

**Kate Middleton**, Sydney's first City Poet, has an ability to articulate the faintest tendrils of thought, in a way that speaks to the heart, and shows why she has been awarded this exciting new posting. Read on to hear how she came up with the idea for an ekphrastic series of poetry, her love for her art and what it means to be a poet today.



**1. Who came up with the idea to do an Ekphrastic series (poems about visual art) and will you be delivering your poems in other wonderful settings, just like at Wendy Whiteley's Garden?**

When I initially put together my application for the role of the Sydney City Poet I thought about the ways in which poetry could potentially reach new, sympathetic audiences, as well as how to use the city of Sydney as a muse. I have long been drawn to writing about subjects external to myself (though of course my own experience is always interwoven somehow in my response) and so a natural way to address this desire to celebrate Sydney and bring new readers to poetry was to celebrate the cultural riches of the city. Artworks were the obvious choice for me: I have written about art in the past, and had recently written a series of poems drawing upon the work of the Heidelberg School artists as well. Images of Sydney have helped instill our sense of the iconic: from Whiteley's views of the harbor, to Margaret Preston and Grace Cossington-Smith's rendering of the bridge, to Martin Sharp's work on Luna Park, there are so many artists that are associated with Sydney in profound ways.

We will be holding more events this year, again featuring new poems responding to the work of Sydney artists, and highlighting both the work of contemporary Australian poets and beautiful locations in Sydney.

**2. When did you first become interested in poetry, and why?**

I seem to have always been interested in poetry: I was writing it ferociously as a child, and still have little books I made for each new poem when I was six or seven. Similarly, I began publishing work early—perhaps too early, but that's another matter.

As for the why, I was the definitive bookish child, and also someone who couldn't stop making. Whether it was music (for my undergraduate degree I combined studies in Music and Arts, with

a focus on composition in music) or writing or knitting or cooking, I always wanted to be creating something new. In a way I think poetry won out because it was my earliest creative endeavor: I loved books, so I wanted to make books. I could reread things again and again, and poetry is among the forms that best holds up under intense revisiting.

**3. Do you think there has been a resurgence in poetry lately and does the inauguration of the Sydney City Poet reflect this?**

While poetry itself has always been bubbling along, I do hope that the inauguration of the Sydney City Poet position reflects the renewal of the conversation regarding what place the writer—particularly the poet—has in public life. I said in my interview for the position that while people often talk about “how to get people to like poetry,” I firmly believe that everyone already does like—love, even—poetry. For most people it might just be one or two poems, be they bush ballads, psalms, Shakespearean sonnets, but their engagement with those beloved poems is real.

Poetry rarely makes headlines, but when it does I think it reminds us of the place it has in our rituals: as when bookshops reported rising sales of poetry after 9/11, or with the recent death of the Nobel Laureate Wisława Szymborska, we reflect on the role poetry can play in the moral consciousness, as did the world of many poets in the wake of the wars of the twentieth century. If the present moment represents a resurgence, I believe it is one among many, and that even during “downturns,” poetry never disappears.

**4. Why did you choose to do a Masters in the US and what is the Hopwood Award?**

I actually did two Masters degrees in the United States. The first was an MA in literature at Georgetown University. I had wanted the opportunity to live abroad for a time, and decided to eschew the slightly more usual path for young Australians of heading to Oxford or Cambridge. What attracted me to the US system for graduate study was that in addition to completing a substantial thesis, students complete a large body of coursework. Over two years at Georgetown I was able to take advanced seminars in all sorts of areas of literary study: one teacher likened the experience of American graduate study to being a racehorse in training, constantly put through your paces. I’m always afraid that I will grow lazy, and so pushing myself into such a rigorous environment was my way of setting myself up for two—then four—years of hard work.

I hadn’t planned on doing the MFA until I was mid-way through my second year at Georgetown, working with the wonderful poet Carolyn Forché. She recommended that I apply for the program at the University of Michigan, an extraordinary—and extraordinarily generous—school. I only applied to two schools, and was prepared to move back to Australia at the end of that first Masters degree when I received an offer. In the end, this opportunity was a real gift.

Again, the MFA gave me a lot of opportunities. My stipend was generous, and I continued to take classes, as well as produce work for our workshops, provide rigorous feedback on the poetry and nonfiction of my peers, and to work as a teaching assistant and then a graduate student instructor throughout the degree. It was an exhilarating time. Four years abroad both gave me a deep appreciation of the complexity and at-once glorious and sometimes trouble variety within the USA, and the psychic distance from Australia that allowed to me to really

write about home. It has also left me with wonderful relationships with former teachers, classmates, and visiting writers, as well as a much broader conception of the poetry that is being written today.

The Hopwood Awards are an annual set of awards given by the University of Michigan, and contribute to the university's prestige as a school for writers. They were endowed by the playwright Avery Hopwood, and are given each year in undergraduate and graduate sections, in categories for Poetry, Short Fiction, Novel, Drama, Screenplay and Nonfiction. While only Michigan students are eligible to enter the awards, an extraordinary group of writers have received them in the past, including Arthur Miller, Robert Hayden and Frank O'Hara. I was honoured to receive awards for poetry and drama.

## **5. What do you do when you're not writing poetry?**

Well, even when not physically writing, a writer always has the cogs turning!

In addition to poetry I write a lot of prose, too: I've recently begun writing a few reviews, as well as some nonfiction, and a blog at [sydneycitypoet.tumblr.com](http://sydneycitypoet.tumblr.com). I write letters and keep a journal. I interview other writers. And I try to keep up the business end of being a writer to some degree—I send out work on a semi-regular basis.

Beyond that, there's so much to life: I spend a lot of time in galleries and seeing films, I read books, I go for walks in Sydney Park or around the city, I sometimes do little watercolour paintings—portraits of leaves I find on my walks. Sitting down with a good coffee is a daily pleasure.

## **6. How difficult is it to make a living out of poetry and how, if necessary, do you supplement your income? (Any info here about how many poems you write annually, if you have any regular gigs for publication or if you also write prose, screenplays etc).**

It's almost impossible to make a living out of poetry! In America, my income came from being a student. While completing my undergraduate studies I worked in a call centre—I can probably still tell you how to cable your television set up in simple steps!

The stipend for my role as the City Poet is modest: in effect it is a part time residency. I do manage to supplement this with money from writing: recently poems, reviews and readings have all contributed a little extra cash, and I was incredibly lucky to receive money from the Western Australian Premier's Award for Poetry in 2009; with very few exceptions however, to live as a poet, you must have another job or be the recipient of grants, scholarships and awards. Even when you are able to publish work regularly, a poem doesn't garner a lot of money unless it wins one of the big prizes. Some magazines don't have the money to pay at all. I would write up to 50 poems in a year, and relegate perhaps 10-15 of these to the drawer. Even if I were able to place them all, however, it would not be enough to live on. Likewise, publishing a book might give me a little pocket money—usually spent on other people's books—but isn't going to buy me a house.

This position as the Sydney City Poet has given me the gift of time, but for the most part I live very quietly, and only *dream* of owning a pair of Chloe boots!

**7. Do you follow a particular poetic style? Or emulate certain poets?**

I largely write free verse, though from time to time I like to write in traditional forms, or to use rhyme. As Audrey Hepburn's Holly Golightly described the act of nicking a mask from the Five and Dime store in *Breakfast At Tiffany's*, performing the poetic acrobatics of following a form or rhyme scheme helps me "keep my hand in."

I have recently been working on a long poem—book-length—that uses the tercet with indented middle line as its recurrent form. The poem strays into other stanza shapes, into little moments of prose, into long lines and triple rhythms, but always comes back to the tercet. What's most important to me is to follow through on whatever form or voice I set up; that aside, I love to vary tone, subject, form. Poetry is a theatre, and each poem can wear a completely different costume if it wants to.

I like to use imitation as an exercise for myself: I have a large file of poems that have interesting forms, poses, conceits, prosodies. When I am searching for something outside myself, I'll scroll through the poems in that file until something jumps out at me, and I begin an imitation. However, at some stages it ceases to be an imitation: I look away from the poem that inspired me and something else takes over. I suddenly find I have an exclusive relationship with the new poem.

**8. What advice would you give to budding poets out there?**

Read everything you can, and think about it. Make notes—create a "personal anthology." Reading deeply is an essential part of being a writer, and reading widely helps you make unexpected leaps in your own work.

**9. Where can we buy a copy of your volume, *Fire Season*?**

*Fire Season* was published by Giramondo in 2009—you can order a copy direct from the publisher (<http://www.giramondopublishing.com/?s=fire+season>) or ask your bookshop to stock it. Some of the literary-minded independents already have it on the shelf—bless them.