



Julia Copus's publications include *The Shattered Eye* (1995) which was shortlisted for the Forward Prize for Best First Collection, and *In Defence of Adultery* (2003), both Poetry Book Society Recommendations. Her work has won many prizes, including an Eric Gregory Award, an Arts Council of England Writer's Award, and a Hawthornden Fellowship. In 2002, she won First Prize in the National Poetry Competition with 'Breaking the Rule'. Her first afternoon play for radio, *Eenie Meenie Macka Racka* (2003) was winner of the BBC's Alfred Bradley Award for best new radio playwright. She is currently working on her third collection of poetry, *Twenty Three Skiddoo*, and is an Advisory Fellow for the Royal Literary Fund and an Honorary Fellow at the University of Exeter. Cyprus Well was lucky to get a chance a few weeks ago to quiz Julia on her poetry and the wider poetic world. Julia Copus is published by [Bloodaxe Books](#).

How does your poetry happen, and how do you capture it?

I often have an idea or germ for a poem in my head. This is much more the case these days than when I started out, and I think that's because I now force myself to keep a notebook for images, phrases, ideas and so on. That way (or so the theory goes) I'm never groping around for something to say – but of course not every germ germinates! I write about my preoccupations; my obsessions. But lyric poetry is all about marrying the personal with the universal: what you're saying has to mean something beyond the private; it has to resonate. As for capturing the poem, for me it's mainly about having the guts to sit down and face the blank page. I still struggle with that niggling self-critical voice: What have you got to say that's worth saying? If you're going to write something mediocre why bother at all? (actually, I can't help agreeing with that). About a year ago I joined a new group of south-west poets who meet once a month or so in a pub in East Coker, and I find that a useful deadline. It's a great group and they really help me keep my feet on the ground. I try to go along to each session with something new and I think it may even have helped me produce a bit more. The blank page has become slightly less terrifying, the niggling voice slightly more muffled!

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?

Generally, I try and refine poems as I go along (writing quite a few drafts, first in longhand and then on the computer), though I do revisit the poems later and edit them. I try to have an eye on the whole collection from the outset. And I write so slowly that I discard very little. I can't afford to discard much: if I did I'd never publish anything! I think themes emerge by themselves. As an example, for my newest book (not yet published) I set out with this vague idea of escape, of moving on, but the poems just didn't come out that way.

Quite late on in the writing of the book (about ¾ of the way through) I realised that there was a much stronger theme running through the poems: the theme of loss, of keeping the lost alive, of conjuring it/them into being through writing. As I work on the last few poems now, I'll have that idea more firmly in mind as I write, so the newest poems will perhaps consolidate and strengthen the theme. I can't be sure though, as I haven't written them yet.

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

Don't be silenced by your inner-critic – or by the blank page. Don't be intimidated by the poets you admire (try to be inspired by them). Don't write poetry because you like the idea of being a poet; write because you want to write poems and feel you are (or can get) really good at it. Remember that poetry is a very badly paid occupation. Apart from a few major one-off prizes, there's little money to be made from it, and nearly all poets end up teaching or taking on other work. Assuming you find you have a real talent, don't send your work out until you're ready: you won't be doing yourself any favours. I read Hilary Mantel's memoir recently and in it she gives the advice that you shouldn't write your work until you're ready. I think that's good advice too: if something isn't working, delay, hold off. You may find you're better equipped to tackle that subject/particular poem at a later stage. But do keep practising in the meantime. It's a question of sensing when it's time to move on to something new.

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

Yes! I think as a rule organisers should take poetry readings a bit more seriously. A poetry reading is a performance. If a singer or other musician is performing, they're given time to prepare – to do warm-up exercises, run through their programme and so on. Public speakers are generally afforded the same respect and thoughtfulness. But far too often (not always, of course), poets are expected to step off the train, meet and greet people and then step up onto the stage and begin from cold. I don't understand why this should be; I just know it should change. The best organisers let the poets know what kind of room they'll be reading in, pay a proper fee, ask if they prefer to read with or without a lectern, a mic etc., and on the day they provide the poets with somewhere back-stage to be quiet and to prepare.

Is there a particular poet whose work particularly inspired you at an early stage in your career?

It's Sylvia Plath for me. I'm aware of how many people give that answer, and I'm not sure why it should be the case. Except of course that her poems are incredibly powerful, very muscular – sinewy, she might say – and many of them pulse with this almost electrical energy. I was relatively new to poetry when I discovered her (not long out of school, and we didn't read any Plath at school) and finding her work really was like coming across "the axe which smashes the frozen sea within us" (to borrow Kafka's much-quoted phrase). I remember it felt very humbling too. And I think also I felt envious: I thought, what must it feel like to be able to write that way?

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

I'm all for better coverage for poetry – I think initiatives like 'Poems on the Underground' are great – but for me the issue isn't so much about coverage; it's about learning to be

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more discriminating. There's an awful lot of poetry out there (far too much is published, actually) and it's so important that the poetry that does get heard is the very best we (as a nation) have to offer. The media is partly to blame here: Instead of asking poets to write a quick poem in response to this and that, I think publishers, broadcasters and publicists should concentrate on discovering the very best of what already exists (as I suppose the Forward prizes aim to do) and then publicising it as widely as possible. Despite what the reactionaries say, there are still some brilliant poems being written and they deserve to be better known, without a doubt.

Thank you Julia!

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