

## A GOOD PERSON TO KNOW

As long as you have a tough skin, Martin Stannard is a good person to know. He says what he means and means what he says; that cliché seems invented for him. The last poem I sent to Martin for comment was swiftly returned because it self-consciously mentioned writing and was too obvious. Fair enough, but I know a lot of people who might get upset by such a curt and dismissive reply.

Upset seems to be a standard response to Martin's reviews and opinions. The trouble is that he speaks his mind, and shares with me the idea that a review is a response, by one person, to a book at a given moment in time. Like me, he also gets bored with the obvious, rejects the trickle-down theory of poetry that suggests Rupi Kaur will somehow lead to Pound or Prynne, and doesn't think poetry is principally about emoting or sharing experiences in an empathetic way.

Neither is he convinced by experiment for experiment's sake, overt artiness, or weirdness. Martin's poetry is accessible on the surface, his subversion is the way poems change point-of-view or follow lines of thought, usually ending up somewhere the reader doesn't expect. He likes the New York School, especially earlier John Ashbery and Kenneth Koch, but seems open to anything that makes him engage and think for himself. For me he sits alongside the likes of Dean Young and Bob Hicok, and I certainly think he had an (often unacknowledged) influence on many younger poets who use a gentle surrealism in their writing.

I came across his work in the late 1970s and early 1980s, in many of the small presses of the time, but particularly *Slow Dancer* and *The Wide Skirt*, where he sometimes sat uneasily with more mainstream writers, including one future Poet Laureate. He was also the editor of *Joe Soap's Canoe*, which I don't think was particularly on my radar at the time, and would crop up doing reviews all over the place. Or that is my memory of back then.

I do know I first met him at a small press book fair, which might have been in Corby although I have previously stated Northampton. I do know I met Mike Shields, the editor of *Orbis* at the same time, as the three of us headed for the bar as an all day poetry reading was announced, which kind of negated the idea of having a paid-for stall to sell magazines and books. I am one of those poets who dislike most poetry readings, especially if, as was the case, they are full of people who mumble into their beards, pre-empt their poems by explaining them first, or can't read their own typing. Six hours of this sounded like hell, whoever was scheduled to read.

I imagine it was on the back of that that Stride Publications published some Martin Stannard books, and asked him to review things for the magazine, although he may have already contributed anyway. From the word go he upset several *Stride* regulars and authors whose books we had published, although I was and remain one of those who immensely enjoys Stannard's put-downs and occasional excuses for basically not-reviewing the books he was sent. After 40 years I share his lack of enthusiasm for many books that are sent, unrequested, to me for review.

It's easy to say Stannard deserves to be better known, but it's also true. Rumour has it he once won a major poetry competition with the prize being a book with the major publisher who was ~~making money from~~ running the competition. Stannard didn't want to wait three years for his book though, and withdrew his manuscript. As far as I know didn't even use the fact he'd won as any kind of publicity, instead returning to his natural habitat of small press publications, online blogs and poetry sites.

Of course, just as *X Factor* has made clear some of the workings of the pop industry, most of us now know how publishing works. We know that only a select few poets sell more copies of their books than many small press poets, and that the myth of publicity and marketing may get grant-givers salivating but that it's mostly bullshit, especially in the days of social media, print-on-demand, and the digital. I suspect that, like most poets I know, Martin likes having readers for his poetry and reviews, but that's about it.

I've probably met Martin three or four times in the last 35 years, at the most, possibly less. He's been a guest lecturer for my students, which was fun, and we sometimes email each other. He tends to not want to review things at the moment, which is fine, but still seems to be writing. I'm always happy to publish and read Martin's work, and I'm glad he is still here. I hope he sometimes gets to prop up a bar with friends or the ghosts of other poets, and hope there will be many more books by him to put on my shelf. Happy Birthday Martin.

Rupert Loydell