. Check everyone has done their homework.

Collapse in to a heap to re-assemble brain with the help of a glass of wine before shower and bedtime, interspersed with several calls about the car club magazine, various projects that friends need help with and plans for who is brave enough to have a teen or two while we are at meetings or away with the car club.

One final check of email and messenger programmes before I stop for the day. No towels in the bathroom because they are all under the kids beds, where else?

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The Truth about Poetry Readings  
Article by Ian Parks

Seasoned performer Ian Parks recounts some of the most (and least) inspiring poetry readings he's given.

And then there was the time I read in Dublin to an audience of just three people: the organiser, his wife, and someone who'd obviously been bribed to attend. I knew he'd been bribed because, after finishing his triple whisky, he simply shrugged his shoulders, stood up and walked out - right in the middle of a poem. After I'd finished the organizer told me that actually his wife wasn't all that keen on poetry either and had just come along to make the numbers up! Scratch the surface and most poets will have similar stories to tell about their experience of giving poetry readings. The fact is, although a well-established feature of the poetry scene, readings really are an unknown quantity. I have turned up expecting an audience of a hundred and read to eight. Conversely, I have been told to anticipate a handful and read to two hundred. Venues vary from the stiff and academic (university lecture theatres) to the improvised and relaxed (back room pubs) and everything in between. Payment varies too, from the official funded events where you often have to wait months before the cheque arrives to the casual where you just get a chance to sell your books. When I first started giving readings in the early 1980s, payment was often cash in hand, the poet walked away with a pocketful of used fivers. The increased level of accountability that's come with Arts Council funding has, by and large, done away with such ad-hoc arrangements: but there's still an awful lot of room for disparity and negotiation. Which is one of the things that keeps the genre alive, I'd argue that the very unpredictability that seems to be built into the whole business of giving poetry readings is what keeps them exciting and relevant: neither the poet, the organizer nor the audience knows quite what to expect - and the reading evolves out of these tensions implicit in this situation.

Why, though, do we have poetry readings in the first place? And what accounts for their enduring appeal almost forty years after they first sprang to prominence in the early 1960s? When I suggest that it has something to do with curiosity I'm not trying to trivialise the attraction poetry reading seem to possess. For readers, there is the intimate connection they've built up with a poet while reading their work. This is essentially a private act, an invisible connection developed between the poet and an individual reader inside the reader's head. The curiosity arises when the reader extends this intimate relationship into the objective world; when they begin to wonder what the person who wrote the

poetry they've been reading is 'like'. There's curiosity too, I think, surrounding the way in which a poem ought to be read. Most readers of poetry bring their own associations and intonation patterns to a reading of a poem and are often surprised to discover that a poet intending it to be read differently. The poet's reading, of course, is not the only or definitive version. There are many versions of the poem as there are readers; but there's something validating about hearing the person who wrote the poem stand up and read it in their own idiom, subsuming it into their own experience and into the moment of the reading.

But poets aren't always the best readers of their own work. For years the BBC's *Poetry Now* programme featured poets reading their own work for radio - until the powers that be decided that the poems would come across better read by trained actors. Well, yes: the actors certainly know how to articulate a poem, and how to exploit its potential as a text; but what they don't have are the sharp edges and felt characteristics that can only come from having put the poem together in the first place. Of course it doesn't follow that a good poet is also a good reader of his or her own work. Many poets who are excellent on the page do little justice to the poems when reading them aloud. If you don't believe me, listen to Eliot mumbling his way through *Four Quartets*. The opposite is also true: some poets who can only just survive on the page come to life during a live reading. Part of an audience's attraction to the poetry reading, then, derives from a natural desire to experience the person behind the poems and to be made aware of how they approach their material.

The poet gains too. Apart from the obvious benefit of sharing his or her work with an audience, there's also the issue of validation. Poetry is often solitary, isolated, isolating art. We all know it can take up to a year before a poem is accepted for publication in a magazine; and then maybe another year before it appears in print. A further couple of years might well elapse before it finds its way into a collection. By the time the poet receives feedback of any kind the poem has passed into an entirely different domain; it's become public property and is so remote from the poet that any kind of intimate connection with it is almost impossible. At a reading, however, a poet can present something that has been written recently, earlier in the day even, and gauge an instant response. Readings also force a poet into thinking about material, into ordering and selecting from a body of work and into shaping something that is coherent and accessible. It concentrates the poet's ideas about what their work stands for, where it's going, and what its main themes and obsessions are. When giving a reading I tend to opt for a healthy mix of poems that are established but which I feel I want to preserve, poems that have appeared in magazines that the audience are probably familiar with, and a generous dose of new stuff. By reading poems that are new to me I'm trying to find some sort of connection between the internal world which they explore and the external world for which they exist. Readings can suddenly and forcibly take a poet out of the narrow confines of a certain set of poetic values and force them to come face to face with the audience for which they're intended.

The poet and the audience coming together for whatever reason is only part of the equation though. An awful lot depends on the circumstances surrounding it and the venue where the reading is going to take place. A poet, after all, would probably want to select a different set of poems for a reading in a public library to the ones they'd want to read in a pub. A bit of care on the part of the organizer can make all the difference. The best and most enjoyable reading I've ever given (out of a total of 300) was the Q gallery in Derby on the evening of Valentine's Day a couple of years back. The event was organised by Literature Development Officer Naomi Wilds

and she'd been tireless in her efforts to publicise it. There were three writers appearing, all of whom had an interest in dealing with the nature of love, and the gallery had been transformed into a French café with wine and candles on the table. Each of the writers was introduced with care and attention to what their work entailed. It was the only poetry reading I've given which was a sell-out. The atmosphere was relaxed, the audience attentive, the writers comfortable with what they were expected to do. And it lasted just over an hour.

Time, too, is a factor when it comes to presenting a good poetry reading. Without naming names, the worst reading I've ever been involved with was a disaster merely because it went on for too long. Too many poets were invited to read, the event took place in an uncomfortable art gallery, and by the end everyone was thoroughly bored. The problem wasn't with the poets but with the organization. Someone commented afterwards that poetry should be enjoyed and not endured.

Exactly. No one should be expected to sit through three hours of poetry. If Shelley himself was reading I think I'd be looking out the window after forty minutes! The point I'm trying to make is that a poetry reading is, or should be, an event: it should circulate around the tensions generated between the poet and the audience and it should be conducted with some consideration as to the venue, the length of time involved, and the expectations of everyone concerned. The emphasis here is on poetry being a public as well as a private art. Most poets will tell you that they sell a majority of their books at a reading where members of the audience, alerted to a particular poem, or with the poet's reading of their own work still active in their head will buy a copy of a book they might not look twice at if they'd come across it on the shelf in a bookshop.

I'd like to conclude with a couple of recommendations of where someone might see these principles in action. There is one series of readings in the north which shows the sort of practice which, I think, exemplary and could be used as an effective model elsewhere. Jane Mathieson at Manchester Central Library (note: Jane Mathieson is now Regional Reader Development Co-ordinator, NW) has come up with the excellent idea of having a pair of poets read for an hour during lunchtimes. The thinking behind this is to encourage people from the offices surrounding the library to drop in for a coffee or a glass of wine and listen to some poetry before going back to work. The pairings are put together with some consideration and the atmosphere is relaxed. I've read there a couple of times and attended several other events and found the mix of poetry and conviviality just right. Other libraries round the country are also doing innovative work. Sittingbourne Library in Kent recently showcased the dynamic Dorothy Smartt and Dr Stewart Brown as part of black history month. Her two 'voices' Battersea and Caribbean, made a rich performance. And John Clarke of Wordquake has hit on a good formula at Nellies in Beverley with a series of evening readings in the gas-lit upper chamber of a weird and wonderful pub. The emphasis here is on good poetry and poets who have a reputation for doing ample justice to their own work. Poetry readings perform an important function: they remind both the poet and the audience of each other's existence and interdependence, they emphasise the centrality of poetry as a public rather than reclusive art, and (most important of all) they help to keep the language of poetry alive.

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Anon

Editorial from the first issue of Anon by Mike Stocks

the anonymous submissions poetry magazine

Welcome to Anon, a poetry magazine that uses anonymous submission procedures.

On a cold day in January 2003 I collected a thousand flyers for Anon from a printer's shop in Edinburgh's Cowgate. I was a couple of weeks away from getting stuck into publicising this new project, but as I lugged the package home, I couldn't resist dropping off some flyers in a few venues. The next day, the first Anon submission arrived. When Anon's administrator opened the envelope, he pulled out not just three poems but a cheque for the first three issues. Since then, subscriptions and advance sales of single issues have come in steadily, challenging the view that everyone wants to be in poetry magazines but that no one wants to buy them. The concept behind Anon seems to appeal to many people. Submissions have poured in, and I'm pleased that Anon has captured the imagination of overseas poets, particularly in the US. I would like Anon to become an international publication for poetry in English (in all her guises) and in related languages such as Scots.

Anon's stance is to treat the poem as a freestanding artefact to be considered without reference to the poet's reputation or previous work. Only when the magazine's final selection has been made do the editorial team find out who wrote the accepted poems. Furthermore, rejected poems remain anonymous; the editorial team does not find out their identities (distinguished or otherwise). This means that well-known poets can submit to Anon without fear of embarrassment. And as the editor, I can conduct the business of running the magazine without the burden of making friends and enemies.

#### Names

This is not to claim that a poet's standing and other work are irrelevant in the enjoyment of poetry; of course they can be of great value and interest. But in my opinion, a poem, whether by an unknown or by a 'great', ought to earn its publication in a magazine on its own terms. It is my contention that some outlets for poetry are based, whether consciously or unconsciously, on the pull of the 'name'; and that this sometimes leads to poems by well-known poets being published at the expense of better poems by unknown poets.

'Names' enhance credibility, making magazines more attractive to buyers and to potential contributors. Anon is not claiming that such a method is ineffective or disreputable. The many excellent poets who have achieved recognition through the existing system testify to this. However, alongside these magazines there is a place for a magazine that refuses to compete on those terms.

There should be no place for deference in the critical process. An attitude of 'This poem must be of interest, because the poet is distinguished', does a disservice to the poem and to the poet. I feel some poetry magazines fall into that trap. A better viewpoint is, 'This is a distinguished poet, but is this poem of interest?' Many magazines operate from such a perspective, honourably and well. But perhaps a viewpoint of 'Is this poem of interest?', with no reference to the poet's reputation at all, represents a worthwhile innovation.

#### Publication history

In the world of poetry magazines, it is standard practice for poets to send in their publication history with their submissions, and other factors are

becoming influential too: MAs in creative writing, residencies, prizes, testimonials from the great and the good. Well-known poets apply an influential authority merely by submitting. In general, all these factors can be indicative of a poet's talent; but they are not necessarily indicative of it. And they are not as indicative of a poem's quality as the poem itself! Several editors have claimed to me that they're not influenced by such information; but if that is so, then why do they continue to receive it? Isn't it mistaken to assume that one can handle that information objectively? Of course, when assessing a batch of poems it's often easy to identify the very best poems, and it's usually very easy indeed to identify the large number of bad poems; therefore information about a poet's identity, history and standing will probably have little or no effect at the upper and lower ranges of poem quality. But when making borderline decisions - choosing one good poem over another good poem, which is 90 per cent of the assessment process - extraneous information can be very influential; and this is leaving to one side the hardly outrageous notion that at least a few magazines are interested in their sales and their place in the pecking order, and so sometimes take pragmatic decisions.

#### Anonymity and objectivity

Anonymous procedures are becoming prevalent in many fields, providing a useful check to unnecessary subjectivity. In many universities, finals papers are now submitted to markers anonymously. This has come about because research highlights all kinds of ways in which non-anonymous procedures are inaccurate. One telling example is that a paper attributed to a known 'strong' student is often awarded higher marks than exactly the same paper when attributed to a known 'weak' student. Such errors occur even when the markers are educated in the processes of institutional bias and are consciously opposed to it. In short, we cannot counter the subjectivity of our own perceptions merely by being aware of it. If one is to claim objectivity, then a starting point is that the infrastructure itself has to be objective.

If Anon is claiming to employ a higher level of objectivity than occurs in many existing magazines, then an obvious criticism is that the editor's own aesthetic preferences and leanings remain subjective. This is true. But it is a criticism that can be levelled at all literary magazines. There is finally no objective way of deciding what makes a good poem. And yet it is an editor's job is to make such decisions. This editor feels that to remove any unnecessarily subjective variables from the process is a sensible action. In addition, in an attempt to counter any unreasonable editorial bias that I as the editor of Anon might harbour, the magazine has external readers. Each of these readers looks at every poem submitted and gives a recommendation to me of reject, shortlist, or accept. In this way I hope to temper my own preferences and leanings a little (but not too much!) by receiving opinions different to my own on poems that I might have underestimated or overestimated on first acquaintance. I can report that the external readers have acted as an invaluable editorial safety net in Anon One.

#### Conclusion

Anon has its downsides. The criticism of Anon that has been made most strongly to me is that an editor ought to be able to recognise the styles of many poets regardless of anonymous submission procedures. I have two responses to this. My first response is to suggest that there are not as many poets out there who are as distinctive as they think they are, even among the most successful, when ALL context is stripped away, and the poem is just one among many hundreds. However, I concede that there are some. My second response is that, if this criticism poses a serious credibility

problem for Anon, then it is a criticism that applies to poetry competitions too. So anyone making this criticism of Anon has little choice but to conclude that anonymous poetry competitions, of which there are hundreds, some of them prestigious and influential, are fatally compromised by the same problem.

It would be easy to caricature the credo of an 'anonymous' magazine as some kind of aggrieved knee-jerk reaction against gross nepotism, as a stand against magazines knowingly publishing indifferent poems by famous poets out of self-interest. I hope this editorial has scotched that caricature before it can be aired. The issue is much more complicated and subtle than that, varying from magazine to magazine and even from submission to submission. There is no general gross corruption that I can see, though I have seen instances, and the great majority of editors work hard and scrupulously to choose the best poems submitted to them; my claim is merely that the extraneous information submitted along with poems is inevitably part of the criteria of assessment.

The anonymous system itself is by no means perfect. But I would suggest that its very visible effect - no favours for the known, no concessions to the unknown, no conscious or unconscious weighting for the quirks of geography and socio-economics that Peter Finch mentions in his foreword - makes it less imperfect than most other systems. But it seems to me that both systems should exist together side by side. I would not, finally, criticise other magazines for being influenced by issues other than the quality of the poetry submitted to them; I merely want to provide an alternative. It is a credible argument (albeit one that I don't agree with) that a poet's standing IS a relevant factor in assessing a poet's work, helping the editor in forming the best decisions, saving the editor from making important choices solely on the merits of his or her own judgement; why, in other words, is Anon re-inventing the wheel for every poem submitted, wantonly ignoring the poet's hard-won publications history? And I can report that the responsibility of choosing one poem over another with no criteria but the words on the page is simultaneously exhilarating and terrifying. No, I would limit my criticism only to the claim that editors can receive and process information about identity and standing and yet remain uninfluenced by it. That is having your cake and eating it. One can argue about the degree of influence, and one can argue that such influence is a good thing or (as I feel) a bad thing. But to claim that there is no influence at all, which seems to be the starting point of most editors I've talked to so far, is surely wishful thinking.

Hopefully Anon is not so very radical in seeking ways to provide a level playing field for all poets, and in encouraging our interest in poetry to be focused on poems rather than on poets.

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 WRITING MY WAY THROUGH CANCER

an excerpt from the book by Myra Schneider, published by Jessica Kingsley.

Diagnosed with breast cancer in February 2000, poet and author Myra Schneider turned to her writing to help her come to terms with the experience. In this thoughtful and readable book, she illustrates how writing helped her through diagnosis, treatment and recovery as well as the change in self-image following her mastectomy.

In her frank expression of intense fear, anger and doubt, Myra Schneider includes notes and finished poems written during her period of recovery. She also offers practical support in the form of therapeutic writing suggestions for cancer sufferers, whether they are experienced authors or have never written before.

Bringing together an unsparing but ultimately uplifting first-hand account of life with cancer and advice about writing as therapy, this engaging and positive book shows the benefits of expressing the self through writing. It will provide inspiration and support to anyone affected by cancer and useful insight for professionals involved in the care of cancer patients.

## TWO DIAGNOSIS

### **2nd February**

On Monday the consultant radiologist gave me the result of the second biopsy, told me without frills that I had breast cancer - grade one, the lowest order, but it's still cancer. As he spoke I saw a gun on each of his shoulders, their nozzles pointed straight at me, ready to fire. It shot through my head that I would never feel safe again, never be safe again. This was the end of any reasonable life. Layer on layer of fear submerged me. Today I'm wondering why I'd assumed cancer was something that happened to other people, why I'd written at the end of this year's diary a reminder to get another check up in 2002 as if there was no doubt that I would be healthy, free. My body is apparently fit but now I've been told it's not, I feel as if the cancer is worming through it, drawing me down into an underworld of illness, a world in which I'm unable to think or write, sinking into a mine of pain, into death...

Later I discovered that many people hear the news that they have cancer as a death sentence whatever they are told about the prognosis.

I was half crying, half furious at the attack on my life as we sat waiting for nearly an hour to see the surgeon. He was quiet-mannered, sympathetic but to the point. He told me he could feel the lump although it was very small and far below the surface. I wanted to disbelieve him. I wanted the cancer to be made up; I wanted to be angry with doctors and nurses. But this was decision time and shocked as I was I gathered my wits, concentrated on the course of action. At the beginning of the consultation I was under the impression that a lumpectomy, removing a part of the breast, would deal with the problem but - another shock - I was offered the choice of a mastectomy. The thought of losing a breast was terrible but my mind fastened onto a single idea: safety. It shone in my head like a huge neon sign. From the information I was given I was quickly sure that a mastectomy offered the most protection and said so. The surgeon and the breast cancer nurse both insisted I thought about my decision overnight. On the way home Erwin said: 'I didn't think I should state any opinion but I'm very relieved you want to have a mastectomy because I'm certain it's the safest course of action.'

Once in the house I sobbed and sobbed. I started to make a cup of tea but almost dropped a cup as I took it off the hook in the cupboard. In a squall of fury I shouted at Erwin and threw it across the kitchen. It fell on the floor by the fridge and broke. Words screamed silently inside me: Why me? I will cease to be a whole person. How shocking to lose an outer visible part of my body. The breast is a female symbol. I'm going to die. Then I felt sorry I'd destroyed a cup I liked.

Among the things I'll never forget from Monday is the kindness of two close friends. First there was the message Mimi had left on the Ansaphone just before she went out to teach. Aware that I would need a lot of support if cancer was diagnosed she'd said: 'I was hoping to talk to you before I left. I want you to know I'm there for you and you can phone me at any time.' She has plenty of difficulties of her own to cope with but she'd even left me a phone number where I could reach her at The Poetry Society

in between her two classes. I was very touched by her thoughtfulness but I didn't want to disturb her while she was in the middle of working. I left a tearful message on her home Ansaphone.

I had promised to phone Ruth, who lives fairly near, and tell her the results when I got home. Slightly more composed after drinking a cup of tea, I dialled her number and managed to tell her the diagnosis before bursting into tears. She said: 'If you'll allow me I really would like to come see you.' Twenty minutes later she was here and hugging me. We sat beside my books in the quiet of the poetry room, where I run my writing workshops, for maybe for a couple of hours. Her presence, affection and reassurance as I cried and repeated my fears over and over, gradually calmed me.

The next day - yesterday - I was still quite clear about the decision I'd made. One or two friends urged me to get another opinion, look at other possibilities but I simply can't. This is partly because I feel convinced by the decision we've made, partly because I'm too emotionally and physically exhausted to cope with other uncertain ideas. I found it extremely comforting when Dilys, another very good friend, said she absolutely agreed with my decision. I'm relieved too that we have private health insurance and that by yesterday afternoon a plan of action was set up. The surgeon who saw me at the North Middlesex is going to do the operation quite early on Saturday morning at the King's Oak Hospital which is a few miles away in Enfield. I also find it reassuring to know that the operation would have been no later than next week if I'd stayed with the National Health Scheme.

Today I'm not in quite such a state of shock. I can see there is every reason to believe the cancer will be removed even though I keep sliding off this belief into a mire of terror and have to hoist myself back onto it or be hoisted back by Erwin. Things haven't been helped by the computer breaking down. It was affected by a short power cut on Monday evening. Erwin was unable to make it work and Ben, my son, who looks after it, is far away on holiday in Kerala. Not having access to my everyday technology has added to my sense of everything falling apart. However, I've managed to focus sufficiently to do some administrative work on Erwin's computer: sending a letter to everyone in my Reading and Writing Process workshop, postponing the workshop that should be taking place in two weeks. I've also started putting together notes which need to be sent in for a 'Writing for Self-Discovery' weekend course I'm co-tutoring in November.

In my head one voice is saying: how on earth do you imagine you'll be running that course? But another voice is saying: the course is part of my life and I'm going to hold onto the belief I'll be living it. Which is worse - the operation or the fear that it won't get rid of the cancer? Am I a coward? I made the mistake of reading a leaflet about cancer and in less than five minutes I felt as if I'd passed through every stage of the disease as it recurred and spread to other parts of my body. I was already at the gates of death taut with terror. Yet the words came into my head: you go down and you come up. I must hold onto the idea of each moment as a moving on.

I wish I wasn't putting such a strain on Erwin. I am afraid the breast cancer nurse, who is coming again tomorrow, will give me more information that will worry me. I have to hang onto the thought of friends and the relatives and friends of people I know who have survived for years and years after breast cancer. I owe it to myself to manage my panic and to make this a life experience not a death experience, to concentrate on possibilities, to grab every moment of life I can, to use what has happened

for writing, to include the awfulnesses but also the plusses. I mustn't forget the moments of joy: the sun lying in swathes on the grass, the sharp clean cut of the air, the disc of the sun on water. I must keep the words that came into my head about the snowdrops I saw in a garden when we walked to the shops a couple of hours ago. I think it's the starting point of a poem.

### The Snowdrops

Drops of life on this distressed afternoon. Everything grey - the concrete frontage with miserable sticks like bunches of deadness. The small white bell heads could be gathered together - could be layers pressed to my breast - could fill the space that will be left by my missing breast. These drops are not drops. The weak heads are not weak, not drooping, not dropping. They are hanging bells with thin rims of green on their delicate undersides. They have pushed through the lumpy earth and stand unmoved by the thrusting wind, the bites of cold air. They are stronger than cones of buddleia, than the can-can poppy - a brazen girl kicking. Very small, they bend but do not give way, they refuse winter, silently they remind me it can end.

Erwin and I have discussed telling his cousin about my illness. She never married, has no immediate family of her own and tries to behave as if she is a 'parent' to us. Especially, she's taken on the role of mothering me which I find trying as she always wants to dominate. She has a gloomy doomy view of life and completely lacks a sense of humour but her generosity is very touching and I know she's lonely so I go along with her as far as I can. However, she has an obsession with illness and medical matters on which, for no obvious reason, she considers herself an expert. I can already hear her querying every decision we've made, pounding us with alternatives she's certain are better. We've decided not to tell her until after the operation.

3rd February

Yesterday evening I ran my monthly Prose and Poetry Workshop and was really pleased I'd done so. I was able to concentrate while we read work by members of the group and also on giving detailed feedback. Running the group took me out of myself for a couple of hours. I decided in advance I would say nothing about my operation - that it would be too disturbing and distracting both for the group and me. I want to believe that I'll be able to run the next workshop at the beginning of March. I intend to do it if I possibly can.

The breast cancer nurse has been to see me for a second time and I've learnt more about my illness. She explained that it was possible the cancer had spread further, that it was most unlikely to have spread far and that there were treatments which would make me very safe. The exact situation would not be known until tests were done on samples after the operation. Of course this raised my fears higher again but she reassured me that I would survive, that my illness was treatable. I have no alternative but to be patient. I know I must focus on getting over one hurdle at a time.

This afternoon I saw Kate with whom I've had counselling/therapy once a month and also a monthly massage for several years. The insights I've gained into myself and the coping mechanisms I've learnt have been invaluable in helping me become a stronger person. Kate suggested techniques to help me deal with the coming week, in particular visualizations. The main one was to close my eyes and re-experience a difficulty in breathing I once had and then to picture myself managing it, calming it until it eased and I relaxed. This fear about breathing

mushroomed from the memory of a sore throat and a feeling I was about to choke when I was coming round from an operation some years ago. While trying out the visualization I remembered I had in fact dealt with this discomfort well, telling myself to breathe shallowly and that the sensation would wear off, which it did.

I've found it somehow reassuring to discover that the fears that have dominated me this week are very similar to the fears other people go through in this situation. Both in a card on Monday and on the phone today John was very sympathetic and caring. John is a close friend, a poet and writer, who has spent the last few years doing groundbreaking work in writing residencies with dementia sufferers, helping them express their feelings and thoughts. He lives in Yorkshire but he's attached to Stirling University and spends much of his working time in Scotland. He ran the Littlewood Press in the 1980s and was my first poetry publisher. I am aware how very much I need the support and affection of the main people in my life. I'm lucky I'm getting it. Erwin, of course, is helping me all the time.

4th February

I was irritable and slow this morning because I've had to take a sleeping pill or half a sleeping pill each night this week. However, it cheered me to get a request today from someone who heard me give a poetry reading a few years ago. She wants me to read at a poetry festival in May which makes me feel that life, and in particular my poetry life, will continue. The thought of losing all this because I'm set apart by illness has been very depressing. I've spoken to Mimi two or three times this week. Like Ruth she's been amazingly supportive and today I received a card from her with a design of many coloured elephants on the front of it. Inside she's written: 'Just to say I love you very much and to wish you the very best for the operation and your hospital stay and for the best of all recoveries. We are all thinking of you - as many friends as these elephants out there who care for you so much, as you have cared for them.' Her message made me cry.

My throat's a bit sore and on and off my nose has been runny so I've felt worried that I might be getting a cold. I phoned the King's Oak Hospital about this and a nurse reassured me that a minor cold wouldn't stand in the way of the operation. Before lunch we walked along Waterfall Walk, a strip of parkland at the end of our road which runs by the small river, Pymmes Brook. The area, which is wooded by the water, has been left more or less wild. Being with untamed nature always makes me feel better.

This afternoon I washed my hair and later on we prepared the soup which has been more or less a routine on Friday for the last three years. We've made a much larger soup than usual, with onions, barley, leeks, sprouts, carrots, mangetout peas. Most of this weekly soup goes to our ninety year-old sweet-natured neighbour, Adrian Taylor. Erwin takes one portion to him straightaway. A second portion is put in the freezer and is delivered to him on Tuesday so he has home-made soup on hand throughout the week. On soup night we have some too. It was extraordinarily therapeutic making the soup this evening, relishing the smell of it cooking, feeling nourished by it, knowing it was life-sustaining. Enough portions have gone into the freezer to keep Adrian going for at least a week and a half!

In spite of these positive activities fear of the operation dominated me all day. Late in the evening in a state of high nervousness - I've always found hospitals frightening places - I suddenly decided to write down everything that was on my mind in my notebook. I was aware that this was something John and I had recommended to others in the journal section of the handbook, 'Writing for Self-Discovery', which we wrote together a few

years ago. In fact instinctively I set myself to do Exercise 98 which asks the reader to make a list of all the different feelings she/he is aware of. This is what I wrote:

#### What's On My Mind

I am afraid of the operation.  
 I am afraid they won't do the operation because I have a bit of a cold.  
 It will be a relief if they do the operation - even to have the fear of the operation.  
 I am afraid of going through another waiting period and the disease spreading.  
 I am afraid of the anaesthetic.  
 I am afraid of the period after coming round.  
 I am afraid that I'll have difficulty with breathing.  
 I am afraid of being very weak and muzzy.  
 I am afraid of not being in control.  
 I am afraid of being seen as a feeble coward.  
 I am afraid of the wound and the discomfort.  
 I am very sad I am losing one of my small breasts.  
 I am even afraid that they will remove the wrong breast.  
 I am less afraid because there is still a purple bruise on my left breast.  
 I am also less afraid because the surgeon will see me before the operation and I will check he knows it is the left breast.  
 I am afraid that although the prognosis is good they will discover that the cancer has spread more than they think.  
 both for myself and other people.  
 I want and believe I will be able to do this to support myself and communicate my experience to others.

The operation is a gateway through which I must pass and my life will be longer if I do pass through it.  
 I want to pass through it and I want it to be tomorrow.  
 I want to fight my fear.  
 I want to make the best use I can of the rest of my life whatever it is.  
 I want to write about cancer in different ways including writing poems about it

Writing this entry helped me beyond anything I could have imagined. I had tried this kind of writing before and believed in it but it was a long time since I had been in such an extreme situation. The list itself shows how writing it helped me. After I had crystallized all the terrors spinning in my mind and put them outside myself by 'dumping' them in my notebook I felt a lightening. I can remember the feeling of change as I stated definitely that the operation was a gateway I wanted to pass through. By then I was sufficiently released from fear for positive thoughts to surface. Indeed by the time I reached the end of the entry I felt a sense of uplift.

I find it difficult to sleep if something is on my mind but I did get quite a few hours sleep that night and I'm certain it was because I'd written that notebook entry.

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 This is an open letter, and as always, any letters or articles that appear on these pages are not the opinion of The Incwriters Society (UK). The Society serves as a go between and buffer to highlight on-going debates within Literature.

#### Open Letter To Poetry Competitions

Why do poetry competitions conspire to keep poets poor and out of pocket and with their work tied up? I mean all those ludicrous rules which they

list on their entry forms. Usually, poems 'must not be submitted elsewhere' or 'been accepted elsewhere for publication', or 'the poem must not have been broadcast or performed' - pray, what is the point of requesting any of that? Most competitions are extremely regionalised, and although they get submissions and fees from all over the UK, there often isn't a widely distributed anthology on the lines of, say, the Forward yearly books, or the one provided after the National comp. Most people's entries just disappear into the void and the administrators bank the fees; only three or four poets will gain financially, and the majority of these won't have their winning poems well-published or talked about.

Entering competitions doesn't pay, for the majority of contestants; yet the competitions want to think of themselves as sole outlets for some reason, as though there's a great cachet in being allowed to compete with other poets on the payment of a fee. The poet loses out both ways; the chances are, they won't win any prizes, and in the meantime their poems are tied up for a number of months. For those who aren't prolific this means a good proportion of their yearly 'output' will be out of action, as they're prevented from sending work elsewhere if they abide by the rules.

Yet what would happen if a competitor somehow won, say, a modest prize in a comp and at the same time had the poem accepted by a magazine? Would the poetry thought-police raid their house, administrators demand their puny £75 prize money back, and the world of British poetry collapse overnight? Of course not. It's just that competition administrators and magazine editors have bigger opinions about the value and integrity of their outlets than they should have. When nobody gets paid on the magazine circuit unless they are luckily in one of the well-funded ones, why aren't poets being positively encouraged to circulate their entries and submissions in a more businesslike way? I can see the point of editors not wanting to find a poem they've accepted appearing in another mag, but with competition entries v. mag submissions, the timescales are completely different, the end result is not the same, and no conflict is likely to arise in terms of appearance, performance, or copyright.

I'd like to see an end to the fussy little 20-point rule sheets and a more honest acknowledgement of real life and economics, please: not to mention an end to high entry fees. Come off it chaps, it's just greed and you know it. When there's such a strong awareness among poets about the vanity press problem, why are people continually prepared to fork out £5 per poem when the probability of a result is only slightly better than that of the Lotto draw? In the end, it supports the idea of poetry as a minority hobby which the poets must continually pay for in order to belong.

Yours sincerely,  
Rennie Parker

REPLY FROM WILLIAM PARK

Undoubtedly, the rules for competitions have increased over the years. I can look back to almost 20 years of competition leaflets in my folders, that have collected like junk mail, the financial outlay is now greater, and prize money can now ludicrously reward 3rd rate (or 5th rate) poems as 1st prize-winners.

David Kennedy had interesting things to say about the distinction, or not, between the 'amateur' and the 'professional' in poetry (Thumbscrew no.17 - 'Them and Us - The Sequel') but at the end of the day, surely the professional has integrity.

I don't see how sending the same poem to different magazines and furthermore getting them simultaneously published, serves poetry well. It demonstrates a lack of prolificacy on the part of the poet, demeans the

magazines, and clutters up an already overloaded system.

The different timescales of magazine appearance and competition schedules, for possible winning entries publication, is a point, but why can't poets be more prolific, and, if not, why bother with the competitions at all? There are now so many, the value of success in them seems questionable.

Better surely to spend money supporting the excellent number of poetry magazines still being launched indefatigably against the odds.

REPLY FROM BRUCE BARNES

As an occasional player at the Poetry Competition Casino, and a sometimes winner/runner up I felt moved to comment. Like many gamblers, I believe that there's a method to winning; the belief isn't mired in the irrationality of addiction but is based on some simple rules.

\* start small aiming initially for the competitions with small prizes.

\* make the minimum investment.

\* send in poems that meet the competition criteria about numbers of lines or a particular theme. (Obvious I know but, you would be surprised).

\* do road-test your poems in a writing workshop before you send them.

The joy of creating a wonderful new poem often leads straight to the cul de sac of a competition envelope. If it's hot off the press let it cool down; get it to a critical workshop and let them pick up the 'obvious' typo or the knuckle-duster cliché that in your enthusiasm you missed.

\* look at the judges, consider their writing, not with a view to aping them but to identify themes that appear in their work. If the competition has a website with previous winners, have a look at that, particularly if the competition doesn't have judges per se.

\* avoid a tear stained winners' cheque, (the bank might not accept it); before you enter any of the smaller competitions, reconcile yourself to the fact that it's largely about winning money. Buy yourself a drink to celebrate, say, being first among 500 and that you can include the poem with a reference to the win in your next chap-book. The best publicity and the serious recognition come with the Arvon and the National, and these are 1000-1 shots.

I hear what you're saying about the petty and restrictive rules of competitions; but perhaps they should be seen not as rules, in the draconian legal sense of the word, but as rules of etiquette, such as not farting in company, which people may recognise but realise that such rules are inevitably broken, or if not broken, they are skirted around. For instance revisions to a poem, inherent in most poets practice, will free the poem for another competition or a magazine. Most competitions give details of their prize giving dates, and if you send in close to the closing date, the poem is tied up for a couple of months at the most, which is the same time scale as the more reliable magazines. I believe that it doesn't do to have too much recycled stuff in circulation, waiting to be picked up by magazines and competitions; the time spent stuffing envelopes is better spent revising the poem that never seems to be making it or better still writing anew.

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The Slab, it's not for chickens

Editorial by Wilton Carhoot

I make no claims for The Slab. You probably won't like it. After all it is full of foul-mouthed recalcitrant drunks, lovers, boozers scrappers and cruisers. It is not for those who wear wax jackets, vote Tory, or vote Rudyard fucking Kipling's, "If," as their favourite poem. It's just that, there are some things I could rant about for a long time. One of them is, how come bookshops are full of the coolest, newest, latest things in the world of fiction, with mega-bucks put behind the promotion of some fairly

talentless tosspots but step over to the poetry section and it is like a museum.

Now, if you like Keats, Shelley, Tennyson, Browning, Marvell, Yeats, all dead fuckers, then you're alright. If you like Kipling, Heaney or Hughes, again the bookshops are alright. But in my book, "If," being the nations favourite poem is a bit like the nations favourite song being, "We'll Meet Again," by Vera Lynn.

Let me say at this point, I don't think we should blame Waterstones. Far too often I have heard people moan about bookshops. Frankly, I know that bookshop staff would much rather sell you a poetry book than the latest offering by that cunt Archer. The thing is people don't buy enough contemporary poetry. Publishers, worried about profit, don't invest in it. We have a self-fulfilling circle. This is where The Slab comes in. The Slab is not a magazine. It is a book. You cannot subscribe to it. You have to buy it from a bookshop. The Slab could just be the single biggest movement since the very over-rated beats. It could be bigger than the beats. I say this because there are more writers around writing better poetry than the beats. The Slab is going to put these poets on the shelves in bookshops.

What can I say about The Slab? What would be most of interest to you? I believe in it. I have put my money where my mouth is. I was a D.J for seven years; my record collection is for sale, to pay for The Slab. I had a James Bond style drinks cabinet, a globe that you lift the top half of to reveal bottles of alcohol. I sold it, to pay for The Slab. I am a writer; I sometimes win money in poetry competitions, all of that has gone towards The Slab. It is time consuming. But I like that, at the moment. I get far more excited than I should at the sight of the postman. I'm ambivalent though, I hope he brings me poems, but also I hope he doesn't bring me poor poems. One of the things I've found hard is, the way I feel about receiving poems that aren't good enough. You see, I want them to be terrific. I've got an issue of The Slab with a hundred odd vacancies. I want great poems. When they are not quite there, I'm unsure how to tell people. I never realised what a burden the conscience is, how much you care for and want to help the sender, a fellow poet. Maybe five years down the line I'll be a churlish, snarling curmudgeon. If I am, blame poetry.

What else? I went for a job interview recently. I never got the job. I try to look on the bright side. I had a day walking round Halifax dressed like an airline pilot. What a waste of time. The thing about being editor is, no one can sack me. I'll survive or not by my own talent. I can wear what I like, publish what I like, it is my baby. I've got something to say, it is time for me to say it and I'm not afraid to say it. The Slab, is the offspring of Wide Skirt, Iron, Echo Room and Scratch. It is not a magazine, it is a book. All writers start somewhere, Armitage and Rollinson and many others cut their teeth in Wide Skirt. That platform is here again. I only hope I can keep The Slab going. Rest assured I will be putting every ounce of my considerable energy into ensuring its survival.

The Slab is dedicated to providing a platform for poetry and showcasing the best new talent. We welcome the Slabtastic Polly North, The Slabdacious Lee Freeman. The Slabarriffic Gareth Jones and the irrepressible gang of Fiona Curran, Peter Ardhan, Andrew Oldham, Helen Burke, Gaia Holmes. The Marvellous Peter Lewin. The Cushty Daithidh Mac Eochaidh. The Slabperb Elizabeth Barrett, Antony Dunn, Geoff Hattersley, Milner Place and Brendan Cleary.

Plus, yes there is more, we have wonderful features on the Tim Cumming, Dan Fante and the spizzerinktum of Craig Smith. There's more, "In My Book," our Slabarooney guide to new books by Jane Routh, Martin Mooney, Ian Duhig,

Geoff Hattersley, Anne Sansom, Matthew Welton, Greg Delanty, Martin Hayes, Tom French, Julia Copus and Sarah Wardle. Of course, you probably won't like it.

The Slab, suitable for all shaggers, slappers, scrappers, boozers, cruisers and drug abusers.

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Reviews

Velocity: The Best of Apples & Snakes

(Black Spring Press 2003 ISBN 0 948238-28-3 pp315 £9.95 edited by Maja Prausnitz, Gretchen Ladish, Geraldine Collinge)

It's been along time since the best voices in Literature have been delivered to readers in manageable and crafted collection. Readers have had ten years of beautifully printed collections on the themes of love, love and just in case we forgot, love. Anthologies have swarmed with the names of dead poets, nailed to metaphor in school classrooms and buried soon after graduation. Now, at last, Apples & Snakes, known primarily for their energetic performance poetry work have delivered a collection that is truly modern, loved, gifted and educational. Velocity: The Best of Apples & Snakes celebrates the best in established and new voices on the poetry circuit.

The prose cracks and whips from the pages. No better examples are given then in the bizarre world of Steve Aylett's "Brain a Goat Snappy" and Joolz Denby's gritty "Trouble". These short stories give no answers, no formulas, no beginnings or resolutions. The writers are afforded the sheer beauty of the word and the space to haunt readers' dreams.

The poetry surprises and delights by breaking pre-conceived ideas of the genre. Lucy English's "This Poem" brings to the page the idea of past poets and ideas that are "Trotted out at picnics and weddings", that the themes most poets explore have been done and done better before. English pokes, prods and parades these foibles with ease to create a startling piece of original work.

The collection has its fair share of big names from the performance poetry world, John Cooper Clarke, John Hegley, Roger McGough nestle alongside the next generation of performance poets, such as, Chloe Poems and Mr Social Control. Both play with the language and inevitably kick the living daylights out of it, creating poems that couple religion, bingo and the word of the Internet.

Performance poetry has often been seen as the annoying, snotty-nosed younger brother of the poetry establishment but with the decline of poetry on the page in this country, it appears that this brat might be saviour of the written word. The editors of this collection have found a balance between performance poetry and poetry for the page. Poets often associated with performance regularly surprise with poetry that works phenomenally well on the page and gives rise to the belief that the poets must be a behemoth on the stage.

Page after page bring together the likes of Brian Patten, Adrian Mitchell, Michele Roberts, Lemn Sissay, Jean 'Binta' Breeze and Michael Horovitz to rub shoulders with Zena Edwards moving poem 'When the Leaves Have Fallen' and the surrealist revelations of Rachel Pantechnicon's 'Claxton Earcaps'.

Velocity is a collection of over one hundred artists and at no time does it settle into the mundane and cosy nature of most poetry anthologies, there is no one unifying theme. Readers are not subjected to footnotes on how this poem helped the editor through her cat's hysterectomy or how when her

friend's lover left her, she gave her this poem to cheer her up. It doesn't set out to command respect, to pat itself on the back but in the end this is a book not to be taken lightly, it does deal with issues that are heart stopping and it does it out in the open, in the world that readers can recognise.

This is brilliant, insightful and eclectic collection that deserves to be in demand and proves that a good poetry collection needs great editorship.  
BM

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fifty-fifty: Fifty Poems from Fifty Years of the Poetry Library 1953-2003  
 (published by South Bank Centre ISBN 0954480708 79pp edited by Charles Bainbridge, Tania Earnshaw, Selima Hill, Mimi Khalvati, Stephen and Simon Smith)

With a foreword by the Poet Laureate, fifty years of the ups and downs, the names and faces of the Poetry Library are seen here. From their opening at Albemarle Street with T.S. Eliot and Herbert Read presiding over events to the new extension and digitalisation project. Six editors and fifty poems drawn from the Library's back catalogue you'd think that all chaos would have broken loose. Simon Smith calms this fear in his introduction "If there was a tie (which happened frequently) lots were drawn" - the image alone of three librarians and three poets sitting around drawing pieces of paper is enough to keep you awake at night. It makes you wonder is this how the Poetry Library operates on a day-to-day basis? Do you think Hughes, Larkin and Gunn ever played scissors, paper, stone when arguing the merits of each other's work? The fact that librarians and poets came together without it resulting in a pie fight is enough reason for us to see what they selected, though it would have been interested to see which poets won over their counterparts and who was in the shortlist.

The anthology sets out fifty years of the library, one poet for each year, the audacity alone to do this and the headaches it must have caused creates an intriguing collection, in which, one feels you want to know more about the process than the result but saying that, Hughes, Larkin and Gunn are all there. Seamus Heaney's 1972 poem Anahorish is included and still as fresh as the day it was first published: 'after-images of lamps/swung through the yards/on winter evenings' and Stevie Smith's 1957 work I Remember still chills and tears at the readers soul.

This anthology allows both poet and reader to see the arc of poetry writing and development of literature over the last 50 years, you see long-gone poets influence stretching down the decades. There are glorious surprises, such as Wallace Stevens' 1954 poem The Poem That Took the Place of a Mountain: 'How he had recomposed the pines,/Shifted the rocks and picked his way among clouds' reveal Stevens to be a timeless poet, that fifty years later his poem feels like a truly modern piece of work. Not all the poets in this collection can say that, some come out the editorial process feeling musty and torn, Pound seems lofty and allusive, O'Hara merely tired, Hill a historic figure with no connections to any time.

The ones that come out of this collection the best are those that didn't root their poems politically or socially, poets who at the time took criticism for being lightweight or second rate. Auden's 1960 poem The More Loving One has stood this test of time, criticisms about Auden selling out when he went to America, of his work being second rate birthday card verse, is shown through the passage of time to be utter nonsense: 'Were all stars to disappear or die,/I should learn to look at empty sky' it still one of the most beautiful lines to have been written in the English Language. It's funny to realize, no matter the vitriolic nature of the critic, no matter to what height their disgust ascends, give it fifty years and it is ash and

the work that remains has stood its ground, and is as refreshing and rewarding as the day it was written.

A criticism of this anthology is that it opens up with a wonderful chronological line, that takes us quickly through the back history of the Library, you feel that this should have been explored more, that the real story about the Library's first fifty years is yet to be written. BM

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The North 33

(Poetry Business 2003 ISSN 0269-9885 64pp subscription £10.00 per annum, single copies £5.50 edited by Peter Sansom and Janet Fisher)

An argument has raged in poetry for years, and will probably continue to do so, that the poem matters, not the reputation of the poet. It can be said that the poetry of Dylan Thomas and Thomas Hardy came first and after their deaths, reputation took over as we tried to keep the memory of them alive. Shakespeare alone is an amalgamation of suppositions and heresay that has eventually become gospel.

The editors, Peter Sansom and Janet Fisher have arrived at this heated discussion with a perfectly formed counter argument to reputation in the shape of The North 33. They have put their money where their mouths are and produced a jaw dropping publication that should be read on every English Literature course in the UK, and by every academic and writer.

There are surprises here that twist like a knife, as the reader is freed from poem and poet association. There are bitter disappointments too as you discover that favourite poet you've been ranting about for the last two years wasn't as good as you thought they were. The lone reader could spend days trying to hone skills to identify the lines from poems that will reveal the Holy Grail, cap their quest of discovery, only to find the poem they've been reading isn't by the poet they thought they identified. I only identified ten of the thirty-three poets, ten! That's shameful! So, this reviewer will name no names here, only the numbers and titles that are listed to mark them in this edition, in the hope that readers will take up the challenge.

The real surprise in The North 33 came on page forty in the shape of Number 28 The Kitty Hawk, 'I have my wife of twenty odd years/In my bagel. And I wish I could fly'. This poem was so haunting, terse lines that stuck in your mind and conjured up images of such loss. Images that were grounded in the everyday world, language that was sparingly used but so powerfully incited. I was wrong and utterly shocked to see who penned this, not only are the words now engraved in my head, I have had to question my opinion of this poet and I have to publicly apologise to them for going along with the literary crowd and all the criticism that has been leveled at them over the years. With this one poem alone, Sansom and Fisher reveal our prejudices as readers. It also raises the question, are editors prone to this? This nepotism of reputation, this cosiness of what is hot and what is just stale or unknown? Are editors across the world rejecting because they look at image over content? Most of us would say yes, but most of us are responsible for this and actively participate in it without a second thought. The North 33 raises this very bitter pill and every page you read, the more you choke of on your defensive counter argument.

Number 4 Wilderness was one the few recognisable poems in the edition, but still a joy to behold and read: "When I play music I can almost see/a faultline in the white of the world,/a piece that's ripped and frayed". The nagging realisation has dawned, that readers have reputation engrained in them from an early age and believe that this is reflected in content and vice versa. How many people would attend a reading given by a poet they've

never heard of? How many go to readings just because of the name and regardless of whether they've actually read any of their work?

Number 33 Cricket would be a perfect example of this, even though it's a beautiful crafted piece, "The open yellow dress, the ball/falling, and all". Would the poem alone sell their books, fill their readings? Many would just come to hear Number 33 read, not because of what they write but who they are and that's the beauty and the grotesqueness of The North 33. As a reader you believe that you approach poetry objectively, but read this edition of The North and realise how wrong you have been. This edition alone is worth the yearly subscription, it will tear down that thin paper veneer of good taste that you have lovingly held before you and re-read time and time again to rooms of people who would rather agree with a group opinion than actually read the work for themselves.

Thankfully, The North 33 has delivered to me poems that will stick in my memory, long after I have forgotten the poet's name. SM

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Aesthetica: A Review of Contemporary Artists - Issue 4

(Federico & Donley 2003 102pp £3.50 edited by Cherie Federico)

This York based magazine is the new kid on the block, it doesn't have an ISSN code or a big budget but what they do have is style and content. Often new magazines are stapled affairs sold in small numbers but Aesthetica is well produced and of a quality that rivals some of the more established magazines.

Issue 4 combines the usual thoroughfare of poetry, fiction, artwork and reviews. To some extent Aesthetica is a Northern Ambit in the making. New writers nestle among established names, Milner Place's poem Spectrum is a joy to read. The stanzas literally drip from the page, giving a languid feeling straight out of a Hemmingway book. Place's love of language, regardless of the language he writes in, smacks of the sleepy rolling tongue of the late Dylan Thomas, vivid imagery that skips to a slow forgotten rhythm: 'kisses lips and sleeps with wars,/ripens in orchards, blinks in traffic lights,/flies through the forests with macaws,/sits on the rims of drunken eyes'.

A direct opposite to this is Jonny Wharton's call to arms for fat people, a humorous poem, that refrains from being bogged down in over use of language, the cheap gag and the obvious. Wharton pokes, prods and satirises, with a last line that would make any reader laugh out aloud.

Andrew O'Donnell's travels round the East are eventually making it into the magazine world. The Voices an excerpt from longer piece of the same name is bravely published here by the editor, Cherie Federico: "You can see where the whale/dipped, the streak of nicotine-/brown at my fingertip, the piece I/strip away. In an industry that often shies away from longer work, publishers and readers alike unable to cope with long poetry. Federico has ditched the formula of perfectly formed 'edited' piece and plumped for the old maxim of always leave the audience wanting more. Gerald England, Andrew Oldham, David Trame, all staples in many UK magazines over the last two years are published here alongside such names as Tommy Randell, whose poem one sausage was a refreshing reflection on the Ciaran Carson line "One sausage alone is a very deep subject".

One criticism of Aesthetica is this overuse of male poets and writers, there doesn't seem to be a fair representation of the female voice but these are early days for Aesthetica and time will tell if this balance is addressed. You could argue that poetry shouldn't be constrained or dictated by the writer's gender but there are times in any publication where a

reader can feel stifled by the same ideas from the same voice. Unusually though, in Federico's case, even with enough male poets to sink a dinghy, the editor has managed to steer the magazine through these sharp objections to deliver a well rounded issue.

Which makes us think that Aesthetica alone could have a very long future.  
KS

*Editors note: Aesthetica are aiming to have an ISSN and barcode by issue 5 and inc. acknowledges and sympathises that Aesthetica can only work with the submissions they have, regardless of gender. The editor, Cherie Federico, has had limited submissions from women writers to date.*

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Contributors:

**Bixby Monk**

Bixby Monk his half Scottish and Half Czech, he was born in 1968. Named by his father after the jazz musician, Bix Beiderbecke, he spent a disappointing childhood in the Edinburgh school system before leaving for the army. He splits his time between Edinburgh and Prague. His claims to fame are being the last war correspondent to cover the Gulf War and being the first war correspondent to leave Kuwait. He writes for several press agencies and writes under various pseudonyms in the UK and European Presses. He is the editor of Incorporating Writing (ISSN 1743-0380).

**Samantha Morton**

Samantha Morton before fleeing the capital worked happily in publishing, the hours were long, the pay was rotten. So in a bid to do what most Londoners do, she left London and set up a gallery and workshop in Cornwall, near St Ives, called Whey Pottery. She has three children and an understanding husband. Next year she hopes to go organic.

**Andrew Oldham**

Andrew Oldham writes for Stage, Television and Film. His credits include BBC1's Doctors, BBC R4 Go 4 it, Piccadilly Key103 BTCC Christmas Campaign, the short film Divine Blonde and The Charlie Manson Room (showcased by Theatre and Beyond at Brighton Pavilion, part of The International Brighton Festival 2002). He is prior recipient of a Writers Award from the ACE NW (UK), a Peggy Ramsay Award (UK) and a nominee of the Jerwood-Arvon award (UK) and has been nominated for the London International Award. Publications include the crime story, Spanking The Monkey, in: Next Stop Hope (Route ISBN 1 901927 19 9). Poetry in The Interpreter's House (UK), Gargoyle (USA), Poetry Greece and Poetry Salzburg (Europe), Grain (Canada) and Dream Catcher (UK) to name a few. He is an academic and journalist.

**Ian Parks**

Ian Parks is a Hawthornden Fellow 1991, he has travelled through the United States of America on a Fellowship in 1994. His poetry has received accolades and awards, including the Royal Literary Fund 2003, the Oppenheim Award 2001 and 2002 and the John Masefield Award 2001. Ian was a National Poetry Society New Poet in 1996 and was a prior Poetry Editor for Dream Catcher (issues 7 -11). His collections include, Gargoyles in Winter (Littlewood, 1985), A Climb Through Altered Landscapes (Blackwater 1998), The Angel of the North (Tarantula CD 2000). Departures and Rendezvous: Love Poems 1983-2003 is due for publication in 2005. His next collection, Shell Island, will be available from Way Wiser (USA) in 2005. He teaches at Leeds University.