

Lighting a Candle for Poetry

HAZEL WOOD



When Jenny Swann's mother died and left her a little money, she wanted to do something with it that her intelligent, well-read mother would have liked. So she started publishing poetry – not large chunks of it between traditional hard covers, but poetry in small, tempting, bite-size helpings, attractive to those who already love poetry, and easily digestible by those who don't normally read it. The latter were the people she particularly wanted to reach. She hoped that discovering a poem they enjoyed might tickle their taste buds and lead them on to more of the poet's work.

She was keen to be green, too, so she found a local printer and some local illustrators. Her husband, who is an academic, designed a website, and she started off with four pamphlets – *Ten Poems by Walter de la Mare*, *Six Poems by Christina Rossetti*, *Ten Poems by Frances Cornford* (now, sadly, out of print) and *Miss Thompson Goes Shopping* by Martin Armstrong – each about 12 pages long and costing £4.95. She called her enterprise the Candlestick Press. In the two years since she started she's gone from strength to strength, beginning with

Twelve Poems about Birds; *Ten Poems about Puddings*; *Ten Poems about Bicycles*; *Ten Poems about Love*; *The Twelve Poems of Christmas*; *Ten Poems by Walter de la Mare*; *Six Poems by Christina Rossetti*; Martin Armstrong, *Miss Thompson Goes Shopping*; and Eleanor Farjeon, *Mrs Malone*, are available at £4.95 each from our shop Slightly Foxed on Gloucester Road (tel 020 7370 3503) or direct from the Candlestick Press (www.candlestickpress.co.uk; tel 07500 180 871).

250 copies of each title and now printing thousands, which have found their way into bookshops large and small.

Which is not surprising, for the pamphlets are beautifully produced and illustrated and make an excellent small present or substitute for an expensive card, with an envelope and an attractive bookmark on which to write your message included. The poems are obviously selected by someone who takes real joy in poetry and are a piquant mixture of the light-hearted and the serious – Edward Lear’s ‘There was an old man, on whose nose/Most birds of the air could repose . . .’ roosting next to Emily Dickinson’s “‘Hope” is the thing with feathers – /That perches on the soul’ (*Twelve Poems about Birds*); and Anon’s ‘O for a roly-poly Mother used to make./Roly-poly, treacle-duff/Roly-poly that’s the stuff . . .’ (in *Ten Poems about Puddings*, introduced by Nigel Slater) directly preceding a poignant poem of exile by Imtiaz Dharker about the cutting of a pomegranate.

What is more, the Poet Laureate, Carol Ann Duffy, has lent her support. Last Christmas she selected and introduced Candlestick Press’s *The Twelve Poems of Christmas*, and she has undertaken to contribute a selection every Christmas for the ten years in which she will hold the post, including a new poem of her own in this year’s selection.

Recently Jenny has taken on a business partner, Di Slaney, who also lives in Nottingham – like her an English graduate, who had already run her own successful business, someone to ‘bounce ideas off, who’s also good at spreadsheets and things – the missing part of my brain’ as Jenny calls her. But Jenny still puts it all together in a small room next to the kitchen. She jokes that, flitting between the two, she’s begun to lose the distinction between a food processor and a word processor.

She started out, she says, wanting to do something good with her mother’s legacy, believing that ‘the more poetry there is out there in the world, the better the world has to be’, and adding (firmly), ‘I’d



much rather be sent a gorgeous poetry pamphlet than a ghastly card or flowers which have been flown in from Kenya.' A sentiment with which I think we'd all agree.



A Spider Bought a Bicycle

A spider bought a bicycle
And had it painted black
He started off along the road
With an earwig on his back
He sent the pedals round so fast
He travelled all the day
Then he took the earwig off
And put the bike away.

Phyllis Flowerdew (1913–94)