

# Peddling a poetry chapbook

Joan Michelson

To peddle. To go from door to door. Or as I am, from person to person selling a signed poetry chapbook. My 'cost of a cup of coffee' is 28 pages long and has a cover illustrated with a line drawing of a cane hooked onto a walking frame. It has honey-brown end papers and is about the residents in an imagined care home.

The word 'chap' comes from the Old English for trade. Chapbooks arose in the 16th century, when chapmen across Europe peddled small, inexpensive books of timeless material, including poetry and stories in tale and ballad form. Behind my peddling stands the memory of my mother's father, a scholar of Hebrew, who escaped service in the Tsar's army by fleeing Russia for America. Landing in Boston, he travelled 25 miles west and started selling things he could carry. It was his first experience of peddling. A century later, this is his granddaughter's.

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The first this morning is the new counter girl in the health-food shop. Paying for my sauerkraut, which is on offer and drew me in, I ask if she has any interest in poetry. She says that she loves poetry. I ask her if she writes it. She says no but that she is studying poetry at school. Now I notice how young she is, her face soft and open. For English they are reading Edward Thomas and Robert Frost. Robert Frost is her favourite. I tell her I aspire to write in simple language like Frost, only I don't rhyme. I show her 'Bloomvale Home.' She opens to the first poem and reads aloud, 'everybody's mother and her own.' She says, 'This is beautiful. This is like my granny.' I'm moved and gratified. 'Your granny must be special.' 'Absolutely,' she says, while looking for details to order the book. I tell her the publisher told me I had to sell it. It's £3.60. She can have it for £3. I look at her, uncertain, and lower my voice, 'Or is that too much?' She says she has no change on her. But tomorrow she works at the Cancer Charity Shop. Could I bring a copy there? I think she'll read the poems. I think they'll speak to her. My thoughts seesaw between selling and giving. I wish I had given it to her in the first place. 'Take it.' I say, pushing it at her. 'Please.'

In the supermarket, I spot Steve, a fellow American who has also lived in the area for most of his adult life. The lenses of his glasses have thickened over the years I have known him and he now brings a shopping list close to his eyes. Could I show him my little poetry book? He is not interested in poetry. Does not read it. I say that people who do not read poetry like these poems. Diana Athill likes these poems. She was surprised she

liked them because she sees herself as a difficult reader of poetry. He doesn't know who Diana Athill is. 'She is a 99-year-old literary critic who lives in a home like Bloomvale.' He shrugs. Why oh why do I go on? Praise the line drawing on the cover. Praise the artist. Show him the book. Now he is with me. He's seen it around the house. My heart sinks and I feel embarrassed as I recall selling his wife a copy. A few weeks earlier approaching on her bicycle she'd pulled up to chat. She had not yet seen the dental implant surgeon I recommended but she had had one of her hip replacements and she wanted to buy the book.

I am grateful for the crowd on the Broadway and the gusts of cold in the wind. I breathe the cold in and collect myself. At the bank I deposit the week's takings from sales: £20 in coins. The teller has been reading my poems to his aunt on Sundays. I tell him about my blunder with Steve and about the schoolgirl who reads poetry and giving her a copy. Not for the first time, I tell him I'm happier giving it but I have to keep to my rule: sell three and a half for each give-away. Today I am in the red by half a book. He laughs. 'You have your work cut out.'

Heading home, I keep a look-out for one more person to try. I meet another American. Ken is younger, not on the road to a Bloomvale Home as might be said of Steve, his wife, and me. The last time our paths crossed, Ken was on his way to play squash. But today – to the cleaner's and walking the dog – he has time for my schmooze. We stand where we meet on a street corner in the fitful wind. I'm well wrapped up, hat, scarf, thermal gloves, winter coat but, a fit fifty, he's bare-headed in black zip-sweatshirt with the hood dropped back, and as if anticipating summer, his sunglasses are propped on top of his head.

He puts his clothes-collecting bag on the pavement, propping it against his leg, and he keeps hold of the dog's leash. The dog seems happy to wait and look around. I pass Kenny the chapbook and stand odd-angled, half facing him, half looking away. I hug my daypack against me protectively. He goes straight to the middle of the book and reads two poems. Then he opens to the first poem, a first stop for nursing home visits, 'The Receptionist.' His face is composed and closed, his hand, fisted with the dog's lead, covering his mouth. Whatever he is thinking or feeling he is keeping to himself. Save for a single interruption, he reads steadily to the end.

By now I am focused on his reading and worried about his response. He is an international journalist in a senior position. Journalists are writers who write every day, who think about words and let them flow, who can't and don't redraft for years creating files of

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rewrites to be rewritten, and surely they don't have time to write themselves into a corner. My doubts about my work surface. My stomach knots, unknots, rises, falls, squirms, takes in the thumps of my heart. I swallow against dryness.

Now I start noting his progress and mentally reading along. I am overtaken by the people in the poems, people reimagined from those remembered, my father's fellow residents from his years in a home. Although he can't know my love for the people and how many times I reworked the poems hoping to bring the community to life, as if he might know how absurdly my feelings are rising, tears burning behind my eyes, he lifts his head and points his finger to a line break. 'This one,' he says. I lean forward to read, 'the other woman' and hear, without really taking it in, his comments on line breaks and how important a role the break has taken on since free verse came in. I say, 'I have so much trouble with line breaks. I am never sure.' He says, 'This one works.' And turns back to his reading.

I look at him and, to give him space, I look around. A gust catches an empty beer can and pushes it over the kerb with a thud. The sound reverberates in me as if it's a bang. The can rolls to a stop against a car tyre. It is silent. But nothing in me is quiet. Here and now the bang of the beer can. Here and then the shuffling of the Bloomvale Home organist moving up the carpeted hall in his slippers. Though it can barely be heard, and it is long past, I hear it. Beside the organist, leaping from a different page, is the 1930s refugee from Berlin. She is sitting at dinner in the home with her tablemates, seeing far away the grapefruits she picked as a kibbutz pioneer when Israel was Palestine. She makes no sound but I hear her sigh. And I hear the scrape of her chair as she pushes it back to leave, to be alone with her past. Now Judge Daxon is stirring his oatmeal before he too pushes back his dining chair. As his heart gives out, I hear the chair fall over with a loud knock. It happens all at once, the lives in different poems unfold before me, crowd into my heart, which is beating everywhere, and into the life in which I am standing in the March wind, bonded to my reader.

Ken has arrived at the last poem, 'The Reader.' His fist moves away from his face and something like a smile edges in. He would love to buy it. He looks at the price. 'That's outrageous!' he says. I say that the publisher is in rural Wales, and he is a non-profit, as if that might explain the bargain rate. The next words rush out like sales patter. 'Five years work,' I say. 'A ten-minute read. The cost of a coffee. That's poetry for you.' We laugh and part. In my pocket, the envelope coin bag to bring to the bank next week. In it two £2 coins. ●