



Authorgraph No.61 ? Kit Wright

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[Morag Styles](#) [1]

[61](#) [2]

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Kit Wright interviewed by **Morag Styles**.

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My first acquaintance with Kit Wright came through the story of another poet, Clive Wilmer, who described how he and Kit had gone to give a poetry reading in a village outside Cambridge. The Literary Officer of the local Arts Association was the only person with any transport: unfortunately for them he had an M. G. sports car with only two front seats. Clive related in hilarious detail how Kit, probably the tallest poet in Britain, had to squeeze himself into the tiny space between the seats, his knees in the air and his legs folded into an almost impossible position. To add to his predicament, the roof had to be rolled back to make space for Kit's contortions and this was a day in coldest January! What came over in this anecdote was Kit's obliging nature and his tremendous sense of humour. When I finally met him I was not disappointed. Kit Wright is funny, humane and terribly good company, just as you'd expect from his poetry books for children. Kit is, of course, as well known for his adult poetry. His latest collection, **Short Afternoons**, has been highly acclaimed, as were his three other books.

Kit got bitten by the 'poetry bug' through contact with other poets and some very good teachers. First and foremost was his father who was both. Ronald Wright was a prep. school master, a dedicated teacher who loved literature and had a gift for instilling this pleasure in others. He was not a published poet, but he enjoyed writing light-hearted verse and did so throughout his life. The whole family took pleasure in books: Kit's mother read regularly to the children and Kit's uncle, an eccentric character, was a clever humorist who could make up a rhyme about anything. So Kit and his older brother were encouraged to read and write voraciously and it's unsurprising that the two lads turned to literary pursuits as adults. (Kit's brother is a successful publisher.)

At thirteen Kit went to Berkhamsted Public School where he was lucky enough to encounter more excellent English teachers. He revelled in the camaraderie of lots of mates and developed a passion for cricket (like many young lads, he aspired to play for England) which he was very good at. Childhood is never undiluted pleasure; Kit was actually quite self-conscious about his height and hid his feelings by becoming the joker who could make everyone laugh. Kit continued writing poetry at school: he had done so since he was about six; it seemed perfectly natural to express himself in verse in his family.

When he was seventeen he met the poet, Vernon Scannell, who influenced him enormously. 'What changed everything was meeting Vernon. He was very encouraging ... he didn't like what I'd written much, but he could see something in it. Until then I thought poetry was written by people like Wordsworth. Yet here was Vernon, whose poetry I greatly admired, so interesting to talk to. He introduced me to other writers and was abrasive about famous poets.' This was heady stuff for Kit who had started to read young contemporary poets like Ted Hughes. **The Hawk in the Rain** (Hughes's first collection of poetry) and other early Hughes had a particular charge. 'The poems were electric - I thought the most interesting thing in life was poetry.' Soon after, in 1965, Kit set off for Oxford with a scholarship under his belt to read English.

At Oxford he continued to write but not successfully. 'Many of us keen on poetry at Oxford were unsuccessful at writing it at that period. It took us ages to have confidence in ourselves and write with authority. Craig Raine was one of the group - we told him his poems were brilliant, but he wouldn't believe us. I think we were very intense ... overwrought with critical theory. We practised our fierce, embryonic powers of criticism on ourselves, almost before we had let ourselves speak.' In fact, Kit didn't publish his first collection (with two others in **Treble Poets 1**) until he was thirty, so the Oxford experience does seem to have had a detrimental effect on his writing.

After a brief encounter with teaching which he didn't enjoy, Kit went off to Canada for a couple of years to teach English at South Ontario University. When he got back to Britain in 1970, he got a job with The Poetry Society as Education Officer and was also involved in charring meetings, fundraising, etc. Meanwhile, Kit had several poems published in literary magazines, did some reviewing, and his first full-length collection, **The Bear Looked Over the Mountain**, appeared in 1974. In 1975 he was made redundant from The Poetry Society and his freelance career began, living by 'the pen and the feet' as Kit put it. In 1977 he went to Cambridge where he spent three years as Creative Writing Fellow at Trinity.

Kit started writing for children in the seventies. 'When I started writing, most poetry for kids was about nature -things rural - there wasn't much about that was urban. Now it's the opposite.' Kit had always liked kids and enjoyed his role as surrogate 'uncle' to a great number (see the dedications of his books!). 'I'm a bit of a kid myself,' Kit admits, so it was natural to turn to writing for a young readership. He takes his writing for children very seriously, applying the same high standards he expects of his adult work. He doesn't mix up the two, as some writers do. 'I put on a different pair of shoes when I write for children. I often write it in a great block - a poem every day. I have to get into it.' Here's an example from his latest book:

*There's nothing I can't see
From here.*

There's nothing I can't be
From here.

Because my eyes
Are open wide
To let the big
World come inside,

I think I can see me
From here.

That's the first poem in **Cat Among the Pigeons** and it represents a strand of Kit's poetry for children which isn't always recognised: one that is introspective, sensitive, thought provoking and serious. There's a terrific emotional charge in 'The Frozen Man' in **Rabbiting On**:

*Here in a snug house
at the heart of town*

the fire is burning
red and yellow and gold:

you can hear the warmth
like a sleeping cat

Breathe softly
in every room.

When the frozen man

comes to the door,

let him in,

let him in,

let him in. (an extract)

And long before most of us were thinking `Green', Kit wrote the moving `Song of the Whale' in **Hot Dog**:

In the forest of the sea,

Whale, I heard you

Singing,

Singing to your kind.

We'll never let you be.

Instead of life we choose

Lipstick for our painted faces,

Polish for our shoes. (an extract)

Kit believes that children can `take some stiffening' and has chosen topics not often tackled in poetry, like a Down's Syndrome child cheering up passengers waiting for a train ('Useful Person'), a lonely blind lady returning from Bingo ('Mercy') and the death of a loved grandfather ('Grandad'):

He'd got twelve stories.

I'd heard every one of them

Hundreds of times

But that was the fun of them:

You knew what was coming

So you could join in.

He'd got big hands

And brown, grooved skin

And when he laughed

It knocked you flat.

Now he's dead

And I'm sorry about that. (extract)

It's easy to miss this side of his work, because the humorous ones attract more attention. And you can see why with poems like `Dave Dirt's Christmas Presents' from **Cat Among the Pigeons**:

Dave Dirt wrapped his Christmas

presents

Late on Christmas Eve

And gave to his near relations

things

That you would not believe.

His brother got an Odour-Eater ?

Second-hand one, natch.

For Dad he chose, inside its box,

A single burnt-out match.

His sister copped the sweepings

from

His hairy bedroom rug,
While Mum received a centipede
And Granny got a slug.

Next day he had the nerve to sit
Beneath the Christmas tree
And say: `OK, I've done my bit ?
What have you got for me?'

Not surprisingly, this piece can be relied upon to go down well when Kit makes one of his frequent visits to schools (he's a great admirer of the dedication and professionalism of teachers - especially primary teachers). `I always tell children I was thinking of myself at that age,' Kit replies when asked who Dave Dirt was modelled on! One of the delicious pleasures in reading Kit Wright's poems, especially for younger readers, is their slightly subversive lack of propriety. Apart from the utterly revolting and irresistible antics *of Dave Dirt* (chewing gum under the table, being sick, picking scabs, sticking things up his nose, blowing his nose on tube tickets ...) he catches tellingly kids' horror of being slobbered over by sappy relations in `Hugger Mugger' and even *uses* knickers and a bra in `Pride'.

Kit is currently working on a new anthology for children and has two already in print. He's keen to bring to his young readership's attention some of the best poetry of the past which he felt was in danger of being forgotten. `Generations of children are growing up not knowing ... the tried and tested winners.' So old favourites like `The Highwayman' and `The Train to Glasgow' sit side by side with contemporary poems.

Writing can be a solitary life for a gregarious person, so Kit will sometimes write the first draft of a poem amidst the hubbub of the pub. The rest is hard work back at the desk to `hack it about': he's a skilled and meticulous craftsman and it often takes a long time before he's satisfied with his work. No word-processor for him - it's a pen, hardback book and ancient typewriter!

Kit now lives with his partner, Penny, and three adored cats, in north London. He was quite upset when we last spoke because George, a small female cat, had been out all night in the January storm and he didn't know where she was. This affection for cats is evident in some of the poems in **Cat Among the Pigeons**. Here's a bit from `Granny Tom':

*For the cat is growing old
In the yard, in the yard,
And the pigeons leave him cold.
He has starred
In his youth in many chases,
When he put them through their
paces.
Now he knows just what his place is
In the yard.*

Kit is refreshingly non-elitist about poetry and has no time for those who would be precious about it. He loves a wide variety of poetry from Shakespeare (I'm still dazzled by what an extraordinary genius he is'), Sir Thomas Wyatt ("They flee from me that some time they did seek" is one of my favourite poems of all time') and *some* of Blake (there's also some rubbish in the prophetic books') to contemporary British and American poets, along with poetry from other cultures in translation.

However, he can't help admiring the arrogance of the distinguished poet, Brodsky, who, on being asked whether he wrote fiction, replied: `No, it isn't enough.' Those would probably be Kit's sentiments, too. `think so highly of poetry that I've dedicated my life to it. It's the most important thing to me.'

Photographs by **Richard Newton**.

The Books

For adults:

Kit Wright Poems, 1974-83, Hutchinson, 0 09 173743 5, £7.50 pbk

Short Afternoons, Hutchinson, 0 09 173607 2, £6.95 pbk

For children:

Rabbiting On, Lions, 0 00 671342 4, £1.95 pbk

Hot Dog and Other Poems, Puffin, 014 03.1336 2, £1.99 pbk

Cat Among the Pigeons, Viking Kestrel, 0 670 817112, £5.99; Puffin, 014 03.2367 8, £1.99 pbk

Poems for 9 year-olds and under, (ed.), Puffin, 0 14 03.1490 3, £2.50 pbk

Poems for over 10 year-olds, (ed.), Puffin, 014 03.1491 1, £2.50 pbk

Page Number:

12

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