

UK poet laureate Carol Ann Duffy draws fans to reading at Singapore Writers Festival

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British poet laureate Carol Ann Duffy reads from her work at the Singapore Writers Festival, Nov 9, 2013. Almost 300 fans squeezed into a white tent on Saturday to hear Duffy read her work. -- ST PHOTO: LIM SIN THAI

Almost 300 fans squeezed into a white tent on Saturday to hear Scottish poet Carol Ann Duffy read her work.

The 58-year-old writer and author of nearly 30 collections of verse is the first woman poet laureate of the United Kingdom. She is one of the headliners of the Singapore Writers Festival, an annual literary event that ends Sunday.

An intimate dinner with her for 20 readers at Barber Shop at The Arts House was sold out even before the festival began on Nov 1. Saturday's one-hour reading drew so many people that the doors to the Binary Pavilion on the Singapore Management University green had to be left open to accommodate the crush.

Visibly exhausted by the humidity and left hoarse by "an English bug", Duffy read about a dozen poems during the one-hour event. These included verses from *The World's Wife* (1999), in which myths and fairytales are retold from a female perspective, and her most recent book, *The Bees* (2011).



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Many in the audience had volumes of her work open during the session, reading along silently, and most later queued to have their books signed in the nearby Festival Pavilion tent. Signing took at least an hour.

The poems Duffy read were characteristic of her style: forthright in examining issues of gender and social responsibility. *The World's Wife*, for example, subverts classical Greek myth in allowing voices to the unheard of female partners of known male characters. There is Mrs Aesop, the wife of fable-spinning Aesop, and Mrs Midas, who leaves her husband after he gets his wish to turn all he touches into gold.

A few questions were allowed after the reading, and 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, Duffy 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.