

Gina Mercer

WHAT THE DANCE LOOKS LIKE: A CONVERSATION WITH RON PRETTY

I met Ron Pretty through the Five Islands New Poets' Publishing Program which he has run, almost single-handedly since 1993. A lot of people meet Ron this way, he spends a lot of time working with fellow poets, developing and publishing their poetry. This makes him a rare man, and an even rarer publisher in these economically rationalist times. I love meeting people who are passionate, who put their passion unashamedly in the centre of their lives. Ron is passionate about poetry, not just his own, but the poetry of others. He is a poet whose ego and self-interest seem consistently to take second place to a profound altruism and generosity towards others. These too are rare qualities. So I decided to talk to Ron about this. As we couldn't co-ordinate our travels to meet in person in the company of a bottle of red, we conducted this conversation by email over the period February–March 2001.

GINA – I'm interested to know about the source of your passion for poetry?

RON – I seem to have been writing all my life. What gives me most pleasure is the act of writing itself: of sitting down, fountain pen in hand, and stringing words together. Even when what you write can only be thrown in the bin, the act itself is a pleasure. But every now and then an unexpected line or sequence turns up, and suddenly you can make something when there was nothing there before. And when you discover something like this in your writing, you want to share it. I can still remember the thrill I had from my first publication—in the school magazine when I was in first year of high school (Year 7 now). At Sydney Uni I discovered Yeats and had a few poems published in *Honi Soit*—in that order; and I wrote imitation Yeats till I went to Greece at the end of the sixties. There I discovered Seferis and Cavafy and a little later Edward Brathwaite and between them they opened up possibilities of language and myth and rhythm that I'm still exploring. And loving the exploration.

GINA – And how did others around you respond to your desire to write, to explore the world in this way? In your family? At school? At university?

RON – In those early years, I don't think anyone among my family and friends were aware that I was writing. I think I was probably only dimly aware of what it meant myself—it was just something that happened now and again, and gave me a lot of pleasure when it did. Like playing chess, which was even more of a passion then than writing. Certainly there were no other writers among my family and friends that I knew of.

GINA – After you finished studying at university, where did your career and writing take you?

RON – I finished at Sydney Uni with an Honours degree in History in 1967. I then went from teaching mentally handicapped (or, to use the current euphemism, developmentally delayed) kids at Strathfield to teaching history at Casino High School. (And I found that my experience at Strathfield stood me in very good stead at Casino High—and later) Luckily, though, there weren't enough history classes to go round at Casino, so half my load was English—and I loved it. Before I went to Casino though I'd organised with a friend to go to Europe, or I might still be teaching English on the north coast somewhere ...

GINA – Or maybe teaching Creative Writing at Southern Cross Uni in Lismore? Sydney University has only recently deigned to put Creative Writing on its syllabus, so like me, you've come to the teaching of it through devious means. Could you talk about how, why and when you began teaching Creative Writing?

RON – At Casino I took over the school magazine and there I had my first taste of teaching creative writing. Both things were a revelation to me. Once kids got beyond what they thought you wanted them to write, anything was possible, from the most trite reworking of their favourite TV show to poems and stories that were startling in their individuality. I loved it; more than that, it made me look seriously for the first time at my own writing. Then, at the end of 1969 I found myself in Serrai in northern Greece teaching in the Strategakis School of English. I knew no Greek when I went there, and few in the town spoke English, so for the next 12 months I was very much thrown on my own resources, and I walked a lot, drank a lot of retsina and ouzo, and wrote endlessly. When I came back, I did an MA in Australian Literature at Sydney Uni, began as a lecturer at Wollongong Teachers' College, and also started teaching writing in WEA courses. From there it's been a more-or-less continuous development.

GINA – I deeply enjoy teaching Creative Writing but also find it draining and frustrating at times. What are its satisfactions and dissatisfactions for you?

RON – The pleasure of teaching writing for me I think is twofold. Firstly, in the impact it has on my own writing. I've always written with the students, so that any exercise I set them, I also do myself (which meant that I rapidly discarded a lot of exercises that sounded good till I tried them). But often I went home from a class with the germ of an idea that I developed that night, or later. So there was that. But there was also the very real pleasure you get when one of your students makes a breakthrough, stumbles onto something new and exciting and which works ... Hemingway says somewhere that he always tried to write as well as he could, but sometimes he got lucky and wrote better than he could. The pleasure for me is in knowing when that happens in a student's writing, and in my own.

It wasn't the teaching that I found draining, or even the piles of marking that fall on you from time to time. Because of the variation, the individuality in the work, I enjoyed that, even when my eyes were falling

out of my head. It was the endless administration. That got steadily worse the longer I was there, and that I found draining ... the endless futile meetings, the paperwork, the emails.

You're right, though, the teaching does get frustrating. For one thing, the steady pressure to increase class sizes makes workshopping more and more difficult; along with that, also in the name of efficiency, the decreasing range of choices open to the students. But I think the thing that I found most frustrating was— is—the amount of talent that is wasted. The number of students who come into university courses oozing with talent, but without the commitment to make anything of it. Often they realise (in these materialist times) that being good at poetry is not an immediate meal ticket, and go looking for easier ways of earning a living, and who can blame them? But what I would have given for half their raw ability. And you realise how important persistence and sheer grit is in this business because you see their talent wasting away because the persistence is not in them, or not yet ...

GINA – Many of us were pleased that you had the grit to write that useful book *Creating Poetry* (1987)? Do you have plans for similar books in future or do you plan to revise that one, given that it's now unfortunately out of print?

RON – In fact I'm revising that book, and a new edition will be out later this year— Five Islands Press is publishing it in September, to be precise. It was an easy book to write in that I simply put down on paper what I was doing in my classes and developed it from there. It needs revising now because I've refined or discarded some things and discovered others. And since there still seems to be a demand for it ...

GINA – There was also a strong demand and interest in the journal *scarp* that you edited for seventeen years. Do you miss it now that *scarp* has been defunded?

RON – I was, I still am, fairly bitter about the way it was closed down: I think it was both short-sighted and wrong-headed, but I don't particularly want to stir those embers.

GINA – Fair enough but can you talk about your admirably long stint as editor of *scarp*?

RON – A lot of the work, as you know, is sheer drudgery—wading through piles of poems and stories trying to find those that excite you, that somehow surprise you with their angle of approach. *scarp* had an editorial panel of second and third year writing students and the best times were those towards the end of the process, where we sat around and argued for and against the pieces on the final short list. Sometimes, with the best classes, those discussions got very heated, and it forced all of us to define more precisely what we were looking for, and why. Some issues of *scarp* are better than others, of course; and those that really gelled still give me a great

amount of pleasure. The issues that featured visual poetry, I think, are among those I remember with greatest pleasure. We were always chasing deadlines, of course, frantic to make sure the magazine actually made it to the launch. All but once we managed it; and that time I was in hospital, so I suppose that's some excuse...

GINA – What do you think journals like *scarp* achieve or contribute to Australia's literary culture?

RON – There's a lecture or two I could give on *that* question ...on one level, what I was trying to do was to give our students at Wollongong Uni some practical experience in the production of a literary magazine, to give them some idea what happened to their work when they submitted it, to give them tools for looking at their own work and at the writing of others: they were intensely practical reasons tied fairly closely to their course. But on another level, I believe that the best way to produce significant writing in a society is to ensure that there is encouragement for all writers; that out of the ferment of writing, (much of it uneven in quality, some of it indeed not very good), out of all that emerge the significant figures in a literary landscape. As the magazines and presses close down, or get taken over by multinationals, so the literary culture is impoverished. That connects with the third dimension, which is political: I think that creative writing has the potential to be as subversive an activity in contemporary Australia as it was, for example, in Stalinist Russia. That's overstating the case a bit (a lot, perhaps) but what I mean is this: in Russia until the fall of communism, many Russian poets circulated their work in samizdats (little clandestine booklets), were unpaid and harassed by the authorities, but had real prestige and were a focus of resistance to the regime. Australian poets today make little money from their work, and are not so much harassed as marginalised, but are nevertheless, a focus for resistance: everything in our mass culture is pushing us to be passive, to allow TV, the sporting circuses, the political massaging to wash over us, make us passive recipients of what the beneficent authorities deem good for us. But at least while we're writing we're defining ourselves for ourselves, so it becomes the last bastion of individuality, of rebellion, open to us. To the extent that literary magazines encourage that process, they are performing a function essential to the intellectual, moral and political health of all of us.

GINA – I can hear a round of ringing applause for that speech! In a similar vein, can you talk about the genesis of your ethos of giving generously to other poets? I remember arguing furiously about altruism with a school-teacher when I was 17 years old. He maintained that altruism didn't exist, I was equally certain that it did ... somewhere. Are you living proof that I was right?

RON – I keep warning my students about these abstractions ... I get a great deal of pleasure from what I do, so it doesn't seem like altruism to me. Like writing itself, the physical act of bringing a book together, when you like the work, and getting it out there into the marketplace is a source of great

satisfaction, whether the poet is emerging, established, or an unreasonably neglected older poet. I think I got as much pleasure as John Millett did when he won the Victorian Premier's Award last year. I've just finished my eighth Wollongong Poetry Workshop. I'm exhausted, but it's a fulfilled exhaustion, there's a sense of having got to know another group of poets, of having advanced their writing careers a little, and of having had tremendous enjoyment while doing it. Perhaps altruism is a badge pinned on from the outside rather than felt within.

GINA – Fair enough, but I'm still young and foolish enough to risk talking about another abstraction: empathy. This is a powerful quality in your most recent publication *Of the Stone: New and Selected Poems*. Empathy surfaces again and again in poems like the beautiful Molly and Douglas sequence. You evoke the lives of the characters subtly and with such a depth of compassionate understanding. Many people seem never to grasp the concept of empathy. It's so difficult to teach, yet so necessary to writers (amongst others). It's clearly a strength in you, I'm wondering what enabled you to develop this degree of empathy?

RON – I don't know; I'm floundering a bit here. Perhaps empathy is another word for imagination. This is probably too simplistic, but it seems to me that you can only kill or abuse someone if you're unable to imagine the pain you're inflicting: because your imagination is blocked by rage or drugs or whatever ... Perhaps the Ivan Milats and Martin Bryants of this world, and all those who can put a bomb on a plane or gas in a concentration camp are finally to be convicted of totally lacking the power of imagination. Once you can make the leap to see how the world looks through someone else's eyes, once you can imagine what their pain and their joy must feel like, then I think you can talk about the flow of empathy. When I'm out among strangers, it's what I like doing: watching them, trying to imagine what the dance looks like from where they're sitting.

GINA – In many poems in *Of the Stone* you provide a delicate narrative portrait of men who have not succeeded in their lives. I'm thinking of poems like 'Flying Ants', 'Lisa', 'On the Hay Plain' or 'Soldier Settler' where the man stands "dreaming of a life without wire" or 'The Thin Man' where the man is aware of "the bluish edge of possibilities foregone". There is compassion here too, but also a motif of regret and resigned defeat to all the wires of cruelty and constraint that can shape a life. Would you speak about this a little?

RON – I think everyone has regrets for all those lives they might have lived, all those myriad possibilities foregone, because they've chosen this fork rather than that one, or had it chosen for them, or drifted into it ... it's like Frost's 'The Road Not Taken', I suppose, but a bit more complex. Really, I feel very fortunate to have been born when I was, to have had the opportunities I've had, the things I've done and achieved, to have survived the illnesses I've had, and to have escaped the consequences of some of the more stupid things I've done (if you don't mind, I won't go into *that*). Yet at the same

time, I can look back on some of the choices I've made, and imagine what my life might have been like if I'd chosen differently. And because poetry is fiction, and only some of these poems have autobiographical elements, I also look at my parents, people I've known, and imagine what *their* lives might have been like, had they made other choices. Not necessarily better, but certainly different, and to have given that up is to have given up some richness, some variety ... There is in that, surely, some reason for regret?

GINA – One path that you chose, which no-one in the Australian poetry community would view with regret, is your decision to put a huge amount of energy into the publication of poetry. Could you tell me about the genesis of Five Islands Press? And the Five Islands New Poets' Publishing Program?

RON – When Edward Cowie arrived to set up the School (now Faculty) of Creative Arts at Wollongong, I was in England on study leave, and it was set up without a writing strand. When I got back, I lobbied for a couple of years to have writing included and then to get myself chosen as head of the strand. From the outset I felt it was not enough to encourage the development of the students in the course. If we as lecturers are earning our money by preparing the students (some of them anyway) for a writer's life, then, I believe, we also have the responsibility of doing what we can to promote the industry into which they graduate. I took over the editorship of the magazine *scarp* with that in mind. Then in 1987, eight of us (Kevin Baker, Rob Hood, Chris Mansell, Mark Miller, Ron Pretty, David Reiter, Ken Stone, Deb Westbury)—lecturers, postgrads and local writers—decided to form a publishing co-operative to promote book publication by its members. That was the genesis of Five Islands Press, which operated for three years or so, until each of the members had had a book published. At the end of that time, most of the co-operative dropped out, and three of us—Rob Hood, Deb Westbury and I—decided to continue as a partnership. Deb and Rob have since also dropped out, though Deb still gives me invaluable help with the New Poets Program.

Then in the early nineties, John Scott and I travelled to Canberra to lobby the then Federal Minister for Arts to establish a writers' centre in Wollongong. We had very little joy from our meeting (though since then we have managed to establish a Writers' Centre here, with State government assistance), but on the way home we hatched the scheme that was to become the New Poets Program. We had some particularly talented poets in courses at that time, and our concern was to enable them, and poets like them, to find a way through to first book publication, once they had established themselves through publication in magazines. The first series was launched in 1993, with one of our graduating students, Melissa Curran, in the six; there have been four Wollongong graduates or postgraduates in the seven series since.

GINA – I know record-keeping is not your favourite occupation but I'd be interested to know, and put on record, how many books of poetry and how many poets have been published by Five Islands Press since it began in 1987?

RON – There were eight FIP co-operative books, and there have been to date 42 New Poets books and about 65 mainstream books: something like 115 books since 1987. There are a few doublings-up, so there would be something over 110 poets.

GINA – That's a remarkable achievement. But now that I've forced you to count those numbers, I'd like to ask you how you manage all the administration that's involved in running a publishing company? Do you have any assistance with things like record-keeping, accounts, correspondence, royalty statements, publicity and so forth?

RON – While I was head of the writing strand, I did have some administrative assistance from the Faculty for both *scarp* and the New Poets Program, though with the cutbacks in unis that was being pared back. Once I took early retirement and went part-time at the end of 1998, *scarp* was closed down and what assistance I'd had disappeared completely and I've been completely on my own. But since last July, I've been talking to the Uni administration—as opposed to the Faculty, which is unable/unwilling to help—about some assistance, given the recognition, and the money, that FIP continues to bring to the University of Wollongong. I heard last week, in fact, that the University is going to make some space available to me, to enable the establishment of an organisation to be called *The Poetry Australia Foundation*. This will work in conjunction with FIP; once it's up and running it will promote poetry workshops, conferences, a poetry library and other resources. With the assistance of John Millett and other volunteers, we even hope to revive the magazine *Poetry Australia*. This is still in the process of being formulated and established, it's a most exciting development. But in the meantime, all those admin tasks you mention are still mine alone...

GINA – All this must take up a huge amount of your time. How does this affect your family? And your writing? Your other passions?

RON – I asked my daughter about this; she said. "Tell them you work a lot. You don't play games any more. And you should be helping me with my legal studies essay right now." (She's in year 12). I guess that says it all. I don't know about my writing. I've never been particularly prolific; in some way my work gives me permission not to write more, but I probably couldn't anyway. Usually I write late at night, usually after 11.00pm and I fiddle about a good deal before anything useful appears ... sometimes I like to imagine I'd have been rich and famous by now if I'd concentrated on that ... I think my family have missed out quite a bit, though really they're remarkably tolerant of it all. I think I'll pass on the other passions bit—that could only get me into trouble.

GINA – Ah, yes, I've just finished reading *Of the Stone* for the second time and I was struck by a recurrence of images relating to notions of disguise and discretion. In 'Cardigan' for example you write of a man wearing a cardigan who says "it's my disguise" and reveals that beneath the cardigan there's "another matt/nearly as grey/ but springy/ with delicate nipples ...

[and] a slightly rancid smell/ [the] loose ends/better left alone." Is the avoidance of trouble important to you, in your work and elsewhere?

RON – Discretion is the better part of valets and all that. I don't know, really. Again I'd say that it's a mistake to treat the poems as autobiographical—some of them are, some of them are partly so, some of them not at all. Yet that's also being a bit evasive. There's no doubt that there have been times I could have made other, perhaps riskier choices: is that being pusillanimous, or just cautious? All things being equal, I guess I would rather avoid trouble if I could. And I suppose all writers try to fade into the greenery a bit, to observe from the safety of a hide...

GINA – And what future plans do you have hidden under your discrete white hair? Will there be another series of *New Poets* in 2002? What do you have in the pipeline for Five Islands Press? And your own work? Don't tell me you're planning a verse novel like so many other poets I know?

RON – No verse novels—though I do have an almost complete prose novel sitting waiting for me to get back to it. Trouble is, those I've shown it to have had difficulty in working out what on earth's going on in it. I fear it needs more work than I have time/am able to give it. For the foreseeable future I think I'll stick to poetry and publishing. I'm trying to limit Five Islands to no more than a dozen mainstream titles each year, besides the *New Poets Program*: I'll be advertising Series 9 of that program about March next year, but in 2002 I'm giving myself a year off.

GINA – I'm pleased to hear that—it will be a rest well-earned. Thank you for your time and for giving us the opportunity to see "what the dance looks like" from the perspective of one of the most respected and valued literary figures in contemporary Australia.