

Turning Another Page

Offering Para-Poetry Services

Kona Macphee

Award-winning poet Kona Macphee explores what's involved in offering "para-poetry" services such as mentoring, critiquing, workshop teaching or editing and offers practical tips on how to get started if you decide it's for you.

About the author

Kona Macphee grew up in Australia and now lives in Perthshire, where she works as a freelance media producer and runs the Muse Tuners creative mentoring agency (see www.musetuners.co.uk).

Kona received an Eric Gregory Award in 1998 and her first collection, 'Tails', was published by Bloodaxe Books in 2004. Her second Bloodaxe collection, 'Perfect Blue', was awarded the Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize for 2010. Her third collection, 'What Long Miles', was published by Bloodaxe in March 2013. www.konamacphee.com.

Introduction

If you're wanting to improve your craft as a poet, there are any number of individuals and organisations who are set up to help you – sometimes for free, sometimes on a commercial basis. Some offer one-off mentoring or critiquing; some offer longer-term regular classes; some even offer academic qualifications.

That's all well and good while you're still in "literary apprentice" mode, but what happens when your craft is well and truly – ahem – afloat? What should you do once you reach the point of wanting to offer such services yourself? If these are questions you're asking, then this article is for you. Before we get to the practical part, however, I'm going to be all blunt and un-British and leap right in with an indelicate but important subject: money.

The bottom line

First, I'd like to tell you a story. A few years ago, I was gloomily contemplating (not for the first time) the difficulty of making any kind of living as a poet. I decided that it would make sense to consider "parallel" options: activities that didn't involve writing and publishing poems, but that weren't fundamentally or temperamentally incompatible.

"Hmm...", I mused to myself. "I've always had a deep interest in psychology, and I like helping people.... I know! I'll become a counsellor! Then I can support myself via a counselling practice and take the economic pressure off my writing.

"I duly signed up for a three-year PG Dip in Counselling. When my co-students and I arrived at the opening session, our tutors sat us all down. "The first thing to realise," they said solemnly, "is that you'll never be able to make a living as a counsellor. There are already too many trained counsellors, and not nearly enough paid positions. If you want to practise, it will probably end up being mostly voluntary." Ach!

I tell this story not as an example of my witlessness, nor as a little parable about the importance of doing your Due Diligence (although it's both of these, of course.) I mention it because I want to help you avoid making the elementary mistake that I did: that of having wholly unrealistic expectations.

I'll make myself clear. If you're thinking of getting into "para-poetry" services (such as mentoring, critiquing, workshop teaching or editing) because you see this as the "next-best way" to make a viable living from your passion for poetry, then stop right now and let me run the numbers for you.

As I write, these are representative fee levels *paid by the customer* for para-poetry services via reputable organisations like the Poetry Society, the Poetry School and The Literary Consultancy:

One hour's one-to-one mentoring:	£50
Written critique of short selection of poems (100 lines):	£50
Written critique of longer selection of poems (300 lines):	£145
Half-day (3hour) group workshop:	£36
One-day (6hour) group workshop:	£62
10 week in-person course (2 hour sessions):	£130
Online taught course, 5 sessions, 2 hours/fortnight:	£82

Table 1: Representative fee levels

Now, what constitutes "making a living?" The May 2013 figure from the Rowntree Foundation's Minimum Income Calculator (<http://www.minimumincome.org.uk>) is **£16,852** for a single person household (one adult, no dependents). For the sake of clean calculations, let's round that down to a modest £16,000.

Based on an attendance of 10 students at group events, Table 2 below shows how much work you'd have to do in any of these categories to earn that minimal living.

Mentoring:	320 hours per year (6 per week)
Short critiquing:	320 critiques per year (6 per week)
Longer critiquing:	110 critiques per year (2 per week)
Half-day workshops:	44 in the year
Full-day workshops:	22 in the year
10 week in-person courses:	12 in the year
Online courses:	19 in the year

Table 2: Making a living

*[Note: The above figures are **maximally optimistic** because they don't include **any** costs (for example travel, venue hire or advertising/website design.) They also don't include the commissions (and any VAT) taken out if you're offering the service through a poetry or literary organisation which can substantially reduce the fee you actually receive.]*

Now, you might look at the above figures and think as follows: "Six mentoring sessions a week? I could manage that in my sleep. One half-day workshop every weekend? Sweet! I could even manage 19 online courses, I'm sure; after all, that's only 95 two-hour sessions – so around two sessions a week, plus preparation time."

The problem, however, isn't *you* and how hard you can work. It's the market. Poets often grumble that "more people write poetry than read it". While this may be true, the total number of people who are (a) writing poetry, and (b) willing to spend non-trivial amounts of money to improve their skill at it, is not very large. In commercial terms, the potential market is *tiny*. It's also competitive, and many of the competitors are long-established organisations equipped with arts subsidies that help them keep their fees down. (It's a sobering reality that even these organisations sometimes struggle to fill workshops and courses, and have to cancel them.)

Based on my own experience, I would say that there is **no way** you could achieve sales levels like those in Table 2, in the UK, for poetry-related services. (If you're a marketing genius, I'd be delighted if you can prove me wrong. Dazzle me.) In other words, offering para-poetry services may bring you a little extra pocket money, and a great deal of satisfaction – but it's not going to bring you anything like a viable living.

Motivation

Still reading? Good! Now we can assume that you're not just in it for the cold hard cash. So *why* are you interested in providing para-poetry services? Understanding the potential costs and benefits, and your own strengths and weaknesses, may help you decide whether para-poetry services are for you, and what kind of services you might like to offer.

Benefits

You're providing a service to help others, but there are benefits for you too. These include:

- **Being of service**

Unless you're inherently misanthropic (in which case for heaven's sake **don't** be a poetry mentor - you'll do more harm than good to all concerned,) there's a definite feel-good factor here.

- **Strengthening your own writing practice**

If you're offering critiquing or mentoring, you have to learn to articulate precisely *why* something isn't working, and *how* it could be improved. You may have edited your own writing mostly by instinct. Having to express your critical intuitions more concretely can refine them and help you apply them more systematically to your own work.

- **Validation**

Writing poetry can be an insecure business – and, ironically, publishing it yet more so. Having your expertise appreciated can be tremendously encouraging. Whether you're paid in cash or in gratitude, there's a warm inner glow to be had through being of value, as a poet, to somebody else.

- **Raising your profile**

People who might not have heard of you otherwise have the chance to hear your name, and some of them might even check out your work. However, be aware that offering para-poetry services will probably not cause a long-term leap, or even a short-term spike, in your poetry sales figures. (Free tip: being involved in a good newspaper-worthy scandal will be far more effective.)

Costs

As well as benefits, there are inevitably some costs involved in providing para-poetry services. These include:

- **Time / opportunity**

The time you spend on para-poetry services (both "actual" – doing the work – and "behind-the-scenes" – marketing and promotion) is time you don't have for your own writing. Perhaps more significantly, it's time you don't have for doing other things that might actually earn you a viable living.

- **Emotional energy**

The best mentors and teachers are generous: they "give of themselves". Mentoring requires you to put aside your own ego, and your own need for short-term validation, and focus intensely on somebody else's work. This can be quite draining if you do a lot of it in a short period, particularly if you happen to be feeling vulnerable about your own work or career at the time.

- **Frustration**

If you offer para-poetry services, you'll encounter students with a wide range of abilities. Your job, as a mentor, is to find constructive ways to help every single one of them improve, and to send them away with fresh inspiration to strive at their craft. If you have a tendency to perfectionism in your own work, or a lack of patience, you may find it frustrating to "de-tune" your expectations to be more in keeping with your student's level of expertise.

Other considerations

Are you an introvert or an extravert? Do you like to think on your feet, or do you prefer to do things in your own time, behind the scenes, without pressure? Are you comfortable in front of a group? Are you good at putting people at their ease? These are questions to ask yourself when you

consider what kind of services to offer.

Some mentors love working one-to-one; others thrive with a larger audience, where they can be more theatrical; still others are much happier to eschew face to face contact altogether and offer written critiques. Be realistic about your own character and preferences, and remember that to be a good mentor, you need to be enjoying yourself too.

If you're nervous about getting started because you feel "unqualified", find some opportunities to practise your skills in an unthreatening context, perhaps through voluntary activities. Remember that we all start out as beginners. If you don't feel confident, try to act it instead!

Next steps

So, you think that you'd like to offer para-poetry services, and that you could be good at them. Where do you start?

Credibility

The first thing to consider – realistically – is your own present level of credibility. Customers will justifiably expect that you are, in some tangible way, more expert than they are. You may well be a gifted writer and teacher, but they'll probably want to see some credentials to demonstrate this before handing over their trust or their cash.

If you're hoping to run an introductory workshop in your local community, aimed at complete beginners, then it may be enough that you love poetry, are well-read and have had the odd poem published or that you've been an English teacher, for example.

If you'd like to offer courses through an established poetry organisation or further education body, you're likely to need some kind of track record of published poems, probably at least via an individual pamphlet or small-press collection. It's also worth investigating what other qualifications might be required in your target market. For example, some local authorities require a "Preparing to Teach in the Lifelong Learning Sector" qualification (PTLLS) – see <http://www.cityandguilds.com/Courses-and-Qualifications/learning/teaching/6302-preparing-to-teach-in-the-lifelong-learning-sector-ptlls>). With the growth of Creative Writing graduate courses, university Creative Writing departments may increasingly require that lecturers and tutors themselves have a relevant MA or PhD.

If you're wanting to support people who are themselves hoping for publication in a full collection, they'll almost certainly want to know that you have published one or more collections yourself with a "recognised" (by their standards) publisher.

The above are just rules of thumb – we can all think of exceptions, I'm sure – but the point remains that you need to assess what sort of customers you'll be likely to attract, and what kinds of organisations might be willing to work with you, and choose your strategy accordingly.

Places to look

Your own show

If you like the idea of working for yourself (and not forking over lots of commission), you may want to try setting up your own service, either as a business or as a charitable or community endeavour.

This may be particularly attractive if any of the following are true:

- You are a natural marketeer / salesperson, and love the challenge of selling
- You live somewhere populous, or you can offer services remotely by phone, post or internet i.e. you have access to a reasonable chunk of the market
- You can set up your own promotional website, blog or social media presence.

Local organisations

There are plenty of geographically-local organisations, such as councils and community-based education and leisure groups, who offer recreational courses. Look at what they're currently offering, and see if you can spot a gap.

Poetry organisations

If you think you have adequate credibility, you can make a polite approach to organisations such as the Poetry Society or Poetry School, outlining your relevant experience and offering your services as a tutor or critiquer.

Universities

Sessional lecturers are paid much less than permanent academics. More and more universities are offering Creative Writing MAs – not least, one suspects, because they're relatively cheap to run – and sessional teaching is therefore a cost-effective way for universities to support them. If you have an appropriate track record (which might include a graduate qualification in Creative Writing and/or heavy-duty publication credits), it's worth investigating whether any sessional tutoring opportunities exist at your local institution(s), at either graduate or undergraduate level. Also, don't forget about home study providers such as the Open University and Open College of the Arts.

Schools

Working in schools is very different from providing para-poetry services to adults. If you like dealing with children and think this might be for you, NAWE maintains a list of agencies who organise writer visits to schools: <http://www.nawe.co.uk/writing-in-education/writers-in-schools/agencies.html>

The credentials and/or amount of prior publication required may vary, and you'll most likely need to have been through a CRB Enhanced Disclosure check (which you'll need to pay for, and which NAWE can organise for you if you're a member.) NAWE's guide to Getting started as a writer in schools is available as a free download at <http://www.nawe.co.uk/writing-in-education/writers-in-schools/getting-started.html>

Things to remember

Once you've gotten started, there are a few points that are worth remembering. In no particular order:

- **Make your teaching a learning experience.** Ask yourself what worked, and what didn't, and why. Seek feedback from your students; a simple post-service questionnaire is a good place to start.
- **Ask for testimonials** from satisfied customers. They become part of your track record and can be useful credentials when seeking future work or new customers.
- **Don't burn yourself out.** If you find yourself losing patience or feeling unreasonably frustrated with your students, or being tempted to make snarky remarks in your critiques, it may be a sign that you're doing too much. (And too much can be remarkably little; this is strong stuff.) We all have limits. Take a break.
- **Tread softly,** for yes, you're treading on people's dreams. When offering advice, think about how you can build up, rather than how you should tear down. The most gifted teachers manage to combine both gentle realism about a student's prospects with warm encouragement of his or her creative practice. Aspire to be such a teacher, or get out of the game.

And so, good luck, and one final word: don't forget to take good care of your own writing, which is, after all, the reason you're here in the first place.

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