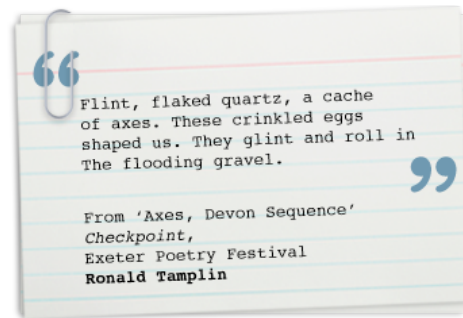




Good Morning! It's Thursday on February 10, 2011.

Literature for everyone in the South West



Home
Community
Grassroots
literature
FAQs
Book of
the month
SW Writer profile
News
About us
Friends &
Supporters
Read SW
Our patron
Apples &
Snakes SW
Interview
Bookshop
Publishers
Donate
Links



South West Writer Profile: Damian Furniss



Damian Furniss was conceived on the night England won the Football World Cup. He was educated at King Edward VI Grammar School, Stratford-Upon-Avon (where he was taught in the same room as Shakespeare) and Keble College, Oxford. He lives in the West Country and works in Health and Social Care. His poetry, prose and reviews have been widely published in magazines and anthologies and he has read at festivals and arts centres around the country and at the Indian High Commission. He is currently working on two novels: *Shin Kicking* and *Life Before Death*. He is the co-host of *Blah Blah Blah*, an arts magazine radio show on Phonic FM.

How does your poetry happen, how do ideas for your poems come to you?

Ideas, lines, fragments can occur at any time - I always have a notebook with me - but they only become poems when I make space in my life for poetry. In the unlikely event that an academic of the future investigates my working rhythms and methods, she'll find periods of accumulation followed by more intense bursts of composition. Sometimes the two occur together. That isn't just a question of time, but mental space. It isn't a coincidence that much of my work has emerged from the experience of travel. 'Becoming the other' is important in any artistic endeavour. But its when the concerns of my everyday life fade to background static that I hear the voice of a poem most clearly.

The thrills of first statement and then of final composition are still the greatest for me, publication is secondary - when a poem first finds its voice and when that voice has fully spoken. Usually, a fragment of a poem occurs first but in that fragment will be a suggestion of the whole. I'm a quick writer but a slow editor. That said, sometimes I write between forms until the poem finds its best shape. But the creative act is usually short-lived and after that it's all about the practice of craft. The former is given, the latter learned, taught even. As you get to know the best writers you realise that what distinguishes most of them from lesser practitioners is the time and thought they give to their craft.

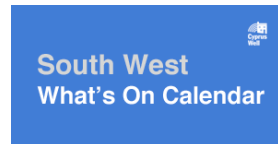
When you are working on refining poems into a collection, how do you go about that, and do you have a working routine at that stage? What do you look for in a selection of poems to link them together?

I edited and sequenced *Chocolate Che* in a getaway I go to in Andalucia - www.fatcows.net - which is ideal for that task - otherwise empty out-of-season, the nearest distractions a hike away, good food and drink catered for, and beyond the reach of internet or TV. I'd been there before to work on prose - a novel or three will finish themselves before long - and knew it to be the perfect setting to facilitate complete immersion in a project. I started each day reading the manuscript as it stood, then began to address its weaknesses. In some instances, that meant further editing; in others re-sequencing; on occasions, I'd see a gap and find the inspiration to fill it.

I say *Chocolate Che* is a book of two halves and three parts. Two halves because it was written in the first part of last decade and second part of this, with a ten year's gap in which I wrote almost nothing in between. Three parts because I returned to the same themes and subject matter, with the different take that passing time brings. Each concerns itself with struggle against the inevitable, using the soldier artist and monk as archetypes.

Chocolate Che is set in Latin America and deals with political conflict and the conditions of revolution; 'My White Ghosts' takes on the voices of the most significant visual artists of the last century; 'Return to Kalighat' retells the tale of my working with dying destitutes in Calcutta and contracting tuberculosis that was at the centre of my pamphlet 'The Duchess of Kalighat', using the occasion of a return to India to reflect on the experience and what it taught me.

I was determined the volume would be more than a collection of my best poems. I've



Literature Clips

Our patron, Helen Dunmore (courtesy [Bloodaxe Books](#))



[Helen Dunmore](#) from [Neil Astley](#)



[Lee Weeks](#)



written and had published plenty of other pieces that didn't fit the concept. I say volume, because I still consider it three books under one cover. I had sufficient material for each to fill its own collection, but discarded enough to get them down to chapbook length. 'Killing your darlings' is difficult for any writer, but has to be done. A year on from that trip, I wish I'd killed more and taken even more time over sequencing. You can have a one night stand with a body of good poems, but to fall in love with a book, you can't imagine it any other way.

Do you have any 'top tips' for poets who are just starting out?

Read and listen to contemporary poetry. It shouldn't need to be said, but it does. Practitioners of most art forms realise they have to go through an apprentice period when they're focussed on mastering technique, absorbing the canon, understanding what it is to be a visual artist, say, or a musician. Because anyone can string words together into lines and assemble lines into something resembling a poem, prospective poets are sometimes convinced that they don't need to develop, are convinced they've arrived as a writer fully formed; that's to be celebrated when it happens, but is very rare. Find writers you like, learn to love them, and understand why you do.

Share your work with other writers; better ones than you if you can find them, and they can find the time; if not, people who you can trust to grapple with your work and give full feedback, no holds barred. You might do this through a paid course, at Arvon or the Poetry School; alternatively, find or form a group and workshop together. Groups often don't work, and when they do they tend to have a natural lifespan, so don't be afraid to admit the current configuration isn't for you and try again. Over time, you'll learn to internalise your best critics, and use them in your own editing process. There is a fine balance between trusting your own instincts and listening to others, of course; listen to everyone equally and before long all your edges will be blunted.

When you're ready, test your work on editors, judges, critics. Find magazines you like, subscribe and submit to them. Buy a ticket or two to the lottery of competition. The best poems don't always get accepted or placed, but the best poets do, eventually. When you start out, any recognition seems better than none; but after a while, you realise some recognitions are more important than others. Acknowledgements aren't everything, but most editors expect a track record before they'll consider publishing a pamphlet or full collection.

How do you feel about poetry readings? Are there things organisers could do to make them a better experience for poets?

Poetry readings are dangerous. Take them too seriously, and you'll begin to write to get instant reaction; play for laughs or applause. There are spoken word artists who are effectively stand-up acts and this is an art form of its own; if it's yours, good luck to you; I've been to my fair share of slams and performance events and usually get something out of them. But good poems rarely reveal themselves through one reading, let alone one hearing. The best you can hope for is that the surface of the poem can be understood. In that way, they have influenced my writing: I think of the layers of a poem, and how I can reward the listener, the first-time and repeat reader.

Readings have their own arc and momentum, and putting together a set of poems needs to be done with this awareness. If my reading is punctuated by claps, I'm concerned. The best readers cast a spell on you, take you into their inner space and hold you there for the duration of their reading. Poets should aspire to be shamens, not comedians, although there's plenty of humour in shamenism. I attend readings often, and read myself sometimes, and the closer I am to a trance state, as audience member or performer, the better. I want to be a mesmer or be mesmerised.

As for organisers, the basic rules of hospitality apply: be there to greet the reader; take them to a quiet place where they can collect their thoughts, conserve their energy; keep the introduction short and to the point; give them an opportunity to sell books and meet the audience afterwards. I prefer a venue to be close to darkness and small enough that the un-amplified voice carries to the back of the room, full enough that it doesn't hit the wall and slap the poet around the face with a realisation of emptiness. Give the reader red wine before and whiskey after, but not too much too soon. An option on food at the end of the night is good if they've come far and are staying over. An overnight companion is appreciated, but optional.

Do you feel that poetry in the UK is thriving, or do you find that it doesn't have enough coverage?

A poet is unlikely to argue that poetry has too much coverage... I sometimes hear it ventured that poets are more valued in other countries, but I'm not sure which those other countries are. They poet as concept may be highly regarded, but I suspect contemporary practitioners are still grubbing in the gutter. The exceptions in recent history are usually societies in which an oppressed people are listening out for a voice to speak for them, when political opposition is kennelled and neutered.

The media is primarily driven by audience interest; given the size of the serious poetry readership, I don't think we can have too many complaints about coverage in the broadsheet newspapers. Most have a poetry review or two in their weekend editions, several publish at least a weekly poem. There are long running programmes and occasional features on BBC Radio, and the intimacy of the small speaker is especially suited to poetry.

But even television makes more space for poetry than it did in my youth, especially since the advent of BBC 4. Yes, the presenters – Simon Armitage, Owen Sheers etc – have to have a TV friendly face and manner, but that doesn't mean the programmes don't seriously engage with the art form. And the great dead poets still attract a certain kind of viewer, listener, reader. Contemporary poets usually feature in some way in those features, even if only as a rent-a-quote or talking-head, but that can lead the audience into new poetic territory.

What impact will cuts in public spending have on literature?

We've had it easy the last decade-and-a-half and have been looking for entertainment, not enlightenment. The last British poets of stature grew up under Thatcher, when we all had to take sides, even writers. Those times will come again, maybe sooner than we think. And the poets that will stake a claim on that near-future probably aren't even writing yet.

Whatever new poetry emerges will have to thrive on less public subsidy than we've been used to under Brown and Blair. (There are Tory poets, but I've yet to meet one who turns down a cheque from the tax payer.) Fewer magazines, festivals and readings will get funding. With public funding of university arts and humanities not just being cut but decapitated, less writers will find their living there, and schools won't have the budgets for the creative partnerships they've been engaged in, bringing artists and writers into schools.

All that said, literature gets under 2% of public funding for the arts. Poetry's entire public subsidy would be loose change to either of our major opera companies. Anyone with enough nous, desire and determination can set up a little magazine, small press, reading venue and create a scene. Of the existing scenes, I'm not going to get into playing one off against another. Poetry gains from other poetries, is not diminished because one group of writers take a different approach, have an alternative aesthetic.

How do you make a living as a writer?

I don't. I'm not even sure if I'd want to. No one makes a living as a poet anyway. Some make a living out of opportunities they have as a poet – they teach, they perform, they broadcast, they enjoy the patronage of wealthy lovers. Not many make a living as a literary novelist either; sales for the average first novel aren't much greater than for the average first collection, and that's not many. If the taxman is reading, my own balance sheet with literature is still in deficit – purchases outweigh sales!

Poets should have a life beyond poetry anyway, especially a working life, although I'm also unsure whether many manage a successful career, personal relationships and artistic fulfilment simultaneously; two out of three ain't bad. Does teaching poetry give you much material for new poems? I doubt it. Enough campus novels have been written already and few good poems have come out of the academy.

You can teach perspiration but inspiration, I'm not so sure. I can see the attraction of devoting a year or three to a MA or PhD in creative writing, but more because it buys you dedicated writing time and a community of writers to develop with than anything you might be taught. In that first flush of serious engagement, development can be rapid. Some argue that writers produce their best work when young. I'm not convinced that's necessarily so, but they probably do so earlier in their career because they run out of experience to process, begin to recycle, or go back to material they'd previously rejected because it's all they have left.

You're also a novelist, of course! What differences do you see in writing poems and writing prose?

I'll only describe myself a novelist when I've finished a novel and had it published. But I do write prose as well as poetry, and know how I approach them differently. Fiction develops an idea through character and plot, a poem through language and image. That isn't to say that fiction can't experiment with language and use poetic imagery, or that poetry can't be narrative in form. I read and write on a spectrum, not in opposing categories. Several of the pieces in *Chocolate Che* would be called flash fiction in a different context because they are composed of paragraphs rather than stanzas. Link some of those miniatures and vignettes and the structure of a novel might begin to emerge, in which they are the set pieces.

The novel is an exposition at length, and while the epic poem isn't dead, it only really lives through translation, with rare and little read exceptions. Writing a novel is an opportunity to develop an argument and entertainment - through different voices, times, places - and to create an imaginative world the reader can share in, which a poem is less

able to establish. My novels contain many of the other forms to which language is put - plays, songs, letters, folk tales, and poems - which to me still makes it the ultimate written art form. Not the ultimate art form though, that would be film, which combines literature, visual art and music in collaboration. My writing is influenced by, and engages with, film as much as it does literature.

Is there a particular writer whose work has particularly inspired you?

You'd get a different answer to that question every day. And I won't necessarily confine myself to writers, because taking an approach from one form of enquiry and trying it in another is vital if an art form is to stay alive. So I learn from songwriters such as Bob Dylan, Leonard Cohen and Tom Waits; film makers including Stanley Kubrick, Francis Ford Coppola and Charlie Kaufmann; Gauguin, Picasso and Gauguin among many visual artists; dramatists from Shakespeare to Beckett; thinkers such as Marx, Wittgenstein and Bhaskar.

When it comes to poets, I'll tell you who I'm reading now as I take stock and consider in which direction my writing should develop. I've just discovered Tony Hoagland and am absorbed by his relaxed but profound take on America as it is now, wondering whether writing that seems so contemporary will last, or seem as dated as most science fiction does in a few years time. I discovered Glyn Maxwell early and still go back to him because of his mastery of form without compromising language or its content. I don't think a poet need use rhyme and metre but I think they should be able to, and in their own voice, if they're to understand the music of English. And I've been returning to Miroslav Holub to remind myself that poetry can take on anything the poet likes, and seem to be taking on whatever the reader wants taken on in the right circumstances.

I realise I've just produced a long list of male influences, but it's local poets who influence my work most on a day-to-day basis through their criticism and support. I regularly workshop with Ann Gray, Fiona Benson, Tinker Maher and Rachel McCarthy and share my work with Phil Bowen and David Woolley so they all have a say in the editing process; whether I take up their suggestions is another matter but I certainly consider them. Other poets in the region I discuss or correspond with include Elisabeth Bletsoe, Norman Jope, Tim Allen, Kenny Knight and Steve Spence. Tony Fraser at Shearsman is as well-read a publisher as you're likely to meet.

At Cyprus Well we're always watching the developments in digital publishing – and asking all our interviewees about it. How do you view these developments?

I started my working life as a computer programmer and have participated in digital publishing - and other media - in various ways. Before the days of blogging, I maintained a website to promote my own work, that of others I liked, plus other presentations of information that can only be done digitally, hypertext being an infinity of inner space. In those days, I was writing in raw HTML, and ultimately gave up when I realised I was spending more time on coding than content.

The blog has changed all that and I maintain a site, though with varying degrees of regularity, depending on how much space I have in my life. It has several purposes. I co-present The Blah Blah Blah Show (a monthly radio arts magazine of previews, reviews, interviews and features covering visual arts, cinema, theatre and literature) with Rachel McCarthy which broadcasts on Phonic FM and the blog is a repository of some of the material I've used on that. But I also use it as a means of promoting my own publications and readings. If nothing else, it's good that someone googling your name can find out more about you. I provide links to short films of me performing, a sampler of the book, radio show podcasts, information on *The Captain's Tower* (a book of poems I'm co-editing to celebrate Bob Dylan's seventieth birthday), whatever takes my fancy.

And that is the downside of digital publishing as well as the upside - anyone can publish whatever they like on the internet; it is the ultimate democratic medium. There is no filter. We have citizen journalism and citizen publishing. With the right expertise, the website of a self-publisher can have the surface sheen of Faber & Faber's. Adding poems to an online magazine is as simple as copy & paste, so the commitment of the editor and publisher is so much less, at least in terms of effort. When I first started submitting poems to magazines I knew that somebody would have to type the poem before anyone could read it - that was a thrill in itself.

That's one of the reasons why I've not yet switched to ebooks. I was creating and distributing them years ago, and there's no doubt that the current and future generations of ebook readers will improve the reading experience to such an extent that, when I'm travelling, I'm sure I'll be packing my reading material onto a handheld device, not dragging a small library around with me, but neither the writing nor the reading experience is the same on screen. I sometimes think about establishing my own press, but when I do, I imagine hand-printed and sewn chapbooks, not digital ink. While we may become accustomed to experiencing every other form of the written word digitally, I'm convinced that poetry has an analogue future. At their best, books are beautiful things, and the physical experience of reading goes beyond mentally registering a sequence of words.

Perversely, I don't indulge in any other form of social networking: I neither facebook nor

tweet. But I would if I was a writer, publisher or promoter who wanted to build a large audience. Social networking creates the illusion that you have the same intimate connection to your favourite author as you do to your best friend; each gets in touch with you in the same way. But I am glad that Shearsman, the publisher of 'Chocolate Che', understands the digital world. Even in the world of paper, print-on-demand has revolutionised the business model for small press publishing: you can print off one copy for little or no more than you can one of a run of thousands; your authors can send you a ready-to-print manuscript and an office of one can edit, design, print, market and distribute a new book a week.

Thank you Damian!



SW Writer Profile PDF Archive

June 2010: Clare Morrall
July 2010: Julia Copus
August 2010: Elen Caldecott
September 2010: Sarah Duncan
October 2010: Simon Hall
November 2010: Lee Weeks
December 2010: Matt Lynn

Cyprus Well
Registered Charity: 1132586
Company Limited by Guarantee
Registered in England and Wales
Company Registration: 06858956
Registered Office: Exeter Central Library, Castle Street, Exeter. EX4 3PQ

Text size