



The year ahead: poetry

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## From Milton to the Next Generation

Sarah Crown looks forward to a bountiful supply of fresh verse

**Sarah Crown**  
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January is traditionally a cheerful time for poetry, for it is on the 25th of this coldest month when poetry-lovers the world over cast temperance aside to raise a glass or six to Ayrshire's favourite son. Unfortunately for Robert Burns, however, so thunderous is the post-detox clamour for haggis and whisky that his poetic legacy - which extends far beyond "Auld Lang Syne" and "A Red Red Rose" - tends to be drowned out. **A Night Out with Robert Burns** (Canongate), a selection of the poet's greatest works made by Scottish novelist and Burns aficionado Andrew O'Hagan, redresses the balance. O'Hagan strips away the sentimentality which continues to cling to Burns's coat-tails and offers him to us at his very best - political, passionate, incisive and expressive - with biographical and textual notes that greatly enrich the reader's experience. Save this collection a place at your Burns Supper table.

January also sees the publication of Anna Beer's much-anticipated biography of John Milton, **Milton: Poet, Pamphleteer and Patriot** (Bloomsbury), which will no doubt create an appetite for a new collection of his work due out in February, edited and introduced by Claire Tomalin (**Poems of John Milton**, Penguin Classics). Like Burns, Milton's hold on the public imagination rests on a fragment (though in the case of *Paradise Lost*, a substantial fragment) of his output; Tomalin's selection reveals a more rounded poet, whose gift for dynamic imagery and rich, resplendent detail is just as potent away from the epic form.

Also worth looking out for this month are new collections from Alison Brackenbury and Jen Hadfield. In **Singing in the Dark** (Carcanet), Brackenbury employs the seemingly simple English ballad (invented, more or less, by Wordsworth, and later favoured by the likes of Auden and Edward Thomas) to grapple with knotty modernity - a clash of form and content that carries the risk of wistfulness but, at its most effective, throws up compelling antitheses. Jen Hadfield's exuberant 2006 debut, *Almanacs*, married offbeat imagery with a zestful linguistic energy; her follow-up, **Nigh-No-Place** (Bloodaxe), based around an extended stay in Canada, has much to live up to.

March sees an embarrassment of riches on the poetry front. Faber delivers goods old and new with a long-overdue critical edition of Basil Bunting's **Complete Poems** (extensively annotated by Don Share) and a brand-new collection, **Mandeville**, from one of the Poetry Society's 2004 Next Generation poets, Matthew Francis. Taking as his inspiration *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, a medieval chronicle of the adventures of an English knight in which recognisable geographies are overlaid with fantastical descriptions of monsters and miracles, Francis reimagines Sir John, giving him vivid voice and drawing out the tensions between the physical and symbolic that underlie his accounts. Francis's astonishingly assured manipulation of the narrow confines of the sestet in his breathtaking 2006 pamphlet, *Whereabouts*, showed his formal dexterity; if he is able to approach his recondite subject with similar suppleness, this could turn out to be one of the collections of the year.

Other noteworthy releases this month come from Robert Crawford (**Full Volume**, Cape) and Australian veteran John Kinsella, who takes the touchstone of Edmund Burke's famous treatise on the Sublime and uses it to reevaluate favoured themes of language, landscape and human and natural interaction in **Shades of the Sublime and Beautiful** (Picador). Intriguing debuts, meanwhile, include Simon Barraclough's **Los Alamos Mon Amour** (Salt) which wheels through forms, moods and locations around a sensual core of love poems and, in April, Adam Foulds's ambitious narrative sequence, **The Broken Word** (Cape), based on the Mau Mau insurgency against the British colonial administration in 1950s Kenya. Also due out in April is **Bloodshot Monochrome** (Canongate), the third collection from Francis's fellow Next Generation poet Patience Agbabi, in which she applies her clear eye and formal

enterprise to the canvas of 21st-century Britain, exploring themes of love, race and writing in twisted sonnets.

Moving into early summer, the appearance of a new collection from one of Britain's most consistently limber and inventive poets, John Fuller, is cause for celebration. **Song & Dance** (Chatto) promises vintage Fuller, in the form of lyrics on love, hate and jealousy: his poems are object lessons in emotional veracity, gracefully delivered with intelligence and wit. In June, meanwhile, another of British poetry's stalwarts, Wendy Cope, has a book out. Her **Two Cures for Love: Selected Poems 1979-2006** (Faber) draws on earlier collections but also includes a generous tranche of previously unpublished work.

Looking forward into autumn, September sees the publication of **Being Human**, the final volume in Bloodaxe's acclaimed trilogy of anthologies, edited by Neil Astley. The first, *Staying Alive* (2002), ably demonstrated the power of a well-constructed anthology to introduce readers to vital new poets. I'll be expecting a copy of this one under my tree next Christmas morning.

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