

The route to a first collection: Kathryn Simmonds

Kathryn Simmonds's *Sunday at the Skin Launderette* (Seren) was published in January this year



Where and when was your first poem published?

My first poem was published in a competition anthology when I was sixteen. My poem was called 'The Rivals' and was about a woman married to an obsessive gardener. It was very tragic.

How many of your poems had appeared in magazines or

anthologies before you started to aim for a collection?

I had a good handful published, and then a pamphlet. I don't think anyone really takes you seriously unless you've put some effort in.

Did you attend any particularly helpful workshops or classes?

Mimi Khalvati's Versification course at the Poetry School was excellent. The class was really about reading and learning, rather than workshopping poems, and it taught me all sorts of things I probably should have known.

Last spring I was lucky enough to take part in a seminar, sponsored by the Jerwood Foundation, called 'Towards a First Collection' where a group of us spent a few days discussing, writing and editing. That gave me a focus on sorting out which poems to keep hold of and which ones to scrap.

How did you approach publishers (or was it the other way round)?

My editor at Seren had seen my pamphlet, *Snuag*, and invited me to send her some poems for an anthology she was putting together. After that she asked if I had a manuscript, so it was fairly painless. Having said that, a couple of years previously I'd sent out a sample of poems to two large publishers: one of the editors replied with a curt letter eight months later saying something like, "I'm sure you'll send me your manuscript when you have it." Obviously I never wanted to contact him again. The other editor didn't get back at all, and when I queried him, it seemed the poems had been lost. The experience didn't inspire me with much confidence, so I was glad when Seren wanted the book.

How long did it take from contract to the finished product?

Two years. This seems like a long time, but poetry lists get very full in

advance, so I discovered it's pretty standard. It gave me time to assemble the collection I was happiest with. If happy is a word you can use in this context.

Did you make many revisions to the manuscript?

Yes, I was revising the poems right up until the deadline for the manuscript, and sometimes dreaming about them.

How did you decide on the title for your book?

At length, and with a lot of head-scratching. *Sunday at the Skin Launderette* was the original title for the book, but when it was taken on, I started to waver, and drew up lists of alternative titles. I canvassed friends with the list, only to return to the one I'd started with – I can't say exactly why, but it seems to resonate with my work as a collection.

What's the day job?

It's a rather strange one; I work for a

company who make quiz material, so I edit and write questions on various subjects, from sport to pop music. Although I have weekly deadlines, my hours are quite flexible, so it's perfect for writing, and the nature of the job means I'm sometimes led in strange directions and will start reading around a particular subject. There's a poem in the book called 'Seahorses', which came directly from a question I was thinking about. I also make some pin money writing short stories and am working on my second radio play. **Any tips for poets starting out on their own route to publication?** Work hard, read widely, write your own thing, and don't give up. It's important to enjoy the journey as much as the arrival, because the journey to a first collection is usually a long one, so get out to events and meet people who are in the same world.