



WHAT I WISH I'D
KNOWN ABOUT...

Publishing my first poetry collection

Thinking of making the leap into a first poetry collection? Three poets provide advice to **Keir Thomas** about what – and what not – to do

This month we seek the wisdom of three poets to ask what they learned before, during and after the publication of their first poetry collection.

The writers we've gathered have for several decades been as near to full-time poets as you'll find. Sheenagh Pugh published her first collection, *Crowded by Shadows*, in 1977 and since then has published eleven further collections. Her most recent is *Short Days, Long Shadows*, published by Seren in 2014. She won the Forward Prize for best single poem in 1999, has twice won the Cardiff International Poetry Competition, and her collection *Stonelight* won the Wales Book of the Year award in 2000.

Cathy Bryant's sparky debut collection in 2010, *Contains Strong Language and Scenes of a Sexual Nature* (Puppywolf), was followed four years later by her second, *Look at all the Women* (Mother's Milk Books). She has won fourteen literary awards, including the Bulwer-Lytton Fiction Prize, and her work has appeared in over 100 publications including *The London Magazine* and *The Rialto*.

Fiona Pitt-Kethley was a genuine literary phenomenon when her collection, *Sky Ray Lolly* (Chatto & Windus), was published to great acclaim in 1986. However, it was actually her fourth and she's since published six further collections, including *Selected Poems* (Salt, 2008). Also an experienced novelist and travel writer, her upcoming pamphlet from Rack Press, *Mineral Adventures*, describes her exploits hunting minerals in Spain, where she now lives.

Getting the idea

What prompted our authors to publish a first collection?

'I'd had enough poems published to feel confident enough to have a go,' says Cathy, referring to prior publications in magazines and online, adding that getting published in this way 'gave me a good writing CV but more importantly taught me how to work with editors and present my poems to the public in the best way, both professionally and as a creative artist.'

Fiona often wrote 'long sequences of poems around themes', which easily provided enough material for a first collection, but she adds that 'it took me a while to realise that it was a good idea to build up acceptances in magazines on the way to a full collection.'

'I had many rejections in my early days,' she adds, 'and this built up anger, which motivated a different kind of poem. Some of these were angry feminist ones.'

Sheenagh suggests not only getting published in magazines but 'if possible got a few competition prizes'. It was her success in these areas that began her journey: 'I was asked to send in a collection by the publisher of what is now Seren but was then Poetry Wales Press. I'd been getting poems published in their house mag, *Poetry Wales*, for a few years, which was how he knew of me.'

As for why a poet should publish a first collection, Sheenagh cautions that 'nobody needs a reason, it's enough that you want to do it.' Cathy says that the

reason can be 'almost anything you can think of other than for the money!' although for her 'it just felt like the right time and people were starting to ask where they could buy my book.'

Fiona explains that 'a collection puts a poet's view of the world on show more than individual poems do.'

Style and content

How did our poets decide what should be included in their first collection – and what style to use?

'It was my best work to date,' says Cathy, 'and represented my character and concerns. Poems that had made audiences laugh a lot were included, as were poems that had touched or moved people. I also gave preference to poems that had been published, as they had already had an external stamp of approval.'

'My first collections sprang from a love of history,' says

Fiona. 'Later ones were motivated largely by anger.'

My current work is probably fusing the two different strands.'

'Does anyone "decide" on a style?' asks Sheenagh. 'Don't they just write what comes naturally? I can't recall that far back [to 1977 when her first collection was published], but of course what I write has changed a lot since, because I'm older and hopefully more skilled.'

Did their experiences with their first collection influence their second?

'My early collections were similar,' says Fiona, 'as were the first few with big publishers in the new style.'



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SHEENAGH PUGH

Cathy's second collection was 'much tighter and more confident' and she put into action her experience of the business side of things: 'For *Look at All the Women* my publisher approached magazines, which worked much better and looks more professional. I went for the personal stuff – friends, Facebook, local media, getting people to read review copies and leave reviews on Amazon and Goodreads.'

Sheenagh says that aside from having 'a lot about Iceland in it,' she can remember little about her second collection: 'I don't even have a copy of that one any more.'

Big vs small

In our modern world there simply aren't large publishers who handle poetry outside a few names like Faber. This leaves poets little choice but to go with small presses. However, it wasn't always this way and Fiona's breakthrough fourth collection was published by Chatto & Windus.

'I much prefer big publishers as they have the money to promote your work and take it to a large audience,' she says, adding that she's worked with Chatto, Abacus and Random House. 'Small publishers can be dedicated decent people but it is really hard to make money on books published with them.'

However, smaller presses can have surprising advantages, she says.

'With the small presses publication sequences were published as I envisaged them. With Chatto I had too many poems of a similar type so they were sorted into two collections, *Sky Ray Lolly* and *Private Parts*.'

In the late 1980s Fiona advertised her services in the *London Review of Books* and caught the eye of renowned agent Giles Gordon, who 'got me some good deals for prose and poetry'. Since he died she's approached big publishers without representation but they demand an agent and 'that's a Catch-22 as most agents won't touch poetry'.

'I'm a fan of any press that publishes poetry in this tough economic climate,' says Cathy, 'So I welcome all of them. However, the editor for my most recent collection (*Look at All the Women*, Mother's Milk) became a friend and worked her socks off to create a fabulous collection. Only with a small press do you get that time, dedication and the personal touch.'

Sheenagh agrees: 'I don't think the

size of a press matters nearly as much as the level of commitment. I'm a bit disillusioned with the current attitude that it's the poet's job to promote the work; I think it's the poet's job to write it and the publisher's job to sell it.'

Doing it yourself

Sheenagh raises an interesting point: 'If a publisher expects writers to do their own promotion then what's to stop our poets simply self-publishing via ebook or print-on-demand services like Lulu, essentially cutting out the middleman?'

It can simply be that the technical hurdles are too high, explains Sheenagh: 'I have no technical ability to actually make an artefact. And I've no idea how e-publishing works either.'

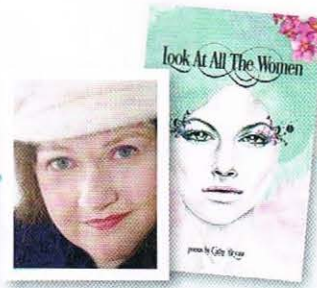
Not having an e-reader device or having even read an ebook, she remains sceptical: 'I have heard that Kindle wrecks the formatting of poetry. If it ever became the only way of doing things, I'd stop publishing.'

'I think it is only one element in the future of poetry,' says Fiona. 'It is certainly better than nothing. Today's ease of self-publishing does at least mean that your voice is not silenced if you don't fit the tastes of the clique.'

She adds that she's undertaken some self-publishing but 'it doesn't pay as well as being published [by a traditional press]. I find self-publishing of ebooks very useful though as it keeps titles in print and Amazon pays much faster than publishers.'

Self-publishing has a place, says Cathy, but again raises a basic concern: 'I have vision issues relating to screens and can't read ebooks (and yes, I've tried all the latest types, various kinds of glasses, and so on). For this reason, if a book is published only as an ebook then I'll never be able to read it.'

Despite this she says the technology has pluses and minuses: 'It's never going to suit the shy writers or the poor writers, and many of our greatest poets have come from those two



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CATHY BRYANT

categories. I think it works very well for two kinds of people: firstly, those who want copies mainly for friends and family, and secondly for people who love networking and marketing and publicising and all that. But it has also made the book world so crowded that it's hard to get work noticed.'

Fringe benefits

The benefits of publishing a first collection were numerous, say our poets.

'It meant I could call myself a published book writer,' says Sheenagh. 'I got more work writing reviews, too, and a few commissions.'

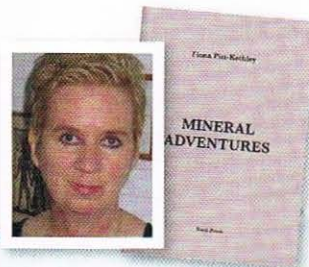
Fiona also picked-up work: 'After two collections I was commissioned to write a travel book and this is a form I return to periodically.'

'I had knocked around publishing enough not to expect tons of money or fame,' says Cathy, but publication of her first collection 'was a joy – my childhood dream come true. The pleasure of the book itself, my launch at Manchester's Central Library with all my friends applauding, the culmination of years of work – I was practically delirious with happiness.'

And if it's not being too nosy did our poets make any actual money? 'No idea' says Sheenagh. 'They must have given me an advance but it was so long ago, I don't recall how much – certainly not that much! If you want to get rich, rob a bank. Or run a bank. Writing poems is no way to do it.'

Fiona is more sanguine: 'Publishing with a big publisher generates some income. You have already made a bit on some of the individual poems in magazines. Readings top up the income.'

Cathy counts fringe benefits instead: 'What a published collection does bring is opportunities – to do performances, run workshops, write articles and so on, all of which can bring money.' [WS](#)



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