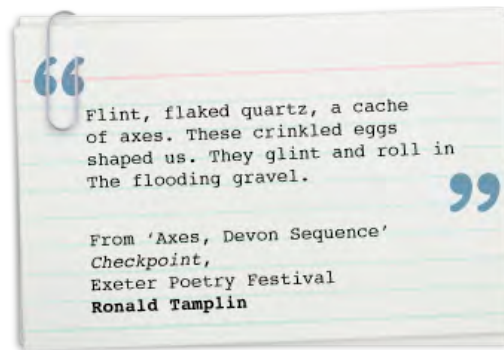


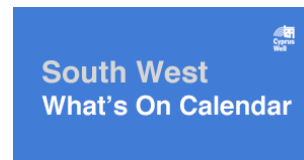


Good Morning! It's Monday on September 20, 2010.

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**Literature Clips**

John Haynes and *You* (courtesy [Seren Books](#))



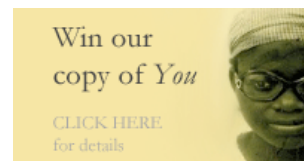
*You* is the new book-length long poem by Costa-Award winning poet, **John Haynes**. The 'You' of the title is the narrator's partner, wife of many years and the book is not just a celebration of and meditation on personal love and devotion, but a record of how such love moves out of a family and is refracted out into the community and the wider world. The tensions inherent in this are compounded by the cross-cultural nature of the union. The narrator is a white British man and his wife was born and raised in Nigeria. Exploring a partnership based on culturally quite different – and in some aspects painfully incompatible - conceptions of 'love', the poem is knit together by philosophical theme of 'I' and 'you' seen from many perspectives.

John Haynes was born in Cornwall.

Cyprus Well was delighted to have the chance last week to ask John a few questions about his new work.

**You is a book length piece over many stanzas, as opposed to shorter pieces within a collection. It is described as a "hymn" and "a meditation" - did you set out with this approach in mind, or did it happen as a natural process?**

Yes it's a hymn in the sense that it's a celebration, but not in the sense of being uncritical praise. In the courtly love tradition the model was, of course, seen as perfect, and to be adored as such, like the Virgin Mary. And this tradition of 'putting her on a pedestal' is still with us in perhaps a less exalted form, in our ideas of 'falling in love', 'romance', 'devotion' (another religious metaphor), as also in our hesitation about arranged marriage. In the poem the narrator has to reconcile his own tradition, consciously sceptical about it as he may be, with that of You whose conception of love is different. But then you have to ask is there some common area, maybe to do with mother love. Although I can see that overall the poem is a celebration, in that sense a sort of 'hymn', yet the progress has to do with conflicts of different kinds, primarily that between different conceptions of love. This is looked at - learning from Chaucer - in a philosophical way, by interrogating from different angles the concept 'You', that very remarkable pronoun! So in that sense it is a 'meditation', but again, I'd want to qualify that by saying: but not 'meditation' in the sense of a quest for individual solitary peace of mind. Far from that.



**The poem uses the 'rhyme royal' stanza – was this in your mind from the very beginning, or did the work evolve into this structure?**

I think I started off with it. My memory's not clear about that. It's a form that has often been used for love poetry, and it's related to the sonnet in being half a sonnet in length, and you get that connection in Shakespeare's sonnet-sequence-like 'A Lover's Complaint'. It's also often used for narrative, again by Shakespeare (in *Lucrece*), but also Chaucer's 'Troilus and Criseyde', which has always moved me with its combination of love, narrative and philosophy.

When I started to write poetry I used to use what I thought of as 'organic' free verse, not thinking about the form as such, other than as the 'solidification' of the emotional lava. These days I think of poetry as fundamentally about language, and a mining away into the tunnels of language as such, and for that having a resistant structure to work with is essential, or at least to me. To me the metrical (or other) form of the poem is a metaphor of the world as it is, of necessity, and also of language as such. Two metaphors perhaps, but ultimately impossible to split apart – language and 'reality'. The poet's composition is a 'cunning' (Chaucer's word again!) in which he gives himself room and 'freedom' of a kind within the bounds of necessity. Chaucer goes into all this in his own way in his treatment of the theme of determinism in 'Troilus and Criseyde'.

**You is very strongly a love poem, in so many different ways. What is it do you feel that seems to draw love and poetry so often towards each other?**

Many poets and writers have expressed the idea that in some way writing is an expression of love. It might be love of God, of love for, nature, a place, or, indeed, a person.

Also, poetry is an emotional form of expression. The characteristics of poetry – at least traditionally – have always been aspects of sound, something difficult to convey in written texts. But intonation (rhythm, pitch, 'cadence') are all features of emotional language. We express our feelings only partly by our choice of words, more emphatically by the way we say them. In that sense metrical and other sound schemes feed into emotive expression.

Poetry is also love of knowledge. I was originally educated as a primary teacher in a time of optimism in which we hoped to communicate the idea that learning as an outgrowth of feeling, especially the kind of curiosity typical of the arts and science. Wordsworth was surely right in seeing this kind of feeling in children, and you can see love as wanting to learn. And that's what I'm after in *You*.

**The poem is vivid with the imagery of Africa – beautifully so. What is it about Africa that you find inspiring?**

One African country, Nigeria, figures in the poem because that's where 'You' comes from, and so it is in her makeup. This is Northern Nigeria, where I worked for some eighteen years – the nearest thing I've had to a 'career'. I learned very much more there, I'm sure, than I ever taught my university students about the English language! I was moved by the way people treated each other, and their generous openness and acceptance of me, a stranger. I have to distance myself a little from your question, or rather perhaps from ways in which it might be interpreted, because it's not 'Africa' as such, I know about, just one part of one country in Africa. And the idea of being 'inspired' by Africa could possibly suggest an uncritical attitude. The word 'inspired' is a difficult one for writers, I think, because we never seem quite able to catch ourselves at it! The poem does take account of ethnic violence and corruption, the problems with Shell, family difficulties, and is, I hope, realistic. The imagery of Northern Nigeria, mainly around Zaria and Kagoma arises simply because that was where we lived. 'You', as the poem shows, suffers from the exile which she has chosen in order to be with the narrator.

**More generally, are there poets who have particularly inspired you?**

It's always difficult to single people out. I've mentioned dear Chaucer. I like his mixture of earthiness and deep philosophy, and of course his narrative skill. Shakespeare hardly needs to be mentioned. I found myself recalling the way he'll dandle a word in his hands, repeat it one way, then another – 'Gaunt in being old' and so on, and wanted to catch something of that as a way of getting into the language, foregrounding words themselves, without having to use post-imagist techniques, that is hoping the reader will recognise connections which are not made explicit. I've only recently realised the extent to which I was affected by my university tutor/supervisor, the poet F T Prince, especially in his study of Milton's syntax and its relation to the verse line. The use of sometimes very long sentences in *You* is due to FTP, I think. Like him I had a passion for Ezra Pound, but this has cooled over the years, but I still admire many aspects of Pound's technique. Although I find myself moving away from over allusive, 'fancy intellectual' (Tony Harrison's phrase, I believe) poetry, I still find Geoffrey Hill unputdownable even in his recent gnomic mode, as

also Muldoon. And W S Merwin's versions of Mandelstam are wonderful, I think. Other loves are Bernard Spencer, Robert Bly. I have a particular admiration of John Clare as a man and a poet. I have a huge respect for the Polish poet, Leopold Staff, whose later work goes for simplicity and directness. I learnt the importance of what you say from Jon Silkin, of treating ancestors, even Will himself, as friends from the Zulu poet, Mazisi Kunene. I'm attached to the Epic of Gilgamesh, which I first found when reading Jung's *Symbols of Transformation* very many moons ago indeed. I still keep Jung's idea of Gilgamesh as the image of the self. And the sense of the self as a yearning for love against all the odds in an indifferent cosmos is something I get from the stories of Chekhov. I live with the anonymous Old English poem 'The Wanderer' at the back of my mind. I've been translating and retranslating the poem all my adult life. The nickname he gives himself, 'anhaga', means 'hedged in', and the word 'hag' (hedge) is the root of my own surname. It's a poem about emotional and ideological struggle, transition, loneliness, and how the ship of life is also the ship of death.

**Can you describe your typical writing environment and processes? How do you capture ideas, for example, is there a particular place you like to write?**

My neighbour until a few months ago, Rob, used to be a builder and has all the practical real-life hands-on skills I lack. He converted the brick garage of this house into the study I'm writing in now. It's a few steps outside the back door. This is where I work. I was once a shorthand typist so I find it easier to write straight into the computer, and I usually compose that way. Like most writers I enjoy rewriting and tinkering once I feel that I've got the basis of something. I find that it's re-writing that leads me properly into my themes. I usually record things I'm working on and listen to them on the car CD when driving somewhere on an uncrowded straight road. This helps with finding the 'cheesy' bits to work on further.

I don't know how I get ideas. It has to be something that matters to me, not necessarily about me. I tend to fall back on personal experience because I'm confident of 'the facts' there. Though autobiography, insofar as I do that, is only ever a starting point. *You* is, of course, in part about me (primarily about 'You'), but being about me is not its purpose. That is to find out something. I start writing as a process of exploration and if I find something and I can get to an end of some kind and then that looks as if it was the idea I 'started with', but of course it wasn't really.

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

I don't have any statistics. It's good to see so many new books of poems and poetry magazines. I'm sure the internet's helping to bring together people who read and write poetry. I think there could be much more poetry on BBC Radio 3 (if it survives). But still I have the feeling, though, that not many people read poetry. Most people find poetry appropriate at a funeral or a wedding, a military memorial day, perhaps when they fall in love. These are all occasions which sum up where we are now in life, a moment of special change or reverence. And perhaps poets and readers of poetry are people who recognise more such pivotal moments in their lives, and see them even in the flight of a bird, the turn of a head. But on the whole our way of life is not reverent like this. If you were to start talking about such occasions, or the idea of death at a social gathering it would sound tactless. It's morbid. You should cheer up.

Also, much poetry is difficult for the 'general reader' to understand, me included, and the idea that the poet should make allowances for his or her readers is viewed with understandable scepticism. It would be good if poets were comprehensible to everyone, of course. But then you have to ask why they're not. Who's 'fault' is it? In the forties Auden and Day Lewis and others address this problem, seeing our society as the problem, the capitalist values it pedals. They felt that a better society would give poetry a much greater currency. Poets cannot, any more than teachers, change the attitudes and tastes of the populace. And perhaps we don't want a 'new labour' kind of poetry in which poets edge themselves into greater acceptance by making themselves more 'commercial'. On the other hand I do think the modernist/imagist style with its particular ways of using assumptions, background knowledge, the 'literary', the educated nod and wink, is just one style, a style which is of course wonderful in the right hands, but one which is never going to be 'popular', and indeed wouldn't want to be.

**Thank you, John.**

Cyprus Well would like to thank Vicky Humphreys at Seren for all her help in arranging this interview.

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