

## **FOGGY's Questionnaire**

**If you could kick off by describing what you've done so far, that would be nice. A story is always a nice beginning.**

I came – or, rather, *returned* – to poetry late, after studying literature at university but veering off into rock music in various guises: guitarist, songwriter, singer, producer and recording engineer. Once the law of diminishing dignity kicked in I rationalised my failures and called it quits. I was always going to have a creative project on the go, however, and poetry came quite naturally after song-writing. In my opinion, the two are related but distinct crafts, so adjustments did have to be made, lyrics are not poetry despite frequent flirtations with the idea. However, the great thing about poetry after rock bands, is that it relies only upon one sociopath as opposed to four or five. So, in practical terms at least, it's easier to realise as an artform. Once I got started I kept at it and, feeling the need for some sense of a cohort, I did the Creative Writing MA at Manchester Metropolitan University. My portfolio for that had the good fortune to win the inaugural Straid Poetry Award, which involved publication of my first collection with Templar Poetry. In retrospect, this was a bit of a mixed blessing because, as a sequence, it probably wasn't quite ready to be my first collection in a world of first collection prizes, where received wisdom dictates that one should 'make your first collection work hard for you' (that's a genuine piece of advice I was once given). Still, who's going to quibble about a first book publication when it's handed to you? And anyway, *The Waiting Hillside* is not without its virtues, nor has it failed to open a few doors. Following on from that I published my second collection, *Cur*, with the estimable Shoestring Press, whose John Lucas, I love. And around the same time I took over the editorship of *The Interpreter's House*.

**Before TIH, what was your connection with the strange world of the fiction and poetry writer?**

I described the long lead-in to my taking over *TIH* above, but I've always written in one form or another since I was a kid. For instance, I must have written hundreds of songs down the years, though I've only put out, or been involved with, about seven albums and a few singles worth. Also, my first paid full-time job was a government scheme that allowed me to be writer-in-residence at an arts centre in Liverpool, where I wrote drama scripts and co-wrote a screenplay. I went on to do a Screenwriting MA at Liverpool John Moore's in the late 1990s and wrote a sitcom that was kicked about a bit by the BBC, as these things tend to be without ever really having a cat in hell's chance of getting made (too much 'sit' not enough 'com'). And I'd written some shorter fiction, which is a medium I intend to return to after my next collection comes out. However, other than running poetry workshops and mentoring a few poets, I'd had no experience of editing a whole journal when I took over at *TIH*. I *had* set up an independent record company, however, so knew a bit about creative economies of scale, knowledge expensively acquired in that particular case.

**Then tackle the following questions. If it's OK, I'll then create the illusion of a dialogue, as though we're both sitting in a room, with cake and coffee. That sort of illusion.**

**So:**

**There seem to be hundreds of small poetry presses about, and I imagine they struggle to make a living, competing as they do for what is essentially a niche market; something led you think: I want some of that. What was the trigger that got you involved in journal editing?**

Well, I saw the call for candidates put out on the Poetry Society website, and I liked *The Interpreter's House* as a journal. I'd been published a few times by the then editor Simon Curtis and always felt that it was punching a little beneath its weight in terms of quality-to-profile ratio. I thought it deserved to be more widely read and that Simon had got something good going for the magazine. When, sadly, it transpired that he had a terminal illness and couldn't carry on, I wanted to honour his efforts by helping to keep the magazine running in whatever way I could. It was just fortunate that I hit it off with both Simon and the magazine's founding editor, Merryn Williams. I got the gig and hope I haven't let either of them down. Also, the opportunity came at a very particular moment in both my creative and private life and I genuinely wanted to 'give something back' to a poetry scene which had been pretty welcoming to a raggy-arsed immigrant from rock music. I suppose I felt that I had enough heft and experience behind me at that point to make a decent fist of it. I refer anyone reading this to the recent Editorial of Issue #65 for any ethics I've subsequently tried to model as an editor.

**TIH has established a clear identity as a magazine...and also as a competition. You've attracted a lot of submissions from well-established and otherwise successful poets. What do you put that down to?**

A 'successful poet', to me, is someone who sends me in a really good poem and that is all. But, yes, I know what you mean, we've been fortunate to have had a number of well-established writers contribute to the magazine over the years and this is important. For other writers, perhaps starting out on their publishing 'career', it is significant to be seen alongside names who are perceived to be successful and well-established. I consciously try to lard each issue with one or two for that very reason. Though, nothing quite beats publishing a great poem and finding out that it is the poet's first publication. This sensibility has been with us from the start and has, hopefully, helped to establish that clear identity you talk about here. Incidentally, I'd be fascinated to know from people what their perceptions of that identity is. Putting together a magazine is a little like making your own sandwich: you never quite know how good it is until you eat someone else's. But I take your point, we wanted to take the magazine into new areas and be open to new voices. We constantly go over our page limits and the number of poems we initially set out to publish each issue. This might be seen as weak editing and I sometimes wonder if the perception of us is as a journal which publishes too many poets and is a rather beautiful photocopier. This would, of course be utter bollocks: we get well over a thousand poems submitted per

issue and we'd rather take a poem which excites us than let it go elsewhere. I'd even be interested in seeing how good an issue would be, which is compiled from those excellent poems that didn't quite make it past our final deliberations for each of the 15 issues.

The competition is a slightly different beast. It is certainly vital to keeping the magazine going year-on-year. I think for the three competitions we've run so far, we've been lucky in getting a succession of fine young poets whose stars have been on the rise to be the judge: Liz Berry, Jonathan Edwards and Niall Campbell. This was a conscious choice and they've done us proud. Their reputations have been vital in attracting the hoped-for number of entries and having been judged to have written a prize-winning poem by these writers has, I'm sure, provided a tremendous fillip to our winners, some of whom have gone on to considerable further success. For my last competition – when I want to leave the coffers bulging for the new editor – I might try to get a 'really big name' to judge *Open House 2018*. Who that will be I don't yet know. I'd best get my skates on, I suppose.

What I put all this down to is a combination of kindness, luck, shrewd judgement, and the eternal reciprocity of tears as I'm begging people to bestow their greatness upon us.

**Of all the lovely small poetry press publications, which are the ones that you particularly like yourself, and why?**

Some of these I like, some I respect, I'll not say which is which. I think Templar continue to make beautifully produced books and pamphlets. Flarestack are rightfully acknowledged to be publishers of damn fine poetry. Two Rivers Press produce good-looking books from commensurately good writers. I like the Russian Constructivist look of the Poetry Salzburg Pamphlet Series and, on a similar theme but for more political reasons, I greatly respect Smokestack books, they publish some important alternative voices, such as Paul Summers. I'm bound to namecheck Shoestring Press, not least because they publish Roy Marshall, whose recent second collection was as good as anything published by 'The Big Five' this year. I think that Eyewear put out fine-looking fayre, though, like many others, I'm not keen on this recent 'pay to submit' business. Imprints that deserve our wholehearted support are Helena Nelson's Happenstance, Brett Evans's Prole and P.A. Morbid's rumbunctious The Black Light Engine Room Incidental Series. Up here, Tapsalteerie have started to bring out some smart looking pamphlets and they are not alone. What's great about pamphlet culture is that it is probably the most dynamic medium at the moment, so that it's quite hard to keep up with all the small poetry presses and their publications. I've not mentioned many fine examples, simply because there are so many. I'd love to be on the panel judging a competition like the Michael Marks Prize, actually, because it would be an education in what is getting produced out there. So, I apologise if I've missed out someone worthy of mention. You ask why I like these presses, well, it's a combination of production values and the freewheeling, chance-taking spirit of their editors and founders. There's something fearless and properly 'indie' about pamphlet publication right now, which I like.

### **Ditto, poetry journals, from the ‘great’ to the ‘small’**

In terms of journals, I’ve always been fond of *The Reader*, it is a genuine literary publication run by knowledgeable people, is beautifully produced and always does you proud when it publishes you. I’m a fan of Robert’s work at *Bare Fiction*. I’ve always had a soft spot for *Stand* and respect its history. I think Jane Commane has done an amazing job with Nine Arches Press and *Under The Radar*. Gerry Cambridge has made *The Dark Horse* a serious and heavyweight journal, every bit as good as the ‘big name’ magazines it is directly up against. I’m fond of Pat and William Oxley at *Acumen*. Young Andrew Wells does a great job with *Haverthorn*. I prefer *Poetry Ireland Review* to *Poetry Review*. There are a lot of good journals around to be honest. *Lighthouse* is good and is also the best-smelling one out there (trust me, sniff that paper). *Butcher’s Dog* has come a long way fast, though the north-east was waiting for a unifying and good journal. I *loved* the ethos behind *Nutshell*, is it still going?. Up here in Scotland, I like the free broadsheet that is *Northwords Now* and the sheer antsiness of *Poetry Republic*. Again, I’m probably leaving many good journals out here but this isn’t an acceptance speech and these are simply those that come to mind. As for the online journals, I like the hefted pdf of *Angle* and *Ink, Sweat & Tears* remains the best one, for me. Overall, I think we’ve an embarrassment of riches and I’m constantly impressed by the quirky and innovative pop-up publications – *Elbow Room*, for instance – that are coming out all the time and which tend to be set up by precociously young editors. The journal and the small run pamphlet have become the new punk indie labels to a certain extent but, then, I *would* see things in those terms.

### **Tell us something about your design choices. Did you consciously decide you wanted a house style? Did you have any models that you wanted to borrow from?**

The credit for *TIH*’s justifiably fine reputation for good looks rests overwhelmingly with Jen Shaw, the artwork co-ordinator. When we took over the magazine she was pregnant with Fionn and we thought it would be a project we could run together which was a long way from changing nappies and raising the merry hell of our young son. At the outset, we sort of scoped out a shared aesthetic sensibility inspired by, I suppose, the artistic generation of the 1920’s and 30’s, who quietly went about their creative business and left a vibrant material legacy that future generations might chance across and still find worthy of attention: i.e. the absolute opposite of the hollow glamour chase of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. So, I guess our spiritual ‘model’ was the generation described as *Romantic Moderns* by Alexandra Harris in her fine book of that name. After that, it was all down to Jen’s good eye. The idea was to use strong colour as a background to each issue which foregrounded a strong emblematic image that had some glancing affinity with the spirit of each issue. We engaged artists whose work was individual but linked by the fact that they used graphically designed images. And we owe those artists – all of whom let us have their work for the paltry fee of 5 contributor copies – so much. We also try to run a link to their web page on our site which features their images. I’d love to have the launch of my final issue at a gallery which displays the work of our cover artists, though this may be difficult to organise.

### **Tell us something about the snags and frustrations you encounter...**

It would be easy to exaggerate these aspects of the job but, looking back over my four years in charge, I can honestly say that it hasn’t been so bad. Sure, there are regular snags and minor irritations but these are more to do with the astonishing lack of

emotional intelligence or mere bad-mindedness in a tiny minority of people I've had to deal with. And a lot of that has been to do with social media, so it merely reflects to world we live in, I suppose. Our Facebook Account, for instance, was never supposed to bear my name, but the original Interpreter's House one was blocked as a result of an idiot troll transferring his own very real problems onto others' situations. Pretty par for the course, I guess. And people's occasionally astonishing sense of entitlement to immediate answers *now*, the odd ludicrously insensitive or arrogant remark and a general lack of awareness of what this job actually entails have caused the odd ruction. But, really, over the whole period these have been very few and far between. Sure, poets simultaneously submit because, well, I guess we all do sometimes. I'm not going to get worked up over that. If someone withdraws a poem late because 'it has been taken elsewhere' then I'd humbly suggest they're missing out since *TIH* is a great magazine to be published in.

Ultimately, if I had one beef it would be the number of people who have obviously not read the submissions guidelines on our website before sending stuff in. Please do this as it's the most basic courtesy one can pay, and it 'ain't hard. Individuals think that it only takes a minute to deal with this niggly stuff but add up all those minutes and it aggregates to hours of my life that I'm not going to get back, just because someone can't be arsed to be good-mannered. I'm sure that's a niggle every editor will recognise. That said, we never send stuff back – except that which arrives outside of the submissions windows – but, really, people!

**How did you set about the business of marketing, about getting the brand out there. It may be that it's something you feel a bit at sea with. How do you get folk to review the stuff, for instance? How do you feel about the business of competitions for small publishers...stuff like the Michael Marks, for instance? Riff on this topic as you feel appropriate**

To be honest, when I took over, I was gifted a bit of an open goal on this one. The magazine was a lovely thing but had absolutely no digital footprint at that time. So, building a half-decent website, and setting up Facebook and Twitter accounts immediately opened up a whole new audience and actually made me look better than I probably am. It'll be interesting to see where the new editorial team take *TIH* from here, given that they won't have the standing start I had. In many ways that's trickier. Of course, to a hopeless old Trot like me, notions of 'brand' and 'marketing', particularly for something like a poetry magazine, are a bit of an anathema. But, you know, I'm not stupid: I *know* what it takes to raise a journal's profile in the community it serves. Perhaps I'd just use different terms for what is essentially the same job. I'm not exactly what you'd call a 'digital native', however, and someone like Robert Harper over at *Bare Fiction* puts me to shame in terms of innovation. Like it says in my Twitter strapline, I'm a poet, editor, git and curmudgeon. Probably in reverse order.

In terms of reviews, well it wasn't something I particularly wanted to be heavy on at the start. 'Bigger' magazines like *Poetry London* and *Poetry Review* publish a lot of reviews. Then again, for a host of reasons, they tend to not publish reviews of many writers whom I think deserve some critical attention. So, I see *TIH* as conscientiously taking up a bit of slack in this area. Over the years, I have picked up a handful of trusted reviewers who have good critical prose styles and a bit of nous. They have formed into a bit of a core team supplemented by a number of people, often writers themselves, who approach me wanting to try their hand at reviews. I have the utmost respect for anyone reviewing for a magazine like ours, since, I know myself that it is both difficult

and unpaid work. I find reviewing hard work so respect others who want to do it. And, even when I've reviewed for bigger magazines, I can tell you that you're not paid all that much. I do enjoy it, however, and, more importantly, find it a really useful meditation upon one's own sense of possibility and writing practice. I think I'll do a bit more reviewing when I finish with *TIH*. As an editor, however, it can be a surefire way to lose you friends. Be warned!

I've been asked about competitions a lot recently (though my opinion matters no more than anyone else's). Again, I'd refer folk to my editorials, particularly in the autumn issues when I'm about to launch our own competition, and to the excellent *Acumen* symposium on the subject published as a recent insert to Issue #. Coming from a serial competition winner like yourself, John, the question comes hefted with some significance. Whatever I think about 'competition culture' as a writer is less significant than my appreciation of it as a means to keep magazines like *The Interpreter's House* going. But your question is more interesting in that you mention something like the Michael Marks' prize, which rewards something more 'long-haul' in its focus upon whole pamphlets and the work of small presses. Without wishing to run down single poem competitions, I guess that I'm instinctively more drawn towards something which seeks to recognize the long-term commitments of small presses to the poetry commonwealth. It's not an either/or, just a personal inclination. More of this type of competition, then, please. Though, I'm not sure that a journal like *TIH* would be eligible for a prize like this and I'm dead against those awards which ask those shortlisted to canvas for votes on social media. It just seems so undignified and I'm not that bothered, to be honest. As a society, we've lost sight of the concept that doing a good job is reward in itself. And, as I said in my last editorial, being a poetry editor is a privilege. Personally, I need no external affirmation of that fact. But, yes, maybe we should have an annual award for poetry journals, why not? Spread the love.

### **What next? More in the pipeline?**

Editorially, three more issues of *The Interpreter's House* and finding the right successor(s) whomsoever they might be. I always said I would do the job for 5 years/15 issues before handing it on, and I knew that I'd stick to that. Charles Lauder (my excellent Deputy Editor) and I are probably due a bit of a break. I think editors can overstay their usefulness, and risk over-influencing the free flow of ideas and styles if they stick around too long. Far better to saddle up and move on. I feel the same way about readings, incidentally: always *understay* your welcome.

Personally, I've just about finished my third collection: the one related to my PhD at Sheffield, which was in Great War poetry. *The Unreturning* I'm hoping to have published in 2018, ideally on the 11<sup>th</sup> of November, given its subject. Meanwhile, a pamphlet of stuff from the book – a sort of EP from the LP – is coming out in the next 6 months with Poetry Salzburg: *Mr. Willett's Summertime*. It's taken from the more recognisably 'elegiac lyric' sequence in the book, which is intended to parley across the lines with the 'neo-modernist' prose poem sequence that opens the collection. Initially, I thought it might be two shorter books but two collections on the same topic is quite a big statement and I don't want to become known as 'that Great War guy'. Besides, others, better than I, have already been that.

There has been some discussion about my setting up a completely new journal from the house up here in Gardenstown on the Moray coast. We've scoped out a general look and aesthetic for it and I know it'll be just two issues a year. I also think that the next editing job I do will involve some modest level of remuneration, beyond expenses. I feel I've now earned that. But, truly, I need a bit of a rest from it all, so it's very much on the back-burner is *Berg*. I'll let you know if or when it might appear. I managed to edit *TIH* at the same time as doing my PhD and bringing up wee Fionn, simply because I was on a grant and had enough 'free' time, but 'the poor man's *aqua fortis*' of need dictates that I must work for a living once more. Something has to give, in order for me to write my fourth collection, so let's see how I manage my new-found free-time. I guess these considerations signpost why, throughout history, so much mainstream culture has been produced by the patronised, the well-to-do, or those with private incomes. But, hey, I seized the means of production for a while. Up the revolution and close the door behind you.