

Women Poets' Prize

Evaluation Report
2018-2020



**Rebecca Swift
Foundation**

“The incredible level of diversity, high number of applications and the powerful statements reveal that the Women Poets’ Prize is a ground-breaking and essential new Prize, demonstrating how important it is to provide women centred development programmes. The Rebecca Swift Foundation is to be congratulated on setting it up with such care and attention; it acts as an important model for literature organisations in the UK going forward.

Nathalie Teitler

Credits

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“Along with the opportunities and nurturing – not least, the sustained mentoring with Mona Arshi – the Women Poets’ Prize did something profound to my sense of myself as a poet: being taken seriously gave me confidence – and confidence is the magic ingredient in our ability to write.

Claire Collison

Winner, Women Poets’ Prize 2018



“It’s been incredibly invigorating and energising for me, and has allowed me to access opportunities that I don’t think I would ever have been able to access otherwise. At the time when I won the Prize I feel like I was still very new to the poetry landscape in the UK, and totally new to publishing, and so I think it’s given me a sense of community and ongoing support. New readers have come to my work through the Prize, which is incredible, and quite life-changing.

Nina Mingya Powles

Winner, Women Poets’ Prize 2018



“The Women Poets’ Prize was such a lovely thing to be awarded, and gave me a boost when I needed it. The best part has been the six sessions of mentorship from my highly-professional and astute mentor (Isobel Dixon), as well as feeling supported, generally.

Anita Pati

Winner Women Poets’ Prize 2018



The **Rebecca Swift Foundation** is a UK registered charity set up in memory of Rebecca Swift – a much-loved editor, novelist, diarist, poet, and founder and director of The Literary Consultancy (TLC) from its foundation in 1996 until her early death in April 2017. TLC is now run by Aki Schilz, who set up the Foundation in tribute to her former boss and mentor, and in celebration of women poets everywhere.

The Foundation provides support and creative professional development opportunities to women poets through the delivery of its biennial Women Poets' Prize, first launched in June 2018. The Prize, which is free to enter, aims to maximise vital creative space for women poets within a supported environment. It combines the holistic (pastoral support and creative opportunities from performance to bookbinding) with the practical (a monetary award, digital skills training, and childcare cover), allowing the poets, and their poetry, to flourish.

The **Women Poets' Prize** is supported by a suite of industry partners whose combined expertise is offered to the three selected winners of each iteration of the Prize. For 2018, the Prize's industry partners were: Faber & Faber, Verve Festival, Bath Spa University, City Lit, The Literary Consultancy, the Poetry School, and RADA. In addition to the creative development opportunities offered by the Prize's industry partners, each winning poet receives £1,000 and is assigned a pastoral coach. Travel and access bursaries allow the poets to travel to and from each of the engagements, and to attend launches and events associated with the Prize. The Prize is administered by Project Manager Victoria Adukwei Bulley.

In its first iteration, the Women Poets' Prize received 573 submissions from UK-based women poets. Submissions were filtered by a reading panel, with a longlist of 40 submissions sent to judges Moniza Alvi, Sarah Howe, and Fiona Sampson. Three winners were then selected from the judges' shortlist of six. The three 2018 winners were Claire Collison, Nina Mingya Powles, and Anita Pati.

Foreword

The Rebecca Swift Foundation is a registered UK charity delivering a free-to-enter prize which we believe answers a genuine need within the writing community of the UK; specifically for women poets. Our theory of change pointed to various short and longterm assumptions about this need, and this report draws from the 573 applications to audit the need as expressed directly and in their own words by the poets who submitted work to the Prize in its first year. It felt important that we honoured the many and varied voices of these poets, engaging with them and incorporating them into the strategy of the Prize's future.

In looking for a consultant with whom to work, Nathalie Teitler was an early front-runner, with her vast experience over a long period of time working with poets in a consultative, coaching, and mentoring capacity, as well as her work project-managing and evaluating the impact of significant large-scale poetry initiatives in the UK, including The Complete Works, and the Jerwood Compton Poetry Fellowships. The latter in particular served as a model for the Women Poets' Prize, and we owe Jon Opie and his team a debt of gratitude for their willingness to share learnings with us in the very earliest stages of the Prize's development. We are so pleased with the results, and have also worked with Nathalie internally to ensure that we incorporate feedback about ways the Rebecca Swift Foundation and its team can continue to improve on the offer and delivery of the Women Poets' Prize to best serve the needs of women poets here in the UK.

We have made the decision to make this report publicly available, in part because we are extremely proud of the findings, but also because we wanted to give voice to the women poets who have written to us with such candour and energy about what they need, and what a prize and indeed prizes in general might usefully offer them. We wish to tell them: we are listening. And to the wider poetry and poetry publishing community, we wish to say: let us keep listening, and keep talking with each other, so that we can all better serve the needs of the poets whose writing nourishes us as readers, and whose creativity we must make every effort to protect and cultivate.

Aki Schilz

Founding Director, Rebecca Swift Foundation

June 2020

Executive Summary

- The number of applicants for the scheme, 573, is very high for a mentoring and development scheme. In comparison The Complete Works Poetry, a national development programme for Black and Asian poets, had fewer than 200 applications for each of its 3 rounds.
- The diversity of the applicants is equally striking: exact numbers are hard to calculate as they are not stated on applications but the statements reveal that at least one third of applicants are women of colour.
- The diversity is equally marked in the range of age (18-70s), geographic location (every country is represented including Ireland, Scotland and Wales), career level (beginner poets to writers with many published collections), disability/chronic illness (almost half the applicants).
- This level of diversity compares favourably with the Jerwood Compton Poetry Fellowship and The Complete Works Poetry (note: TCW was a programme for Black and Asian poets thus all applicants were Black/Asian), both are considered to be at the forefront of promoting inclusivity within the literature sector.
- Both the high number of applicants and the level of diversity are a major achievement, particularly for a Prize in its first round.
- The high numbers and the applications themselves demonstrate a clear demand for a poetry prize designed for women, with all female tutors, a holistic approach, and focus on empowerment.
- The application statements and numbers also demonstrates how little provision there is currently for a women focused poetry development programme/courses and demonstrates a need within the wider poetry sector.

“The standard of the entries was exceptionally high. These are sophisticated poets who have found their voices: and those voices are incredibly varied, challenging yet also often downright beautiful. Across this diverse group of poets, each one is subtle, transformative, distinctive and powerful.

Moniza Alvi, Sarah Howe, Fiona Sampson
Women Poets' Prize 2018 Judging Panel

The statements

Applicants were asked to submit two statements: one on why they wrote poetry and the second on what this Prize could offer them. These statements revealed the following:

A significant number of poets stated that they wrote poetry 'to survive' and because they 'had to'. This was linked to socio-economic and cultural factors specific to women (e.g., abuse, lower economic status).

A significant number of poets also stated that childrearing or caring duties meant that poetry was their only means of expressing their core selves in a society in which they felt silenced.

These reasons given differ significantly from the applications from male poets to similar schemes and prizes (for reference, Jerwood Compton Fellowship, the Complete Works Poetry and Roehampton International Poetry Prize are just some of the points of comparison).

Poets emphasised that they felt they could gain 'empowerment' from the programme (expressed by poets at all career levels) and that the particular range of professional partners, pastoral mentors and women tutors of diverse backgrounds seemed to offer the best possible development support.

All applicants were excited to be part of an all-women network. Many stated that they had received negative comments from male peers/tutors at courses, or had seen female tutors treated badly by male colleagues/students (it should be noted that this seemed to impact on poets of all career levels).

Applicants stated that having some financial support from the Prize would have a strong impact on their access to time to write. Many also stated that winning the Prize would validate them as poets, enabling them to take time away from family duties and jobs to focus on their writing.

National news coverage

**The
Guardian**

31 October 2018 | 'Women Poets' prize reveals first three winners', featuring poem extracts from all three winners

THE BOOKSELLER

21 May 2018 | 'Foundation and poetry award launches in memory of Rebecca Swift'

31 October 2018 | 'Winners of the inaugural Women Poets' Prize revealed'

**PUBLISHING
PERSPECTIVES**

6 November | 'In the UK, inaugural Women Poets' Prize Winners begin Mentor Programs'

14 June | 'The Rebecca Swift Foundation's New Women Poet's Prize Opens for Submissions'

23 October | 'The UK's Inaugural Women Poets' Prize Shortlists Nine Writers'

BUSTLE

1 November | 'These Women Just Won A Major Award For Their Feminist Poetry & You Can See Why'

Poetry in Britain in 2020

In 2020 the poetry world in the UK is significantly different to what it was in 1996, when The Literary Consultancy was set up by Rebecca Swift. There has been a major increase in the number of poetry sales in the UK, with young women representing the majority of the buyers (Ferguson, Dona. Guardian, 2019).

Statistics from UK book sales monitor Nielsen Book Scan show that sales grew by just over 12% last year, for the second year in a row. In total, 1.3m volumes of poetry were sold in 2018, adding up to £12.3m in sales, a rise of £1.3m on 2017. Two-thirds of buyers were younger than 34 and 41% were aged 13 to 22, with teenage girls and young women identified as the biggest consumers last year (Guardian, 2019).

This is, in large part due, to the high sales figures of poets made famous on the social media platform Instagram. Rupi Kaur, for example, is responsible for almost 1 million of these sales (Guardian, 2019).

There have also been major changes within the major UK Presses with several now publishing more women poets than men. Bloodaxe, for example,

has published a list of 65% women poets over the last three years. Of course, there are still Presses where gender diversity is less representative. There are an increasing number of female poets on major judging panels (gone are the days of all male judging panels), as tutors for prestigious organisations, editors of poetry journals and in academia. Women poets are also well represented on the winners' lists of major Prizes: for 2018 and 2019 there were equal numbers of men and women who won the Forward Best Collection Prize, the Costa Prize, the T.S Eliot and the Ted Hughes Prizes. This is a relatively new development: from 2015-2017 the percentage of winners of these key prizes were 37% women and 63% men (Teitler, 2020).

Against this backdrop it might seem that a prize for women poets is not as essential as it might have been several decades ago. This is not the case, as the Rebecca Swift Foundation Women Poets' Prize demonstrates. While major literature organisations like Spread the Word and the Poetry School have a majority female audience at their events and courses, reflecting that they are the

largest consumers of poetry, there are few courses that are women-centered in their content. None of the courses offered by the largest literature organisations (in particular those with Arts Council England NPO status) give serious attention to the Instagram poets such as Rupi Kaur and Yrsa Daley-Ward, nor do they tend to focus on the themes of empowerment and the female body that these poets explore (Teitler, 2020). These poets remain the focus of negative critiques, most recently in the London Review of Books (Bucknell, LRB 2020). In other words, there is a disconnect between what the majority consumers, (often young) women, are buying poetry for and what they are taught is valued in writing courses/journals/Prizes. The best option might be to offer courses looking at a wide range of women poets, starting with the Instagram poets and moving on to prize winning poets like Warsan Shire, Sharon Olds and Malika Booker. Poetry that the audience of the Instagram poets might not know but would probably find inspiring and powerful. Instead of ignoring the 'Instapoets', organisations could see them as a way of drawing a wider audience into the poetry world. Most tutors still note that the male participants are far more vocal with their opinions than female participants. This leads to women contributing less even when they are the majority participants; in spite of this, there are no courses offered exclusively for women participants.

Applications to schemes such as the Complete Works Poetry reveal that female applicants are significantly more likely to be suffering from a lack of confidence, even if they have attained the same level of professional success (publications, reviews etc.) as their male counterparts. Critic Dave Coates notes in his research (Coates, 2020) that national reviews of female poets are still significantly less common than those of male poets. In journals and national papers this bias also exists, with national papers such as the Guardian publishing twice as many male poets as female poets from 2015-2017 (Coates, 2020).

The RSL's recent extensive national survey, 'A Room of My Own' states that over the last 10 years the average earnings of professional writers from writing alone have dropped from £18k per year to £10k per year, with women hit the hardest (RSL, 2020). In socio-economic terms, women

are still suffering high levels of abuse (Rape Crisis Centre, 2016), and they still take on the majority of domestic work and child-care/ caring duties (BBC, 2016). This might at first seem unconnected to a poetry prize; it matters, however, because – as is strongly reflected in the applicants' statements for this Prize – poets write within the context of their life experiences.

In the words of many of the applicants for the Rebecca Swift Prize, poetry offers them a space to express a voice that has been silenced. It is a matter of survival. The reasons why there are writing, how they write and what they write about are often fundamentally different to their male counterparts. This explains why there is a significant demand for the kinds of women centered programmes and courses which have yet to be programmed.

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The applicants

In terms of race, age, disability, geography, career level, disability and every other marker the list of applicants could not be more inclusive

Demographics

It is worth starting with the point that the numbers of year one applicants 573 is very high for a mentoring and development style scheme. As a point of comparison, the Complete Works Poetry had about 200 applications for each round (with ten poets selected). The sheer volume of applications for the Women Poets' Prize immediately demonstrates that it is offering something unique and important.

It is not only the high volume of applicants that is notable. The diversity of the entries is the highest I have seen in 25 years of working in the literature sector. In terms of race, age, disability, geography, career level, disability and every other marker the list of applicants could not be more inclusive. Although the exact numbers are hard to calculate as applicants in the first round of the Prize were not asked to give details, the extensive statements indicate that there are a much higher number of poets of colour than would be expected given the demographic background in the UK. It is likely that at least a third of applicants are poets of colour. In terms of age, exact figures cannot be given as

this data was not collected for the first year, but the statements reveal that applicants include 18 year-old poets who have sent in the first batch of poems they ever wrote, to 60 and 70 year olds. It should be noted that it is extremely unusual to have any entries from the older age range so this is a real achievement. A significant number of the poets mention having chronic illness, disability or mental health issues (this can be estimated to be almost 50%).

There are high numbers of applicants from Scotland, Wales, Ireland and every part of Britain. Again, this contrasts with the usual figures for Prizes of this kind where the majority of applicants are from London and the South East. As mentioned, some poets are sending in the very first poems that they ever wrote; others are the veterans of 3 or more published collections but still refer to themselves as 'emerging'. Again, this is unusual. Poetry Prizes tend to attract the usual suspects, even when huge efforts are made to reach beyond these audiences.

Reasons for the high level of diversity

1) The language of the initial call out with the focus on empowerment, the women tutors and the presence of pastoral support meant that women felt confident in applying. Many spoke in their applications about how the idea of more holistic support was particularly appealing and necessary. A large number wrote about never having had the courage to apply for a Prize before. Many wrote about their desire for a community of women poets. In fact, the majority of applicants gave these as being among their reasons for applying. (This also suggests that significant changes may be needed in the way prizes and courses are delivered.) The language of the call out and the structure of the Prize also suggested that the usual value judgements implicit in major prizes would not be in place. The majority of the applicants mention Rupi Kaur, Warsan Shire or Yrsa Daley Ward as inspirations.

2) The work done by the Rebecca Swift Foundation team in getting the word out on so many platforms from grassroots to more established networks (see 'National Coverage'). This level of diversity does not just happen on its own, particularly on the geographic level. A significant amount of effort has gone in to ensuring that news of the Prize was as widespread as possible.

The focus on empowerment, women tutors and the presence of pastoral support meant that women felt confident in applying

3) Confidence in the RSF and wider The Literary Consultancy team and organisation. The constant holistic focus of TLC which is strongly affiliated with the Prize, its dedication to providing empowering services to writers is well known within the poetry community. During Aki Schilz's directorship this has come to the fore even more with TLC leading in the way in how to offer provisions, run events etc. Again, the level of diversity of applications and the honesty of the responses is a real testament to the way in which TLC is viewed.

4) The diversity of the tutors and the Prize's administrative team. The presence of a diversity (age, race etc.) within the team and the tutors is likely to have made a difference in the kind of applicants who apply. Even poetry organisations who are well intentioned find that the level of diversity in their students is consistently low, even when they hire tutors of colour. It is often hard for them to understand that their all white staff (and often board) does not create an environment conducive to inclusivity. TLC and therefore RSF have inclusivity embedded at the deepest level, in terms of staff, ethos and services provided. This prize offers conclusive proof that this does make a huge difference.

5) The fact that so few provisions for all women courses/events or prizes exists. The outpouring of applications indicates that more are needed.

6) It is worth mentioning that the level of poetry was incredibly varied and that a significant number of the poets were not the usual suspects for Prizes. There were many exciting new finds within the applications of poets with barely any public profile but who could publish and be successful. Many of these were from women who had come to poetry late, due to caring for children, or from poets with little education. In both cases, they stated or implied that they lacked confidence.

The statements

Why women write poetry

Empowerment and necessity

Almost all the poets articulated within their statements that they had to write poetry to survive and that their voices had been silenced

The applicants were invited to submit two statements: the first on why they write poetry, the second on what they felt the prize could offer them. Almost all the poets articulated within their statements that they had to write poetry to survive and that their voices had been silenced. The reasons for this were complex but largely linked to socio-economic and cultural issues: a troublingly high number had either suffered abuse or chronic illness (often both). That is not to say that the poets did not also mention a profound love of language and craft as a motivating force for writing poetry but in a large number of cases, including widely published poets their statement as to why they wrote poetry began with the words, 'because I have to'.

A significant number also stated that their duties of child rearing and caring for relatives meant that poetry was their only means of expressing their core selves. For the poets of colour, a large number gave the additional pressures of their communities in silencing women's self-expression. For the queer and trans poets writing poetry had provided their

only lifeline to being their true selves. For all of the poets, poetry was a necessity not a luxury.

Having run a number of national mentoring and development programmes over the last 20 years, as well as managing the Jerwood Compton Fellowship and judging international prizes, I can categorically state that these statements are fundamentally different to the applications of most male poets. While there is some overlap with male writers of colour/queer/working class writers, the applications from men tend towards saying that poetry is their best means of expressing themselves. Rarely is it the only means in a world in which they are silenced, abused, underpaid and burdened with most caring duties.

These differences suggest that women poets – particularly in the earlier stages of their development – might well benefit from women-only courses with women tutors looking at women writers. It also explains why there was such a strong outpouring of applications. This is not to say that all women poets fall into this category; what it does suggest is that there is a very high number

of women poets for whom this is true. Existing prizes and courses simply do not address these needs. This explains why many of the entrants were entering their very first poetry prize. I came across a high number of applications that were of an excellent standard from poets who had little/no formal training and had never won prizes. This is unusual. Finding a poet who is virtually unknown within the poetry circuit and who writes with skill and originality is the ultimate goal of prizes. Again, it is to the credit of the Rebecca Swift Foundation Women Poets' Prize that it has unearthed many such poets. It has been my experience over the

last 20 years in the literature field, that men tend to over-emphasise their level of skill, while women have a strong tendency to believe they are much less skilled than they are.

Over and over again in the applications, women mentioned lack of confidence or even that they had previously been embarrassed to show their work to anyone and had not wanting to waste readers' time. Lack of confidence and 'imposter syndrome' was mentioned in the majority of applications, even from poets who had significant publications and performance history.

What they can get from the Prize

Empowerment, confidence, validation, money and women centred support

Applicants all spoke highly of the importance of entering a community and network of women poets and how important this would be to their development

Many of the applications gave detailed and well thought out explanations of how they could hone their craft, grow their audience and increase their understanding of/access to the poetry world through the Prize. They showed an excellent understanding of their own craft and

process and a clear sense of how to progress, often with specific projects (this clarity is one of the reasons many would be great candidates for other funding schemes). The main thing that stood out however was that applicants used the word 'empowerment' over and over again. The holistic

aspect of the Prize with the pastoral mentor as well as the poetry mentor, was widely praised and one of the key things they felt that they would gain. In other words, the combination of professional and pastoral support was exactly what they felt that they needed and what was hard to find elsewhere. It was interesting to note that this was the case with poets who were already well published as well as those who were just starting out.

Applicants all spoke highly of the importance of entering a women community and network of poets and how important this would be to their development. Again, this suggests a pressing need to provide more of a women centred community within the poetry world at all levels. The fact that there was significant diversity within the mentors themselves also did a great deal to raise confidence. A large number spoke of negative experiences from male peers/tutors in the response to their poetry which had put them off taking more courses. For many of the applicants the reason for applying was 'validation'. They felt that if they were shortlisted for, or won the Prize, they would then be empowered to take the time and space they needed to write. In some cases that validation was for themselves, in many cases it was also something that they needed to prove to their communities. It is interesting to note that one of the Jerwood Compton Poetry Fellows, Hafsa Aneela Bashir,

a 50 year old Muslim poet, has spoken at length about how winning the prize has given her the confidence to explain to her extended family and the wider community that her poetry writing is important. It is the first time that she has felt able to say 'I'm a poet' in public and private. This was also the case with many of the female Complete Works Poets who spoke of finally being able to take retreats or time to write because their families and communities now had to accept that their poetry was important enough to justify leaving child-rearing and domestic duties.

It was also clear that financial issues played a key role in whether or not they were able to pursue their poetry writing, with the stipend offered by the Prize being a significant factor in why they had applied. In terms of both time and money, it is clear that female poets are in a very different position to their male counterparts. As the RSL research demonstrates, women poets have less time and less money to write than their male counterparts, for the socio-economic and cultural reasons outlined earlier. While lack of time, space and money are three of the key reasons given by all writers for not pursuing writing, these problems are particularly severe for women.

Conclusion

The Women Poets' Prize is both brave and necessary. Brave in that it shines a light on just how stark the differences are at fundamental levels for women poets. Necessary in that it shows the need for change in the poetry world – in the way we set up and deliver courses, in the way we talk about women poets and the way we talk about poetry readers.

As well as wanting the benefits of having access to the prestigious partners, mentors and TLC itself, the statements provided by women poets applying for the prize revealed that the majority believed the main benefit they would gain from the Prize was through its unique features of being women centred and with a pastoral and holistic emphasis.

The level of diversity, high numbers of applications and the powerful statements from applying poets reveal that the Rebecca Swift Foundation Women Poets' Prize is a ground-breaking and essential new Prize, demonstrating how important it is to provide women centred development programmes. The Prize acts as an important model for literature organisations in the UK going forward.