

**How would you introduce yourself as a writer to those who may not know you?**

I seem to have eras, both in my writing and in how my writing is thought of. I find that a bit confusing, because I *feel* like myself all the time. I think I'm always trying to work in the same direction. I mean, of course one has imaginative spells and dry spells and rational spells too. But my ideals, around books, art, poetry and society, have never really changed, although I've developed and changed out of all recognition, and my working life and the opportunities I've had to write have also changed enormously.

I'm a poet, and that's I guess what I've had honours and awards for, here and abroad. I do a great deal of work in other countries, where I'm much translated, and where I also work with other poets to support their work into print. I co-translate, and have worked as a literary editor. I've also done lots of reviewing. I'm the kind of critic who doesn't get high on trashing someone (which is so easy), but who tries to pay attention to what's *really* going on in a book, even if I don't think it's fully successful. I was that kind of editor too: the kind who always reads everything in the slush pile and doesn't practise nepotism. I'm not sure such good practice has much of a place in contemporary British poetry, but it certainly does in the rest of the literary world ...! Before all this, I worked with writing in health and social care for years.

But I've also always been a prose writer *manquée* and now I've published three prose books in the last two years. A literary biography, *In Search of Mary Shelley* (Profile), came out in January and has had just a wonderful reception, and last summer I published a book about *Limestone Country* (Little Toller), which I'm also very proud of. I love writing about place. And at the end of 2016 *Lyric Cousins: poetry and musical form*, which EUP have published in paperback this month, so it's now out in an affordable way (it was £70+. Pointless).

### **When did you start writing?**

I gave up the violin when I was twenty-three and launched myself into writing. I had no idea how hard it would be in every way. But I'm glad I didn't know: or I wouldn't have had the courage to do it. And it is who I am. I'm no essentialist, but I do know that this way of going on suits me as nothing else does. I'm not a career scholar, though I love doing scholarly research – and then turning it into a great story. I'm not an entertainer: I am entertained, or engaged, only by serious writing. I'm not simply a musician: I love language. But I am a writer.

I wrote stories and poems in my village primary school, where I knew I wanted to be a writer and no-one, in that innocent time and place, told me it wasn't for the likes of me. But my teens in not-specially-good Welsh and English state schools with, latterly, an English teacher who hated me – and the realisation that as a girl much was closed to me – knocked that out of me and I made a foolish detour (into music) for some years. I had some amazing experiences but I bitterly regret the handicap of being a late starter in writing.

### **Do you have a writing routine?**

Not as much of one as I'd like: I rely on fierce organisation and time management to get things written. I've always had to support myself, so the day jobs have always been with me. But I do write first thing (which on uninterrupted days, and in the absence of any intervening crisis, means most of the morning), and on days when I'm writing I go for 1,000 words a day. Poetry isn't quite like that but it too is a first-thing routine. I write it before getting out of bed in the morning.

I'm someone who relies heavily on deadlines and timetables. I love writing – you don't have to drag me to it, though you may have to drag me away from it – but I can't write if I believe no-one is going to read the text. A kind of terrible lack of confidence enters it.

### **When you write, do you picture somehow a potential audience or do you just write?**

Oh, I just started to answer this above! I do picture an audience: for prose, anyway. I feel that I'm talking, persuading, explaining *to*

*you*. If I'm on automatic pilot for any reason, I tend to notice it by picking up that I'm just boring, rather than charming, this ideal reader. I think poetry is much less advertent, much less sociable, in its instigation though. I don't think that I write it *to* someone, but simply *from* myself.

**Some writers describe themselves as planners, while others plunge right in to the writing. Would you consider yourself a planner or a plunger?**

A plunger! Despite all that I've said so far, I know that the important thing is not displacement activity, but writing. And in writing I always find I say more than I knew that I thought. I'm much more interesting on the page than in life, for example. Though this may be because one gets in the girly habit of not talking about one's stuff but instead listening ...

But I plunge with a plan or direction. Both in poetry and prose I have a sense of making through doing, but also at the same time of shaping a given direction. In poetry, I concentrate on the poetic thought (that's not an epithet! It's just a category – the matter of the poem) but it's being shaped as it goes by technique. In prose, I plunge in, but it's being shaped as I go by my book- or essay-plan.

**How important are names to you in your books? Do you choose the names based on liking the way they sound or for the meaning? Do you have any name choosing resources you recommend?**

Not being a fiction writer, no. Although I changed many of the names of the people in *Limestone Country*, in case they didn't like what I'd written about them (though I didn't feel I wrote anything disparaging. But you never know). It's a book about inhabited landscapes: the push and pull between person and place. So being observant, rather than sweetly charming, about the people in them was the whole point. I tried to translate these names sideways, to get a similar feel. For example a French farming family had in real life a surname from a village in the Vézère valley: I picked another hamlet from the same region, whose name had similar metrical attributes, as their pseudonym.

**Is there a certain type of scene that's harder for you to write than others? Love? Action? Erotic?**

I find it hard to write narrative verse. How do you move things along without ending up writing tranches of exposition? But I have worked with long poem form (I wrote a verse novel in 2006) and am working on a libretto right now; so I don't duck the issue!

**Tell us a bit about your non-literary work experience, please.**

I have worked in literature ever since I stopped being a violinist. But especially when I was in my twenties I was very committed to community arts practice. So I didn't just work with writing in health and social care: I worked in adult ed (teaching feminist theory as well as the inevitable creative writing) and did what must have been hundreds of schools' workshops. I also set up an international poetry festival that was deeply rooted in the community itself (Aberystwyth, in Wales). All of this had to do with my belief in 'bread and roses': that the good things in life, the things that bring pleasure but also give meaning, must be available to *everyone*. The professional and indeed personal economic costs of this idealism were rather too high (another thing I didn't know when I was young) but there was some artistic pay-off. I have been fearless ever since in advocacy of access to really good provision for everyone. I don't think it's elitist to make the best writing, art, music, drama available to everyone, rather than fob people off with dumbed-down pap. I think the fobbing off is what's elitist and patronising. What I found was that – laid open by the great and awful events in life – everyone, including people who have never had any prior relationship with anything 'arty', wants and needs and understands the best, the greatest, work. *And they deserve it.*

I also became quite politicised in a different direction by work in the Balkans. I became very committed to translation and cultural translation as key to dialogue between equals. My partner for a long time was a writer who had a 'bombing cancer', one of the soft tissue cancers that occur in clusters of cases in the places where NATO bombed former Yugoslavia (and other countries, incidentally) using depleted uranium as ballast. I am deeply moved by the Balkans and can't believe how they are simply regarded as unfashionable by

western culture-makers now. Those fault lines haven't gone anywhere. They are all still waiting for the next seismic shake-up.

**What do you like to read in your free time?**

Much of everything!

**What one book do you wish you had written?**

Apart from Proust/Joyce/Eliot, do you mean? The list is just too long ... I can't possibly pick one. Oh, *Vixen* by W.S. Merwin is probably my most specific poetry model; *Danube* by Claudio Magris non-fiction; *The Bridge over the Drina* by Ivo Andric the novel ...

**Do you see writing short stories as practice for writing novels?**

I'm not qualified to say, as I don't write fiction. But I think young writers in the US are lucky that there are still amazing outlets for short literary fiction: as the form, though exquisitely controlled, is concentrated. It *does* allow a young writer to reach a real audience before they're either ready or allowed to have a book. Small wonder, too, that their short fiction is so good.

**Do you think writers have a social role to play in society or is their role solely artistic?**

Yes, I think writers do have a role to play. One such is simply, as I've tried to help in a tiny way towards doing, to make the written culture open, inclusive, accessible, a genuine place to discuss and to hear discussion by a chorus of voices.

But I've also worked enough in countries other than philistine, anti-intellectual, muddling-along-blindly Britain to know that in most other parts of the world writers are public figures with a remit to think and feel for their societies. We might even say their societies think and feel *through* them. I think that's incredibly important. Look at the Anglophone societies who don't have such figures – UK, US, Australia – who, despite their western comforts and liberties seem to confine public discussion of ideas and events to politicians and journalists, and you can see how fatally reductive of the discourse

that is. And the consequences for, among other things, democracy. We desperately need thinkers who are not political careerists or their accompanists.

### **Tell us something about your latest publication, please?**

*In Search of Mary Shelley: the girl who wrote Frankenstein* was commissioned by Profile for the 200 years of *Frankenstein*. I was incredibly lucky that they came to me. I'd prepared an edition, with Introduction, of Percy Bysshe Shelley for Fabers a couple of years earlier: they read this, and – bingo. Most of the best things in my working life have been like this: unexpected. I loved writing the biography and tried to make it extremely readable story-telling; but it is scrupulously researched, and I did make some original discoveries. I tidied these all away to the dozens of pages of notes at the back of the book. I didn't want the confetti of superscript footnote numbers. I think it stops the reading flow! I wanted to write a sort of psychological biography – to find the person behind the facts – but not to fictionalise. Nothing is invented or speculative: where I speculate I do so out loud. I start each chapter with a freeze-frame image, then let the people in it move. It's lovely writing in a genre that's so widely read, and also lovely that I seem to be writing lots of supplementary things about Mary Shelley still: articles and essays and talks. This allows me to explore some of the things I didn't have room for in the book. *In Search of Mary Shelley* has had a wonderful critical reception – I'm so grateful – as well as being serialised on BBC R4 (not that I did the abridgement), etc. It's almost like Frankenstein's monster – it's grown away from me!

### **Can writing be taught?**

There's a ton of craft in writing, and that requires an apprenticeship – Malcom Gladwell's 10,000 hours of practice, perhaps – just like any other craft. Gift can't be taught, but it can be suffocated or released by opportunity and circumstance. In 'the old days', writers (who for this reason alone were usually male) had a Classical education. They were making poems and practising rhetoric (through translating the Classics) from when they were six, seven years old.

They also had enormously gifted teachers – in a very few, rarified schools and universities – who mentored them informally through patronage and, to put it another way, nepotism. I don't think that's good enough. I think if we want the best and the hungriest writers, they won't just come from that narrow stratum of society.

**Have you given or attended creative writing workshops and if you have, share your experiences a bit, please?**

I've given so many, in community settings and to kids and adults and students – where to start? I'm now Professor of Poetry and Director of the Poetry Centre at the University of Roehampton in London. It's a half-time Chair so that I have time to write.

I try to bring my experiences as a violinist to bear when I workshop. I was taught by some amazing musicians, and what made them great teachers (and people) was that they brought their own practice, and enthusiasms, into the teaching room. It wasn't being taught by a full-time teacher, while the world of actual professional music-making went on somewhere else. It was the world of professional music coming into the teaching room and embracing you. That's the conservatoire system and it's phenomenally inspiring and exciting: and I have to say that its standards are far higher than even Oxbridge (where I went on to do my first degree in my twenties).

**Flash fiction – how driven is the popularity of this form by social media like Twitter and its word limits? Do you see Twitter as somehow leading to shorter fiction?**

We used to ask the same about SMS messages, and that both did and didn't happen. New media and contexts will always throw up exciting new forms we can do new things with. At the same time many old forms will continue (though maybe they will change shape in ways we can't imagine) because of the things we can do with them – that point about our own capacities and needs as readers and writers is a really important one.

**Finally, what question do you wish someone would ask about your writing, and how would you answer it?**

I wish, of course, that a publisher, film/radio producer would ask me what I'd like to do next ... It's much nicer making things than it is talking about oneself!

Finally, finally, some Quick Pick Questions:

**E-books or print?**

Print. E-books don't smell.

**Dog or cat?**

Both. But not in the same room, obviously.

**Reviews – read or don't read?**

Read.

**Best city to inspire a writer: London, Dublin, New York (Other)?**

Belgrade.

**Favourite meal out: breakfast, lunch, dinner?**

Dinner. It can go on, and on ...

**Weekly series or box sets?**

Neither.

**Favourite colour?**

Varies constantly. Today, pearl.

**Rolling Stones or Beatles?**

Stones.

**Night or day?**

Dunno!