

RAPTURE - CRITICAL VIEWS – WHAT THE PAPERS SAID

The effortless virtuosity, drama and humanity of Carol Ann Duffy's verse have made her our most admired contemporary poet. *Rapture*, her seventh collection, is a book-length love-poem, and a moving act of personal testimony - but what sets these poems apart from other treatments of the subject is Duffy's refusal to simplify the contradictions of love, and read its transformations - infatuation, longing, passion, commitment, rancour, separation and grief - as either redemptive or destructive. *Rapture* is a map of real love, in all its churning complexity; simultaneously direct and subtle, with poems that will find deep resonance in the experience of most readers, it is a collection that can and does speak for us all. 'These poems are outstanding; intellectually and emotionally complete, popular as love poems perhaps should be and can be, they are also masterly examples of poetic form ... *Rapture* is brilliant, beautiful, and heart-aching' - Jeanette Winterson, *The Times*.

'A passionate and beautiful new book-length love affair in verse ... Ruthless, sensuous, tender; utterly modern, utterly classical, it's fantastic to see one of our best and most popular poets going from strength to strength in subtle literary originality, while making poems that will sound sweetly to all' - Ruth Padel, *Independent* . '

Rapture is that rare thing - a poetry book that can (and should) be read from start to finish ... As the latest Carol Ann Duffy collection it is magnificent; as an examination of modern love and how it shapes us as human beings, it is unparalleled'.
Scotsman

Carol Ann Duffy's collection, **Rapture**, also owes something to fairy tales. Its red-ribbon bookmark and sumptuous cover, a silver-gilt scene depicting some of the book's subject matter - a heron, shooting stars, a woman with arms outstretched to a crescent moon - suggest it could be an old children's book, and Duffy is not afraid to use techniques familiar from nursery rhymes and ballads: repetitions, choruses, full rhymes.

But these are adult poems, tracking the trajectory of a love affair through infatuation, love, domesticity and bliss to abasement, arguments, and a break-up. The final poem has an epigraph from Browning, about the "wise thrush" that "sings each song twice over" to "recapture / The first fine careless rapture!" and the book ends with the admission that the poems are a way of reliving events, "a gift, the blush of memory".

The danger in 'Rapture' is that the singularity of the subject matter could become relentless, and this danger is heightened by Duffy's recurrent use of certain images: stone, moon, charm, star, heart, gift, trees, bones. But actually, contrarily, the book works cumulatively, and the poems take on the strange power of charms, spells, incantations. In the hands of a lesser technician, the self-imposed limits on the language might mean tedium, but Duffy makes each poem sing an intricate, delicate song. She is also aware of the difficulties in trying to make the oldest emotion fresh: she finds *the words at the back of a drawer, and rubbed at them till they gleamed in my palm - I love you, I love you, I love you - / as though they were new*.

In "The Love Poem", Duffy lifts lines from Barrett Browning, Marlowe, Shakespeare, Wyatt, Sidney, Campion, Donne, the Song of Solomon and Shelley, and this awareness of the love poem's heritage allows Duffy to make new ones. Many of the individual poems here stand easily beside the best of her writing. There are brilliant parables like "Give", the domestic snapshots of "Tea" and "Chinatown", or the eerie chant of "Betrothal", which marries Thanatos to Eros, and owes as much to Myra Hindley as Philip Sidney. There is an exceptional fluidity and grace about these poems and, using only the simplest language, Duffy can still spring a verse on the reader that is startling: If I was dead, / and my bones adrift / like dropped oars / in the deep, turning earth... *Telegraph* 13 Nov 2005

Reading Rapture. An Introduction

Duffy's poetry is rooted in common experience, but its accessibility belies its complexity and richly allusive nature. While clearly speaking in a highly distinctive modern voice, Duffy is acutely aware of the heritage of English, American and European poetry.

A number of her poems deal with the limitations, as well as the possibilities of language. It is notable that Duffy frequently draws attention to its inability to convey what human beings wish to express.

Duffy's use of LANGUAGE:

Duffy's use of language is much noted for its resistance of the studiously poetic. She succeeds in writing in an immediately recognizable and accessible idiom. Her diction reflects the fact that she is able to articulate what ordinary people feel. This is not to suggest, however, that her poems are simple. She uses straightforward language in complex ways.

Her lyrics articulate sentiment in a memorable way but they are never sentimental. They have the authentic sound of the modern but are never in danger of being ephemeral.

'I tried to make the language of poetry coincide with that of passionate, normal speech. I wanted to write in whatever language comes most naturally when we soliloquise, as I do all day long, upon the events of our own lives or of any life where we can see ourselves for the moment.' *Essays and introductions*, p521

Language itself is explored by Duffy as a system of communication, signification and, sometimes, obfuscation. Her poems often reflect on the inability of words to express what is felt, thought or imagined. Words are, as Heraclitus said, 'fallible things', but are also, as Terry Eagleton points out, 'the shared counters of experience'. Language becomes a system that refracts meaning rather than one that truly reflects what the user intends. Duffy articulates this tension very clearly in her poetry.

The philosophy of language was a feature of Duffy's undergraduate study and she was particularly interested in Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951), whose *Tractatus* (1922) deals with the limitations and possibilities of language. One of the most striking features of the *Tractatus* is its conception of how the limits of language correspond with the limits of thought.

The central questions of the *Tractatus* are: How is language possible? How can anyone, by understanding a sequence of words, say something? And how can another person understand them? His solution was that a sentence that says something (a proposition) must be 'a picture of reality'; it must show a situation in the world. His picture theory seemed to explain the connection between the signs on the paper and a situation outside in the world.

His later *Investigations* posited the idea that language may be viewed rather like a game whose rules we must learn. Ultimately the signifying power of language is somehow required to live up to the task of articulating what is beyond itself.

Themes

Childhood

- Childhood memory and the experience of it.
- Evokes childhood fears - Sinister child-nightmare references to 'moon', 'fields', 'love', 'forest', 'wood' and 'dark'.
- The invasion of childhood innocence by the world of adult experience is also considered.

Forest – despite knowing that it is dangerous, ignore warnings and run the gauntlet of the forest.

Religion

The influence of Duffy's catholic upbringing finds expression in several poems as a source of imagery.

Memory

Duffy's preoccupation with memory and its power to both uplift and destroy is evident.

Memory as a means of reliving the past is a vital human capacity.

Memory can be real or imagined. It can be hers, or of a persona.

Memory serves as a source of 'mental balm' for the persona in these poems.

The present is a bleak place.

Love, relationships and sexuality

- The nature of love and relationships is presented in a multi-faceted manner. Love is presented from a variety of perspectives. A large number of these poems are lyrics about love.
- The issue of sexuality is explored from both a gender-based point of view and one that addresses physical relationships. These relationships explore heterosexual and homosexual (and asexual) partnerships in a way that echoes DH Lawrence's concern with 'the otherness of lovers'.
- Many of the poems are erotic and Duffy presents them in a highly erotic, sensually charged manner. Her use of the sonnet is appropriate to a love lyric. Her frank presentation of sexual contact through the device of repetition articulates physical experience at a visceral level.
- The intensity of love and passion felt for a lover.
- Feeling is beyond language.
- Destructive potential of love is explored.
- The breakdown of relationships.
- Communication between the lovers ceases.
- Regular structures reflect the inescapable temporal progression of time.
- Duffy uses extended metaphor and the metaphysical poet's use of the conceit to convey the dangerous dimensions of committing oneself to a long-term relationship.

More critical opinions:

1. Congratulations Carol Ann Duffy!

A Belated Review Of 'Rapture'... 3 May 2009 'The Guardian'

When Ted Hughes died in 1998, Carol Ann Duffy was, apparently, a whisker away from taking his place as Poet Laureate. Maybe she was considered too risky an option at the time. But now Andrew Motion's term has finished the laurel's finally been passed on to her. And deservedly so.

Duffy's 'Selected' was published in 1994, and in 1999 'The World's Wife' was widely considered as the collection which sealed both her reputation and her popularity. Some of those poems continue to be set texts for G.C.S.E English exams. The Independent has called her 'one of the most important, and rightly loved, poets of our time.' This collection, her seventh, was the winner of the 2005 T.S.Eliot Prize. A suite of fifty-two short poems, it is her bravest and most personal to date. Although there seems to be a loose narrative, starting with the start of a love affair in summer, progressing through winter and ending with the end of the affair the following summer, there is a sense in which every poem, no matter where it is placed, both celebrates and mourns. In 'Forest', the fourth poem, she writes: '... we knelt in the leaves,/ kissed, kissed; new words rustled nearby and we swooned// Didn't we?' That 'didn't we?' introduces doubt, the possibility, even in the very midst of her rapture, that she might be misinterpreting or inventing a memory. 'Haworth', the sixth poem, begins 'I'm here now where you were', already self-consciously making art from absence. The paradox for any love-poet is that the time spent on making the poem is time not spent on the loved one. The poem can only speak of past or future contact. Any 'now', any 'rapture' in the poem must, of necessity, be insincere because its textualisation makes it second-hand, a simulacra. This submerged theme becomes overt at the end of the suite, in poems like 'The Love Poem' which, with more than a hint of the Shakespeare of the sonnets, begins: 'Till love exhausts itself, longs/for the sleep of words - /my mistress' eyes - /to lie on a white sheet, at rest/in the language' and also in 'Art' which ends: 'and where my soul sang, croaking art'. But Duffy is playing a dangerous game, and she knows it. On a first reading she seems to have set out to write a diary of the heart with candour and directness, writing poems which are not afraid to be *moving*. The very title 'Rapture' seems to announce these intentions – and these intentions should be applauded.

Since Modernism many poets have used a self-consciously intellectual or allusive language – and this is one reason why the readership of contemporary poetry in this country has so massively dwindled. Duffy might already be reversing that trend. (Show the poems in this little red book to a *non-poetry-reader*, as I've done several times, and the chances are they will be greeted with surprised appreciation. People even want to read *more* by her). But – and this is a big but – is she, by giving the punters what they want, i.e. emotional candour,

also giving them 'a croaking art' and 'a sleep of words'? Is the 'rapture' really possible in a poem – or will it always be a *'lie on a white sheet'*? Duffy, in those last poems, admits, humbly, apologetically, that yes, the rapture is a lie. Yet the whole book seems hellbent on undermining this admission.

First of all, we must consider the cover. It has that satisfying cloth-bound texture, dark red with the name, title and a lino-cut of a naked woman praising the moon – all in embossed silver. And a red, cloth ribbon so you can find your place, like a diary or a secret notebook (is it a coincidence that the number of poems – fifty-two – is the same number as the weeks of the year?). The cover is reminiscent of Victorian and Edwardian children's books and perhaps more particularly the more recent Folio Society reprints of Grimm's or Hans Andersen's or Perrault's fairytales, albeit with a more erotic twist. So the cover has designs on us, reminding us of a pre-digital age when a book could be a treasured, intimate, physical thing, a thing of spells, charms and remembrances. It creates an expectation – or an acceptance - in the reader of naïve pleasures, and a nostalgia for their passing.

This naivete carries over into the poems. They too find themselves indebted to the timelessness and universality of fairytale. There are occasional explicit references – the 'Beast's rose' (in 'Unloving'), the 'goblin' (in 'Your Move'), the being lost in a forest ('Forest'). And like the 'three wishes' of fairytale there's the three-word repetition which she leaves like a footprint - a breadcrumb? - throughout: 'love, love, love' (in 'Write'), 'reprieve, reprieve, reprieve' ('Spring'), 'rhyming, rhyming, rhyming' ('Name'), 'text, text, text' ('Text'), 'gold, gold, gold' ('Hour') and 'I love you, I love you, I love you' ('Finding The Words'). It is also evident in the way the contingent world has largely been edited out. There are two poems about communicating via mobile phone ('Text' and 'Quickdraw'), a mention of an 'Oscar-winning movie' ('Art') and a 'motorway' ('New Year'), but otherwise the landscape is idyllic and pastoral. And the vocabulary, often simplistic, monosyllabic, reflects this – the references to 'rivers', 'kisses', 'moons', 'roses', 'forests', 'jewels', 'stars', 'gold' and 'rain' pile up in poem after poem. The question that must be asked is: are these references and repetitions mythopoeic? Do they have totemic power? Or are they just cliches?

I think Duffy would say yes. Yes, they are mythopoeic. And yes, they are cliches. The important thing to realise is that, as with the cover, we are being asked to covet these cliches, as we would an old children's book, or an old Valentine's card – with indulgence and nostalgia. And maybe also with irony. On a closer reading the overt message of those last poems, the ones which talk of:

'love's lips pursed to quotation marks' ('The Love Poem')

is one which was inherent throughout. It was in the last stanza of 'Finding The Words' which goes:

'and my breath/warmed them, the words I needed to utter this, small words,/ and few. I rubbed at them till they gleamed in my palm -/ I love you, I love you, I love you -/ as though they were new'.

Here the simplicity of the rhyme - 'few', 'you', 'new' – and the oblique reference to Aladdin rubbing his lamp, are what make the poem seem both accessible and archetypal. Yet the 'as though' undercuts the sincerity. It makes it clear that the words she has found are, in fact, just second-hand. And suddenly, when we reread 'small words/and few' she seems to be taking a wry sideswipe at the puritan poetics of her whole collection. We realise how deliberately and self-consciously and sadly all of these cliches are used – sadly because, when we want to write directly and honestly about love, she knows that these hand-me-downs are all we have. We also realise that there is a limit to this dangerous game, this rubbing of small, old words till they gleam. Though this may well turn out to be her most widely read and widely cherished collection to date, I sense that she might, for her own artistic survival, have to cast around for newer, bigger words, retrace her footsteps and leave this particular forest, even if this means losing some of her legions of fans along the way.

For her eagerly anticipated next collection, as Poet Laureate, I would suggest that she has to leave this rapture, or 'rapture', behind.

3. Carol Ann Duffy: *emagazine, Issue 2, November 1998*

'Poetry has a strength because it is rooted in truth, not academia.' Defiant words from Carol Ann Duffy, a poet who is currently on several A-level syllabuses, and an increasingly popular choice at examination. But Duffy is such a refreshing poet to study, precisely because she conveys authentic human experience and emotion without obscuring it with inaccessible language. Unlike many of the more traditional poets studied at A-level, there are no complex literary allusions to identify or alienating references to be unravelled. Her writing has clarity and simplicity, while also being intensely well-crafted: 'I hope that the language I use is the language of my time, the late twentieth century. It isn't more poetic or separate from the language in which we think, speak or read.'

Duffy was born in Glasgow in 1955 into a Catholic working-class family. They moved to Stafford while she was still young, and Duffy found herself adjusting her speech in order to fit in:

I remember my tongue

shedding its skin like a snake, my voice

in the classroom sounding just like the rest ('Originally')

Luckily for Duffy, she had English teachers who encouraged her to write, drawing out her affection for language: 'It taught me to love words for their own sake. Originally I liked stories and things, but by the time I was a teenager, poetry was my real love. It was at the time when poetry was becoming more populist and kids would go to poetry readings the way they would go to pop concerts.'

By the time she had completed her degree at Liverpool, she was already being published and in 1983 she won the first of many awards – the National Poetry Competition. Language is for her an almost physical presence, exciting, sexy, frightening, surprising.

The first two collections were overtly political – unafraid to confront the greed, racism and sexism of Thatcher's Britain. But there has always been the contrast of Duffy's love poetry – which is intense, lyrical and sensual. Duffy manages to take us inside relationships without alienating us. She has said that: '**The 'you' in the poems is anyone. I like a love poem to have room in it for the reader.**' Duffy's poetry has gently become less public and political, and more personal and intimate. 'Mean Time' further explores themes of emotional memory, parents and children, longing, death and love. There is less satire than before (except for the notable 'Fraud' about Robert Maxwell. Though his name is never mentioned, watch for the closing 'm' on every line). The language remains no-nonsense, yet sensitive, as we weave in and out of relationships and their repercussions.

Duffy's book 'The World's Wife' is a witty collection of poems about the women behind great men. She has described these pieces as 'entertainments', and the book is possibly designed for a different, younger audience than her previous work. But Duffy might disagree: 'I've got no concept of writing for myself or anyone else at all. I suppose I'm writing for language.'

Her editor, Peter Jay of Anvil Press Poetry, writes:

'It has been a great pleasure to see how such an uncompromising poet, a poet who follows her own instincts and whose writing is quite unlike anyone else's, has become – without any publicity hype – so seriously popular. She has simply got better, book by book.She has now written some of the subtlest, sharpest and most moving poems by which 20th century English poetry will be remembered'.

4. 'I am in heaven, I am in hell': Carol Ann Duffy links love poems into a single, entrancing narrative in *Rapture*, says Kate Kellaway:

'Observer' Sunday 9 October 2005

'Falling in love/ is glamorous hell; the crouched, parched heart/ like a tiger ready to kill; a flame's fierce licks under the skin./ Into my life, larger than life, beautiful, you strolled in.'

Carol Ann Duffy's collection of love poems reads as a single narrative: the poems are linked - hand in hand - from the beginning of an affair to its end. 'Rapture' is intimate as a diary - except that it is free of particularity, of identifying characteristics about the lover, who could be anyone but is not quite everyone.

This renders the poems a combination of intimate and teasingly anonymous. Pain has more character than the person who has inflicted it. We see a glimpse now of fair hair, or a hand with rings on it, a 'jackpot laugh', a

name with three syllables that - although it has become a loving refrain - cannot in these pages be allowed to fuse into a word.

The poems are wonderful. But before forming any judgment of them, I found myself developing a hostility to the love object: the casualness, the 'strolling' into the life - even that lucky laugh. By contrast, the poems counteract casualness with deliberation. They reveal the way in which, even at the early stages of an affair, doom may creep in and attach itself to joy. These are poems that will be recognised by anyone who has ever been sexually obsessed to a self-punishing degree.

Love is an extremity, rivaled only by death. It is more often 'glamorous hell' than heaven. And desire is almost a death wish. 'If I was dead, and my bones adrift like dropped oars ... ' But love stays buoyant for a time, like the toy boat described in 'Ship'. It is an open air drama beginning in high summer, foundering by winter. The wedding ring is made of grass. Only the scenery endures: stars, moon, roses, graves. And rain is a faithful presence, still there after love has gone wrong. This is an elemental love - it could belong to any time were it not for the occasional contemporary accessories: a little black dress (metaphorical) and a mobile phone (actual). There is a wonderful self-mocking poem called 'Text', short enough to send. So we are not in the forest of Arden, or in Eden. This is a modern idyll - and the phone a character in the drama.

Carol Ann Duffy knows the power of a repeated trio of words - like Larkin's 'Begin afresh, afresh, afresh' (from 'The Trees') or Shakespeare's 'Never, never, never' in King Lear. In 'Hour' she writes: 'Time hates love, wants love poor,/ but love spins gold, gold, gold from straw'. And in 'Spring' she writes of 'rain's mantra: reprieve, reprieve, reprieve'. This mantra belongs to more than the rain. There is nothing lost in love that can't be found again in poetry - if the poet is good enough. And Carol Ann Duffy is.

5. The public and the private: secret lives in Carol Ann Duffy's poems. Carol Ann Duffy has the power to win over readers who do not expect to enjoy modern poetry. Marian Cox and Robert Swan explore the complex, multi-layered personas central to her poetic vision

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Duffy's poems are set in a specific historical, political and social milieu. This is important for A-level students because the key assessment objective in both the Edexcel and the AQA specifications for Duffy is AO5 (literary and historical context). Fully to appreciate the subtlety and richness of the poems requires an extensive knowledge of the ideas, references and concerns of these periods and places. Many of the personas in the poems construct their meaning and identity from specific cultural signposts--films and pop songs associated with key events and stages in their lives. Several key themes recur in Duffy's poetry. The precarious journey from childhood to adulthood is at the core of much of her work, as she says in 'Originally' and 'All childhood is an emigration'. So many of her characters are, in their secret inner lives, inadequate or failures that this must count as a prominent theme.

Hidden audiences

Virtually all Duffy's poems are narrated by a persona, generally in some form of monologue. Some are wholly internal, non-grammatical stream-of-consciousness sequences of ideas and images. Others are turned and polished, as if for articulation, although not necessarily in public. Most often, it is left to the reader to infer the circumstances of the 'utterance' (if any) of these monologues. Some clearly have no audience. Many are ambiguous, as if a listener might be being addressed, or at least an imaginary listener is in the persona's mind. Even on the rare occasions when there is explicitly an audience there is no real dialogue; the audience is generally a foil or a device rather than a participant. Some are delivered in real time; many are retrospective, an account or summation of a life's experiences.

A key question which has to be addressed in many of Duffy's poems is the relationship between the voice of the poet and the voice of the persona. This subtle blending is what makes Duffy's own position so hard to pin down. To write from within someone else's mind implies a high level of empathy, although not necessarily sympathy. To include perceptions and observations which can only be the poet's muddies the waters. Because of the importance of sensitivity to language and its use in the study of modern poetry, this provides students with both a good reason and an opportunity to analyse language register, syntax and imagery especially thoroughly. Here are two instructive examples:

Man and wife

Following the success of her first four collections, all of which cover broadly similar ground, Duffy published *The World's Wife* in 1999, which differs from her previous work in being her first themed collection. It is more

consistently and overtly feminist than much of her earlier work. Other themes also achieve a much greater prominence: religion and classical mythology, as well as a number of explicit language games. In the process, though, a central feature of Duffy's earlier work is lost: because the title of every poem names the historical or mythological character whose wife or female counterpart is to be given a voice, the challenge for the reader of identifying the narrating persona is removed. The title of the collection is itself a clever turning of a well-known phrase, 'the world and his wife', a deeply patronising commonplace which implies that, in all places and all times, only men have been of importance, and that their wives have been mere appendages.

Mythical pasts

An important difference from earlier collections is the proportion of poems set either in a historical past before Duffy's own experience, or in Biblical and mythological times. In this, she picks up a central concern of women writers in the Modernist movement: looking at the role of mythology in establishing the archetypal dominance of males and submission of females.

Marian Cox and Robert Swan teach English at Padworth College. This material is adapted from their A-level resource pack on The World's Wife and Selected Poems which will be published later this year by Philip Allan Updates.



6. CAN YOU MOVE DIAGONALLY? Jeanette Winterson interviews Poet Laureate Carol Ann Duffy, ([The Times August 29, 2009](#))

Carol Ann Duffy is the nation's favourite poet after Shakespeare. 'Poetry is our national art', she tells me in her garden outside Manchester. Then she says, 'I've got bird shit on my jumper.' She gets up to find a cloth and turns back: 'Shall we have a glass of champagne?'

Within two minutes the essential Carol Ann is all there: Her certainty about poetry and its place at the heart of things, her earthy straightforwardness, always present in her poetry, and, for such a serious person, a love of life and its good things, to be enjoyed without elitism or embarrassment. When I try and think of a poet she reminds me of – the presence – the person - it has to be Walt Whitman.

She is outspoken, direct, attractive in her ease about what she does and who she is, and just the kind of Poet Laureate Britain needs – not snobby, not class bound, not seeking personal advantage, political in that she wants to change things, still idealistic in that she believes she – and poetry- can change things.

And, of course, she's a woman, she's a Celt, and she's gay.

When the news came that she had smashed through 341 years of male bardship, it was an incredible moment for women, as well as for poetry. She's the real thing all right, with that combination of untamedness and seriousness that makes her both exciting and hard to ignore. But the Laureateship is an Establishment appointment – how does she feel about talking to the Queen and being Britain's official poet?

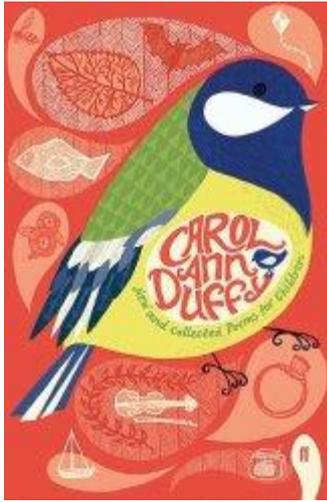
'I don't have to write Royal Wedding poems, if that's what you mean, or dirges on the Fire at Windsor Castle. If you Google Buckingham Palace/Poet Laureate, you'll see the brief...' She pauses a moment, 'Poetry has changed since the days of Larkin – he 's a good poet, but poetry has changed for the better. It's not a bunch of similarly educated men – it's many voices, many styles. The edge has become the centre.'

She's right. This is a very good time for poetry written in English, and whether you prefer Alice Oswald or John Agard, Jackie Kay or Fred d'Aguire, poetry now is both popular – in that is inclusive of experience- and dazzlingly rich in terms of language, image, and emotional range.

'Look at this ' she has an early copy of Don Patterson's new book, RAIN, and she knows I love his work so she lets me read it while she cleans her jumper a bit more.

'It's wonderful isn't it? What I want to do with my laureateship is spread poetry around – it isn't about me, it's about poetry – and so I'm going to bring in all kinds of different poets, bring them to people's attention, use the influence that comes with this appointment to commission and encourage, but most of all, to show people what we've got, because there's enough poetry out there for everyone.'

She has already begun, bringing together her favourite women poets, commissioning new poems on the war in Iraq. 'Poetry isn't something outside of life; it is at the centre of life. We turn to poetry to help us understand or



cope with our most intense experiences.'

It was her own intense experience of a broken love affair that sprung RAPTURE; a sequence of love poems, exact, agonising, and redemptive. RAPTURE won the 2005 TS Eliot Prize, and reminded readers that the Carol Ann Duffy, whose poem PRAYER is the second most read in the language, was a poet who would go on doing new work, and pushing poetry forward – as an emotion, as an experience, and as an art. 'Poetry can't lie' she says, though she resists the modern obsession that reads everything as autobiography. 'The poem tells the truth but it is not a documentary' – though she laughs when she remembers her mother saying she should learn to write articles to earn a living. 'Poetry is a way of being near something. The love poem is really about the person writing it, but 'about' and 'person' are transformed in the poem, so that it is the reader who can get close to the feeling.'

This feels right to me. It seems that the best writers perform the Indian Rope Trick and disappear, leaving the rope – the poem – for us to hold on to.

What happens to the poet to allow the feeling to happen to us, is not necessary

for us to know.

She is private about her personal life. It is well known that for many years she was involved with the poet Adrian Henri, and the two of them remained long life-long friends. Her daughter Ella, now fourteen, benefits from the regular presence of her natural father, the writer Peter Benson, and the continuing closeness of poet and novelist Jackie Kay, with whom Carol Ann Duffy shared a home, and a long relationship. After our interview, Jackie joins us for supper, and it's clear that as well as her easy intimacy with Carol Ann, she has a lovely connection with Ella. 'Ella is the reason that I began to write for children' says Carol Ann. 'It started as soon as she was born – look at First Summer in the collection, that was the first poem I wrote for her.'

I look. It's poignant, beautiful, as the child learns her first words... butterfly, bee... 'first words/seen through the throat of a flower;'

The poems can be wonderfully silly but they are never patronising. The language is always as tight and fired with thought as her adult work.

'I haven't published an adult collection since RAPTURE. That doesn't bother me. I am comfortable with letting poems come when they will. Poetry selects its own occasions.'

She talks of her 'double bereavement, like two heavy stones' - the loss of a lover affair and the death of her mother, so that she was unable to write for a while, except for children. 'I couldn't hear words. I felt deafened. So I walked to a different part of the beach – away from the noisy infested waters. I walked to somewhere quieter, gentler. The alive part, away from the wounded part. I had to do that for a while, and I couldn't write about my mother at all. Now I can.'

Carol Ann's mother, Irish and working class, used to make up rhymes to entertain her children, and the zest that the small Carol Ann loved, bubbles through her nonsense poems: 'At Manchester High School for Cows/the favourite lesson is Mooing-/they all make a terrible row/then it's off down to lunch for some Chewing.'

Children love learning and reciting poems and I can't think of a better way for any child to jump head first into language, than with this book.

She has been committed to working in schools for a long time, but she believes her Laureateship has given her more power, and she is using that power as part of the GCSE Poetry Live initiative.

'Poetry is in your everyday life – that's what I want children to experience – and the incredible pleasure of language.'

She read everything – and talks with feeling about her love of DH Lawrence – a writer who became a casualty of feminism for a while. She doesn't believe that political correctness should select a reading list, nor is she worried by 'message'. 'I've always liked Martin Amis. I want good writing, not an agenda.'

Schools need to hear this, and kids need directing towards reading as widely as possible. The narrowness of much modern education worries her, and her public role won't stop her speaking out – quite the reverse. 'I will go on living the life of a poet – that means being involved, engaged, criticising, and celebrating.'

We have a bit more champagne. She is particularly pleased that she gets to present the Queen's Medal for Poetry, and unlike Andrew Motion, intends to award it as regularly as she can, 'because there are very good poets working now, and they should be more visible.'

Visibility is the focus of her plan to put poems in towns. On paving stones – 'under your feet.' Anywhere where a poem will be seen and read. She's aware that books seem remote to a lot of people, but as a live gig poet, who



likes the out-loud experience of hearing poetry, making poetry available in different formats is a way of keeping poetry present. 'A poem isn't a special occasion. Why should it be? Poems in town centres will be like a light in the window.'

She pauses – she often pauses because she is articulate but not glib. 'Whether I am writing for children or for adults, I am writing from the same impulse and for the same purpose. Poetry takes us back to the human.'

When she was offered the Laureateship, she had no intention of trading the human for an institution, though she was fully aware of the Laureateship's place in the iconography of British life. 'There's the Queen, the Prime Minister, the Archbishop of Canterbury; you can feel a bit like a chess piece. So I asked Ella how she would feel about her mother becoming a chess piece...'

Ella thought for a bit, and asked, 'Can you move diagonally?' For Carol Ann Duffy, the answer is yes.

7. Extract from **Carol Ann Duffy: 'I don't have ambassadorial talents'** [Aida Edemariam](#) [The Guardian](#), Tuesday 26 May 2009

Rapture (2005) traces the arc of a love affair (perhaps her decade-long relationship with poet Jackie Kay, perhaps not) makes much recourse to the elements.

Asked to describe her own development, Duffy is silent, then offers: "I suppose the difference between then and now is that I'm much more attuned to not writing and being silent than I was when I was younger. There isn't that compulsion to produce. I'm more certain of when to write than I was."

It's a lesson she hopes will carry her through her laureateship. **A poem, she says, somewhat tendentiously, "is a place where language is most truthful. In the poem, more than any other literary form, you can't lie."** "I think it's good to go back to the poetry you read when you were at school. And I think that people who are at school now will return to the poets of now - they'll be returning to Simon Armitage in their middle age."

She does believe that the job is made easier by the changes poetry has undergone since Larkin was writing. "There are so many more voices: other cultures, women, performance poets. You know, people away from London and Oxbridge have made ... this rich kind of broth. The edge is now the centre." If she were to draw a line through the centuries, the story now is probably "diversity - many voices".

We return to her sense of vocation. It's unusual to admit to such seriousness, I suggest, especially in this country; it cannot be allowed to stand for long without being punctured by a nervous joke or lashings of irony. "There used to be a lot of irony [of that kind] in the Larkin/Kingsley Amis axis of English poetry. But I think it isn't there any more." Gone because the world's got more serious? "Gone because the landscape's changed. I mean, Larkin was a wonderful poet. But the clubbable, piss-taking attitude that was allowed to seep in along the edges of the poetry and perhaps shouldn't have - that's gone."

Is there anything she's particularly afraid of, about her new job? "No, not at all - the opposite. **I think people - and this is stating the obvious - turn to poetry at the most intense moments of their lives. When they're bereaved. When they're getting married or having a civil partnership. And some of those people will continue to write, as I did. Or they will return to poems. I think this idea of people being afraid of poetry or not liking it is a bit of a myth. One of the things we'll see with the diversity of poets now is that people will take poetry a lot more seriously, and have a lot more fun with it. And we'll see the end of taking the piss.**"

8. Rapture, By Carol Ann Duffy

Reviewed by Ruth Padel *Friday, 16 September 2005* [The Independent](#)

"Over", the last poem in Carol Ann Duffy's passionate and beautiful new book-length love affair in verse, carries an epigram from Robert Browning:

That's the wise thrush: he sings each song twice over,
Lest you should think he never could recapture
The first fine careless rapture!

The quote says it all. This book of wonderful love poems is also a love poem to poetry itself; to writing love, as well as making it. The best love poetry always seems direct and fresh but underneath is sophisticatedly literary. Duffy's *double entendre* reminds us how poems overlay or writes "over" experience. The affair may be "over"; the song will be sung over in another sense. Experience matters: it comes first, Duffy's poems always seem to say.

Experience, the world, feeling thrusts its way ruthlessly to the light like pioneer scrub. But to the artist, at least, "art" - that secondary thing, the apparent after-comer - matters as much. "Only art now" begins the third-last poem, "Art":

our bodies, brushstroke, pigment, motif;
our story, figment, suspension of disbelief;
the thrum of our blood, percussion;
chords, minor, for the music of our grief.

This whole book, whose see-saw internal balances and rhymes you see working in that quatrain, is a superb demonstration of such "only art": Duffy's formidably inventive artistry, her dedication to the craft and tradition of poetry, and above all the love poem.

The three strong books that made her name in the Nineties blazed with voicings; with dramatic characters, a bomber, a psychopath, an American buying Manhattan. This voicing power emerged again in *The World's Wife*, along with the same sharp humour, social criticism and satire. But those collections ended in love poems and you felt that this, in the end, was what really drove Duffy's work. In *Rapture*, it comes to its full flowering: ruthless, sensuous, tender; utterly modern, utterly classical.

One of the originalities of *Rapture* is a spotlight on everything rhyme stands for, both in life and in art. "I hear your name/ rhyming, rhyming,/ rhyming with everything." Rhyme, in our supremely mongrel uninflected language, which draws its vowel sounds from so many different sources, is one of the most significant ways in which words as well as people partner each other to create relationships that are more than the sum of their parts.

Inevitably, then, the form that dominates *Rapture* is the sonnet, that magical shape so suited to reflections on love, which established its classical rhyming patterns and their hold on love poetry in the Renaissance, Italian and English. It was revived (especially by Meredith) in extended sonnets of 16 lines, then truncated, broken, and made to sing new tunes in the 20th century, especially in America, and is still vigorous today. Out of 52 poems here, 18 are classical 14-liners, many more are extended or shrunken sonnets.

Even the 14-liners are inventively varied. Often Duffy breaks a central line, so it looks as if we are casually beginning a new stanza when in fact we are not - just as in the ambiguous stages of a love affair. Duffy is supremely sophisticated in making sound and form match sense and context. Talk of "Fifty ways to leave your lover": here are 50 ways to break, disguise and celebrate your sonnet. And through the sonnet, your love.

Fantastic, to see one of our best and most popular poets going from strength to strength in subtle literary originality, echoing traditional craft from Shakespeare to MacNeice, while making poems that will sound sweetly to all: "their silhouettes/ simple as faith".

9. Critics and Contexts

The Big Interview by Christina Patterson The Independent Friday 10 July, 2009

Carol Ann Duffy : 'I was told to get a proper job'

She's the first female poet laureate and a set-text fixture, but, says Carol Ann Duffy, life hasn't really changed all that much

Last time Carol Ann Duffy met the Queen, she told her that Kipling was "exceedingly good". Let me get this straight. Her Majesty Elizabeth II, Defender of the Faith, Duchess of Edinburgh, Sovereign of the Most Ancient and Most Noble Order of the Thistle, etc, etc, better known for her interest in livery than literature, made a pronouncement to a bisexual single mother about poetry. Now the bisexual single mother is her poet laureate, perhaps she'll quip about "Queen Kong". Or maybe "Queen Herod", or maybe "Mrs Midas", or maybe one of the other witty reimaginings of myth and history that peopled Duffy's bestselling poetry collection, *The World's Wife*. If the Queen likes Kipling, she'll love *The World's Wife*.

I last interviewed Carol Ann Duffy 10 years ago when *The World's Wife* was just out and the world and his wife had gone mad. Seeking poetic colour after Ted Hughes' death, the press had unleashed a torrent of imagined poetic rivalries and sexual speculation, weaving myth and fact into a gossamer web which would have done a poet proud. Bruised by the brouhaha, Duffy said that the next time the laureateship came up she would declare herself "out of the picture". "I just couldn't be bothered with all that media," she says. "It seemed unimaginable that I'd put myself in that position again."

But here we are, in a large house in a leafy suburb of Manchester, and here she is, the "Queen of modern British poetry", now bedside reading (one hopes) for the real one. On the mantelpiece are birthday cards for her daughter, Ella. "She's 14 now," says Duffy. "When it came up again, I was aware that I'd be in the running again, and I had to make up my mind whether to take my name out. I felt the landscape had changed so much that it was important to accept it, if it was offered."

Curling up on a comfy sofa with a nice cup of tea, it's quite hard to imagine that the woman sitting opposite me – cool in loose linen – was once perceived as a threat to the British establishment. The rumour was that in 1997 newly elected New Labour thought Middle England wasn't quite ready for a lesbian laureate. Actually, I don't believe it. Does she? Duffy laughs. She has a deep, comforting laugh. "Labour had just got in on a huge majority. They thought they could walk on water. They had gay people like Mandelson, they were determined to introduce civil partnerships. I find it very unlikely. I think someone thought, 'let's have this as a story', and it just got picked up and mythologised."

In fact, any passing official from the Department of Children, Families and Soft Furnishings (as David Cameron called it in a speech earlier this week) would, I'm sure, be delighted by this suburban sitting room. There are bohemian touches – a coffee table that's painted to look like a leopard, beaded cushions, an ethnic throw – but the overall sense is of calm. Next door in the kitchen, there's a wall of photos: of Ella, with her friends, her father and her elder half-siblings. On the kitchen door, in gold letters painted by the artist Stephen Raw, are words from George Herbert's poem "Prayer". "Softnesse, and peace, and joy, and love, and blisse" says the

door, and this does feel like a place of "softnesse and peace". Duffy, too, has the air of someone comfortable in her skin – the air, in fact, of someone doing what she was born for.

Two months into the laureateship, life, she says, "isn't really any different". "Like most poets," she explains, "my diary's booked up months ahead, so there's no room for anything new to get in. What's tended to happen is that when I go to readings I was doing anyway, people are excited because they've got a poet laureate." Well, I'm sure they are, but Duffy, let's be honest, isn't like "most poets". Most poets are not booked up solidly for readings for months ahead. Most poets have not won the Forward prize and the Whitbread poetry prize and the T S Eliot prize. Most poets do not sell poetry in quantities more usual for novels. And most poets have not been living off their poetry – and readings of their poetry – for 30 years.

Carol Ann Duffy has been writing poems since she was ten. Encouraged by "storybook-special English teachers", she fell in love with poetry, and then, at 16, at a music gig in Stafford where she lived, with the poet Adrian Henri. They were together for ten years. "He took me to a party at [the Arvon creative writing centre in] Lumb Bank. Ted Hughes was there. He was dancing with Carol [Orchard], who he must have just married. I was too shy to be introduced to him, because he was my set text. It was," she adds, with a faraway look, "like watching Shakespeare dance." Inspired by the sight of her idol, and by Henri, she started going to poetry events and publishing poems. If she didn't imagine that she would follow in Hughes' footsteps – first as an A-level set text and then as poet laureate – she never doubted that poetry was her vocation. Hughes, by the way, remains a hero. She has even waived her laureate's stipend to start a prize in his name.

Her first collection, *Standing Female Nude*, published in 1985 (two years after she won the National Poetry Competition), introduced the dramatic monologues and lyric poems that have become her trademark. Both strands have continued throughout her work. It's hard to think of a poet who matches the wit and virtuoso ventriloquism of her multifarious, and often tone-perfect, voices. Hard, too, to think of a contemporary poet who has written more tenderly, or more passionately, about love and loss. But it was only with *The World's Wife*, sneaked into Picador's fiction list, that she hit a bigger audience. "I realised," she says, "that I needed to take what income I could make from poetry a lot more seriously because I had a baby. It was quite a revelation just publishing in a different way."

The poems in *The World's Wife* – with the exception of the last one, "Demeter", which heralded the arrival of spring, and of a daughter "with the small shy mouth of a new moon" – were not personal. Nor were most of the poems in *Feminine Gospels*, the collection that followed. It was in *Rapture*, the collection that won the T S Eliot prize in 2005, that all hell (or heaven) broke loose. The poems – electric, searing, agonised glimpses of love found and lost – read as if they were ripped out of her heart. Not much question there, I think, about whether the book was personal.

Duffy smiles, and if the smile isn't exactly a new moon, it's like being invited in to a secret, special place. "I've always kind of moved between the very, very personal," she says, "and the mythic and storytelling. I tend to swing between them. Usually, when I've done something that's absolutely killed me, like *Mean Time* [the collection that won the Forward prize] and *Rapture*, then I took refuge in the more cerebral."

But didn't she feel exposed? "Not at all," she replies, with a flash of that secret smile, "because I think love poems, or poems of bereavement, are such deeply human, common, universal experiences that in a sense they're anyone's poems. I lost myself in the formal problems, and referring back to other love poems, so I was kind of saved by poetry." Sure, but the poems relate to very particular, and sometimes painful, moments. "Well," she says, "it's both not me and me, I suppose. In my private heart, they're my poems, but I never confuse the two. Not in public, anyway. I don't," she adds, with a smile that's now nearly a grimace, "break down at gigs... "

Duffy has never talked publicly about the private experience behind the poems in *Rapture*, and she's not about to now. For ten years, she lived with the poet and novelist Jackie Kay. They parted a few years ago, but Kay lives round the corner and they're still close friends. Kay's son, Matthew, and Ella are like brother and sister. There's a picture of him in the kitchen holding her as a baby which made me want to cry. "The central thing in my life," says Duffy simply, "is being a mum."

Ella's arrival didn't just, according to the poem "Demeter", bring "spring's flowers" to "winter and hard earth". It also unleashed a whole new stream of work: not just poems for children, but also fairy tales. The first book Duffy read "all through" as a child, when she was seven, was *Alice in Wonderland*, followed by Grimm's fairy tales. "That," she says, "would be my *Desert Island Discs* book. I love fairy tale, actually. To me, it's very close to poetry, because it uses archetypal symbols. It doesn't need plots or explanation. It can move through time." These days, she writes more for children than adults. "Writing for children," she explains, "brings more of your poet self alive. I was just lucky that my daughter brought this magic with her."

This, clearly, is not a poet who has ever suffered from writer's block. In addition to the eight collections for adults, and more than 15 books for children, there have been a number of anthologies. But after her mother's death, four years ago, for the first time she found herself "deafened". "I wrote lots of children's poems," she says, "but it was more like paddling than swimming." On the day that the laureateship was announced, she published a poem "imagining that I met her at the hour of her death". The poem "broke down this huge, rusty, nasty door" and unblocked a dam. Her next collection will, she says, be about her mother, and "personal".

Actually, it's probably Duffy's father we can blame (and thank) for his daughter's crusading commitment to her craft. A fitter for English Electric, and later a Labour Councillor who moved his family from Glasgow to Stafford when Duffy was six, he hated the idea of her becoming a poet. "He would always tell me," she says, "'get a job, get a proper job'. Part of my vocational sense about poetry is to do with asserting the space that poetry can have. It's as important as anything else," she adds matter-of-factly, "because it's the music of being human."

I don't know what the Queen thinks about the music of being human. I don't know what John, her favourite cabbie, thinks of it either. But I do know what he thinks about Carol Ann Duffy. "She's very calming to be around," he told me, as he dropped me back at Stockport station. "Very chilled. She has this aura around her. I was dead proud of her when she became laureate." Well, John, so was I. We are lucky, lucky, lucky to have this passionate, thoughtful, brilliant poet flying the flag for poetry, flying the flag for the healing power of words. And, boy, could we do with some calm.

10. Jeanette Winterson interviews Carol Ann Duffy

In the taxi from Manchester Piccadilly to Didsbury, where Carol Ann Duffy lives, the driver asks me why I'm in Manchester. I tell him. 'Oh, Carol Ann, oh yeah, she's a well-known Manchester bird. They do her in school, like. In't she the Poet Laurel?'

Sadly she isn't. In 1999, she was neck and neck with Andrew Motion, to succeed Ted Hughes, and the word in the newspapers was that Tony Blair didn't want a lesbian. Perhaps not, perhaps a woman would have been difficult enough, as no woman has ever been Poet Laureate.

And yet Carol Ann believes that for poets themselves, and for most readers, the gender issue is over. 'In the 1970's, when I started on the circuit, I was called a poetess. Older male poets, the Larkin generation, were both incredibly patronising and incredibly randy. If they weren't patting you on the head, they were patting you on the bum.'

And is that really over? ‘Completely over. There are a lot of women poets now, and their work is accepted and respected. Look at Alice Oswald, a major poet by any standards, and that is generally understood.’

But what about sexuality? ‘I’m not a lesbian poet, whatever that is. If I am a lesbian icon and a role model, that’s great, but if it is a word that is used to reduce me, then you have to ask why someone would want to reduce me? I never think about it. I don’t care about it. I define myself as a poet and as a mother – that’s all.’

We’re sitting in her lovely garden. Her daughter Ella, who is 10, is nearby, playing with the puppy. Ella’s father, the writer Peter Benson, is cooking pizza, chasing the dog and the daughter, and generally looking after everyone. This is family life, and it’s a poet’s life; it’s obvious that it works, even though Peter doesn’t live with them. ‘I saw a thing on an Internet site saying that I was bringing up Ella without the involvement of a father – very hurtful to all of us and just not true – I hate the way journalists twist things for a story.’

This interview for the Times is the only interview she’ll give for her new collection of poems – RAPTURE, because she doesn’t want to talk about her private life. ‘Everything to know about me is known’ she says, ‘And the rest, the impetus for these poems, well, where do you want me to begin?’

To begin before the beginning, Carol Ann Duffy was born in 1955 to a Scottish father and an Irish mother. At 16, she was dating the poet Adrian Henri. She chose to study Philosophy at Liverpool to be near him. ‘He gave me confidence, he was great. It was all poetry and sex, very heady, and he was never faithful. He thought poets had a duty to be unfaithful.’ She laughs, ‘I’ve never got the hang of that.’ Her first collection *Standing Female Nude* was published in 1985, the same year as my first novel, *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit*, and I remember reading it, so excited, feeling part of something bigger, my generation beginning to shape the word, and maybe, through that, the world. ‘Maybe novelists have ambitions in that direction’ she says, ‘I feel, like Beckett, that all poetry is prayer.’

So where does that sit poetry in the twenty first century, in this confusing and bloody world of ours? ‘I’ve been thinking about that’ she says, ‘Male novelists and dramatists are getting very documentary now, aren’t they? As though that is somehow more serious. Poetry can’t be documentary. I’m not sure that any of the arts should be – but poetry, above all, is a series of intense moments – its power is not in narrative. I’m not dealing with facts, I’m dealing with emotion.’

When *Mean Time* appeared in 1993, Duffy was winning all the major awards, and was high wire walking the line that divides the serious poet from the popular entertainer. In fact, most poets know they can be both – festivals and readings have proved it so – but reactions to later collections – *The World’s Wife* (1999) and *The Feminine Gospels*, (2002), asked questions about whether Duffy had lost her balance. Had she stopped writing poetry and slipped into verse?

It’s not a question that interests her. ‘You work from who you are at the time. After Ella was born in 1995, I moved from London to Manchester. I was teaching at the university, I was exploring different possibilities for myself and for poetry,’ She started writing children’s books, working on Grimm’s fairy tales for the stage, editing anthologies, and probably, I feel, testing the boundaries of what it is to be a poet and a mother, a mother and a poet. Such boundaries are mostly unexplored. Men can’t

do it – and men have been the poetic model until very recently. The whole issue of women's creativity and their children is vexed and complex. I ask her if having Ella made her write differently. 'Having a child makes you do everything differently. It is a different kind of pressure and a different kind of release.'

Then she tells me that three important things have happened to her in her life: The first was Ella's birth in 1995 – 'I divide my life into before and after – they are separate continents' The second was her mother's death, of cancer, last year. She and her mother were close, and her mother loved that Carol Ann was a poet. 'My father's proud of me, but he doesn't read poetry, so he doesn't read any of mine.' What, not any? 'No, and if you force him he'll say he could do it much better! He was pleased with my CBE though.'

The third happening was falling in love – ecstatically, head over heels, finding her love returned, and later, painfully lost. 'I'm not going to talk about who I fell in love with, or how, or what happened. I'm not going to put into prose what I have spent two years putting into poetry. I want the reader to bring themselves to the poems, not be wondering about me. If a poem endures, the life is between the reader and the poem. The poet should not be in the way.'

These poems are outstanding, her best work since *Mean Time*. By 'best', I mean intellectually and emotionally complete. And she will prove her doubters wrong; these are popular poems, as love poems, perhaps, should be, and can be, but they are also masterly examples of poetic form, despatches from a writer working with absolute confidence and fluidity. 'I have published them in chronological order. That's never happened to me before. I knew I was following the seasons, and when I reached the second Christmas, I decided I would not let myself take them into another year. There was a seasonal and a symbolic ending that felt right.'

Is *RAPTURE* the cliché of the broken heart making the best work? I want to avoid that thought', she says, 'It is about deep feeling. I could not feel more deeply than I have in these poems – but these are not journals or diaries or letters, they are works of art. A transformation takes place – it has to, if the feeling is to be revealed to others. Intensity of emotion is only the beginning – I have to do something with it.'

She's right of course, but the troubling question returns. Yeats put it simply, and didn't bother with the question. 'Only an aching heart/Conceives a changeless work of art.' Whatever has happened to Carol Ann Duffy, it has happened to her poems.

RAPTURE is brilliant, beautiful, and heart-aching.

(The Times, 2006)