

An with Philip Salom, poet and author of *The Well Mouth*

When did you start writing?

At the beginning of the 70s I was painting and yet reading a huge amount of fiction. Somehow as a back-thought I wondered if I should write a novel. When I began writing in the mid 70s it seemed that poetry found me instead. It was very disconcerting – what was poetry? Poetry seemed to know the answer and after stalling me in my ignoranace for a year or so it seduced me and I gave in.

What was your first big break?

Fremantle Arts Centre Press [now Fremantle Press] needed manuscripts in their early days and I was tempted to submit one. The poems had collected in only two years, I hadn't published any of them, so I wasn't sure of the chances. The publisher's readers raved about the poems so we were off. Within a year that first book *The Silent Piano* won the Commonwealth Poetry Prize in London and I sat back in utter surprise. When *Sky Poems* also won the Commonwealth Prize a few years later I admitted it – I had received a double-break. I was a poet.

How do you write your poetry?

I am several different poets and therefore I write several different ways. Each poetic has its own practice. There are overlapping approaches, however, and commonalities. Before I write anything I immerse myself in the ideas, I brood over feelings, the guessed-at sound of the language and the larger compass of a possible poem or – say in *Sky Poems* and *The Well Mouth* – of the poems plural, the poems of a much longer sequence or book. When I sit down to hand-write first drafts I simply start with the first words that come into my head. While I am writing I am also reading and responding to what I have just written and this process is very rapid. I like to write fast. There is an associative energy that breaks through the expected and seems to know and have words for observations and constructions I have not and could not have imagined. Later, I re-write according to whatever that poem and process has delivered. I do not always return to and do not insist on what seemed to be the 'original' idea or prompt.



Tell us about *The Well Mouth*

This book began as a slow enveloping, a dreaming of voices, entering and leaving my head for more than a year before I wrote anything. I knew this was a whole collection, a book, but I needed to defer – and brood through the long build-up (as above). I wanted to be the medium, the receiving self of the book's main underground character: and she will 'hear' all the voices of the newly dead, and she will in this time outside of time develop an understanding of her own death... The dreams and the imaginings of these people are for me suspended in a place we all instinctively understand. Some poems are full of questions, some are lyrical, some are breaking down and merging with the sound and scrape of language but all the words are deserving of being 'overheard' and registered and accorded their odd uniqueness. The book lets in strange, uncanny and also quite funny moments. It is poetic in the haunted sense, therefore, but several people have reported unexpected laughter while reading it – their own!

Do you have any advice for other poets who may be just starting out?

Read as much poetry and as wider range of poetry and poetic as you can. Trust your unconscious to

deliver the early words of poems but use your subtle reading self to discern the poem for what it is and for how to develop it. The prepared mind is equally crucial for technique and for final insights. Any one source of advice is unlikely to be of use!