

∞ READING ROUND ∞

The Writers Who Inspire Me

Andy Jackson

MY ENGLISH TEACHER at primary school once asked me to write a poem for a fellow-pupil who was moving away to another school. Until that point I had never entertained thoughts of being a poet — after all, it was pretty clear when I was nine that I was going to be an astronaut. I can remember the pupil's name, but nothing of the poem. However, the seed of an idea that I might have a talent for the written word was probably planted there. Whilst not a writer, my old primary teacher was certainly an inspiration to write.

In secondary school I was fed into the O-Level English mincing machine where I was fortunate to be exposed to some interesting poetry in the curriculum. I vividly recall first readings of Charles Causley's 'Timothy Winters' and Louis MacNeice's 'Prayer Before Birth', both dark and challenging poems from interesting writers. I never stopped reading the work of these two poets, so I count them as my earliest and most persistent inspirations. In the Sixth Form I was fed contemporary poetry for the first time in the shape of the incomparable Seamus Heaney. I'd never read anything like it, and if any one poet got in the way of me picking up a pen at seventeen to write poetry it was Heaney — what would be the point in the face of such genius?

After many fallow years, I returned to poetry in my forties, learning a lot from being part of a poetry workshop group under the writer in residence at Dundee University (my place of work for many years), Colette Bryce. Colette stressed the importance of the edit — 'a poem isn't finished until

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there's nothing left to take out' was her mantra, and now mine. She was, and remains, an inspiration.

Where once I was intimidated by Seamus Heaney's brilliance, these days I am inspired by the poets whose work I love — W. N. Herbert, U. A. Fanthorpe, Sean O'Brien, Kathleen Jamie, Don Paterson, John Glenday. They show me not just how poetry is done, but how it could be done — the possibilities of poetry, in all its many voices and costumes.

My biggest inspiration to pursue poetry, however, was a fellow writing-group member at Dundee University, the late Jim Stewart, a singular poet who devoted much of his time to promoting the work of others, mostly students on his Masters course in Creative Writing. Many long conversations over several years remain with me, and his patience with my failings as a writer were formative for me. Jim's work was published posthumously, and I urge you to seek out the collection put together by his friends in 2018 entitled *This*. He was, in the words of Robert Burns:

The friend of man, the friend of truth;
The friend of age, and guide of youth:
Few hearts like his, with virtue warm'd,
Few heads with knowledge so inform'd...

And there can be no finer inspiration than such a person. Here's to you, Jim, and to all those writers whose poems I've stopped to read at least a second time.