Interview

Sue Wootton

New Zealand

Usha Akella

Usha Akella has been invited to participate in a number of International Poetry Festivals that include festivals in Nicaragua, Istanbul, Medellin, Macedonia etc., She has authored two books of poetry from presses in India, one musical and an upcoming bi-lingual book of poetry in Macedonian and English. Her work has appeared in many journals in US, India, Europe and Australia. Her poems have been translated in Spanish, Turkish, Macedonian, Telugu etc.

Sue Wootton

Sue Wootton lives in Dunedin, New Zealand. She practiced as a physiotherapist and acupuncturist for many years, and is now a writer. Her growing reputation as one of New Zealand's vibrant newer voices bears out in her writing profile. Her work has been described as fresh, tough and big hearted.

Sue's three collections of poetry are ***Hourglass*** (2005), ***Magnetic South*** (2008) and ***By Birdlight*** (upcoming 2011). Her fiction and poetry is widely published and anthologized in New Zealand and internationally. In 2008 Sue held the *Robert Burns Fellowship* in creative writing at Otago University. Some of her work has been translated into Hungarian, Romanian and Spanish. In 2010 she was an invited poet at the VI Festival International de Poesia in Nicaragua. Her poetry awards and honors include Inverawe Poetry Competition 2007 (Tasmania, Australia) for "Temporal", 2010 Takahe international poetry competition (for "Haunted") and places in the 2007 and 2008 Bravado International Competitions.

Her first collection of poetry, *Hourglass* (Steele Roberts, 2005), received strong critical favour. Reviewing the collection in the *Bay of Plenty Times*, 1 April 2006, Sue Emms wrote that: *'Wootton's style is open and*

accessible. She writes with humor and insight, is often tender but manages to avoid sentimentality, even with those poems that are in response to the death of a friend. Hourglass contains warm and intelligent writing.'

In 2006, she won first prize in both fiction and poetry sections of the Aoraki Literary Festival competition, the first writer to walk away with both honors (poem: "Breakfast with Raymond Carver"). She won the 2007 Inverawe (Tasmania, Australia) poetry competition and the 2010 Takahe international poetry competition. As well as writing for adults, Sue also writes poetry and stories for children. Her children's book, ***Cloudcatcher***, was published in 2010. In 2008 her story ***Virtuoso*** won a place in the prestigious NZ Book Month anthology, *Six Pack 3*. That same year she was a finalist in both Takahe and Sunday Star Times short story competitions. Sue was a runner-up in the 2009 and 2010 BNZ Katherine Mansfield short story competitions. Sue's short stories have been broadcast on Radio New Zealand National and published in literary journals including International Literary Quarterly (http://interlitq.org/index.php)

Q. ***When we met at the Nicaragua Poetry Festival, I distinctly remember your remark about an aversion to the sentimental in poetry. I find that intriguing and wonder how it ties in with your writing aesthetic. Has 'sentimental' been unavoidable in women's poetry?***

I suppose it must have seemed a strange comment, especially if taken as me objecting to the emotional in poetry. Actually, for me the emotional tone of a poem is usually what makes it compelling, but it need not be overt – subtle and understated is often good. Composition of my own poems usually involves extensive and time-consuming tinkering as I try to better express that elusive feeling or mood.

So, it wasn't so much 'sentiment' I was objecting to; it was 'sentimental poetry'. I was thinking of poems which display saccharine or clichéd emotional responses. Then it seems to me that the poet has not paid attention to the particular in the general; has not truly observed and faithfully transcribed.

One meaning given in my Concise Oxford for 'sentiment' is 'emotional weakness'. It's a pejorative connotation which sticks more often to a woman poet than to a man. I think I fear that judgement. Thus I suspect I'm 'en guard' against this kind of sentimentality in a way that a male poet does not need to be. Is 'sentimental' unavoidable in women's poetry? Perhaps it's just the accusation of sentimentality that is.

Q. Was there a defining moment in your writing process when you became aware of this? When did you begin to consciously sculpt your 'voice.' Where does this voice stand in relation to the 'canon' of New Zealand women's poetry?

I don't look back and see a Eureka moment, more a slow growing into myself. My writing, which had always been a private part of my younger life, took a backseat as I moved into a career in physiotherapy, and had a family (my children are now 18, 15 and 11). Poetry was my private and under-practised passion. In my late thirties I experienced a sense of urgency, a real need to write, and to take myself seriously as a poet. I found it difficult to justify claiming attention and energy for my art. I felt guilty for claiming time for something the economic world disdains (as Auden said, 'for poetry makes nothing happen'). I doubted my abilities and I doubted my worth. Things changed when I enrolled part time at university to study English literature, and began to mix with others for whom reading and writing poetry was *the* meaningful occupation. Over time I began to submit work and have it published, and subsequently was awarded a mentorship with a senior poet (Elizabeth Smither) through the NZ Society of Authors. All this helped me take my work seriously. My first collection, *Hourglass*, is pretty much a document of this journey. The voice in that collection is questing, but often thwarted by quotidian domestic demands - I suppose I am the 'left of centre, caged' heart in my poem "The Waxeyes", wearing Scarlet Woman and insisting "let me through".

Being awarded a year's writing fellowship (the Robert Burns Fellowship at the University of Otago) in 2008 allowed me to properly establish what Flannery O'Conner calls 'the

habit of art'. A large component of my habit is reading. People I read bleed into my own writing – I'm constantly trying on voices and practicing a range of forms.

For a number of years I helped co-ordinate a regular event: 'Upfront, Spotlighting Women's Poetry'. This was set up to give Dunedin women poets a chance to read their work - not in the noisy male-dominated pub scene where loudness, courage and confidence was a pre-requisite, but in a quieter, more nurturing environment, The consequence was always a rich evening of poetry, where lyric voices could read next to political poets next to rap-goddesses next to drama queens next to balladeers. A community of women poets formed and remains strong here. There's always a strong contingent of women poets at the many Dunedin (mixed gender) poetry readings. I do think that's the legacy of the Upfront years of encouraging - sometimes almost pushing - women to the podium.

I haven't answered your question about the 'canon' - perhaps I can't because I feel I'm still and always working and changing, with no sense of occupying a definite 'place' (beyond the place called "I write").

Q. **As you succinctly say,** ***"A chance to be wrecked in a far language. An absolute capsize!"***

That encapsulates writing poetry for me: fear of foundering – and the chance to be changed.

Speaking of place, you come from a city that was historically the earliest settlement for Maoris, a whaling port, site of a gold rush, and is now a university town known for its Dunedin sound, and ecotourism. Is 'history' sediment in your poetry?

I haven't always lived in Dunedin. But I have settled here – I'm one of a long line of "settlers" in this place. I'm very interested in the notions of "home", "belonging", "settling down", "putting down roots", "placement" and "displacement". I'm a first-generation New Zealander, my parents having been displaced (from England via Africa to New Zealand) by the consequences of the Second World War. When I was in my early twenties I made the reverse journey (via Africa to England) to meet relatives and stand where my family had come from. This was a crucial journey for me; my understanding of my racial, genetic and cultural identity solidified. When I returned to New Zealand two and a half years later, I returned as a "confident New Zealander", a Kiwi of Anglo-Saxon heritage. The New Zealand poet Brian Turner recently wrote to me from London about 'Homo Diaspora' – the many peoples on this planet who are between nations, between homes. My own family history gives me an empathetic connection with people in this situation – it feels to me almost a tribal connection, one that goes beneath particular cultures, that speaks to shared characteristics of loss and being lost. My writing reflects this, circling and re-circling the themes of identity and belonging.

There's another aspect to 'place' for New Zealanders – our geographical isolation and relatively small human population. This 'tyranny of distance' haunts our consciousness and infuses our literature. Plus, we live in a particularly vivid physical landscape.

Dunedin is visually beautiful, a harbour city built on steep green hills. The Pacific Ocean is our eastern boundary, and there are many stunning beaches. It's a compact city, very easy to live in, very easy to walk in. It has a powerful presence as a physical place. It cops spectacular and changeable weather. Its human heritage infuses daily life, whether it be the Maori and Scottish place names, the nineteenth century grand stone architecture, or in its cultural life – there's a strong history of Dunedin artists, musicians, poets and writers. For me, the history and presence of this place scaffolds my consciousness, and so always scaffolds my writing – often invisibly, but there, nevertheless.

Q. In some sense "home" and "belonging" are nesting terms with an unavoidable association with gender. In a time of irreversible globalization and erasure of traditional family patterns, how does the woman poet navigate those shifting definitions. Is ambiguity the only safe realm?

This theme of "home" haunts a lot of NZ poetry, whether written by men or women. There's a trail one can trace through NZ poetry (in English) which parallels the country's journey from the colonization period, through separation from 'Mother England' – aka 'Home' – to independence. Ursula Bethell's 1929 poem, "Response", is framed as a letter to 'Home' (England) from home (New Zealand). It's literally and figuratively a poem about roots – she writes of having planted chrysanthemums which need staking against the cold 'south winds' (south winds in England would of course herald warmth). Set against this 'settler' image is her familiarity with the indigenous 'bush warbler' and 'wattle' (but her familiarity stops short of knowing their Maori names). Though she is

‘glad’ to be here, the poem ends with the ghosts of memory and loss: ‘Oh, we have remembering hearts…’ Here’s the poem in full:

RESPONSE By Mary Ursula Bethell

When you wrote your letter it was April,
And you were glad that it was spring weather,
And that the sun shone out in turn with showers of rain.

I write in waning May and it is autumn,
And I am glad that my chrysanthemums
Are tied up fast to strong posts,
So that the south winds cannot beat them down.
I am glad that they are tawny coloured,
And fiery in the low west evening light.
And I am glad that one bush warbler
Still sings in the honey-scented wattle…

But oh, we have remembering hearts,
And we say ‘How green it was in such and such an April,’
And ‘Such and such an autumn was very golden,’
And ‘Everything is for a very short time.’

As late as 1941, Allen Curnow, one of NZ's most influential poets, wrote (in "House and Land") of a 'land of settlers/With never a soul at home.' This bewilderment is encapsulated in the final couplet of his 1943 poem "The Skeleton of the Great Moa in the Canterbury Museum, Christchurch": 'Not I, some child, born in a marvelous year,/Will learn the trick of standing upright here.'

That couplet was like a thrown gauntlet to NZ poets, especially the generation writing in the 1940's and 50's when poets such as Curnow, Fairburn and Glover wrote consciously in the NZ vernacular, of NZ settings and NZ ways of living. This period of 'canon-setting' was dominated by university-educated males, who, while singing the necessity of learning to 'stand upright here', also yearned for a particular status for NZ literature – a status firmly rooted in an intellectual response to the canon of European and British (and later, American) literature. One effect of this was a sidelining of women poets, who were less likely (unless unmarried or childless) to be able to live the academic, scholarly or bohemian life. Few women poets are visible at this time, and even those writing 'seriously' received more attention in subsequent decades (sometimes, as with Robin Hyde, posthumously).

The 1977 *Private Garden* anthology marked a turning point in visibility for women poets. The collection showcased poets like Elizabeth Smither, Fleur Adcock, Lauris Edmond, Fiona Kidman, Anne French. Here were women writing 'as women', refusing to be dismissed as sentimental (that word again) or weak. Since then, NZ women poets have been represented more strongly in the anthologies, although 2010's extensive *99 Ways*

into New Zealand Poetry, (edited by Harry Ricketts and Paula Green) is the first study I'm aware of in which women poets feature in roughly equal numbers to men.

In answer to your question about ambiguity, I think there are times when it makes sense to speak ambiguously or risk not being able to speak at all. Or risk not being listened to. This isn't to be false. Poetry is always a mindful sculpting of language to express complex, multiple and difficult truths.

Q. Yes. *Private Gardens*… I've wondered about Riemke Ensing, of her Dutch birth and origin who ends up doing the seminal task of giving new Zealand women a voice in writing! What are exclusive publishing resources for women poets now? Any more "Private Gardens?"

I'm not aware of any regular exclusive publishing resources for women in New Zealand. Blackmail Press 13 was a women's issue (see http://nzpoetsonline.homestead.com/index13.html). I've mentioned Upfront, Spotlighting Women's Poetry, the performance event we used to run here in Dunedin. Last year we honoured Katherine Mansfield's birthday with an open mic for women poets, and about 25 women read for this event. It was a wonderful evening: inspiring, moving, fun.

Q. Who are the Poets that leave a mark, give you a rush and make you want to risk it?

Poets who give me that rush – this is an ever-evolving and hence incomplete list – include Anne Carson, Wallace Stevens, Rimbaud, Yeats, Neruda; the Scottish trio John

Burnside, Don Paterson and Kathleen Jamie; Czeslaw Milosz, Wistawa Szymborska, Anna Akhmatova….

Q. Can the poet avoid being an activist in our times? You recently read at a commemoration to celebrate the work of Rhys Brookbank who lost his life in the Christchurch earthquake.

Rhys Brookbank was a young poet who died in the Christchurch earthquake. His loss was keenly felt here in Dunedin, where he'd been very active in the poetry scene a couple of years ago. The memorial reading was a moving tribute to an exceptional person and a gifted, attentive writer, serious about his craft.

The arts and literary communities have responded to the earthquake in a number of ways. Some have written or painted the confusion, fear and grief that pervades the lives of those living with the damaging major quakes and the ongoing aftershocks. Fiona Farrell, who lives near Christchurch (though she is this year's Burns Fellow in Dunedin), is a poet whose recent work has been a powerful 'voice' for affected communities. Her poems are terrifyingly real and distressing; each delivers a seismic shock to the psyche. Yet ultimately, because of her poetic control, they unify and strengthen. Her poems burrow into shock and pain, and bring the reader out whole – another step towards a kind of healing.

Some artists and writers have responded with fundraising initiatives, like Claire Beynon's website selling donated books or artwork, and writers Cassie Hart and Anna Caro, who have put together an anthology of short stories http://talesforcanterbury.wordpress.com Every serious New Zealand writer I can think of is in some way an activist. Poets active in environmental and political issues spring to mind – Dunedin poets Kay Cook and Richard Reeve writing to protest wind farm proliferation on so-called 'empty' South Island landscapes; Southland poet and poet laureate Cilla McQueen and Central Otago's Brian Turner on the dominant creed that land is a 'resource' to be mined, (over)farmed, polluted, drained and changed at whim, regardless of the cost to other species, or to our own. Others, myself included, read for Amnesty International and Disability Awareness Week (the latter co-ordinated by Dunedin poet – and pyrotechnic expert – David Howard).

Writing is an act of attention – a bearing witness to. A poet is always an activist.

Q. I am curious about the 'canon' something you'd prefer avoiding. So let's rephrase this to glean some tidbits about NZ Writing. Who are the New Zealand poets (especially women poets) who inspire you. Why?

Various anthologies and academic critiques over the years have established a core canon of poets such as J K Baxter, Alan Curnow, A R D Fairburn, C K Stead, Hone Tuwhare and Bill Manhire (to name a few). Recent anthologies include more women, Maori,

Asian and Pacific writers. Bill Manhire has had a strong influence on promoting this diversity; his creative writing programme at Victoria University's International Institute of Modern Letters in Wellington is an esteemed launching pad for new writers.

NZ women writers who've left a mark on me include: Mary Ursula Bethell, Robin Hyde, Katherine Mansfield, Janet Frame, Ruth Dallas, Cilla McQueen, Bernadette Hall, Michelle Leggott, Fiona Farrell, Tusiata Avia and Rhian Gallagher. I admire their 'strength of pen' and certainly see them as models and mentors for my own work.

Q. Stereotypes the NZ the woman poet has to break?

I think it's the universal catch 22: the difficulty of being taken seriously if one writes of the personal; the difficulty of being taken seriously if one doesn't write of the personal.

Q. I've read somewhere that in NZ female poets are getting published just as often much as male poets? Do you think that this is true?

I'm not sure about the ratio, but there are a lot of women publishing here, many of them through Victoria University Press (as graduates of the Wellington Institute of Modern Letters programme) or Auckland University Press. And women seem well-represented in the literary journals, many of which are edited or co-ordinated by women (Siobhan Harvey for *Takahe,* Helen Rickerby at *JAAM*, Emma Neale for the *Otago Daily Times*

newspaper, Liz Breslin and Laura Williamson for the forthcoming online journal *Blackmail Press 30*, Sarah Paterson for *Deep South 2011*).

Q. What are contemporary trends in NZ poetry? Is Globalization affecting forms and trends?

New Zealanders have a reputation for being big readers and great travellers. I think we are always exploring trends from elsewhere, and incorporating them into our take on the world. Contemporary New Zealand poetry is increasingly touched by wider influences than the traditional canonical UK and USA poets. I can only characterize what's going on here by calling it diverse, and often experimental. I feel there's an open-eyed-ness to our best contemporary work – a willingness to adopt and adapt while continuing to speak with our own peculiar (and diverse) South Pacific inflections.

Q. Sue, let's get down to talking about your poetry specifically. Your most recent, *By Birdlight* offers an eclectic range in the least! There are poems inspired from an engraving of a flying ship published in The Gentleman's Magazine 1786, The Endurance Expedition, Antarctica, 1914-16, a World War 2 street sign, Nevsky Prospect, St Petersburg… the range here is markedly different from *Hourglass.* which seems a more interior book to me.

The *Hourglass* poems were of necessity written at night after my children had gone to bed, or in time snatched while they napped in the afternoon, and reflect the fact that

writing opportunities were constricted by many calls on my time. I couldn't journey "out" very much, so journeyed inward instead. In contrast, the work in *By Birdlight* is influenced by actual travel – to Russia, for example – but also by extensive reading, including time spent as a research assistant where I read 18th century periodicals in search of travel writing (thus the Gentleman's Magazine, with its 1786 description of a Flying Ship, and its 1747 report of an American bird thought to be luminous enough to read by).

In many ways *By Birdlight* is a natural progression of my previous preoccupation with 'belonging' and 'identity', but painted on a wider temporal and geographic canvas. Broadly speaking, *By Birdlight* is about exploration, 'discovery' (how often we think we have 'discovered' a brave new world, how often we are blinded by solipsism!), migration, hope, endeavor, conflict, upheaval, loss, change and courage.

Q. In *By Birdlight* sometimes onomatopoeia, and concrete poems abound. (*Magnetic South* contains the concrete poems "The true color of the moon" and "Pattern for Plain heart".) I found a particular focus on the audio; you are just skipping along on sound. Comment? In "lovebird":

lovebird

hummingbird under the skin
hot strum of strings, feverish wings

feathered thrill hovers and sings

feverish featherstrum sings
bird hum of strings, thrill-fevered skin
hot hover humming and wings

hoverbird's feverish wings
strum-feathered strings, underthrill sings
humming strum hotfeather skin

thrillfevered underskin strings
strummingbird sings, hover-hot wings
underbird featherskin stings

I love sound aspects of poetry, not just onomatopoeia, but the way the aural elements of a poem create rhythm and melody. I had a lot of fun interweaving repeating sounds and syllables in "lovebird", and shaping the poem visually. Months after writing "lovebird", I read about the Pentagon's Hummingbird video drone, designed to 'flutter into enemy territory', and suddenly "lovebird" had a pared down, no-nonsense partner, "hatebird". Both poems were designed to hum, but the quality of the hum differs: "lovebird" hums with desire; "hatebird" hums with distrust and menace.

hatebird

The Nano Hummingbird video drone developed by the Pentagon is designed to "flutter into enemy territory"

Hummingdrone
surveys your home
No harm

Stay calm

Flutters in
Shoots skin
Sorts alien
from kin

No heart
No nest
Robotic parts
know best

No one did it
No one's hand
Hunting instinct
unmanned

Snap! Acquires
maps for buyers
Bird of pry
Unfriendly flier

I love the multi-sensory aspects of poetry, and the freedom that offers to the poet. Line length, stanzas, word placement, word density and empty space shape the poem visually as well as aurally. My concrete poems are not usually planned as such, but begin to evolve as strongly visual poems during the composition process.

Q. This might seem a glaring observation, that shouldn't be made at all to any serious poet. You really like words and seem to want to taste them and spit out the pits. It's about the word for you, primal, before the other things.

Maybe! I think this is because my mother read nursery rhymes and stories aloud to me from a very early age, which is like marinating a baby's linguistic cortex in rhyme, rhythm and complex language. To this day I find that the best words, or combinations of words, melt – or explode – on the tongue, releasing sound, taste, aroma, image, texture, melody, and tone, like complex flavors from a gourmet treat.

Q. *Hourglass* seems to reverberate with loneliness, not thematically, but has that undercurrent tugging at the poems?

Yes, true. The poems were written at a time in my life when I felt isolated, in retrospect mainly from my real self. I was a mother of young children and my husband was often absent. Twenty years working and studying physical therapy and acupuncture had given me valuable professional and personal skills, but no sense of community with my colleagues, who on the whole were outgoing, social types (the lucky things!) and not readers. *Hourglass* is pretty much a blundering through the dark towards finding my true community, which has turned out to be a community of readers, film buffs and writers. Although, it probably sounds melodramatic to others, at the 2010 Nicaraguan poetry festival I was amazed and thrilled to realise "this is my tribe!"

Q. There is no 'blundering' in your next book *Magnetic South.* Sue Wootton the mature poet bursts through in this book; finds her direction. The book begins with a poem on time: "Le temps entre chien et loup" ("The hour between dog and wolf.") and ends with *Magnetic South.* What guides poem arrangement in a collection?

The first poem asks the reader to risk 'dancing' with the wolf – with half-light, vulnerability and uncertainty, the only outcomes being 'oblivion' or 'ecstasies'. The final poem, "Magnetic South", is a sure statement of homecoming – of 'returning and returning' (which does not preclude going away from time to time). The collection's

divided into two halves. Part One, ‘And will you dance?’ contains poems which (loosely interpreted) consider knowledge and reason, and/or their shadow, uncertainty, faith and belief. Part Two, ‘Voyage with water and stars’, is about love (the phrase is from Neruda’s Cien Sonetos de Amor: ‘Ah, loving is a voyage with water and with stars’), and geographical voyaging – culminating in that magnetic pull to ‘home’.

I don’t find it easy to arrange collections. I like them to have an overall shape; a rise and fall similar to a novel. But poetry books are often read by dipping in and out, so the arrangement has to take account of that too. I’ve made it more difficult for myself so far by writing across a wide range of tones, forms and subjects (including humour). The question is how to group poems – by tone, or by theme? – and how to manage the transition between groups. Ideally you want a strong opener and a strong closing poem, subtly connected, so that there can be a sense of a journey taken, a destination reached. I usually spread the printed-out poems all over the floor, and repeat this process several times over several months before I’m happy. In spite of this, I suspect most readers wouldn’t be particularly conscious of a pattern in the arrangement. I hope, though, that a sense of cohesiveness shines through.

Q. *Magnetic South* is a paean to the earth and nature. I think it is a testimonial to your identity as a New Zealand poet. I confess that this is my favorite collection. What's happening as you were writing this book?

The poems in *Magnetic South* were written over a period of about 2 years, and were originally conceived as a collection concentrating on science, as I'd been reading about string theory, quantum theory, theories of time, and so on. Scientific rationalism and logical thought has taken us a long way from instinct. I wouldn't be writing this if it hadn't. But – the paradoxes! The brain's a closed loop unto itself – we'll never know how much we're deaf and blind to, lacking appropriate receptor sites. And no matter how 'scientific' our training, our limbic brains remain dominant, though we don't like to admit this. But how does advertising work if not by appealing to the ancient, sub-cortical, sub-lingual, instinctive, sex-warmth-food-and-shelter-seeking limbic brain? And why is it so difficult to get humans to accept scientific evidence for human-induced climate change, for example, except that going with logic on this one would involve giving up some of our 21st century cave-comforts?

I digress! I meant to say that I find poetry a great medium for the expression of the inexpressible. The poem "String Theory" acted as an anchor to the collection as a whole. It plays with the metaphor of multiple dimensions, and ends in 'holes', where 'knowledge' falls into the unknowable.

Although the genesis of *Magnetic South* was in science, the risk with science poems is that they can become gimmicky shallow wordplay based on poorly understood scientific jargon and a rudimentary grasp of complex theories. I decided to broaden things out, retaining 'knowledge' as the idea underpinning the whole collection. I think this is why the poems have that earth/nature physicality you refer to. They are observations from a

particular place, that place being the south of the South Island of New Zealand, which is pretty far south. *Magnetic South* explores the magnetism of this area, geographically, historically and psychologically.

Q. You seem to prefer descriptive tropes (Hypotiposis, Topographia, Chronographia) to metaphor?

Funny you should ask that, when I was telling a friend recently that I think almost entirely in metaphor! Perhaps those tropes are so strong as a result of me pushing myself beyond what comes naturally to me – I've definitely worked hard on honing both my observation and descriptive skills. By nature I'm much more aural than visual in my orientation to the world. I also find it really difficult to render my observations accurately in words. I can wander through town without noticing much visually, while vaguely alert to voices, traffic, snatches of music, wind-noise and birdsong. I've been known to miss some pretty dramatic events because I just didn't see them (unless my attention was drawn by a noise) and since I don't notice distinctive landmarks I'm really good at getting lost. In recent years I've been trying to use my eyes more, really concentrating on seeing well. Likewise, when I write I try to concentrate on finding accurate and particular language, on 'practicing the particular' rather than lazily generalizing. Perhaps the practice has paid off – great!

Q. What's the biggest taboo you had to combat in your writer's consciousness?

I think it was overcoming my conditioning (common with the eldest child of immigrant parents) to always be 'good', to 'fit in', be compliant, be responsible and safe, and never shock or offend. I used to care too much about helping readers understand my poems. I think this was in part a habit that came with me from my years as a physical therapist, where clear explanations were vital. And while I still believe in clarity, I don't necessarily believe in explanations. As my own reading has got tougher, so has some of my writing. Now, I'm willing to risk being ambiguous, obscure, naughty, ugly, unlovable, irresponsible, gauche, violent, sexual, inelegant, blunt, rude, impolite, confusing, forceful…whatever it takes to write an authentic poem.

Q. Poetry undoubtedly reveals connections; the poet's imagination is the space between things, closing assumed distances. I found this on your website and want to chat a bit about your creative process:

Lynn showed me two strikingly beautiful and detailed images: a drawing of a hydrangea flower, and a topographical map of the Pacific Ocean floor. I was inspired by the sheer physical beauty of these images, and by the 'invisible worlds' revealed within the leaf, and under the sea. The challenge was to somehow show a connection between the two images, without the 'earthy' flower drowning in the immense 'wateriness' of the Pacific basin. I set the drawing of the hydrangea on top of the map, and spent several days looking at the composite. I became fascinated by the names given to sub-marine features in the Southwest Pacific Basin – in particular the various Fracture Zones, and the Bounty

Trough, which is just off the Dunedin coastline. In the background, throughout the composition process, news about the BP Deepwater Horizon disaster kept coming through. It seemed apt that as well as standing for British Petroleum, BP might also stand for 'Black Petal'.

My poem "Petal" is typical of the way I work in that it was a long time in gestation. It was commissioned as part of a jewelry/poetry exhibition. Jeweler Lynn Kelly crafted a stunning silver brooch, a hydrangea, whose petals were etched blue with the Pacific Ocean map. I really had no idea how to proceed with my part of the project. I pinned the map where I could see it, and pinned the hydrangea flower on top of the map. I studied each image closely, but often in a dreamy, sort of detached manner while thinking of other things. I had to trust that something would 'click' to start a poem. A week in (when I was beginning to panic), I suddenly saw in my mind's eye the Deepwater Horizon underwater oil plume – a giant black hydrangea blossoming towards the surface from a long black stem.

That's quite typical – slow and uncertain beginnings, lots of 'inkling' time when I sense words on the move, but can't yet write them. I'm more confident than in the past that another poem will come, given time. And once I begin a poem, it usually goes through many drafts. Frustrating though – I often wish I was a thousand-a-day novelist instead of a hey-I-moved-a-comma-today poet.

Q. **That comma, which is so crucial to a Pantoum! Do you write in form? Are you on the tightrope between form and free verse? Or are you veering toward one or the other? Have you found your personal prosody?**

I'm on that tightrope, sometimes veering towards free verse, and sometimes towards the formal forms. I enjoy the challenge of meeting requirements of rhyme, meter, stanza structure and so forth. Imposing technical restrictions can intensify a poem. Searching for the right 'fit' can help me break habits about vocabulary, syntax and line break. Unexpected associative leaps can occur, taking the poem somewhere new. Writing in a 'cage', beating on the bars if you like, can deepen a poem's musicality.

I've written, tightly or loosely, in a variety of forms: villanelles, pantoums, terza rima, ghazals, sestinas, etc. In *By Birdlight*, the long poem "Fall Sonata" is blank verse; "Through Cromwell Gorge" (about travelling above a hydro dam, scene of a gold rush 150 years ago) is terza rima; and "Vagabond" is one of 7 sonnets. (There are 13 sonnets in *Hourglass* and 11 in *Magnetic South.*) I do particularly enjoy writing (often non-traditional) sonnets, exploring various ways that tension can rise and fall within that fourteen line boundary fence. The "Sand Sonnets" in *Hourglass* were composed to the additional restraint of each line being eleven syllables long.

I like rhyme, and while I enjoy the occasional bold and obvious end-rhyme, on the whole I prefer them subtle and internal: sly, shy and slant.

Formal poetic form – reading it as well as writing it – is good training for the ear. A good ear for rhythm and musicality lies behind all compelling free verse. Liberty is nothing without discipline. That's why, when I take a workshop as I'm about to do this weekend, we will focus on writing 'one poem 3 ways', in syllabics, as terza rima, and as a sestina. Perhaps all that work will eventually be binned, and the end result be a poem in free verse. It will, however, be a poem that could not have been written without the formal preparation.

For an example of some of my recent free verse poems, see "Haunted" and "Hatch," in *By Birdlight*. (These won and were a runner-up in the 2010 Takahe International Poetry Competition.)

Q. For Lauris Dorothy Edmond and Katherine Mansifield the influence of French writers was marked. In contemporary NZ poetry are there discernible influences from the outside? Have you experimented with literary forms of other cultures?

Yes there are outside influences on the NZ scene. All the forms mentioned above, of course, and Japanese forms such as haiku, but also multiple influences from immigrants – and refugees – who bring Polynesian, Asian, African etc traditions to page and podium. We're still an English-orientated writing culture, but gradually this is changing with some public grant money becoming available for translations. As to experimenting with literary forms from other cultures, I haven't practiced beyond the forms I've mentioned. Not yet, anyway…

Q. You recently pulled out of a Masters course? And are teaching Creative Writing workshops around Dunedin. What are your expectations as a teacher and a student of writing?

Yes, I pulled out of a Science Communication Masters course, basically because for me there was too much emphasis on new technologies and too little on studying the history of literary science writing and on practicing technique – the building blocks of good writing necessary for publication in any format. Many of the students were not widely read, and needed guidance. Instead, there was a childish excitement about electronic self-publishing, the ease of this, the opportunity it gives for anyone to grab a platform and perform. I came to publication through the submit and die method, and have a hundred rejection slips to paste on the wall. I hated and still dislike having my work rejected, but I like knowing that accepted work is of a publishable standard, as ascertained by more experienced eyes. Sometimes it's good to be saved from yourself (and sometimes a writer should ignore the rejection – this is a judgement call every writer needs to learn to make; it can't be practiced if all one's work is instantly published). Anyway, I'm not interested in making yet more noise in an already over-noisy world. I would have liked to obtain my Masters, but only if the work was worthwhile, and not by sacrificing my integrity and sanity!

Any student should be guided to develop a comprehensive understanding of traditions and current practices in their chosen field. The 'creative' in Creative Writing workshops

doesn't absolve the teacher from this obligation, while at the same time he or she needs to facilitate creativity through serendipity and playfulness. I take workshops which aim to help students find their own most effective writing practice. I advocate a tricky but necessary balance between discipline and play, between bum-on-seat-fingers-on-the-keys (or bum-on-seats-eyes-on-the-book) and a good siesta on the daybed (perchance to dream).

Is this the realm from which your children's books emerge- perchance to dream? At what juncture in your writing life did *Cloudcatcher* come about? 'Your children's books tap into another part of your aesthetic sensibility. I find a poetic playfulness rooting in prose there.

Cloudcatcher came about originally as the response to a serious question by my son. He was 4 years old at the time, and asked me, as we watched clouds racing through the sky, "Mum, how do you catch a cloud?"

Writing for children does allow for real playfulness with language, and makes an ideal foil for my tendency to get too earnest. It's a good way to reconnect with the imagination – 'perchance to dream' indeed. I really enjoy it. Sound and rhythm are really important in children's writing. I write stories and poems to be read aloud. Kids like language that moves, that's muscular and musical, alive with rhyme, rhythm, imagery, colour and the full range of sensory and emotional experience.

It doesn't matter if the language is occasionally 'difficult'. Pictures and narrative context are there to help, and we do children a horrible disservice if we make things too easy. It's always a buzz when an unfamiliar word explodes into meaning, and all the more self-empowering if this happens through a kind of natural word-osmosis.

Neither do I believe that children's work should always be 'positive', 'optimistic', funny and upbeat. Contemplative, complicated and melancholic emotions also belong on the page: sadness, grief, envy, anger, guilt and confusion. Stories or poems which deal with these emotions can be deeply reassuring for children.

Incidentally I think the best compliment I've had as a writer (for adults or for kids) was having one of my poems, first published in the NZ School Journal, subsequently come out on CD, sung enthusiastically by a choir of children.

The Brazilian Priest's Flying Ship
(Gentleman's Magazine 56, 1786)

Scallop-hulled, my lovely vessel plies the air
on feathered wings. Her bowsprit beak splits clouds,

streams tufts of cumulus and stratus
past her flanks. Her rigging's no frayed salted grid of rope

mast-glued to crawling seas; she hoists no canvas tower
nor stands a man in any so-called nest – nay, she *is* the crow,

the actual bird, the raptor, gull, horizon-hunting
albatross. Her stately pinions beat. Her canopy's

an iron net strung liberally with amber beads. Gentlemen,
it's by this secret, modern, scientific operation (and God's will)

we'll keep aloft. And swift, so swift! Two hundred
miles per day – unhindered reef-free sky! Flamboyant

whoop-whoop birds ablaze with jungle song ne'er heard by Christian ears
will roost with us on Tuesday; will decorate our snow-view

Andes Thursday plates with gaudy spectrum (plucked) of plump!
And never becalmed! Bring forth the bellows. Pump, gentlemen, pump!

Temporal

Manuherikia Valley, Central Otago, South Island, New Zealand

Folds and sulci corrugate the hill's brown dome. You're
reduced, a rare, weak impulse in the synaptic click

and tick of rock. A lofting hawk spans the updraft, hangs
mirage-like in the corner of your thought, never recedes

(still there when you close your eyes tomorrow,
and tomorrow). The river cleaves schist, pours itself

upon itself. Bees, vipers bugloss, the blue
untender thrumming land. Kick-dust sheep track:

skulls, a clavicle. Someone mined or mustered here,
but the huge willow, cracking open, yields no histories.

Gooseberries, wild roses, rabbits. A solitary fallen sheet
of iron, whose argyle rust becomes a skink, regards you

reptile-cool, and vanishes. Flurry of quail. Cacophony
of dun wings. Scratch marks in the dust. The hawk coils.

LINKS AND NOTES:

NZ Book Council website home page:

http://www.bookcouncil.org.nz/Overview/Introduction/Home.htm

Most of the poets I've mentioned are listed on this site, eg:

Elizabeth Smither http://www.bookcouncil.org.nz/Writers/Profiles/Smither,%20Elizabeth

http://www.bookcouncil.org.nz/Writers/Profiles/Bethell,%20(Mary)%20Ursula

http://www.bookcouncil.org.nz/Writers/Profiles/Adcock,%20Fleur

http://www.bookcouncil.org.nz/Writers/Profiles/Edmond,%20Lauris

http://www.bookcouncil.org.nz/Writers/Profiles/Ensing,%20Riemke

http://www.bookcouncil.org.nz/Writers/Profiles/Kidman,%20Fiona

http://www.bookcouncil.org.nz/Writers/Profiles/French,%20Anne

http://www.bookcouncil.org.nz/Writers/Profiles/Farrell,%20Fiona

http://www.bookcouncil.org.nz/Writers/Profiles/Wootton,%20Sue

Deep South (ezine of English Department, University of Otago, Dunedin, NZ)

http://www.otago.ac.nz/deepsouth/

Blackmail Press http://nzpoetsonline.homestead.com/index.html

International Institute of Modern Letters http://www.victoria.ac.nz/modernletters/

http://suewootton.co.nz

Note to Poem, "The Brazilian Priest's Flying Ship": A description and engraving of this flying ship was published in *The Gentleman's Magazine 56 1786.* Invented by a Brazilian Priest, the vessel was to be covered by "iron wire, in the form of a net, on which are fastened a good number of amber beads, which by a secret operation, will help keep the ship aloft." It would offer fast travel ("200 miles in 24 hours"), and utilize the latest modern technology (a pair of bellows stored fore and aft) to combat the doldrums.