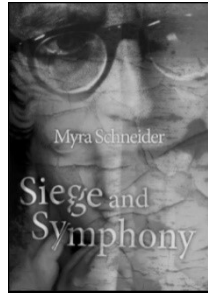


THE PAIN AND THE GAIN MYRA SCHNEIDER INTERVIEWED BY JUSTINA HART



Myra Schneider has published 16 collections, the latest, *Siege and Symphony*. A new collection, *Believing in the Planet*, is due out from Poetry Space in May 2024. She has tutored for The Poetry School and Second Light and has published several guides to poetry writing.

JH: In this issue we're exploring resilience and the part writing can play in coping with difficult life experiences, including ageing, which is something you must be aware of in your ninth decade. How have periods of serious illness you have faced affected your writing and output? And in what ways has writing helped you cope?

MS: As far back as I can remember writing has been my support as well as a way to be creative and express myself. When I was 64 I had a mastectomy followed by months of chemotherapy and radiotherapy. I was terrified when I was given the diagnosis but within a few days I found, that without consciously planning it, I was turning my writing notebook into a journal. In this I included writing exercises – exercises I'd often used in workshops. Even before the operation I wrote a note for a poem and during the following year I continued the journal and wrote about twenty poems. The journal and the poems formed the basis for a book, *Writing My Way through Cancer*.

JH: I'm so glad that the cancer never returned but you also suffered severe illness recently, didn't you?

MS: In May 2021 I was struck by encephalitis, a delusional illness, and it was only in July after two months in hospital that I began to recover and understand what had happened to me. This was a great shock and it took me about four months to come to terms with the way my life had changed and in particular how much weaker my body was and how dependent I now was on other people. However, by early August I was correcting the proofs for my book, *Siege and Symphony*. By September I was writing again. Several of the poems I wrote during the early months of recovery will be in my new collection, *Believing in the Planet*. During that time and beyond it writing has been my mainstay. Writing a poem demands total concentration at every stage and, of course, the process was an escape from the everyday and world problems into the excitement of creativity. Drawing on my immediate surroundings and concentrating on writing poems was also a very useful way of combating delusions.

JH: One sustaining feature of your poems for readers is their optimism. How do you find unceasing inspiration and make your poems travel both in times of global uncertainty and when you yourself are less able to travel?

MS: I think creativity, for most people anyway, demands a sense of excitement, the need to feel excited by an idea, a possibility for a poem. This doesn't mean ignoring and escaping from reality. In spite of the many the problems we all live with nowadays there is much that is positive and beautiful in the world. The need for action on world problems such as poverty and climate change is at last being recognised: a combination of increased government action, activist pressure, forward-thinking enterprise and scientific discovery may prevent total disaster. Poems about the environment, including mine, send out increasingly stark warnings but the poems which work always include, or touch on, the beauty and positives in the world. Of course, I also write about other subjects. I think because I love colour and think visually that this has an upbeat effect on how I view life and also how I write. I can't travel far physically now but I've drawn increasingly on my immediate surroundings: the garden, the park behind it and the road we live in where I walk with a helper. I travel in my imagination to places I've visited in the past and quite often a painting or internet image gives me an idea or a starting point for writing.

JH: For your recent collection and I believe in your next one you are donating the profits to the Woodland Trust and another charity. What difference do you think eco poetry can make?

MS: I think writing eco poetry which is effective and not rant connects with the work of activists, also the growing awareness of the effects of climate warming. Only this morning I read in the paper that 76% of our population see the environment as a very serious issue.

JH: Can you comment on your own poetry-writing practice. Do you use any ‘first-readers’ to comment on your poems in the making?

MS: The process of writing is solitary and demanding. To make a poem work means thinking about form and rhythm, vocabulary and tone as well as finding a way to make the words and ideas of the initial inspiration travel organically. In addition, the writer needs to consider the reader so that without spoiling the poem the detail needed to make it comprehensible is included. To my mind it is very difficult to write at a high standard without reading both published contemporary poetry and poetry from the past. Most people who are serious about developing their work also value receiving comments on their poems. I get feedback from other poets I trust, including belonging to a small poetry group which met every few weeks to look in detail at each other’s work (one poem by each poet). I found this invaluable. The pandemic followed by my illness brought that to a close but I have continued to receive detailed feedback from four different poets, one of whom lives close enough to come here for occasional sessions in which we look in depth at each other’s poems. It is important to me to make sure my poetry goes on developing however old I am.

JH: You’ve taught poetry for many years for the Poetry School and as a freelance. How do you aim to develop your students’ poetry and how does this feed into your own work?

MS: For my advanced seminar I ask people to apply with samples of their work and to show a serious interest in developing it. I try to impress on students the importance of reading outstanding contemporary poets; choosing a suitable form for their work; paying attention to syntax and varying it. I believe that individual mentoring can be extremely helpful too. It’s very satisfying when a student’s work blossoms and is published in a pamphlet or collection. Also, by examining students’ poems, I learn much myself and get more insights into the writing process. This feeds back into my own work.

JH: Thank you, Myra, for being honest about setbacks and for covering so much ground. With 16 collections over some 30 years, can you say what will be new in your next book?

MS: *Believing in the Planet* goes further in exploring my surroundings: the road we live in, the re-wilding of our garden, objects like the pictures on a calendar hanging in the kitchen, also places I’ve imagined myself being transported to – in particular the Norfolk coast where henges were found fairly recently and the exploration of the idea of a circle, using Stonehenge in particular. I have a feeling that drawing so closely on what is around me has given my work a new immediacy.



Justina Hart is a freelance writer and poetry tutor. Her long eco-poem, *Doggerland Rising*, won first prize in the Second Light Poetry Competition, 2020 (extracts in Issue 25). The poem was commissioned by Durham University and Free Word and led to several national reading events and a study tour in Australia. She won third prize in the 2023 Disabled Poets’ pamphlet competition.

poem from forthcoming collection, *Believing in the Planet*:

Grass

After David Hockney

No way to block the noise of the unwieldy machine
that's racketing along the pavement and drowning the whirr
of passing traffic as it crops the grassy verges.

I trail along the stark street, stare at a solitary
yellow-gold dandelion that's somehow evaded the chop,
at mindlessly uprooted clover plants, crushed daisies,

limp petals of a roadside poppy and tell myself
the grass will rise again but wonder when. A clump
of unmutilated dock leaves offers no consolation,

nor does the breeze which fails to ease the humidity.
I pause by a frontage near ours, breathe in
the scent of green needles from its thriving pine trees.

If only this mini-wood could cancel the heat
thrown up by the sheets of concrete now planted
instead of flower beds in most front gardens along our road.

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This morning after a night of listening to rain pattering
on my window, I throw open the back door and step outside
to sniff the air's sweetness. Bluetits and goldfinches

are fluttering in and out of the plum trees as if to celebrate.
Beyond the lawn the elderberry and bramble bushes
merge into the soft layers of the park and I think of him: Hockney

in his garden in Normandy and all the months he spent
studying the character of every tree, the different weathers,
the patterns slow and fast rain make on the surface of his pool.

Once again, I open his book and remember how the green
of the unfettered grass, the trees coming into blossom
nurtured me as I struggled back from illness two autumns ago.

Myra Schneider