

Interview with Carol Ann Duffy

Poet Laureate Carol Ann Duffy talks with young reporter Beth, from Scottish Book Trust's What's Your Story? Programme, about her Laureateship and gives advice for aspiring young poets.

Beth: I want to start off by talking about your new project which is *The Map and the Clock*, an anthology you've made with Gillian Clarke. Can you tell us a bit about that, and what you hope readers will get from it?

Carol Ann Duffy: So, Gillian was National Poet of Wales up to about a year ago, and I was Poet Laureate, and we're great friends. So we spent a lot of time travelling together, talking about poetry. And we decided it would be fun, as we were both national poets, to do an anthology together. And she lives in Wales, and is Welsh, speaks Welsh. I was born in Scotland of an Irish mother, grew up in England. So that kind of geographical heritage is what gave us the idea that we would look in all four countries for poetry that gave a sense of place really, of time and history. So that's where we started. And we collected poems over two years, and then worked very closely with the poet Matthew Hollis, who's the poetry editor at Faber who published the book. And it was great fun.

B: And so about your role as Poet Laureate, could you tell us what you do and why it's important for a country to have a Poet Laureate?

CAD: Well we've had a Poet Laureate in the UK since John Dryden, although some people can in my opinion, a Poet Laureate, but I think officially it's Dryden. And over the centuries there have been 20, all male. Initially it used to be for life but, when Tony Blair was Prime Minister, he changed it to 10 years, which is what it is now. And the main reason for my agreeing to do it was because there'd never been a woman. So when I was Poet Laureate, Gillian was National Poet of Wales, and there's Liz Lochhead, the Scottish makar. So it was like you waited for 400 years for a Poet Laureate, then three of them come along at once, to be a woman. And so it was a very serendipitous time. There are no duties for the UK Poet Laureate, it's a representative role, an honour, and I've interpreted it as kind of stepping in to affirm all the different language that poetry uses, at moments when I feel everyone is listening to the same subject. So for example, I've written about the Scottish Referendum. And then other kind of bits of popular culture like David Beckham. I've written about the Queen being 60 years on the throne, because everyone seemed to be attuned to that kind of remarkable length of duty and service, whether or not they are royalists, or whether they're a republican. But there isn't

anyone asking me or telling me what to write about. And then sometimes you do feel that the poetry should clear its throat and perhaps add to the babble. So that's how I've interpreted the role.

B: So as you have already mentioned, you were representing quite a lot of firsts for the Poet Laureate. You're the first female, the first Scottish born, and the first LGBT...

CAD: First mother...

B: ...oh and first mother. And so how do you think or hope this has impacted UK poets and poetry?

CAD: Well that's the kind of thing I'd only be able to assess after I've stopped I think, when you sort of look back. It's very difficult to judge what you're doing when you're in it. What I have tried to do is share it, and be inclusive and put what light there is around a Laureate on as many poets as possible, so setting up the Ted Hughes Award. I do a series of pamphlets with the Poetry Business in Sheffield called Laureate's Choice, where I can find new poets, and I've got lists of different anthology events. There's a thing called Mother Tongue Other Tongue, where school children are supported in writing in their first language, and also in English. Or if English wasn't a first language, perhaps translation, or a language they might be studying. So there's so much that you can do. Again, it's being sensitive to where poetry might add to the national life, alongside my fellow poets.

B: For young poets like myself, what kind of advice would you give to them? Like something perhaps you thought you'd been told when you were starting out?

CAD: Well I was probably just a bit younger than you when I wanted to write. I had great support from my English teachers, I was really lucky. And then when I was around 16, I started going to poetry readings - they're as popular then as they are now. And if I look back, I think what I could've done with more of was someone actually giving me books to read. 'Cause I had to kind of find them by accident. So I think if you're a young poet who wants to write, you should read as much poetry from the past, and go right up to the contemporary. And learning from the journeys that other poets have made, particularly of form and experiment, how they used voice. What makes a poet necessary, rather than everyone writing the same poem. So reading, definitely.

B: Is there any advice you'd give to specifically young LGBT writers who want to write about their experiences?

CAD: Do it! Again, there are great poets like Thom Gunn, who wrote out of gay experience. And that's what all poets do. The person is the music of being human. So you're using your own humanity, your own memories, your own experience, your own imagination, your own

language, the music, your particular voice as the subjects of your poetry, and so just confidently, happily, joyously celebrate who you are.

B: This is something I'm particularly interested in hearing about. How do you feel about your poems being so widely studied across the country?

CAD: Pleased. I'm delighted. I mean I first fell in love with poetry at school through being taught poems, and being given copies of poems. When I was doing GCSEs, A Levels I was studying Tasso, Thom Gunn, and, on the side, Eliot and Thomas Hardy. And it was through that engagement in school that I wanted to write. So I'm pleased to be part of that.

B: Was there any fear about school kids who aren't really in it for the poetry, and they don't want to like it. So you know that out there it may be being mocked by them potentially?

CAD: No that's fine. It's fine. I mean poetry is a minority art form, as is dance or opera. And so I don't expect, you know, however many million people live in the UK, 60 million or whatever, that all of those people would love or be interested in a poetry book. I'm sure there are one million, and I think that's absolutely fine. I'm not kind of evangelical about everyone must be a part of things. There are things that I don't engage with, just because they don't speak to me as a person. It's fine to be different, just choose your own interests.

B: One final question. What do you think poetry does that other mediums can't do?

CAD: A good poem is memorable. So it can enter us and it's a little piece of very special language that helps us understand ourselves, and the world we live in. So it's different from a novel, or a piece of theatre. It goes right into you, and we can keep it forever. That's what makes it personal.