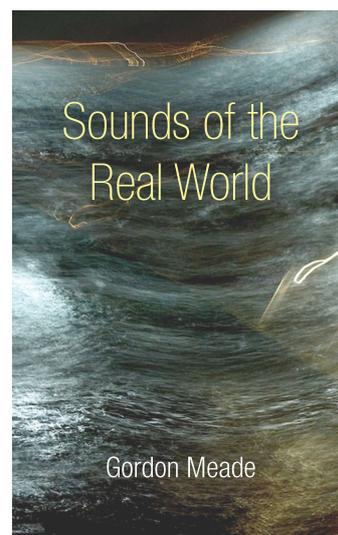


Anne-Marie Jordan interviews Gordon Meade

'As I began to regain specific memories, in a very random manner, this early grounding in speech therapy somehow gave me the right to play with language in a way I had not been interested in doing before the accident.'

Gordon Meade is the author of *Sounds of the Real World* (Cultured Llama, 2013). *Les Animots: A Human Bestiary*, with illustrations by Doug Robertson, is forthcoming in 2015



A-MJ: When did you start writing? Was there anything specific which prompted it?

GM: I suppose I had a couple of false starts and one re-entry as far as writing goes. My first interest in literature came from my older sister. When she was revising for English A-level, she would read to me some of the poets she was studying. It was later that I first tried my hand at actually writing anything and then the influences came from bands such as Deep Purple and Led Zeppelin. Luckily, nothing much came of my attempts at copying them.

My second 'false' start came while I was studying English at the University of Dundee. However, no matter how much I tried, I found it almost impossible to write creatively while I was also trying to write critically.

Things did improve a little after I had left university and gone down to London, but I was unsure as to whether I would have either the talent, or the motivation, to make anything of my writing. Then, on Friday 13th March 1981, I was involved in an accident on London Transport, which resulted in my sustaining a fractured skull. When I woke up three days later, I had lost both my memory and my speech.

It was while recovering from the accident that I began to take my writing seriously. A part of my re-entry into writing was the awareness of both the importance of language and its arbitrary nature. In my early sessions of speech therapy, if shown a photograph of a dog and asked what it was, I would be just as likely to answer 'cat' (its opposite), 'wolf' (a similarity), 'log' (another similarity, in sound) or 'dog' (the right answer!).

As I began to regain specific memories, in a very random manner, this early grounding in speech therapy somehow gave me the right to play with language in a way I had not been interested in doing before the accident.

A-MJ: Can you remember how you felt when you had your first piece published? What was it?

GM: Unfortunately, I can. When I was about seventeen or so, I sent a terrible poem of mine called

‘The Four Horseman of the Apocalypse’ (more Black Sabbath than Yeats) to an advertisement in a newspaper that was looking for poems for an anthology.

At that time, I had never heard of Vanity Publishing and, when my poem was accepted for publication, I quite happily sent in my few quid for a copy of the book. Even when the hardback *Autumn Anthology* arrived, I was none the wiser, until I opened it to see my poem sharing an already crammed page with, if it were possible, an even worse attempt than my own, entitled ‘My Pet Rabbit’.

A-MJ: Do you have a routine for your writing?

GM: My writing routines have changed over the years incorporating periods of full-time work, part-time writing residencies, house husbandry and fatherhood. However, what I try to do now, when I can, is get up in the morning and start early. I like to try to get two to three hours of work and coffee done before lunch. If my afternoons are free, they are usually split between revising and reading.

A-MJ: From where do you draw your inspiration?

GM: Almost everywhere. There have been constant themes in my work for as long as I can remember – the sea, creatures, childhood, landscape etc – but I try to get something from wherever I happen to be, and whatever I am doing.

A-MJ: What or who has been the greatest influence on your writing?

GM: My ‘greatest’ influences have changed over the years. Once I had started writing, without doubt, two of my earliest influences were Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath, quickly followed by Seamus Heaney. I loved Hughes’ early animal poems, Plath’s control over highly-charged emotional themes and Heaney’s descriptive rural poems.

As I developed as a writer, I found that I became more drawn towards American poets. Galway Kinnell, Maxine Kumin, Jim Harrison and Robert Wrigley are some of my favourites who have definitely had an influence on my own writing.

I like the way in which American poets are not scared to write about the large poetic themes of Life, Love and Death in a language and style that is both intelligent and, at the same time, totally accessible.

Another American poet who has joined their ranks recently is Lucia Perillo, one of whose poems is referred to in a poem of mine, ‘A Cormorant in Regent’s Canal’ in *Sounds of the Real World*.

A-MJ: Tell us about your creative writing courses for vulnerable people.

GM: After having worked, in the 1990s, as Creative Writing Fellow at the Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Writer in Residence for Dundee District Libraries, I began my work with vulnerable people in 2001 by running two courses of creative writing classes at QMH hospital in Dunfermline: a) for Alzheimer’s patients and b) for patients with mental health issues, predominantly depression.

From 2002 to 2007, I was involved in a number of projects working with vulnerable young people, both in drop-in centres and schools, most of which were primary schools.

Although I have enjoyed my work with all age groups, it was certainly my work with primary school children that I felt most rewarding. However, as with most initiatives, the funding for this work was not reliable and, from 2008 to 2012, I worked as the Royal Literary Fund Writing Fellow at the University of Dundee.

Since moving down to London, the ugly head of lack of funding has, once again, reared up. However, at present, I am mentoring the writing of a person with a brain injury who is keen to develop his own writing.

A-MJ: In *Sounds of the Real World*, your passion for the sea is unmistakable. When did your relationship begin? Has it changed over the years?

GM: Before writing the poem ‘West Sands’ (in *The Familiar*), I would have said that my relationship with the sea began when my partner (now my wife) and I moved back to Scotland and the coast of Fife after my accident in 1981. ‘West Sands’ gives the lie to this.

My relationship with the sea has always been organic and as such, like the sea itself, ebbs and flows. The relationship, as it stands now, is best summed up in the poem ‘A Love of the Sea’ in *Sounds of the Real World*.

A-MJ: Nature, in general, is also prevalent in your work. Have you always had this love and respect for the natural world?

GM: My childhood was spent in rural Perthshire and, albeit on a very small scale, a lot of my time was taken up with my father and with the countryside pursuits of hunting, fishing and shooting. The hunting was mostly of rabbits and pigeons and the fishing for flounders and eels.

I must say, however, that it was probably boredom, rather than any moral outrage, that led to me stopping the above. As I grew older, I suppose that, for some reason, I began to see things from the creatures’ points of view.

By the time I started writing, I was already very interested in the interaction between the human and animal worlds – and this has remained a constant and, I hope, developing theme in my work.

A-MJ: *Sounds of the Real World* is such an evocative title – where did it come from?

GM: Unfortunately, most of the titles of my collections so far have also been the titles of one of the poems in the collection. Not very imaginative, I admit.

However, with *Sounds of the Real World*, I was aware of a slight shift in this. There is a poem in the collection called ‘THE Sounds of the Real World’ which does give the reader some insight into a number of the themes in the collection. However, by dropping the first word of the title, I hoped to give a more general idea of what might be happening in the collection as a whole.

I have always been interested in the sound patterns in poems and have also never been quite sure as to what can be called the REAL world. The collection is, on some level, an attempt to try and answer this question by using the sounds in poems.

A-MJ: Its cover is also very hypnotic – how does it capture the essence of the collection?

GM: The cover image is from a photograph by the Scottish photographer, Alan Shedlock. When I moved down to London, I was aware that the collection would straddle two very different areas of my experience: living on the coast and relocating to the city.

I wanted the cover to be faithful to my abiding passion for the sea and, at the same time, not to deny the fact that there had been a major change in my life that would, eventually, have an impact on my writing.

I hope that the abstractness of the front cover somehow addresses this issue, whereas the calmer image of the back cover helps show another side to both the sea and what the book contains.

I am very grateful both to Alan Shedlock for the initial image and to what Mark Holihan, the designer of the cover, has made of it. Any success regarding its effect is down to them.

A-MJ: What effect, if any, has the move from your native Scotland to inner city London had on your writing?

GM: I have only been living in London for about eighteen months and the twenty or so poems in the collection that were written in, and about, London were done so in a sort of honeymoon period from October 2012 to April 2013.

I have always been able to write a number of place poems from wherever I have found myself – Germany, the Everglades or Venice – and London has been no different. As to what the lasting effect might be, it is too early to say for sure, however I have noticed a shift to more overtly human issues rather than my usual human/animal ways of looking at things.

A-MJ: Do you have a favourite piece of writing, and why?

GM: I found it quite difficult, initially, to answer this question – so many good poems vying for the number one spot – but, then, surprisingly easy.

My favourite piece of writing, if I can use the politician's cheat of not actually answering the question as it is given, is not a single piece, but a slim volume of essays, meditations and techniques written by the Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh.

In his *The World We Have: A Buddhist Approach to Peace and Ecology*, Thich Nhat Hanh quite simply, in a wonderful prose style, gives us a vision of the real world (?) as it is now and ways in which we might address some of the most pressing issues in that world today.

There is also a really good introduction by Alan Weisman, the author of *The World Without Us*,

which gave me the idea for one of the poems in *Les Animots: A Human Bestiary*, my next collection with Cultured Llama.

A-MJ: Whose writing do you look forward to reading?

GM: As I mentioned earlier, my main reading these days comes from across the water. In the last couple of years, there have been great new collections from some of my favourite authors, including Robert Wrigley, Billy Collins, Thomas Lux and Michael Collier, alongside an excellent collection, *On the Spectrum of Possible Deaths*, by Lucia Perillo, a poet whose work is new to me.

I do, however, look forward to reading any of my friends' books when they come out and, since moving down to London and being taken on by Cultured Llama, I have been introduced to a number of new poets whose work I greatly admire.

I am especially looking forward to new Cultured Llama poetry collections from Michael Curtis and my fellow Scot, John Brewster, as well as the new departures by Cultured Llama, including its book on the music of Medway, *Do It Yourself* by Stephen Morris, the blend of different genres (journal entries, letters, poems and photographs) in Sarah Salway's *Digging Up Paradise* and, of course, my own collaboration with the artist, Doug Robertson, in *Les Animots: A Human Bestiary*.

A-MJ: As a reader, as I approach the end of a book I always feel excited to see how it ends and regret as I don't want it to. How do you feel when you finish writing a collection?

GM: Somewhat similar to your feelings as a reader, very mixed emotions. There is the feeling, hopefully, of a job well done, allied with doubts as to whether the job is really as well done as I might think it is.

There is the fear as to whether the collection, an entity in its own right now, will find its audience and be appreciated. But mostly, I think, is a sense of relief; the chance for a pause, a deep breath and then the opportunity to start again on the next one.

A-MJ: What are currently working on?

GM: At present, my work is three-fold: I am putting together a few reading sets for a couple of tours of Belgium, Germany and Luxembourg due to start at the beginning of May; I am working as a writing mentor for a person who received a quite severe brain injury and wishes to develop their own writing; and I am working on the poems for my next collection *Les Animots: A Human Bestiary*, which I will touch on in my answer to question 17.

A-MJ: Why do you think poetry has such enduring appeal for readers?

GM: For those of us who have fallen under its spell, poetry's enduring appeal is without doubt. Why, is a more difficult question.

In my case, it came through my older sister reading me passages from William Shakespeare and Wilfred Owen while she was studying for her English A-levels. There was something about the sounds of the words that got me hooked.

I would imagine that, for most people, their love of poetry also comes from some early personal exposure to its power. Still now, a really good poem somehow creeps up on me and takes me unawares. And long may they continue to do so!

A-MJ: What plans do you have for future collections?

GM: As mentioned earlier, I am in the process of working on the poems for my next collection of poems, *Les Animots: A Human Bestiary*. I say MY collection of POEMS, but the book will not just be mine, and the poems will not just be poems.

Les Animots: A Human Bestiary will be the result of a collaboration between the artist Douglas Robertson and myself. We have met a couple of times to discuss the above project, most recently, appropriately enough, the Natural History Museum and it is our intention to not have a book of illustrated poems, but a book in which the text and the visual image come together to make something quite different.

We do not have a name for this yet, but I have seen some of his initial sketches and am very excited to see how our work together will develop.

A-MJ: Your moustache has been greatly admired on the reading circuit. When and why did you first grow one?

GM: Well, I see that you have left the most important question for the end. As with my taste, or lack of it, in poetry, I blame the Americans and, more specifically, The Eagles, Joe Walsh and Carlos Santana.

Having no musical talent at all, the only way I could feel part of their world was to grow a moustache, which I did, aged eighteen. It has been with me ever since.

Sounds of the Real World costs £8 and is available from www.culturedllama.co.uk

