

This interview with Nikki Milholin in March/April 2004 was conducted as part of her thesis on The Dark Horse at West Chester University, Pennsylvania.

Nikki Milholin: What was the inspiration for publishing The Dark Horse?

Gerry Cambridge: There were several: brazen self-promotion, annoyance at hype in the poetry world, a desire to have a say, indignation at the inflated reputations of some poets and the undue neglect of other poets, and an ambition to present cogent alternative possibilities to what was considered good by the mainstream. Summing up, in other words: moderately aggressive male competitiveness.

What individual or type of writing has had the most influence on your creation of The Dark Horse?

Poets who have been influential on me as personalities and in guiding my own aesthetic (and therefore influential on the creation of the magazine) are, in Scotland, George Mackay Brown and William Neill. From America, Dana Gioia, especially in the magazine's early days, offered much valued advice and feedback. Our tastes are rather different, as is our verse, but we share a belief in a culture of individualistic little magazines. Partly because of the connection with Dana, the early Horse was associated with American New Formalism. For me this link was useful in that it helped give the early magazine an identity. Temperamentally, however, I am not a joiner of literary movements. New Formalism has been an interesting socio-poetic phenomenon (though it has had no effect whatever in England or Scotland, where the literary cultures are quite different) though I find it a little tired now. There are fine poets associated with it, but much of the writing produced by the movement lacks the anarchy of sensibility that, as a Scots-Irish writer, I look for. Nevertheless, the Horse's critical engagement with New Formalism remains a significant part of the magazine's history. The magazine will continue, on occasion, that engagement.

Why did you choose The Dark Horse for the title of your magazine? Does the logo relate to your editorial intent?

Colloquially, the phrase "The Dark Horse" indicates "an unknown quantity". I like to think this title helps the magazine retain an air of the unpredictable as to editorial practice and policy. I dislike programmatic editorial approaches. I believe that the logo, too, has a certain enigmatic quality which I think is in keeping with the magazine's ethos.

Why include "A Scottish-American Poetry Magazine" on the cover? Is it intended for the reader, or a declaration of the magazine itself?

Both, probably. In the early issues, the sub-head on the cover was "A Journal of Poetry and Opinion." I felt as the magazine progressed that I wanted to emphasise the transatlantic nature of the journal.

Have you found traditional form or free verse more accessible to modern subject matter?

It depends upon the subject matter. Both traditional form and free verse can lead to flaccid writing, albeit for different reasons. In the former, by padding out with unnecessary matter to meet the requirements of a particular form; in the latter, paradoxically, by not providing any template to rein in a writer's tendency to verbosity. A writer of free verse needs an exacting ear. The Dark Horse has, in my view, been over-identified with traditional form. In part this is because it set out with a somewhat partisan interest in metre and rhyme, and that is what poets, therefore, tend to submit; as a magazine can only print what it receives, its reputation can become self-fulfilling. I am, though, as enthusiastic about free verse as about traditional form. I also believe free verse is harder to write effectively. Form tends to foreground concepts, because form itself can be a metaphor (one thinks of the potential for repetitive forms such as villanelles to imply obsession, for instance). Therefore a big danger for a formal poet is in finding their linguistic register becoming too abstract. And it would be hard to imagine, say, a magnificent poem such as Ted Hughes' 'Swifts' -- and there are numerous other examples -- being written in a formal stanza. Of course, that poem has formal resources of its own which are -- and this is the miraculous thing about free verse at its best -- unique and unrepeatably. Conversely, it is hard to imagine a poem such as Anthony Hecht's chilling and masterly sestina 'The Book of Yolek' working as effectively in free verse. This poem's formal fulfilment buttresses the power of the subject matter.

What topic is most abused in modern poetry? Is there a topic that you feel deserves more attention that you have stressed in The Dark Horse?

To the first question: I'm not sure. It is difficult to be precise about this because it would mean replying generally, and individual poems are always particular. To the second: The Dark Horse is against the implied consensus of hype. It is against the merely fashionable. It is for the "authentic voice", though with numerous complications, and irrespective of how linguistic theory thinks it has demolished such a notion.

What are the advantages of including essays, reviews, and poetry as opposed to strictly poetry and author interviews?

Purely pragmatically, because readers enjoy reading intelligent prose about poetry, perhaps more than they enjoy reading the poetry itself. This is hardly surprising: the heart sinks at poetry magazines consisting only of verse and interviews. In the former case, because one expects from yawning experience so many of the poems to be mediocre. In the latter, because one expects so few of the interviews to be other than love-ins between admiring supplicant and chosen poet. Another advantage of essays and reviews is that they help to demonstrate that poetry matters sufficiently to be worth debating and criticising. It is worth pointing out that I feel rather prouder of the prose published in *The Dark Horse* than of its poetry. This may be because it seems easier to judge the excellence or otherwise of prose.

As the editor, do you ever rely on a second opinion before publishing anything?

I have always retained the final decision on what appears in the magazine. This is mainly because experience co-editing a previous publication proved costly both time-wise and emotionally. From issue 1 to the earlier work on issue 12/13 (a double), Aileen McIntyre, my UK editorial assistant, proved a valuable sounding board on everything relating to the magazine's contents. If we both liked something, it would certainly be printed. If I liked it and she didn't, I would still print it if I still felt convinced of its quality. If she liked something and I didn't, I wouldn't print it. And, of course, Dana Gioia would frequently advance work with a recommendation from the U.S. I rejected numerous such submissions, and accepted others. Now, there is the ongoing editorial filtering on the American side by our assistant U.S. editor, Jennifer Goodrich, who sends me work she has sifted for a final decision. I now make all decisions on content without any second opinion in the U.K. It is worth pointing out that this doesn't seem to have led to any decrease in quality of the magazine's content.

How does your background in photography relate to your editing a literary magazine?

Very little, except that the perfectionism which governed my natural history photography has been transferred, I hope, to the overall appearance of the *Horse*.

Have you considered including wood engravings or other illustrations in *The Dark Horse*?

No, though it would be pleasant to do so occasionally. However, to find suitable images for certain poems, or to commission them, would be a time consuming business, and I am strapped for time as it is.

Who reads *The Dark Horse*?

Poets, critics, general readers looking for an intelligent engagement with the world of, predominantly, contemporary poetry. The Scottish poet Don Paterson told me a

couple of years ago that, though he seldom saw a copy of the magazine, he heard a good deal about its presence. He told me that Alice Quinn, the poetry editor of the New Yorker, had told him that she only read two British poetry magazines. One was Poetry Review, the magazine of the London Poetry Society, and Britain's largest circulation poetry journal. The other was The Dark Horse.

Does your readers' feedback reflect eclectic American views or more traditional Scottish views?

What are "eclectic American views"? What are "more traditional Scottish views"? I don't wholly understand this question. Scottish views can be as eclectic as from anywhere else.

Has the internet enhanced your subscribers' interactions with the publication?

I'm not sure. An internet presence has, though, made it easier for interested parties to find out about us. As for "enhancing subscribers' interactions" with the Horse, the website is plain and straightforwardly designed. Primarily it contains downloadable archive material -- prose and interviews -- from out of print issues. I suppose that is an enhancement of some sort.

How long was the design process for The Dark Horse? Were there critical elements of design that you felt were necessary to the publication's success?

When I first began the Horse I knew nothing whatever about design, though I had a sense of composition owing to my background in photography. I wanted the magazine to seem distinctive in Scotland -- and in general -- and therefore, I chose the current format, known as B5. Dana Gioia, from his business background, advised that a logo was an important element of a singular publication. I spent several months searching for a piece of art which seemed appropriate, commissioned one logo (with disastrous result), and finally found what seemed suitable. The Horse graphic is from a 15th century Dutch woodcut. I've forgotten the artist, though the work was called "The Death of the Groom". By trial and error, using this image, I cobbled together a composite logo which has remained the magazine's since. A good friend, around issue 5 or 6, scanned it for me as a TIFF image, thus avoiding the problems I'd had previously whenever trying to reposition its various components.

The design remained constant up to issue 8, though the magazine evolved a spine at issue 4; it had previously been saddle-stitched. With issue 8, following some contact with a designer working on my book "Nothing But Heather!" for Luath Press of Edinburgh, I took a renewed interest in the magazine's design. I opened up the layout somewhat, increasing the leading and the white space round the prose. This process has continued to the current issue, number 16. With issue 15, the magazine developed a two colour matt-laminated cover (it had previously been

various coloured card overprinted with black) and some minor improvements to the body text. I slightly redesigned the cover layout for issue 16. The design re-vamp is now, I think, more or less complete.

How would you assess The Dark Horse's success?

Not in terms of sales, which are very modest. But the notion of "success" is very often a personally defined matter. I class the Horse as a success for me because it has established some sort of a forum, however small, for discussion of poetry; it has become (or so I fondly believe) a benchmark of sorts for poetic quality; and it has given me, as well as my contributors, a voice. A "success" in conventional publishing terms is measured in profit. A success in terms of a little poetry magazine is in: a) surviving; b) retaining literary quality; and c) creating some kind of a ripple in poetic sensibility, or simply achieving a distinctive voice when many other voices are not.

What is the future of the literary magazine? As a follow-up question, where do you see The Dark Horse in the next five years?

Literary magazines may well become more web-based, though the best of them will still have the print copy of each issue as their most important aspect. In an age of publishing conglomerates and the smoothing out of all eccentricities, the thrawn (Scots for "stubborn"), unconventional and contrarian presences of the best little magazines can only make them more important, provided they're ambitious.

Over the next five years I shall have to decide whether to continue producing The Dark Horse. A decade is a reasonable span for a little poetry magazine. If the Horse continues, its sheer longevity may make it more establishment.

Has your own poetry been affected by editing the magazine?

Thank you for this question. Firstly, because one effect of editing a little poetry magazine is that it can marginalise an editor's work as a poet and, paradoxically, the better that poet seems as an editor the more marginalised his or her own creative work can seem. I belong to a tradition of poet-editors, and I have tried to avoid having my own poetry marginalised by: a) writing as well as possible; b) publishing at reasonably regular intervals. I consider the fact that I write verse absolutely crucial to whatever discrimination I can muster as an editor. It can mean I am both less likely to be impressed, and more genuinely impressed: I bring, I hope, a craftsman's pragmatic insight into the difficulties etc of making verse.

But I assume there are two main implications behind your question. The first is: has the writing of my own poetry been negatively affected by the demands of editing on my time? The second is: has the experience of editing the magazine

changed my own aesthetic. To answer the first: no. I may well have written less, but I have probably written better, because editing and attempting to honestly assess the work of others is a great self-teaching process which filters down to one's own writing. To answer the second: my early work may well have been too prone to rural romanticism. My later, has, perhaps, more edge to it, more dryness of tone, a touch more asperity. This may well be to do with the sheer bulk of contemporary verse I've been subjected to as editor of the Horse for a decade.

Looking back, would you change anything in the content or design of the publication?

I am a little embarrassed by the slightness of some of the poems I selected for earlier issues, but otherwise I am proud of the magazine and wouldn't change anything. It's been a learning experience: one corollary of which is that mistakes are part of the creative process of editing.