



The Writer's Compass

How did I get here?

Moyra Donaldson: Breaking the silence

This feature has been commissioned by The Writer's Compass (NAWE) in association with LitNet NI.

About the author

Moyra Donaldson was born and brought up in Co Down. A pamphlet of her poems, *Kissing Ghosts*, was published by Lapwing in 1996 and her first full collection *Snakeskin Stilettos* was published in 1998, followed by *Beneath the Ice* in 2001, both from Lagan Press. An American edition of *Snakeskin Stilettos* was published in 2002 from CavanKerry Press, New Jersey and short-listed for a Foreword Book of the Year Award. *The Horse's Nest*, was published by Lagan Press in 2006. Her new collection, *Miracle Fruit*, is to be published by Lagan Press in November 2010.

Her poetry has won a number of awards, including the Allingham Award, the National Women's Poetry Competition and the Cuirt New Writing Award. Both her poetry (1998) and her short stories (2002) have been short-listed for the Hennessy New Irish Writing Awards. Her poems have been anthologised and have featured on BBC Radio and television, including the Channel 4 production, *Poems to Fall in Love With* and she has read at festivals in Ireland, England, Canada, America and Hungary.

Moyra has also written for the stage and worked with community theatre. She has had a screenplay, 'h', produced and was a founding member of the Creative Writers' Network and a previous Literary Editor for Fortnight Magazine. She is also a creative writing facilitator.



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A great love for words

I grew up with a great love for words. Some of my earliest memories are of my mother reading to me, and even as a small child I was always writing: poems and stories. I also loved reciting poetry to myself, feeling the rhythm and meaning roll over my tongue and my brain. I was going to be a writer and as a teenager I was young and naïve enough to think it would be an easy journey, so my first literary success when I was only seventeen and still at school, first prize in the Belfast Telegraph Short Story Competition, a cheque for £50 and the story printed in the paper alongside a photograph of me in a mini skirt, (well it was 1973) felt simply like the beginning of my career. It was another 25 years before I published my first book.

The years between held a degree in English, a few tentative published poems, a crisis in confidence and a conviction that as a Prodigy and a woman in Northern Ireland I had nothing to say which would be of any interest to anyone anyway. I moved away from the idea of being a writer, took postgraduate qualifications in Social Work and Social Welfare Law and set out on a career in welfare work. Occasionally I would write a little poem and hide it away.

Feel the fear and do it anyway

One particular event brought me back to my desire to be a published writer. I had been through a very difficult failed marriage but I was in a good new relationship, I had two children and my job was going well. I was immersed in the work when I applied for a promotion that I was sure was mine. I didn't get it. Angry and upset, I railed and wept for a couple of days, and then started to reappraise things. I realised I had packed away an important part of myself, so I made a decision to give it another go, to 'feel the fear and do it anyway' – to take my desire to write seriously again.

My first step was to join a local writers' group, Ards Writers, where I got wonderful support and encouragement, not only from facilitators Martin Mooney and Damian Gorman, but also from the other group members, a community of people who understood the compulsion to put words on paper. Martin encouraged me to send some work out for publication and I had a poem accepted in the literary magazine, The Honest Ulsterman. I can still remember the thrill of the magazine arriving through the post, of seeing my poem on the page opposite a poem by Seamus Heaney. I can remember thinking that even if I never published anything else, I would be content with this.

Of course that contentment didn't last long, I had the publication bug. I started to attend readings and to meet some very generous and supportive people, Joan Newmann, Rene and Denis Gregg, members of Belfast Writers' Group, Noelle Vial and many others who helped to confirm my sense of myself as a writer. I had found a support network that simply was not there when I was younger. I threw myself into poetry, writing it and reading it, catching up with the new and the exciting.

With two young children, a husband, a full time job and all the other bits and pieces of life, the only time I had to write was late at night, sitting up into the early hours of the morning to work on poems. It was no chore: I loved it. Of course I was still beset by doubts as to

whether what I wrote was any good, but this time I didn't let them stop me: I did it anyway and tried to develop my skills and my ear for what worked. In 1996 a pamphlet of my poems, *Kissing Ghosts* was published by Lapwing Press, Belfast.

Untold stories, silenced voices

Since then I have gone on to publish three full collections of poetry, with a fourth launched in October 2010. I write the occasional short story, have had a short screenplay produced and written a number of plays for community theatre.

My involvement with community theatre came about as a result of my interest in and involvement with the Community Arts Forum, an organization which lobbied for funding and recognition for this sector of the arts. CAF also has a fundamental belief that there were and are many untold stories in Northern Ireland and many silenced voices and that it is vital that these stories and voices should be heard. Having been silent for so long myself, I was keen to be involved and it meant I was able to gain great experience in writing for the stage.

I enjoy writing short stories, they seem close to poetry in their intensity and discipline and it was one of these stories that happened to be picked up by a film maker who then approached me to turn it into a screenplay. Of course I said yes, and then rushed off to find out what a screenplay looked like!

Two separate people: the writer and the social worker

I have continued to work full time and to juggle my life to accommodate two distinct careers. Although sometimes I feel as if I am two separate people, the writer and the social worker, I'm glad to have the two separate areas in my life. Each one brings a sense of perspective to the other.

Having said that, it can sometimes be very difficult to have enough head space for the writing, particularly as I get older and less able to sit up to all hours and still get up for work the next day. The support of The Arts Council of Northern Ireland has been invaluable to me in this respect. I have received three Individual Artist awards from the Arts Council and these have enabled me to 'buy' time from work in which to concentrate on my writing. I have taken blocks of unpaid leave from work and have also used the Awards to take myself for a week at a time to an isolated cottage where there are no distractions. This is particularly useful when I am at the editing stage of work for a collection, and when I need to look at my work to see how the shape of a collection is emerging. Through the Awards I have also been able to explore themes and develop my work through research visits such as that to the Hunterian Museum in the Royal College of Surgeons, London.

I have also been able to use the skills from one job to complement the other. I facilitate workshops in all kinds of settings including writers' groups and schools and I have also worked as a mentor for poets working towards a first collection. This began through a scheme set up by the Creative Writers' Network, a funded initiative where they selected unpublished writers from different genres and matched them up with a mentor. I then went on to do this on a freelance basis and work with both poets and short story writers.

Working as a writer in healthcare

I particularly enjoy working with groups in the health sector, and find that my social work training combined with my love for words allows me to do this effectively. I enjoy working in the area of mental health and have worked with groups of inpatients and outpatients. I have also worked in other health settings, some examples being in a cancer unit, a hospice and with people who have aphasia as a result of a stroke. I have worked on a number of occasions with hospital staff.

The opportunity to do this work came about through having built up a reputation as a general facilitator, and this came about by initially saying yes to every chance to work with a writers' group or a community group or indeed anyone who needed a tutor. My name became known, and I was approached by Arts Care to do freelance work for them. I loved it and found I was good at it, so became someone who was approached on a regular basis by Arts Care artists looking for a creative writing element in their programme of work. I was also approached by voluntary organizations such as the Stroke Association.

In terms of becoming employable, one thing is essential: be good at what you do. Prepare well for workshops, tailor them to the needs of the group and the individuals in the group. Develop interpersonal skills and be alert to group dynamics. I think this is at least as essential as literary knowledge and this is where I believe my social work training has really helped my facilitation; but of course anyone can develop these skills. I believe in the value of these workshops and that makes it easy for me to be enthusiastic in the work and enthusiasm is infectious.

Making time for these workshops isn't always easy, but it is very important to me. I feel as if I am combining the disparate parts of my life to good effect and I get a lot out of that. I do these workshops in the evenings where I can, and otherwise take leave from my full time job in order to maintain this part of my literary life. Financially I could not afford to give up my job and rely entirely on the income from freelance work, although it is a little bit of a Catch 22 situation, in that if I wasn't working full time in social work, I could get more freelance work. For those starting out, I would suggest part-time in each might be the best arrangement.

Tips for other part-time writers

In terms of my own writing, as essential as the support from the Arts Council, has been ongoing contact with other writers. It has been very important for me to have a group of fellow writers with whom I can discuss ideas and who give feedback on my work and its development. This small group consists of writers I know I can trust to tell me the truth about my work, who are serious about their own work as well as mine, and most of all they are people whose opinions I value. We support, encourage and challenge each other and I know how much I have benefited from this arrangement.

I am proud to be published by a Northern Irish publisher, Lagan Press. Such smaller, vibrant independent presses are the lifeblood of poetry. I am also published by the New York based CavanKerry Press.

As a part-time writer, there are a couple of other things I have learnt which have stood me in good stead. Firstly, it is important to be selfish when you need to be. This may come naturally to some, others have to learn the skill of taking time for themselves – to attend the reading or festival, to leave the list of things you really should do and instead write down the poem that has been gestating in your mind, to abandon your family for a week or so at a time so you can concentrate on your writing. They may grumble a bit, but they will survive.

Secondly I have learnt to just keep plugging away, to keep with it through the times when I doubt my skill, my validity, myself as a writer. To write through the inevitable disappointments as well as the successes, to write principally for myself and make my work the best I can make it. To live with the fallow times and make use of ideas when they do arrive. To keep sending work out.

The 'business' side of poetry

When I started writing again, I had not given a thought as to the need to have a profile as a writer. I soon realised that as well as writing the work, you also have to promote it, initially building a reputation through publication in magazines as a first step to a collection. I had imagined that the work would speak for itself, and to a large extent of course it does, but you have to build a platform from which it can be heard. That means actively seeking out opportunities for readings, looking for chances to bring your work to a wider audience, continuing to send work to magazines between collections in order to keep your name in the consciousness of poetry readers. This is the 'business' side of poetry and has to be done if you want your voice to be heard. Your publisher of course can do a lot to help, but you have to be prepared to put yourself out there.

This is something else that does not come naturally to everyone; there is a tension between the inward journey to discover what you want to say, and the public presentation of the finished product. If you want your work to be read and heard, you have to do it.

I'm not one for regrets, so I don't regard those years when I wasn't writing as wasted time. They are what have enabled me to write the way I do now, to be the writer I have become.

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Useful links

LitNet NI

New literature development organization supporting writers and literature professionals working in Northern Ireland. Runs a Professional Development and Mentoring programme for writers and literature workers, an annual conference and a literature forum. Business and creative skills for mid-career and emerging practitioners will be developed working in collaboration with leading UK literature organizations.

<http://www.litnetni.com/>

The Writer's Compass

Provides a range of free information and advice services for writers including a fully searchable online directory of professional development opportunities; a fortnightly jobs and opportunities e-bulletin; an information and advice helpline; professional development planning and coaching; and a wide range of information sheets, 'how to' factsheets and other resources. Also acts as an information and advice resource for all involved in writer development. It is the professional development arm of the National Association of Writers in Education (NAWE).

www.nawe.co.uk

The Arts Council of Northern Ireland

The lead development agency for the arts in Northern Ireland. Funding for writers is available through the Support for the Individual Artist Programme (SIAP). Funding schemes available within the current SIAP programme include: General Art Awards (max £1,500), Self-arranged Residencies (max £5,000), Major Individual Awards (2 awards of £15,000), Artists' Career Enhancement Scheme (£5,000) and Travel Awards (covers air travel at specified rates). There is a rolling programme for Travel Awards (you must apply at least four weeks before your anticipated date of departure) – all the other schemes operate on a deadline basis. Extensive guidance notes can be downloaded from the funding section of the website.

www.artscouncil-ni.org

Ards Writers

Meets on alternate Tuesday evenings at Ards Art Centre to read and discuss members' work. Occasional guest speakers. All types of writing – poetry, short stories, novels, plays, non-fiction – are covered.

<http://www.ardswriters.com/>

Arts Care

Arts and health charity which works in partnership with health and social care trusts throughout Northern Ireland to bring all forms of art into health and social care settings.

<http://www.artscare.co.uk/>

Business Link Northern Ireland

Free business advice and support service, available online and through local advisers.

www.businesslink.gov.uk

CavanKerry Press

New Jersey-based literary press which provides publishing opportunities for gifted, under-recognised writers of poetry and prose.

<http://www.cavankerrypress.org/>

CLE: Irish Book Publishers' Association

Cross-border organization whose members comprise most of the major publishing houses in Ireland. Provides industry information, advice on copyright, marketing, training etc.

www.publishingireland.com

Community Arts Forum

The umbrella body for community arts in Northern Ireland. Produces a free weekly newsletter and maintains an online directory of individuals and organizations working in the field.

www.caf.ie

Cúirt New Writing Prize

Offers emerging writers of poetry and fiction a chance to receive recognition at an international literary event.

www.cuirt.ie

Fortnight Magazine

Monthly magazine providing incisive commentary on the politics, arts and culture of Northern Ireland. Welcomes submissions by new writers.

<http://www.fortnight.org/>

ForeWord Book of the Year Awards

Aims to bring increased attention to librarians and booksellers of the literary and graphic achievements of independent publishers and their authors. ForeWord is the only review trade journal devoted exclusively to books from independent houses.

<http://www.forewordreviews.com/>

Hennessy X.O Literary Awards (in association with The Sunday Tribune)

Annual award supporting new writing talent. Three categories: First Fiction, Merging Fiction and Emerging Poetry.

<http://www.tribune.ie/arts/books/article/2009/jun/28/rules-hennessey-irish-literary-awards/>

Lagan Press

Publishes works of literary, artistic, social and cultural importance to the north of Ireland, with a literary emphasis on essentially non-commercial forms, especially poetry, drama and literary fiction. Committed to supporting new writers and those writing in the Irish language.

<http://www.lagan-press.org.uk/>

Lapwing Publications

Small poetry press based in Belfast that publishes local and international poets.

<http://www.freewebs.com/lapwingpoetry/>

Lapidus

Membership organization promoting the benefits of the literary arts for personal development, health and wellbeing across the UK. Annual conference, regional groups, quarterly magazine and other online resources.

www.lapidus.org.uk

The National Association of Writers in Education (NAWE)

The one organization supporting the development of creative writing of all genres and in all educational and community settings throughout the UK. Publications, events, online resources, disclosure processing. Free public liability insurance cover for professional members. The Writer's Compass is its professional development arm.

www.nawe.co.uk

nibusinessinfo.co.uk

Northern Ireland's online business advice service.

<http://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/>

Poetry Ireland

The national organization dedicated to developing, supporting and promoting poetry through Ireland. Publications, readings, education (runs the Writers in Schools scheme), information and resource service.

www.poetryireland.ie

Verbal Arts Centre

Promotes the language arts, working in three main areas: education, youth and community development, and art form / reading development, throughout the North West region.

www.verbalartscentre.co.uk

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