

## THE ART OF THE NOTEBOOK

by John Siddique

The poet's tool bag can be a very simple affair, a pen and a notebook is pretty much all that is needed to get to work in physical terms. You bring the meaning, the music, the rhythms and the curiosity to explore through the art. We often therefore take for granted how important equipment like the notebook can be, and that there are many ways to use them to aid our creation of poetry.

### CHOOSING A NOTEBOOK

Which notebook to use can be a serious hurdle for many writers, we are going to be making art in this space, so the notebook should be a thing of beauty in itself, shouldn't it? This bit is pretty much down to your own aesthetic but perhaps boiling it down; if a notebook is too grand then we may fear making a mark on the page, may think we have to write a perfect piece every time to live up to its demands on us; we must never make a mistake or experiment or blunder along, perhaps only to discover years later that that bad idea was the kernel of a good one. The opposite of course is also true: too cheap a journal and perhaps we won't value anything we put in there ... And does size matter? Small notebooks may keep your lines and ideas terse, and if they are too big then perhaps things will get unwieldy. There are many good brands of notebook out there, maybe try a few different ones over a year or so until you find the place where pen, art and poet feel like they have a home.

### FACING THE BLANK PAGE

One way to beat the blank page syndrome is to have times when you plan your ideas. Many writers use the back of their notebooks as a place to create lists of ideas for pieces. If you are working on a sequence or a book of poems these lists are invaluable. If inspiration strikes then lucky you and write where you will, though for many poets inspiration is attracted by preparing the ground for it to come. When you decide to have some writing time, you can then look at your ideas list in the back of the notebook, grab one and then write your poem in the front part. Many notebooks these days also have pockets at the back and these come in very useful for keeping photos, fragments, bits of treasure, and other inspirations, to spark one's creativity when it is writing time. Here are some ideas on how to get words into the notebook:

- Make lists in your book of your poetic ideas, and have planning meetings with yourself to make these lists.
- Take your notebook on a date at least once a week, go somewhere you love, a park, a cafe, somewhere inspiring or somewhere unexpected and just let it be the two of you.
- Meet a writing buddy for a writing date and each bring an inspiration to the table, then set yourselves off and give yourself a time limit for writing each piece.
- Never leave the house without your notebook because the minute you do you'll suddenly need it. Have a spare in the car, at work, next to the bed, next to the loo.
- Try noticing the physical joy of writing as you use your notebook, all the arts have a physical component - for the poet the connection between mind, heart, pen and notebook is a magical thing.
- If you like to use existing poems as starting points as many writers do these can be folded, pasted or collaged into your notebook.
- Write upside down, in the margins, diagonally, sideways ... break the rules so that the notebook becomes a place of freedom.
- Perhaps most importantly: remember that your notebook is a private space, so keep it private as poetry needs a close atmosphere to grow in.

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## TEACHING THE ART OF POETRY

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### THE LAB

The notebook is the poet's laboratory. It is a place to experiment and gather things. Very often we must remember that the paper of our notebook is stronger than the people around us, and it can be called on at anytime - so that it is okay to use one's book as a journal, a diary, a place to make notes, write down overheard things, make collages, doodle, get serious, get sexy, talk about the hard stuff, be absurd and place word against word to make poetry. Apart from good books for reading, the notebook is perhaps the writer's best friend, and should be cherished as such. It is very important not to think of anything in the notebooks as rubbish and excise it, you will be very surprised when your mind goes back to what seemed like a bad idea from ten years ago and then you make good with it. As the notebooks grow on your shelf over the course of your writing life they will track your creativity. The amazing thing about them is that they don't need a power supply, never need to be charged up, and you don't need to have them serviced as they never break down. Your notebook can go anywhere in the world with you, and can record the world in the most tangible way there is. Therefore I wish you and your notebook a happy, deep and fruitful life together.

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