

Poetry: Reading it, Writing it, Publishing it

Edited by Jessie Lendennie (Salmon, 2009, €15.00)

THERE CAN BE NO DENYING THE HUGE INTEREST in creative writing, as evidenced by the growth in Writing MA programmes in the universities of Ireland, as well as the more informal classes being taught countrywide. Patrick Kavanagh once ruefully remarked on Ireland's 'standing army of poets,' which is certainly on the increase, if not completely on the march. This is why *Poetry: Reading it, Writing it, Publishing it* might serve this army well.

How-to-write-poetry books have been widely available from some time now. They

vary in size and remit, from *Becoming a Writer* by Dorothea Brande, to *How to Write Poetry and Get it Published* by Fred Sidgwick to *Teach Yourself Writing Poetry* by Matthew Sweeney and John Hartley Williams. Anyone who teaches in the field will likely have a shelf-full of these books, useful for new approaches as well as further readings lists.

There is at least one Irish how-to book already existing: Pat Boran's *Portable Creative Writing Workshop*, which covers fiction and poetry. The new Salmon anthology works for two reasons: because it addresses a specific approach to the Irish poetry scene (writing and publishing), and because it uses the varied individual lenses of thirty contributors. As well as Irish writers, there are Australian, US and UK contributors, all of whom have a connection to Salmon Poetry, each with a unique and entertaining insight.

Splitting the anthology into three parts means that the anthology can be used as a reference, one easily dipped into along one's writing journey. The first short section looks at how important reading poetry is to the developing writer. This saying will be familiar to many who teach Creative Writing. Lord knows how hard it is to get people newly interested in writing poetry to actually read it: to read what is going on in poetry now—not what happened in the nineteenth century, but what is being written by real, live poets; right here, right now. Essays by Maurice Harmon, Michael Heffernan, Anne Fitzgerald and Lex Runciman underscore this point amply.

The middle section, 'Writing It', takes a longer look at what strategies the developing writer can adopt. Rita Ann Higgins' personal essay on a specific poem she wrote, illustrates her process in writing 'Ask the Concierge'. There is a terrific essay by Susan Millar DuMars, titled 'What's the Point?' It is a lively modern vindication of poetry, which would inspire the most cynical of workshop participants. Joan McBreen's essay also makes a personal exploration into why and how she came to write, with a heartfelt account of bringing her six, then still small, children along to a poetry reading by Eavan Boland, in Joan's early days of poetry discovery (one that this reader identified with).

But the biggest section by far is that on publishing poetry, which speaks volumes about the determination needed for that path in poetry. Working towards getting published requires no little amount of editing, re-writing, spit and polish—and that's before perseverance, luck and a sympathetic editor. The essays in this section range from one by Joseph Woods, Director of Poetry Ireland, explaining the remit of the national poetry organisation; through the journal editor Philip Fried of *The Manhattan Review*; to small press publishing editors like Noel King, of Doghouse Books, or J. P. Dancing Bear of Dream Horse Press in the US.

These insights are invaluable. People starting down the poetry path, have no idea that the beating hearts of poetry presses and journals are dependent on little more than a wing and a prayer at the best of times. Noel King remarks on how frequently Doghouse Books receive manuscripts from newly writing poets who don't realise that their work must first be tested in journals or magazines (and plenty of them). J. P. Dancing Bear is equally pragmatic about his US poetry press, saying that even from the outset, he knew

