

BREAKING THE GLASS CEILING, PART 1



“Those who decide what’s important frequently object to the presence, in some women’s writing, of: high-register imagery, free verse and writing from female experience. This last objection is The Great Hypocrisy, of course.”

Fiona Sampson

Fiona Sampson opens our series on women poets and the pressures of the ‘glass ceiling’ with an analysis of underlying factors. Eleanor Livingstone, Festival Director of StAnza, conveys her determination to buck the trend by delivering Scotland’s premier poetry event.

Further articles by enterprising women to come.

Fiona Sampson: A Culture of Gender

Whether the differences between men and women are the result of nature or nurture or both (you’ll have your own ideas about this, as do I), such differences certainly surround us. Men and women write, we could say, out of different cultures. And some of these cultural differences affect the ways in which writing happens. To take a trivial but familiar example: the woman who forgets a birthday is a bad friend and a lousy lover. The man who does something similar is nothing of the sort. So women write with a divided mind, some part of it always in hock to the quotidian. Other cultural differences enter the text directly, in the form of experience and sensibility. For example, since it’s no surprise that women, traditionally excluded from education, are traditionally associated with less-educated discourse, it’s no surprise (either) that women often conform to such expectations. Conformity is always more rewarded than rebellion.

I’m invoking this complex topic because I don’t believe we can think about the glass ceiling in British poetry without thinking about how it’s come to exist. One of the key problems for women poets, it seems to me, is the inability of most editors, and such critics as we have – but really, we scarcely do: lacking a reflective, critical culture our poetry is at the mercy of blogosphere knee-jerk, publishers’ brand marketing and arts managers’ group-think – still, the inability of those there are, to *hear* anything beyond personal taste. To put it another way: leaving aside the ghost of misogyny – which I’m not suggesting has yet left the room altogether – much of the difficulty women poets face is a perfectly innocent, stubborn inability on the part of some male gatekeepers to *hear another culture*. Bernardine Evaristo (an exceptional role-model for brave and articulate advocacy) has written, particularly in connection with the exciting new Bloodaxe anthology *Ten*, about this deafness to international, migrant and hyphenated British cultures and the way that, as a result, BME [black and minority ethnic] writers are radically under-represented in the publishing canon. I suspect the same argument applies to gender, though here it’s slightly better-disguised. For, while the majority of creative writing students and emergent poets in every kind of scheme and course are women, our presence in British poetry is pyramidal: as a great cluster of relatively low-ranking producers who are largely not taken seriously as *really important* poets.

Those who decide what's important frequently object to the presence, in some women's writing, of: high-register imagery, free verse and writing from female experience. This last objection is The Great Hypocrisy, of course. We've all heard how, apparently, writing about football is a great equaliser, whereas writing about shopping for shoes would be of narrow interest because it engages with only 50% of the population; that the post-industrial landscape is a political topic but women's domestic servitude is not; that a poem of love and desire from a man's standpoint is part of canonical tradition whereas from a woman's it's 'merely' confessional...

But questions of poetics are just as pertinent. If a woman chooses the complex rhythmic integrity of free verse over blank verse's determinist left-right march, or if she tries to open up the diminishing returns of conventional wisdom with vibrant imagery, transferred epithet, surrealism or playfulness: this needs to be heard *as* a choice. *As poetics*. (She also needs to do it well, of course.) It's clearly arrant folly to assume that the only possible result of technical control, of deep study of poetics, could be one single form and style, made fashionable in today's Britain by a small group of (forgive the cliché) white men. What of the poetries of every culture and century since Gilgamesh? Would none of them – the Psalms, Sappho, Pushkin, the Kalevala, Shakespeare, Basho – weigh in the balance against the anoraked specialists of one constituency? True, women write from the same time and place and in broadly the same language as men, and our poetry must address those same parameters. But even the most cursory reading of discourse theory reminds us – as if experience didn't – that women's culture currently uses language in specific ways. For example, many of our speech acts don't impart information but simply prompt, bond or affirm.

At the same time, we *also* face the opposite critique. Though men are allowed to write as (ostensibly ungendered) human beings – and are at their most interesting, for my taste, when they do so: in poetry with metaphysical, spiritual or philosophical dimensions, for example, or about mortality and loss – women are *also* punished for doing this: and by both men and women. There are the male editors (I won't name names) who want their women poets to be All Woman, writing about their bodies, and sexuality, and love. *'Tis woman's whole existence...* A woman can't possibly *be* a poet of ideas: she must just have forgotten the Golden Rule of writing from experience. And there are also women (largely, then, other poets) who say that women who write as human beings, with spiritual as well as emotional lives, and collective as well as private social issues, rather than sticking with the gendered totems of housework and child-bearing, are – like the 'class traitors' of old – gender traitors.

But if we're going to bind our own feet, we can't blame the male gatekeepers when we fail to run very far. If we internalise any limit, whether that's attempting to conform to a 'better', masculine-gendered model of poetry culture, or trying to be true to an 'authentically' female-gendered one, we limit ourselves. And in this question of choice I see room for optimism. Something that could really change the gender future of British poetry is the arrival of a meritocracy via the emerging ubiquity of MA and other university courses – whatever their other shortcomings. Suddenly, there will be a lot of senior, male poets in whose interest it is for the most talented, achieved of their student writers to receive professional attention. As in business, where the profit motive outstrips even misogyny, real talent will start to be a trump card, whatever gender form it takes. One of the things that's most held us back has been our internalisation of secondary status *outside* the text. For too long, too much professional patronage – without which, in our poetry village, emergence and progress are inordinately hard: I write from experience – has depended on personal contact (yes, I'm aware that this phrase can be read as a euphemism). But to resort to the tricks of the harem is *precisely* to internalise the idea that this is all you – all we – have. Every time a woman is advanced *only* because of whom she's (let's say) flicking her hair at, the better poet (whether male or female) who would otherwise have had that chance is *by definition* lost to us – whether it's only for half a page in a magazine or permanently, for example in exclusion from some key bursary scheme.

Sometimes we also have to compete for a scarce allocation of places for women: though not in *Poetry Review*, where a disproportionately higher percentage of submissions by women go on to be published. Fewer than one third of poetry submissions are by women (in the last three months, they totaled 41% compared to the male total), and the proportion of *poems* submitted by women is even

lower, since they generally submit four, or a maximum of six, poems, whereas men generally submit a minimum of six. That's under an editorial policy of reading every single submission, and of deliberately representing the range of best practice in Britain today – in other words, of embracing a range of poetics. As for our essays/Centrefold/belles-lettres, that all-important shared public *thinking about* poetry: in the last five years Ruth Padel is the *only* woman to offer an ars poetica; women may be happy to *be* interviewed but only two women have offered interviews they have *carried out*; in order to include women poet's voices I have to resort to their memoir and fiction (wonderful as these are in themselves). As for expert women reviewers – they're gold dust!

But in coming decades, greater ease of professional emergence will make it possible for more women to take the risk of being identified as that least 'feminised', in our bizarrely antediluvian British poetry culture, of figures: as thinker, critic, editor. As we allow women to be literary authority figures, the way they are in pretty much the rest of the *soi-disant* non-fundamentalist world – to be repositories of expertise, intelligence and knowledge – we'll create the possibility of women decision-makers. Then the real aesthetic debate can finally start...

* Fiona Sampson's latest collection is *Rough Music* (2010), shortlisted for the Forward Prize and the T.S. Eliot Prize. She reviews regularly for *The Independent*, *The Guardian* and *TLS*.

Eleanor Livingstone:

StAnza, Scotland's International Poetry Festival, is in its fourteenth year and the festival continues to grow – we had more than 11,000 attendances last March. I've been Artistic Director since 2005 and earlier this year took over as Festival Director under a restructuring which means I've kept the artistic remit for the present but with welcome extra support for administration, distribution and programming. I wasn't quite ready to decide I'd run out of ideas.

Officially our planning period is eighteen months but that's an understatement. I'm always working on ideas for future festivals: I don't just want the next one to be the best yet, I hope to deliver great programmes year after year – already I have outline plans for 2012 and 2013. No two festivals ever feel the same, each one starting with a set of new themes (next year *Timepiece* and *The Poets' Ark*) around which we build and weave different elements. Our spring festival always features a diversity of readings, performances, talks and discussions – 83 events, exhibitions and installations last March from almost 100 participants – with visual art, music, film, education, comedy and theatre in the mix, and three groups of people have to enjoy the final product: the audiences, those taking part, and of course our wonderful StAnza team of staff and volunteers.

So programming is never simply about selecting the biggest names or poets with new books to promote. I have to balance major figures with less well known poets and promising newcomers; poets writing within the mainstream with others at the experimental end of the poetry spectrum; page against stage; poets writing in English and translated poets, decide which poets will work best in which venues, and choose ancillary events to complement them. Readings take place in ten of our fifteen venues, ranging from the Poetry Centre Stage auditorium experience in our hub, The Byre Theatre, to the intimacy of a Round Table reading in wood-panelled St Mary's Hall. The programme should be varied enough to appeal to everyone, but at the same time I want people to discover poets new to them and encounter poetry in fresh and challenging ways.

In addition to booking venues and inviting poets, there's the financial work, applying for funding and sponsorship, squaring the budget, preparing reports and more reports, and practical tasks such as drafting publicity material. We post a page for each participant so as well as liaising with our web designers, I spend a fair bit of time getting permissions from poets or publishers to post poems on our website, and also for our Poetry Walk and Poetry Theatre, for filming and podcasts. By late autumn when the programme is mostly ready and confirmations and contracts have been sent to every

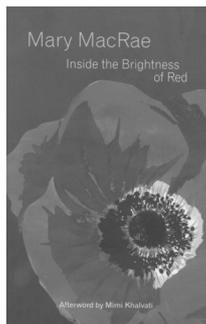
participant, I pass poets' details to our Travel Agents and start on accommodation lists, while planning the programme-after-next. Christmas is a brief pause then it's January and the focus is again on the looming festival, distribution, marketing and preview events taking priority, along with volunteer recruitment, dusting off equipment and preparing dozens of schedules which make the festival run smoothly. We also deliver up to thirty school workshops in January and February, and I have to make sure they all go as planned.

StAnza is much more a way of life than a 9—5 job. When I'm home I'm rarely off the laptop for long – people sometimes comment about emails sent at 6.00am or after midnight – but I've no regrets about my commitment. There's such fulfilment from getting it right, in wonderful readings, enthusiastic audience response, even just the festival buzz in the Byre café bar. I love spending my days – and a lot of evenings – with poets and poetry, and initiating StAnza's digital programme and live webcasts has been especially exciting. Our Distant Voices festival linked up poets in twelve cities around the globe, live from Mumbai to Sacramento in what we think was a world-first, and this year we staged a Cyber Slam with Melbourne's Overload festival – and won!

The opportunities came at the right time for me: my daughter is grown up, my husband ready and willing to assume responsibility for everything at home, and I'm very grateful for that. I'd hate to have to balance festival commitments with small children. Even so, this past year has been a crazy one. As well as my enhanced role at StAnza, my first full collection came out and reading opportunities took me to Macedonia in August, Lithuania in October, with London and Newcastle scheduled for November. It's no surprise I've hardly written anything new all year. I hope that will change once things settle down but meantime I have a festival to run. StAnza 2011 is coming up fast, 16 – 20 March, and that's both a challenge and a privilege.

* Eleanor Livingstone's latest collection, *Even the Sea* (2010), was published by Red Squirrel Press. Her two previous collections, *The Last King of Fife* (2005) and *A Sampler* (2008), were published by Happenstance.

Outline details of StAnza 2011 can be found at www.stanzapoetry.org



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afterword by Mimi Khalvati

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