

Into the Hands of Readers

A Conversation Between Susan Aizenberg, Rupert Loydell, and H. L. Hix

Susan Aizenberg, *First Light* (Gibraltar Editions, 2020)

Rupert Loydell, *Cathedrals of the Soul* (Ravenstongue Press, 2020)

HH: Of course we'll let this conversation go where it wants to, but there are some obvious points of contact that led to associating these two books as an interesting basis for conversation, so let me open the conversation in that vicinity. If you set the two physical books side-by-side on your desk, what is the first thing you begin to think about?

RL: Well, the first thing is that I don't want to leave *First Light* on my desk, it's a very tactile object that needs picking up! And then I started thinking about the physical differences, that perhaps *First Light* fits into a tradition of fine printing and poetry, whereas *Cathedrals* has more of a handmade, craft feel to it. That's not to elevate or lower Denise Brady or Angela Annesley's work, just me thinking aloud. They both work with print (Angela is also a painter) but perhaps situate their publications differently? Other Ravenstongue booklets are on sale in National Trust property shops and craft outlets, and feature stories to do with Cornwall. I offered my poem sequence to Angela as something she might be able to work with, and although I saw and agreed the prints and proofs, it was very much her project and is her press, though I should emphasize I'm very pleased to be part of it!

Maybe that's me projecting on to the books though?

SA: Hello, Harvey and Rupert. Sorry to have taken so long to reply. The first thing I want to say is that I enjoyed your poems very much, Rupert. And the chapbook is lovely.

On to Harvey's question:

I agree with you, Rupert, that these books are situated quite differently and part of two different publishing traditions—which, as you so rightly point out, is not a knock on either—a craft tradition, as you say, for *Cathedrals*, and letterpress/fine arts for *First Light*.

The obvious physical differences are the first that struck me as well, especially the tactile differences. *First Light* is hand-set letterpress, done on an historic Vandercook proof press. The books are hand-sewn and the endsheets are made by hand from recycled fabrics. Each copy is numbered.

I'm struck, too, by the differences in the relationship between the visual artwork and the poems in our books. In *Cathedrals* there is a clear pairing, whereas *First Light* includes only 3 linocuts, none of which are intended to match or illustrate specific poems. The reader's experience of the poems and art will thus be quite different, I think.

Finally, this difference as far as the physical books and their making: Angela is both the artist and publisher of *Cathedrals*, while Kevin Bowman, the artist who made the linocuts, was commissioned by Denise Brady and Gibraltar. Denise, with the help of an assistant, did the actual making of the books-- setting type, printing, sewing, etc. All the choices as far as paper, typeface, etc., though she kindly shared them with me for my opinions, are hers, and of course she had to approve Kevin's work.

Briefly, the process was this: I asked Denise if she would be interested in considering my manuscript. She was, obviously, and also obviously, happily, decided to take it. After accepting my poems, Denise reached out to Kevin, whose work she knew, because she thought his work would be a good fit with mine. Kevin read the ms. and then made his linocuts; his intention he said, was not to illustrate the poems, but rather to make art they inspired. I think he did an amazing job, by the way –when I saw his work I was thrilled at how the linocuts felt so right with my poems.

I too, am very pleased to have this book, to be a part of this tradition, and honored to be a Gibraltar Editions poet. The press has a storied lineage – Denise’s co-publisher is Guy Duncan, the son of Harry Duncan, who is widely considered one of the masters of the fine arts books movement, and they founded the press to honor his memory. And I am beyond thrilled with these books, themselves – when I opened my box of copies and held the first one, I cried at its beauty.

Having said all that about *First Light*, let me say a little more about *Cathedrals of the Soul*. I like the poems and the accompanying illustrations very much. I love the pocket-size of the book and its feel in the hand. I love the idea that an individual artist makes these books and that they are so widely available in the kinds of settings you describe. I imagine your work gets into the hands of readers who may not be traditional poetry-readers in this way, which I think is wonderful. The book feels very personal and very reader-friendly. It’s truly among the best-made and best-looking chapbooks I’ve seen.

Also, Rupert, I’d like to hear more about your working relationship with Angela, because clearly your process was very different from Denise’s and mine, and especially than mine and Kevin’s.

You didn’t ask us to discuss the poems yet, Harvey, but one thing that struck me is that there is at least one large difference there, too – in *Cathedrals* the poems are all thematically related, and the book works as whole in a lovely way. In *First Light* there are some poems that relate in that sort of direct way, but the collection as a whole is not intended to have a single theme and the subjects and styles of the poems differ.

I’ve asked myself, what are the similarities between the books? They, too, are obvious, I suppose, but thinking aloud – both are very short collections and offer readers something different than a traditional full-length collection, no? They’re more of a glimpse into our work, and of course they not only include visual art, but are works of art themselves. I think, too, they have in common that those who buy these books include different readers than those who buy more traditional collections. I suspect at least some are interested more in the artwork, and in the books as lovely objects.

Thanks to you both!

RL: This is interesting stuff Susan, thank you. I’m actually pretty ignorant about fine art letterpress, although a tutor at my Art Foundation Course, John Easson, published a letterpress chapbook series – as The Quarto Press – which my friend and mentor Brian Louis Pearce was the poetry editor for. Otherwise, I own a limited edition of Ted Hughes’ *Crow* with art by Leonard Baskin, and a few William Everson and Robert Lax letterpress editions. My world has been more utilitarian: I started *Stride* magazine using my mother’s Gestetner duplicator, learned to staple booklets then make paperbacks using bricks and glue, bought a photocopier, learnt to screenprint, etc. Now of course the magazine is online, and I ceased Stride Books (which for the second half of its 30+ years life used commercial printers and then print-on-demand to produce paperback editions).

You ask about my working relationship with Angela, and I have to inform you I pretty much handed over my poem sequence, which was originally entitled ‘Thirteen Cathedrals’, to her as an offering for the press. Angela has worked at Falmouth University for most of my time there, but I have only got to know her better through my friend and colleague Kingsley Marshall, now Head of Film, who I collaborate with on book chapters, academic papers and conferences (about Brian Eno and *Twin Peaks*, since you ask).

Angela paints and prints, and also runs Ravenstongue. The small format and different audience appealed to me, and as ‘Thirteen Cathedrals’ didn’t seem to fit into any of my planned poetry books, and had been published in the online poetry magazine *Amethyst Review*, I wondered if the brevity and visual components of the series might inspire her. After that it was pretty much Angela’s project, although I saw the her prints and then proofs of the book, and also allowed her to retitle the sequence.

I tend to work in sequences and sets of work (like Harvey, up to a point), and this sequence was inspired by Giles Gordon’s novel *Ambrose’s Vision: Sketches Towards the Creation of a Cathedral*. Gordon is a fairly neglected post-war novelist who was part of a loose group of experimental writers which included Eva Figes, Ann Quin, Alan Burns and B.S. Johnson, although he later abandoned writing and became a publisher. I have an interest in this group of writers and use them in my teaching; they are slowly becoming more known again and brought back into print.

One thing I struggle with is when things become too ‘precious’. This isn’t a charge I am raising against *First Light* by the way, and as an artist and writer I know that framing, context, production and such all affect the reception of the work, but part of me thinks poetry and painting have to be ‘tough’ and stand for themselves, which is why I still sometimes produce stapled photocopy pamphlets as Analogue Flashback Press, and folded sheets as Smallminded Books.

I guess, I want it all: lo-fi chapbooks, the sharing of digital texts, mail art projects, commercial paperback books and beautiful print editions too.

HH: It’s interesting to me that what suggested thinking about these books together was their shared difference from “regular” commercially-printed books, but actually beginning to think about them together has led us immediately to much more subtle and fine-grained points of similarity/difference.

Both books are handmade limited editions, rather than commercially manufactured, yes, but the handmade-ness realizes very different artistic values, and is realized through very different processes.

The word “precious” does seem to me to help toward articulating those different artistic values. “Precious” can have positive connotations, and apply to something very good, and it can have negative connotations, and apply to something bad. The positive sense indicates successful assignment of value: I hold something precious in this good sense if I rightly recognize its value (its rarity, say, or its association with a person I love). The negative sense indicates a *misassignment* of value: I hold something precious in this bad sense if I assign it a value that properly belongs somewhere else (emotionally *substituting* it for someone I love, for instance).

I’d want to say of the physical books that *First Light* aims *toward* the positive sense of “precious” and *Cathedrals of the Soul* aims *away from* the negative sense of “precious.” And it seems apt, too, about the poems. Susan’s poems seem to me to try to achieve preciousness in the positive sense of the term,

and Rupert's poems seem to me to try to eschew preciousness in the negative sense of the term. So even though the word "precious" could be used in a characterization of either aesthetic, it doesn't refer to the same thing in the two uses. It's not that Susan's poem try to do what Rupert's poems try not to do. The aesthetics are different, but not so simplistically opposed. Does that characterization seem apt, to you the poets?

RL: Yes, that seems one possible way of describing the two books, and a very interesting one as such. One thing I think I was looking for in offering my poems to Angela and Ravenstongue was a solidity to accompany fairly abstract poems. Despite the fact some of the poems mention materials (feathers, glass, paper, mercury, bones) others are more abstract and less literal with their use of fire, alchemy, dreams and sound. Although I am a writer who believes in the reader doing some work, I was also interested in how the mass and bulk of cathedrals, their very real, weighty architecture and history, could be reconciled with my abstractions, without images becoming too illustrative. I think by her imaginative use of pattern, form and focus on details such as gargoyles, something new was brought to the sequence of poems.

They are perhaps an aid to reading in this instance, a way of contextualising the provocation and abstraction, without – I hope – compromising the inherent doubt and confusion of the poems.

SA: Thanks, Harvey and Rupert.

First, Harvey, to answer the question you ask above: if in characterizing the physical book of *First Light* as aiming towards the positive sense of the word "precious," the term is understood to mean a book that although, yes, beautiful and finely made, is first about the poems, and meant to be held, read, and well-used, then I can see that. It's not a word that I'd have used, however, and I have some reservations about the idea, because for me, when "precious" is applied to an object, unlike say, to refer to a person who is precious to us, it often connotes a Faberge egg or the like, which would be inaccurate in describing what Gibraltar aims for. Denise says for her the poems are always the first consideration, and she also is very clear she means for her books to be read and touched. I know, Harvey, you don't mean the term to imply otherwise, but it seems to me a tricky abstraction. As far as thinking about aiming towards the "precious" in my work – again even in the positive sense of the word – I have to say I don't think about my work in terms of overall characterization. I try not to think too much about that sort of thing. Having said that, if I did, I don't think "preciousness" would feel right.

Rupert, thanks for telling me more about how you work; it was very interesting. I've never done any publishing myself. Along with writing poems, I've taught creative writing, been poetry editor for a couple of journals and co-editor of an anthology, and have written a couple of essays, but I've never had an interest in publishing a journal or making a book myself.

I hope all is well with you both & look forward to continuing our conversation.

HH: I think what I'm trying to sort out with the two-different-meanings-of-"precious" question is the inclusivity of the differences between the two books. Because we're engaging in this conversation during an historical period of deep, violent division, I'm very aware of divisive differences, that are in themselves (or are presented as) either/ors. They divide us into opposing teams, and create conflict. So it seems profoundly important to me — lives-are-at-stake level of importance — to get at this quality of difference that does not divide.

The books feel very different to me: *I* feel different when I experience the books, different conceptually, emotionally, even physically. But I feel *invited* by both books, welcomed, even beckoned. Each material difference (sewn binding, stapled binding...) *signifies*, because each realizes an aesthetic commitment, but nothing makes me choose sides.

Different aspects of myself are invoked in different ways. If I just open each to its exact middle, Rupert's "The mercury cathedral" invites me to apply my wit (in the Elizabethan sense) to pick up on the double entendre of the last line "a heavy metal heaven." I'm challenged to be conceptually nimble. Susan's "Eleanor Remembers Her Soldier" invites me to feel the "something" that "hovers in the dark between us." I'm challenged to be emotionally available.

I'm sure I'm not saying this well, but even if it's not something to be explicated, it still seems worth wondering over, admiring, this quality of invitation and inclusion that, precisely *because of* their differences, the two books share.

SA: Harvey – I'm up in the very early morning, still dark, and opened my phone to find your email. I think you've said this more than well, beautifully, in fact; thank you. I love so much the ideal of – and deeply believe in – the "difference that does not divide."

RL: As I get older and reflect on several decades of writing, publishing and making art I become less and less convinced of publicity & marketing, and more persuaded by the notion of offering work to the public. I was going to say gifting, but of course financial transactions are involved, so perhaps offering is a better word.

What I mean by that is that once I have produced a finished painting or poem all I can do is place it somewhere, be that a book or magazine, art gallery, or Instagram and see what happens. The work must find its place in the world. Different methods of publication (different strategies if you like) to do so are interesting and different times of offer. One hopes that they are *all* inclusive, but of course an academic journal may not be accessible to non-academics, magazines are read by different audiences, there are different types of galleries, from community arts spaces to high-end commercial ventures.

For me, having previously published the Cathedrals poems in *Amethyst Review*, an online poetry magazine of 'new writing engaged with the sacred', Ravenstongue was a way of reaching a new audience. The sequence may also end up in a paperback poetry collection in the future, which means I have three different audiences covered.

SA: Thank you, Rupert.

For some reason, perhaps because today would have been her 93rd birthday, what Rupert writes here has me thinking of my mother. She was a painter who put aside her work for most of her early and middle adult years, until at around age 50, she began again to paint. For the next thirty years, she painted every day with a devotion and joy as great as that of any artist I know, and with only rare public showings. Please feel no obligation at all to look at the attached, but in case it's of interest, I wanted to share with you a few of her paintings and a little piece I wrote about her and her work.

Best to you both—

HH: One concern (perhaps among several) that runs through all the issues we've touched on so far, from books as tactile objects through Susan's mother's paintings, is the many pressures on communication: who gets to communicate in what way and about what to whom. Economic pressures (you can communicate more freely if Google or Facebook or Amazon make money from your communication), political pressures, legal pressures, social pressures, and so on.

The things we've noticed in this conversation (like the conversation itself) all seem to me to be instances of trying to create tiny "breathing spaces" for liberty and autonomy in the systemic pressures, tiny intimacies in the pervasive surveillance. The decision to make a book by hand and in limited quantities, when the system imposes mass production and enforces economies of scale. The decision to write in *rispettos* when the system says to tweet. The daily practice of painting when the system says that's not what mothers do.

There's a connection, I think, between Rupert's impulse toward *offering* work and Susan's disclaimer, "Please feel no obligation at all to look at the attached." Both contrast (for me, powerfully) with the ultimately threatening "listen to me" and "look at me" and "do what I tell you to" of so much discourse now, of advertising and business and politics...

RL: Well, there are two (probably more) things here. Firstly, the commitment to practice, to *keep* painting and writing, an idea which seems to be unpopular these days. For me it's about engagement rather than a daily routine. I have never been a 9-5 studio painter, nor a poet who writes every day, but I am constantly reading and editing my poems, drawing and using a sketchbook with and about my paintings; even the daily act of going to studio each day (even for a quick 5 minute peek) maintains my relationship with my work. I am also keen to not go with the first idea that comes to me but to spend time refining and adapting ideas, often in series or sequences of either poems or paintings, which may perhaps be a way of hedging my bets!

The second thing which is really important in my writing is to get away from the ego in confessional poetry. I don't want to go as far as some of the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets and reject what they decided was a hierarchy of grammar and syntax, but neither do I want my poems to be about me, the poet, sharing something I have felt or done so that a reader can empathise with me. This very much seems to be what Harvey is calling a 'look at me' writing. I'm keen to use disrupted syntax and experimental processes, along with different – perhaps conceptual or philosophical, theological or abstract – themes and content to write about the world; and, of course, narrators and characters rather than the personal. (I am not, of course, so stupid to think I am not in the mix!)

I must also say, within this conversation (having previously privately emailed Susan) how wonderful her mother's art is. Some of it reminds me of Andrew Wyeth at his best (which, for me, is his empty rooms, house exteriors and landscapes), and Susan has an informed and interesting way of writing about both the artist and her work.

I sense I may have avoided replying to Harvey about his idea of making space being a form of resistance, an idea which I can only agree with. I also think that for me it is a way of processing the world, helping me sieve through and deal with the huge amount of images, words and ideas that come our way each day, despite my best attempts at dodging it by distancing myself and not engaging with the likes of social media.

SA: Harvey and Rupert: It's Election Day as I write this—I voted weeks ago, so nothing for me to do today but hope. I half wish I had the discipline not to watch as the results come in tonight, but I will watch. I remember watching CNN four years ago, late that night and deep into the morning, stunned at the results. I won't be stunned this time, and I'm determined not to become depressed, either, as I did four years ago, if Biden doesn't prevail, but I am hoping, fervently, that he wins by a landslide.

But that's not what I want to write about here. First, so much of what you've each written, above, resonates for me—the idea of “breathing spaces” and “offerings,” the notions of our work as practice and a way of processing the world. And thank you Rupert, for your kind words on my mother's work. What you've shared, above, about your own practice, Rupert, has me thinking, as I write this afternoon, about the welcome turn mine has taken over the last few months and especially since this summer. I have always been an extremely slow writer. *Muse* came out in 2002 and *Quiet City* not until 2015. During the years I was teaching full-time I often finished only 2-4 poems a year. This did not change immediately when I retired in 2016 because although lack of time to work played its part, it wasn't the only issue. I don't know that I know all the reasons I worked in this way, and I'm not sure why it changed, but beginning sometime last fall I began to work more freely and more regularly. I can't overstate how happy this made me.

Then, this summer, Leslie Ullman proposed that she, Betsy Sholl, and I do a poem-a-day exchange during the month of August. The arrangement was that we would send each other a new poem every day and that we would not comment on them except very briefly and only in terms of encouraging the process—no workshop-style critiquing. Given my working history, I was very unsure I would be able to do it, but I was excited by the idea. I knew of other groups of poets who did this sort of “grind” and had wanted to try it. It turned out that not only was I able to do it; I loved doing it. Harvey, you heard me speak of this at my reading. It was exhilarating, exhausting, unpredictable—it was fun. And to our surprise, we each wrote a good number of good poems, some close to finished, which was especially unexpected.

So I now have a thick folder of drafts from August and the months before, and I am working daily on revisions, moving from poem to poem—which also is new for me. I have almost always worked on one poem at a time, even though I've always believed working on more than one at a time is much healthier. I love to work, and I feel lucky and deeply grateful to be able to work as I am now.

Well! Talk about writing in a “look at me” way. I'm hoping you both like talking process as much as I do. I enjoyed reading about your practice, Rupert, and Harvey, I would love to hear more about yours.

Thanks & best to you both—

HH: Our conversation seems to me to be addressing very clearly why and how practice, and the commitment to practice, matters. I think of Iris Murdoch's succinct insight that “it is a *task* to come to see the world as it is.” What we are calling here “process” and “practice” might be performed *as* writing, but they are performances *of* recognition and valuation.

When Rupert says he is “keen to not go with the first idea that comes to me but to spend time refining and adapting ideas,” that is a mode of resistance. No pressure is stronger or more pervasive in contemporary society than the pressure *not* to refine and adapt your ideas. You are a data point, a

consumer, a demographic. Or, as my employer insists I am, “human capital.” To spend time refining and adapting ideas is a radical defiance of the status quo, the existing world order.

It appears to me that the same is true about Susan and Leslie and Betsy exchanging poems. To *listen* to other persons as they refine and adapt ideas is to recognize them *as* persons, *not* to regard them as data points, consumers, a demographic, human capital. Again, this seems to me a radical defiance of the status quo, a dwelling in possibility.

RL: It’s interesting to see my practice framed as resistance, as it’s not something I would have consciously used as a way of thinking about my work. But I do think you are right, Harvey.

I do a lot of collaborative writing, and have learnt to surf the wave of energy that produces and to trust my collaborator(s) and work quickly and responsively. The editing can come later! I confess that is pretty much my attitude towards solo writing, get something written that I can then work with: collage, free write, steal phrases from books or CDs on my desk, whatever; but get a first draft down. Then I can spend weeks and months tinkering and refining.

I’ve never found workshopping very helpful, I confess, but I do have trusted writer friends (some who I have never met apart from emails) I can share work with and get intelligent feedback. And one thing that gets my goat is an editor trying to edit my poem during submission. I would just like a yes or no, an acceptance or rejection thank you. The poem is finished, of its specific time, and is no longer available for tinkering with, especially by someone I do not know. I’m sure I am not alone in having finished bad poems (which are not submitted) but I am not someone who is endlessly revising 30 years of work. (End of rant)

Various poet friends have taught me the value of planning projects in advance, with Sheila Murphy in Arizona being the person who most challenged and informed me regarding that, when we taught a residential creative writing course together. I have found a commitment to exploring a theme, using variation and differing voices, approaches and ideas, consistently rewarding, be that for a small sequence like the cathedral poems, a chapbook, a full collection or – as in the case of my annunciation poems – something that spills into several books.

Harvey and I have spoken before about ‘occasional poems’, which he appears not to write. The hardest thing in the world for me is to gather up and shape a book from my occasional poems, an exercise I have just started doing, well aware that many readers are put off by any exploration of faith & doubt, or spirituality, however cynical, questioning or witty that might be. A very different set of people responded to *Wildlife* (2011) and *The Return of the Man Who Has Everything* (2015) than *Dear Mary* (2017) and *A Confusion of Marys* (2020), let alone the chapbooks and more fugitive editions I have published. I guess both fugitive editions and daring to try and discuss belief away from either new age or militant belief systems might also be seen as a form of resistance, just as trying to argue the case for a broadminded and questioning liberal arts education system might be?

HH: There continue to be exciting and beautiful continuities — “threads” — running through this conversation. These descriptions of process have many points of contact, no doubt, but one that seems to me especially worth highlighting unites Susan’s word “unexpected” with Rupert’s “responsively.”

It's a basic problematic of life, correlating expectation with outcome, adjusting the two to one another. We have ways to describe poor correlation: e.g., I'm delusional if my expectations are too loosely correlated with outcome. And we value certain correlations more than others: for instance, "hope" names an especially prized correlation between expectation and outcome, a correlation we find worth "clinging to."

In poetry, it's a point of identity between form and content: a poem creates expectations, then fulfills or subverts them. And the same with collaboration. So Susan's exchange with Leslie and Betsy, and Rupert's various collaborations, Susan's with Kevin Bowman and Denise Brady in *First Light*, and Rupert's with Angela Annesley in *Cathedrals of the Soul*, create unexpected outcomes in part because they heighten responsiveness.

Responsiveness only to oneself is a feature of tyrants (Creon or Trump) and one contributing cause of tragedy. Responsiveness to the world around one, including and especially the *persons* around one, is an urgent human need. Poetry and collaboration both seem to me valuable as forms of responsiveness practice.