

Voices on Silent: where is poetry's next generation?

'Where have all the poets gone?' could be the Pete Seiger-esque cry of the noughties literary generation, particularly when prose by young writers seems to be more popular than ever. The British public spent £2436 million pounds on books last year, a figure not insignificantly contributed to by the sale of numerous celebrity autobiographies (notoriously, Jordan's). But book sales were substantially influenced by the mainstream media's decision to venerate the novel. This past year showed that, contrary to popular belief, the TV-glazed public does actually read, and is interested in contemporary fiction, as the popularity of Richard and Judy's bookclub proved. The featuring of certain books in particular on this show heightened the profile, (and the sales figures), of several young writers under 40, including Monica Ali, David Nichols and Susan Fletcher, the 25 year old York graduate, winner of this year's Whitbread First novel award, for her debut, 'Eva Green'. The emerging Next Generation literati, consisting of writers, as featured in Granta magazine's 2003 list such as Hari Kunzro and Zadie Smith, are fashionable and well-known enough to rival the Notting Hill Jude Law/ Rhys Ifans film clique in the style stakes. Young writers take a perch in the reading public's semi-conscious – try asking a reader to name you a novelist under 40 and they're likely to proffer you somebody suitable. But ask the same person to name a poet, and you're likely to be met with silence.

True, poetry has and never will have the popular appeal of fiction; it is a minority interest and will probably always remain so. Sales figures reflect this; only around £13 of the £2436 million pounds revenue from 2004 book sales was generated by poetry. Today, even those involved in any aspect of the literary business, be it publishing, PR, or journalism, would struggle to name you a modern poet aged under 40. In 2003, research conducted by the Poetry Society revealed that just 28 of the poets published by 8 major imprints were younger than that magic number. But it's not just the published, profiled young poets who are elusive; it's the near-inexistence of any youthful stirring in the poetry world.

These days, most towns and public libraries have a modest writing group appended, but the average age of the members tends to be closer to sixty than sixteen. With stress levels and curriculum pressure at a peak in sixth forms and colleges nationwide, fewer and fewer young people have the time or energy to dedicate to writing of any creative kind. Even in the supposed 'free' days of your degree, pressure to sculpt a luscious CV, necessary for all but the most menial of graduate jobs, renders time devoted to creative, non-vocational activities a luxury few students can afford. And when poetry doesn't even offer the same promise of intellectual reputation and commercial reward as prose, it's easy to see why any savvy young person would deem poetry simply not worth the effort.

I, on the other hand, feel like one of the only young people in the country who has decided to throw financial caution, social respectability and stable job prospects to the wind by dedicating myself to some kind of life involving poetry. I recently attended St Andrews Poetry festival, 'Stanza', in Scotland; the perfect setting, I thought, in which to find young and likeminded poetic individuals. This, I had deduced since 'The Poetry School,' the most comprehensive research centre for verse in the UK and overseen by Douglas Dunn, is situated at St Andrews. But what

surprised me was the lowly number of people under thirty five attending any festival event.

Granted, the 'Stanza' committee was aided by a smattering of graduate students affiliated with the English school, but where were the promising poetry publishers, the budding balladeers? And not just from St Andrews but from beyond, especially considering that the festival took place out of term-time for the student majority on both sides of the border. The festival-goers themselves were a predictable mix of academics, poets, those involved in the industry and crucially, the readers. I was impressed that so many professional and older poetry enthusiasts with full-time jobs and family responsibilities had managed to attend. Unfortunately, this also led me to lament the absent, younger enthusiasts.

In spite of a vacancy for voices bursting with youthful enthusiasm, one of the liveliest speakers of the festival was Neil Astley who gave the annual 'Stanza' lecture. Far from the conservative, downbeat tenor I had expected, his controversial speech is fast acquiring notoriety in the literary world. Astley pointed out that poetry today was under threat of becoming an even more elitist minority interest, as a result of the predominantly Oxbridge-educated, white, male clique who govern what is published and to a great extent what is read in the UK today. It was not his intention to paint a bleak picture of poetry's future, and as the innovative, dynamic publisher of Bloodaxe books, he clearly relishes the challenge of printing more diverse, marginalised poets. But when I asked him for his advice on how young people, soon to be of working age, could help to destabilise the hegemony of the 'poetry police', he had no faith that entering establishment publications would achieve anything positive.

Instead, he suggested that there is room for another publisher of Bloodaxe's ilk in the industry, and urged young people to set up this, and more publications which will challenge the formulaic prescriptiveness of broadsheet and mainstream poetry mag reviewing. According to Astley, smaller, more diverse organisations with a commitment to all kinds of genres, styles and writers are the future. But this seriously depends on one factor: that the currently elusive, younger versophiles reveal themselves, take charge of their interest, and rise to the challenge of carrying the torch for contemporary poetry.

Admittedly, there are pockets of younger poetic activity, and in my quest to eke out my junior compatriots, I have come across some of them. One of the most promising and prominent of these is the Tower Poetry project, named after the late academic Christopher Tower and currently overseen by Dr Peter Macdonald at Christ Church college, Oxford.

Established in 2000, this aims to encourage young people seriously interested in poetry to develop their work and has enlisted the aid of several highly successful writers for support, including Philip Pullman and poet Gillian Clarke. Tower Poetry runs an annual poetry competition open to sixth-form students, and with cash prizes of £1500, £750 and £500 for first, second and third places respectively, plus a cash bonus for each winner's school or college, it rewards with a little more clout than a requisite school leaver's medal. Tower Poetry also runs an annual summer school, where 12 applicants aged between 18 and 23 are tutored in group workshops and taken on a sight-seeing trip of Oxford's literary landmarks. The website invites all

young people to review poetry themselves, although, when I last looked, the reviewers tended to be published poets.

Agenda is the first poetry magazine to have created a special section 'Broadsheet', dedicated to younger poets, which it inserts as a supplement to the main magazine. For those of you reading this as hardcopy, *Agenda's* website provides thorough, non-patronising advice if you are just starting to compose verse, and, as this article is proof, it encourages contributions and essays on matters of poetic concern from its younger readers.

Finally, and perhaps, most inclusively was the scheme run by the Poetry Library at the South Bank Centre late last year. This involved sending several well-known poets into schools across the UK to encourage GCSE-age pupils to choose poems for an anthology called 'Fifty Strong'. The anthology was a new youth canon of verse from all eras and genres, which the pupils felt spoke to them, and not merely their traditionalist teachers or the literati. Congratulations are due to these schemes, but it is a shame that these projects have all been created and run by those much older than the target audience.

When I left Neil Astley's lecture, I felt more troubled than when I had arrived. The advice he gave me as to how young people could collaborate and rise against the poetry police felt futile; how could this happen when my collaborators appeared to be nowhere in sight? I don't believe that young people aren't interested in verse because of their own predilections. I do believe that their interest has been neglected by the media, by publishing, and by the way poetry is taught in schools today, and that they could so easily be made to see how intellectually and spiritually rewarding poetry can be, how accessible, and simply, how much fun.

There is one serious problem for young people trying to write and work with poetry today. Our generation's Art, labeled 'post post-modernist', seems to have no defining characteristics of its own. Post-modernists were allowed to absorb all of history and culture's experiences and modes of expression, before re-arranging it and proclaiming it their own. But even when we avoid explicit references to poetry gone before and delve into the deepest recesses of our souls to produce something original, all our cultural references are dismissed as concepts stolen from other societies, or declared to be those which have seeped into our own culture from others. On the globalised artistic stage, everything and nothing is left for us to claim our expressions of ourselves, our own truths.

But this is if we talk about poetry in critical, canonic terms. As a mode of artistic therapy available to all, poetry should be enjoying a revival. Certainly, creative restoration is more actively encouraged than ever before: we practice yoga, we dance, we hold theme parties in our homes, and dress up for them at clubs. When time is not merely money but relaxation, artistic expression and a chance to think freely, a five-minute poetry fix is practically the most efficient activity we can enjoy. And when it comes to employment, the instability of a poet's life should be more readily acceptable when 'work-life balance,' 'flexi-time', and 'home-working' are the employment buzzwords of the day.

Maybe all the great verse of the modern age to come is being lost midst the text message generation, but I doubt it. More likely, it just seems that our younger poetic voices do exist but are simply 'on silent'. If we could keep the communication lines open between young people, whilst encouraging them to turn up the poetic volume, I feel sure that in an age where time and job satisfaction are ever-precious, poetry could be really popular. Currently, I'm holding out for Vogue to declare poetry 'the next big thing', especially now that Pete Doherty, ex-Libertines front man, has been exposed as an Arts Council prize poet, prior to his rock and roll spits. If Pete can make poetry cool, surely we're on our way to redressing future society's aversion to verse.