

# Writers' FORUM

# workshop: poetry

with Poetry Editor **Sarah Willans**

## Get your poetry published with **Writers' Forum and HappenStance!**

Over the next 12 months, *Writers' Forum* will work with an award-winning poetry publisher in a bid to find talented new poets and help them on their first steps towards publication. For one of our monthly poetry competition entrants, this process will culminate in publication by HappenStance, winner of the 2010 Michael Marks Award for poetry pamphlet publishing.

The HappenStance Mentoring Scheme's selection phase begins in this issue and will run throughout 2011, with the last qualifying poems appearing in issue 122. Poetry competition winners and runners-up from these issues will be invited to submit a further five poems to the scheme, and each will receive feedback on their six-poem group (including their winning poem), outlining ways in which they can improve their work and progress towards publication.

From these winners, Helena Nelson, founder of HappenStance, will select four poets to work under her guidance towards the production of a small set of poems suitable for submission to publishers or poetry magazines. Of these four poets, one will be accepted for publication in the HappenStance Sampler series.

Helena writes both serious poetry and light verse, and has been widely published as a poet, essayist and critic. Her first full collection, *Starlight on Water*, was a joint Aldeburgh Jerwood prize winner in 2003, and her second, *Plot and Counter-Plot*, was

published in November 2010 by Shoestring Press. She launched HappenStance in 2005, and from the start focused on finding promising new poets and publishing their first collections in chapbook form.

'I knew it was getting increasingly difficult for "new" (by which I don't necessarily mean "young") poets to get a foot in the publishing door. A pamphlet publication, if it's a good one, is one way to get started. In fact, it was how I began myself, with a pamphlet collection from Kettillonia.'

HappenStance continues to focus mainly on first collections, and several of its early poets have already gone on to enjoy further success and critical acclaim. Matt Merritt's *Making the Most of the Light* (2005) was one of the imprint's first chapbooks, and he has since produced two full collections; the most recent, *hydrodaktulopsychicharmonica*, was published by Nine Arches in December 2010.

'I can't stress enough just how much of a big deal being published by HappenStance was,' says Matt. 'For a start, it was a huge confidence boost to be published alongside some really fine poets. For another, it led directly to being noticed and approached by other publishers. And last, but certainly not least, the experience of putting together a chapbook with Helena was a real education, making me think about how poems work together, rather than in isolation.'

Helena sees this support and guidance as central to the HappenStance ethos, although



HappenStance founder  
Helena Nelson

it's a substantial commitment for both publisher and poet.

'One of the things that's important at HappenStance is to work closely with poets, strengthening poems over a period of time so that the final collection is as good as humanly possible. It's hard to invest that kind of time. It's costly in every sense. But it's also crucial, especially for people who aren't in a position to apply for residential courses or creative writing degrees.'

Key to this strategy has been the introduction of the HappenStance Sampler series – slender card pamphlets containing a small selection of poems that provide a flavour of the poet's work.

'The short Sampler collections allow for an interaction that looks closely at poems

### Competition guidelines: who can take part?

- | Poets who have already published (not self-published) a collection are excluded from the Mentoring Scheme.
- | All contenders will be drawn from the winning entrants and runners-up in the *Writers' Forum* monthly poetry competition, from issues 111 to issues 122 inclusive. The poetry competition runs on a rolling basis, and entries that miss the judging deadline for one month are entered in the next month's competition. *To be considered for the scheme, however, entries must arrive before 15 October 2011.*
- | Competition entries must be unpublished; additional poems submitted by long-listed poets may have been previously published, but must not be currently available in print or online.
- | There is no additional entry fee for participation in the scheme: every winning or shortlisted poet who has not already published a collection will receive an invitation to take part, along with instructions for submitting their additional poems. All poems must be the work of the entrant.
- | There are no restrictions on the subject or style of poems submitted for the scheme: HappenStance publishes free and formal verse, and recently launched a new 'Po-Lite' series of light verse pamphlets alongside its 'serious' publications.
- | Poems entered in the monthly competition may be up to 40 lines long; additional poems may be up to 50 lines.
- | After the closing date, all participants will receive feedback on a six-poem group. Four will be chosen to take part in mentoring with Helena. They may submit up to six poems, each up to 50 lines in length (these need not be the same poems submitted in the selection phase), and will receive feedback. After editing, they may re-submit their poems twice more for further feedback, and will then receive a final report and submission advice. Helena will choose one of these four final submissions for publication as a HappenStance Sampler.





In this month's workshop, Sarah Willans (left) launches an exciting new publishing opportunity for all those who enter our poetry competitions

line by line, if necessary,' says Helena. 'And it's just the right amount for the average reading, so it supports performance too.'

Her approach to mentoring is straightforward, and founded on a relationship of trust.

'I won't create false expectations, or compliment poetry that is essentially flawed. This is a process that relies on truthful interaction. Poetry is an art requiring commitment and hard work, as well as a natural instinct for the music of language.'

HappenStance now receives around 250 submissions per year, and publishes ten chapbooks a year on average – often after working with the poet over a long period, and sometimes for up to two years. Though such mentoring is available to only a few, Helena has made a good deal of help for new poets freely available via the HappenStance website. Downloads include lists of recommended poetry magazines and UK poetry chapbook publishers, the practical fact sheet 33 DOs and 12.5 DON'Ts of Poetry Submission, and the first two chapters of Helena's chapbook publication *How (Not) to Get Your Poetry Published*.

Since its inception as a chapbook publisher, the press has made its first foray into full collections with the perfect-bound *Nearly the Happy Hour*, by DA Prince, and now produces a range of poem cards – blank inside and with a single illustrated poem on the front. The website also co-ordinates reviews of poetry pamphlets from a wide range of publishers and self-publishers, as well as occasional features and interviews, and Helena's blog provides an insight into the world of the small press publisher.

Ali Smith, chair of judges for the Michael Marks Award, said: 'HappenStance proved outstanding in the elegance, thoughtfulness

and clarity of their design, and the infectious interaction, open-mindedness and energy of their publishing ethos.'

### Improving your chances

How can you maximise your chances of winning a place in the Mentoring Scheme's selection phase – and perhaps a place on the shortlist, with a one-in-four chance of publication by HappenStance?

Read as much contemporary poetry as you can: poetry magazines are a good place to start, and recently published chapbooks, full collections and anthologies can provide further reading. Sample poems from HappenStance publications can be found on the publisher's website. For a HappenStance publications list and postal order form, send a stamped sae to: HappenStance, 21 Hatton Green, Glenrothes, Fife KY7 4SD.

Be a perfectionist: a poem isn't finished when you get the last line down on paper – revise, put it aside for a few days or weeks, and then revise again. Don't send it off until you've lived with it for a while and polished it until it shines.

Get feedback: try to find a trusted and knowledgeable 'first reader' who will be honest with you about your poem's strengths and weaknesses. Don't rely on friends and family.

Make sure that your work is flawlessly presented. If you don't take your own poem seriously, why should your reader?

For further suggestions and more information about the scheme, visit the HappenStance website at: [www.happenstancepress.com](http://www.happenstancepress.com).

Good luck, and look out for reports on the scheme's progress, both here and on the HappenStance site, later in the year.

## poetry news

### Price wins Katherine Mansfield

Poet Chris Price has won one of New Zealand's most long-standing and prestigious literary awards, the Katherine Mansfield Prize. Born in the UK, Price emigrated to New Zealand in the late Sixties, and her collections of poetry include *Husk* (2002) and *The Blind Singer* (2009). The prize covers living at the Villa Isola Bella in Menton, France, in the year of tenure. While in Menton, Price will work on a book exploring the life of the eccentric English poet and anatomist Thomas Lovell Beddoes, as well as a new collection of her own poems.

### Updating Shakespeare sonnets

Carcanet has published a new poetry collection by Philip Terry that 'transforms Shakespeare's sonnet sequence into a celebration of language unleashed'. Terry, Director of Creative Writing at Essex University, brings together Shakespearean themes and the language of the new media, so that his version of the well-known Sonnet 18 no longer begins *Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?* but *Shall I compare thee to a Smirnoff ad?* Billed as 'disrespectful and anarchic as a cartoon', *Shakespeare's Sonnets* is available from [www.carcanet.co.uk](http://www.carcanet.co.uk).

### Poetry school's new lessons

The Poetry School has commissioned a new set of downloadable lessons for its website at [www.poetryschool.com](http://www.poetryschool.com). Priced from £3, each is a burst of advice about a particular aspect of the craft. Longer courses are also available, as are face-to-face courses and workshops.

### Underground poem returns

A Facebook campaign has succeeded in raising enough money to restore a much-loved poem to the walls of an underpass at London's Waterloo Station. *Eurydice* by Sue Hubbard ran the length of the tunnel for nine years before it was painted over without warning by Network Rail, who refused to reinstate it. Now a total of £4000 has been raised by public donation and sponsorship.

### Newsletter for young writers

Academi's Young People's Writing Squad, an initiative aimed at locating gifted young writers in both English and Welsh and introducing them to some of Wales' leading writers, has launched a new bi-monthly e-newsletter featuring advice for young writers and exciting opportunities and projects. Subscription is available via the Writing Squad website at [www.writingsquads.org](http://www.writingsquads.org)

## POETRY WORKOUT

Limber up with our weekly poetry prompts – four in each issue

- 1 Experiment with a 'concrete poem' – that is, a poem in which the arrangement of the words on the page makes a picture that complements its meaning (eg a poem about Adam and Eve in the shape of an apple).
- 2 Write a list poem of not less than ten lines in length, free or formal, about things that flow.
- 3 Closely read this month's poetry competition winner, *Tap*. Find an object that you have had for many years, and write a poem about the new thing it has become. Leaps of imagination are positively encouraged!
- 4 Write a formal poem in two stanzas about a couple dancing together. Let the poem's metre reflect the rhythms of their dance (eg waltz, tango, rumba).