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 Incorporating Writing Issue 1 Volume 2  
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 What is Literature?

Editorial by Samantha Morton

I'm sat at my computer, with an email saying "You do the editorial this time", this has been going on for several weeks, between me and Bixby. I've got to admit that I find writing daunting, I enjoy it, I love it, I'm one of life's natural readers. My perfect book has yet to be written, so I'll carry on reading until I find it. Sure I've got close, Wally Lamb nearly clinched it, Helen Fielding promised so much and delivered so little and DBC Pierre kept me warm during the winter months. But I have yet to reach my Xanadu of a perfect writer, if I found them would the world end? Could I read anymore? Would I compare to other loves of my past? Of course not, it's like comparing Proust to Archer - one took to his bed for years and the other was forced into bed before lights out, and only one has written something that can be called Literary. But that's it, what is Literature and what is literature? My Mother never read what I read, when I read Germaine Greer, she read Mills and Boon, when I started on Harry Potter, she foisted Enid Blyton on my children (the unsanitised version). It's hard to explain to a six year old why it's okay for Harry Potter to sleep in a tower full of boys (I have seen the frightening metaphor) but that it's not a good idea to run around an inner-city primary school yard playing PC Plod and the Golliwogs (please, don't all write in saying that I can't use that word, Blyton did and I blame her for having to mention it here). It's funny though how stories we grew up are not appropriate for our children and that the stories that our parents read seem inappropriate to us.

It's the idea of language and literature with a small 'L' and a capital 'L' that has sparked the biggest argument in the office to date. So much so, that a chalk board has been employed to list names of writers and poets in two columns. In the last week we have dissected the twentieth century, Hughes is in the Literature camp, so is Thomas and Hardy. Ayres, Townsend and Archer have been regimented to the literature side. Rants have been followed up with tirades over John Cooper Clarke, now on the borderline of both and why Gunn isn't in the Literature list, we've argued about Auden, pre-USA and post-UK. We have compiled wish lists and drawn up lengthy

attacks and defensive ploys for our favourite writers, I saved Woolf but had to, with a bitter irony, ditch Albee. This useless but enthralling exercise has shown that to all intents and purposes, regardless of critics and Literature courses across the globe, that reading and devouring of Literature and literature is a subjective thing. That we will never agree with everyone one hundred percent that Swift was a perfect satirist, that Wallace Stevens is still unappreciated, that Anne Sexton was brilliant and that Claire Pollard is shining beacon in UK Poetry. I still feel that Ezra Pound should be consigned to the nearest cat litter tray or budgie cage.

So, it did come as a surprise, when we opened City Life, that Inc. and Incorporating Writing had been on the receiving end of a critic and I leave you with their words and a glowing pride in what we are trying to do here: *"GIVEN that Inc. is 'a new wave in UK writing', you'd be forgiven for dismissing it as another site devoted to fiction and poetry by would-be writers. But Inc. is a bit different. Based in Ashton-under-Lyne, the website launched at the end of last year and exists to promote literature in the UK: listing events, marketing small press magazines and running articles on writing, by writers. Primarily, though, Inc. seems to be a promoter of poets. Heading the webpage is a list of 'incwriters', selected from publications such as Poetry Review and including Graeme Mort and Julia Davis. Click on their names and you get a short biog, samples of their work and details on how to book them for events. When it comes to reading material, Inc. rather cleverly brings together original articles with those reproduced from the magazines it has close links with. So, in the current edition, Blake Morrison talks about his memoir and his love of The Movement while Anthony Cropper discusses the follow-up to his debut The Weatherman (Route). A quirky feature offers a day in the life of Peoplespoet.com editor Paula Brown (which seems mainly to consist of her retrieving things from under her children's beds) and poet Ian Parks gives an honest look at the highs and lows of poetry readings from the point of view of audience and writer. The mass of websites devoted to new writing, literary news, new magazines and e-zines can be bewildering at times - hence the emergence of these 'one-stop-shops' for lit lovers. It's likely we'll soon be overrun with these, too, but for now Inc. provides some good reading and new information - definitely mightier than a lot of other crit out there, as well as the sword".*

This months edition includes new interviews with Hilary Mantel, Roger McGough and Steve Aylett. An article on writers block by Roselle Angwin, a day in the life of Julia Bird from the Poetry Book Society and an insight in a behemoth of UK Literature Magazines, The North.

PS Some great news as well, Peter Lewin has been reading in the USA, a joint partnership between Kendal Press, Incwriters, [The Bowery Poetry Club](#), Bob Holman, to promote Peter's writing and collection Silverdale in the States. The tour is going phenomenally well with Peter selling hundreds of books at each reading. We will bring you more information on this in the August edition.

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 The Pop and the Passion: Roger McGough  
 Interview by Bixby Monk

Award-winning poet, playwright, broadcaster and children's author Roger McGough was born on 9th November 1937 in Liverpool, England. He was educated at St Mary's College, Crosby, Liverpool, and at Hull University. He taught at St Kevin's Comprehensive School, Kirby, and lectured at Mabel Fletcher College in Liverpool and at the Liverpool College of Art. He was a member of the pop music/poetry group 'The Scaffold' between 1963 and 1973. He made his name as one of the 'Liverpool Poets' with Adrian Henri and Brian Patten, included in [The Mersey Sound: Penguin Modern Poets 10](#) (1967).

A Fellow of John Moores University in Liverpool, he won a Cholmondeley Award in 1999 and was awarded an honorary MA from Nene College of Further Education. He was Fellow of Poetry at the University of Loughborough (1973-5), Honorary Professor at Thames Valley University (1993) and is a member of the Executive Council of the Poetry Society. He was awarded an OBE in 1997.

He has twice won the Signal Poetry Award: first in 1984 with Sky in the Pie, then again in 1999 for Bad, Bad Cats. He is also the author of a number of plays, including All the Trimmings, first performed at the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith, in 1980, and The Mouthtrap, which he wrote with Brian Patten, produced at the Edinburgh Festival in 1982. He wrote the lyrics for an adaptation of The Wind in the Willows first staged in Washington, DC, in 1984, transferring to Broadway in 1995. He has written for and presented programmes on BBC Radio including 'Poetry Please' and 'Home Truths'. His film work includes Kurt, Mungo, BP and Me (1984), for which he won a BAFTA award, and he won the Royal Television Society Award for his science programme The Elements (1993).

His most recent book of poetry is Everyday Eclipses (2002) and his Collected Poems, bringing together over forty years of McGough's poetry. His live poetry album, Lively, is now out on CD.

The Mersey Sound had a major impact on the sixties UK poetry scene. The Post-War poetry world was one of academia rather than performance. The Mersey Sound was one of the first accessible poetry books for a public audience.

How did you become involved in the scene and the book?

I began writing poetry when I was at the University in Hull, some of my first poems were written there, and I was just writing for myself. I wasn't part of any group and didn't know anyone who wrote poetry at University, there were people, of course but I didn't mix with them. Phillip Larkin was the sub-warden of this small hall of residence, called Needler Hall, but he was someone who was a remote figure amongst the students and there was no real contact there. So, when I came back after University, back to Liverpool, I began to go into the town centre. Having lived out in the suburbs, I used to go into the town centre, to the clubs and there was a movement going on as poetry as performance. I used to read about the Beats, and listening to Howl, I had the record of that and Christopher Logue who recorded poems by Neruda to Jazz and I know Laurie Lee was doing it in London, Michael Horovitz and people like that.

They used to do readings in Liverpool, in a coffee bar called 'Streets' and then there was regular poetry and jazz evenings there, with local poets; a Beatnik atmosphere and I went along and started doing readings there. I met Adrian through that, I'd seen him around, he was an art college lecturer and then Brian turned up one night. He was very young then and a journalist for the local paper. He was there to see what was going on and that's how we met each other. We didn't team up, the problems then being that Brian in particular was younger, and I saw more of Adrian than Brian socially but we got involved in doing things. At the time of course, this was when The Beatles were around and there was a focus on Liverpool. Local television would put us on the air reading poems in clubs or in the cemetery of the Anglican Cathedral with a group of art students all sitting round, it looked very glamorous and great, and probably caught people's attention.

I didn't know this, but Brian says that the then Poetry Editor of Penguin, had heard of Brian and of me. He wanted another poet and Brian suggested Adrian. At that point the Editor wasn't sure who he was going team up in this book. So, in the same way as 'The Scaffold' came together, to just make an alignment, we didn't actually seek each other out as a group, a

threesome. We were part of a larger group, an amorphous group, doing poetry, comedy and satire; some television people saw a group of us and they chose five of the group, auditioned them for television and eventually chose three. The three were Mike McCartney, John Gorman and myself; we became 'The Scaffold'. So, this was all during the same time. In a funny way we grew to have more in common but became friends over the years, when age difference became less specific. We had certain things in common, we wanted poetry to be accessible, certainly we used images from street hoardings and advertising commercials, which at the time were very new, very fresh in those days, people forget this, you know the television adverts - to use them in a poem was very shocking and funny. In away like Rauschenberg was using images of comic cartoon characters in art. The same thing happened here, we had art college links, more than the music, the music has been associated with us, we forever had these labels 'Pop Poetry', 'Beat Poetry' all that sort of stuff. The original 'Pop Poetry' tag was because of the art link and the connections with Pop Art rather than Pop music and it was all rather confusing.

Do you feel Pop Art had a great effect on your own poetry?

In a sense that it was, something that seemed very modern and it seemed very clear and of today in away and a lot of paintings prior to that, a lot of the art scene was Sir Robert Dalton and post war years' sort of stuff and poetry seemed to belong to what other people did.

You came from a working class background, how did you overcome the prejudices of the then poetry scene and being a poet?

There were no magazines around; the only poetry magazines were Encounter and London Magazine as I remember. I remember sending poems off to them and them sending the poems back, not rejecting me out of hand but often so. There was a magazine called Ambit, which is still going, amazingly enough, and I had some poems in that. Martin Bax was very supportive, he organised readings with various Northern Poets and I was doing readings in Manchester and then Brian created a magazine called Underdog, which he used to publish our work in and of course the poetry readings round Liverpool helped. Reading in these clubs was a way of reaching an audience and we were supported in that. There were lots of clubs and often there would be a place that during the weekend was a folk club or on another night rock 'n roll club, and on a Monday it would be dark and we'd get it cheap, probably get it for nothing. So, we organised readings there and put up posters and people would come along, flock along and it was sometimes every week. Sometimes I hosted them, sometimes Brian or Adrian, and other people would be doing it but it did keep you writing because suddenly there was the audience for you and you couldn't repeat yourself too much. So, a lot of poetry was written there.

How do you feel live poetry has changed since this early 'Pop' scene?

It's one of those hard things, people always say, it went up and went down but from my point of view it never has, it's much the same. It's been a growing thing with me; I've always had good audiences. If there's been a lull it wasn't where I was. I've always been very busy, sometimes stuff with 'The Scaffold' and when 'The Scaffold' packed up, I was on my own as a poet and then I worked with Brian. I've done shows with Liz Lochhead and various things. So, it's always been finding new ways of doing it, I've done poetry shows with music, using a set and often using sound effects, and playing with it. So, I've always tried to make it theatrical because early on I sat through poetry readings that seemed to be precious, and difficult for an audience to listen to. It's the idea that poetry is good because its difficult, the sense that the more difficult the poem was the better it was. I never quite subscribed to that really.

But there are those who try their hand at poetry in the belief that it will make them rich, famous or infamous. How do you feel about that?

I used to take it all very seriously; I still do take it very seriously but you should remember that you're not in control. I should be fiercer than I am sometimes about this. People who give poetry a go but that doesn't work, go on to something else, they go onto singing or something but poetry is something that you do anyway and I say this to anybody who is like this that the gift is the writing of the poetry and that's the great thing. They can say, "That's alright for you", in a way it is, I'm getting published but it is basically still true, if you're going to be a poet, you're going to be a poet. You go on and do it, whether or not how successful you are depends on so many things out of your control, but you've got to keep on writing, instead of saying I'll give it a go and if it doesn't work out, I'll do something else, that's a wrong reason.

Do you feel a poet is born or that you can learn to write poetry?

I don't know, I used to think that but you've got to say to people that you can all do it. Everyone can learn to draw better or be a painter. This is not the best craftsmanship initially because I was put off being artist because I wasn't a good enough craftsman but I think that was less important, I think I could have mastered that because I've got a way of looking at something and that's the way I have with poetry. Where that vision comes from is somewhere else really and that's harder to identify, to spot.

If we can back track a bit to your years at Hull, what changes do you feel you went through as a poet during those early years? What fired your imagination and love of language?

I'd listen to recording of Under Milk Wood and heard what could be done with language and read a lot of Thomas Wolfe, prose work and some of the French Poets in translation. Prior to that, I thought the idea of the artist and what a poet could be was rooted in the historic and then I read the Beats, Kerouac and people like that and sensed the excitement they felt from it. Poetry to them wasn't something that was hobby or pass-time. Also the way Cummings was using language, a lot of my early poems had that but looking back on my early stuff it was very much ballad form. I used that form and also took to using capital letters, running words together. That became a sort of a hallmark, which got in the way eventually and I stopped doing that, you can see that my style has changed from my first poems, which were very serious, quite dark and they're all about the usual teenage angst.

What kind of editing process do you go through?

I've got loads and loads and loads of notebooks and that's what I've always done, written in them and usually transferred them to another book, with crossings out and more crossings out. I look at my books sometimes to see the way a poem was conceived, like Harps and Flowers, which is quite a long poem for me, about two pages, about my Auntie, she had a mastectomy, and it's about that really. I left it alone for years and then went back to it with the idea of her being our babysitter and wrote it out and did one version, did another version, and another version and suddenly a few months had passed before I'd got a draft of it. Sometimes you can keep a couple of poems going at the same time like this but I always think the more you write, the more you write. People talk about writers block, but if you have your notebooks there, there's always something half-finished there. I always go back to something that was not started or didn't work and try to get something to work. I find the best, most successful way writing works is when part of the brain takes its eye off the ball and the poem sort of achieves itself.

To discuss writers block further, do you believe it exists or do you think it's more down to the ego of the poet getting in the way?

I don't know actually, probably there is writers block for all sorts of reasons but as I say, if you start to write something, finish it. The exciting part is always about finding out what the poem is doing and the excitement of getting to the end and finding what you're writing about. I don't really believe this idea that you write a poem about something. People who don't write poetry think that the poem comes out fully formed or you write a poem about something and of course you can do that and I think that's part of the craft. Poets should be able to turn their hand to something, write a good poem about something but the best poems don't know where they really are. You start to write and at some point the poem itself directs you.

When Andrew Motion was named the Poet Laureate, after the death of Hughes, your name was mentioned as a possible contender. Is it something you'll consider when Motion stands down and what do you think you could bring to the post?

Much the same, I think he's (Motion) good in the way he's raised the profile of poetry, and that's something I would have probably done as well. I'd work hard to do that; I spend a lot of time in schools with children, that's important and I'd continue to do that but to be serious to it. I wouldn't worry too much about the Royal side of it; I wouldn't let it get me down.

Your poem The Last Strike appears in the Apples & Snakes Anthology, and concerns the 80s strikes but in the notes you discuss the fact you were still living in Liverpool but wanting to make the move to London. Did the change of the environment act as a catalyst to your work?

I was going through a bad patch emotionally in Liverpool, for various reasons, marriage broken up, The Scaffold broken up and I was getting more and more work down in London, and my then girlfriend was down in London. It seemed the sort of way to go, to break away from it and go down and do something else. Then it sort of became just about being a poet and writing. I don't know how much the poetry changed, probably not that much in away, if you know what I mean, your voice is still the same. For example, in my recent poem, Geography, it ends up in the sense that no matter how far you travel, everything I'd already learnt, I already knew.

Do you feel current affairs effects your work?

It must do, after 9/11, there were poems written about it and even if there weren't poems written about that, there is always something that affects the way you are. Today, a friend of mine phoned me up and he's got cancer and we talked about that and that affects my writing. I'm not saying I'm going to write a poem about him, but everything that happens to you, you read about, you worry and you do. I think poets can be very inward looking and I sometimes wonder if I should be writing more poems about current affairs, expressing opinion, putting the poems out there but if you can't do it, you can't do it.

Your Collected Poems (Penguin) must have been a mammoth task, how did you go about selecting and ordering your back catalogue of work?

What I did in fact is that I got all the poems and had them all photocopied. I just went through them and some poems I was never quite so happy with but if you go by those decisions what you can't do is take out a poem because you don't like how it shows you to be. Attitudes have changed a lot since the sixties, attitudes about women and that sort of thing, it seems very arrogant to be jack the lad in your work, but you can't throw those out because that's how you were and that's the truth. So, you keep those, the only ones I dropped out were ones that were in my first book Watch Word, a lot of the poems had been written, commissioned for this

television programme 'Eleventh Hour', they worked well at the time but they were about specific things, they hadn't lasted, they were interesting historically or socially but not as poetry. So, I threw them out. I also went down to a place I go to, called Mount Pleasant in Ryegate, Surrey and they've got a snooker table there and I laid all the poems out on it. It was like the war office and I tried to put them in order that was a hell of a job actually. I decided not to do them chronologically, I didn't find that interesting, I tried to make the collection more like a life.

Do you feel the poems have got easier as you've aged?

One of the things I've noticed that's going on is that I take longer over them. Maybe when you first start writing it's such a thrill to be writing and you think, "Bloody hell I've written a poem, put my name on the bottom", "What shall I call it?" It's very exciting and sometimes it's the immediate reaction to something. You're getting down to the way you write it, how you present it, this takes longer and sometimes I take a lot of care about them and how they're set out, twelve poems with twelve lines each or thirteen poems with thirteen lines each. It works for me to set myself the task of doing a poem like that, one that rhymes, one that doesn't, so you're clear. That's always gone on. What I do find getting as I get older is that I spend longer on them because, (A) I want to try and get it right, and also; (B) Because I don't like letting them go, in case I don't get another one.

Do you have advice for any the next generation of poets out there?

Probably the same as ever; if you're a published writer, you're on your own mate and don't forget you're lucky to have it. It's always hard, there's one thing that's said to me, "It's alright for your Rog, you were in the sixties and in Liverpool," as if that made it easy. The implication being is that if he or she had been around then they'd be publishing and doing all right. It's an odd thing to say but people say it, I could say, "I'd wish I'd been around New York in the fifties," as if it would have made me Kerouac, because it wouldn't. To the young poet, this is your time, there is nothing more exciting than where you are at the moment, you may not think that now but you will later on.

Do you prefer writing for children or adults?

Often the pattern in things, if I'm writing some poems or there's a book coming out and there's poems coming along for adults, then all the poems are quite serious, not all. You're pursuing things and looking inside yourself, when that's finished, suddenly it's really nice just to play with language and that's often the starting point for the children's poems. Like taking a well-known phrase or saying and then going there, and then it sort of becomes a release really from myself, to do children's poems. Not that they have to be silly or that any less work goes into them, that's not true, there's a different level to the way it works.

Where and how do you write?

I now have a sort of study, where I have desk and all the other writing things, a computer behind me, though I don't write poetry directly on to it because it always looks too perfect and too easy. I always write with a pen, then the last thing is getting it typed out but it wasn't always so when I first started writing, I'd write anywhere. I didn't have a desk for the first forty years of my life, I used dining room tables, buses; I don't drive, so I spent a lot of time on buses and trains, in the tube, making notes and writing there.

Read more on Roger's continuing tour dates and publications at:

[www.rogermcgough.org.uk](http://www.rogermcgough.org.uk)

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Damn Near Illegal: Steve Aylett

Interview by Samantha Morton

For those of you who are unaware of Aylett's work, Aylett is one of the cutting edge satirical writers of the last ten years, not merely pandering to the ideals of Swift but taking a razor blade to it and carving it up for the consumerist generation. Aylett is a rare and refreshing voice in UK Writing but how did this Bromley boy, born in an era of love and flower power produce a book of such haunting hatred as The Crime Studio? Generally regarded as a cry for help, Aylett followed up The Crime Studio with a prolific output that would make Stephen King gasp for air, before you backed your car over him for the second time. Aylett produced throughout the nineties, book after book, Bigot Hall, Slaughtermatic, The Inflatable Volunteer, Toxicology, Only an Alligator, Atom, The Velocity Gospel, Dummyland, Karloff's Circus and Shamanspace. Published by Orion in the UK and Four Walls Eight Windows in the states, Aylett's style of writing won him a place as a finalist in 1998 Philip K Dick Award. His disturbing and humorous novels and stories have found their way into Spanish, Czech, Italian, French, Japanese, German, Russian and Greek languages. His short story Brain a Goat Snappy, a story that is equally bizarre, exploring the world of magazine publisher, can be found in Velocity: The Best of Apples & Snakes (Black Spring Press 2003 ISBN 0 948238-28-3). More people should know about Aylett and more writers should take a leaf out of his book.

"In the satirical writing I do, it's coming up with loads of original ideas and images and packing them very close together so they're sparking off each other and making a sort of toxic glow, like a really weird substance has been created. That's the sort of stuff I would like to read, ideally, and because no-one really does that, I have to write it myself. I also occasionally write surreal poetic nonsense, which Brain a Goat Snappy is".

No one can question Aylett's self belief and beguiling misdemeanour but how does he explain his job to people who just baulk at his titles, do they reach for phone and call the police?

"I say I write books. When they ask what sort of books I write, though, it gets a bit more complicated, especially if I'm talking to someone who never reads books. I'll end up describing it in a way even I don't recognise".

But recognise Aylett you will, his humour and his ability to twist phrases and situations can be found in Brain a Goat Snappy. A short story concerning a magazine publisher, who has given his readers exactly what is says on the cover. Is this Aylett smashing the pomp and titillation of magazines that promise women love in five easy steps or should magazines actually deliver what they promise?

Aylett somehow blends the cruel and philosophical satire of Voltaire with the Frank Zappa's back catalogue. His protagonists inhabit a world of lies and the grotesque, a world that is instantly recognisable as our own but where do the ideas come from?

"My writing is usually a lot more satirical, like in Slaughtermatic and Shamanspace. It's fun to just do something really stupid occasionally. I once did a whole book in this style, called The Inflatable Volunteer, which is hilarious".

Aylett could be accused of being over self-confident, smug in his response but Aylett is rare writer, he believes in his work without any apparent nagging worries but there must have been a time, that he sat down at his computer and questioned what the hell he was doing?

"There was one story in Toxicology called 'Idler' which wasn't up to snuff. It had a bunch of good ideas at the start, then just degenerated into a descriptive 'creative writing' exercise. It was only about two pages long, but the second page wasn't very good".

Are there moments or events that keep Aylett awake at night?

"Wasting people's time, which is an insult. Nobody else seems to even recognise the concept, though, these days".

In Velocity, Apples & Snakes drew on two decades of writers to bring together the collection, how did Aylett come to work with A&S?

"I've done a couple of Apples & Snakes readings at the BAC. I think I did bits from Toxicology and short stuff like that. I like acting it out in stupid voices and so on. And not going on too long".

In the wake of The Big Read, the country seems now to be more turned on by sci-fi and fantasy but did any sci-fi writers influence Aylett?

"Voltaire, Lewis Carroll, Jack Vance, Kerouac, Ingersoll and JP Donleavy".

Any what of his contemporaries?

"They are almost totally indistinguishable from each other and say nothing original".

This kind of response is typical of Aylett, refreshing in his way that he just cuts through the argument. Aylett won't sit on the fence, he'll burn the bloody thing down and wait for the ensuing chaos and point at it as if to say, 'I told you so'. But when Aylett shuffles off this mortal coil, how would he like his contemporaries to remember him?

"As one of the last independently functioning brains. But of course, I won't be remembered".

Many interviewers never ask the big questions of writers, because many times they don't know what those questions are.

"Would you like this suitcase of money?"

Straight to the point and time for the pop quiz question to fall back on. If you could have anyone, living, dead or fictional, to talk to who would they be and why?

"Fairuza Balk. Because I would want to watch her mouth like a firework display".

Aylett now dreams of hundreds of people reading this article rushing to their computers, their internet connections, their books of Who's Who or the little known title Who the hell is that? Trying to find out who Fairuza Balk is - she appeared in the film The Craft and played Dorothy in The Return to Oz. There now may be collective sigh of, 'oh yes her', but more likely in this day and age there will still be the stamping of feet, the slumping of shoulders and the puckering of mouths before they swear and add the tag 'who?' somewhere in the expletive. And you can't blame them.

As the market becomes more commercial and most new novelists are mainly signed for their looks and not talent, see Fairuza Balk as a reference point, what kind of advice could Aylett give to those writers out there who have not been translated into Czech and who are more than likely still struggling with English

"I would ask that they say something original and interesting, perhaps something which hasn't been written before - but in saying that, I'd know that I would be sending them like a lamb to the slaughter, in regards to the market. If they want to make money, just write the stuff that's already out there - learn those rules. It depends whether they want to be genuinely creative or not. Genuine creativity is damn near illegal at the moment, and I'm sure it'll creep into the actual legislation soon. I'm just a bit perverse in staying with it".

Steve Aylett's new book [Karloff's Circus](#) (Accomplice 4) is now available from Amazon priced £6.99

For further information on the writer, visit:

<http://www.steveaylett.com>

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Variation To The Local Geography: The Mind of Hilary Mantel.

Interview by Incorporating Writing readers

Two months ago, with the permission of Hilary Mantel we laid down the gauntlet to our readers to submit one question only to be answered by the writer herself. Sixteen hours in and we had over one hundred questions, as

the deadline hit, we had two hundred and we're still receiving them now. For the one hundred and ninety questioners who weren't selected, we apologise, the final selection was by random means and was fairest way of selecting who and who wouldn't go forward. So congratulations if your name appears here or if the question you wanted to ask got answered.

Hilary Mantel was born in Glossop, Derbyshire, England on 6 July 1952. She studied Law at the London School of Economics and Sheffield University. She was employed as a social worker, and lived in Botswana for five years, followed by four years in Saudi Arabia, before returning to Britain in the mid-1980s. In 1987 she was awarded the Shiva Naipaul Memorial Prize for an article about Jeddah, and she was film critic for *The Spectator* from 1987 to 1991.

Her novels include Eight Months on Ghazzah Street (1988), set in Jeddah; Fludd (1989), set in a mill village in the north of England and winner of the Winifred Holtby Memorial Prize, the Cheltenham Prize and the Southern Arts Literature Prize; A Place of Greater Safety (1992), an epic account of the events of the French revolution that won the Sunday Express Book of the Year award; A Change of Climate (1994), the story of a missionary couple whose lives are torn apart by the loss of their child; and An Experiment in Love (1995), about the events in the lives of three schoolfriends from the north of England who arrive at London University in 1970, winner of the 1996 Hawthornden Prize.

Her recent novel The Giant, O'Brien (1998) tells the story of Charles O'Brien who leaves his home in Ireland to make his fortune as a sideshow attraction in London. Her latest books are Giving Up the Ghost: A Memoir (2003), an autobiography in fiction and non-fiction told in four parts, taking the reader from early childhood through to the discoveries in adulthood that led her to writing, and Learning to Talk: Short Stories (2003).

How do you understand other peoples' sadness so well, just for the younger writers to know (Terry Dooley)

"It's a real compliment to you - as a person, and also a writer - if someone tells you that you have that capacity. The conventional response would be, 'I've had a difficult life.' In other words, I would lean on my personal experience. That is useful, but only up to a point. Experience can be over-rated. Empathy and analysis is more important. I think that to understand other people, you lay the template of their character on your own: you examine the common areas, then with particular care you examine the off-cuts. If you write about a character - whether real or invented - you will begin to understand the sadnesses and deprivations that activate them, as well as their hopes and aspirations, and so you will see and understand the origins of their actions. In novels, characters can't just be - they have to act, and evolve. Something has to change, page to page - they get better or worse, they do better or worse. They are making choices all the time. Every choice leaves in its wake a trail of other choices that your character might have made; there lie the origins of regret".

Where do you write? (Zack Dykes)

"I write wherever I am. I always have a small notebook and if I am away for a night I take my big A4 journal. I do my best work in these. They contain the outlines of more novels and stories than I will ever live to write. I finalise what I write at my desk in a corner of a big light room, in a flat in a converted hospital in Surrey. I work from my handwritten notes, on to a PC".

In the NY Review of Books, you are compared with Graham Greene, as being the 'blackest of black comedians', where do you think this dark side of your writing comes from? (Georgina Ragan)

"Well, *Glossop*, actually...see answers below. Catholicism is important; I don't know whether it produced my dark side, or simply nourished it. Like most converts, Greene sees the powerful, intellectually masterful aspect of his chosen faith, whereas I am a cradle Catholic, and grew up exposed to a great deal of stupidity and superstition. But I think it helped me as a writer because Catholicism is an early introduction to the metaphorical side of life. You learn that every prosaic event has an enhanced and symbolic meaning, a metaphysical shadow. And issues of belief and unbelief are examined early. You understand the power of faith even if you don't have it. The darkness comes from the knowledge of the closeness of sin, even if you don't believe in sins in the Catholic sense. You are aware that, at any moment, things might go wrong, but also that things might go ill - which is slightly different, and worse".

Do you feel your childhood in Glossop had any effect on your writing?  
(Sheila Catterall)

"I was fortunate to be born in a wild and beautiful part of England. But it takes the development of a Romantic sensibility to make a person get beyond chilblains and taciturnity. What I noticed as a child was not the beauty of the surroundings, but how they seemed to shut people in. What I mainly sensed when I was growing up was a bleak, black humour. I was born in Glossop but grew up in Hadfield, a sort of sub-sub-Glossop, an outpost, which was even more out-flung. You may be familiar with the TV series *The League of Gentlemen*. Much of it was filmed around Hadfield. Some of the residents are very proud of this. They take it as a tribute. You can take a tour of the locations. I didn't write it myself, as some people have suggested. My novel *Fludd* is set in a heightened version of the Hadfield of my childhood imagination, with some variation to the local geography. I don't any longer have family in the immediate area, but feel very strong ties of memory".

Has there been subjects in your writing that you've approached with trepidation? And if so, what were they and how did you overcome them?  
(Paul Madison)

"Not so much subjects - but I approach the realist mode with fear. When I wrote *A Change of Climate*, I was telling a sober story, with a certain expansiveness that I haven't deployed elsewhere, and I felt responsibility for my characters, and to my reader. The story needed to work out - not happily, maybe, but in a certain form that would satisfy the reader. This seemed to me a need generated by the realist form, rather than anything true to life. I found it a constraint. I did my best to satisfy both myself and the reader, by opening areas of ambiguity in the closing pages. I suppose I will take on any subject, if it takes on me. Then I will try to find the right way to work with it".

Do you feel your work loses something in translation? And how important do you feel the English language is to conveying your work? (Andre Truffaut)

"Lost in Translation? Andre, yes, I feel it must be so. But what can one do? There is one translation of a novel of mine into French that goes wrong in the very first line. It may be that it is the first and only error. But I don't want to read on! Besides, my French is rusty - like so many English people, I am really a glum monoglot. So I feel I am not qualified to form an opinion about most of my translations. I suppose that every author wishes he or she could write a superb but transparent prose, easily translatable. However, I know I cannot aspire to this. Everything I write is infused with quotation - I cannot help this. I even speak intertextually. Of course, when I am writing certain characters, their speech must be banal, to be true to them. I try to catch the demotic, and

catch it so that it is a source of fun. But then again, that is another problem for the translator - the street-talk of a language doesn't travel. I think that in a book like *The Giant, O'Brien*, what I am writing is a poetic prose, and it works best when read aloud - it is very dependent on heightened language and peculiar cadences".

What excites you and what depresses you? (Claire Jacobs)  
 "Nature and humanity, respectively".

What are you working on at the moment? (Stephen Davies)  
 "I am finishing a novel called *Beyond Black*, a contemporary comedy about a professional psychic. Then I will be writing a radio play called *The Price of Light*, based on a true story and set in the eighteenth century in Vienna. Then a sort of extended essay, a short non-fiction book called *The Woman Who Died of Robespierre*".

Many writers express the fact that they are adults who have never really grown up, how much do you feel the child inside you has affected your work? (David Cross)  
 "I don't really feel like someone who has never grown up, more like someone who was always grown-up. Maybe it comes to the same thing".

Where do your ideas come from? (Marsha Stevens)  
 "Personal memory and general history. I'm not conscious of 'making up' stories, rather of stumbling across them. I gather up interesting locations, ideas and fragments into my notebook, not knowing what they will become. I guess 80% of the material goes nowhere but the other 20%, perhaps over many years, coheres to other bits of material and slowly forms up into a usable idea. I think that anything that leaves me very puzzled - someone's behaviour, let's say - is likely to be the genesis of an idea, because I will work and work at it for years until finally I am ready to explore it on the page. Also, many ideas come through reading non-fiction. You find a footnote that leads you on. I think you get quick at spotting your kind of material and your kind of character. I like the macabre and I like unorthodox ideas which are ahead of their time - whether they are political or spiritual or scientific. I like the potential for comedy. I expect that a good idea won't show its potential at once. It's usually about 7 years for me, between idea and finished book, so the original form of the idea is much less important than what it might become".

Hilary Mantel, on behalf of Incorporating Writing, Inc. and your readers, thank you for taking time out to answer ten of the two hundred questions we received from our readers.  
 "Thank you for these good questions".

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 A Day in the Life of...

Julia Bird, Marketing & Education Officer at the Poetry Book Society

I go to work on the Clapham omnibus. I don't know whether or not its passengers' opinions are still held to represent those of all middle England, but catch the 77 at just the right time in the morning and it's full of schoolkids, not average men in the street. The kids' opinions are worth eavesdropping though - I sit unobtrusively at the back of the bus and listen in. Recently, the driver had to shush two girls who were sitting in the luggage rack, eating pasties from Greggs and arguing loudly about the existence of God.

Theology allowing, I get to the PBS, in its boxy Victorian building between Clapham Junction station and Young's Brewery, by 9. The Poetry Book Society, founded by T S Eliot and friends in the 1950s, is an organisation dedicated to the promotion of contemporary poetry. We run a book club

selling the brightest and best new titles to a community of poetry readers, we award the annual T S Eliot poetry prize and we also organise poetry promotion projects. There are three members of staff: director Chris, me, and Clare, the Membership & Sales Officer. I devise ways to create and maintain the membership of the PBS, oversee its selection procedure, produce the quarterly *Bulletin* magazine, and work on our projects.

The first post brings jiffy bags full of manuscripts from the 300+ poetry publishers on our books. Our panel of poet-selectors pick the half dozen 'best books' from the scores of titles published each quarter. We solicit submissions from the largest London imprint to the smallest kitchen table operation - and officially I manage the submission process on behalf of the panel. Unofficially, the sneak previews of new books I get are one of the best perks of the job. Don Paterson's *Landing Light* won the 2003 T S Eliot Prize in January - I first read its bundle of loose pages on the 77 home last July. I got so tangled up in it, I missed my stop - having previously thought that was only supposed to happen to the writers of bad thriller blurbs.

Depending on how they're doing with their reading, one of the Selectors might ring in during the morning with the announcement of the new season's recommended books. This anxiously awaited news gets passed on to publishers and poets, then feeds into the production of the next *Bulletin* magazine. We've had a lot of debut collections recommended recently - an especial thrill for poets and publishers, and for me too, if they're writers whose progress I've followed in magazines or competition winnings. This submission / selection / selling process happens four times a year - the cycles overlap and work six months in advance of books' publication - so it's a complex code of stripes and stickers we need on the wallplanner to guide us through the year.

Lunch is a cheese sandwich at my desk, a rush through *The Independent* and a bottoming out of my Hotmail inbox. As well as my work for the PBS, I manage the occasional freelance literature development project. I co-ordinated the Richmond literature festival last year, and am currently working on a touring project with the British Council involving young UK and Hungarian poets. The locating of bilingual proofreaders, editing of on-line tour diaries and booking of many, many train tickets gets slotted into lunch hours and weekends.

When I introduce myself as a poetry promoter, people ask me if I laze about reading poems all day. Not *all* day - but a typical afternoon job does involve the close and creative reading of the books we sell. Almost ten percent of PBS members are secondary school teachers. Their quarterly membership packages contain the books, *Bulletins* and discounts that all members receive, but they also get poetry posters and discussion ideas based on our new stock. I write these discussion ideas, aware of the way poetry teaching has changed since I was at school, when a favoured analytical technique involved dissecting and labelling a poem with a yellow highlighter pen for metaphors and a pink one for pathetic fallacies. Pupils' imaginative and critical faculties do have more room to breathe now. That said, it's not our place to boost SAT scores or bump up league table standings. The PBS' education work reflects the realities of the 2004 classroom, but our aim is to foster a life-long love of poetry in all age groups. PBS teacher members are equally committed - annual renewal rates for schools are nearly 80%.

I don't know what arts admin career heights one has to reach before one is excused envelope-stuffing duties, but I expect to attain them about two days before I retire. The PBS distributes 60,000 membership leaflets a year, 10,000 membership parcels and more than 3,000 books. While some of

this piece-work is subbed out, we're never more than a few days away from a ream of renewal letters and a box of C5 self-sealers. When there's no room in my head for any more words, usually late Friday afternoon, it's time to stuff envelopes. Your hands can work independently, leaving your brain free to concentrate on singing along to the radio or telling stories.

It's for the stories as well the poems that I'll go on to a reading or book launch after work. The man on the Clapham omnibus would probably be the first to opine that London is made up of a series of villages. It's true, but these villages are about community as much as geography - and the inhabitants of London's poetry village are the audience, performers and promoters involved in the dozens of events taking place each week in the capital's concert halls, cafés and pubs. I've been resident for a few years now, so performances and events are full of my colleagues and friends. A stage-stopping reading or the arrival of a thrilling new collection reminds us why we work in literature promotion, but after the art is done, we'll swap news and gossip about both locals and incomers, and try not to make village idiots of ourselves at launch party free bars.

The conversations continue as those who are heading south catch the last tube home. Anyone who wants to is welcome to listen in.

Poetry Book Society members get information, guidance and discounts on hundreds of poetry books - for more details, visit the PBS website at [www.poetrybooks.co.uk](http://www.poetrybooks.co.uk)

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Begin anywhere

Article by Roselle Angwin

For a long time, I stated - ad nauseam - to my students that there was no such thing as writers' block. I quoted Peter de Vries' words when asked whether he waited for inspiration before writing: 'Yes, and I make sure that I am inspired at nine o'clock every morning.'

I really believed that such a phenomenon as writer's block was a delusion, a failure of confidence, something that could be willed away. Mind over matter and get on with it - stop being such a prima donna. (I don't actually say this, but it has been my attitude.) Just sit down and write the first sentence. Then another; and another.

Over the years of course I have written probably billions of sentences in articles, stories, poems and reviews and a number of published and unpublished full-length manuscripts, with never a moment's hesitation. I'd never found myself unable to write.

Now I understand. I'm no longer quite so cavalier. Partway through my second novel I hit Block. Big block. For weeks, even months, I felt as if my tongue and my hands were tied. The worst of it was that that book had become so 'forefront' I couldn't do anything else either.

I don't know how it is for others - you - but maybe it's always the same: it wasn't that I didn't like what I wrote; it wasn't even that I didn't know what to write next. I had the plot all worked out in my head, and a chapter-by-chapter breakdown (sort of) on paper. It was just that I couldn't actually make myself get the words down.

I am learning, now, to be gentle on myself (I'm much harder on myself than I am on my students).

The truth is, there are times when I simply can't write. That's how it is. There may be any number of reasons: times of personal crisis or change;

times when the ideas are not 'ripe' enough, when you need to write something else, something different; times when you're too tired, or distracted, or stressed; times when what you really need is a treat, or a rest, or a walk or some input from something or someone else. Or when something else is more pressing than writing. Maybe, as Hemingway (was it?) said, the well needs to be filled up again before you can draw anything off. Maybe - as I explore elsewhere in this book - you are simply still somewhere else in the creative process, incubating.

And sometimes you have to just sit and do it anyway. The wisdom, of course, lies in differentiating between states.

It's a bright December morning, and I've cleared a day to write (this year, this has been a relatively rare occurrence). Because I need space to think, away from admin, phone and family, I treat myself to breakfast in the local wholefood café by the church, where I can see trees and sky and jackdaws. The café's warm and the coffee's good and the light slanting in is of just the right quality and intensity, and the lunch-time quiches and cheese scones are steaming temptingly and my folder is sitting weighty and promising on the table beside me. There was a stimulating programme on the radio as I drove in - Melvyn Bragg's *In Our Time*, exploring the connections between language and thought and identity, something which interests me greatly. So as I sit down my head is full of ideas and I can't wait to get back to the next piece for this book, which is today's agenda.

I'll just have a look at the newspaper, I think; I don't get much time to read papers at the moment. Just five minutes with my coffee.

But the paper - of course - is back-to-back disasters: too many to process. It seems to be worse even than usual at the moment: an unmitigated picture of grotesque murders and senseless cruelties. And five minutes in and already I've lost it, unable to wrench my mind away from the news, and unconvinced that anything we can do, even anything creative, can stand between us and some of the grimmer aspects of life.

How can writing do anything to tackle unnameable pain and fear and torture and injustice? And if it can't, then is it just a comfortable bourgeois indulgence? And if that's the case, where does that leave me?

I'm full of fear and dread suddenly for this world we live in; for all of us, all our fragile lives; for another young local girl who's gone missing so soon after the last tragedy; for my own daughter; for Iraq and Palestine and Israel and numerous other countries; for what today seems like an insuperable excess of the clashes of violence and powerlessness in our species; for my own helplessness.

Right now, once again where it leaves me is with my hands tied and my mouth stopped. There. That's how it is. So after an hour of not writing, I get up and go out; look at the bare trees, the Christmas lights, people's faces, the traffic, the moors just visible beyond the town. And I drive home: east wind, mud on the lanes, cattle in the dunny winter fields.

And I can't write a word.

Q: Do I let it go, or push on through? A: Today I really want to write. OK. So how to find a way in?

Peter Redgrove's essay on 'Work and Incubation' that a friend has sent me sits in my folder. I scanned it through again just now; and here is Rodin, answering a younger artist's question: 'What do I do when I can't work?' 'Work at something else.' Anything, actually, will do. Keep a folder of 'rainy day ideas' that you can pick up and put down. Edit yesterday's work.

Wash the dishes. Bake some bread. Make or play some music. Go for a walk. Be gentle with yourself. Go look at the bare winter trees. Write about them. Remember you're a writer. Write something. Write anything. Begin somewhere. Write about what's stopping you. Write yourself through it. Begin somewhere.

As I think this I think about the many times I've said (perhaps not so brutally, but the gist is there): 'I don't care if you don't feel like writing. You say you're a writer. Sit down and do it anyway.' Easy words.

Time for my own medicine. Write yourself through it. And there's my gap. Instead of 'forcing' myself to write the chapter for the book, I write to a friend of how distressed I was at this morning's news, how it's affected the rest of my day. (So often the problem and the solution arise in the same place - reading words 'blocked' me; writing words about not feeling able to write, and about those read words, frees me.)

And now, here I am: writing something; writing about what's stopping me, about that whole process. And - see - here's what I needed for the book.

For the truth is writers write. It's what we do; it's how we make sense of the world; it's how the world speaks to us; it's how we answer, and how we question. It needs no justification and maybe value judgements are anathema. We may not stop the world or change the world or even speak to one other person. But still we write. 'The real writer is one who really writes' says Marge Piercy. 'Work is its own cure. You have to like it better than being loved.'

Roselle Angwin is an author & poet, and Director of the 'Fire in the Head' creative & reflective writing programme. This extract is taken from her Arts-Council-funded new book 'Writing the Bright Moment - living the writing life', a collection of essays & exercises from 13 years' of Roselle's workshops, and includes work from other well-known writer-tutors. The book is due out from Fire in the Head in September at £10 plus £2 p&p; advance orders 20% discount. See [www.roselle-angwin.co.uk](http://www.roselle-angwin.co.uk)

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Polarising Press: from The North to The Poetry Business

The Poetry Business was started by Peter Sansom in 1986, mainly as a workshop base and for the publishing of pamphlets and The North magazine. Janet Fisher joined as co-director in 1989, and Anita Fenton as Administrator in 1994.

Although (or maybe because) we publish very few titles (4 or 5 main collections a year, plus half a dozen pamphlets) we have achieved a reputation for being one of the best independent literary publishers in the country.

The Poetry Business' priorities are (1) the spreading of interest in contemporary poetry, (2) the encouragement of new writers, (3) the publishing of work of new and established writers, and; (4) the setting of high artistic standards. It's ongoing activities are publishing poetry books, pamphlets and (formerly) cassettes under our imprint Smith/Doorstep Books. The publication of the literary magazine, The North. The running of the annual Books and Pamphlet Competition and co-ordinating Writing Days and the Writing School.

#### The North

Since the first issue - A4, typewritten and stapled - appeared in 1986, desktop publishing has come a long way. Poetry too, not least with the

emergence of Bloodaxe Books and their impact on other publishers' lists. Peter Samson once that *The North* was them turning their=r noses up at a prevailing southerly wind: poetry rather than poems. Samson didn't want to limit northerly concerns along whippet and flatcap lines, or to pretend to more of a manifesto than the magazine had then or will ever have. In any case, *The North* have always published as many southerners as natives and, their string vests notwithstanding, more women than most. They've also been lucky in the American and American-influenced writers who have sent in work.

*The North* magazine started life as the *Journal of the English Society*, Samsom was a research assistant at his alma mater, Huddersfield Polytechnic. The first issue included such writers as Carol Ann Duffy (even then a rising star), Harry Guest, Jon Silkin, Michael Schmidt, and a local lad by the name of Armitage. It still looks good. After the first few amazingly uneven issues, Janet Fisher became co-editor (and co-director of the Poetry Business Ltd), and they founded the current format, so that in one way or another the magazine has become whatever it is (a 'victim of its own success', a comment made in *Zene*).

With more lit-crit than before, and the conversations between poets and with our 'Blind Criticism' and 'Poets I Go Back To' features, *The North* are performing a slightly different function to when they first set out (alongside such magazines as the *Wide Skirt*, *joe soap's canoe*, *The Echo Room* and the just-then revived *Slow Dancer*). The magazine is still evolving.

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Reviews

CHAPMAN 102-3

Editor: Joy Hendry. Centenary Double issue: £9.95 Regular issue: £6 inc. P&P. 4 Broughton Place, Edinburgh EH1 3RX. Scotland. E-mail: [chapman-pub@blueyonder.co.uk](mailto:chapman-pub@blueyonder.co.uk)

The first issue of CHAPMAN was in 1969. Issue 102-3 is a Centenary Double Issue, the 2nd bumper issue in a series of 3, concentrating on regular contributors to CHAPMAN over the years. It's a handsome A5 300pp production of fiction, poetry, and art, attractively presented. 13 of John Bellany's quirky, captivating paintings are reproduced (in colour). B+W illustrations by other artists complement the written word elsewhere.

The back pages Review section refreshingly includes 3 pages on pamphlets, with an additional 3 pages on theatrical productions, and a piece on the Edinburgh Book Festival.

Amongst the poetry is a translation of Pablo Neruda's work by John Manson. This didn't, in my view, convey Neruda's fruity, evocative style. Instead: 'I breathe at my ease/in the banking garden of this century/which is finally a great current account/in which I'm fortunately in credit.'  
(VII:THE OTHER MEN)

There are 6 pages of Twelfth Century Norse lyrics by George Mackay Brown. I thought GMB had an enchanting lyrical gift, but these 'lyrics' are embers only. A 2 page poem CLOTHES by Liz Lochhead is typically engaging & brisk, but dressed up in banter with the end thread left hanging.

However, this edition of CHAPMAN is weighty enough, & one can find more evocative language elsewhere - Gerry Cambridge's playful & precise pieces, as well as John Murray's LOVER-DIVER:

'I gather wildflowers from the meadows of your eyebrow.  
I brush through the bamboo groves of your eyelid.'

Ian Crockatt's THE IDEALIST:

'In those blonde moments when  
sun and silk marry  
he imprisons himself in her hair'

Or Alec Finlay's deft haiku:

'high in anti-  
oxidants  
the poet's tea'

The fiction (of the 7 stories I read) was on the whole well-written, but lacked, for me, a dimension of dynamic purpose & imaginative drive. Scenes were set, characters shuffled, but to what end, I found myself asking. Only KWIK-UNPICK by Ruth Thomas was engaging, & had something to say:

'The year was rushing towards the meaningless, dog-end days, when people skived, or did stupid, life-endangering things, or left early to go for family holidays in Weston-Super-Mare.' WP

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The Third Alternative Issue 37 Spring 2004  
(TTA Press, £4.00, ISSN 1352-3783)

The Third Alternative is one the UK's best kept literary secrets, over the last ten years, during the tenure of this publication we have seen a renaissance of Science-Fiction. The UK have bred a new generation of writers, now tackling the darker side of sci-fi, gone are the days of Bradbury and wistfully looking towards Mars, gone are Asimov's Barbarians and Empirical fears in Foundation. This generation are looking inwards towards genome, the genetic modifications, they have returned to the fear of Frankenstein and are creating a whole new debate in sci-fi. With the nomination of Margaret Atwood's Oryx and Crake for last year's Man Booker Prize, sci-fi is in the ascendance again - it still has large sales for a genre area but had often been mis-represented as the bastion of geeks and anoraks. Though Atwood's book didn't really explore anything new in the world of sci-fi, it did open the way for an attack on the mainstream audience. Atwood could learn the true meaning of 'visionary' by reading the interview in this edition with her counterpart, Ursulas K. Le Guin.

The Third Alternative is pushing the boundaries further than any other sci-fi magazine in the UK, it is akin to the great sci-fi magazines of the fifties that came out of the United States. The names that appear on their pages are the sci-fi giants of the near distant future, Caselberg, Ashley and Lees. The magazine has this distinct feeling that we are moving forward but looking backwards, it does feel like a copy of Amazing Stories, it has this unshakeable American feel about it but has coupled it together with some of the darker aspects of UK writing. It combines fantastic artwork, exploring the sub-cultures of science-fiction in a fresh, hard but strangely comforting way. Readers will be torn between the content and the way the magazine feels in their hands.

This is the kind of publication you could read on a train and everyone will be drawn in around you, the look of the magazine, the crisp artwork, the easy novel like way it's set out, draws people in. Once in, the reader can explore whole areas that they never knew about, open up veins of debates, glean an insight into graphic novels with Jaspre Bark or followed John Paul Catton through Japan's strange and exhilarating culture. There was a time that Japan seemed the genre's only hope, what we in the west dreamed of, Japanese scientist where making real and with the rise of Manga and the

subsequent peripheralisation of it, a new way has been opened for UK Science Fiction and TTA Press is at the cutting edge of it all. AO

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 Peter Lewin: SILVERDALE  
 (Kendalpress, £4.95, ISBN 0-9545883-8-4)  
 Bruce Barnes: SOMEWHERE ELSE  
 (Utisgutu Press, £7, ISBN 0-9545585-0-2)  
 Nell Farrell: THE WRONG EVANGELINE  
 (Panshine Press, £3, ISBN 0-9546039-0-7)

Is there still room, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, for a poetry of nostalgia? By claiming that the poems in Peter Lewin's new collection renew one's faith in the power of contemporary verse to capture 'exact and poignant memory' Brian Rosebury certainly thinks there is. And I'd be inclined to agree. In SILVERDALE Lewin addresses this question head-on in a sequence of poems marked by his gift for anecdote and their own disarming honesty. In poem after poem, Lewin returns to the haunts of his childhood, naming their names - and the names of his family and playmates - as if the act of naming is enough to bring them back to vivid life.

Lewin grew up in the Silverdale of the title and uses this rural backwater and its proximity to the sea as an objective correlative for lost innocence. In a style reminiscent of Dylan Thomas fused with Charles Bukowski, Lewin explores the (often painful) connection between memory and the present, between child and adult, between innocence and knowledge, and - especially - between parent and offspring. Silverdale, the place is for Lewin what the Garden of Eden was to the writers of GENESIS: a pre-lapsarian place. The poet can never again experience the exact intensity of his childhood days. Which is what, in the end, lifts the collection and makes it relevant to us all. 'My life consists of intervals', he says in TOWER HOUSE, 'visiting this childhood place'. When I suggest that Lewin's poems lack sophistication I mean it as a compliment. We've grown so used to a poetry of artifice that these direct and honest poems puzzle us with their uncompromising openness. In a language devoid of irony but rich in humour and associations, Lewin builds up a poetry at once accessible and textured.

The length of this review precludes any substantial quotation from the text; but anyone coming to this collection for the first time would find CHEF a good place to start. In it the adult, tied to a meaningless job, wants to 'go back/to Silverdale's apple green/goose pink morning skies' and to a time when 'before the split-shift/before the pay slip' he could 'pray by that simple bed'. What saves this from sentimentality, of course, is the precision of the language and the persuasive feeling that the situation is both genuine and deeply felt. Or take ROAD TO NOWHERE where Lewin imagines returning to his childhood haunts, seeing himself as 'a ghost at any time of year'.

Peter Lewin already enjoys a wide reputation, mainly through his publication in magazines on both sides of the Atlantic. And, in a culture that seems to prefer the instant over the authentic it's easy to see why. Lewin's work in general, and SILVERDALE in particular are like a breath of fresh air. Is there then still room for a poetry of nostalgia? On the basis of the ample evidence provided by this collection I'd say yes, there is. (Editor's Note: As this goes to press, Peter has had his first reading in New York, thanks to Incwriters and Bob Holman. Peter launched Silverdale in the States at The Bowery Poetry Club and starred on George Wallace's radio show on WUSB 90.1FM. The collection has sold 5,000 copies to date)

To move from Peter Lewin's SILVERDALE to Bruce Barnes' SOMEWHERE ELSE is to move from the rural to the urban and from the personal to the public. While Lewin's poems are always spoken in his own voice, Barnes employs the

monologue to great effect, allowing his own sensibility to refract through the voices of others. Barnes has a sharp sense of form and an uncompromising way with language. He relishes its hard-edges and isn't afraid to take risks, sometimes pushing the form of the poem to its very limit as he does in *GRIST TO THE MILL* where the logical sequence falls apart, approaching something very close to what used to be called concrete poetry. Somewhere else is, after all, where most of us want to be – and the title poem of the collection is an ironic response to this, contrasting the vagueness of its title with the specific references to 'a Bradford skylight' and 'the soft custard yellow of Yorkshire stone'. Indeed, the first section of the book is entitled *BRADFORD POEMS* and in them Barnes maps out two cities: the actual place of bricks and mortar and the (sometimes more real) city of the imagination. Like Lewin, Barnes is fond of naming. *MANNINGHAM MILLS* and *ILKLEY MOOR* remind us that poems, like life, happen somewhere while *THE BRADFORD MUSE* skillfully mixes classical Greece with the Yorkshire city. For me, though, the most accomplished and satisfying poems occupy the part of the collection under the title of *MONOLOGUES*. In these, Barnes is able to subsume his own voice into that of his speakers. Beginning with *GARGOYLE* (perhaps the best-crafted of Barnes' poems to date) he takes the reader through a series of observations, making the experience new and relevant. In *NO NORTH OR SOUTH*, for instance, he imagines the ghosts of Luddites lying in wait to ambush ramblers and smash their compasses.

This inventiveness is typical in a collection of originality and control. It also points the reader in the direction of the past, which really is another country for Barnes. History might provide the poet with one of his 'elsewhere's' but its uncomfortable proximity to the present is never far away in these considered, moving poems.

Place is also of paramount importance to Nell Farrell who in this, her first collection, makes a memorable and distinguished debut. Most of the poems have already been published in magazines and anthologies; but to read them together under one cover is to understand something of Farrell's gift for allowing her images, lines, and individual poems to accrue.

Farrell is in touch with the deeper currents that animate our lives, her intuition is acute, and her way with language impeccable. At times, the mistiness of her subject matter is reflected in the mistiness of her language in a poetry where everything is transitional, provisional and shifting. In *SEWERBY BEACH*, for instance, she begins with a meditation: 'Whatever sand there is lies buried under marker stones / bleached to a bone-white radiance by sun an ozone'.

The idea of things being hidden and then coming to the light is central to this poet, the poem ending with no real resolution (as in life) but with 'the revolution of the blood, / the surge of life sustained, continuing'. It is no coincidence either that this poem opens the collection, emphasising as it does how carefully the poems have been selected and put together. Farrell is literate, allusive and scrupulous; a true and gifted poet whose work is marked by its vivid eye for detail and its sense of the shifting nature of human perception. She has a deep and intimate understanding of the tenuous threads which connect the individual with the place – and of the language, which circulates around such connections. Her main strength as a poet lies in her uncanny ability to give shape to those experiences; to articulate her relationship with the past in a poetry at once emotionally complex and accessible. Poem by poem, stanza by stanza, and line by line she offers us an intricate mapping of this landscape of the heart. IP

(Mslexia, £4.75)

This Newcastle publication is one of the success stories of any art board funded magazine in the UK. Though the magazine has been marketed as women's writing publication, a tag-line that seems to be redundant. Though that sounds harsh, it isn't meant to be, because this is a great publication, regardless of which sex writes it, runs or delivers it.

I don't want to get bogged down in debate about Feminism, or how women's writing presses have had the stigma of being seen as only an outlet for Feminism because the fact remains, regardless of the marketing that Mslexia have undertaken - and all Literary magazines in the UK should take heed of way Mslexia markets - that Mslexia is one of the best, and most likely is the best magazine for new and established writers in the UK.

The resources and industry news alone is worth the money, how many hours do you spend trawling for information or writing jobs? Don't bother, it's all here and more as well. This magazine will keep any writer busy for weeks, the contacts and listings are thorough and up to date, printed all in one section so there is no constant flicking forwards and backwards looking for an address.

The articles concentrate on the craft of writing, tapping in to new areas for writers, revealing the new hot-spots that publishers are concentrating on. Even if you don't agree with that it does open up avenues that you may never have considered and Melanie Ashby gives a balanced and insightful article into this. Mslexia is not bound by the page though and Janice Day reveals all about writing for TV, Film and Radio. This is magazine written by writers who work in the industry and who are far from secretive, there is a feeling of comradeship that is often lacking in other writing magazines. This is a magazine that genuinely wants to help improve your skills and contacts as a writer.

Mslexia isn't afraid to name their top ten writers for 2004, the likes of the Scottish Poet, Kate Clanchy, sits next to the likes of Deryn Rees-Jones and Jackie Wills.

The magazine pulls in the big names as well, Liz Lochhead selects new writing, the TV journalist/presenter, Joan Bakewell reveals all about her reading and the way she reads - which doesn't sound that fascinating but we all take for granted that we all read the same but this column reveals a warm side to writers and readers. Jackie Kay reveals the ins and outs of her first short story draft and reveals how a national newspaper can make the oddest requests.

There's so much within these pages, regardless of gender this is good writing, delivering everything a writer needs, Mslexia lays out the craft of writing and then includes the nuts and bolts of how to get published. They take away the mystery and complexity that is often associated with the industry, to reveal that your woes, your hopes, your problems are shared by all writers.

Buy Mslexia and you'll never look back. SM

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Anon One

(Anon, £4.00 ISBN 0-9545156-0-9)

[www.blanko.org.uk/anon](http://www.blanko.org.uk/anon)

This is a publication to rival the sixties Penguin series of new writers but with a beautiful twist. All the poems in All the poems in Anon are selected through an anonymous submissions process, there are biographies but the poems stand or fall by themselves, and it is rare to find a

collection where all the poems could stand up to a nuclear disaster. You find yourself, time and time again going back to poems who have become firm favourite friends.

This magazine is a collection of great poems, that puts it beyond small press publications. This is not a literary magazine but anew way of thinking about Literature, a new book for a new beginning. It raises the question of how many of us know a poem by heart but can no longer remember the name of the poet. As you read this, snippets once learnt at school flood back but the names remains in the shadows because the poet never mattered, only their words did. Anon celebrates the content rather than the fame or infamy.

I could name poems in this collection that I personally enjoyed but I enjoyed all of them. This is a whole piece with an interlude provided by children's poetry section that had me howling with laughter.

Anon is more than a magazine, it shows up our prejudices and snobbery, and than shows that we can be and read so much more. BM

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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.

**William Park**

William Park was born in Hillingdon, West London, in 1962, and grew up in High Wycombe. He now lives in Preston, where his interests include Buddhist philosophy, World Cinema and Jazz. In 1990 he was awarded a major Eric Gregory Award, and in 2003 he gained an MA in Poetry from Liverpool Hope University College. His poems have appeared in Critical Quarterly, Observer, Poetry Review, Stand, and many more. His latest collection Surfacing (Spike ISBN 0 9518978 7 X) is available now.

**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.