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Carol Ann Duffy

– visibility for poetry

Zoë Fairbairns meets the poet laureate for our times

When I was eight, I was made to learn John Masfield's poem 'Sea Fever', which I hated for its dum-de-dum rhythms. My teacher, hoping to instil in me a more respectful attitude, informed me that Masfield was the poet laureate, employed to write poems for the Queen on special occasions. I hoped for Her Majesty's sake that the poems were better than 'Sea Fever'.

Even after Masfield died and was succeeded by more interesting incumbents such as John Betjeman, Ted Hughes and Andrew Motion, I remained uneasy with the idea that a poet could receive, or want, a royal seal of approval, like Bendicks chocolate mints or Baxters tinned soups. If a poet isn't his or her own person, then what's the point? If official poetry is needed for times of national celebration or grief, it's already there in the form of Wendy Cope's 'All-Purpose Poem for State Occasions', which you can read in her collection *Making Cocoa for Kingsley Amis*, or on line, and which, presumably by arrangement with Ms Cope, can be brought out as required. So what, in the twenty-first century, is a poet laureate for?

Honorary

'To show that poetry matters,' says Carol Ann Duffy, Britain's first female poet laureate, whose appointment was announced last May, and whom I'm meeting for coffee in a Manchester hotel. She's in her early fifties with dark, curly hair, green eyes, and a low-pitched voice which carries hints of her Glasgow birthplace and Midlands upbringing. She's wearing what she calls 'a comfy woollen suit which I bought from Ragamuffin in Edinburgh – I like to feel comfy and wear nice fabrics, but I'm not into designer clothes. I like natural fabrics. I prefer autumn clothes to

summer.' The dark colours are brightened by a turquoise necklace.

Politically left, openly bisexual, a feminist ex-Catholic single parent one of whose poems ('Education for Leisure') was recently excised from a school exam syllabus after an invigilator decided that it glorified knife crime, Duffy is quick to distance herself from the role of official bard to the establishment. She has declined a £5,000 per year stipend from Buckingham Palace because 'I didn't want there to be any sense of being employed or sponsored. I think the laureateship is an honour for poetry, not a part-time job.' She has channelled the money instead to the Poetry Society for the Ted Hughes Award for new work in poetry. Since her appointment, her public poems have included 'Politics', an attack on the corrosive effect of the political process on those who practise it, and 'Last Post', which was read in Westminster Abbey on November 11 by Jeremy Irons, at a service to mark the passing of the generation that fought and lived through World War One. She has written poems for Oxfam, and for National Poetry Day, and there has been an off-the-cuff couplet in response to the MPs' expenses row – *what did we do with the trust of your vote? / Hired a flunky to flush out the moat*. You somehow can't imagine her gushing into print against her will over a royal wedding.

'I can't imagine them asking me to,' she says. 'My dealings with the Palace so far have been very positive. They're very grown-up, very pro-art.' And she refers me to the Buckingham Palace website entry on the laureateship: 'nowadays, the position is purely honorary. It is up to the individual poet to decide whether or not to produce poetry for national occasions or Royal events such as weddings and funerals.'

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Football star

So it’s business as usual for Carol Ann Duffy. ‘My working life for many years has been similar to most poets of my generation, which is some teaching in a university,’ – she is Creative Director of the Writing School at Manchester Metropolitan University – ‘poetry readings in schools or festivals or theatres or rooms over pubs, and my own writing. That is my life and that hasn’t changed.

‘I suppose what has changed is that I am more visible than I would have been before, so if I am going to do a reading now, it will be “the poet laureate is coming to a reading.”’ But she denies reports that she gets greeted in public by cheering crowds, as if she were a football star. ‘I think when we do the GCSE Poetry Live readings, which is a whole bunch of poets – Gillian Clarke who is the national poet of Wales, John Agard, Grace Nichols, Imtiaz Dharker – we may reach 2,000 teenagers, and they will cheer us when we come on, but that’s just because they’re having a day out. Visibility for poetry is the thing that is nice. And the odd invitation to big occasions.’ Such as? She looks vague – star-struck she is not. ‘Maybe a government reception or something. But I probably wouldn’t go to that because it’s usually a school night.’ (She has a 14-year-old daughter.) ‘Nothing tangible that makes me think, “oh my god, what have I done?” I live the same life, but with a light over it.’

Nuns

Born in Glasgow in 1955, brought up in Stafford, big sister to four brothers, she can’t remember a time when she didn’t write: ‘I loved it from about eight.’ She had part of her education at a convent school, which she doesn’t rate very highly: ‘I don’t think the nuns were even qualified teachers. You know what nuns are like – “oh, we’ll have a school, that will get the money in.” We had elocution with an Irish nun. Can you imagine? So we were all saying “how now brown cow?” in thick Irish accents. But occasionally they brought in real people.’

So the nuns weren’t real? ‘Not really,’ she laughs, though she acknowledges, thinking of other writers, that ‘a lot of us went to convents, didn’t we?’ How does she account for that? ‘It’s almost a cliché now, isn’t it? From James Joyce. The kind of rhythm and incantation of the Latin mass particularly. And then the images around the whole thing of statues and religious icons and frankincense and myrrh and all that. It’s very potent. So if you are a young person who is experiencing most things through the ear as writers do, then that will last.’ I mention another convent-educated writer whom I met recently and who admitted to being haunted by fears of eternal damnation. Duffy’s response is brisk: ‘That’s silly. I have respect for people

of any faith. But what are essentially stories and myth, become fact. And people believe myth and symbols. It’s a bit like believing in the gingerbread house, believing in eternal damnation. It’s a story.’

Brodie

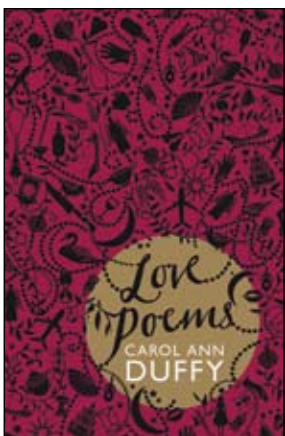
One of the ‘real people’ whom Duffy’s nuns brought in to teach was a charismatic Jean-Brodie-esque English teacher who roared into school in her sports car wearing dark glasses and smoking black Sobranie cigarettes, and introduced the young Carol Ann to *Outposts* magazine, which published her first poems. ‘I was embarrassed by them,’ she admits now. ‘I was a 15-year-old when I wrote them, and they came out when I was about 17, by which time I had moved on. If I could have my time again I would have waited rather than published those, but my teacher was impressed.

‘I think I published before I could write good poetry,’ she continues. ‘So obviously I had all the energy and the vocation and the desire to see my poems published, but I hadn’t got any of the talent or the craft.’ She acknowledges that early publication gave her confidence and validation. ‘I suppose looking back it made me not doubt. So I never had a job or anything. I just assumed that I would get by.’

Noise

You could say she has got by. Since the first appearance of her work in *Outposts*, Carol Ann Duffy has published an estimated 300 poems in more than 40 publications. These have included her own collections, from *Standing Female Nude* and *Selling Manhattan* (both published by Anvil in the 1980s) to the more recent *Rapture* (Picador, 2005) and *The Hat* (Faber 2007). She writes about, and in the voices of, people who have been marginalised, not listened to – particularly women. One of her most popular collections has been *The World’s Wife* (Anvil, 1999), in which helpmeets such as Queen Kong, Mrs Midas, Frau Freud and the Kray sisters step out of the shadows to present their own take on the events that made their menfolk famous. Poems in *Feminine Gospels* (Picador 2002) cast new light on dieting, shopping and gambling, and *The Good Child’s Guide to Rock ‘n’ Roll* (Faber 2003) invites children to reassess their grandmothers’ taste in music.

Duffy has co-authored volumes with Adrian Henri, Vicki Feaver, Eavan Boland and Jane Ray, and has edited anthologies including *Overheard on the Saltmarsh: Poets’ Favourite Poems* (Macmillan 2004) and *Answering Back* (Picador 2007) in which contemporary poets respond to classic poems from the past. Once you’ve read Duffy’s own riposte to Kipling’s ‘If...’, ‘the nation’s favourite poem’ will never sound the same again.



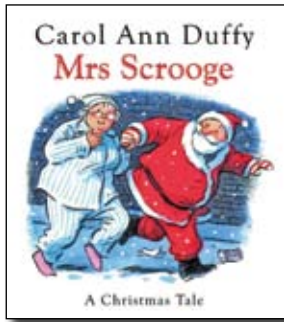
She has won practically every poetry award going, including a C Day Lewis Fellowship, the Dylan Thomas Award, the Whitbread Children's Book Award and the TS Eliot prize. She has also written plays for the Liverpool Playhouse and the Almeida Theatre in London, and for radio.

Easy

It has been said of Carol Ann Duffy's writing that she 'makes it look easy'. And she does – sometimes. The voices of some of her shorter comic monologues are so real-sounding that they seem not to have been written at all, but transcribed – a Head of English notes with polite regret the absence of rhyme in the work of a visiting poet, a neighbour of the Virgin Mary wonders what's going on next door, a weasel demands an end to negative stereotyping of its species. But many of the poems don't look easy at all: 'The Laughter of Stafford Girls' High' which summons up a bygone era of a certain type of girls' education and pays tribute to the power of girls' giggling, is complex, disturbing, hilarious and 19 pages long. 'Psychopath' is creepy and complex. And poems such as 'Girl Talking' and 'Lizzie, Six', which evoke not just violence against children, but the sort of violence that in some circles is approved of and encouraged – genital mutilation, corporal punishment – are almost too painful to read and certainly don't look as if they were easy to write. 'Girl Talking' was fragments of recorded speech,' Duffy says. 'Lizzie, Six' was more invented, but based on true incidents.'

There's nothing easy about Duffy's methods of composition. 'I was writing a poem last night,' she recalls. 'I have a notebook. I don't think I have it on me. I had an idea for a poem so I could...' Her voice trails off. 'It's difficult to describe, really. I could apprehend what the poem might be. But I didn't quite have the words for it. So I was trying to get a beginning. I did eventually get a beginning of maybe two lines. But to get those two I probably wrote eight over a couple of hours. And that will go on for a few days, and then suddenly there will be a breakthrough and I will probably write it quite quickly.' She seems suddenly exhausted, as if she has been doing the





work rather than just describing it, but I press her: where does she write? Does she have to be on her own? 'Last night I was doing it in the sitting room. Ella, my 14-year-old daughter, was watching a movie, and I was sitting next to her with a notebook. I'm good at that because of having four brothers. I find it very easy to write with noise around me, as long as its not pop music.'

Shy

She talks about Ella a lot, as a companion and inspiration. Her rhythms of writing follow Ella's school year – 'Autumn is like "ah! New pencils and a new notebook." Spring is good, and then summer holidays – nothing.' Before Ella, it never occurred to her to write for children: 'It came out of that parent-child relationship. Bedtime stories. I remember feeling quite shy actually. I remember thinking, "oh, I should write her a bedtime story", but I wasn't sure that I could. It was a bit like being a lover, giving someone something. The very first thing I wrote was *Underwater Farmyard*. She likes farms. So I was thinking, how can I make it fresh? So I thought we could have one at the bottom of the ocean.

'And then another one about a zoo on the moon,' she continues. 'And that was it. I was able to enter her childhood but remember my own. I've written more for children than adults.' Her *New and Collected Poems for Children*, published this year by Faber, is dedicated to Ella 'with love from Mummy', and contains 'A Stick Insect's Funeral Poem', for which Ella gets a joint writing credit.

Anthologists

It's not just her daughter who gets invited to participate in Duffy's processes. In 'The Act of Imagination' (in *The Other Country*, Anvil, 1990), space is left for readers to add their own 'images which appal the imagination'. Many of her poems are lists, which you can imagine yourself adding to – 'Seven Deadly Adjectives', 'Counting to a Billion' – and the rhythms of some of the more playful poems, such as 'Questions, Questions' and 'Know All' settle in your head and nag you to create lines of your own. And in the introduction to *To The Moon: An Anthology of Lunar Poetry* (Macmillan), Duffy as editor expresses the hope that 'the reader who enjoys the selection here will, over time, slip their own choices between its pages.'

'The best anthologist is the reader of poetry,' she says. 'If we love and read poetry, we take into our memories and our hearts and sometimes into our notebooks and journals, poems we like. Over our lifetime, the ordinary poetry reader will, without knowing it, be an anthologist.'

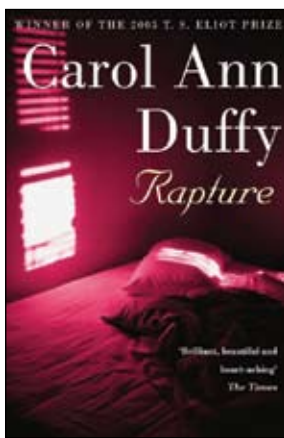
Even without the reader's 'scraps', *To The Moon* is a hospitable book, one which invites

you in and lets you find your own place. 'I started with Sappho, 600BC or something,' Duffy says. 'Then it goes right up to Alice Oswald who is writing now. And I find that moving – the relatively short distance between Sappho and Alice. Essentially it was still a poet with a notebook looking at the moon. And it really reveals our humanity and our mortality, that book. So if I was reading it in a book group, I would perhaps look first at the timescale of the anthology, and perhaps talk about the difference and the lack of difference in the lives of the poets. One would find that there has always been falling madly in love, there has always been war, there had always been motherhood, bereavement. I think recognising that would help move forward.'

Centre

'I'm really loving being poet laureate,' she says. 'It's to do with helping to bring poetry to the centre.' Recent mainstream media reports about poetry and poets have not always been good news – rows about the Oxford professorship of poetry, debates about criminal records checks for writers going into schools, accusations of plagiarism – but no one can doubt that there is a thriving culture of poetry in this country. Duffy's conversation is dotted with praise for other contemporary poets and their work (Alice Oswald, Seamus Heaney, Don Paterson) and references to projects she is working on to spread awareness of poetry and its appeal: chairing the committee that awards the Queen's gold medal for poetry, inviting around 600 young children into a lecture theatre of Manchester Metropolitan university for music and poetry sessions.

In her introduction to *To The Moon*, Duffy describes poetry as 'language's human smile against death's darkness.' She would like to see everyone reading a poem every day – for pleasure, for intellectual development and for mental health. 'I'd like it if people could find poems that become part of them, that either console or celebrate their own lives.' She doesn't want people to read passively: 'If they like a poem, think why; if they don't like it, then think why not. Develop your own anthologist's muscles.' She would like to see people integrating their poem-a-day into their normal lives – she herself always has an anthology on the go in the bathroom. And she likes to think that people will read her latest 'wife' poem *Mrs Scrooge* (published by Picador as a single stocking-filler sized volume, with illustrations by Posy Simmonds) in their homes on Christmas Eve, with a glass of wine in their hand, carols playing and children listening. 'Language is what makes us different, isn't it, from other life on this earth? And the best use of language is poetry.' ■



Rapture by Carol Ann Duffy is published in paperback by Picador, price £8.99.