

Two years in the game: calling yourself a poet at 40.

Article by Swansea writer, Matthew M. C. Smith.

The self-published poet

In the words of the famous English poet, Eric Clapton, 'nobody loves you when you're down and out'. These lyrics can be aptly related to poetry, with the substitution - 'nobody loves you when you're a self-published poet'. Apparently, there are millions of us plugging our own work in our solitary echo-chambers, a Cohen-esque tower of song. That's how I started two years ago.

Approaching 40

Ignorance was bliss when I decided to set bucket-list goals in 2017 for my 40th birthday - one being 'publish a poetry collection'. I had never published a single word of writing, knew no living poets personally, had never performed anything I had written, save for a few drunken student open mics back in the 90s, and wasn't remotely updated in new poets. I was out of touch but had drawers full of poems from 25 years of writing on my own and felt a strong impulse to write and hopefully be read by some people out there. Dreamy types into myth, war, loss, psychology, religions and darkness.

Insecurities

I managed to sell about 40 copies of my debut work 'Origin: 21 poems' to family and friends in the spring of 2018. This was a confidence-boost to an extent but also left me feeling a little exposed. What did people I know really think about what I was writing? Was I opening myself up for criticism or humiliation? Would any strangers buy the book, value the writing or get anything out of what I had written? A thousand thoughts went through my mind. I also didn't hire an editor and had some doubts about my own proofreading skills and the overall quality of the work despite slaving over it for a year. These are some of the insecurities that probably affect most writers.

Performance poetry

I'd heard that poets should practice performance and read at local poetry nights in order to get a stronger voice on the written page. This was a big decision to make and it took me months to finally pluck up the courage to attend open mic nights in Neath and Swansea. Thanks to Huw Pudner for nagging me,

After going on my own initially, I quickly made friends and acquaintances and this was a steep, but fascinating, learning curve not least for someone who has spent decades overcoming a stammer. I got heckled on my first night about a



poem I wrote about Syria and was challenged to suggest a solution, rather than just perform a piece about human tragedy. The heckler is actually a lovely guy but was a little worse for wear. My first performance was a battle but I also had a lot of applause and encouraging comments afterwards. I enjoyed the experience precisely because it was nerve-wracking, gave me a buzz, and was a challenging new environment. I attend regularly and continue to sell a trickle of books at open mic nights. To date, I have probably sold about 70 copies of my first book.

Social media experiment

In April 2018, I took to Twitter and found out that starting off as a poet is a very slow process. I was lucky to get support very quickly from the accomplished Swansea writer, Peter Thabit Jones. Peter followed me within days and seemed to like the poetry I was posting. Others followed in dribs and drabs. It took months to get to 50 followers and to generate any responses from people. But there were good-hearted souls on Twitter (you know who you are) – people like Steve Birt and Stefan Ellis - who came out of the virtual woodwork and by sending copies of my book to various people, I was able to get feedback and testimonies. I was so grateful to Professor Daniel Williams of Swansea University and Ian Finlayson, the writer. Positive feedback made me harden my resolve. It was still a slow grind.

Competition win

I started to send off work to different publishers but my submissions were, looking back, pretty weak at first. This all changed when I submitted to an RS Thomas festival in mid-2018, in North Wales. I sent a poem 'Henrhyd Falls', which will be in my second collection. To my astonishment, I won the competition and was invited to a

prize-giving ceremony. It was a remarkable feeling to read on a stage for the first time in an arts centre in Anglesey and collect a £100 prize from Ness Owen, Karen Ankers, Martin Daws and Glyn Edwards, poets I really respect. As an obsessive reader of RS Thomas, this will always be something to look back on fondly.

Reading new work

The biggest revelations in the process of becoming a dedicated poet have been reading new material all the time and getting published for individual poems. I enjoy reading some of the latest contemporary poets from Wales and further afield.

My style of writing did not change fundamentally but I found myself writing in a bolder way after reading poets like Mari Ellis Dunning, Natalie Ann Holborow, Angela T. Carr and Anne Casey. I enjoyed their work and wrote a number of reviews of poets' work, posting them on Twitter. This was, again, useful writing practice in interpreting and learning more about new poetry. During my social media adventure, I found out quickly that even social media support for some of the brightest and critically-acclaimed poets is often lacking and that there is a real need for mutual support between writers – a culture of greater reciprocity. I have since read hundreds of new poets and will be writing about my favourites in future.

Poetic insularity

It gives me a sinking feeling of dismay when I see some poets, not too many, posting and blogging exclusively about themselves and giving very little back to the community. People like this don't seem to realise that connecting and supporting others is the only way to establish meaningful relationships online and to get feedback and any sort of readership. It is the lifeblood and it is also disheartening when successful writers only publicise their work and don't help people less fortunate than themselves. I understand that successful writers are often time-poor or may not like social media but it's not hard to offer a like, a retweet or a nice comment. Rant over!

Goals

My goals in writing are not financial and I don't feel like I am an egotistical writer, although others may disagree but I don't particularly care! If you don't do some promotion of your own work, who will? There is very little money in poetry and any successes come in patches. Poetry seems to be spectacularly uncommercial, so I learned pretty quickly that unity and support were vital in order to get your work read and to feel good about your creative work. Poetry is a passion. These are my loose goals and my assumptions may be incorrect but I have run with them.

Getting published

After numerous rejections for individual poems in the first six

months of 2018, I got a break with *Seventh Quarry Press* and other poem acceptances followed over the next year from presses, such as *Panning for Poems*, *Fevers of the Mind*, *Wales Haiku Press*, *Re_side* and *Wellington Street Review*. Seeing your work in a physical or online journal is a hugely significant experience in being more objective about your work. Seeing it in the cold light of day in a different context makes you a better editor of your work.

Black Bough

After reading at least a millionth moan from poets on Twitter and across the internet about rejections and the long waits for feedback from publishers (I like a moan too sometimes), I decided to do something about this in my own small way. I started an online micropoem press called *Black Bough*, inspired by a poetry press in Northern Ireland, *Panning for Poems*, and the name was lifted from a line in the Ezra Pound haiku 'In a Station of the Metro'. I wanted to publish some of the poets who seemed to me to be full of talent and potential but kept on getting rejections and wanted also to publish a few poems of my own. Would my own poems stand shoulder to shoulder with other poets? It was clear also that more established writers would want to road-test their work and could benefit from social media publicity. *Black Bough* has been (tempting fate here!), a success to date, not least because of the volunteers and the contributors who have helped with the four editions, and we have published hundreds of poets in 2019.

Re-issued work

This year, I have also re-issued 'Origin' after some changes and proofreading by Ankh Spice, Laura Wainwright and Kyla Houbolt. I urge everyone to read these poets. They have an extraordinary command of language.

I was also lucky to get testimonies from Jack Bedell (Poet Laureate of Louisiana), Kate North, Anne Casey, Mari Ellis Dunning and Patrick Jones, also poets you have to read.

I'll be writing more about my poetry odyssey, about *Black Bough* press and the interesting people I have met along the way. Thanks for reading.

Matthew M.C. Smith

Twitter @MatthewMCSmith Facebook @MattMCSmith
Twitter @blackboughpoems
Facebook @BlackBoughpoetry
www.blackboughpoetry.com