

Rhyme and Reason: Developing Contemporary Poetry

Executive summary

Background

In 1999 the Arts Council of England commissioned research into the market for contemporary poetry. The overall aim of the research was to increase understanding of the market for poetry, particularly for contemporary poetry, by collecting information from publishers, booksellers, poetry readers and non-poetry readers. It is intended that the research will provide information which can be used by publishers and booksellers to develop publishing and marketing programmes and strategies, with a view to increasing sales of poetry in general, and of contemporary poetry in particular.

There were several strands to the research:

- an analysis of existing data on the sales of poetry books;
- interviews with publishers and booksellers;
- statistical analysis of poetry readers and buyers; and
- face-to-face in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with readers and non-readers of contemporary poetry.

Publication and sales of poetry

An analysis of the 1,000 top-selling poetry titles during January 1998 to December 1999 showed that a total of 1,904,356 volumes were sold, at a total cost of £13,152,982. The average price per volume was £6.91.

- There is a high degree of concentration at all levels of the poetry market. A high proportion of sales, both generally and within individual genres, was accounted for by a small number of imprints, titles and authors. Three imprints accounted for more than 60% of sales, a single imprint had more than 50% of the market in nine out of 19 genres, and two imprints published eight of the ten top-selling titles.
- Contemporary poetry, the main focus of this research, represented only a small proportion of sales, accounting for 3% of the volume and 4% of the value of sales. This category was also highly concentrated. One imprint generated more than 90%, and one author 67%, of sales of contemporary volumes.
- When asked about their reasons for publishing poetry, publishers referred to notions of 'quality', although their interpretations of this term differed.

Selling poetry

Among the factors influencing the sales of poetry were: price, design, size and format of poetry books and sales policy.

- Price was not seen as an issue for existing poetry readers, but could act as a deterrent to potential readers, who did not always regard poetry volumes as good value for money.
- Book covers were seen as important in attracting browsers to a volume, but there was disagreement among interviewees about how covers should look. Some talked of the importance of brand identity, others wanted more attractive covers.
- Regular readers preferred slim volumes which they could carry around with them, but more occasional readers liked larger anthologies. Readers thought that the layout of the poems on a page, the amount of space and the typeface were all important in attracting them to a book.
- The range and quality of poetry available in bookshops was seen as in decline. Readers said that the poetry section was often hidden away in a corner, and that they were unlikely to pass it while browsing. Poetry rarely featured in table displays.
- Interviewees said that there were fewer specialist poetry buyers in shops than formerly, and that shops were increasingly intolerant of slow-moving stock.
- Booksellers argued that publishers' reps carried fewer poetry books than formerly. There was an interaction between the mutual perceptions of reps and booksellers; a rep might spend more time and offer a wider range of titles to a shop which was perceived as being interested in poetry.
- Audio cassettes accounted for only a small proportion of poetry sales. Shops reported doing either very well or very badly with them. Some readers said that audio cassettes had offered them a 'way into' poetry.
- The Internet was seen as offering opportunities to publishers, and a way of countering declining stock ranges in shops. Few readers had used the Internet to access poetry.

Marketing poetry

- Booksellers wanted more point-of-sale and promotional material to be made available.

- Poetry readings in shops did not seem to stimulate sales; they appeared to be more effective at literary festivals. A number of poetry readers had been drawn into poetry through readings.
- Reviews of poetry in the media, though widely seen as important, were seen as declining in both quality and quantity. Good feature coverage was seen as much more beneficial, although there were concerns among publishers and booksellers about the propensity to focus on poets' personalities or private lives.
- Poetry was seen as badly served by radio and television.
- Opinions about literary prizes and promotions such as National Poetry Day were mixed. There was widespread knowledge of, and support for, *Poems on the Underground*, which was seen as instrumental in raising the profile of poetry.

Buying poetry

- The majority of poetry purchases were made by women, people aged 45 and over, and those belonging to non-manual social groups. It was clear from the research that there is not one, but several, poetry markets.
- Women bought 70% of Favourites, but only 53% of Traditional Classics.
- People aged under 35 bought 22% of collections, compared with 13% of anthologies.
- More than 50% of Modern Classics, but fewer than 40% of Favourites, were bought by people in the AB social groups.
- Several publishers and booksellers distinguished between a 'core' market of poetry fans and a broader market with wider tastes. Specialist market niches, for genres such as women's poetry, gay poetry or religious poetry, were also identified.
- More than a quarter (26%) of volumes were bought because the purchaser 'saw it in a shop'; 19% were bought for school or for study, and 10% because they were being sold at a discounted price.
- Poetry buyers said they usually set out to buy a specific volume, but also bought when browsing – not necessarily for poetry books – either in bookshops or at second-hand stalls.

Reading poetry

- Women and older people were more likely than men and younger people to be readers of poetry. Readers appeared to be slightly younger than buyers.
- Almost 75% of Favourites and Light Verse volumes were read by women, compared with almost 60% of Traditional Classics.
- Readers were classified into a typology, depending on the type of poetry they read and their reasons for doing so. At one end of the spectrum there were 'Highbrow', regular readers who take their poetry seriously; at the opposite end were 'Marginals', who have a casual interest in light and humorous verse but little propensity to become more regular or committed poetry readers.
- There was widespread agreement among interviewees and focus group participants that one's first exposure to poetry could be crucial in influencing later experiences. The family was cited as a major influence on reading habits. Respondents reported both negative and positive exposure to poetry at school. University courses, poetry events, radio and TV were also cited as influences on poetry reading.
- The image of contemporary poetry, lack of awareness and knowledge, cultural factors and factionalism within contemporary poetry were seen as major barriers to widening its appeal.

Widening the market for contemporary poetry

- Readers of non-contemporary poetry, poetry event attendees and readers of literary fiction were seen as the groups with most potential for becoming readers of contemporary poetry.
- Suggestions for raising the profile of contemporary poetry included: placing it in new contexts, promotional campaigns, profiling poets, and increasing exposure in the media.
- Bookshops were seen as crucial to the process of generating a wider audience for contemporary poetry. Their contribution could include more use of promotional aids, giving poetry books a better location in shops, making it easier to browse, and providing more expertise and advice.
- More long-term strategies included examining the way poetry is taught in schools, and exploring ways of bringing adult readers to poetry.