
'Sounds of science' poetry competition at the University of Bradford library

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AN INSPIRING MEETING

The University Science and Technology Librarians Group (USTLG) met at the Radcliffe Science Library in Oxford in November 2010. During a tour of the library we were shown some poetry on display: the winning entries from a poetry competition called 'Parallel UniVerse: bringing science to poetry and poetry to science'. As a subject librarian I had recently moved from a role supporting art, architecture, design, film and performing arts to engineering, design and technology. Over the year I had immersed myself in a new subject and what at times seemed like a new world. This led me to be fascinated by a competition that combined both science and poetry, and as Bradford University was to host the British Science Festival, this seemed the perfect opportunity to try a similar project.

I contacted the librarians at Oxford, and they wrote back explaining how they had become involved and the background to the competition. They kindly sent me some very useful, practical information, which saved me time because they had thought through issues such as copyright and the most appropriate maximum length for the poems (40 lines). Their encouragement gave me the motivation to start the project.

MAKING CONTACTS AND FINDING SUPPORT

A Beastie Boys album called *The sounds of science* inspired me to use the name for the competition as I thought it aptly reflected the theme of poetry and science. My colleagues in the library gave me the names of people in the university who might

be interested in becoming involved. This was very helpful because I was relatively new to the university and did not know many of the staff. I contacted two lecturers who taught creative writing and poetry, Ed Reiss and Julia Deakin, who are award-winning poets themselves, and who very helpfully raised matters I had not considered. For example, we decided that entry would be free, even though most poetry competitions have an entry fee that contributes to the prize and the judges' time.

I went to a meeting to discuss the possibility of the British Science Festival supporting the competition. Our competition did not meet their criteria because its funding is aimed at local community groups and schools. However, the staff were supportive of the idea. There were many practical matters to consider, such as who would be eligible to enter. We decided that the emphasis would be on the library 'celebrating' the science festival coming to Bradford and that entries would be limited to staff, students and alumni of the university. This meant that judges of the competition would not be too overwhelmed by extra work.

It was suggested that I get in touch with John Hegley (performance poet and alumnus of the University of Bradford) to see if he would like to be involved. He was slightly intrigued that an 'engineering subject librarian' from Bradford was trying to contact him! He said he was interested in performing at Bradford in our theatre and would be happy to share the stage with the competition winners. When Ed Reiss and Julia Deakin agreed to judge the competition, it began to feel as though the project had enough support and momentum to actually work.

PUBLICITY AND ORGANISING DATES

I met with the communications and marketing team and the alumni office and was delighted when the marketing department offered to pay for the design and printing of postcards to promote the competition. The alumni office then offered to support the evening by making the performance of John Hegley into an alumni event. They helped enormously with marketing provided refreshments during the evening and paid for John's accommodation and travel expenses. Sharing the cost enabled me to go back to the library to ask for one hundred pounds to give as a prize to the winner.

Negotiating dates and agreeing the wording of publicity was a complex task. After negotiating



with the staff at the theatre, the Head of Arts, John Hegley, the judges, the alumni team and the library, it was decided that the closing date would be the end of the second semester, which gave the judges plenty of time over the summer to read the poems. We organised a date during the Science Festival for John Hegley's performance when there would be an opportunity for the competition winners to read their poems. The team at the Theatre in the Mill, the university theatre, would be in charge of ticketing; The Head of Arts, Iain Bloomfield, would introduce the poets during the evening.

It was Easter before the postcard and posters to advertise the competition were ready. We used electronic versions to advertise it on the social networking sites such as Twitter thus achieving maximum publicity at a minimum cost. The Special Collections librarian, Alison Cullingford uses social media extensively in her role so it was very easy for her to retweet my message to all her well-established contacts at the University of Bradford and beyond. In addition, the alumni team posted messages on Facebook. I was able to use the email contacts I had as a subject librarian to reach many students, and colleagues sent messages to students in their own areas. The event was posted on the student union website, in email staff briefing, library news and on the plasma screens around the university. Printed posters and postcards were put in the student union and places such as the university café.

THE POEMS ARRIVE!

Once the publicity had been completed I spent a few days nervously wondering how many entries I would receive – something I was frequently asked about over the next few weeks. I was extremely pleased to find I had plenty of entries from students and staff from many disciplines within the university. The poems arrived, some via email, others by hand; after the closing date I anonymised each entry before passing them to the judges. With hindsight I should have done this as the poems came in because it seemed a more onerous task to do all in one go! It was pleasing to find that as soon as I gave the poems to the judges they commented on the high standard of the poetry.

At the start of September the judges decided on the winner and two highly commended entries. It felt good that it was my responsibility to phone the winners and invite them to read their poems at the theatre. Following these phone calls I sent an email to all the participants to thank them for their poems and let them know who had won. The competition had removed more barriers than I could have imagined, and not only between science and the arts. As the standard of poetry was so high I wanted to celebrate all the entries, so I

decided to display all the poems in the library on National Poetry Day in October.

JOHN HEGLEY

Monday 12th September, 7.30pm
John Hegley presents:
The Adventures of Monsieur Robinet
At Theatre in the Mill, University of Bradford
Tickets: £10, £5 students and alumni. (Enjoy a free drink in the foyer)
01274 233200 or theatre@bradford.ac.uk

THE ADVENTURES OF MONSIEUR ROBINET

The New Dog
The Needy Neighbour
The Spoken Heart
Vegetables
The Strange Bunce
Maurice Bunting

This event has been organised by the Alumni Office, Theatre in the Mill and the JB Priestley Library to celebrate Bradford hosting the British Science Festival.

THEATRE IN THE MILL
UNIVERSITY OF BRADFORD
ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND
BRITISH SCIENCE FESTIVAL

The following few weeks I spent helping to organise and prepare for the evening with John Hegley and the competition winners. It helped that different areas of the university were involved because everyone wanted it to be a success and to contribute to Bradford hosting the Science Festival. When I wrote the publicity material I was careful that everyone involved was included and was happy with the choice of words. After publicising the competition, it seemed easier to promote the John Hegley evening because I already knew whom to contact for additional support. Rachel Kaye from the theatre created another flyer and ran a Facebook campaign from September to advertise the event using John's own publicity photos. The theatre added the event to their programme, circulating information via their mailing lists and

promoting it on their own website. Likewise, Ayo Bakare from the alumni office used Facebook, Twitter and the Science Festival blog and put a feature in the *Braduate* magazine. Ticket sales were quite slow at the start but I was assured that

people often decided to go to such events at the last minute.

THE BRITISH SCIENCE FESTIVAL

The week leading up to the poetry reading became quite hectic. Luckily the Science Festival took place just before all the students came back for induction week, so I had plenty of time to devote to the event. Senior managers of the university phoned me to make sure we had invited key people such as the writers in residence. We made arrangements for the judges and John Hegley to bring their books so we could sell copies on the night. The local community radio station and the alumni team arranged an interview with John Hegley and the university filmed all aspects of the British Science Festival; we arranged for the team to film the winners reading their poems so we could make this a

truly 'sounds of science' competition. The film was added to YouTube and listed on the Science Festival blog.

On the night the theatre was full and it was a splendid evening. It felt wonderful, after ten months of preparation, to sit in an audience being entertained by John Hegley and listening to the poetry readings. Many of the people who came had never listened to poetry in a theatre before.

NATIONAL POETRY DAY

On National Poetry Day, 6 October, it was decided to celebrate by putting all the entries on display in the library. I worked with the subject librarian for English, Susan Mottram, and we created an

attractive display using National Poetry Day posters. We wanted the display to be interactive so we put some letters on a white board for students to create their own words/poetry in the library. This had to be monitored on a regular basis to make sure nothing inappropriate appeared! We also used some games from the National Poetry Day website where the aim was to match the poem with the picture. The display seemed an apt conclusion to the project.

ON REFLECTION...

It has been a very exciting venture. Ed Reiss commented after the event: 'I actually think that initiatives like that are what universities are all about, or should be all about. It got people to think more deeply about science and what we do.' It was a success financially, because it demonstrated what can be done without a large budget but with a lot of enthusiasm, by using social media and with collaborative working across the university. The timing was perfect: using the British Science Festival meant we got a lot of help with the publicity on the university website. As a librarian I had the opportunity to be involved with people across the whole university and help to organise an event, something I had never done before. The library is ideally placed at the very heart of university for a project such as this to be a success. The poems say it all...

WINNER: EMILY A. FIOCCOPRILE

Doing Science

She stares at her samples
Tries to select the correct ones
How is she supposed to know?
Consults her notes, her books
Still no answers
So she makes an educated guess
Plucks the best ones from the box
Runs the machines
And waits for results.

He drags the beeping box through fields
Pacing back and forth
All in the name of science
It's kind of relaxing, actually
Back and forth
Back and forth
Then back to the computer lab
Time to process his data.

She spends her time with skeletons
In a corner of the basement
In a lab devoid of life
Only the dead for companions
And she wants to tell their stories
To know all about them
And how they came to rest in this chilly lab
So she examines them carefully.

I chose to do an arts degree
I'm not too keen on lab coats
I sift through reports
Pull books off dusty library shelves
Look for information.
I theorise over coffee
Thinking about life and death and
Trying to make sense of it all
In the solitude of my room
I write
And much to my surprise
I find that I too am doing science.

The winning entries are available at
<http://blogs.brad.ac.uk/bsf/2011/09/12/sounds-of-science-competition-winner/>