

‘No Artform Is an Island’:
cross-arts weekends at Northcourt, Isle of Wight

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Timeless
Ageless
Watched today
Yet
Watched centuries ago

Master sculptor
Shaping
Cliffs and mountains
From
Nothing

Tame as a kitten
But
Carries great boulders
And
Kills

Every swirling colour
From
Crystal clear, perfect
To
Black

Ancient as the sky
Drunk
By Adam then
By you
Now

And the only show
Of timeless age
Is the ripples
Like wrinkles
On the surface ¹

The water in this poem is real. For all the grand scope of its concepts, the water, the little stream that runs through the grounds of Northcourt on the Isle of Wight, has been observed. Reading it, we can guess that it was the insight of the last verse, seeing ripples (on what is in fact a very young river) as wrinkles of age, that bred the poem. More than one pair of eyes was involved: before the poem came a drawing. Everyone had walked around the garden with some guidance on how to look for small specific details and to catch them in ink drawing. Many people have looked at that stream and seen glitter and colour, but the black-on-white of a fine-liner's tip brought out the ripples/wrinkles. The drawings were laid out for everyone to choose somebody else's for their writing, so between the water and the poem there was one child's choice of subject, then the effects of the medium, then another child's instinct, feeling drawn to what the first had seen. No one is an island, indeed...

The Experiment

Northcourt is special - there's no other way of putting it. For twenty-four middle-school children to spend a Spring weekend in the gardens of a Jacobean manor house, with woodland, a stream, great azaleas, wild garlic, a sunken garden and old orchard, with freedom to write and the guidance of published writers... the experience can hardly *not* be special. Still, it's worth explaining what it is *for* - what we have been working to make of a rare opportunity created by a certain amount of luck and a great deal of hard work and goodwill, with a regular team of volunteer adult helpers and a range of visiting writer-tutors.

Since 1999, there have been Northcourt weekends on poetry and on drama, with experienced practitioners in each. This article will follow one strand: an ongoing experiment in which three tutors have collaborated, year by year, on work that has taken young writers across the line into drawing, collage, ephemeral sculpture and photography. (And back... since these are first and foremost poetry weekends, for children self-selected by their enthusiasm for creative writing. The experiment is to see how practice in another art form can foster qualities that strengthen writing, as well as skills that go beyond any single form.)

Observation

Each year has been different - the one experiment we

seem not to have tried yet has been to do the same thing twice. Each year's theme and exercises have come from reviewing the previous few years' work - and a commitment to the skill of direct observation. Working from life does not come automatically to young writers - especially not keen and able ones who have mastered the popular hallmarks of poetry like big emotions, adjectives and rhyme. The writing exercises, such as the worksheet-questionnaire the children used on this year's map-making walks, are often simply a practical way of saying 'Look! Really *look*.'

When I came to the place...

where the stream sat in front of us
as still and smooth as a pane of glass

I caught a very small glimpse
of an orange and white butterfly fluttering
just in front of me, as if it wanted to make friends,
but was too shy.

I heard the rooks calling
as if inviting us to join in with them.

I felt the damp grass underneath me
and the warmth from the sunshine
both so different yet exactly the same.

I smelt the wild garlic and fresh leaves
so delicious and welcoming, inviting summer.

I drew some small pink flowers
sat in front of the glass-like stream
swaying ever so slightly.

I took a breath of fresh air
and a blade of grass
not very much,
but enough to remember it by.

I left a mark where I sat
to remind all visitors I was there. ²

The words in italics, the 'I saw... I heard... I felt...' structure, were the given starting point. The presence of 'I drew' is not accidental. Since 2001, children at Northcourt have been encouraged to produce line-drawing illustrations for the final publication, with practical guidance from Zélie on selecting and framing details, making bold and simple marks on small

rectangles of good card with fine-liner pens - and a ban on pencils and erasers.

I drew the lily pads, like cup coasters or saucers floating amongst the algae and swirling waters...³ I drew a pot with growing greens like a symbol of new life...⁴ I drew the spiky cactus, Which was as prickly as a hedgehog, It writhed and wriggled in the wind, And wouldn't let anyone touch it...⁵

These lines picked at random from various children, plus the drawings themselves, show children really looking... and the way that simile and imagination grow from observation. *A growth like tangled spider legs...⁶ I studied a sundial, like a map of time...⁷*

Tree, gnarled, fruitless and bent, split
Sideways half up,
Like an argued couple the trunk divided in the middle,
it leant both ways.⁸

In the final session, three walking-groups (eight children in each) presented the others with a large-scale map of their journeys, embroidered with pictures, poems and invented names - our own personal *Mappa Mundi*.

Follow the path
Where the rusty iron roller
Lolls at ease on his day off,
Past the high-flying fish of stone,
From Simile Swamp to Murky Marsh
Until you reach the Rock Bottom Bridge
Where Laughing Manflowers laze
And wave you towards Garlic Galore
Where the Eyeless Flier
Spreads its blind wings and flies.
Keep going past the Rickety Look-out
And the tree house wrecked in a sea of bushes
Until you see Random Bench and find yourself
In the Clearing of Thorned Silence.
Keep out of the Elephant Bath - you may never escape
Head for the Arch of Tangled Whispers
and the See-Saw Tree. Beyond the Pink Snow Rains
of the Blossom Tree is the Magnificent Manor.⁹

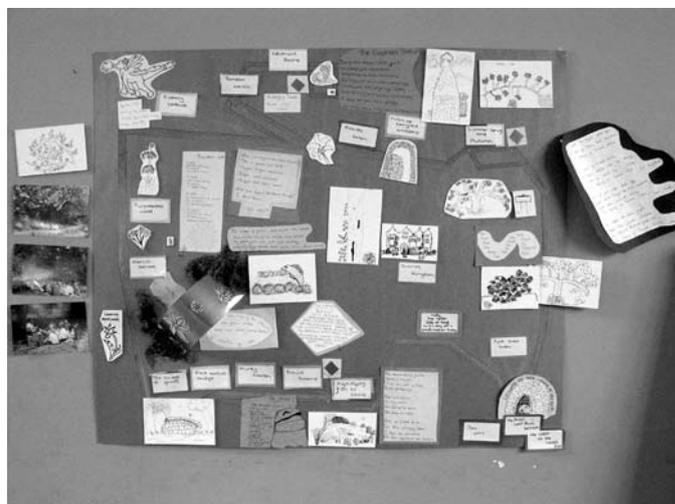
Notebooking

Most confident adult writers, especially poets, use notebooks in some way, for stray ideas, eavesdroppings, fleeting impressions, juicy phrases, small reminders of a time and place. Children might have special books for poems, but the habit of creative note-taking as a way to

keep ideas in play, open to different uses, is one to be learned. Northcourt weekends have always encouraged notebooking, but this year we gave each child one for the purpose - plenty of space, sturdier and more special than working with paper and clipboard, but not sacrosanct like their own glitter-covered notebooks. (Note to ourselves, in hindsight: next year make a bargain with the children and collect the notebooks at the end. We saw some going home with sharper and quirkier lines in them than the read-out and handed-in poems.)

To keep ideas in play... As cross-arts work has come to shape these weekends more and more, we have come to see the value of that border-crossing in modelling ways to keep the writer's thinking open - not to go for closure or for *finished* work too soon. One year, the central exercise was collage - cutting and pasting images and photographs out of magazines. Here, the process came first. Few children started on their collage knowing what it would look like in the end, and those that did found that it changed in their hands, as chance and choice presented them with different materials from the pile. The joy of surreal juxtapositions took over, and we had haunting images of a trapeze artist over a cricket field, a businessman with a tiger's head, a duck paddling through the sunset over London, a man deep in conversation with a meerkat ...

At this point we made a mistake. The thinking behind the game was that next we would say *Now do the same thing with your drafts of poems: cut and paste...* We did, and most of the results were cautious, unexciting. In fact, we should have said *Now write about your collages*, and let the visual fantasy run. It was the wrong moment to make the cross-arts connection in purely formal terms. There *is* a valuable experience to be smuggled





back across the border - that of watching an art work *find itself* in the act of making, letting it surprise you, rather than knowing what you'll end up saying in advance. That's a big step to take for a young writer, and takes confidence. Maybe it has to be taken by stealth, implicitly. Many of our games and exercises aim to offer little bits of evidence that it's a risk worth taking.

Collaboration

The most self-evidently rewarding use for notebook jottings is for sharing or exchanging - for collaborative work. This could mean sequencing several writers' lines to make a poem, or it could mean deep rewriting and re-use. Either way, it opens the door for thinking about reshaping and redrafting one's own work. Writers in schools and teachers know the reluctance of most young people to go back and change much once a poem-shaped draft has been achieved. We are always on the

lookout for practical ways to set young writers free from allegiance to a first draft, and to ask: *What is the poem that wants to grow out of this material?*

Some of our collaborative writing games involve each person trusting each of the others to take, shape and adapt lines they have written - just as everyone else will be trusting them with theirs. (The trust sum comes out even.) The contract must be open from the start: this *is* a trust game. We're inviting you to take a small risk, we say, and to see what surprising things you gain as a result. No writer, like no artform, is an island.

And of course this isn't just about collaboration; it's a glimpse of the writerly state of mind where what matters is the growth, in its own right, of the poem. That it's *mine* becomes secondary. That's the ideal, and we all touch it sometimes. Letting go of your words, into the hands of a friend or classmate, is practice for letting them go into hands of the unplanned and unconscious



parts of yourself.
 (None of this takes away from each child's ownership of their own poem, or line, or idea. If they don't feel that is respected, if they aren't sure they possess their words, how can they do the other fundamental human thing: to pool and share?)

Making and Unmaking

In hindsight, it seems more than coincidental that some of our visual-art exercises have been working with found things - those magazine images, or another year fallen twigs and leaves and flowers from the woods. The ephemeral sculptures that resulted were tests of ingenuity and imagination. Inspired by photographs of Andy Goldsworthy's work and by talking and writing about 'spirits of the place', they were the product of sharp-eyed attention to the surroundings, and utterly site-specific - in one case hung from the outmost twigs of an overhanging tree. To learn in practice that you can

shape a piece of art that feels your own, using things that you did not create, echoes the lessons of collaborative writing: it clears the way for standing back from your own ideas and first drafts, and playing more freely with what you find there.

It also schools us in a key creative skill, vital for editing, re-shaping, and letting poems change: the art of *letting go*. At the end of the weekend, we undertook to return our found materials to the ground - to leave no trace. The most moving part of the course was the one we'd planned least, when we staged a closing ritual of taking the sculptures apart and giving them back. Children began talking, about friends moving away, about pets or family members who they'd loved and had to let go, and some good and touching poems followed. No one asked them to write about loss and bereavement, but the practical process - making and unmaking - led them there.

Aside: On Mucking In Together

On Northcourt weekends the adults - writers, artists and volunteer helpers - write alongside the children, and we see each other's work. There is no assumption that adults' drafts will be 'better' than the children's - in fact, part of the point is to demonstrate that even a published writer's first draft might be as scrappy as anyone's.

What experienced writers are likely to have is the confidence to redraft boldly, to edit rigorously, and to experiment with shape and spacing on the page. All these skills are hard to convey in the abstract; the only way to teach them is by modelling (and time and practice, of course).

At some point in most weekends there will be a session where the whole group throws in ideas around one stimulus - either written on slips of paper or spoken out loud, to be caught on a flipchart. Over lunch or a drinks break, Philip will shape and order the ideas - with as few changes to the actual words as possible - and 'give them back' when we next meet. What I've done, he'll say, is simply what I do with my own first drafts. Sometimes a less confident child is surprised to find a line of theirs suddenly looks like 'a proper poem' without a word being changed - just because of bolder use of lines and spaces. Sometimes an almost chance aside, simply by careful placing, might become the punch line of the whole class poem.

Unidentified Standing Object

tall, slender as a ballerina on her first night,
a slim water weed rising from the swamp,
a mirror that takes every face that tries to look...

a skeleton smoothly brown as molten chocolate,
polished wood that darkly gleams like light
reflected off the moon, or life reflecting art...

a boulder trying to stop the flow of water
to the rocks below, a road sign warning of flowers,
a lollipop lady cursed and turned to wood...

a lily just about to burst and bloom, a beret
perched on curled feet like a jester's shoes,
like sheathed claws in a lion's toes...

a target for a form of ornamental archery
practised by ladies of the ancient Chinese court

with ivory needles and silk-stringed bows...
a feeble shield, a flower stalk at the end
of summer, one last petal left to fall,
a soldier on guard, to attention, battle-ready...

stiff, dry as an aged sunflower, withering,
a notice from the days of horse and carriage:
*Horses Must Not Eat Grass - Penalty One Penny.*¹⁰

There are some lines by adults in this group-generated poem, but they don't necessarily lead it. A reader might not be able to spot, in some cases, which they are. This is in the spirit of the game. Everyone present was firing similes at a curious piece of furniture we had found in the sitting room, taking risks with the widest range of ideas we could muster. (It turned out to be an 18th-century wooden individual fire-screen, by the way - for saving fine ladies' make-up from melting. So truth is as curious as any simile.)

Collaborating across ages is a discipline for the adult writer, too. Shaping a brainstormed piece like that above, Philip was answerable, there and then, to everyone who has put in an idea. If they did not recognize the end product as in some sense 'theirs', he would have done it wrong. The words must not feel *taken* but *borrowed*, that's the test.

This might look like a trick - the effect can be of mild magic - but the point is to demystify the magic, and make it available to everyone. No one 'loses' their line; it's still theirs to use in other ways, in other poems. And there's a world of difference between my doing this at the first-jottings stage and later. Working with individuals and their part-done poems, any of the adult helpers might make a suggestion: *What if you tried this? What if you laid it out like that?* But these are genuine questions, not instructions. The most important thing to teach is writing as experiment: try it out this way... and that... and that... then you choose.

The Art of Shifting Focus

The movement back and forth between writing and drawing, or writing and sculpture, is a shift of focus. It's a change that's as good as a rest. (Little 'free time' is scheduled on a Northcourt weekend: there is usually a drawing task at lunchtime, as well as the chance to run and roll around on the grass.) Most serious writers know the experience of struggling with a problem for an hour of concentrated effort, then giving up and going to make

a coffee... and half way downstairs the answer hits you. Genuine creative practice is a fine blend of focus and distraction, and shifts of perspective are close to the heart of what we mean by 'creativity'.

In writing sessions (other than collaborative ones) talking is usually best discouraged, or it is hard for individual children to hold a thinking space for their ideas to grow. In visual and physical art work, on the other hand, gentle talk seems to bubble naturally, as people think with their eyes and their hands. Far from competing with words on the page, the talking picks up from and improvises on the collage or scrap sculpture. Imagination often thrives on this de-centring of the attention. (Think about it too hard, it gets shy and retreats.)

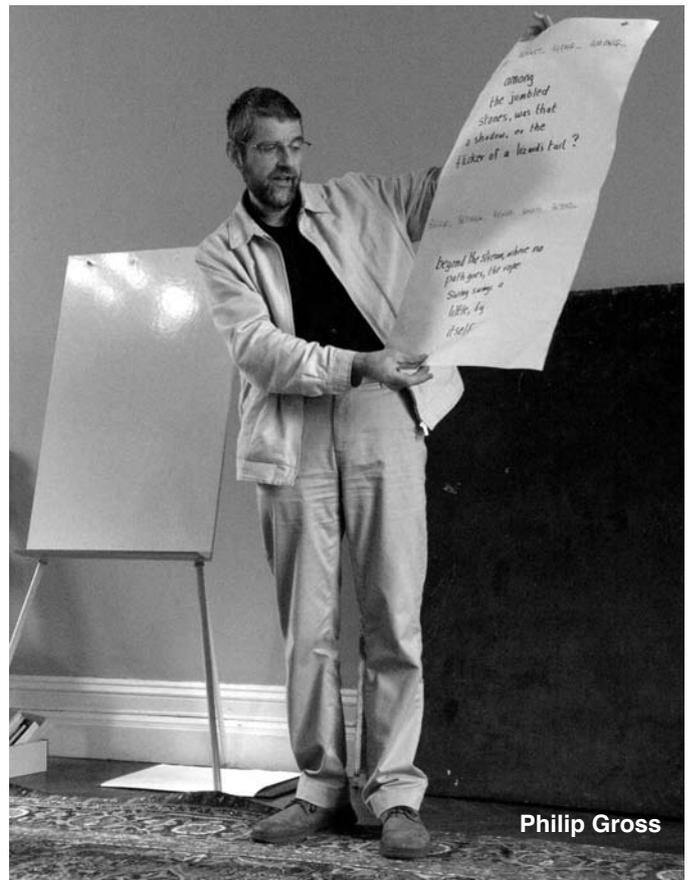
One of the most coherent themes for a weekend was the one titled *Curious Craft*. The seed idea came from writing, using Philip's poem *Mappa Mundi* as a model. Instead of verses starting *In the land of...* the young people brainstormed more and more wonderful things that a boat could be made out of. *The boat made of stone... of elastic... of knives.*¹¹ *A ship made of stars... a yacht made of youth...*¹²

The boat of shadow has never been seen.
It glides through the water, it skims over seas.

It can drift through cities and flit through the mountains,
Pass down rivers without drawing a glance.

The shadow boat's sail may be ragged and torn
But the boat is not powered by wind.¹³

Between the first stimulus and the final poems, there was the side-step into visual art: using a variety of scrap materials and found objects the young people made fantastical boats on the grass beside the stream, working alone or together, talking as they went. Later they toured each other's boats, and wrote again, about whichever took their fancy. Whether the final poems came from the initial word game, or from the ways the materials led them, or from the relaxed and playful thinking and talking that practical work allowed, would be hard to say. Better to say, maybe, that they were learning, in practice, habits of creative working which should feed their work and lives in many ways.



Going against the Grain

At a casual glance, a Northcourt weekend might look like a writing holiday. In fact, it is full of assignments and tasks, and often not ones our young writers would have chosen for themselves. We have never had a Mission Statement, but if we did it would include the fact that this is writing *training* - training in the sense that sportspeople train. Despite appearances (the hours on the grass, in lovely gardens) the children are rarely offered *carte blanche* as to what to write. Often this has meant resisting some kinds of writing the children would naturally do, if left alone and told 'write a poem'. (A lot more poems about fairies and ghosts would have been written otherwise. And it is a genuine discipline to steer clear of the word 'pretty' in a setting that blatantly is, or to go easy on the 'shimmering' when, frankly, that is what the river does.)

This going against the grain is quite deliberate, and the steps across the art forms have come to be part of it. All the children are keen young writers, self-identified by themselves and their schools for their interest - the itch

to do it (rather than simply academic ability). Most have the experience of being able to turn a poem that will please themselves, and friends and adults around them. The Northcourt project grew out of the need for a *next step* for children like these on the Island - somewhere to go with the keenness they have, and also to be challenged. We have tried to stretch their range, to offer paths beyond their comfort zone - in short, to aim for something that bit special.

Rose Lions

The afternoon sun closes in on me
through the cave-like trees.

It makes a path of sunshine.

Only I know
that the roses are lions.

Once alone and in silence
they transform with their powers,
merely look like flowers.

They growl softly, calm the trees.¹⁴

P.S. - The Prehistory of the Northcourt Weekends

Philip: In the mid 1980s I found myself working on the annual 'Arts in Trust' scheme in Cornwall. The brainchild of Cornwall's then adviser in Outdoor Education, Roger Butts, this put practising artists in National Trust properties for a week to work with (mainly primary) school groups from across the county, each bussed in for the day. These were visual artists, and the aim, for the schools and for the Trust, was to offer children a practical way of engaging with the sites - a way of seeing - as well as teaching them Art. After a while, poets and other writers were involved.

I found myself working on the same site as the painter Carole Page-Davies, and we became interested in each other's work and ways of working with the children. The following year we planned our workshops in parallel, so the writing group could meet up with the painting group and find they had been doing something similar - in terms, for instance, of framing and selecting details, or juxtaposing without comment. One year, on Lizard Point, we agreed to work on colour... and were interestingly challenged when a week-long sea mist came down, and the only colour anywhere was grey. After several years we were planning cross-arts workshops together, with each of us sitting in on and helping facilitate the other's workshops.

Let me be honest. What brought me to cross-arts work was self-interest... or rather pure *interest*, the sense that I could be learning something new about creativity in general, and ways of observing that I might bring into my writing. At every stage, then and in the Northcourt workshops, I have trusted that what fires me as a writer is likely to fire the children. I'll be working with them, and showing that even published writers need to be trying out new things - not always skilful, sometimes making mistakes. The world is not divided into the people who know (authors, grown-ups) and (children) who don't.

Zélie: My first involvement with the Northcourt writing weekends in 2000 was as one of the volunteer helpers; I offered to run a short drawing session with the aim of producing illustrations for the annual anthology and things grew from there. I had retired from secondary art teaching some years earlier but the itch to be involved in the creative process with children doesn't just go away. Philip and I had worked together many times with children at our Quaker Meeting on activities that combined our mutual interest and respective skills in writing and visual art, finding not only that the two blend well in the child's experience, but that each medium feeds the other, often in surprising ways.

We realized that the inclusion of a simple drawing task at Northcourt had stimulated an appetite (could it be harnessed in the service of their writing?) for observing and recording - one of the harder skills the weekend aims to teach. And we noticed how much the children enjoyed the task and valued the results. It was a simple step for us to envisage other creative activities involving looking, drawing, playing with visual images and making things with their hands that might enrich children's writing.

As a painter and art teacher I have been bringing to Northcourt a particular awareness of how losing oneself in non-verbal activity can release creative thinking. Children's conversation while they engage in art or craft work isn't just idle chatter. Listen in and you hear discussion about something that isn't working or what they are trying to achieve, ideas that come out of the blue, outbursts of pleasure and surprise at what has been produced, and silences of deep concentration (often a pause will occur mid sentence). In this collaboration with writers I see my role as providing intense shifts of focus during a weekend all about words - away from the verbal into creating with hands and eyes, through to relaxed and freed-up thinking and talking, and back again to working with words.

Lydia : In 1997 I was an English co-ordinator in an Isle of Wight Middle school, with a strong interest in writing, my own and that of the young people I was working with. The offer of a part time post as Literature Education Development Worker (funded by the Arts Council and Isle of Wight Council) was exactly what I needed. I was very fortunate to have the support of the then English adviser/inspector, Daphne Denaro, and together we set up the very first Northcourt weekend for twenty-four young writers. Our aim was to combat the social and geographical isolation of the Island by bringing to Island children opportunities more readily available to mainland or city children. From the very beginning the idea was that young writers would work alongside professional writers in a new and inspirational environment for a sustained period of time, to enable them to explore new ideas, to take risks and to look critically at their own work.

Initially, the focus was just on writing and the two invited professional writers ran separate workshops each day, loosely connected by an overall theme, working with half the young people on Saturday and the other half on Sunday, finishing with a sharing of work in the whole group. The crossing of the arts began gradually, first with the inclusion of writers, such as Michelle Magorian and Jeremy Davies, who had strong drama interests, and then through Philip and Zélie. The majority of students came then, as now, from Years 7 and 8 but both older and younger students have taken part. Two weekends are now held each year and afterwards an anthology of work is published, including poetry, art, script and monologue – and photographs of the young writers, actors and artists in action.

It's easy to assume that Northcourt is a stately home remote from everyday life and that the young writers and artists are a privileged elite. Neither is true. Northcourt is a beautiful and loved home kept going by the sheer hard work of the family who owns it. The students come from a cross section of Island state schools and many are enabled to take part by funding from their schools. With luck, with trust in the creative process and in the special quality of Northcourt itself, we all discover something in each cross-arts weekend on which we can continue to draw as writers and artists.

Poems and writing by:

1 Chris Barker 2004. The drawing was by Liam Harrison.
2 Hannah Chiverton 2006

- 3 Hannah Chiverton 2006
- 4 Emily Burridge 2006
- 5 Rozi Thearle 2006
- 6 Robyn Womack 2006
- 7 Charlotte Allan 2006
- 8 Robyn Womack 2006
- 9 Sophie Manley, Rhiannon Kennerley, Rozi Thearle, Jo Godfrey, Ella Greenslade, Rosie Ely, Ashley Higgins, Robyn Womack 2006
- 10 Brainstorming session from the whole group, 2006, arranged by Philip Gross.
- 11 Stewart Knight 2005
- 12 Kayleigh Bowers 2005
- 13 Alex Frampton 2005
- 14 Gemma Abrook 2003

With thanks to:

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Christine and John Harrison for opening their home and garden to us all.

Lydia Fulleylove is writer in residence at HMP Albany and writer in healthcare for the Healing Arts on the Isle of Wight. She also works with young people in literature education. She has published a range of creative writing materials and poems, short stories and articles in magazines. Her first collection, *The Green Swing*, is published this year.

Philip Gross is a poet, novelist and playwright, with three new books published this year: *The Egg of Zero* (poetry), *The Storm Garden* (novel for young people) and *The Abstract Garden* (poetry collaboration with engraver Peter Reddick). He is Professor of Creative Writing at Glamorgan University.

Zélie Gross, trained in Fine Art and taught art and ceramics in secondary schools for many years. More recently she has been involved in education work with the Quaker Study Centre and has collaborated with her husband Philip on the Isle of Wight project and other cross-arts work with adults and children.