

The background of the cover is a photograph of autumn leaves floating on a body of water. The leaves are in various stages of decay, showing shades of yellow, orange, and brown. The water is dark and reflects the leaves and the sky. In the bottom right corner, there is a white geometric logo consisting of a central square with lines extending outwards to other squares, forming a network-like structure.

JANE
DOWSON

Carol Ann Duffy

Poet for Our Times



Carol Ann Duffy

Jane Dowson

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macmillan

Jane Dowson
De Montfort University
Leicester, UK

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For Tim

I.M. Diana Widows 1922–2015

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ABBREVIATIONS

Poetry Volumes by Carol Ann Duffy

Bees	<i>The Bees</i> (London: Picador, 2011)
FG	<i>Feminine Gospels</i> (London: Picador, 2002)
MT	<i>Mean Time</i> (London: Anvil, 1993)
NCPC	<i>New and Collected Poems for Children</i> (London: Faber & Faber, 2009)
Near	<i>Near</i> (London: Faber & Faber, 2012)
NSP	<i>New Selected Poems 1984–2004</i> (London: Picador, 2004)
PMP	<i>Penguin Modern Poets 2: Carol Ann Duffy, Vicki Feaver, Eavan Boland</i> (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995)
Pamphlet	<i>The Pamphlet</i> (London: Anvil, 1998)
Rapture	<i>Rapture</i> (London: Picador) 2005
RL	<i>Ritual Lighting: Laureate Poems</i> (London: Picador, 2014)
SFN	<i>Standing Female Nude</i> (London: Anvil, 1985)
SM	<i>Selling Manhattan</i> (London: Anvil, 1987)
TOC	<i>The Other Country</i> (London: Anvil, 1990)
William	<i>William and the Ex-Prime Minister</i> (London: Anvil, 1992)
WW	<i>The World's Wife</i> (London: Macmillan, 1999)
PBS	<i>Poetry Book Society Bulletin</i>

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Poet for Our Times

Carol Ann Duffy is one of the freshest and bravest talents to emerge in British poetry—any poetry—for years. (Boland 1993)

The effortless virtuosity, drama and humanity of Carol Ann Duffy's verse have made her our most admired contemporary poet. (Winterson 2009)

It's particularly apt to honour a laureate who so energetically challenges Auden's oft-quoted line 'poetry makes nothing happen'. (Wilkinson 2014)

INTRODUCTION: 'HOW POETRY / PURSUES THE HUMAN'

Due to her originality, unusual range, prolific output, and swelling influence, Carol Ann Duffy is a major poet of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. For over thirty years, she has been lauded as one of the most gifted, relevant, and versatile poets of her time. She has published ten main poetry collections—along with pamphlets, poetry selections, poems for children, and edited collections—starting with *Standing Female Nude* (1985) that received the Scottish Arts Council book award. The many subsequent prizes included: the Somerset Maugham for *Selling Manhattan* (1987); the Cholmondley (1992); the Forward and Whitbread for *Mean Time* (1993); the T.S. Eliot for *Rapture* (2005), and the 2012 PEN/Pinter Prize, aptly given for work of 'outstanding literary merit' that casts an 'unflinching, unswerving' gaze upon the world and shows a 'fierce intellectual determination ... to define the real

truth of our lives and our societies'.¹ Duffy was awarded an OBE in 1995, a National Endowment for Science Technology and Art (NESTA) in 2000, and a CBE in 2002. In 2009, she became the first female Poet Laureate of the United Kingdom, a post that crowned the ways in which Duffy raises poetry's profile and that entrenched 'woman' and 'poet' as respected adjuncts. The laureateship further released her passionate labour towards enhancing the place of poetry in contemporary culture. In 2015, she was made a Dame, the female equivalent of a knighthood, and hailed 'a great public poet who deserves her public honour' (Wilkinson 2014).

When Duffy was appointed Laureate, reviewers concurred on how her appeal is both deep and broad: 'As one of the bestselling poets in the UK, Duffy has managed to combine critical acclaim with popularity: a rare feat in the poetry world' (Flood 2009); 'Carol Ann Duffy is that rare thing—a poet whose work is loved by children and adults alike, critics as much as the public' (Cooke 2009). Not only is her poetry printed in the broadsheets and analysed in academic works, but it also appears in popular magazines, tabloid newspapers, and Internet forums. She has worked in primary and secondary schools where her poems have long been on exam syllabuses at GCSE, Advanced, and Scottish National and Higher levels. She has published several poetry books for children, winning the coveted Signal Prize for Children's Verse (1999), and edited *A Laureate's Choice: 101 Poems for Children* (London: Macmillan Children's Books 2012) and two anthologies aimed at teenagers, *Stopping for Death* (1996) and *I Wouldn't Thank You for a Valentine* (1992). She has also edited: *Anvil New Poets 2 No. 2* (1995); *Times Tidings: Greeting the Twenty-First Century* (1999); *Hand in Hand: An Anthology of Love Poetry* (2001); *Out of Fashion: An Anthology of Poems* (2004); *Answering Back: Living Poets Reply to the Poetry of the Past* (2007); *To the Moon: An Anthology of Lunar Poetry* (2009); *Jubilee Lines: 60 Poets for 60 Years* (2012); and *1914: Poetry Remembers* (2013). Her individual poems have been claimed for several territories, appearing in exhibitions and anthologies organized by timescale, nationality, gender, sexuality, or theme—from childhood, generations, and love, to films, short stories, memory, and the millennium.² These anthologies

¹The words are taken from Harold Pinter's Nobel Speech, cited on The PEN Pinter Prize website. <http://www.englishpen.org/prizes/pen-pinter-prize/>

²'-/99' (NCP 139) was displayed during the Salisbury Festival, *Last Words* (25–31 October 1999) and printed in the anthology, *Last Words*, ed. Don Paterson and Jo Shapcott (London: Picador 2001).

target many audiences, including new parents, lovers, cancer sufferers, and poetry buffs. She is counted as British, English, and Scottish, and her poems are translated into Chinese, French, German, Hungarian, Italian, Polish, and Spanish. From the United States, she received the Lannan Literary Award for Poetry in 1995 and the E.M. Forster award in 2000. Duffy writes opera librettos, is sometimes accompanied by musician John Sampson, and performs with the poetry band LiTTLe MaCHiNe. Her poetry has been set to music and read on the radio.

The breadth of her readership, subject matter, and literary complexity, makes Duffy magisterial but also vulnerable to disparagement. A furor over ‘Education for Leisure’ (*SFN* 15) exemplifies the battle involved in being a fresh brave voice against the conservative watchdogs in Education and the Arts. As the title indicates, the poem captures the restlessness of a youth for whom ‘leisure’ is a euphemism for unemployment. The dramatic monologue invites sympathy for the youth’s disempowerment and subsequent impulse for violence: ‘I get our bread-knife and go out. / The pavements glitter suddenly. I touch your arm’. In 2008, when an external examiner, Pat Schofield, complained that the poem glorified knife-crime, the AQA exam board ordered schools to remove from its GCSE syllabus an anthology containing the poem. Duffy’s riposte, ‘Mrs Schofield’s GCSE’ (*Bees* 15), displays her wit, compassionate politics, and how her imagination is first and foremost literary. She parodies exam-speak and cites fragments of violent threats or acts in Shakespeare’s plays, always compulsory on the National Curriculum—‘You must prepare your bosom for his knife, / said Portia to Antonio in which / of Shakespeare’s Comedies? Who killed his wife / insane with jealousy?’—then commends the purpose and power of poetry. Mrs Schofield allegedly called the poem “a bit weird” and continued, “But having read her other poems I found they were all a little bit weird. But that’s me” (Addley 2008). This ‘weirdness’ is, of course, what makes Duffy’s work original and affecting. A typical line, ‘a bowl of apples rotten to the core’ (‘Disgrace’, *MT* 48), blends the pleasant image of a fruit dish, evocative of a still life painting or homely domestic space, with a disturbing voiceover that all is not well. This tendency to make something familiar seem alien signals what Freud famously called ‘unheimlich’ (‘uncanny’), and pushes the reader to a new awareness, which in Freudian terms would be about something repressed. Thus, the speaker in ‘Education for Leisure’ is a recognizable stereotype whose social disaffection represents a segment of society that we might wish to ignore but are uncomfortably pushed to face, contemplate, and

even find sympathetic. We also see how Duffy is ‘for our times’—historically specific and enduringly relevant—for although written during the 1980s, the poem is also pertinent to the economic recession that began in the mid-2000s.

While the spat over ‘Education for Leisure’ is amusing and Duffy the clear winner, the notorious comments from the Oxford Chair of Poetry in 2012 give more pause. In a lecture, ‘Poetry, Policing and Public Order’, Sir Geoffrey Hill made a denigratory remark about one of Duffy’s poems: “‘My simultaneous incompatible response is this is not democratic English but cast-off bits of oligarchical commodity English such as is employed by writers for Mills & Boon and by celebrity critics appearing on A Good Read or the Andrew Marr show’” (Flood 2012). Although Duffy graciously ignored the hubristic slight, it was reported in *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Daily Mail*, and *The Guardian*—right wing and left wing, broadsheet and tabloid papers, all of which proved loyal to her.³ *The Daily Mail* clearly welcomed her appeal to readers who might not naturally read poetry: ‘She claims to have grown up in a “bookless house” and has become a passionate advocate for the teaching of poetry in schools and the popularization of the art among the young’ (Gayle 2012). It printed ‘Remembering a Teacher’, the poem that Hill dismissed as juvenile, and referred to an interview for *The Guardian* in which Duffy had allegedly said that mobile phone texts and Facebook could foster poetry writing due to their methods of condensing language. Importantly, Hill and the paper misrepresented her remarks and less reported was his approval of ‘The Christmas Truce’ as something “‘radically different’” (Flood 2012). Thus, the media can both shape and topple a poet’s status by stirring controversy and preferring gossip to plaudits. However, as Lemn Sissay comments on Hill’s attack, the dispute over what makes good poetry and who should read it prove that ‘Poets are at the heart of revolution because revolution is the heart of the poet. Poets see things because they won’t look anywhere else. They are single-minded in their pursuit of the poem’ (2012).

Given the accolades, it might seem unthinkable that Duffy’s rightful status is not secure but the atavistic chauvinism in classing Duffy as a ‘Mills and Boon’ poet echoes the fates of female poets over the preceding 300 years. Published and esteemed in their lifetimes, they lacked literary recognition and were subsequently side-lined or forgotten. In her day,

³Hill’s slight was also blogged about on *Poetry News*, 1 February 2012, and on the American site *Scarriet*, September 2009.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning was suggested for laureate but passed over for Tennyson; then, after his death, Christina Rossetti was proposed but not appointed; and, rather than have a woman, there was a gap of four years. This book, therefore, aims to record the full range of verdicts on Duffy's achievements, to consolidate current readings, and to find traits that run across her entire oeuvre. Primarily, it defines what 'Duffy-esque' means as an evaluative benchmark for other poets, just as Duffy is frequently compared to Philip Larkin, Seamus Heaney, or Tony Harrison. The subtitle, 'Poet for Our Times', is taken from the title to a poem discussed later that dramatizes the crossover and distance between poetry and journalism. The phrase flags the relevance of Duffy's poetry to the period in which she writes but does not mean the relevance is *only* to her lifetime. Duffy uniquely draws on the languages of both her contemporary culture and her literary heritages to probe what it means to be human, both in and beyond a specific time and place. As evidence, her date-specific 'Translating the English, 1989' (TOC 11) was included in a millennium anthology titled *News That Stays News* (Rae 1999), and her poems are read at ceremonies that mark the rites of passage from birth to death.

In 'Mrs Schofield's GCSE', Duffy addresses the specific issue of censoring her poem then pleads: 'Explain how poetry / pursues the human like the smitten moon / above the weeping, laughing earth; how we / make prayers of it' (*Bees* 15). Such a poem says much more than the words through the vital vehicles of image and sound. Here, her favourite symbol, the moon, is 'smitten', as if with the love and pain it sees on earth, and the assonance of the long 'oo'—in 'human' and 'moon'—stresses the magnetism between poetry and humanity. In these few lines, Duffy condenses her sense of vocation and her belief that poetry can mirror, provoke, and sacralise tears or joy: "Poetry isn't something outside of life; it is at the centre of life. We turn to poetry to help us understand or cope with our most intense experiences. ... Whether I am writing for children or for adults, I am writing from the same impulse and for the same purpose. Poetry takes us back to the human" (Winterson 2009). As discussed later and through the chapters, 'To be human is to reflect on being human' (Mousley 2013: 171) and this reflecting is what poetry does and produces most intensely. Duffy's poems plumb our private interiorities in which we think and feel, and which we struggle to access or verbalize. They express and explore our attempts to put into words the knotty states of love, loss, and yearning for connection—to feel at 'home in our hearts' ('Disgrace', MT 48). They pinpoint our desire to shape ourselves from within rather

than according to the scripts of others, or to reach back for our childhoods. Her poems accommodate the irrational aspects of experience that manifest in cultural myths and individual dreams. They nurture our dual sense of being unique and of wishing to identify with others; and they speak of the nourishing milk of human kindness. Collectively, they open up the full range of human experience that we can find within ourselves, in the lives of others, and in the environment.

LIFE, CAREER, AND WRITING

‘Duffy likes her work to be visible but to remain herself unseen’ (Ross 2012) and any ‘Google’ search finds a narrative about the link between her life and writing that Duffy herself has largely scripted through a handful of extensive interviews (McAllister 1988; Forbes 2002; Cooke 2009; Wroe 2014). She was born in Lennoxton, Glasgow (23 December 1955) to Mary [aka May] (née Black) and Francis (Frank) Duffy, a fitter and subsequent trades union activist who stood as a Labour candidate for parliament in 1983. May’s parents and Franks’ grandfather were Irish, Frank and his father were Scots, and when she was six, Duffy’s family moved to Stafford, England. Recalling the migration in the poem, ‘Originally’ (TOC 7), she reflects, ‘I want our country, I said / but then you forget, or don’t recall, or change’, and this psychic dislocation reverberates in many poems. Contingently, she asserts, ‘I haven’t actually felt a very strong national identity, ever, ever’ (*Second Shift* 1994: 20). Her lifelong enthusiasm for football, caught from her father and younger brothers, comes through in such poems as ‘Munich’ (NSP 136) or ‘The Shirt’ (*Bees* 18); she dedicates *Feminine Gospels* to her brothers and writes of her memories about them in ‘Brothers’ (MT 12). While professing no religious practice or belief since the age of 15, the language and iconography of Roman Catholicism, embedded from the weekly churchgoing ritual with her mother and from her convent schooling, permeate her poems and Duffy frequently talks of poetry as prayer. In 1977, she graduated in Philosophy from the University of Liverpool and the city features in several poems throughout her volumes, from ‘Liverpool Echo’ (SFN 44) to ‘North-West’ (FG 64). From 1981, she took up writer-in-residencies in East London Schools, funded by a C. Day Lewis Fellowship. Based on these experiences, ‘Head of English’ (SFN 12) jibes at the conflict between ‘a real live poet’ and a traditionalist English school curriculum—‘We don’t / want winds of change about the place’—and ‘Comprehensive’ (SFN 8) refers to

the state system of schools for all, marking and interrogating its ideals of class and racial harmony. In 1996, Duffy moved to Manchester where she still resides. She was appointed Lecturer then Professor of Contemporary Poetry at Manchester Metropolitan University and subsequently became Creative Director of its Writing School.

Duffy insists that it is ‘emotional truth’ rather than autobiographical fact that informs the poems. Primarily, she is the rare order of professional poet: “‘Yes, it is a vocation, to give your life, your imagination, to language; to offer up your experience of being human’” (Cooke 2009). Her writing began in Year 5 (aged 10) at St Austin’s RC Primary School. She recalls the glow of proud detachment when the teacher, commemorated in ‘In Mrs Tilscher’s Class’ (TOC 8), typed up six of her poems and tied them together with a shoelace. At St Joseph’s Convent [Secondary] School, she was further inspired by June Scriven, the subject of ‘Death of a Teacher’ (NSP 134), who helped Duffy publish her first pamphlet, *Fleshweathercock and Other Poems*, in 1973, and then by Jim Walker at Stafford Girls’ High School. A subsequent influence was Adrian Henri (1932–2000) whom she met in 1972, and with whom she was in relationship for nearly ten years and collaborated on a poetry pamphlet, *Beauty and the Beast* (1977). Henri was a painter, musician, and member of The Liverpool Scene, a poetry-rock group that took poetry to pubs and clubs during the 1960s. Along with Brian Patten and Roger McGough, he contributed to the best-selling anthology *The Mersey Sound* (1967) which was an antidote to the situation famously sketched by Adrian Mitchell in 1964: ‘Most people ignore poetry because poetry ignores most people’ (Mitchell 1964: Preface). Duffy continues these poets’ left-wing perspective, strong elements of performance, rhythm, humour, and symbolism, particularly the surrealist disjunctions that Henri loved. She dedicated to him her pamphlet, *William and the Ex-Prime Minister* (1992), that had a limited print run of one hundred and that includes a sequence of satirical ‘prayers’ from her earlier pamphlet, *Thrown Voices* (1986).

In Liverpool, Duffy knew working-class playwrights, Willy Russell and Alan Bleasdale, and her two plays, *Take my Husband* (1982) and *Cavern of Dreams* (1984), were performed at the Liverpool Playhouse. Her radio play, *Loss*, was a BBC broadcast in July 1986; *Little Women, Big Boys* was produced at the Almeida Theatre, London in 1986, and *Grimm Tales* was performed at the Young Vic in November 1994. Among subsequent adaptations are *Casanova* (West Yorkshire Playhouse 2007), *Rapunzel*, for the ballet LORENT dance version (2013), and *Everyman* at the National

Theatre, London (2015), also published by Faber. Not surprisingly, then, she excels at the dramatic monologue, evincing ‘the most valuable skills of the playwright: dramatic timing and characterization’ (Donaghy 1991: 244). Her skill in writing lyrics was also budding and the title of her 1982 pamphlet, *Fifth Last Song: Twenty-One Love Poems*, links to sequences by Pablo Neruda and Adrienne Rich. Looking back on these formative years, Duffy states:

Poetry now is much more part of the fabric of people’s lives than it was, say, thirty years ago. There weren’t any women poets around then. The best thing that made poetry less Oxbridge, I think, was the Liverpool poets. They had quite a lot of hostility and snobbery to deal with from the Oxbridge mafia, who fortunately now don’t have as much power. As a teenager, I went to poetry readings like pop concerts: I heard Norman MacCaig, Peter Porter, Adrian Mitchell, when I was 15, 16. It was wonderful. That all these poets should be alive and talking in the language I thought in. (Duffy, Viner 1999)

When Duffy won the National Poetry Competition in 1983 for ‘Whoever She Was’ (*SFN* 35), responses were mixed and getting her first volume published was not a given: ‘I’d been to every major publisher in England before Anvil took it [*Standing Female Nude*] and they’d all turned it down’ (*Second Shift* 1994: 22). Through the late 1980s and early 1990s, however, Duffy ‘became one of the busiest poets on the circuit. She took residencies, gave readings, visited schools, encouraged younger poets on Arvon Foundation courses and was *The Guardian’s* poetry critic 1988–9’ (Forbes 2002: 22). In 1991, Duffy met Scottish-Nigerian poet, Jackie Kay, her partner for over ten years. However, it was the birth of Duffy’s daughter, Ella, in 1995, that self-confessedly became her central consciousness: ‘so I changed, I learned, / turned inside out—or that’s / how it felt when the child burst out’ (‘Thetis’, *WW* 5–6). This reorientation glistens in her poems for children and in the intensified reflections on Duffy’s own mother, particularly following her death in 2005: “‘I remember going to see her in one of those frightening chapels of rest. And there was a silence so deafening that it did deafen me. It was four years before I could write about it, and then eventually a poem [‘Premonitions’] did come”’ (Preston 2010). This personal lyricism continued during her laureate years when she also resuscitated the craft of public poetry, earning praise for ‘her indefatigable record in responding to public events over the five years of her tenure as poet laureate’ (Wilkinson 2014).

Poetry Volumes and the Critics

Duffy made an impressive entry to the British poetry arena when reviewers applauded her first volumes. As she became a serious contender in the ring, however, some critics felt the need to knock her out and, as already illustrated, she is still not without detractors. Robert Nye's 1986 review of *Standing Female Nude* (1985) is often cited: 'A clarity, a mixture of charm and truthfulness which breaks the windows of perception in new ways altogether ... a book that marks the debut of a genuine and original poet'. Reviewing her next book, *Selling Manhattan* (1987), Vernon Scannell noted the stylistic spread, from the tender 'Warming Her Pearls' to the disturbing 'Psychopath', and judged it 'one of the most satisfying new volumes of poetry to come my way in the past couple of years ... The world that is reflected and explored in these poems is almost entirely urban and more or less darkened by poverty, violence, fear, resentment and frustration. ... [Duffy's] intelligence, wit and verbal resourcefulness treat these realities in ways that are not depressing' (1987/8). In interview, Duffy explained: '*Selling Manhattan* is mainly about loss. The poems explore the loss of contact with true values and there's an ecological theme that ties in with that although I wasn't really aware of it at the time. I suppose I'm trying to shape through language things which are outside of it; to give a voice to those whom we've denied a voice, attempts at pre-language' (Buckley 1989). In his effusive review of *The Other Country* (1990) Dennis O'Driscoll noticed these ambitious raids on the inarticulate: 'Duffy's poetry concerns itself, too, with the limits of language, with the white spaces on which words leave no imprint. She is aware of how often words veil what they signify, how difficult it can be to match language to feeling. She strives to express the ineffable, to recover lost time, to give a hearing to the body language of lovers and the "wordless barefaced truths" of strangers, to catch the "phrases of light" and "the colour thought is / before language" (1990: 65). He approved a discernible shift towards 'more personal territory'.

Mean Time (1993) caused a cascade of praise, typically, 'one of the best and most intelligent collections to have been published by a younger poet in recent years' (Harris 1993), and Sean O'Brien's oft-cited prophecy: 'she could well become the representative poet of the present day' (1993). It was the book promoted through the New Generation Poets in 1994 and first set for A Level. *Mean Time* ends with 'Prayer', voted the 'second

most popular poem in the language' in 2003, trumped only by Philip Larkin's 'The Whitsun Weddings' (Ezard 2003). In *The Poetry Book Society Bulletin*, where it was the recommended choice, Duffy explains the title:

The poems are about the different ways in which time brings about change or loss. In the collection, I mean to write about time. The effects of time can be mean. Mean can mean average. The events in the poems can happen to the average woman or man. The dwindling of childhood. Ageing. The distance of history. The tricks of memory and the renewal of language. The end of love. Divorce. New love. Luck. And so on. ... Lastly, I have tried to order the poems in *Mean Time* in such a way that the collection shares the coherence of a record album; that it reads with some kind of emotional, not literal, narrative. Opening with Manfred Mann's 'Do Wah Diddy Diddy' and closing with the quieter place names of the shipping forecast familiar from the radio—*Mean Time* tries to record the brief words we hear and speak under the clock. In that effort, at least, I hope it is optimistic. (PBS 1993)

Duffy's role in a renaissance of love poetry was considered brave: 'At a time when coolness and cleverness are at a premium among poets of her generation, Carol Ann Duffy's passion and compassion are unfashionable virtues' (O'Driscoll 1990: 66). With the publication of *Selected Poems* (1994), critics rehearsed previous verdicts and interviewers rehearsed the stock questions about class, feminism, and sexuality whereas Duffy aired her sense of becoming more steadily autobiographical and also more confidently experimental, trying longer poems, for example. In terms of perspective, she saw beyond 'isms': 'I think I've been interested in the failures of our lives—inarticulacy and the feeling people have that they have talent and energy, but that they haven't been given any opportunity to develop it' (*Second Shift* 1994: 22). The *Selected Poems* printed new monologues that anticipated *The World's Wife* and that might explain the misogynistic bias of some reviews. *The Pamphlet* (1998) also included three of the 'wife' monologues, and it took a female critic, Helen Dunmore, to pen a spectacular article that addressed the tendency for 'biography' rather than 'form' to dominate reviews:

Poets have been much in the public eye this past year or so. But if their personalities have been analysed in the broadsheets, or blazoned across the tabloids, poems themselves have stayed in the shadows. ... Most people prefer gossip to poetry.

Carol Ann Duffy, however, is a genuinely popular poet. Her work sells, is widely read, discussed, enjoyed, imitated. ... Few poets ever manage to make their readers feel, again and again, that strange pang of mingled recognition and excitement that Duffy can evoke with such poems as ‘Plainsong’, ‘Warming Her Pearls’, ‘Small Female Skull’ or ‘The Way My Mother Speaks’. Her ear is fine, her tone beautifully poised, her language makes an appeal which seems to be naked but is really clothed in art. (Dunmore 1999: 80)

The World’s Wife (1999) is the volume that decidedly broadened Duffy’s audience, due to becoming a set text in schools and to its entertainment value, as Katharine Viner records:

In the world of British poetry, Carol Ann Duffy is a superstar. Highbrow and lowbrow, readers love her: from critics such as Sean O’Brien, who calls her ‘the representative poet of her day’, to students who study *Mean Time*, her majestic 1993 collection, as an A-level set text. Her poems are accessible and entertaining, yet her form is classical, her technique razor-sharp. She is read by people who don’t really read poetry, yet she maintains the respect of her peers. Reviewers praise her touching, sensitive, witty evocations of love, loss, dislocation, nostalgia; fans talk of greeting her at readings ‘with claps and cheers that would not sound out of place at a pop concert’. (Viner 1999)

Viner’s inviting summary outlines the book’s varied sources: ‘*The World’s Wife* is a joyous, exuberant book of poems about women usually excluded from myth and history: wives, such as Mrs Pilate, Mrs Aesop, Mrs Darwin, Mrs Faust, Frau Freud, Mrs Quasimodo; women usually defined by their men—Delilah, Anne Hathaway, Eurydice; and re-tellings of old stories in which the lead changes sex—Queen Kong, the Kray Sisters and Elvis’s twin sister, the nun’ (1999). For Duffy, the monologues—drawing on the Bible stories from her Catholic upbringing, the history lessons at school, and the pop music and films she imbibed—are costumes for ‘naked’ emotions and insights:

I think the poems are looking for the missing truth, rather than accepting the way we’ve been taught. ... So it’s looking for missing or hidden or unspoken truths in old stories. It wouldn’t have worked if you’d just gone through a list of favourite tales and revised them. You had to find something hard and truthful in the story. That’s why it took so long to write. Each poem had to be personally honest, and have some kind of autobiographical element in it, whether it had happened to me or whether it was an emotional or intellectual truth. (Duffy, Viner 1999)

On the subject of the book's feminism, Forbes sees 'The harrowing personal note of *The Other Country* and *Mean Time* replaced by a roistering, wickedly spiced burlesque' and although 'A few men think the poems are a bit too anti-men', he defends, 'It is hard for anyone, male or female, to resist the book's best jokes' (2002: 23).

Feminine Gospels (2002) is to date the most undervalued volume, perhaps because several poems demand more commitment from the reader, due to their longer length and densely de-familiarizing symbolism. Also, the title belies the book's scope and some critics simply made links with the use of myth in *The World's Wife* (Burt 2002). Duffy describes the book's junction of public and personal references:

Perhaps because I've been writing a lot for children—poems and fairy tales mostly—many of the poems have a dark fairy tale, or myth-like quality. A woman grows taller and taller and taller. Another gets louder. The Map Woman's Skin is an A to Z of her home town. A girl searches in the forest for her lost umbilical cord. There are many tall stories here, circling female experience, and told as gospel truth. The poems exist in an uncertain landscape where history crumbles in the distance and the women in these gospels walk towards us out of the dust of the words. Who was beautiful? Who went shopping? Who dieted? Who was the substitute?

... The collection closes with poems that are more prayer than gospel and more obviously personal. I wanted the collection to move in this way—from the larger 'public' statement of the gospel to the smaller, more intimate address of the poem as prayer, in love or parenthood or bereavement. (*PBS* 2002)

Jane Draycott writes of the collection: 'Transformation and transmutation are at the heart of these poems. Like Jack's beanstalk, narratives extend supernaturally through the kaleidoscopic material, historical and imaginative worlds of female experience' (2004). Forbes reads 'The Laughter of Stafford Girls' High', that takes up twenty pages, as an allegory of the rise of feminism, 'sweeping away dowdy post-war austerity and buttoned-up emotional sterility' (2002). For Duffy, it is 'a comic elegy of the sort of schools I went to—a convent and then a girls' grammar school—and for a certain kind of woman teacher' (*PBS* 2002). Novelist Charlotte Mendelson advocates Duffy's skill with narrative: 'A brilliant tale of a school transformed by a giggling epidemic, it sings because of her language (sky "like Quink", the "passionate cold / of the snow"), her humour and, most of all, her ability to pin down a lifetime in half a line and, in a few more [poems], tell