

INTERVIEW

Northern poet wins largest literary prize

In a move that will get London writers shifting their garrets to Sunderland, the largest literary award in Britain on Thursday, April 18 went to a Durham poet, specifically for living in the north. Anne Stevenson, 69, won the first £60,000 Northern Rock Foundation Writer Award, set up by the Newcastle-based bank for writers resident in the north-east. At three times the worth of the Booker prize, and outstripping the combined £50,000 Whitbread awards, it is the UK's biggest literary award for an individual writer. Stevenson has published 15 volumes of poetry since 1965, with her verse described as heart-breakingly terse and "objective". A contemporary of Sylvia Plath, she published a biography of the American poet, Bitter Fame in 1989. Stevenson grew up in the US and lived in Ireland, Scotland and the south of England before moving to Durham in 1988. She has been a Northern Arts literary fellow since the 1980s. The poet, who will receive yearly instalments of £20,000, said: "This award comes as a confirmation or affirmation of my writing at a time when I was telling myself that I should perhaps retire from poetry." Stevenson said the award was a tribute to the large arts scene in the north-east, which includes Booker prize-winning novelist Pat Barker, the poet and critic Sean O'Brien - twice winner of the Forward poetry prize - and the children's laureate, Anne Fine. Stevenson said: "Only unobservant and benighted southerners who have never troubled themselves to look north of the Trent imagine that London is and will always be the only city of culture in the United Kingdom."

Cynthia Haven: You've had a long career your first book was published way back in 1965, under the auspices of Generation at the University of Michigan. How do you think you've changed as a poet since then?

Anne Stevenson: I suppose, over the years, I've become more conscious of what I can and what I can't do in poetry. And I hope I've learned not to think of myself as the center of the universe. It's apparently very hard for people to swallow that they aren't all that important. Don't you think it's better to open one's eyes to the objective world than to become a slave of ambition and desire? But I'm not very good at saying such things in interviews. If I could, maybe I wouldn't have to write poetry.

CH: Could you describe your daily schedule?

AS: Practically nonexistent. I used to do a great many readings and arts councilings and that sort of thing. But my husband prefers a quiet life, and I myself have found that for writing, I'm better off not scooting around too much. As a consequence, my new book, at least in my opinion, is one of my best.

CH: Your new book was published in Britain?

AS: *Granny Scarecrow* came out last May. It's published by Bloodaxe Books. Oxford stopped publishing poetry at the end of last year. Bloodaxe is, fortunately for me, based in Newcastle Upon Tyne, just a few miles from my home in Durham. [Ed. Note: Bloodaxe is one of the preeminent British publishers of poetry.]

CH: You attended the West Chester Poetry Conference this summer. Was that the first time you participated in a U.S. poetry conference since your move to Britain decades ago?

AS: Yes, and I had pretty cold feet about going.

CH: Why?

AS: Partly because I'm seriously deaf. But I went in company with a good young English poet, Chris McCullay. It was a deal. I was supposed to keep him from drinking alcohol. He was supposed to do my hearing for me. [Stevenson laughs]

CH: So you haven't been back much to the U.S. as a poet?

AS: Well, I gave a few readings early in Junetwo in Wisconsin, one in Ann Arbor, and then took part in one in West Chester. I don't much like traveling around giving readings. I sometimes wonder what people get out of listening once to poems they don't know. Even when my hearing was better, I know I missed most of what was read on such occasions. I admit I do quite enjoy "treading the boards" if the audience is sympathetic and small enough.

CH: What did you speak about at West Chester?

AS: In my "master class" I tried essentially to make a distinction between rhythm and meter. The former is a physical-cum-musical concept; the latter has to do with prosodic forms. People forget that memorable rhythms are not always metrically exact. Mainly I used examples from poems that I thought would be familiar to the students: poems from Shakespeare, George Herbert, Emily Dickinson, and most of all, G.M. Hopkins, whose ideas about sprung rhythm can be shown to apply almost universally. I also drew attention to Ivor Gurney's experiments with form and rhythm, and to the elegant free verse of my friend Frances Horovitz, who, alas, died of cancer at forty in 1983. And, yes, I quoted nursery rhymes and pop songs. It's surprising how much so-called traditional poetry is not metrically exact especially if you count stresses per line instead of feet. Once you know what a foot is in a line of poetry, it's good to get away from the straightjacket of over-strict meters. Poetry has to either sing or talk most naturally. Otherwise, it gets boring.

CH: Yet you've written much verse in very traditional meters...

AS: Well, I suspect there isn't really such a thing as free verse. Or if there is, I don't think I've written any. Readers may not always realize how formally constructed my poems are but I assure you, not a single line has ever been passed over as accidental or unconsidered. Let me show you a poem that illustrates what I mean.

[Stevenson reads her poem: "Trinity at Low Tide"]

Sole to sole with your reflection on the glassy beach, your shadow gliding beside you, you stride in triplicate across the sand.

Waves, withdrawn to limits on their leash, are distant, repetitive whisperings, while doubling you, the rippling tide land deepens you.

Under you, transparent yet exact,

your downward ghost keeps pace-pure image, cleansed of human overtones: a travelling sun, your face; your breast, a field of sparkling shells and stones.

All blame is packed into that featureless third trick of light that copies you and cancels you.

As you must have heard, there are a great many assonantal sounds there: beach, teach, repetitiously obviously echoing words or echoing noises. "Repetitious whispering" is onomatopoeic. "Doubling you" and "deepens you" are chiming, rhythmic phrases.

Since there are eight lines in the first stanza, all of different lengths, the second stanza has to repeat or reflect the same number. The poem is, among other things, about reflections. Then the "you... you... you" noises are important as are the repeated "c's": cleansed, copies, cancels, and the rhyming of pace and face. The effect is of rhymes running all through the poem's wave-like rhythms. I wanted them to reproduce the sound of water lapping against the shore.

CH: It also conveys what one critic called your "nervous echo, the insistent double, the recollecting mirror."

AS: "This doubling develops into something between a persistent motif and a personal signature." But it's interesting you use terms like "echoing" and "chiming" where many would use "internal rhyme," or "alliteration."

AS: I rarely think of terms like alliteration, internal rhyme, et cetera. Either a poem sings or it doesn't. I am conscious of the line endings, yes, but I never analyze what is happening when I write. That comes later. As Elizabeth Bishop put it, it's too easy to talk the life out of poetry. My model is, anyway, music: that is, poems come to me in musical phrases or cadences. Some of my poems are probably just musical toys.

CH: So how do you begin a poem? How does a poem come to you?

AS: Sometimes a line just appears, but most of the time I see something or hear about something, or even read something that makes me sit up and say, "I'm sure there's a poem there." Once I've drafted a first stanza, then, say, in the poem I just read, usually decide to carry through the pattern it sets up. I don't know how long the poem's going to be, of course. Sometimes I don't even know what the poem is going to be about. But by the time I've worked my way around a few drafts it usually takes me, oh, I would say twelve to fifteen drafts to write a short poem like "Trinity at Low Tide" and by the time I've found a rhythm that seems right, and I've got an idea running smoothly through it, then the poem sort of comes together of its own accord. The process is not unlike solving a crossword puzzle. No, not really the same, because most of what happens is unconscious, and most of the time you work on a poem, for a couple of days, very hard getting nowhere with it, or losing the thread completely...and then, you wake up one morning and the whole thing works!

So writing a poem is like conducting an argument between your unconscious mind and your conscious self. You have to get unconsciousness and consciousness lined up in some way. I suspect that's why working to a form, achieving a stanza, and keeping to it, deciding that the first and third and fifth lines will have to rhyme, and that you're going to insist on so many stresses per line, helps the poem to be born. That is, to free itself from you and your attentions to it and become a piece of art in itself. Heaven only knows where it comes from! I suppose working out a form diminishes the thousands of possibilities you face when you begin. And once you've cut down the possibilities, you can't swim off into the deep and drown. Well, it's a very strange process.

CH: How did you begin writing poetry?

AS: I suppose my father read lots of it to us. And I have always loved ballads and songs. Those are what I wrote as a child, you know ballads and songs. I knew a great many by heart, though I couldn't recite them now. And when I got to high school, I had very good English teaching, and I spent my summers writing poems and practicing the piano and cello. At the time, I wanted to be a musician. My father was a good amateur pianist.

CH: And you began as a musician, didn't you?

AS: Well, in my teens and for two years at Michigan, I studied the piano and the cello, but I was never very good. My hearing is so bad now I don't try to play the cello, but I can still hear enough to enjoy my piano.



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Music and poetry developed together for me, and despite my deafness, I still believe that music is the finest of the arts.

But maybe something else goes into making a poet: you could call it a resistant discontent with the given thing. I've never been a quick learner, and in grade school my teachers thought I was slow, even stupid. One problem may have been, even then, unreliable hearing. And not being able to hear may have made me the kind of person who has to think about everything hard before taking it onboard. Being slow to understand can be an advantage, and perhaps I learned at an early age how to make the baffling world make sense.

CH: Music is very much evident in your poetry in its composition and sounds, even its subject matter. I am particularly fond of "Kosovo Surprised by Mozart" which appeared in Britain's PN Review earlier this year and later in *Granny Scarecrow*. Can you describe its origins?

AS: "Kosovo Surprised by Mozart" was written, as the title indicates, in April, 1999, the day after I had listened to Bernard Roberts in Harlech play K 533 in F Major. Roberts gave a series of recitals that spring centered on classical 18th-early 19th century piano music at a time when the horrors of Serbia's invasion of Kosovo were, in Britain, only "entertainment" on the television. The elegance of Mozart's music has always struck me as a true artist's response to squalor, evil, and human folly. One doesn't wallow in violence and cruelty, one rises above it! Very unfashionable point of view today but, nevertheless, mine. Out of Mozart's short, sad, in many ways squalid life, arose all that magnificent music; it survives still, bringing to those who can hear it great joy today, though Mozart the man was buried more than 200 years ago in a pauper's grave.

The horrors of Kosovo on the television were symptomatic of humanity's willingness to inflict record, and accept misery. It's easier to wallow in a cinematic hell there before you on the screen at the flick of a switch than to listen and understand the passionate compassion Mozart imparts through those "inky dots," but, really, nothing is more boring than sustained violence, nothing more degrading to the spirit, which is why, to a few, Mozart's music is like a redemption, despite the continuing defeat of the beautiful and good in a world, past and present, of terrible yet ephemeral events.

The theme of "Kosovo Surprised by Mozart" is that of "The Miracle of Camp 60" a poem about the chapel built by Italian prisoners of war in Orkney during World War II. Art of any kind, if it really is art, moves us towards sympathy, understanding, and a release of the spirit, just as Aristotle taught in the 4th century B.C., and as W.H. Auden and Wallace Stevens, with their very different beliefs, taught in the 20th century A.D.

CH: At the University of Michigan?

AS: Yes. I was a graduate student. It must have been 1960, 1961.

CH: One thing Sylvia Plath, you, and I have in common is that we all left university, moved to England, and married Englishmen.

AS: There's lots else we have in common. [Stevenson chuckles.]

CH: Yes. But of the three of us, I was the only one who went back. Why did you first move to England?

AS: I was born in England. I was born in Cambridge.

CH: I thought you were born in Ann Arbor.

AS: No. I was born in Cambridge, England, where my father [Charles Leslie Stevenson] went to study philosophy with [Ludwig] Wittgenstein and G.E. Moore, among others, after he'd taken a first degree at Yale. I was born in Cambridge, in January, 1933. That's why I was in such a hurry to get back to Cambridge after I'd graduated from Michigan.

CH: And your first husband was Cambridge, yes?

AS: During the war, my family adopted two English girls from Cambridge as part of an Anglo-American university scheme to send the children of English doss to the States to escape the bombing and the Nazis' very possible invasion. Robin, my first husband, was the younger brother of these girls. He must have been nine at the time (I was seven), and he lived with a banker's family just up the street. Much later, when we were both at university he was at Cambridge and I was a senior at Michigan we met again one summer and decided it would be nice to seal the family bond. So I came to England, actually, to marry Robin Hitchcock. The marriage was not a great success, but we have an awfully nice daughter and two lovely grandchildren to share between us. We're still on good terms.

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CH: Do you see an affinity between your native Michigan and the north of England where you live now?

AS: Probably. The south of England, Oxford and Cambridge, are a bit like Harvard and Yale, aren't they? That ever-present, coolly

assumed superiority. I'm sure I'd rather live in an environment where there aren't quite so many tropical fish, as it were, crowding the fishbowl, mostly bent on eating each other. I don't thrive in a community of egos. Not at all. I feel the Midwestern part of me is the healthiest party you know, feet on the ground, common sense. But I need a lot of space, too, which to think, I need to read a lot. I don't just mean reading poetry, but reading novels and books on science and history, lots of biography. I wonder how poets ever have time to read enough when they're flying all over the world giving readings.

CH: It's good to have time for mulling.

AS: Mulling, yes. You have to mull a lot. You have to be in touch with yourself, with your deeper self, to write poetry. Having to project yourself, as I do at readings, cheats me from being in touch with the self that writes the poems. There's one of me that's a "projector" an actress, if you like but the me that writes poems is a more difficult person. If I give too many readings, or even see too many people, I find myself behaving in ways that I fancy might please them. Afterwards, I feel rather dirty and nasty, as if I'd betrayed somebody behind her back.

CH: Maybe that's what ate Sylvia Plath.

AS: Sylvia Plath felt the same. I know she did.

Her journals analyze her social conflicts again and again. It's clear she found people exhausting, but she needed to impress them, too. Then, when she got to Devon and there weren't any people she much cared to impress, she became depressed and miserable. I don't think that's so surprising, mind you. Probably for Plath, as for me, poetry was the only language through which she could approach her emotional truth. Alas, the truths in her case were so devastating they killed her.

CH: Did you know Jane Kenyon? Of course you must have. She grew up in Ann Arbor, too.

AS: I knew who she was.

CH: But she was married to Donald Hall. Didn't your paths cross?

AS: Donald Hall was married to somebody else when I was in Ann Arbor. Jane was a little younger than I was.

CH: Tell me a little bit about your connection with Donald Hall. He encouraged you to write your first book about Bishop, Elizabeth Bishop (Twayne, 1966).

AS: Yes. He introduced me to poetry, really. I owe Donald Hall a great deal. I took his course in contemporary American poets. He was intelligent, inspiring, a fine teacher.

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