

Getting known

How do you get ahead in poetry? **Ian Pindar** and **Neil Rollinson** trade thoughts and **Judith Palmer** solicits other views, ahead of a discussion at Ledbury

In Samuel Beckett's play *Krapp's Last Tape*, a waning, disappointed writer listens to a recording of his hopeful younger self. The younger Krapp, plumped by pride, was remarking upon the upward trajectory of his career: "Seventeen copies sold, of which eleven at trade price to free circulating libraries beyond the seas. Getting known."

So, how do writers 'get known', and what are the key achievements which can help to cheer a career along?

"I don't think it gets any better than having your first poem in print," says Simon Armitage. "For me, that was a poem in the now defunct Leicester magazine *Other Poetry* – they sent me a cheque for a couple of quid and I've never cashed it. I think that's the most exhilarating moment, because it's going from nothing to something, which is an increase of infinite proportions. Also, I had such low expectations of myself at the time... to make any kind of notch on the post of English Literature, no matter how faint, no matter how low, seemed not just fantastical, but almost criminal."



Simon Armitage



Maura Dooley

"Having encouragement as a young writer is vital," suggests Maura Dooley. "I'm laughing as I say this but I won a competition in the *Bristol Evening Post* when I was 13, and it made me think, 'here's something I love to do and someone else thinks I can do it.'"

Dooley and Armitage have both gone on to be shortlisted for the T.S. Eliot Prize, but both cite winning an Eric Gregory Award in their twenties as the more momentous career moment.

"The amazing thing was that people who knew nothing about you, had read you. There's nothing better than feeling your writing has made a connection with someone," says Dooley. Getting the approval of other writers was the key, says Armitage: "It wasn't about the accolade or the money (though that was handy) – it was about the confidence. The justification to go on writing poetry. I felt as if all those years living in my head had been legitimised."

Dooley reminds poets that they have far more opportunities to take their careers into their own hands than fiction writers. "There are so many outlets where you can get off the ground. You can take your poems onto the internet and, if you keep at it, you will always be taken by some magazine or other, and slowly begin to make your way." Poet and Picador poetry editor Don Paterson has a final word of advice: "Young poets should remember to love the poetry more than they love the idea of being a successful poet; that way they can't lose."

Ian Pindar



Most poets make efforts to shape their careers. "[Wordsworth's] letters suggest that he was beginning now to conceive of himself more professionally as a poet," writes Stephen Gill in *William Wordsworth: A Life*. "He was thinking about publishing, making money, establishing a reputation [and] marketing." T. S. Eliot was the same, observes Peter Ackroyd in his biography: "Almost from the beginning Eliot had a clear understanding of the mechanics of making a literary reputation; he understood the importance of being mentioned regularly in the newspapers, just as in his own criticism he was always aware of the need to

make the right impression."

So here are ten possible career moves: (1) *Publication in poetry magazines*. Some of the greatest names in poetry first appeared in small magazines, still a crucial means of access to the literary scene. Alternatively, start your own magazine. (2) *Find a champion*. Ezra Pound nagged the editor of *Poetry* to publish Eliot's 'Prufrock', thereby introducing a major new talent. Such champions are rare. (3) *Publish a first collection*. Who decides who's published? In truth, a handful of literary gatekeepers – not fair, but it was ever thus. Alternatively, self-publish. (4) *Become part of a movement*. Poets object to labels, but it can make new work more accessible. (5) *Appear in an anthology*. Think of *Des Imagistes* (1914) or *The New American Poetry* (1960). (6) *The literary establishment* has its own distribution of power and privilege, so get a blurb or a puff from a respected poet. (7) *Correspond with another poet*. Charles Olson and Robert Creeley

bashed out the emerging poetics of a generation in their letters, throwing out statements like "form is never more than an extension of content". (8) *Give a speech or write an essay*. Think of Eliot's 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' or Olson's 'Projective Verse'. Even a poet as reticent as Paul Celan gave his important Büchner Prize speech, 'The Meridian'. In each case the poet offers us a way into their work, creating the conditions for its reception. (9) *Win a prize*. Generally out of the poet's control, although Rae Armantrout attributed her recent success to her move to a university press better at handling publicity, including award submissions. The result was she won the 2010 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry. And finally, (10) *leave everything to chance and let the poetry speak for itself*.

Ian Pindar's first collection Emporium is published by Carcanet in 2011. He was a prize-winner in the 2009 National Poetry Competition.

Neil Rollinson



your craft, find your subjects and your voice, and push yourself the whole time. By all means send to magazines and competitions but never waver in your desire to write better poems.

One of the first and most persistent questions you get asked when you teach creative writing is, 'how do I get published?' Whenever I hear it, I think

– oh dear, this one's going to be trouble... These students are rarely the best writers in class. They mistake publishing for excellence and often have an inflated opinion of their work.

So leave it for the moment. Give yourself five years, maybe more, concentrate on the work and eventually, if you're lucky, you might make it.

Neil Rollinson's latest collection is Demolition (Cape). He was National Poetry Competition winner in 1997.

'Getting Known', Neil Rollinson and Ian Pindar in discussion with Judith Palmer, is on 4 July, 11am-12pm, at the Ledbury Poetry Festival. www.poetry-festival.com

MEMBERS' POEMS 'BURIED LANGUAGE'

PHILIP WILLIAMS TORFAEN

They told us Torfaen – *Stone Breaker* –
was the older name and that our river
only became grey – *Afon Llwyd* –
when they came to cut the coal.

"You could not see it for foam,"
my father said. He remembered its speed,
just as fast as we boys found it,
taking the feet from beneath you, taking its toll.

They all but emptied our valley of magic
when they filled in the fields
between each village to form our town.
Except here, behind Ty Pwca,

where the worn lane rises in its steep bend
beyond The Last Bus Stop and The Fairy's House:
the *Pwca*, our *Bugi-Man*, your Puck.
And there, where the Candwr Brook –

The Singing Waters – still clears her throat
over smooth, cold stones.
So why, I wondered, from Saxton,
an Elizabethan approximation

of the name we had all used all along?
Had the stream, Torfaen, simply lost her voice
as she broadened to a river
somewhere bleaker, blacker, a place

with spittle in its throat, a rattling in its lungs?
Or did our *Afon Llwyd* only combine
with Torfaen to form one grey, stone-breaking river
when they baptised us all into one Borough

and gave us each a name we never knew?

FRANCES GREEN TIME CAPSULES

They buried both tins together
somewhere under the apple trees,
to be re-discovered in one thousand years

but they weren't sure, since he could not
converse with them, that he would understand.
His little sister, bright and brilliant, sucked on a pencil

and decided upon: her last Barbie's best dress;
her own second favourite hair slide; a photograph
of her and Father Christmas at Selfridges;

and three old unwanted *Girl Talk* magazines.
His own tin looked empty in comparison.
They smiled at him indulgently:

for his twigs; his grass cuttings; his fallen leaf;
and those two red and yellow sweet wrappers
he had kept under his pillow for months.

They did not see that in the space around these things
lay all the fragrances of spring and summer,
the rich descents of autumn, and the sharp scented crackle

of winter fires. *Don't you want
to put anything else in here?* they asked him.
He looked at them, uncomprehending –

because there was nothing else or better to be saved
but he wasn't sure, since they could not
converse with him, that they would understand.