

I've been enjoying the *Faber New Poets* publications recently, a series of pamphlet collections bound in Top Shop-colour covers, showcasing the work of eight emerging young poets. And I've noted down who won this year's Eric Gregory awards (open to poets under 30), who was in the Bloodaxe anthology *Voice Recognition* (featuring young poets poised on the brink of their debut books) and I'll keep an eye out for October's Foyle Young Poets announcement (big prizes for 11-17 year old poets). Despite the graceful ageing of the population at large, publishers regularly direct readers' attention to young poets who are fresh out of the box. It seems our condition is best chronicled by those who have seen almost none of it before.

Sheila Hillier, in her 60s when her debut collection was published, disagrees. She says, "There still exists the image of the linear poetry career: young (maybe tragically cut short), middle-aged, frustrated and turns to the bottle, gets married again, if survives becomes older, respected, a judge, a national treasure, or at least obtains a berth in a university. Perhaps this isn't the wider reality – if it ever was. People can move in and out of poetry or do other things simultaneously, like painting, novel-writing or forest fire-watching. Or they can write poetry for the first time later in life."

For every Rimbaud, a child prodigy who had done with poetry entirely before he hit 21, there's a Wallace Stevens, debuting late and writing major works well into middle age. It doesn't take much bookshelf-browsing to discover many highly regarded poets whose writing lives have not followed the one-stop UEA degree to TSE shortlist model. Inspirations to panicky, unpublished 30-somethings everywhere, these writers have released their first books in their 40s, 50s, 60s and 70s. Talking to them and reading their work, there is no sense that they have 'left it late' – rather that they were engaged elsewhere in their earlier years, living the lives that led them to become the poets they are, at the time they happen to be in.

Planning pinball

Is it the pressure of adult responsibilities or youthful bashfulness that delays the point at which a poet can devote him or herself to the art as well as the life? Both possibly. Claire Crowther says of her life prior to publication, "I can't write creatively without a lot of space around me – if there are things to do I will do them first. I had children and a complex job – together that was too much." Mark

Better late

Why should young poets have all the best tunes? They don't, says **Julia Bird**. Plenty of brilliant writers bowl up later in life, blending vim with vast life experience



Image by James Dawe. www.jamesdawe.co.uk

Waldron didn't want to show his work to anyone else until he "was old enough to have shed some of youth's self-consciousness" and, in any case, works from an assumption that poets write the poems they were born to, whatever age they start. "There's a theory that, just as women apparently have a certain number of eggs lined up like balls in a pinball machine, and when they're used up, they're used up – so it is with ideas," he says. "If you start using them when you're 17 they'll be finished by the time you're 35. I only started using mine at 41, so I've a fair few left."

Poets who start writing later necessarily shunt first publication

forward too. Martha Kapos says, "Once I started writing, I think I simply went about getting published in the way everyone does. A first book takes everyone quite a long time, although I had an early break when the Many Press brought out a pamphlet in 1989, which was my first publication of all. Then magazine publication followed and the first book came out in 2003 from Enitharmon. So nothing as such prevented me from getting published. I would say that the circumstances that enabled me to start writing took a while to form in my life."

Late licence

Starting to write poetry is not like

GREATER, LATER

Who published what when

Claire Crowther (59 when her first book *Stretch of Closures* was published by Shearsman)

Annie Freud (59, *The Best Man that Ever Was*, Picador)

Sheila Hillier (66, *A Quechua Confession Manual*, Cinnamon)

Martha Kapos (62, *My Night in Cupid's Palace*, Enitharmon)

Angela Kirby (73, *Mr Irresistible*, Shoestring)

Diana Pooley (67, *Like This*, Salt)

John Stammers (44, *Panoramic Lounge-Bar*, Picador)

Mark Waldron (48, *The Brand New Dark*, Salt)

launching yourself as a career gymnast – youth is not a prerequisite nor necessarily an advantage. A 19-year-old and a 65-year-old can take part in the same competition. The vim-filled teenager on a trolley-dash through a wild variety of influences and enthusiasms is balanced by the sexagenarian with a vast life experience to call on in the service of her writing. And there will be a range of readers (or a range of appetites in an individual reader) for work by both of them – readers looking for that phrase, sound or sensibility who know that these are not necessarily synonymous with youth. A poet who is yet to find his first grey hair, for example, will not write about what journalist John Walsh calls 'The Finite Future' with the keenness felt by a more mature writer. "The older I get," John Stammers says, "the more I tend to write about death or 'The End'." Anyone who has read Angela Kirby's work, or seen her perform, will appreciate that there's a thrilling licence in her attitude (her 'one's death approaches and so one had better get on with it all') that just could not be felt in the work of a younger writer. There's deep pleasure to be had in reading beyond what's deemed age appropriate for you too. Diana Pooley says, "I read the *Faber New Poets*, the Gregory award-winners, tall lighthouse and *Voice Recognition* people, and enjoy the ones I enjoy as I do with older poets."

"When it comes to the composition of a poem, the thought of being a late starter never really makes any kind of difference at all," says Annie Freud. "It's a bit like that moment when you've met the love of your life and you find yourself thinking, 'What if I'd met you 20 years ago? But hey, I didn't, and that's that. I've got you now and I'm going to make the best of every minute we've got'."

At least four of the six nominees for this year's Forward Prize for Best First Collection are children of the Sixties. Debuts by older poets do get published, but the attention given to new young writers via age-specific prizes and publishing programmes leaves less cultural bandwidth available for individual books by their elders. The co-operative amplification of age-diverse voices is what's missing from poetry currently, and for this to happen, perhaps what's needed is a Gregory-equivalent for the over 40s? They could call it 'The Prize for Poets Who Are Old Enough to Know Better'.

Julia Bird's collection Hannah & the Monk is published by Salt. She is a freelance literature promoter and also works for the Poetry School.

In brief

Perfectly formed: 26 inspires 62

Andrew Motion and Maura Dooley are among the 26 writers who have penned a personal 62-word response to 26 precious objects in the V&A's British Galleries.

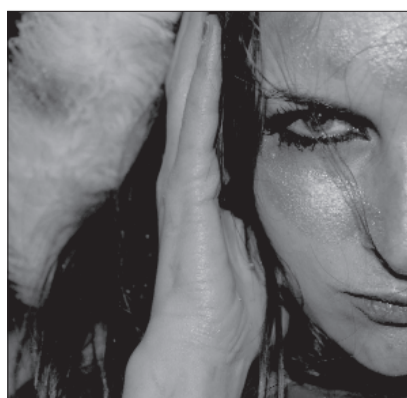
Andrew Motion was paired with a bust of Homer, and Maura Dooley an ornate mirror; other selected

A leopard flagon from the V&A collection

treasures include The Great Bed of Ware, a Rococo candle stand and James II's wedding suit. The written pieces will be displayed next to the objects during the London Design Festival, 18-26 September, as part of 26 Treasures, a project created for and run by members of the writers' collective, 26. As co-founder and Poetry Society trustee John Simmons explains, "It's the eighth year that we have participated in the London Design Festival, making sure that writing is celebrated as an essential element of design and communication." The poems continue to be viewable online after the festival at www.26treasures.com

Liverpool's Mercy beat

Creative agency Mercy has programmed genre-busting events and performances for the Liverpool Biennial of contemporary art (until 28 November) to show "how far experimenters with language encroach onto territory traditionally held by visual artists and the live arts". 20 poets and writers have devised an idiosyncratic audio tour of the Biennial, Homework and Stop Sharpening Your Knives contribute to the Basement Performance Series, and Ross Sutherland, Tim Clare, Laura Dockrill (right) and Hannah Silva take to the stage at the Bluecoat. www.mercyonline.co.uk



Laura Dockrill

Eliot reading groups launched

The Poetry Book Society has launched a new reading group scheme for titles shortlisted for the 2010 T.S. Eliot Prize for Poetry. From 21 October, when the shortlist is announced, reading groups will be able to download a pdf document on each poet and three poems from their book at www.poetrybooks.co.uk/projects. Readers can then vote for their favourite poet online via the new PBS website. Generous reading group discounts are on offer, plus a prize draw for tickets for the T.S. Eliot Prize Readings in the Royal Festival Hall, London, on 23 January 2011.