

BREAKING THE GLASS CEILING, PART 2



“... *how much sway do women actually have in publishing, even in small press publishing?*” (*Fortune-Wood*)

“*One of my main anxieties was, of course, that my own writing would suffer because of the time I need to spend on Oversteps work...*” (*Marriage*)

Jan Fortune-Wood – ‘Who Are We Waiting For?’

And who will join this standing up
And the ones who stood without sweet company
will sing and sing
back into the mountains and
if necessary
even under the sea

we are the ones we have been waiting for.

Kathleen Fischer, *Women at the Well*

In March 1994 I was ordained priest at the first service of ordination of women in the Church of England. It was a piece of history that came after a long and bitter struggle. After that amazing service I returned to a parish where I was appointed only because no man would take the post, where the church was falling down, where the dwindling congregation was divided because several women would not receive Communion from my hands. In the next parish (another place that no men applied to) I was assaulted three times and had to retire. Three years before ordination I’d completed the first PhD in feminist theology in the UK; I predicted that the struggle for women bishops would be a long road and, seventeen years later, the church is still labouring along it.

Being a small press editor/owner of an independent publishing house seems relatively free of the gender barriers I experienced in the church. There are no obvious structural blocks and women abound in strong positions: as editors of major literary journals; festival directors; events’ organisers; arts funding officers; lecturers in creative writing; literary agents and, in no short supply, as writers. But the devil is always in the detail. The mere fact that this article is being written begs a question – how much sway do women actually have in publishing, even in small press publishing?

Influence is never simply a numbers game. The more that women write, organise poetry readings, take positions as editors, the better. Numbers do matter – as Jane Campion points out in the world of film director/writers – 95% male dominance is not acceptable, but it is not only about numbers, as my old life warns me: there has been a huge rise in the numbers of ordained women, but the power balance and culture has not shifted in the seismic way that many hoped. And despite the rising numbers of women in many literary arenas, women small press owner/editors are, if not rare, still not the norm.

Moreover, although I do not face huge structural impediments, I do notice that I’m approached differently – not by everyone, but since becoming single and the sole owner of Cinnamon Press, a small group of vociferous male authors or distant colleagues (probably well-meaning) have been keen to furnish me with strong advice on how I should be running the press, usually beginning with ‘Forgive me for interfering, but...’ (none have added ‘my dear’, but perhaps I’m not quite paranoid to

sense that it's implied). In contrast, several women authors have offered help with editing or other generous gifts, with no 'words of wisdom' on the proper way to run a press.

I feel enormously privileged to run Cinnamon Press. I love working with words and seeing innovative manuscripts become books. I'm pleased that women make up a large percentage of Cinnamon Press authors without any artificial selection. But I'm mindful that the way that I work and exist is, in many ways, a metaphor for women's work. Cinnamon has been the fastest growing press in Wales in the last five years and we've had wonderful successes with literary prizes including poets winning Wales Book of the Year and being shortlisted for the Forward Prize and Aldeburgh Prize for best first collection; but it is done on a shoestring and performed as a juggling act characteristic of many women's lives.

In addition to an ambitious list of twenty-five books a year, I run a home; have home-educated four children (three now at university or beyond) and try to make time for my own writing. I often work seven days a week or late into the evening and rejoice simply to break even. It is this frenetic combination that makes it a specifically-gendered role. I do not subscribe to an essentialist notion of gender (identity is more complex and dynamic than this allows), but I do think that women experience the world, both biologically and culturally, in particular ways and therefore the more women there are working in small presses for the love of seeing excellent writing make it into the world, the better. But it comes with a price tag: to put cracks in the glass ceiling, women, as so often is the case, have to do more and be more; have to frenetically, but joyfully juggle for little or no return beyond the pleasure of seeing good writing prosper – after all, 'we are the ones we have been waiting for.'

Alwyn Marriage – 'Taking Oversteps Books to New Heights'

In 2008 I was invited by Anne Born of Oversteps Books to submit a poetry collection. This was accepted, and my second collection, *Touching Earth*, was published in record time, in order to be available for the Ways with Words Festival that summer. During these months I became friends with Anne, so when she fell ill that following winter, I went to visit her.

'Is there anything I can do to help?' I enquired rashly, thinking I might be able to take some review copies to the post office. Without a moment's hesitation Anne looked me in the eye and replied, 'Yes. I want you to take over Oversteps.' This possibility had certainly never crossed my mind, and I had more than enough work through my writing, lecturing and environmental consultancies. What's more, although I had edited a journal, I had no experience of book-publishing.

However, I was aware that there are few enough good poetry publishers around, and we could not afford to lose another. Peterloo had recently closed down and several others were struggling, so I eventually agreed to Anne's extraordinary request; and I suppose that rather back-handed way of being recruited for the job explains why I have not been aware of a glass ceiling in the publishing business.

There was, of course, very little money available, so it was clear from the beginning that there would be no salaries and that therefore I would have to do everything myself – for love. My first coup was finding a really good and helpful digital printer, who was kind enough to alert me when I made mistakes. I then managed to secure an Arts Council grant, which allowed me to start developing the publishing.

Cover design was one of the most expensive items, so I bought some desktop publishing software and learned to design the covers myself. It was a bonus to find that this part of the work was highly enjoyable. Without going through the whole wide range of necessary activities, I can say that the best elements of the work have been my relationship with so many lovely poets, and the actual editing of the books to make sure they are of the very highest standard. The worst part has been the huge amount of administration – which is certainly not my fort . The more successful Oversteps becomes, the more admin is needed, and I must admit to finding that tedious and time-consuming.

I had some previous experience of choosing poetry, both as a competition judge and as Editor of the Collins anthology, *New Christian Poetry*, in the 1990s, when I had to choose poems from the eight and a half thousand that were sent in. However, as many of the poets submitting work might be known to me personally, I invited some well-published and respected poets to join me on an Editorial Board, and have guarded their anonymity so that there is no pressure on them to favour their friends. In an effort to keep at least some time for my own writing and lecturing, I have to limit the number of potential submissions, so only poets with a track-record of publications or competition successes can be considered. For the poets who are invited to submit a whole collection, I remove their identities from the manuscripts before forwarding to the Board, and we meet for a long editorial meeting twice a year, to decide which we can take forward to publication. Details of our submissions policy can be found on our website (www.overstepsbooks.com). There are no exceptions to this.

Oversteps is now going from strength to strength, with ten or a dozen new books each year. The waiting list for consideration is getting longer and longer; our books receive very good reviews; and groups of Oversteps poets read regularly at festivals and other events. If you would like to receive our occasional e-newsletter that gives information about new books, please let me know (alwynmarriage@overstepsbooks.com).

One of my main anxieties was, of course, that my own writing would suffer because of the time I need to spend on Oversteps work. In the past I have written non-fiction books, and I had just embarked on writing novels when Oversteps landed on me. Not surprisingly, these time-consuming literary pursuits have suffered slightly; but my poetry continues to flow unabated, and although I'd like more time for editing and improvements, I am enjoying a good steady stream of publications and plenty of invitations to give readings and lead workshops.

[see p76 for Erratum in respect of Fiona Sampson's article in Part I, in Issue 5 Eds]



Many Second Light members contributed poems to the following anthologies, all in very good causes:

Did I Tell You? 131 Poems for Children in Need (Wordaid, 2010, eds Nicky Gould and Vicky Wilson). "With all the profit from each copy sold going directly to Children in Need, this is a book that not only explores children's lives but will help to change them for the better." More at: wordaid.blogspot.com

Sixty Poems for Haiti (Cane Arrow Press, 2010, eds Ian Dieffenthaler and Maggie Harris). All proceeds to the Lambi Fund. "The collection is the 'book of the concert'", which took place in June 2010. More at: www.canearrowpress.com.

Soul Feathers (Indigo Dreams, 2011, eds Ronnie Goodyer and Annie Morgan) has been compiled to appeal to all members of the public, from those who are familiar with the best poets writing today to those millions of people who support the work of Macmillan and want to enjoy accessible poetry from all walks of life. For more info see: www.indigodreams.co.uk/#/soul-feathers/4545520025.

Members featured (some in all 3 books): Moira Andrew, Carole Baldock, Sara Boyes, Alison Brackenbury, Maggie Butt, Caroline Carver, A C Clarke, Anne Cluysenaar, Clare Crossman, Marilyn Donovan, Barbara Dordi, Val Doyle, Claire Dyer, Margaret Eddershaw, June English, Joanna Ezekiel, Janice Fixter, Wendy French, Katherine Gallagher, Daphne Gloag, Gabriel Griffin, Jenny Hamlett, Sue Johnson, Mimi Khalvati, Gill Learner, Pippa Little, Alison Lock, Liz Loxley, Simone Mansell Broome, Joan McGavin, Gill McEvoy, Alison Michell, Gillian Moyes, Sue Moules, Katrina Naomi, Geraldine Paine, Ann Phillips, Harriet Proudfoot, Sue Rose, Myra Schneider, Penelope Shuttle, Susan Jane Sims, Ruth Smith, Anne Stewart, Angela Topping, Vivienne Tregenza, Catherine Whittacker and Vicky Wilson, and past-members U A Fanthorpe, Clare Holtham and Mary MacRae.