

Free Verse: The Poetry Book Fair – Exmouth Market, London, 24 September 2011

Online responses



Free Verse
 Exmouth Market Centre
 24 Exmouth Market
 London EC1R 4QE

free entry · readings through the day
 Saturday, 24 September 2011, 10 a.m. – 5 p.m.
 Opened at 11 a.m. by Michael Horovitz

the poetry book fair

Anvil · Arc · Carcanet · CB editions · Donut · Egg Box
 Enitharmon · flipped eye · HappenStance · if p then q
 Nine Arches · Penned in the Margins · Poetry Book Society
 Rack Press · Reality Street · Salt · Shearsman · Shoestring
 Sidekick · Ward Wood · Waterloo · Waywiser · zimZalla

drawing by Fabian Peetke

Katy Evans-Bush (blog):

You didn't think it was possible. On Saturday, the rather grandly named Exmouth Market Hall – which is in fact the church hall of the wonderful 1880 Italianate Church of Our Most Holy Redeemer, in (natch) Exmouth Market, Clerkenwell, London – was the scene of a Renaissance of independent publishing.

Yes! A Renaissance. Conceived . . . in response to the swingeing Arts cuts earlier this year, the first annual independent publishers' fair packed out the hall, lured a street singer inside from the pavement for a fantastic set, sent carrier bags groaning out the door, put a smile on the face of the coffee shop owner opposite, and generally established one salient fact. **THERE IS A BUZZ AROUND SMALL PRESSES.**

. . . The room was too crowded even to really get into – so many people there that I was stuck in the doorway for about 20 minutes while people going through it stopped to say hello. This buzz continued all day, and there were many bulging carrier bags leaving that hall. It wasn't all poets, either: it was people off the street, and people who read poetry but don't write it, and general readers, and friends of readers. Mothers of readers. And everybody was happy. It was like a holiday.

. . . Here were the things that were wonderful:

- to see such a variety of presses together: from über-experimental zimZalla to formalist

trans-Atlantic Waywiser. Celebrating the sweep of current poetry practice, not just one or other bit of it.

- to see the covers all arrayed upwards, so you could really see the books – house styles, and different and also surprisingly similar aesthetics, and also a chance for the designers to have their moment.
- to be able to peruse. To see things you might never see otherwise unless at a reading.
- to be able to see the sense of a given press, the spectrum of their books, with some surprises – editions of ‘canon’ poets by experimental presses, earlier editions of books now published elsewhere, interesting juxtapositions.
- some standout gorgeous books-as-objects, inventive packaging and formats and beautiful designs – in some cases, utter perfect simplicity.

I’d have loved to get one book from each press . . . But I think lots of people did buy ten, or more, or almost, books. People were very happy, delightedly showing each other the contents of their bags, out in the street.

Chris Hamilton-Emery, Salt Publishing (blog):

It was uplifting. Here were over twenty amazing publishers from Anvil to zimZalla offering the best in contemporary poetry in *gorgeous* books and pamphlets . . . People came in droves. Really. Not only did they come, they spent money; lots of money . . . There were readings, and an astonishingly good set on the crimson-draped stage of the main hall from a young and *very* sexy busker. And there was the chance of catching up with mates and competitors in the recently dis-established world of poetry.

It’s amazing what one little fair did for showing that the readers are still there, and even with numerous barriers set up against them, they still came. We need bookshops and book fairs to make poetry thrive and enable new audiences to find out about this life transforming art . . . A bookstore, a book fair, can still provide the space to find something amazing and disturbingly new. A book fair can be a revelation and, on Saturday, Free Verse was.

Matt Merritt (blog):

I’m not sure exactly what I expected, but the sheer volume of people who came through the doors, and more importantly who bought books, was genuinely uplifting . . . As well as offering the opportunity to put faces to names, it was also a great chance to browse books that, however easy they might be to find on the internet, you’d never get a chance to try before you buy otherwise, unless you happened to go to a reading by the poet in question.

Perhaps it helped that it was a beautiful, balmy afternoon, but as I made my way back to St Pancras, I felt more optimistic about the British poetry scene than I have for ages, this summer just gone having been a thoroughly difficult one. With poets, publishers and, most importantly, readers brought face to face, you were reminded of what’s actually important (getting good poetry out there to be read), and of how much time and energy gets wasted drawing up binary or even balkanised models of the poetry world. Here’s hoping CB Editions will take their fair around the UK.

Sue Guiney (blog):

Poets are wonderful creatures. There's a marvellous subversive element to our collective consciousness, and when we feel threatened or taken for granted, as we so often do, we rise up and make our voices heard. Yesterday's new poetry festival held in London's Exmouth Market was a fantastic example of such a poetic uprising . . .

After our reading, the fair was officially opened by the visionary, inimitable Michael Horovitz, who sang, read, harangued and kazooed his way through a mesmerising thirty minute slot. I was thrilled to have noticed him sitting in the audience and smiling during my reading, and then when he mentioned 'Sue from Ward Wood' in his talk, I was completely gobsmacked. It gave me the courage to go up and chat with him, and we exchanged poetry books. A personal high of the day's events. But I know lots of people had lots of similar exchanges all day long, re-meeting old friends, coming face to face with people we had only known (though intimately) on Facebook, shaking hands and chatting with people whose books we have loved, whose work we have admired from afar, whose vision we have shared . . . Free Verse really did show that, in case anyone was wondering, contemporary poetry is still very much alive and well on these shores, not only among poets themselves, but among readers as well.

Thom Chivers, Penned in the Margins (blog):

I've just returned from a packed and buzzing Exmouth Market Hall for Free Verse, the poetry book fair organised by Charles Boyle of CB Editions with help from the ever-energetic Chrissy Williams and Anna-Mae Selby . . . We sold loads of books, which was fantastic, and what was particularly pleasing was that almost every book we've released sold at least one copy . . . It was great having the opportunity to speak to people, recommend books to them, and talk about the press and how it's developed in the last five years. It's not something I get to do very often!

Kirsten Irving, Sidekick Books (blog):

The Free Verse Poetry Book Fair, which was held in the beautiful Exmouth Market area of London, was a fantastic opportunity to see exactly how active the independent poetry publishing scene is. Over 20 presses took their places at tables around a buzzing hall, while, upstairs, readings took place throughout the day . . . Here's to the next one, eh?

Hilaire (blog):

A breezy, summer's-last-hurrah day . . . First stop, the Free Verse Poetry Book Fair at Exmouth Market, organised by the excellent CB editions. An inspiring, if slightly overwhelming, event – more than 20 small poetry presses plying their wares, and free readings going on throughout the day. Half an hour's browsing resulted in the purchase of six books, plus a good gathering of leaflets and postcards. Then upstairs to catch the final reading, by a trio of poets from Waterloo Press . . . A bubble of concentrated poetic energy in a rather poky room above a church hall; Jeremy Reed bringing a flourish of glamour to the space, tossing handfuls of sequins up in the air to shower down on us mortals.

Andrew Bailey (blog):

I was up at the Free Verse book fair yesterday, revelling in whatever flavour of orgone energy it is that a gathering of poets and publishers and readers gives off . . . the room in the hours I was there was pretty full, with however many people upstairs in the readings . . . It's good to be reminded how many small and independent presses there are, good to see so many together, and talking to each other, and good to see so many people turn up on a warm day with several tube lines out of action.

Michael Horovitz's piece in the programme whipping up enthusiasm for the art in the face of the 'New Philistia' seems to transmit, quite directly, the feel of the force that drives a commitment to a defiantly uncommercial art, as it celebrates those who feel it. Charles Boyle's introduction to the same programme states that the event was a response to the cuts, that it celebrates, without public funding, the kind of press who suffered from those cuts, and that we should celebrate (and buy from) the kind of presses who value the language over the money. That the country's literary health 'depends on there being an array, a disarray, of publishers'. Big yes.

Ken Edwards, Reality Street (blog):

Reality Street was amazingly successful, with a lot of interest at our stand and regular sales . . . The book fair was generally lively. Michael Horovitz opened it with a half-hour reading . . . The kazoo figured prominently. It took me back to an earlier, perhaps more optimistic age. Kudos to Charles Boyle for organising it, and I hope we get another next year.

Fiona Moore (blog):

Saturday, day of the Poetry Book Fair in Exmouth Market. Why hasn't something like that happened before? Never mind, it's happened now thanks to CB Editions and it was wonderful. Imagine a church hall, complete with red velvet stage-curtains and metal icicles hanging from the ceiling. There are trestle tables all round the edge, covered with poetry books - 22 publishers from Anvil to zimZalla, from all points of the compass, co-existing amicably - and the hall is full of people talking about poetry . . . This was so, so much better than visiting 22 internet sites. It's much easier to get an idea of who publishes what - to make connections - when the books are there like a jigsaw puzzle with extra colour and you can hold them, finger the pages, look at the typeface; and browse through them, taking in the shape of the poems, reading bits here and there, reading half a book . . . I discovered that Arc publishes poetry in translation in parallel texts: I'd got one from some event long ago, had assumed it was a fluke, but no! Anvil does a few too; I bought Nikos Gatsos's *Amorgos* . . . There was too much to do and not enough time . . . between talking to the publishers (who are all heroes of course, to be publishing poetry), looking at books, meeting friends, going upstairs for readings or outside for a coffee in Exmouth Market. . . . if this isn't totally impractical, run it for several days so people can come back. The fair filled a gap in the market (yes, there must be a poetry market because there is a gap). As Chris Hamilton-Emery writes in an excellent crusading piece on the Salt blog, if only some of the funds given to and taken away from poetry could be devoted to subsidising real space for small publishers and their readers.

Helena Nelson, Happenstance Press (blog):

On the stage at the front, Michael Horowitz did a weird and wonderful introduction to events, accompanied by kazoo and his own personal sound effects. Later, a singer from the street outside came in and did a few songs. Upstairs, there was a little room in which readings went on throughout the day, non-stop – and although I only made it to a couple of these, I can confirm it was a friendly little room and I should like to have heard a whole lot more of them . . . There was something of a party spirit in the air. In fact, several parties were going on in various parts of the hall . . . From the money side of things, going to the event did not – could not – be rational. There was the fee for the taking of a table, there was the (in my case) plane and train fares, the car parking in Edinburgh, the tubes and so on. And most of all, the time investment. But the meeting of the poets, the taking part in the hubbub, the learning experience – these factors made it worth it.

Tamar Yoseloff (blog):

Coming away from last weekend's Free Verse book fair (laden with my bag of purchases!) I felt truly optimistic for the first time in quite a while for the future of poetry publishing. The fair was arguably an example of something positive emerging from the recession . . . The Free Verse fair was inaugurated in a spirit of defiance, collaboration and small-scale entrepreneurship. As the larger presses find it increasingly difficult to support their poetry lists, and, as a result, are taking fewer risks on new poets, there is growing scope for small presses (often very dynamically and successfully run by a single dedicated publisher with a vision) to discover the poetic talents of tomorrow.

I cannot remember a time in the two dozen years I have lived in this country when there have been so many presses producing such innovative and exciting work ('a disarray of publishers', as the programme proclaimed); apart from being a bit too young, I was not in the UK during the flowering of the small press and pamphlet movement of 70s – it seems to me from everything I've read and heard about that period that it was very much a revolt against the mainstream, whereas the current spawning of new small presses feels far more organic and welcoming.

. . . I am very much hoping this will become an annual event. Judging by the number of people who poured through the doors while I was there (and the number of people leaving with bags as heavy as mine was!) it should be.