

Chancellor Dharker,

Today, we honour Carol Ann Duffy. When I was asked to give this citation, my first thought was, how do you sum up such a great artist, or cherry-pick moments from a career that has spanned so many years, and is still very much ongoing?

I switched on my laptop and began. The first article on my screen was:

10 of the Best Carol Ann Duffy Poems Everyone Should Read.

Everyone ought to read them. That's for sure.

Her most famous one, according to this article, is *Prayer* - and what a poem it is, as fresh today as when it was first published. These two lines demonstrate why her poetry is so vital:

"Some nights, although we are faithless, the truth
enters our hearts, that small familiar pain..."

A pain only poetry can resolve, especially when written by poets like Carol Ann Duffy, a poet who defies definition. In an interview with Jeanette Winterson, Carol Ann said, "I define myself as a poet and as a mother – that's all."

We must, of course, consider Carol Ann's incredible achievements.

She won the National Poetry Competition, as well as the Eric Gregory, Somerset Maugham, Forward Prize and T.S.Elliot Awards, to name a few. She is a Fellow of the British Academy, the Royal Society of Literature and the Royal Society of Edinburgh. She has been awarded an OBE, a CBE and a DBE.

In 2009, The New York Times ran this headline:

"After 341 Years, British Poet Laureate Is a Woman."

Reading the article reminds us how the impact of Carol Ann's appointment to this role was celebrated, worldwide.

Women and members of the LGBT+ community were filled with hope to see this redress, as Carol Ann Duffy, a "...vegetarian eco-feminist...", ended what *The Guardian* called "[f]our hundred years of male domination..."

I cannot resist further quoting from the article, where Carol Ann is recorded

"...as saying...the role needed to be "much more democratic...", ...that she would "not write a poem for Edward and Sophie - no self-respecting poet should have to..."

When I read this, I went to my doorstep and sent her an imaginary high five.

Carol Ann Duffy unites us, by articulating what others might find difficult to say.

Jackie Kay sent me this beautiful quote:

“Carol Ann Duffy is that rare thing – a unique, utterly original and well-loved poet whose work has shone brightly, lighting the path. Her work has empathetically and intelligently crystallised our times. She is a great ambassador for poetry too, generous and ground-breaking in the way that she has embraced all of her public roles as Laureate and as Professor of Creative Writing at Manchester Metropolitan University.”

I recently returned from Kendal Poetry Festival, where I saw the *Painting The Poets* exhibition. Poetry's serendipity found me, while writing this citation, standing in front of her portrait, experiencing a great sense of connectivity.

I spoke to Clae Eastgate, the artist behind this body of work, about her portrait of Carol Ann, and here are some of the words they said:

“The portrait was to mark Duffy's personal achievement and draw attention to the erstwhile absence of women in the laureateship timeline... I was drawn to Duffy's poetry because of its fresh perspectives, its sharp edge...assurance, nonchalance...classical and accessible to all.”

I also spent time at Kendal, talking about Carol Ann with Chancellor Dharker. She said,

“Over the years I've admired Carol Ann's absolute control of her craft, that can be traced back to Shakespeare and Donne, yet belongs

entirely in the present. Her work is a conversation with poets from all times...with all humanity.

As Poet Laureate, she created a uniquely inclusive, generous space for poetry in this country. Just one example of the kind of work she initiated is *Mother Tongue Other Tongue*, a national multi-lingual poetry project for young people, celebrating cultural diversity. She has changed so many lives. Just watching her is a daily inspiration to me."

The poetry community utters her name with love and respect. I asked friends if they could define her or her work and here are a selection of words they used:

generous gifted revolutionary inventive

creative challenging supportive frank astute

a voice to make you sit up and take notice

Carol Ann Duffy brings together poets wherever poetry is needed.

Two examples of her generous facilitation are the *Anthologise* competition for secondary schools launched in 2011, and the more recent *WRITE where we are NOW* project, in which Carol Ann and the Manchester Writing School brought together poets to write throughout the Coronavirus crisis. So many contemporary poets found a place for their voices during Lockdown. I was proud to have my poem included there too.

It is testament to her ability that she has remained at the forefront of poetry for decades. Her work is a celebration of these amazing, important, curious, meaningful things we hold so dear—these things we call *words*.

“Words, words were truly alive on the tongue, in the head, warm, beating, frantic, winged; music and blood.”

Poetry is one of the truest forces, bringing people together in peace, support and celebration. That I - a working class, LGBTQ+ autistic woman poet - can stand here today, is thanks to poets like Carol Ann. She is a touchstone for women who continue to fight for their place in poetry.

To quote from her poem *Dream*,

“She has placed bright insects on her eyes / and she is flying.” She is part of us all.

Chancellor Dharker, in recognition of her empowering contribution to poetry, I present to you Dame Carol Ann Duffy, for the award of Doctor of Letters, *honoris causa*.

Citation by Jane Burn, Public Orator

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