

Good poets need good teachers

Akshita Nanda

Scottish poet Carol Ann Duffy, 58, thinks good poets need good teachers as well as the impulse to write.

The poet laureate of the United Kingdom spoke about how her education helped her hone her verse, in a one-hour reading last Saturday at the Singapore Writers Festival.

"I fell in love with poetry as a child in school. English was my favourite lesson from the age of 10," she told a crowd of about 300 packed into the Binary Pavilion tent on the Singapore Management University's Campus Green. "I was very lucky with my teachers. We were encouraged to write poems and stories, and creative writing was very much a part of education."

Another pivotal moment came when her secondary school English teacher lent her a collection of Dylan Thomas' poems with a stylish photograph of the author on the cover.

"He looked kind of cool and it made me see poetry as kind of sexy and glamorous. Which of course it is," she said to laughter.

Duffy was one of the headliners of the annual festival of literary arts which ended yesterday. The author of nearly 30 collections of poetry, as well as numerous plays and books for children, she is also the first woman poet laureate of the United Kingdom. The mother of a teenage daughter has held the post since 2009.

An intimate dinner with her for 20 readers at Barber Shop at The Arts House was sold out before the festival began on Nov 1. Saturday's one-hour reading drew so many people that the doors were left open to accommodate eager fans.

Visibly exhausted by the humidity and left hoarse by "an English bug", Duffy read poems from collections such as *The World's Wife* (1999) and her most recent book, *The Bees* (2011).

Many in the audience had volumes of her work open during the session, reading along silently. Among them was Vietnamese student Annette Wu, 18, in her first year in the liberal arts programme at Yale-NUS College. She

has studied Duffy's work as a secondary school student and hopes the poet will appear in her undergraduate curriculum as well. She says: "She's an inspiration as a strong woman. What really counts for me is how blunt and unpretentious she is."

The poems Duffy read were characteristic of her style: forthright in examining issues of gender and social responsibility.

After the reading, a member of the audience asked whether the collection was born out of resentment.

No, but there was a deliberate attempt to fill in "the historically female silences" in traditional stories, the poet answered. "It wasn't so much an anti-male sense that I had, though I'm hugely anti-male-behaviour,

though not anti-male," she said to ripples of laughter.

The *Bees* include personal reflections about her daughter Ella as well as reactions to the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan post 9/11.

"Poetry for me has always been a kind of invisible companion, a way of not just explaining myself to myself but the world to me, and other people, landscapes," she said.

In 2008, her poem *Education For Leisure* was removed from the syllabus after complaints that it encouraged teen violence.

When the matter was brought up by a member of the audience, Duffy said the poem reflects the need for education for disaffected youth and then read out the poem she had penned in answer.

Mrs Schofield's GCSE, named after the horrified educator who first complained, points out all the other violent literature on the syllabus, including Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and *Othello*.

"Explain how poetry/pursues the human like the smitten moon/above the weeping, laughing earth; how we/make prayers of it.

"Nothing will come of nothing:/speak again. Said by which King? You may begin," she ended.



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"Dylan Thomas looked kind of cool and it made me see poetry as kind of sexy and glamorous."

Carol Ann Duffy (above), on seeing Dylan Thomas' collection of poems with a stylish photograph of him on the cover