Judges Notes for All Contributors to the Somerset Poetry Competition 2016

Being asked to judge the Somerset Poetry Competition has been, yet again, a great privilege. It is encouraging to see a large group of developing poets expressing their deepest feelings, their reactions to the world around them in micro and macro ways. The variety of approaches, forms used and themes presented is heartening.

The writing of poetry (or narrative fiction for that matter) enriches the creator but at the same time something of the self is given away. The creative act is one of the few ways we can grow and help others to grow at the same time. I want to congratulate you all for your efforts and generosity, for it takes time—a great deal of time—to produce a convincing poem. You need to struggle with form, with word choice.

I would also like to congratulate the teachers who spend time with you; who have faith in your talents and help you refine and use them. As the writer Sean Williams said in a newspaper interview “the greatest gift a teacher can give a young person” is “the love of learning and trying new things...” (“Living his life by the book” The Advertiser 2 Feb 16). It is absolutely clear that many of you are trying new things and that you have teachers and other supporters helping you to do that.

It is also clear that you get a kick out of writing, and if you get pleasure from writing something it is almost guaranteed that readers will enjoy reading it. You have also discovered that getting something down on paper brings us closer not necessarily to a solution to problems but to a closer understanding of what those problems might be. You try to give form to vague shadows, deep fears, unalloyed joys that reside somewhere in your mind, heart or soul. This is what poetry does.

I many ways I would have preferred not to have to judge your work at all, since every piece has something to recommend it. I know that ultimately it was going to come down to a matter of taste, and that another judge would, in all probability, select different poems for the awards. I think it fair to admit to that for this and all writing competitions. It is also fair to give you an idea of what I think a good poem is. I wrote the paragraph below when responding to one winner’s poem last year, and it is worth sharing with you all:

There are probably thousands of definitions of a good poem. Writers, teachers and readers are never going to agree 100% on what a poem is, let alone a good one. But for me a good poem will simply let you, the reader, know it is good—it will grab you in delightful and unexpected ways. Having a list of rules that makes for a good poem is a third class way of trying to find excellence in the art—it will often tell you more about the critic than the artistic product. For me the sign of a good poem is that it will be inescapable for the reader. It will leave an impression, a mark, a dent in the mind. A good poem won’t let you just read it superficially: instead it hands you an experience, sensual, spiritual and suggestive. And ambiguity. Poems don’t have to be authoritative of definitive. They can be open-ended, inconclusive. The quality of the work lies in the sense that somehow the writer is articulating something evasive and contradictory about being human, about the way we think of ourselves and our place in the world.
Good Things About Your Work

Here some of the things about your work that make it worth reading—and I would stress that there was not one manuscript that I felt was not worth writing, such is the level of work from entrants in this competition:

1. You are sincerely engaged with your subject matter, whether it be searching your own soul to express something you are feeling about yourself and your place in the world.
2. You are engaged with what is happening in the world around you, from your classroom, your family to the large humanitarian crises from all corners of our troubled globe. You try to convey what it feels like to be loved, to be lonely, to be a refugee, a soldier, or an imaginary creature in a fantastic world.
3. You select single objects—a tree, a friend, the moon—and try to see them in a different light, a personal light, one that is only experienced by you.
4. You clearly worked hard to find the right word or words to convey something that is extremely difficult to verbalize. That is what poetry does. One gets the sense that the poem you have presented is the only way to say what you are trying to say.
5. You realize that the form of the poem strategically influences the way we read it. There is an intimate relationship between the form and what a poem to conveys to reader. If the form changes, automatically so does the meaning. I think you get that and I can see you working hard to find the most appropriate form for your exposition.

Some Advice to Regard or Ignore

Here are some things you can think about as you continue on your creative path. The following may help you develop and grow as a poet (but you can also ignore my advice and carry along in the way you want to go):

1. Too Many Words

In Peter Shaffer’s play Amadeus Emperor Joseph II has just watched a Mozart opera with the composer conducting. Mozart awaits Josephs response which is this: “My dear young man, don’t take it too hard. Your work is ingenious. It’s quality work. [But]... there are simply too many notes, that’s all. Just cut a few and it will be perfect.” Mozart, cheeky as ever in this play, asks a question by way of reply, “Which few did you have in mind, Majesty?”

Frequently your poems are over-written—too many words. This is understandable. We work hard to produce copy after copy and watch the embryo of an idea grow into a full work of art. We invest so much into the text it hurts to edit it. Here is something to try: When you write a poem and you think it is finished, rewrite it again and make it half the length. Also read more short poems (try any of Emily Dickinson or Shakesppear’s Sonnets) and look at the power or brevity and economy of language. Once you write your shorter version someone interested in your writing to read the long and the short and tell you which one they like best. Try it! You will be fascinated in the result, whatever it might be.
2. Something Deeply Felt

We writers always have to be reminded that just because we hold a deeply felt belief or have a strong reaction to something, the expression of those beliefs and reactions is not necessarily poetry. Saying what you feel or think by itself is not poetry, however sincere. It is your job as a poet to transform this into image, to give your deep feelings a sensual shape which readers can see, touch, smell, taste and hear. When you do this your emotional life or ideas are transformed into art. They force the reader to find for herself through image. Just telling your readers how you fee or that something is terrible or wonderful is rarely poetic. You must allow your readers the process of discovery.

3. When To Be Absolutely Clear and When Not?

Wallace Stevens said a poet is “the priest of the invisible”. He means many things by this, but one of them is the way music and poetry can take hidden things which we sense are there and bring them to light suggestively but not conclusively. Often a poet is dancing with ghosts and sprits. The power of some poetic images and symbols lies in the multiplicity of possibilities: they can’t be reduced to signs, that is things with one to one linked meaning. That said you can’t confuse the life out of your reader for the entire poem. What do you want the reader to see clearly? Sometimes the most elusive parts of Steven’s invisibility are presented through clearly describe voice, setting or object.

4. Me...me...me....

Because we teachers want you to be personally involved in your poetry we encourage you to write about yourself, what you see, feel and perceive. But it is possible for your poetry to come across as self-indulgent, to be lacking in objectivity. If you look at the following four examples of intensely personal, autobiographical poems for some reason when we read them the central focus is not “I” or “Me” but on what is being seen. Robert Frost in “Stopping by Woods on A Snowy Evening” includes “I” only three times; “Bright Star” by Keats, a wonderful love poem, has only one “I”; Robert Bridges “I Have Loved Flowers That Fade” has two; and finally, Wordsworth’s “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud” has four. Don’t put your reader off by being too egocentric. I feel this I feel that..... Give the reader the means of discover feelings through symbol, event, image. An experiment when you write an autobiographical poem: change it into the third person and describe someone else. As in the case of too many words show someone the two versions and discuss the change of effect. You may prefer the original that is fine.

George Watt