

THE POETRY OF HELEN DUNMORE KATHERINE GALLAGHER REFLECTS

Writer extraordinaire: poet, novelist, short story and children's/writer alongside her career as wife and mother. Early on as a poet, her name kept appearing in the winners' lists. Her poetry books received a *Poetry Book Society Choice and Recommendations*, the *Alice Hunt Bartlett Award* and the *Signal Poetry Award*. *Bestiary* was shortlisted for the *T.S. Eliot Prize*. She won first prize in the *1990 Cardiff International Poetry Prize* and also first prize in the *2010 National Poetry Society Competition*. She had ten poetry collections – *Inside the Wave*, the final one, won the *2017 Costa Prize for Poetry*, and shortly after, the *Costa Book of the Year*.

But, you tell yourself, she also published twelve novels, three books of short stories with Penguin including *A Spell of Winter* (1991), winner of the *Orange Prize for Fiction*. In *Second Light*, we're here mostly for the poetry. I remember wondering some time back why Dunmore had so turned to fiction, albeit incredibly successfully. In fact, the contemporary highlighting of fiction vis-à-vis poetry leaves me bemused. *Why not poetry, Helen?* Obviously one writes what one writes but I have a theory that it's difficult to write poetry and prose at the same time. You need a different headset for each. I guess I'm different – I started out writing both. Here's Dunmore herself on the question. 'If writing fiction has affected my poetry, it has probably done so in a paradoxical way, by making my poems shorter and more lyrical' (Quoted in *Modern Women Poets*, p.304, ed. Deryn Rees-Jones. Bloodaxe Books, 2005).

Another interesting take on the question is *Guardian* critic Kate Kellaway's blurb review of *Inside the Wave*. 'She was – first and last – a poet. Her first collection *The Apple Fall* was published when she was 30, her last, *Inside the Wave*, in April this year... Her last collection is her most spare and moving ... as smooth as a sea pebble and liminal – poised between life and death' (*The Guardian*). Moniza Alvi, Chair of the Costa judges gave a similar response in an article following the posthumous award to Dunmore for *Inside the Wave* as *Costa Book of the Year*.

As I read these last poems and researched her final months for this article, I was drawn to her sheer bravery in living as fully as possible despite her brain cancer. Such courage. She had great presence; I remember her quietly authoritative bilingual handling of the audience at a French Literary Festival at St Clémentin in June, 2014; and her similar unruffled, attentive demeanour when I knew her as a distance-learning tutor for the Open College of the Arts.

In an article for the *Guardian* (4 March, 2017) only a few months before her death, she tackled the question of legacy. It starts:

'What is left behind by a life? Avoiding this question can be as much of an art as answering it. I have been thinking about this question of legacy over the past few months, for one reason because my new novel deals with memory, historical record, what remains, what is saved, and what is lost. The question has become more acute because a few months ago, I was diagnosed with a cancer that has a very poor prognosis...'

There she was, despite her illness – heroically tackling the most difficult question for any writer: legacy. The critic Claire Allfree reviewing her final story collection, noted, 'Such was the particularity of Dunmore's great gift as a writer: the ability to evoke both the fabric of an ordinary life and its place within a wider historical moment'. Her extraordinary gifts and achievements in poetry and prose testify to this. Dunmore was simply one of our greatest writers.

"I am on the deep deep water
Lightly held by one ankle
Out of my depth. Waiting."

(*September Rain*)