



# Authorgraph No.94: Gareth Owen

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**Gareth Owen** interviewed by **Adrian Jackson**.

## Gareth Owen interviewed by Adrian Jackson

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Gareth Owen has led a packed writing life and a packed life in general. It's taken in the Navy, teaching, working off Broadway, an involvement in the music business, managing the soul singer Ruby Turner and an independent record label, winning awards for his writing and his reading of verse, and now presenting **Poetry Please** on the radio.

Looking for Gareth's cottage deep in the Powys countryside can make these lines from 'The Secret' tease round your head:

*?a place I know*

*That no one can find except me, except me*

*That no one can find except me.?*

The titles of his well-known collections of poems, **Salford Road** and **Song of the City**, might lead you to expect somewhere urban but with writers the equation is never as simple as that.

Childhood was Ainsdale, pretty distant from Liverpool but convenient for watching Everton. He seems to have travelled a long way, although the poems and novels have tracked and fixed childhood memories as seen with youngsters' eyes. It's this which may begin to attract children to his writing but there was also and continues to be a deeper feeling for the variety and detail of the world as he sees it.

Writing was not an obvious career option for him and when he left school at sixteen he was faced with the choice of going into banking or insurance and being *respectable*. 'I was never going to do that, so I joined the Merchant Navy. It was the open sea for me ... there wasn't much else I could do since I couldn't add up - though there was a lot of adding up in the Navy.' He spent four years as a sailor but 'I was hopeless at it'. After falling from the mast, he left the Navy for good, having seen some of the exotic ways of the world, even if he was too young to appreciate it all.

He became a teacher, then Head of English and Drama ('It was all a mistake') and for the next 16 years worked in a College of Education. He had impressed at interview by not liking D H Lawrence and, in the wake of the **Lady Chatterley** trial, was thought to be someone who could be trusted with pupils' welfare.

In the early 60s he began writing for his pupils, 'illustrating little nostrums by making up my own'. The birth of **Salford Road**, though, was long and protracted. He had written several of the poems when he met Barry Maybury, who was preparing an anthology, and was willing to include five of them in **Wordscapes**. This was 1970 and it seemed he was on the road to success but, try as he might, he couldn't get a publisher to accept a complete collection of his own.

He was turned down by many publishing houses and a 'long silence' followed until, eventually, Viking published **Salford Road** in hardback in 1979. (Even then it took almost another decade to get the book into paperback.)

During the 70s his writing continued, but not predominantly as poetry - 'I'd given up'. His teaching work with students led him naturally into acting, and to writing his own plays (which he continues to do), forming his own theatre group and producing plays both here and abroad.

Performance has always been close to his work, as a teacher, writer and actor, and that sense and need of an audience stays with him. His recent plays for Radio 4 have included a pastiche Country and Western musical, in which he played the lead. Writing for the theatre has clearly had an important effect on all his work, especially his novels.

When **Salford Road** was finally published, people started to treat him as a poet, 'they asked me for poems' and he began to develop this again. Although he may seem a long-established children's poet, his new collection, **The Fox on the Roundabout**, is only his fourth though he might be seen to be suddenly prolific with two collections in successive years.

**Song of the City** was published in 1985, winning the Signal Poetry Award, and at about the same time a respected friend asked him why he didn't write a novel. 'A poem is a sprinter's job, a novel is a marathon and I couldn't think of anything to write about.' The pleasure of the plays had in part been in the contact with an audience, so he asked a teacher friend if he could read a chapter of the novel to some pupils. His audience gave him the feedback he needed and he wrote and read them a chapter a week until it was finished. 'They liked it - the teacher didn't think much of it.' But Gareth was 'astonished' with what he'd done, 'it read like a real book'. Not only that but it (**The Final Test**) was a runner-up for the Smarties Award. 'I was asked what the next book was going to be and so went into another school to read to a class.' **The Man With Eyes Like Windows** followed and then **Never Walk Alone** and **Omelette**. It's a fine sequence of books and he's unhappy that all four have gone out of print, especially since he feels there's a readership for them. I can only agree. Still, undeterred, there's another ambitious title due out next year with which he's very pleased.

After his last collection of poems, which took his poetry into the world of adolescents, he wrote **Rosie No Name** and then **The Forest of Forgetting**, which he hopes 'bright 15-year-olds and adults will read'. He'd like it to be a 'crossover book - it's a different sort of a book ... an allegory.' Never has he wanted to write simplistic novels. With **The Final Test** he hoped to 'write Marcel Proust for Juniors', there was Ulysses in **The Man With Eyes Like Windows**, and he calls the latest one '**The Seventh Seal** for teenagers'. His theatre background has helped too, he feels, because he turned it into a play which demanded some changes and shifts to catch the fantasy. When he changed it back into a novel he felt it had become tighter. 'The world of the fantasy, shifting from Arthurian legend to 1916 was something I could cope with ... I wasn't good at knightspeak'.

This bringing into vision and introducing his own voice have been key elements in his work - with theatre a clear and continuing influence. Catching the voice, though, was hard. '**The Catcher in the Rye** had it, but it didn't seem possible to write that way in England ... You couldn't express yourself in the tongue that was about at that time.' **There is a Happy Land** impressed him because with this book he felt Keith Waterhouse captured the tones of the child, 'he really got it right'; it taught him that 'you've just got to look at real life.' That same use of the child, the mining of his own memories and childhood and seeing it clearly and precisely, without sentimentality, were the catalyst for the **Salford Road** poems and what he calls the 'confessional voice of a child of about ten'.

When he works with children he adopts the same approach. 'Children don't see anything, they're not very observant. If you can't see what's in front of your eyes, you can't see what's not in front of them.' He stresses the importance of making what you see *real* to your readers - 'We confuse imagination with invention' - and encourages children to focus on what they really know as the best route into worthwhile writing.

It's this quality of observation which first made Owen's poetry so striking: it was what was there - fish and chips and Denis Law, what it felt like to be bored, and how to make a poem capture the action of table tennis. This was poetry that

children might have written for themselves.

It was a delight for me to discover **Salford Road** and read it with youngsters at a time when so little poetry seemed to be produced on their terms. Some of its poems are timeless, some he thinks, like 'Denis Law?', just need the latest star's name inserted (but the rhyme isn't so easy?)

*'His red sleeves flap around his wrists.*

*He's built all thin and raw,*

*But the toughest backs don't stand a chance*

*When the ball's near Denis Law.?*

and some may find their time again. How many children faced by a SAT would like to repeat the letter 'Dear Examiner'?

*'Thank you so much for your questions*

*I've read them all carefully through*

*But there isn't a single one of them*

*That I know the answer to.*

*I've written my name as instructed*

*Put the year, the month and the day*

*But after I'd finished doing that*

*I had nothing further to say.*

*So I thought I'd write you a letter*

*Fairly informally*

*About what's going on in the classroom*

*And what it's like to be me.?*

In his new collection, **The Fox on the Roundabout**, there's the child's voice again, sometimes just as a voice, but in other poems as a way of regarding the world through older eyes: about being in love, or being in a world of unemployment. And there are older voices, too: one aware of the distance between now and memory, looking at what is happening 'beyond the edges of my life?'; another 'Blind Date' - a monologue by a woman facing up to her husband's adultery. It's a collection which includes poems perfectly attuned to teenagers. The range is clearly demonstrated by the changing styles of the very distinctive illustrations by Danny Markey.

With **Poetry Please** Gareth Owen aims to popularise even the most demanding verse. He's won poetry reading competitions (most notably at the Cheltenham Literature Festival in 1992) and clearly delights in reciting - 'I love reading other people's stuff ... it's worth grappling with quite testing poetry.' Some of his favourites would gladden the hearts of perpetrators of the National Curriculum lists at Key Stages 3 and 4 - T S Eliot, Hardy, Wyatt, Crowe Ransome, e e cummings and Shakespeare. Perhaps if young teenagers heard him read, they'd find such writers much more accessible.

Gareth Owen is delighted his own poetry has reached a wide audience in schools: 'I've always thought the poems have

got something about them that would go outside the small circle of poetry readers? and he hopes his new collection will continue to extend that circle.

**Photographs by Richard Mewton.**

**Gareth Owen's books are all published by Harper Collins:**

**Salford Road** , 0 00 672919 3, £2.99

**Song of the City** , 0 00 672410 8, £2.99

**My Granny Is a Sumo Wrestler** , 0 00 674883 5, £3.50

**The Fox on the Roundabout** , 0 00 185607 3, £8.99 hbk; 0 00 674882 1, £3.50



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