

CELEBRATING MYRA SCHNEIDER AT 80... INTERVIEW BY DILYS WOOD



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Myra Schneider first published children’s novels with Heinemann in the 1970s and 80s. Her first poetry collection was *Fistful of Yellow Hope* (Littlewood, 1984). She has edited women’s poetry anthologies, tutored, written poetry handbooks, the latest *Writing Your Self* with John Killick (Continuum International, 2009). Her latest poetry collection is *The Door to Colour* (Enitharmon, 2014). Another, *Persephone in Finsbury Park*, is due from Second Light Publishing, summer 2016.

DW: You have published 13 collections of poetry since the 1980s (with a new one about to be published) and have tutored poetry groups for over two decades. How would you characterise the state of poetry in the UK in 2016 and for which poets do you feel particular empathy?

MS: In one way poetry is in a good state now. Readings with guest poets are held in most parts of the country and workshops too. The Poetry School and university courses offer ways into writing and reading poetry. In the early 1960s after I left university the small amount of poetry activity I found was pretentious and male-dominated but in the last twenty-five years women’s poetry has emerged and is now flourishing. In fact the UK poetry world has a wide range of voices and it’s been enriched by poets with roots in other cultures. These include poets who came to Britain as refugees such as Hungarian-born George Szirtes and Lotte Kramer who came with the Kindertransport from Nazi Germany, Moniza Alvi who has explored the Pakistani side of her family, and Jane Duran who has written about New England and Chile, where she grew up, and her father’s involvement with the Spanish Civil War.

Unfortunately, cliques dominate the poetry scene and work that’s ‘fashionable’ is often overpraised while many good poets are undervalued. It’s sad too that poetry reaches fewer non-writers than thirty years ago and that such attention as the media give to poetry is often to work which is clever, abstruse or poor and it doesn’t attract the public. Contemporary poets whose work speaks to me? Anne Stevenson, Seamus Heaney, Derek Walcott, Mimi Khalvati, John F Deane, Anne Cluysenaar – those are just a few. There are a lot more and I’m very aware too of exciting young voices.

DW: Your tastes obviously lean towards spiritual profundity in poetry but your own poems often refer to the home or everyday events such as tube travel or what’s going on in your local park. How do ‘everyday’ starting-points and your wider interest in the human spirit work for you?

MS: Often I do set out from what appears to be everyday but in fact my subject matter is varied. For example I write about the natural world and the environment which greatly concerns me, childhood, relationships, and I feature myth and history. To me the spiritual isn’t separate from the clutter of day-to-day living but within it and what is crucial to me is to write poetry which connects the ordinary to deeper thought or feeling. So my poem *Milk Bottle* begins with rinsing a bottle, looking at the soap bubbles it’s trapped and then following a line of thought which leads me to the human condition,

before coming back at the end to the sink and a broken tile on the sill. What's important, as it is in every poem, is how the poem travels, how it makes links and throws a new light on its subject matter whether the starting point is going down an escalator or visiting a ruined temple in Malta.

DW: I appreciate the breadth of your interests. Among these are the Arts, music and painting in particular. Some poems – not yours – seem to fail because they merely describe, say, a painting. What's on your mind when you write (as you often do) about an artist or work of art?

MS: Yes, works of art feature quite often in my poetry. I use them in different ways. The huge sense of energy in Picasso's *Deux Femmes Courant sur La Plage* was the trigger for *Women Running* which is about the longing to keep hold of youthful vigour and also how potent energy is. Matisse's famous chapel and his comment about his beliefs inspired me to write *The Rosaire Chapel* which culminates in a contemplation of God. T S Eliot's "the door we never opened / Into the rose garden" in *Burnt Norton* took me back to childhood and led to the writing of *Garden*, which explores the sense of time passing. I love using a painting as a starting point and I think this must be because colour has a strong emotional effect on me. The only artist I've written about directly is Matisse. I was very struck by the late and difficult start he had as an artist, something I empathized with because the beginning of my creative life was slow and hard.

DW: One feature of your out-put is that you've written many narrative poems, including one book-length poem, *Becoming*. These range from poems with a contemporary setting to poems which are versions of myth. Not all poets are interested in narrative. What different dimensions have you been able to explore through your longer narrative poems?

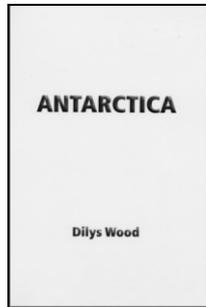
MS: Narrative offers me the chance to write in different voices and often in very different language from any I would use in a short poem. For example in *Voice Box*, writing as William, an imaginative twenty-year-old who's frustrated, difficult and partly living in a fantasy world, was an extraordinary release. I also found it revealing to give a voice to his burdened and over-protective mother, Millie. The gentle Minotaur, in the poem of the same name, didn't come alive until I found a way to make him express his animal as well as his human element. I've used narrative to explore the complexities of relationships in context. All these poems have a theme. Two of them look at disablement: *The Waving Woman* and *Voice Box*. Several of the poems tackle issues round women. This includes *Becoming*, which was a way to write about my father and the damaging effect he had on me as woman in a fictional setting, and *Caroline Norton* which focuses on the life of this early campaigner for women's rights. The *Minotaur* explores victimization, the sense of not belonging, and the often fortuitous reasons for a high reputation.

DW: I would characterise some poets as 'I' poets, that is they work outwards from personal experience, and others whose starting point for a poem rarely seems to relate to their own emotions or experience. You seem to fall into the 'I' category. Is this true? Can you explain this? Does it relate in any way to your life-history?

MS: You're right – I am an 'I' poet and I think this relates to difficulties I experienced in my earlier life. Most of my early childhood was in Scotland and I felt uncomfortably different because I was both English and Jewish. My upbringing was rather repressive. My parents, especially my domineering father, had high expectations of me, and from the time of adolescence I was upset by the friction between the two of them. I was well into adulthood before I felt any sense of belonging and security. It took me a long time to develop as a writer but from the age of fifteen I always felt a need to write. This was a place to be myself. I believe profoundly that writing (of any kind) can be therapeutic – hence the publications about personal writing. My earlier poetry was often very personal. It helped me explore and come to terms with my relationships with my parents and my postnatal breakdown. Later, the trauma of cancer brought me back to personal writing. My life experiences have also contributed to making me look outward and led me to write about such issues as the role of women and persecution.

DW: Your friends are now looking forward to celebrating your 80th birthday with you. How has your poetry developed since you started publishing in the early 1980s? A continuum or some big changes? How do you see the coming years? Do you think you will be content with reflection and consolidation, or are looking to break new ground?

MS: I feel my poetry has developed considerably since the early 1980s. I am still expansive but less wordy than in my early work and I use form more subtly. The range of my subject matter has widened over the years and my treatment of it is more ambitious. At first I wrote about direct experience and observation, now I mainly use personal material indirectly. Writing narratives has played a part in this and in recent years the surreal too. I find it offers me the opportunity to delve into the imagination to write about feelings, experiences and ideas and I turned to it instinctively to write about some of my reactions to cancer. It's essential to me to continue to try and break new ground. I've almost completed another full-length collection in which the theme of survival is looked at from different angles. It includes a fictional narrative which features a period of depression which draws obliquely on my own experience. For me being alive means writing poetry and trying to take it further.



Dilys Wood founded Second Light Network in 1994. Her collections are *Women Come to a Death* (Katabasis, 1997) and *Antarctica* (Greendale Press, 2008). She has co-edited Second Light's ARTEMISpoetry and the following Second Light anthologies: *Fanfare* (2015), *Her Wings of Glass* (2014), *Images of Women* (with Arrowhead Press, 2006), *My Mother Threw Knives* (2006), *Four Caves of the Heart* (2004), *Making Worlds* (with Headland, 2003) and the anthology *Parents* (Enitharmon Press, 2000).