

Carol Ann Duffy, is the present poet laureate of Britain – the first Scot and woman to hold the position. She was born in Glasgow in 1955 to working-class parents and was raised in Staffordshire. Duffy graduated from Liverpool University in 1977 with a BA in Philosophy. She won the National Poetry Competition in 1983, an Eric Gregory Award in 1984 and her first collection *Standing Female Nude* (1985) was met with acclaim. Robert Nye in The Times declared the book “The debut of a genuine and original poet”. In 1993, *Mean Times* won the Forward Best Collection Prize, a Scottish Arts Council Book Award and the Whitbread Poetry Award. She has gone on to publish many books for adults and children and is also an acclaimed playwright and editor.

Duffy was honoured with the title Dame Commander of the British Empire for her contribution to poetry and is Professor of Contemporary Poetry at Manchester Metropolitan University.

Duffy is best known for writing love poems that often take the form of monologues. Her verses, as one reviewer described them, are typically “spoken in the voices of the urban disaffected, people on the margins of society who harbour resentments and grudges against the world.”

As Duffy says herself: “I like to use simple words but in a complicated way”. She believes poetry is “above all, a series of intense moments” and believes its “power is not in narrative” Her focus is not on facts but, according to her, she deals with emotions. She often takes an unconventional attitude, using conventional forms. When her poem “Education for

The Poem:

In an interview, Carol Ann Duffy discussed her poem ‘Stealing’.

The recording was made on 31 March 2009 at the BBC Studios in Manchester and was produced by Richard Carrington.

The transcript can be found at www.bbc.co.uk/poetryseason/poets/carol_ann_duffy.shtml

Stealing

BY CAROL ANN DUFFY

CONTENT

The thing I remember most about the writing of ‘**Stealing**’ is that Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister. During the 1980s, because of her government’s policies, there was a lot of social unrest - poll tax riots, the miner’s strike, race riots in cities like Liverpool and Bristol. And there was a lot of homelessness and unemployment- very visible in London particularly, with people sleeping rough in shop doorways. Then there was the Falklands War. Thatcher said “There is no such thing as Society”. She believed in the individual pursuit of wealth and made many changes to facilitate this. So the rich got richer and the poor got poorer, with continual cuts in education and health and social services. This is the unseen background of ‘**Stealing**’.

The poem was originally inspired by the theft of my neighbours’ children’s snowman from their front garden one night. Someone - for whatever weird reason - had taken the snowman away and when the children woke up in the morning it was gone. I was so intrigued by the oddness of this that I began to construct a voice for the “thief”. I

felt, in an instinctive and perhaps humorous way, that only under Margaret Thatcher would someone be driven to steal a snowman. So in some ways, the poem is a little political. As I created the voice of the thief, I imagined that he is being interviewed—maybe by a social worker or probation officer or journalist. Although I don't make it particularly clear what sex the thief is, I imagined a male voice as I wrote the poem. But I left the sex ambiguous because I wanted just a voice to come out of the poem, not a see-able character. The thief is talking about the theft of the snowman ("the most unusual thing I ever stole...") and in doing so he reveals something of his psychological and emotional state.

The thief has stolen the snowman for company. ("I wanted him, a mate..."). The thief is psychologically disturbed ("the slice of ice within my own brain") perhaps because life has been difficult ("life's tough"). He is pleased at the idea of children crying when they find the snowman has gone because he wants to shatter their illusions in the same way that his own have been. Perhaps the thief is not too far away from his own childhood. Maybe he is a teenager ("I joyride cars..."). Certainly he is hurt and angry. When he gets the snowman back to his own backyard and re-assembles it, the snowman does not "look the same" and he expresses his anger and disappointment by kicking the snowman into lumps of snow.

The thief is also bored and lonely - lonely enough even to imagine that a snowman could be a "mate". He knows that somewhere there is a solution to boredom - perhaps in music ("I stole a guitar and thought I meant learn to play") or literature ("I nicked a bust of Shakespeare") or home-making ("I break into houses just to have a look"). But these solutions seem out of his reach - probably because of lack of education, unemployment, the drift into crime. And yet the thief instinctively knows that he must not give in to hopelessness ("better off dead than giving in"). In this sense, he feels that the theft of the snowman is original, different, a way of asserting his own personality and needs. But he also feels that no-one else will understand this ("You don't understand a word I'm saying, do you?")

FORM

'**Stealing**' begins and ends with a question - ("The most unusual thing I ever stole?"; "You don't understand a word I'm saying, do you?") In this sense, the poem takes the form of both an answer and a question.

I allowed the voice of the thief in '**Stealing**' to dictate the form of the poem. The poem does not use a rhyme scheme or a particular metre but tries to follow the rhythm of a speaking voice, sometimes with that voice speaking to itself, or speaking internally. I found that the poem fell naturally (as most of my poems do) into regular-lined verses - in this case, five five-lined verses. The verses are unrhymed and irregular in metre. These free verses work for me like small canvasses to hold the words of the poem. They help to control the rhythm, particularly when the poem is written in a voice. And the verse shapes give the poem more energy by preventing it from sprawling or having too much in it!

Sometimes, as in natural speech, there are rhymes in the poem – often internal rhymes, rather than rhymes at the end of the lines – (“I started with the head.//Better off dead...”; “a fierce chill piercing my gut./ Part of the thrill...”) Sometimes there are assonances or chimes between the words (‘mute, moon, mate, mind’). This is all part of making a music from the thief’s voice – something lovely coming out of something sad perhaps. So when the thief says “Aah” in verse three, it is a sound for his envy or curiosity or longing. At this point in the poem he has no word for how he feels. At other points, he speaks in one-word sentences (“Midnight”; “Mirrors”; “Again”; “Boredom”). These one-word sentences usually work as keys to unlock more information, emotional or psychological, from the thief.

LANGUAGE

The language in ‘**Stealing**’ is a mixture of normal colloquial speech and a more lyrical tone. Words like “mate”, “ton”, “gut”, “tough”, “joy-ride”, “mucky”, “mess”, “booted”, “rags”, “daft”, “sick”, “nicked”, “flogged” – mostly blunt, one-syllabled words – are rooted in the life and culture of the thief and reflect its harshness or toughness. But there is a lyricism in the words the thief uses to describe the snowman – “a tall white mute/ beneath the winter moon” – or in his own breath seen against the cold night – “my breath ripped out in rags” – and in other parts of the poem, which is meant to work against the ‘slangier’ (*sic*) vocabulary. This is because I wanted the language of the poem to suggest the difference between how the thief feels (“sick of the world”) and what the thief wants (“I thought I might learn to play”). The more lyrical parts of the poem are trying to reach upwards and away from the thwarted voice.

