



# *‘I Like the Cut of your Jib’*

– or Dr Ian Sansom, Writer-in-Residence.

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Ian Sansom, writer, reviewer, bon vivant and, currently, the Writer-in-Residence at Queen’s University should be a difficult man to get in to see. He is, after all, a Guardian columnist, an Oxford scholar, an author and a man who provides delighted interviewers with the opportunity to use the phrases ‘bon vivant’ and ‘Oxford scholar’ in one sentence. (Something that editors will usually call you into their office and look at you, more in sadness than in anger, for.)

Unfortunately he’s also approachable and pleasant, even serving me coffee, so my plans to disguise myself as a deliverer of Mongolian Mutton BBQ and buttonhole him on his way to the car came to naught. Ah well, I still have the costume. I can do it another time. The hat is rather fetching.

***I was once given the advice that if you can’t write something nice in a book review, write nothing at all. As a noted reviewer yourself, would you agree with that?***

Gosh. I don’t know. Am I ‘noted’? I don’t think anyone notes reviewers, do they? Do you? Really? You ever recognise a reviewer in the street? And if you do note them, aren’t you really noting the writing, rather than the reviewing? In which case the niceness or nastiness becomes irrelevant – what you’re admiring is accuracy, or truth, or swing, or wit, verve, gusto, beauty.

But then again, absolutely and of course, I like nice as much as the next man, although obviously I often fail to live up to my own high standards of niceness. That’s certainly nothing to be proud of.

But – hold on – then again when I’m reviewing a book I don’t think about being nice or being nasty at all. It’s not part of the process. I’m simply setting

out to answer some basic questions, like ‘What is the author doing?’ and ‘Do they succeed?’ and ‘Is it worth it?’ It’s an inquiry.

‘You may abuse a tragedy, though you cannot write one. You may scold a carpenter who has made you a bad table, though you cannot make a table. It is not your trade to make tables.’ Samuel Johnson.

***Assuming you’ve ever had a bad review (I sucked up); does the fact you’ve written reviews yourself inoculate you somewhat against the criticism?***

‘Against criticism we can neither protect nor defend ourselves; we must act in despite of it, and gradually it resigns itself to this.’ Goethe.

***Which reviewer, if any, would you most like to review one of your books and why.***

I would most like my friends to review my books. For obvious reasons.

***How did you become Writer-In-Residence at Queens and what do you consider the post should be?***

I don’t know if I stepped in so much as stumbled in – or fell, maybe. Wandered? Tripped? As far as I remember it happened like this: I met Ciaran Carson for the first time in a bar a couple of years ago and he said ‘I like the cut of your jib’, or your suit, or something, and he asked would I be interested in coming along and convening the Group? I had no idea what he was talking about, but drink had been taken and I said yes, and all of a sudden there I was. I had no idea what I was letting myself in for. I have to say it’s been a great blessing to me though: I’ve met some wonderful people.

And then, yes, coincidentally and subsequently I was appointed BBC Writer in Residence – that was a surprise too.

As for what a writer in Residence should be, well ... I think middle-aged bearded men like myself are not perhaps ideal. Young, and thin, and beautiful and brilliant would be better, but I guess those kind of people are often too busy doing other things. Personally, middle-agedly, beardedly, I think a good Writer in Residence is like a yeast – ‘yellowish frothy viscous substance consisting of fungous cells developed by germination in contact with saccharine liquids and producing alcoholic fermentation, used in brewing beer, making wine, distilling spirit, and raising bread etc’ (OED). Actually, that sounds horrible. But you know what I mean.

***The Queen’s Writers’ Group is surely one of the longest-running writers group in existence; it’s been running since the 1970s (or 1960s if you include the meetings where Heaney, Mahon, Longley and others met to discuss their work.) How do you feel about the responsibility of continuing that tradition?***

It seems to me that Northern Ireland has plenty of people much, much better equipped than me able to talk about traditions. The tradition, such as I understand it, is simply this: be intelligent.

***As well as the duties of the Writer-in-Residence you have also done literary workshops with the BBC over the summer, meeting with a variety of writers of varied experience. Do you think these sort of workshops are a valuable tool for aspiring writers?***

Hmm. Tricky one. Yes and no. Writing is difficult, and it can be a lonely business, and workshops are a form of conviviality, so in that sense they’re probably a good thing. On the other hand, and in the end, if you’re going to write anything worthwhile, you’re just going to have to sit down and do it by yourself, so ... Is that a Catch-22? I can’t remember what it really is, a Catch-22. A few weeks ago I was at a dinner with this great American crime writer, a real hero of mine, and in between the chicken livers and the lamb I asked him, ‘Do you have any advice for aspiring writers?’ and he said, ‘Yes. Just f\*\*\*ing do it.’ Maybe a good workshop is just a polite way of saying that.

***What do you think of the current Northern Irish Literary Scene?***

Alas, I don’t really do scenes; I don’t know anything about scenes; they kind of pass me by. I’m the kind

of person who could have been living in Paris in the 1920s, or in San Francisco in the Fifties and Sixties, or Belfast in the Seventies, and people would have said, ‘So what do you reckon about Gertrude Stein/or this guy Kerouac/or these young Belfast poets?’ and I would have said ‘Sorry? Who?’ There are some great writers and emerging writers in Northern Ireland. And there are always stories. And there will always be poets.

***Are there any tips you’d give to aspiring writers?***

My first agent gave me some good advice: don’t staple your manuscripts. (And then he dropped me like a hot potato). Seriously. That’s a great tip.

***The third book in the Mobile Library series will be coming out in January 2008. Will you be having a Belfast launch?***

Now you mention it, maybe I should. My fear is, though, no one would come. Would you come? I never go to book launches. Have you ever been to a good book launch? Have you, though, really? That lethal combination of writers, and wine – ugh, awful! As it is the mere writing of books seems to provide me with more than enough opportunities for embarrassment – why seek out any more? Then again, maybe if there were jugglers, or magicians, people who could do things with balloons, or a dance ... That’d be quite good. Actually, a dance would be great. If I could persuade my publishers to pay for a nice venue, and a good band, and a light supper, I’d definitely have a book launch. I’m open to offers.

***Of all the books you’ve reviewed, are there any that you actually picked up again to read for pleasure?***

I read all books for pleasure, including the books I review: why else would anyone read a book?

***From Oxford to Queen’s – is there a big difference in the literary culture at these two universities?***

‘A man in Paris does not imagine the same sort of thing that a native of Uganda imagines. If each could transmit his imagination to the other, so that the man in Paris, lying awake at night, could suddenly hear a footfall that meant the presence of some inimical and merciless monstrosity, and if the man in Uganda found himself in, say, the Muenster at Basel and experienced what is to be experienced there, what words would the Parisian find to forestall his fate and what understanding would the Ugandan have of his

incredible delirium? If we live in the mind, we live in the imagination. It is a commonplace to realize the extent of artifice in the external world and to say that Florence is more imaginative than Dublin, that blue and white Munich is more imaginative than white and green Havana, and so on; or to say that, in this town, no single public object of the imagination exists, while in the Vatican City, say, no public object exists that is not an object of the imagination. What is engaging us at the moment has nothing to do with the external world. We are concerned with the extent of artifice within us and, almost parenthetically, with the

question of its value.' Wallace Stevens, 'Imagination as Value'.

### *Is there anything else you'd like to add?*

Yes, certainly. The best advice anyone ever gave me: don't waste time being miserable.

Oh, and I have another book out in November: The Enthusiast Field Guide to Poetry (Quercus, £12.99). It's quite good.

*Tammy Moore*

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Publishers receive thousands of unsolicited manuscripts from as yet unpublished authors every week. So, if you want to have your book published, how do you give yourself the edge? Two new websites may offer intriguing digital ways around the slush pile; both of which can offer free feedback as well as possible publication.

[www.meettheauthor.co.uk](http://www.meettheauthor.co.uk)

Focuses on video pitches, where author talk about their books in a short clip, which is then accessed and rated by their online community. There is

a fee structure, but it looks like there is a free introductory period. Also, it is a great resource to see how people within your own genre pitch to prospective publishers.

[www.authonomy.com](http://www.authonomy.com)

A new website about to be launched by HarperCollins, which seems to do peer reviews and rating of submitted new texts. HarperCollins promise to take a good look at those books which achieve the highest rating each month, and once again this constitutes the business end of an online community, which may be of greater help to aspiring writers. The details will become clearer when the site goes online in the next few weeks. You can already join their mailing list.

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