

**PAUL McDONALD**  
The Sentinel Literary Quarterly  
**Monday Writer**  
23 November 2020

The Monday Writer is a weekly feature published by  
Sentinel Literary Quarterly

<https://sentinelquarterly.com/monday-writer>

<https://www.facebook.com/sentinelquarterly>

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## About Paul McDonald

Paul McDonald taught at the University of Wolverhampton for twenty-five years, where he ran the Creative Writing Programme. He took early retirement in 2019 to write full time. He is the author of over twenty books, which cover fiction, poetry, and scholarship. His books include the novels *Surviving Sting* (2001), *Kiss Me Softly Amy Turtle* (2004), and *Do I Love You?* (2008); poetry collections, *The Right Suggestion* (1999), *Catch a Falling Tortoise* (2007), and *An Artist Goes Bananas* (2012), and a recent collection of flash fiction, *Midnight Laughter* (2019). His scholarly work ranges across a variety of disciplines, including American literature, humour, and narratology. His most recent academic books are: *Enigmas of Confinement: A History and Poetics of Flash Fiction* (2018), *Lydia Davis: A Study* (2019), and *Allen Ginsberg: Cosmopolitan Comic* (2020). His creative work has won or been shortlisted for a number of prizes including the Ottakars/Faber and Faber Poetry Competition, The Bedford Prize, The Bridport Prize, The John Clare Poetry Prize, the Sentinel Literary Quarterly Poetry Prize, the Sentinel Short Story Prize, and Retreat West Flash Fiction Prize, and the Pushcart Prize (nomination).

## The Monday Writer Interview:

# Paul McDonald

*in conversation with Nnorom Azuonye*

**Paul, before we get into talking about you and your work. May I have your view on the Covid-19 pandemic. How do you think it has changed and continues to change the world? Predict the state of life in a post-Covid world.**

It's been such a strange time for everyone, of course, and a very painful one for many. It's hard to generalise about the potential impact, although I'm sure it's made us more aware of our vulnerability as human beings. Hopefully it'll make us more intent on cultivating the values that are important: if we see more investment in the NHS and social care as a result of the crisis, and more respect for healthcare workers in general, that would be a positive thing. Some positives have emerged already of course - for instance, now everyone in England is an expert on virology and epidemiology!



**Countless poets have produced full collections based on the pandemic. Have you been inspired to write anything around the Coronavirus and its effect on our way of life?**

I have written a couple of pandemic related poems, but nothing substantial. Perhaps this is because I haven't been significantly affected by it. There's a saying among writers that only trouble is interesting, and mercifully the pandemic hasn't created too much trouble for me so far. I'm one of the lucky ones - my income is secure, and lockdown for me was a fairly comfortable experience, albeit with a heavy reliance on Amazon and Netflix.

**Your creative writing traverses poetry and fiction. Which genre did you embrace first and how do you decide what subject will be better expressed through fiction or poetry?**

I enjoy writing poetry, fiction, and literary criticism in equal measure. The latter is probably the easiest for me because I'm working off/with someone else's work, and it's just a matter of finding a perspective on the subject. Poetry and fiction

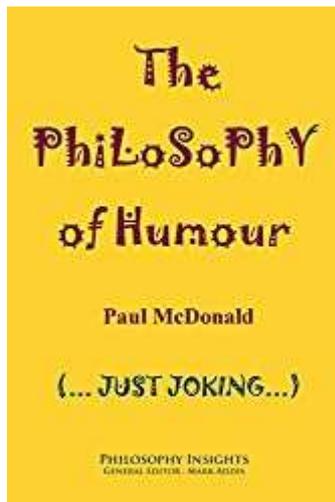
demand more creative energy, and a different mindset: they require more invention and originality. They are also different disciplines in themselves - one way to distinguish between poetry and fiction for me is to say: in the former my focus is mainly on language, while in the latter it's on narrative. When I write poetry, I strive to combine words in ways that are arresting and evocative, and this becomes an end in itself. In fiction my principal aim is to tell a story, creating enough tension to keep people interested in my characters as they move through time, so I'm less concerned with foregrounding the language. There is overlap between these activities, of course: sometimes my poems tell a story, and sometimes my stories become poetic. It's hard to say which topics lend themselves to each activity - occasionally I'll write poems and stories about the same thing.

**You ran the creative writing programme at the University of Wolverhampton for many years. In your experience, could a technically competent and disciplined person without outstanding talent become a successful writer?**

It depends on what you mean by success. I like to think that my students' writing improved during their time studying with me - certainly many of my ex-students became excellent writers, leaving me way behind! It's hard to know to what degree it's possible to teach creative writing, and it's been the focus of much debate over the years. Some say that you can't teach it, as such, but you can help people learn it for themselves. You do this by offering them guidance and feedback as they gradually begin to find their voice. While you can't imbue people with talent, you can help them to make the most of whatever abilities they have, and that in itself can be profoundly enriching both for teacher and student. In my view, creative writing is an excellent subject to study, even for those who don't aspire to be professional writers. Such courses allow people to flex and strengthen their creative muscles, develop their problem solving strategies, their capacity for invention, and their communication skills. Students emerge from creative writing degrees more able to think creatively, and express themselves fluently: these are valuable key skills (can you tell that I spent a lot of time promoting my course at university open days?)

**Yes, definitely. I might just join a creative writing programme. Sounds fantastic. OK, let me phrase this properly. As a person who taught creative writing, did you ever feel your work would always be under severe scrutiny with your readers expecting your own writing to be a showcase, sort of 'how to write it'?**

During my lecturing years I rarely referenced my own creative work on my courses. My poetry and fiction was available in the library for students to read if



they felt inclined, but I didn't cite it as required reading. I would have found that a little embarrassing and egocentric. However, I did often use my critical and scholarly books as set texts, mainly because they were written for a pedagogical purpose. For instance, I wrote a book called [The Philosophy of Humour](#) specifically for students studying my module on humour writing, and I've also written various books about authors and literary topics that I've taught over the years. These books were designed to increase students' understanding of literary context and theory, rather than as models of good writing - hopefully they provided a useful supplement to my lectures, plus the royalties helped pay my mortgage!

**Now, just a quick follow-up to my earlier question. 'How it works' is a crisp, succinct piece of flash fiction you published in Flash Fiction magazine. In 2019, you published *Midnight Laughter* - a collection of flash fiction. What are the key characteristics of extraordinary flash fiction?**

I developed an interest in flash fiction mainly through teaching them. Flashes are very convenient for teaching because they can be read quickly, and written on the spot in class. It's useful for students to learn to write within constraints - fledgling writers often write too much, hence the saying 'less is more'. I'd encourage students to read and write flashes as a means of developing a feel for narrative economy. Setting a limit of, say, three hundred words for a story forces writers to think hard about word choices; it forces them to be succinctly expressive, which is a quality they should always be looking to nurture in their work as a whole. As for what makes a good flash: it will be a narrative with engaging character and conflict in which no words are wasted. Easy to say, hard to achieve!

THE ENIGMAS OF  
CONFINEMENT  
A History and Poetics of Flash Fiction



PAUL McDONALD

**Tell me a little about your book *Enigmas of Confinement: A History and Poetics of Flash Fiction*.**

As I began to teach flashes I became increasingly interested in the origins of the form, and the elements of flash fiction that might be said to distinguish it from conventional short fiction - so issues relating to how miniature narratives create their effects, how they're structured, and so on. My view is that narrative compression tends to lend itself to ambiguity, hence the title [Enigmas of Confinement](#).

**Your last published novel was ‘Do I love you? (2008), do you plan to write another long fiction, or are you about the short form now?**

I'm constantly threatening to write another novel, and I've been constantly threatening for the past twelve years. But I *really am* going to write another one, eventually...

**I have enjoyed reading your ‘Four Poems After Gregory Crewdson Photography’ published in The Ekphrastic Review. How much creative licence should an Ekphrastic poet exercise in order to create something original whilst being faithful to the subject artwork so that somebody who is unable to see the work may visualise and appreciate it?**

I love writing ekphrastic poetry, although I'm entirely not sure why. Perhaps it's because it combines my fondness for criticism with my love of poetry. The critic in me compels me to interpret things - I enjoy thinking about art and reflecting on its potential meanings. Writing art-based poems offers a way of unpacking those potential meanings in creative ways. I rarely try to recreate the artwork in words, or to scrupulously describe it; I'm more interested in developing my own subjective response. I'm not really trying to help readers visualise the artwork in my ekphrastic poems, then, but hopefully they will add an extra dimension to a painting, or another way of viewing it that might otherwise have been missed.

**In June 2013, Dr Claire Askew, the Sentinel Literary Quarterly Poetry Competition Judge, wrote of your first prize winning poem, ‘Queen’ in her [report](#):**

*“As well as being about man’s relationship with nature, though, this is also a poem about place and space – what is home, and how meaningful is the concept of home?... For a poem that’s essentially about one wasp, there’s a lot going on...And the poem is really well written. Rhythmically tight, with every single word doing something, adding something.”*

**Let me quote the last bit again, “...with every single word doing something, adding something.” That is really high praise, Paul. What advice can you offer to poets on how to build a champion poem like ‘Queen’?**

It was a thrill to win the Sentinel competition, and Dr Askew's words were very encouraging. Someone once said that a good poem is one in which the words seem magnetised together, and that's what I try to achieve in all of my poems. So my advice is to try to avoid superfluity and 'flimflam' - words and phrases that have no real function, force or meaning. Also, try to avoid being clichéd or vague

- spend time identifying specific details and images that have some originality and force, even if it means waiting a long time for the right word to come. Another crucial tip is never submit your first draft of anything - always put it aside for a few days, then revise it with a fresh eye. It took me years to learn this, and even now I'm occasionally guilty of sending things out too soon. In my experience perspiration will take you further than inspiration, and for me success has always involved a lot of perspiration, and much judicious pruning and editing.

**Thanks Paul, for giving me your time.**

Thank you for asking me Nnorom, and keep up the excellent work with Sentinel!

“The Monday Writer Interview: Paul McDonald in Conversation with Nnorom Azuonye” ©2020 Nnorom Azuonye & Paul McDonald.

Nnorom Azuonye is the author of *Funeral of the Minstrel* (a play), *The Bridge Selection: Poems for the Road, Letter to God & Other Poems* and *On the Record: Conversations with Writers & Artists* (12 July 2021, SPM Publications)

## Touched for the Very First Time

### *A short story*

I was shocked but exhilarated to find that my new doctor was Madonna. Although Dr. Cleverley had been my GP for so long, I wasn't sure how I'd cope with the change, particularly to a doctor who is also a global female icon.

As I entered her surgery she was perusing my notes, but she looked up and acknowledged me immediately. At close quarters Madonna's eyes suggest a caring person, with empathy for suffering.

'How can I help you, Keith?' she asked.

This was new. Dr. Cleverley always called me Mr Priestfield, and sometimes just Priestfield. I appreciate informality, but at this stage decided not to reciprocate by calling her Madge. With croaking voice I told her about my sore throat and lower back pain, both of which were so intense I could hardly bear it. My throat felt full of shattered glass, and there was an acute grinding pain in my spine when I walked. I'd seen Cleverley about it several times over the past months, but he was baffled.

She instructed me to open my mouth and began inspecting my throat with a pencil torch. I couldn't help wondering what goes through Madonna's head as she stares down an ordinary person's gullet: what kind of inspiration might a creative spirit find in the throat of a middle-aged man? Very little, I daresay, although I enjoyed how her hand rested on my cheek as she worked: there was a relaxed intimacy to her touch that reminded me of my mother. I couldn't remember Cleverley ever touching me. Using a spatula to hold down my tongue, she had me say *aaaahhhh*; it being Madonna, I tried to say *aaaahhhh* tunefully, and with conviction.

'Have you been straining your voice, Keith?' she asked.

I told her that I like to sing karaoke, and because I live alone in a detached house, I may have been excessively enthusiastic with my vocals.

'Hmmm. There's nothing wrong with enthusiasm Keith, but it might have something to do with your vocal technique. Let me hear, please.'

'You want to hear me sing?'

'If you could Keith, yes. Sing what you'd normally sing at home, exactly the way you sing it.'

Obviously I was self-conscious singing in front of Madonna, and a small part of me was wishing Dr. Cleverley hadn't retired. Still, a new doctor meant a fresh approach, and it was only fair to respect that. I cleared my throat and sang two verses of Papa Don't Preach, and a verse of Into the Groove, before she gestured for me to stop. If she was impressed that I knew the lyrics to her songs by heart then she didn't say so; I suspect she was reluctant to patronise me.

'The problem is that you're singing from your throat, Keith,' she said. Tactile as ever, Madonna leaned forward in her chair and began patting my

abdomen. 'Sing from here - use the power of your diaphragm. Drop your shoulders and project from the inward breath.'

That sounded like good advice, so I thanked her. Then she wanted to know more about my lower back pain. I told her it began with a dull ache whenever I danced, and eventually developed into an excruciating and debilitating throbbing.

'I noticed you were a little stooped when you walked in,' she said. 'Do you dance often?'

'Fairly frequently - I tend to dance when I sing...'

'What kind of dance moves have you been attempting?'

I told her that I hadn't tried anything too adventurous, just jazz squares, and basic kick-ball-change, routines.

'Let me see you do some box steps with jazz hands.'

'With or without vocals?'

'With,' she said, leaning back in her chair and steepling her fingers. 'Again, dance exactly how you dance at home.'

Once more it was embarrassing, particularly given that I was wearing winter footwear, but I did it, box-stepping through a rendition of Material Girl, the soles of my wellingtons squeaking on the linoleum.

'HmMMM,' she said, when I'd finished. 'Now could I see you chassé from the filing cabinet over to the coat-stand?'

I did as I was told and she observed me intently.

'And back,' she said.

I chasséd back, finishing with an elementary pirouette: ball-change-hold, and relax.

'I see the problem,' said Madonna. 'You're letting too much weight fall on the base of your spine during the chassé. Always push *upwards* into the move, and use your arms to help with the rising thrust.'

'Will the pain go away if I make those changes, doctor?' I asked, although somehow I suspected it would – there was something about her that encouraged trust and confidence; she was so much more efficient than Cleverley.

'Yes Keith,' she said, smiling a little. 'Follow my advice and you'll have no more problems, but in the short term I'll prescribe some painkillers, just in case you need them to get you through.' Her smile was warm and natural, exactly as I remember it from the documentary, *I'm Going to Tell You a Secret*. I'd enjoyed that even more than the earlier, *In Bed with Madonna*, despite the fact that Madge picked up a Razzie Worst Actress Award for playing herself.

I thanked her again as she wrote my prescription, trying not to sound pathetic and obsequious, which is generally how I sound when addressing someone important or famous.

'You know, Keith,' she said, tearing the prescription from her pad and handing it to me, 'you're quite deft on your feet for a fifty-five-year-old.'

'Thank you, doctor,' I stammered, feeling my cheeks burn. I was suddenly, crushingly ashamed of the fact that everything I'd told her about singing and

dancing to her songs at home was a lie: something I'd come up with spontaneously in order to impress her. I was a fan, of course, but in truth I wasn't *that* obsessive.

'And you sing in tune,' she continued, oblivious to my guilt. 'In fact, the timbre of your voice would complement mine quite nicely, were we to perform a duet.' She hesitated, apparently turning something over in her mind. 'Listen,' she said at last, 'this is unorthodox, but maybe we could spend some time in the studio together, and see if we gel..?'

'That would be incredible,' I said, feeling the pain swiftly, miraculously melt from my throat and back.

'I have your phone number in your medical records,' she said, smiling that smile again. 'I'll give you a ring in a week or two and we'll fix something up, how's that?'

'Thank you, doctor,' I said, no longer stammering, and for once unafraid of sounding either pathetic or obsequious. 'I will look forward to it. I enjoyed your recent duet with Nicki Minaj immensely, and before that the collaborations with Lil Wayne, Britney, and Justin were inspired.'

'Call me Madge,' she said.

'Thank you...Madge.'

I left her surgery with a pain-free, confident stride, feeling fitter than I could remember. Passing through the waiting room, the buzzer sounded on the receptionist's desk as Madonna summoned the next patient, and I couldn't resist pausing, leaning over the desk and saying to the receptionist: 'You know, Madge is so much better than Cleverley; she has the potential to transform this practice into something worthwhile.'

The receptionist regarded me the way you might regard someone who'd used the wastepaper bin as a toilet. 'I'm sorry, what?'

'I'm trying to pay the practice a compliment,' I said. 'You've made an inspired appointment who is a credit to this clinic, and to the National Health Service. Frankly it's been a long time coming!'

'I have no idea what you're talking about,' she said, 'do you need to make another appointment?'

I'd always considered this particular receptionist a little dim and unpleasant, so I left without pursuing it, propelled by my renewed vigour. What did I care? No more shattered glass in my throat when I swallowed, no more grinding ache in my spine when I walked. I paused, relishing a sudden ray of light that broke through the winter clouds. Tearing my painkiller prescription to shreds, I tossed it in the air and let it confetti my hatless head. Like a fallen woman transformed into a virgin bride, I was cured. *SLQ*

'Touched for the Very First Time' by Paul McDonald won 3rd Prize in the Sentinel Annual Short Story Competitions 2015 judged by Alex Keegan.

## Queen

It began in March with a solitary wasp  
Entering a vent beneath our house.  
Any femme fatale can be a queen,

Ignore the heart beating in her thorax,  
Crack a rival's eggs with her mandibles.  
Ours set her nest in motion, felt it grow around her,

Hexagons of cardboard cells  
In the fabric of our home.  
We let her be, let her feel free

To thrive in the cavity we owned.  
How many thousand yellow jackets  
Seethed in the darkness?

By May we could sense ourselves surrounded:  
Netted routes of industry  
And wires of wasp-essence in the sky,

Detectable by compound eye, antenna.  
The house hummed a song for the sovereign.  
Walls blurred with pictures out of focus,

Light fittings buzzed with the engine of wasps.  
By October they were curls of angry static,  
Drunk on the certainty of death.

We'd find them in the living room and kitchen,  
Seeking heat, seeking sex, furious with windows.  
Females stung the glass I used to trap them,

Flew at my face when I set them free.  
There were things to be done before the freeze:  
No time for pity, or thanks for hospitality.

'Queen' by Paul McDonald won 1<sup>st</sup> Prize in the Sentinel Literary Quarterly Poetry Competition (June 2013) judged by Claire Askew.

## The Milkmaid

*(After the painting by Vermeer)*

Windows are important:  
they clean the air with yellow light,  
endless blues like those  
inside your head, shades  
to match your pinafore.  
Maids can break a frame  
with dreams alone, slip the snare  
of scrubbed, cold kitchens.  
I sense it as I watch your art of pouring:  
milk arcs to crusts of bread,  
the contents of a broad Dutch oven.  
Anticipate the bake: rising heat,  
patient swell of sweet.  
Or your sinuous ceramics,  
their cradled weight like sleeping babies.  
Later, with your box of coals,  
heat will bloom sultry air  
like breath beneath your dress,  
toast your freezing thighs.  
Delft decorates the walls  
with tiled tales of Cupid: a stranger on his way  
to steal a heart. Will he find your  
master's house? You'll know him  
by shadows cast on whitewashed walls,  
a window frame's crack:  
he'll spirit you away in his silver purse.