

POETRY IN PRACTICE

~~WORRYING~~ TITLES

Kathryn Simmonds on naming your poem

Finding the right title for a poem can feel like trying to solve a particularly painful crossword clue, but once you've hit on the solution, sometimes after dozens of false starts, the answer seems obvious: how could it have taken so long? I find this tantalising, head-scratching phase of discovery is often the most enjoyable part of writing the poem, perhaps because it's not really writing at all, more like daydreaming, and since poems are short (well, shorter than the average novel) you can play the naming game over and over again. If some advertising copywriters are said to be frustrated poets, then perhaps some poets are frustrated copywriters – at least when it comes to titling.

Luckily for an enthusiast like me, titles are everywhere, in songs, books, films, dodgy Channel 5 documentaries, they bob around in the imagination, rubbing up against the flotsam and jetsam, riffing along on their own rhythms. And memorable titles have rhythms – *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, *Glengarry Glen Ross*, *Exile on Main Street* – combinations of sounds which are pleasing to say. Thinking back, I only picked up *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* for its enigmatic title and though I was a bit disappointed to find it featured a slightly seedy bloke and his sexual conquests, the title had nonetheless worked its magic. Another copy sold.

It's difficult to quantify why some titles have the power to stay with us, but everyone has a few favourites that stick in the memory. One of mine is Heaney's first collection, *Death of a Naturalist*, which seems to combine both confidence and poignancy, and the hush of John Ashbery's first book *Some Trees* blows through my head too. Out of curiosity I asked a few fellow writers for their favourite collection titles. Here's a sample: *My Life Asleep* (Jo Shapcott), *The Privilege of Rain* (David Swann), *The Weddings at Nether Powers* (Peter Redgrove), *Tattoos for Mother's Day* (Jean Sprackland), *Landscape with Small Humans* (John Whitworth), *Bunny* (Selima Hill), *Landing Light* (Don Paterson), *The Best Man that Ever Was* (Annie Freud), *The Book of Blood* (Vicki Feaver).

Most poets have a stack of half-written or unwritten poems kicking about where the only thing they feel certain of is the title. I have a friend who teaches in a nursery school where the children call her by her Christian name, and when she took the class on a trip I liked the idea of writing a poem called *Miss Marion in the Butterfly House*. Or rather, I liked the sound of the title. But I couldn't actually write the poem, so that one line sits in a file just in case I'm able to add something to it one day. Apparently, Hugo Williams had a similar dilemma when he came up with the title *Billy's Rain*, but fortunately (the collection won the T S Eliot Prize) he managed to find the accompanying poem. Of course, you could try getting away without any poem at all, as Don Paterson did with *On Going to Meet a Zen Master in the Kyushu Mountains and Not Finding Him* where the title is the set-up and the blank space below is the punch line.

Using a long title can create a striking effect, and James

Wright was a master of the art. His famous poem *Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota* not only sets a specific scene, lowering us down into the lull of the hammock as we begin to read, but it's also the preparation for the poem's killer last line, "I have wasted my life". The contrast of that short line with the long, languid title helps to achieve the sudden impact. One of my favourite long titles is Frank O'Hara's *A True Account of Talking to the Sun at Fire Island*; using the contents page test, who wouldn't want to flip straight to that one? Another title to make a grab for the reader's attention is Ron Pagett's *Ladies and Gentlemen in Outer Space*, a poem

in which the title becomes the first line, and the second line follows on with "here is my philosophy". Dropping into the poem by using the first line as the title isn't always successful, it's occasionally obvious that the poet couldn't think of anything so just waded straight in, but in the case of Pagett's poem the strategy works a treat, delivering the unexpected, namely a philosophy which offers the best way of cooking vegetables ("a few minutes only ... butter and serve").

But of course titles don't have to tap-dance across the page, and there's a fine line between intriguing your readers and irritating them with the self-consciously kooky. In the end, everything depends on the poem and sometimes, as those copywriters know, it's best to keep it simple. Many of Elizabeth Bishop's poems bear straightforwardly descriptive or narrative titles, *The Fish* or *Filling Station*, confident introductions which don't need to shout for attention. Her villanelle *One Art* was *The Gift of Losing Things* for a long time before she decided to rename it, and the result reflects the clarity and poise of her writing.

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Bishop drafted and redrafted her work, only publishing about a hundred poems in her lifetime. That ability to wait until the poem is truly ready is something everyone wrestles with – how do you know when you're finished? Thinking about my own writing process, I sometimes find that if I'm really struggling to title a poem it's because I don't know what I'm naming – I don't know what the poem is, and that's a sign that it's not actually finished, only that I want it to be. I've also had the experience of coming up with the title too quickly and then being thrown off course because the poem's title is dictating what sort of poem should follow. I'm more comfortable when the title comes with the body of the poem.

But if you're pretty sure the poem is finished and it's only the title that's causing trouble, you could always ask around for suggestions; I've noticed that even the quietest workshop springs to life when it comes to suggesting names for the baby. And if that doesn't work, there's always the lift, an option which has proved particularly popular with novelists – a well-judged clip from the right poem lends lyricism and weight, consider *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, *A Handful of Dust* or *Tender is the Night*. Hard to believe that if Steinbeck hadn't reached for his Robert Burns in time, *Of Mice and Men* might have been the much more prosaic 'Something That Happened.' Robert Frost turned to Longfellow to find a name for his first collection *A Boy's Will* and many other poets have called on the poets who've gone before. John Stammers' second collection had the (second) working title of *Mother's Day* before he decided to use a phrase from a Rosemary Tonks poem and the book became the darkly charged *Stolen Love Behaviour*. He explained, "As a title, it has a much wider synecdoche. I think it's just more striking with its hint of euphemism and odd-sounding syntax." Stammers likes to have a working title when he's writing the manuscript, along with a cover image because "It's all part of the aesthetic: I think of the book as a whole piece of art."

Titles force us to frame our work in a particular way, to give the reader some kind of steer, however loose, as to how it might be read. It used to annoy me when I went to a gallery and saw a painting (usually something modern, usually something I couldn't make sense of) and then crept forwards only to read the smug little label *Untitled*. Not only did it appear that the artist hadn't put in enough thought, but I also felt excluded, left to drift along on my own interpretation, whatever that might be, without a rope to cling to. Later it dawned on me that perhaps that was the point – the artist wasn't looking to interfere with the way the work was being received and perhaps, even more unsettling, they weren't quite sure what the painting was either. Glancing along my bookshelves while writing this, my eye fell on Geoffrey Hill's 2006 collection *Without Title*, a book that is learned, complex and passionate; a book that wants to roam free and so deliberately refuses to be pinned down. Not far away sits a fat volume of Emily Dickinson; her brief, strange poems, also without title, come at the reader just as they are, fully alive. To title them might be to reduce them, or explain when no explanation is necessary – and yet, what happy Amherst afternoons she might have spent with just a pencil and those piles and piles of unnamed poems.



Kathryn Simmonds' poetry collection *Sunday at the Skin Launderette* is published by Seren. Her first novel - as yet untitled - will be published next year.