

WRITING A POETRY REVIEW 2

Reviewing poetry (or, for that matter, novels, non-fiction, memoir, short stories and translations) differs fundamentally from reviewing art exhibitions, drama, opera, musical performances, sports matches, restaurants, fashion shows or new cars. The crucial difference is this: the medium of the review is identical to the medium of the subject under review; i.e. language.

This means that the literary review possesses a unique critical tension: it is in both *sympathy* and *competition* with its subject. At best, it means that the reviewer endeavours to be as creative, precise, distinctive and imaginative in their use of language as the poet is; in other words, it spurs on. The varieties of “worst” are far more prolific: reviewers should not show off, play one-up-man-ship, be clumsy, be mawkishly enthusiastic, be pedantically dismissive, claim the poet justifies the critic’s own position, grind an axe or their teeth or prematurely insist that the work in question is unquestionably the most sublime work of genius ever to be gifted to the reading public and the Nobel Prize Committee. In other words, it dumbs down.

Reviewing is an art, just as much as any other form of writing is, and it has a history just as long. Aristotle was a reviewer.

My first piece of advice is to read criticism, just as you might borrow from the Scottish Poetry Library or buy novels in a bookshop. Critics like Helen Vendler, Lorna Sage, Christopher Ricks and Stanley Fish will sharpen your talents; reviewers like Michael Schmidt, Erica Wagner, James Wood, Sam Leith and Fiona Sampson are well worth studying.

Practicalities

Read the publications to which you submit reviews.

Read widely anyway! Every new book comes garlanded with hype, and only a sure knowledge of literary history will let you distinguish between innovation and imitation.

Prepare to be edited. For all reviews, but for newspaper reviews in particular, stick to word-counts. Even if you deliver exactly the number of words required of you, it is likely that you will be edited. For example, there’s a big difference between “the cat sat on the mat” and “the domesticated feline lounged supine on the Axminster”.

An apposite quotation will describe the poem better than translating it into your own critical précis.

Be honest. If every critic in the country is having paroxysms of joy over a work that doesn’t do it for you, then say so. If written with integrity, *there is no such thing as a wrong review*.

The poem itself will tell you the aesthetic criteria by which it wishes to be judged. So don’t criticise rhyming verse for not being vers libre; don’t criticise avant-garde work for eschewing traditions; don’t castigate light verse for a lack of seriousness.



poetry box ideas

Good good reviews are more difficult to write than good bad reviews: English has far more synonyms for 'bad' than 'good'. If you are going to write a less than glowing review, read the work more thoroughly than if you are going to praise it.

If you have a chance to proof pages, double-check against the original. If you do not have the chance, inform the editor precisely of indentations, gaps, line breaks, italics and so forth: many email packages and inter-software transfers reformat texts.

Be sensitive to meta-poetic passages. Every collection will have some moment where the author reveals, directly or indirectly, her or his idea of poetry itself.

Above all, you have to prove to the reader the rightness of your judgements. A review is a rhetorical construct and you have to convince the reader by persuasion and logic. You should:

- Explain why a quotation exemplifies the virtues of the whole, or demonstrate its particular fault or failing.
- Situate the work within an appropriate context, both of the author's own work and the wider poetical debates and currents.
- Pay as much attention to the structure of the collection as a whole as to the merits or demerits of individual poems.
- Avoid lukewarm, ambiguous and clichéd language in order to leave the reader with a clear sense of whether or not they should part with cash for the book.
- Keep a sense of the subjective "I" that is writing; avoid sweeping, pseudo-authoritative generalisations.

Some Myths About Reviewers and Reviewing, Debunked

Only a poet can judge poetry. Nonsense. If you sit on a chair and it collapses, you don't need to be a joiner to know there's something wrong.

Reviewers are frustrated writers. Romantic tosh. Reviewers are first and foremost readers, and if they are frustrated, it's because they care about reading and are being disappointed by a writer, not as a writer.

It's all an old boy network. A grain of truth, usually exposed each Christmas in *Private Eye*; but the majority of book reviews are independent and impartial.

A bad review destroys careers. In terms of sales, no reviews damage a book. Often, an intemperate (a bad bad review) will actually boost sales. In terms of the writer's sensibilities, a mature writer will take criticism with the same attitude as they take praise.

Reviews will be superseded by blogs. Blogs are a new form and represent new and unique opportunities. One key difference is that a review in a printed format will have been read by a minimum of three people (in the case of my own newspaper, five). The authority of a newspaper review is conditional on a rigorous process of fact-checking and multiple viewpoints, whereas a blog is spontaneous and individualistic.



Review Coverage

The following is a selection of periodicals publishing reviews of poetry. If you want to review poetry for them, send a sample (usually by email), short letter and CV. Remember your approach will be speculative, and there may be many reasons why they can't offer you the opportunity to write for them at the time you approach them.

Chapman, 4 Broughton Place, Edinburgh EH1 3RX: Joy Hendry

The Dark Horse, c/o 3B Blantyre Mill Road, Bothwell G71 8DD: Gerry Cambridge

The Drouth, PO Box 7419, Glasgow G5 9WB: Johnny Rodger and Mitch Miller

Edinburgh Review, 22A Buccleuch Place, Edinburgh EH8 9LN: Brian McCabe

The Herald, 200 Renfield Street, Glasgow, G2 3QB: Rosemary Goring

The Literary Review, 44 Lexington Street, London W1R 3LH: Nancy Sladek

London Review of Books, 28 Little Russell Street, London, WC1A 2HN: Mary-Kay Wilmers

Markings, 42-44 High Street, Gatehouse of Fleet DG7 2PH: John Hudson

PN Review, Department of English, University of Glasgow, 5 University Gardens, Office 401, Glasgow G12 8QH: Michael Schmidt

Poetry Review, 22 Betterton Street, London WC2H 9BX: Fiona Sampson

Scotland on Sunday, 108 Holyrood Road, Edinburgh EH8 8AS: Stuart Kelly

The Scotsman, 108 Holyrood Road, Edinburgh EH8 8AS: David Robinson

Scottish Review of Books, 9-10 St Andrew Square, Edinburgh EH2 2AF: Alan Taylor and Colin Waters

Sphinx, 21 Hatton Green, Glenrothes, Fife KY8 1JH: Helena Nelson

Sunday Herald, 200 Renfield Street, Glasgow, G2 3QB: Alan Taylor

The Times Literary Supplement, 1 Pennington Street, London E98 1BS: Lindsay Duguid

Stuart Kelly is the literary editor of *Scotland on Sunday*, and has reviewed, to date, well over 1400 different books in every genre. He is the author of *The Book of Lost Books* (Penguin, 2005) which has been translated into 14 different languages.

