

## NOT JUST BEGINNER'S LUCK ALISON BRACKENBURY ON U. A. FANTHORPE

'Poetry struck'. This is U. A. Fanthorpe's own penetrating summary of the period in the mid-1970s, in which, while working as a hospital receptionist, she first began to write poetry. Ten years after Fanthorpe died, her words were quoted by R. V. Bailey at the 2019 Ledbury Poetry Festival. Bailey was reading from *Beginner's Luck*, her own selection from those first poems. They were 'rescued', she tells us, in her invaluable preface to the book, from 'Waitrose plastic bags ... tossed annually into the attic'.

It can be hard to prove how influential a particular writer has been. But the quiet persistence of U. A. Fanthorpe's gift to other poets is clear from tributes made to her. I will briefly add my own.

I heard Ursula Fanthorpe read from her hospital poems on BBC Radio, in the 70s, when I was beginning to write. I was deeply impressed by the fact that she had given up her post as Head of English at Cheltenham Ladies College and was working as a receptionist at Bristol's Southmead Hospital. Her entry into poetry is described, bluntly and memorably in a poem set firmly in her new workplace: *Job description: poet*

A cheap art. All you need is something  
To write on, and with. In my case  
Yesterday's clinic list, a hospital biro.

Family and friends may be dismayed when a writer abandons a prestigious career to work in low status jobs. But this risky move may not simply yield more time to write. It may lead to wider, even shocking experience, which become the necessary subject of the writer's work. Fanthorpe's poems about Southmead are intent on sympathy, angrily aware of differences of circumstance and class.

In *Demonstration of leuco-coagulation treatment to a conference*, features a compassionate doctor and her patient, with "fractured mind" are displayed, while "above them burn / The lunch-flushed faces of psychiatrists". Someone we may meet any day – and forget – can become unforgettable in a Fanthorpe poem. "I'm the receptionist ... I am nothing". A low-key opening builds skilfully into cold fury: "But sometimes ... I am Cerberus, / Guardian of Hell. Beware of me. I bite." (*The Receptionist*.) The classical allusions, which add weight to Fanthorpe's gravest poems, give a final twist to an ending whose ferocity is unsurpassed in her later work.

U. A. Fanthorpe's poems are deservedly much loved for their wry humour. With what her partner, R. V. Bailey, calls "disarming humility", Fanthorpe presents her long and distinguished teaching career, in a poem called *Misunderstood*, through the prism of a new acquaintance's remarks:

Oh, an English teacher! How dreadful!  
You'll be shocked at my spelling!

I never thought of correcting  
Chaucer's.

Sharpness of her mind's eye is clear in *Boarding kennels*: the beloved pet (a dog?) is left behind: "Love will wait till we come back / (Being behind bars it hasn't much choice)". Fanthorpe's work, unusually, is both engaging and rigorous. Rueful sympathy gives *Boarding kennels* its terse final line:

When it sees us  
Love will leap in such an agony  
Of joy as to spoil completely, in retrospect,  
All the pleasure that we had on holiday  
Without it.

One of the deep pleasures of *Beginner's Luck* is the inclusion of subjects which Fanthorpe's later poems do without. R. V. Bailey observes 'Later, she seldom wrote about herself at all.' The poem *Infidelity* offers a warm celebration of Fanthorpe's father, "a heavy man, a judge," It reveals how his weight "nearly foundered" the dinghy he loved, and how he accepted "so humbly" the scorn of "Tiddler the fat waterman, who ruled / The mooring raft". The humour is assured, but the poem is also vivid with pain. Fanthorpe regrets that, as a child, she shared Tiddler's scorn of her father. The poem's ending is unsparing, although leavened (for the reader) by Fanthorpe's quick wit:

The boat is sold  
And you are dead, and Tiddler, if he lives,  
Must need his shirt by now. All I have left  
Is the sad taste of treason in my mouth,  
And a dislike of boathooks.

Fanthorpe's early poems are also stylistically fascinating. R. V. Bailey notes that in the later work: 'Rhyme begins to be reserved ... for comedy'. Each poet finds their own way. But I am glad to have read one powerful early venture of Fanthorpe's down a different path. *For Sappho* marries outspoken passion to a final delicacy of two-syllable rhyme:

What conflagration flamed in you  
That such a fieriness still lingers?  
We breathe upon these scraps of ash  
And find that they have burned our fingers.

Fanthorpe's work seems to me highly distinctive in its technique and tone. It does not depend upon showy phrases, or upon strict poetic form. Her unique achievement is the voice which speaks in her poems, not concealing the idioms of her own time and class, but remaining clear, sometimes angry, often humorous, always compassionate.

Not least because of her years in low-ranking jobs, her poems also give voice to other speakers. I hope that younger readers, with many different stories of their own, will discover Fanthorpe's poems and appreciate them with the same generosity which shapes her own work, of all periods. *Beginner's Luck* reveals some of her enduring strengths. Her poems have a firm historical sense of the English landscape, as shown in her references to Tennyson and to King Arthur in *At Cadbury*. Nor does she shy away from sexual politics – and the dangers of the present world. R. V. Bailey notes Fanthorpe's sympathy with gay men "in the early hostile world of the 70s". "Bill is scared / To be out at night" Fanthorpe writes in *Gay Christians*. I wish these lines belonged to a closed chapter of history.

R. V. Bailey states, near the close of her preface to *Beginner's Luck*: 'These are all apprentice pieces; she'd be the first to dismiss them.' Yes, there is some variation in quality. But even the occasional poem which seems fragmentary remains intriguing. The reader can reach out to what it just failed to catch, before its author packed it away, showing the 'brisk side' referred to in Bailey's introduction, in its long resting place, the carrier bag. But here, in *Rites de Passage*, is Fanthorpe, already at her best, her lines alive with humour and compassion

For our young, who can't be contented  
With shrews, balls of string, or  
Milk, and find it so difficult to be  
Human.

Irresistible... I strongly recommend the early poems of *Beginner's Luck* as an absorbing introduction to U. A. Fanthorpe, a pioneering writer, with work of lasting power. She should be celebrated.

The celebration of *Beginner's Luck* at the 2019 Ledbury Poetry Festival took place on a warm sleepy afternoon, towards the end of a crowded week of poetry from many readers and countries. In proof of U. A. Fanthorpe's lasting and deserved popularity, the large hall was packed.

If, book in hand, you would like to listen to R. V. Bailey's illuminating introductions and her readings of favourite poems, simply search online for: Ledbury Poetry Festival 2019 Podcasts Event 42. (I also had the privilege of presenting my choices.) The poems of U. A. Fanthorpe's *Beginner's Luck* are a joy to read, aloud, or on the page. We are lucky to have them.

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