

Will:

We'll just be a couple of minutes. I think we'll just wait for things to get going.

Okay. I think we can start. People are just arriving now. My name's Will, and I'm joining you from New Writing North in Newcastle upon Tyne. I'm in the New Writing North offices this evening. Yeah, I can see that the audience is arriving now. It's lovely for you to join us all. We're really looking forward to welcoming you here tonight.

Just to apologise, I think there was a problem with our setup via Eventbrite, with the link going out to you, so thank you so much for all the audience members who've managed to find your way through that and to join us. Thanks for persevering and being here with us.

I'm just going to quickly introduce what we're doing this evening. This is one of our Northern Writers' Awards Roadshows. It's the first one that we're doing for our 2023 Awards. 2023 Awards opened up today, actually this afternoon, so they're all available now, on our website.

Which I should say has moved from where it used to be, which was on a separate Northern Writers' Awards website. It's now on the main New Writing North website. So if you're following a link that you have like a year ago, that's not going to work anymore. But don't despair, the awards are still there, and they're still open.

Just a few key points I was going to raise about the Northern Writers' Awards. The first is the deadline for the awards that are open at the moment is the 22nd of February 2023. We have a really wide portfolio of awards that are open this year. It includes... We're going to be talking mostly about poetry tonight, so I'm going to focus on the Poetry Awards.

Our Awards portfolio includes two main strands for poets, one of which is the Northern Writers' Award for Poetry, which is open to any poet, regardless of your level of experience or your publication history. That particular award is for bursaries of up to 5,000 pounds.

Then alongside that, we run the Northern Debut Awards, which is an awards programme for poets who are looking to work towards publishing their first collection of poems. This award is open to debut poets who haven't yet published that first collection, but might have published a pamphlet, or have published poems in magazines and have some experience in publication, but it can also be poets who are completely and utterly new. And through that award strand, there are three awards. The poets receive a bursary of 2,000 pounds plus mentoring and other support. One of those poets also goes into a programme with one of our guests in that, tonight, Anthony Anaxagorou, which is with Out-Spoken Press.

Yeah, those are the main award strands we have. Every year, we welcome really talented and exceptional judges, I think, who we love working with. This year, as our poetry judges, one of which will be Anthony working with us, again, on the Northern Debut Awards, as he did last year, and helping us to choose that poet who goes onto the Out-Spoken Press programme. And our other poetry judge will be the poet, Caroline Bird.

Yeah, those are kind of the key points around the awards. We're going to talk a little bit about the Northern Writers' Awards, and we're going to talk a little bit about poetry, in general, and opportunities for poets and have a look at what we feel like the poetry landscape is out there, at the moment, at this period in time.

There's also going to be a chance for the audience to ask us questions. Please put those into the Q and A box on the webinar thing, and we'll get to that when we can, later on in the discussion. And please, as well, just if you want to put anything in the chat, that's a good area to be putting things, like saying hello, saying where you're from, where you're joining us from. We're really interested to see a little bit

of the audience and know that you're out there. So please put any comments, or just general greetings, or whatever, into the chat and questions into the Q and A thing.

Okay. Yeah, we've got about an hour to talk tonight. I was just going to ask, first of all, each of our four guests to introduce themselves. We've got four really exceptionally talented poets with us tonight and people who I'm really looking forward to hearing from, and to hear a little bit about your experiences as poets, as well. I was going to ask Clare Shaw, firstly, just to say a quick hello. Clare is a previous Northern Writers' Awards winner and a poet based in the North England.

Hello, Clare.

Clare Shaw:

Hello, Will. What length of hello do you want? Is it just a hello Will that you want?

Will:

I think just a hello to me and to the audience, and just a hello.

Clare Shaw:

Hello to everybody. I'm just shouting a hello from my upstairs bedroom, well, on the hills above West Hebden Bridge in West Yorkshire. Great to be here.

Will:

Good to see you too. Harry Man, Harry is also a previous and very recent Northern Writers' Awards winner. Harry is joining us from Newcastle.

Harry Man:

Hey everyone, I'm Harry. I'm poet, editor and translator. I won a Northern Writers' Award alongside Suzannah Evans. So we've become a dynamic duo, the two of us.

Will:

Well, thanks, Harry. Good to see you. And Jade Cuttle as well. Hi, Jade. Good to see you.

Jade Cuttle:

Hi. Yep, I'm Jade from North Yorkshire originally, Doncaster area, kind of Selby/York. Zooming today from London, which is where I now work at The Times. Hopefully you can hear me all, but it's a busy office. But yeah, so it's been great to be involved with Northern Writers and get back to those northern roots.

Will:

Yeah, good to see you, Jade. And Anthony also joining us from London, I think.

Anthony Anaxagorou:

Yeah, London, East London. Hi, everyone. I'm Anthony. Yeah, broadcasting from East London, in Hackney, where it's very cold and very noisy. So yeah, hopefully you won't get any of that from your screen. Yeah.

Will:

Yeah, thanks for that. I can see now from all of you out there as well, in the audience, you're from all over the place, yeah, Manchester, yeah, Brixton, South Shields, York, Cumbria, Liverpool, brilliant. Thank you. It's great to see all of you. Thank you for coming tonight.

Anthony, I was going to just start off with you, actually, and just ask you a little bit about Out-Spoken Press, and just to tell us a little bit about what Out-Spoken does, but particularly the programme that we work on with you, through the awards.

Anthony Anaxagorou:

Yeah. I mean, the idea with the emerging poets' development scheme was that, I mean that, firstly, we should say that one of the things that I think we lack in the UK is infrastructure. So the idea with the awards... not with the awards, with the development scheme, was to try to create a space where poets could work, one to one, with other poets to develop their practice. So the scheme really came about with us thinking, "How could we give three individuals access to all the things that you need to set you on your way?" It's one of the questions that I get asked a lot, like from people who are aspiring to be writers. Some people want to do it professionally. Some people want to make a living from it.

I think, yeah, the idea is that we work with three poets, two from the north, one from London, throughout the year, so for 10 months. In that time, you work with me on a monthly basis, and then there's also support and resources from New Writing North and Spread the Word, who are partners in this with us as well. So there's a whole range of different things that the poets get in that timeframe to fortify and develop their writing practice.

Will:

Great. Thanks, Anthony. Yeah. From our point of view, we've love working with you on this programme. That last year was the first year of it. Yeah, it's a very multidimensional, multifaceted support programme, I think. And that really personal input you get from Anthony through it is obviously a really special part of it.

Jade, I was going to ask you. You won your Northern Writers' Award a couple years ago, and you received mentoring in that, as part of your award, from Daljit Nagra. Do you want to tell us a little bit about how that's been for you, and what, I guess, the benefits of that were, and how you felt going through it?

Jade Cuttle:

Yeah, definitely. No, it's been absolutely incredible. I'm remember our initial Zoom conversations. You let me really steer it, like who would I love to work with? So I drew up a list, a dream list, and yeah, Daljit has delivered more than I could have ever hoped for in terms of not just editing my debut manuscript, but we're looking at getting published with a publishing house, but also in terms of just...

Well, I'm now looking to do a Ph.D. based directly on the conversations we were having around race and nature poetry. Yeah, that's going to steer, I think, the next at least three years of the Ph.D., if not beyond that.

So I think the Northern Writers' Award for me really has been that turning point where, yeah, I got to sit down once every... We had a meeting once every, I think, two months, me and Daljit, and would really dig into the poetry and dig into deep tricky questions that I haven't thought about since joining the world of work. I work as a journalist, and it's been really refreshing to have that time, yeah, to dig into that. So yeah, I'm super grateful and can't wait to see what happens next. Yeah.

Will:

Yeah, thank you. I mean, that, what you're saying then about the Ph.D. as well, that's one of those things that emerges from a process, that maybe you don't expect to happen at the beginning, or it might be, you might think of it as a possibility. But it's a very fulfilling sense I think you get, when something like that happens. And you feel like you've found your way somewhere really significant through that.

I think sometimes, with those mentoring programmes, when they work well, I think it's guiding you towards a goal, but then there's all sorts of other things that come out of it, as a result of that, the legacy of it. And the ongoing practice that are born from it, I think are often just quite incredible and extraordinary things. Yeah. Well, thanks, Jade, for sharing that with us.

Yeah, Clare, so I was going to ask you about your award as well. We've talked, at other events and things, a little bit about this and about, I guess, things that were beneficial from it. I'll let you say it, obviously. Because obviously there's a financial payment as well that comes with it, that's one thing, but I suppose there are other elements too.

Clare Shaw:

Yeah. To be honest, the financial payment, because I was, I mean, very lucky, in a sense. I won my award in 2018, and I think there was three or maybe even four of us who shared the poetry award that year. The 5,000 pounds shared out, it wasn't a life-changing amount. It was really nice, but it wasn't going to set me up for six months, or...

So for me, it was a lot more about... I think it was, firstly, just the process of application was really, really useful. And that was a great learning point for me, that applying for grants and funds can be a useful process. It doesn't always have to be just an awful pain. I had to think through what I was doing and why I was doing it. And I had to check that what I was doing fit with my intention. It made me be a lot more rigorous and structured. And I felt, from that point onwards, like I was really steering the ship for the book. So yeah, enormously useful.

And then, yeah, well, lucky enough to win the award, and it was Imtiaz Dharker who was the judge that year. And I think the second big thing was the feedback that she gave us. She gave us all beautiful individual feedback. I've always carried that in my head because I think, "All right, I've got to go for a third now, haven't you, because it's got to be rule of three."

The third element is what I got from the award, was validation. It was the validation from other people, the validation of, yeah, Imtiaz Dharker, for heaven's sake, saying really nice, insightful things about my work and expressing her faith in my work. Being able to say that I had a Northern Writers' Awards, having that validation on my CV.

But it was also about the validation for myself, being able to recognise for myself that I am a writer. I am a poet. And a vote of confidence in that particular body of work that then really boosted me to give it my all, once I'd won the award.

Will:

Yeah. I mean, it's really interesting that you say that about validation, that you make that point, because at the time you won your award, you were already known as a poet. And you published. You'd have collections published. I think that's one of our other things we try to get across, a little bit, is that it's important to have that validation, whatever career stage you're at, I think. And that there are challenges for poets who are a debut, are completely new, but there's also a lot of challenges that come on in mid-career poets and later career poets, as well.

Clare Shaw:

Yeah, absolutely. I mean the whole awards culture, it's a very strange culture. There are so many invitations, I guess, in the writing industry, from the point that you first put pen to paper. I say industry. I make it sound a bit grand. So many points and so many ways to feel unsure about yourself and unsure about what you're doing, and particularly in the world of poetry. Although, I guess that's also true in other writing fields.

But particularly difficult to, if you're not making a living out of poetry, or you have to earn your living in different ways, just how do you feel confident that this is who I am, and this is what I'm meant to do, and this is what the world wants me to do? I think we will all have our weak spots and doubts and needs around that, and we will all have ways in which we can feed our sense of identity as writers. That, certainly, it was much appreciated food for my sense of identity.

Will:

Yeah. Well, thanks. That's really, really well put. And Harry, I was going to ask you as well. Just to follow on a little bit from what Clare was saying, I guess, I mean, did the award help you in a specific way that's very related to you, as a poet? The project that you were working on was pretty challenging as well, wasn't it?

Harry Man:

Yeah. Yeah, very much. I mean, I think Clare's hit the nail on the head with the sense of validation there because, I mean, for the project that I've been working on was five years of scratching away in the dark and not being sure if what we... I was working with a Norwegian collaborator, together, on a sequence of concrete elegies.

And for us, it was for love project. I mean, the money had run out long, long, long, long, long ago, and we, yeah, we're just working together over and over through the material, trying to write new poems and write the right thing.

So suddenly having the attention, bearing in mind every single writing achievement of my professional life, and have the same for other poets, is always built on a mountain of rejections. And rejections are part of that work, and I get that, but is, also, it is challenging. It is challenging dealing with rejection in the sober light of day. And thinking about what that means, of being disciplined about it, but also knowing that all of that effort wasn't for nothing. It was for something.

For me, I concentrated on the goal of having something out in my hands that I could hold onto, and know that I'd completed the job. But it was a real shot in the dark. I never thought that I would ever get a Northern Writers' Award. And for me, yeah, it was a shock to the system and so incredibly welcome. I mean I really felt I reached... I've been going across this long tundra by myself. Yeah, it was really incredible to have.

And then the second aspect to it was then thinking, "Okay. Well, how am I going to make my practice... How am I going to make this sustainable? How can I invest this in myself, as a writer?" And all the kind of touch points between my writing and the publishing process, from actually physically writing to paying yourself time, making time to write where you're actually paying yourself, rather than thinking, "I've got to be back on the shop floor, in a minute," or, "I've got to be working." To suddenly to see writing as work, in that way, was so incredibly validating and powerful, as a feeling.

Yeah, and like I say, that sustainability element of thinking about, "What are the books that I need to complete this? What are books that are going to also outlast this project, that I can take forward? What are the poems that didn't make the grade? What are ones that I felt I'm still working on at the same

time, but don't belong in the current project? How can I make sure that they have another life?" And I am one of those people who puts printer paper on their Christmas list. It's just I'm always thinking about what are the tools I need to move forward?

Yeah, it was incredibly special to do that and to, then, therefore, that take some of that portion of that award and put it towards taking myself on an Arvon. The last one I went on was 10 years ago. So suddenly being able to do that again, yeah, was incredibly helpful. I mean, I could actually spend time outside of my ordinary working hours and go off and get advice from Martha Sprackland and Mimi Khalvati, and get input on my poems. And see, get a sense of structure and trajectory, which is so fragmented, particularly over COVID. Keeping track of those ideas was really tricky, and suddenly having that structure, it's propelled the whole book forward. That's been really, really helpful and valuable. Yeah.

Will:

Brilliant. Thank you. Thanks for all of you, for those opening remarks, I guess. I want to talk to you all a bit about this idea of poets having to build their portfolio to get their work out there, a little bit. I guess I was going to ask, first of all, maybe, did you guys feel that is important to do? Anthony, if you were looking someone who'd made a submission to you for a collection, are you looking at things like that? Are you looking at how far they've published in magazines and anthologies?

Anthony Anaxagorou:

I mean, it plays a role, but it's not a crucial role, for me. I just like reading poems. I'm not really that interested in how many books someone has had, or what press they publish with, or how many magazine submissions they... When you get cover letters, that everyone just puts all the accolades down. And to be honest with you, I don't really read them. I just go straight into the poems. I don't. Accolades are great, but it's more just, I don't know, it's just pageantry isn't it, really? For me, it's just what have you got on the paper, and let's start there. Yeah.

And also meeting people where they're at, I think is important. If someone has been writing for three years versus someone who's been writing for 30 years, that information is important to know, I think. Whereas, I've had two poems published here, a poem public. Like, "Great, good for you." So yeah, I think it's more to do with how far in the game you are.

Will:

Yeah, because that does seem important. It's particularly important in poetry, that you have to become a poet. You have to learn to refine your technique, your skills in a way that, maybe, and you can, possibly, in some other forms of writing, you can just sit down.

Anthony Anaxagorou:

Yeah. I think because poetry is all technique. That's all there is to poetry, is technique. And the more technical, and the more technique, and the more craft you have, and you know the more sophisticated your poem has become. And I feel that that's the teachable part. That's the part that you can bring across.

You can't teach people how to imagine or how to feel, but you can teach them, if you put four words on a piece of paper, how you can structure those four words to make a more interesting idea on the other end. That you can teach.

That's what I'm interested in, how, if you read a poem, the potential that's there. In other words, you've got some really good ideas. You're taking some risks. This is really interesting. I haven't read anything like this before. And you might need a little bit of guidances into, I don't know, lineation, or some clichés, or tautologies, or whatever, but you can teach that. You can teach poets a way from that, and just give them permission to be more risky and be more daring, and then you get more interesting poetry.

Will:

Yeah. Clare, does that resonate with you a bit, as well?

Clare Shaw:

Very much. It's a hard thing to say, isn't it? So I'm glad that Anthony said it first because the received wisdom is that we must build up a lengthy CV of journal submissions. That wasn't the way that my career worked. And was, though, although I'm not brave enough to say you don't need to do that to the people that I mentor or teach, for example. I always say it's not the only route into publication. It's not the only route into the industry.

For me, it was about being in the right place at the right time for my ability with words to be spotted. I guess that's the way that the building up of a portfolio works. It's so that your ability can be spotted. But there are lots of ways to be spotted, and there are lots of ways to be read.

I'd say it's a lot more about being very thoughtful and honest with yourself about why you do what you do. Who do you want to read your work? Why do you want to write? What is it about? Who do you want to speak to? Do you want to speak to anyone? And then just investigating the possibilities around that.

For example, you might get a much wider audience on social media than you'd ever get in a poetry journal, or in poetry film, or... So yeah, for me, I'd say there are a lot of possibilities out there. You don't have to go the same way as people were going 20 years ago or 40 years ago, even.

Will:

Interesting. Yeah. And Jade, what do you think? Is it organic for you? I'm interested is if any of you actually consciously sit down and think strategically about... Because that seems, to me, a bit unnatural, in a way. That it's more about just creatively, artistically coming up with the work and giving yourself time for your process. Is that how it is for you, Jade?

Jade Cuttle:

Yeah, definitely. I think particularly having the one-year timeframe of the Northern Writers' Award, the mentorship, I think that allowed me to take a step back in terms of I don't need to submit everywhere, here, there and everywhere, to all these competitions. I've got this one year where I'm going to take it a bit slow and really think about what I'm doing and why. So I think that, for me, is the first ever time that I really got to grips with, "What am I doing in poetry, and why?"

I mean, obviously, I did a master's before, and I did start to think about that, but there was something different about the mentorship being so personalised. It's one-to-one for a whole year. I think that's when, yeah, I really took that step back.

And I think, for me, personally, it came at a really good time in the sense that, because of my job being in journalism, everything is like, you need to be a big name. You need to be have this many followers. There's such a focus on, yeah, how well known you are, how much visibility you have. Whereas, poetry,

coming back into that, I think, discipline, it's a really refreshing opposite take on that. It's not about how many followers you have or how many, yeah, journals or magazines you've submitted to, necessarily. It is, like Anthony was saying, a bit more about what you're doing and why.

So yeah, I think that's something that I've only just started to get to grips with. Because when I first started, I was, yeah, submitting everything everywhere, wanting to get a pamphlet out ASAP, even if it wasn't... When I look back on it, it's nothing. It's not the type of thing that I want to stand by in terms of, yeah, who I am as a writer. So I think, yeah, taking that time out for like a year, in a programme such as this, is a really, really beneficial way to, yeah, think about what you're actually doing.

Will:

Yeah. I mean, did you feel that there was pressure on you then, to get that pamphlet out? And do you know where that pressure was coming from, if there was pressure there?

Jade Cuttle:

Yeah, I think I put on myself, to be honest, just being feeling so much like an outsider to this space, and yeah, just wanting to feel included in it. It's like, "Okay. How do I do that? I need a pamphlet. I need a collection. I need a publisher. I need this, that." And while I'm moving towards that, I think I'm moving at a different pace and maybe more motivated by, yeah, what I want, rather than, yeah, imposing all this pressure on. But I think it's natural that when you're starting out, that's all you see. Isn't it? So yeah, I think having a mentor is really helpful, yeah, to just have that space to really think.

Will:

Yeah. And Harry, have you experienced that as well, that sense that you feel an outside force that's saying that you should publish in seven journals, and these particular anthologies, and not these ones, and win this competition, do a pamphlet and lead up to a collection, and that? Or has it been have you managed to step aside from that a little bit?

Harry Man:

I have, really, because I think that... Yeah, it's kind of brutal to say it, but I don't think that my work really fits into that world quite, of either journal publication, or working gig to gig and building up a portfolio on social media. I think every video I have of myself, I seem to make the most extraordinary and bizarre poses and sound really strange, and I really hate looking at myself. So Zoom has always been great.

Yeah, so that I have felt like there is a boot at my back to get the book out, and I have thought strategically about how I send my work out and where I send it out. But I think part of that, as well, is that editors also serve as a backstop, and that submissions process is also a backstop for the things that are not so good and don't belong in the world, potentially.

I'm pretty glad that poems that I wrote when I was much younger, in my early 20s, and so on, are not in the world because I think it's that same thing of when you're a kid, and you look at a Barbie doll, and you cut its hair and assume that it will grow back. Sort of thing where you look back on your own work and realize, "Crikey, I probably shouldn't have sent that out," or, "That's not quite right," or, "It's not how it sounds now." And you're always most in love with the most recent thing you've written.

Yeah. I mean, yeah, I would rather publish work that I really like and be published well, and go and publish comfortably in magazines that I like, and I would like to read and feel have a harmonic with what I'm up to. Those are always the things that lead me towards magazine submissions. But at the same time, I think that there is an academic pressure to continually publish work at a rapid, rapid, rapid rate.



But yes, also, the other thing which is the sanity check about thinking about is this something I would want to read myself? I find if I write for magazines, or write thinking in the back of my mind, "I'm going to send this out," often they fall at that hurdle, the magazine. And their poems are endlessly boring, about paint swatches called Olive Temple and stuff that I'm not really interested in reading. I don't want to see, ultimately, in print. So yeah, I mean, my imagination is quite weird, but yeah, that's how I see it. Yeah.

Will:

Okay. Thank you, Harry. Yeah, just to the audience, if you want to put any questions into the Q and A, we'll come to those in a few minutes. But just, I guess, one of the things that I'm quite interested in is the importance of development as a writer, and particularly, for tonight, as a poet. I just wanted to ask each of you what advice you'd give to people who have poems that they've written and are getting somewhere with their work, but they know that it needs to develop further? And how that they can generate support for themselves, that they can find how they can do something themselves that will help their poems to develop, whether that's to find time or to find some feedback from elsewhere, or a mentor because, as anything else, to read more widely? Anthony, do you want to go first?

Anthony Anaxagorou:

Yeah. My approach to these kind of questions... I get asked this loads, and I talk about this more or less two, three times a week, with different people that I'm working with. I think the idea is to see poetry as a very complex Rubik's Cube. There's no straight answer to a lot of these things. Because you have to ask yourself, firstly, as an individual, what do you want from poetry? Do you just want to write poems and have other people read them in a book? And if that's one thing, do you want to write and teach? Do you want to be involved in curation? Do you want to be involved in production? Do you want to be involved in editing or publishing? There's so many different revenue streams and strands to poetry that I think, as an individual, you work out what it is you actually want.

Most, 90% of people just want to write. They want to write their poems, and they want other people to read them, and they want them to be seen. I think if that's the case, and you're in that, quote, unquote, "emerging capacity", having a mentor is fundamental. Having a mentor, doing courses and having a mentor are literally the way in which you move forward because, what that does, is it creates this condition that allows you to not only try things out with the mentor, and the mentor will tell you what's working and what isn't, but you're also getting advice and books.

I really feel that, for me, my development as a poet came from my reading. It came from having a network of poets that I was drawn to poets because I was firstly drawn to their work. And then I became friends with them as a result of that. The friendship was secondary to the fact that I like their work first. And if you have poets or friends that you can send work to, as well as a mentor, and you stay reading both contemporary poetry and the more canonised material, I think you really get a sense of how you form a voice and an aesthetic. That is really what people are after. Because so much of the poetry in the initial stages is imitation. It's derivative of something. I think it's trying to work with a mentor or work on a programme with a group of people, to push out of that space of imitation and into an authentic sound.

But then what Clare was saying was really interesting, and I think important as well, is that who validates that? That's the problem with this business is that it always relies on validation. And that validation is wholly subjective. There's so many things that have to be in place in order for a book to do well. That's what people forget is the overnight success takes 10 years.

For a book to do really well, so many cultural factors have to be in place in order for that to happen. It's never just about the poems in the book. There's all these things that are going on around the book that

will catapult it into people's imaginations and into people's houses, and minds, and lives. That's really what people need to understand, that some folk just want an instant, like, "Come on. I've been doing this for 10 years, and nothing's happened yet." It's like, yeah, but you're not cooking a curry. You're not making eggs. This is something very different. This is something that can take years and years to fully realise itself. You just have to stay chipping away at it.

Will:

Yeah, great. Clare, do you want to come in on that topic?

Clare Shaw:

Yeah, sure. A big yes to all of that, but I think maybe even go back one step further and go back to that question of, why are you doing what you're doing? Because that'll lead you to the right room in terms of sustaining yourself, in terms of taking that collection of poetry forward.

I think you already named a lot of the elements. If you've got a bunch of poems, and you want a collection or you want a pamphlet, then you're going to need some time. You're going to need some feedback. You're going to need some self-belief. You're going to need to learn the craft, and you're going to need to stay loving the craft and feeling really passionate about it because there isn't a great deal of money or glory. It's got to be something that you continue to love, and the love will continue to drive what you do. It'll drive all of those elements. It'll drive you finding the time, and doing the learning, and seeking out the networks.

I guess there's going to be different routes for different people, but for me, my routes into passion, and feedback, and learning, and time, and self-belief has always been about writing with other people. Not necessarily a mentor for me, but writing with a group, be that on a course, or be that... Residential courses are always lovely, though slightly expensive. But it's been about, as much as anything, writing with informal groups of friends who share a passion, but also have something to teach me, something that we can teach each other. So people, but starting with why, and then you'll find the right people.

Will:

Has that always been a long-term thing for you, Clare? Have there always been people that you share your work with? I guess what I'm asking is, whereas, are you still sharing work with people that you've shared work with for a long time?

Clare Shaw:

Whenever I don't share work with people, that can be when I start to really drift. There are different ways of sharing work. Sometimes it's about being part of formal groups. I did a MA a while ago. More often than not, for me, it's about groups of trusted friends because I find groups really difficult. I feel absolutely mental when I'm starting workshops. I really don't like them. That's a confession because I run quite a lot of them. They're alright if I'm running them!

But I also think that it's about, yeah, it's something to do with friendship, something to do with validation. You can get that in different places, in different ways. At the moment, I'm exchanging work with just one friend, and it's very, very useful. It's something to do with accountability. There's somebody who witnesses what I do and pushes me, and I push myself because they're witnessing.

It's something to do with audience because I find audience to be a really, really important part of editing, whether that's for single poems or a collection. No matter how hard I've worked on a piece, when I read it out to somebody else, I'll spot things that I need to change, or where I need to up my

game. And no matter if I've read it out to a small group, if I then read it out to a big group, I'll spot even more things, so an audience has to be part of editing, for me.

But sometimes it's as simple as posting it on social media because then that's my audience, and that's my accountability, and that's my feedback. That's what I mean about, maybe, it's about checking out why you're doing what you're doing, what you love, and that might lead you in your particular direction, in terms of taking that batch of poems forward to where you want it to go.

Will:

Okay. It's really useful to think in that way, actually. Harry, you mentioned Suzannah, as well, who won the award at the same time. Have you guys shared work with each other? Or is it about, kind of, encouraging each other?

Harry Man:

Oh, I feel like, yeah. Yeah, I feel like, yeah, it's a [inaudible 00:42:41]. But yeah, we do share work, and she's great. We both share poems. It's a real honor for me to look at Suzannah's work, and to have that time together, on opposite sides of the north of England has been really nice. But yeah, I think Paul [inaudible 00:43:04] said it, "It's because my capacity for self-delusion is infinite."

I think that's true with looking at poems, subjecting them to the tests and pressures that that poem requires, listening to that individual poem. What is it saying? And how is it saying? What's that poem's diction? What's the design and form? And does it sit in that form? Does it belong in that form? Those very forensic checks can be very useful. And over time, as well, we've gotten to know over this last year, we really got to know each other's work really well, and having somebody there who has been able to follow your voice over a series of poems, follow you as well.

I mean, I have a trusted group of friends who I share work with, reciprocally, as well. We've been doing that now for about 20 years, so we know each other's voices. That is so valuable because, again, people know what you're doing. You don't feel like you've walked into a chemist and asked people if they can look at your car. It's the right person looking at the right things, understanding what you're trying to do. So yeah, yeah, but it has been really, really, really special to do that. And obviously, we're both sci-fi nerds. I mean, so we both also get the fringe references as well. Yeah, that's been great.

Will:

It's important, isn't it, to have that common ground.

Harry Man:

Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

Will:

Thank you. And Jade, how do you find taking feedback on your work? Do you feel that there's a real importance there to be receptive, but also to know where you're coming from, as well, from within?

Jade Cuttle:

Yeah, I find feedback, at least through this mentorship, really helpful, not just in terms of the editing of individual lines or words, but more thinking more broadly in terms of... We have conversations, not just about the word, but about the landscape of poetry and the industry of poetry, more generally. I think that has also steered me in certain directions, thinking outside the poem, outside the box of... It's not

just about the poem you submit by email, and going through it, but just, I think, taking that step back and, yeah, having discussions around whether it's, in mine and Daljit's case, around race and representation, or diversity, and things like that.

And then, yeah, so I think more so than the editing of the individual bits and bobs, it's been more useful, for me, the feedback in terms of just rethinking where I am in the landscape, and where I want to be, and what I want to bring to it. So yeah, conversation is definitely key, I think. Compared to before I started the mentorship scheme, I was just in my bedroom, just writing alone. And it's like, where do you go with that? I think dialogue is really, really important.

Will:

Yeah, and interesting that it's also quite big picture stuff that you're thinking, as well. You think about around the individual poems themselves, but you're also thinking widely about them as a body of work, I guess, too.

Okay. Yeah, we do have a few questions, which I'm going to read out, if that's okay. From Dan, first and last question, "What do you listen to when you write?" So does anyone not listen to anything when they write?

Clare Shaw:

I don't. There's no way I could listen to something when I'm writing. That would really stop me from writing. Though, I do like to be somewhere where there is a little bit of background noise, nothing that I'm in control of. I like to be on a train, or in a cafe. That can work quite well, unless there's a big argument, or there's music on. But if I've got music on, no.

Will:

[inaudible 00:46:50].

Clare Shaw:

[Inaudible 00:46:50] lyrics or the tune.

Will:

Yeah, it's a distraction, or it's also, maybe, I don't know, generating a feeling in you that maybe isn't quite a feeling of what you're working on.

Clare Shaw:

Too intrusive. A bit of chatter and a bit of hum in the background, that's grand.

Jade Cuttle:

I'm the opposite. I listen to one particular track on loop, for hours and hours and hours. Yeah.

Will:

Is it the same track every time? Or...

Jade Cuttle:

No, it depends. I mean, this weekend, it was Beyonce's BREAK MY SOUL, but yeah, usually I opt for something instrumental, sax-based, or something. Ah, someone's saying, "Tune," in the chat. Yeah, it's a good tune. So yeah, complete opposite.

Will:

Yeah, but a consistent momentum then, by it being the same tune?

Jade Cuttle:

Yeah, I think so.

Will:

Harry and Anthony, do you guys listen to any music or any other sort of sounds?

Harry Man:

Yeah. I mean, yeah, very similar to Jade, I drive my partner crazy because if we're driving in the car or something, and I've got Spotify on, it will come up with the tracks for listening to while writing, which tend to be deeply repetitive and solely which is just focusing my attention and drowning out the rest of the world. But yeah, I don't really listen to anything with lyrics in it, pretty much, as just a blanket rule, but then I'll just hover around between, yeah, different sounds. But I really like electronica, liquid drum and bass. Listen to that a lot.

And if there's something that I feel, yeah, like Johann Johannsson, or somebody. Well, it seems to fit the atmosphere of what I'm working on. But sometimes I find that my brain travels further with the song than it does on the page, and then it's off on its own little holiday. That's no good. So I like things, yeah, which is repetitive that'll keep me on the page. Yeah.

Will:

Yeah. Okay. Anthony.

Anthony Anaxagorou:

Yeah. I think my relationship to music is quite complex, when it comes to writing. There's three stages because I don't just write. My writing, and everyone's writing, it goes on for sometimes years you're tinkering with poems.

So when I'm in the generative state, in other words when I'm trying to get just random stuff down, I listen to a lot of electronic lo-fi, sometimes white noise. And I have it very, very loud in my headphones, which are noise-cancelling. That really, for maybe two, three hours, is kind of automatic writing. It gets me into this quite overstimulated space. And then I leave it for some time. And then I'll come back to it.

And when I come back to look at what I've written, maybe a couple of days later, I put on something like Nils Frahm, which I listen to loads of Nils Frahm. I have all his albums on iTunes. That creates a different experience inside my body, that then I react to the language differently.

And then once I get that draft or the second phase done, and the poem is starting to realize itself, so maybe like three, four drafts in, with the Nils Frahm. Then I cut to silence until the poem's done because I need to hear the sound or the notes of the music of the words. I need to hear the sound of the language, which becomes its own music. That's how I do it.

Will:

That is very complex, actually. Yeah, but it seems like you've got a real pattern there that works for you.

Anthony Anaxagorou:

Yeah.

Will:

Thank you very much, Dan, for such an interesting question. Yeah, so a few more popping up, actually. This is from Rasha: "how do you go out meeting other poets and mentors that are publishing or seeking to publish their work? Through local writing groups or courses? I'm in a writing group, but no one else in the group wants to publish their work." And there's a list of constructive criticism. Clare, do you want to answer that one?

Clare Shaw:

I think the same way that I get anything done, which is just put yourself out there and keep putting yourself out there. If you're in a group that you're not getting what you need from it, leave the group, it's okay, unless you're getting other stuff out of it that's worth putting up with the lack of critical feedback.

Just keep yourself out there. Go to readings. Hang out online. Check out social media. Speak to people. Keep telling people that you're looking for a group. That's what I do all the time. I just tell people what I want, and eventually it turns up.

Will:

Great. Thank you. Thank you, Clare, now. And Rasha, I hope that that helps, actually. And yeah, I think you find the best group for you.

There's a question here, "How many hours do you read a day, or in a week?" Look, I mean reading, we could probably talk for another hour about what you read, and what you recommend reading. But I guess it is important, I guess. And to supplement that question a bit, I'm sure you all read a lot, but are you selective about what you read? Are you reading books that you think are going to inform your poetry? Or do you read, just generally, what you want to read? Jade, do you want to go first on reading?

Jade Cuttle:

Yeah. I mean, I read a lot and review a lot for work. I try and draw as much inspiration from that as I can, but yeah, I don't necessarily read every day. I wish I did. But yeah, I find, yeah, reviewing other poets work really helpful, actually, in terms of seeing what they're doing, how they're doing it so great, and yeah, that feeding back into, yeah, my editing process, so I definitely would recommend wide reading. And yeah, I mean, the poetry library has been a really great resource. So yeah, libraries are great.

Will:

Do you guys read other things that aren't poetry? It's a silly question. Harry.

Harry Man:

Yeah. Yeah, I mean, I tend to read three different poetry collections at the same time, as a kind of steering committee to check that I'm doing the right thing on this one poem. What's the sound? And

what's the image? What's the voice? I'll tend to move between those collections, as I'm writing, so it's the listening and writing processes all folded together. Which, understandably, makes me feel like I've been dunking my head in a massive bowl of spaghetti for eight hours.

So what I tend to do, alongside that, is just read nonfiction stuff that will jump into my writing. And at the moment, it's a shame I'm in the wrong office. I've got a gigantic map of Mars, which is great for stopping conversation. You just fold it open and no one can see. But that, it's got the whole geological history of Mars. That is really interesting to me, and probably only me, but I really like that. It acts as a kind of cold sink from the intensity and the heat of looking at collections and poems up close. Yeah.

Will:

Yeah. Okay. Yeah, Clare, Anthony, anything on reading with you guys?

Anthony Anaxagorou:

Yeah, I read a lot. I read a lot. I read all the time, actually. I have just books around me. I mean, there's books all over the place here. You can't see them because I didn't want to put them behind the screen.

But I have a rule with poetry. I mean, I read a lot of nonfiction. I read a lot of history. I read a lot of essays. I'm really into essays, essay collections. I read a lot of periodical journals, like New Humanist, Paris Review, New Statesman when I can. So I read a lot of journals as well, like and Granta.

But with poetry, I have a five-poem rule. It's like when I get sent... I get sent a lot of books, and I just, if I'm enjoying it and I'm five poems in, I'm reading to the end. And if I'm not enjoying it, and I've read five poems, then the book goes on the shelf because there's just too much to get through. There's too much I want to read, so it is, literally, that I have to be quite austere with the way in which I do it. Otherwise, I'll just end up getting stressed out and reading things that I don't really want to be reading. And if I have to read something, that's different, but if I'm reading just for leisure, then that's what it is.

Will:

Yeah. Okay. Yeah. I mean, there is a lot out there, isn't there? And Clare, are you primarily a poetry reader?

Clare Shaw:

I'm going to nick that five-poem rule now. Yeah, that's a great idea. I've got a billion books. Again, you can't see, but I'm like, I'm nearly can't get out of the house because I've got so many books. I'm interested in a lot of things. When I get interested in something, I want to read about it. I'm not primarily a poetry reader.

I more or less lost the ability to read, through lockdown, and also I experienced quite severe migraines. So reading, for me, is something that I've spent a couple of years at not doing, and I've felt a bit weird about it because it's always been a big part of my identity. But these days, easing my way back into it. Audiobooks for fiction, that's nice. And poetry books, I'm chugging on through, but it's going to be the five-poem rule, from now on.

Will:

Fantastic. Yeah. I know it's 7:00. Are you guys okay just to hold on to answer one more question, what we've got from Patrick? Thank you. So Patrick's question is, "What's the best way to go about getting a mentor?" Which is a really good question and quite a difficult one to answer, I think. But does anyone have any tips in finding a mentor? Clare, do you want to go first?

Clare Shaw:

Yeah. My recent experience, so I've just found a mentor, or a kind of mentor. It was somebody who's work I love and I approached her, and now we're doing some work together.

I also do do mentoring. The way that works for me is, well, I'll either have met people... I really like to have met people because it's a very intimate, intense relationship, working with somebody. So it will usually be people that I've worked with on courses, that I'd take on. But if somebody wanted me as a mentor, and this has just happened recently, then I would want them to get in touch and send me a nice letter, and send me a page of their work so that I know that we can helpfully work together. But I'd say choose someone who's going to be useful. Approach them. What's to lose?

Will:

Yeah. That's good advice. Thank you. Anyone else? Any thoughts? Or...

Anthony Anaxagorou:

I think that I'll just say, with mentoring, yeah, it's like finding... I mean, not everyone offers it, so it's finding a poet that you like, and a poet, I think, that is actually... Because, and this is quite controversial, but I don't think that writing poetry and teaching poetry are the same skill set. There are some poets who are fantastic writers of poetry, but they find teaching it quite difficult. I've sat with those poets and had those workshops, and I can see that it doesn't actually come as naturally to them. So I think, yeah, approach poets like is what Clare did, approach poets, see if they offer mentoring, and then maybe have a taster session with them, to see how you get on.

Actually, it reminds me a lot of therapy, which is really interesting, because you develop this trust. And it's the trust that... Because you're dealing, a lot of the time, with very tenuous subjects within the writing itself. So it's like having a poet who's sensitive to the subject matter is really, really important. It's not just someone who, "I like your line breaks, and I like your metaphors and your images." It's more to do with how they can work within the subject that you work in. I think that's really important to take into account, as well.

Will:

Yeah, it is. It's so important to get that match right, actually. Isn't it? And to have that awareness of established from the beginning of that understanding of what you're working on together. That's also such a good point, though, as well, about it not necessarily being the world's most famous poets. But equally, they might also be great mentors, not saying that they're not, or household names, or whatever. But there are poets out there, or in towns and cities across the north, who are doing absolutely brilliant grassroots work, workshops, and working with community groups. They're not the most famous poets in the country, but they're absolutely brilliant at tutoring and mentoring, and yeah, who have a huge amount to offer. Any final thoughts on that, Harry and Jade?

Harry Man:

Yeah. All I would say, it's quite useful to... If you're thinking about, just going back to the point about sticking to a group, finding a writing group, getting people to stick together is, yeah, just as Anthony was saying about going on a course and stuff, a lot of the relationships that I have, people looking at my work and me looking at their work, has grown out of courses. That is just a really good place to start meeting other people who are very serious and want to look at work together and begin those conversations.



And equally with the Arvon I went on, from this award, that also allowed me to stay on a WhatsApp group that I'm still on, where we regularly give feedback on each other's writing, as well as post pictures of each other's gardens and whatnot, as well. But yeah, but giving feedback there has been invaluable too. So yeah.

Jade Cuttle:

Yeah, I found my Arvon course really useful as well, just kind of immerse yourself in the environment for a whole weekend and forget about the outside world. But then, yeah, when those situations aren't possible, I've found that, yeah, the online short courses, like by Poetry School, I'm doing one at the moment, they're really helpful. Just by giving yourself that deadline, I think, and that motivation, especially if your full-time job isn't poetry. It's about setting that structured... Yeah, motivation, I think is really helpful.

Will:

Yeah, Poetry School courses are just wonderful. They're so imaginative and innovative. Yeah, I really recommend anyone who's up for really having a look at those.

I'm sorry to say we have actually run out of time. There's loads more I could have asked the four of you. Thanks so much to all the audience for your comments in the chat, your thoughts in the chat, and the questions that you sent in to us, but also just for joining us and being there with us, this evening.

But yeah, Clare, and Harry, Jade and Anthony, lovely to see the four of you. Fantastic. Thank you also for being with us, this evening, and for sharing, so generously, your knowledge and expertise and your enthusiasm for poetry. Yeah, really, really lovely to see you. I'm going to say goodnight, and it's going to cut off very abruptly, but yeah, really lovely to see you all. See you again.

Clare Shaw:

Bye-bye.

Jade Cuttle:

Bye.