

## 101 Ways to Make Poems Sell

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Writing as Chris Emery, his poetry has appeared in numerous journals including *The Age*, *Jacket*, *Magma*, *Poetry London*, *Poetry Review*, *Poetry Wales*, *PN Review*, *Quid* and *The Rialto*. He was anthologised in *New Writing 8* (Vintage, 1999). A first full-length collection, *Dr. Mephisto*, was published by Arc in 2002. A new collection of poetry, *Radio Nostalgia*, is available from Arc. He lives in Great Wilbraham with his wife, three children and various other animals.

## Writing as Chris Emery

### Poetry

*The Cutting Room* (Barque Press, 2000)

*Dr. Mephisto* (Arc Publications, 2002)

*Radio Nostalgia* (Arc Publications, 2006)

# 101 Ways to Make Poems Sell

The Salt Guide to Getting and Staying Published

**Chris Hamilton-Emery**



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*For the neophytes,  
the grand viziers  
and the barbarians  
at the gate.*



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Finally, I'd like to thank you, the reader, for spending your hard-earned cash on me, and I hope you find this book a welcome addition to the shelves, but one that has its spine broken and Post-it notes hanging from the pencilled margins. This book should be put to use and made to work.



# Preface

Poetry is a multi-million dollar, international business, though you could be forgiven for thinking that it was the poor relation of the book trade—the country cousin, buck-toothed and socially inadequate—perhaps a little smelly and stained. Of course, it's true to say that poetry accounts for a very small percentage of the total book buying sales, but it's still a big business. Despite this, many booksellers and literature readers will glaze over and look a little panicked at the mention of the “P” word. One anxiety is about *difficulty*. Poetry is an art form that demands participation and intellectual effort from the reader. Effort is in short demand in an age of passive consumption. This isn't to say that poetry isn't entertaining (it certainly should be), we've just grown lazy about our intake of high culture. As Stephen Page of Faber and Faber succinctly put it, most publishers have “rushed to the middle”. The book trade is intensely conservative and slow-moving. The middle-ground, middlebrow hegemony in all genres has, at times, looked like stifling creativity and innovation. Poetry has to compete with this if it is to survive in any meaningful way.

Another anxiety is *ubiquity*. Quite literally, thousands upon thousands of people attempt to write poetry, coming into the art at many levels, but mostly as amateurs enjoying the problems and rewards of wrestling with language, capturing emotional extremes and seeking solace and comfort.

Many people will, at a push, admit to *writing* poetry at some point in their lives (usually in their adolescence), but few people would confess to *reading* any in their daily lives, especially the modern stuff. There is nothing fundamentally wrong with this gap, except that so many people want to see their poetry published in a book. This is a great mystery, that thousands of folk believe that their poems *will* be purchased, when so few buy any poetry at all. So, if poetry is a multi-million dollar business, what is selling? Dead poets sell well. Famous poets sell well. The rest is a struggle between tiny quantities and no quantities. Poetry is, it seems, an art aimed at posterity with little contemporary appetite for the new.

Many surveys around the world have shown that trade sales of poetry are in modest decline. There are perennial discussions of poetry's demise, of its retreat into academia, of its neglect of the "general reader". We are offered either resignation or quack remedies. Poetry "cannot be marketed", or alternatively, we are reminded of how the grass roots can really show the best way forward towards a poetry of total inclusion—as if it was all about a form of mass participation in the art. I sincerely doubt that either position is true.

All of this has led to the view that poetry is a "special needs" case, whose only hope of survival is to broaden out, dumb down, and seek patronage and subsidy. Whilst any business needs "seed capital" and investment to build its operations, the poetry business seems to be a permanent charity case—non-profit, beyond the seedy world of commerce and the confessions of mass marketing and media giants. Some people will

treat it as such. Some will not. Whether you are a publisher or a poet, if you are interested in creating a paying readership for poetry, then this book is for you. This book is about the business side of the poetry scene, about making sales and profits to fund literature in a sustainable way.

I'm not interested in seeing any art form limp along, least of all poetry. If you want poetry to prosper in the twenty-first century, then this book will help you to find a way to make that happen. You could say I am on a mission in these pages, a mission to see the perceptions of poetry realigned, to recognise that a major literary genre can also be a major publishing genre, one equipped with sales to match the aspirations of its practitioners. There's no easy route out of the current predicament. The only way forward is to learn some basic business and marketing skills, and to hustle for all you are worth.



# 1

## Making Poetry Submissions

**B**efore considering making a poetry submission to any publisher, it is important to consider what you want to contribute to a publishing relationship and precisely what you want to achieve within your writing life. This is certainly not a financial contribution, we're not talking about vanity presses in these notes, it is a far more important contribution than just money. Understanding your intentions and efforts as a writer will, to a large extent, determine what choices are to be made and provide you with a few opportunities and very many challenges. It might surprise you to discover that being published may not be the best choice for you and your work.

### Why Do I Write?

There are, of course, as many reasons for writing as there are people on the planet, but understanding your desires (or

compulsions) as a writer will help you to think through whether you really want to be published and whether you are prepared to work (often exhaustively) to develop a readership for your writing within a commercial context.

Very many people begin to write poetry in their adolescence and many write from experience of trauma, personal loss or as a form of spiritual or emotional growth. Some write from their first experiences of ethical and political conviction. Some from their first reading of a major poet at school; many learn through emulation. All of these are perfectly valid and rewarding pastimes without any form of publication. You may have had a substantial writing life producing poems as an extension of your emotional experience. However, this is not a test for the financial viability of your poems in a published work.

The authenticity of your feelings, their depth, novelty and sincerity, are not markers for commercial success. Many publishers will recognise the characteristics of such poetry and flinch from the memory of heart-felt writing, from young and old alike, which fails to stimulate the reader beyond calls for sympathy. Alas, sympathy does not sell books; it sells greeting cards.

Emotional excess and the unburdening of strong personal feelings can be a major impetus to writing, but this is rarely the sole basis of a successful poem. Some poets do this well, but the measure of their success lies not in the expression of their personal feelings (or their excess), but in how they have engaged the reader and transcended such conditions with new language. In this way, the commercial publication of poetry demands reciprocity and interaction with a readership.

Frequently the reader is a participant in the very process of the poem, active rather than passive. You may be the best reader of your own work, but without someone else, the poem is incomplete, and without a buyer it cannot be published.

Many poets and commentators will correctly state that the writer works first for themselves; there is no doubt that this is true. But as soon as you seek to develop a readership beyond your family, friends and colleagues, you will establish for yourself a set of ambiguous responsibilities. Clarifying and articulating these responsibilities will define your writing. If you want people to pay for your poems, to give up their time and effort in order to engage with your work, then one responsibility is commercial. Why should anyone pay money to read you? More importantly, why do you think that they will? It isn't the publisher's job to answer such questions, it's their job to ask them.

## What does Publication Mean for My Writing?

Being published means entering into a partnership with a publisher and commits you to the serious application of your time and talent to finding readers and marketing your work. If you are not primarily interested in helping to sell books, you do not need to approach a publisher, as they almost certainly won't succeed in making sales on your behalf without your active participation. Of course, there are many ways to find readers, and selling books is just one of them. But for publishers who depend on books sales to fund their businesses and

develop their relationships with their customers, it is of major significance. Not every book has to be a bestseller; few, if any, will be, but every book, it is hoped, will make a positive contribution to the publisher's financial performance or the cohesion and identity of their list.

This is the commercial publisher's risk: that their often considerable investment in money and human resources will pay dividends in profitable book sales. Where poetry is concerned, those rewards may be very meagre indeed. Most volumes of poetry sell under a thousand copies, many sell less than 300, and some do not sell at all, despite the massive efforts of all concerned.

You may infer from this that commercial publication bears no real relation to the intrinsic value of your writing. It would be folly to merely seek some form of validation through a publishing relationship. Your work may be highly-prized by the publisher as an asset, but it would be wrong to think of the publisher's role as primarily one of defining some true value (though they may try very hard to do so for the sake of their profits). The publisher's primary role is to market and sell books, and to use whatever means are put at their disposal to do so. Good or even great poetry which doesn't sell will not be of much use to the publisher.

At the end of the day, true value is bestowed by a living readership, and publishers need paying customers, here and now, in order to finance their operations. On the other hand, a poet can write rewarding and committed poetry without ever being published in this way, and can, should they wish, self-publish, or indeed find their writing life fulfilled through giving read-

ings and performances in a range of venues and cultural forums. There are many ways to practise poetry, only one of them requires a commercial publisher and that depends on your wish to develop an impersonal readership willing to pay.

## What are the Social Conditions of the Poet?

Poetry is a broad church, and more people write it than read it. Even more people read it than buy it. The market for selling poetry is, in relation to the total book trade, an extremely small one, and it is complex, fragmented, well-managed and highly competitive. Because of this, it is notoriously difficult to coordinate a sustainable economic model for contemporary writing. You will be extremely unlikely to earn a living from selling your poetry. However, you may earn money from a range of cultural projects related to “acting” as a poet, and some writers seek to earn their incomes from running workshops or courses, teaching English or Creative Writing, making festival appearances, giving paid readings, taking on residencies, and becoming cultural commentators and critics. Others may seek grants and bursaries or roles within the media.

The range of possible jobs which relate to poetry has in fact become highly professionalised, whilst the task of selling poetry has become more demanding, expensive and sophisticated. Some would say decadent and corrupted. Often the two go hand in hand; selling poetry books depends increasingly on how well the writer is known within a range of often distinct

literary communities, some of which may be supported by the public sector and administered by civil servants.

Despite the rapid growth of public sector support within the culture industry, the market for poetry has been in decline. Some consider this to be a feature of the current management, some of its critical reception, others consider this as the negative impact of academic study. Given the huge growth in undergraduate numbers since 1990, it would be inaccurate to state that those of us studying literature are not valid as a readership. Many will go on to a lifelong engagement with, and commitment to, literature.

In the main, this is not a failure of any single party, it is symptomatic of changes in the commercial structure of book-selling in general, and the increasing need for booksellers to generate profits. Poetry is not a mass-market product, even if at times it crosses over into the world of bestsellers. It sells in modest numbers to a highly-informed and often specialised readership. This readership can be extended, and doing so is the problem of poets as much as it is of publishers.

Building a reputation as a poet is a vital feature of having any form of commercial life as a writer. Some may baulk at the notion of working in this way on an art form which is traditionally perceived to operate at a high level, dealing with spiritual, social and political realities. However, this is not the case where publishing is concerned. Anything you do as a poet to manage and extend your status as a writer will be of considerable use to the publisher. Indeed, some publishers will invest a great deal of effort in support of managing and publicising your writing persona, in order to achieve more sales and realise

their investment in your writing. Constructing perceptions of the writer and, indeed, their celebrity, can be a full-time occupation for some people within a publishing business. Writers are expected to support this process.

For very many poets, the navigation of literature officers, workshop managers, festival and venue directors, university lecturers, broadsheet literature editors, critics of all shapes and sizes, small magazine editors, listservs, Web masters, librarians and perhaps most troublingly, other poets, can be a demanding daily task. Some poets excel at building such networks of relationships (and their dependencies), others find this repellent and inauthentic behaviour. However, the more experience the poet has of knowing who's who, and who to call upon to further their career as a writer, the more chance they have of commercial success. Some are combative in their pursuit of this, some are jealous of others' share of the limelight, whilst others will deconstruct the field and recognise the signs (I almost wrote sins) of patronage and power. Still, no one has ever been plucked from obscurity by a publisher, inexperienced and ignorant of the poetry scene, its operations, its bias, indeed its enmities, hostilities and prize-fixing glamour, and succeeded to achieve marvellous book sales. Knowing the scene (and being known by it) and establishing your relationship to it are as important as scribbling *vers libre* in the attic, or workshopping quatrains at the weekend writing school.

There can be little doubt that success as a poet involves working within such communities; inside them you will achieve one tier of sales (almost "business to business" in nature), and through them you may reach a wider, more general and any-

mous readership. If you know nothing of these communities, a publisher may still be interested in you, but if you understand these communities well and have gained some expertise in working with them, a publisher will see their risk reduced and the possibility of sales increased. As a commodity, you are suddenly more attractive.

## Who Buys Poetry?

So far, we've made some observations about the circumstances surrounding the business of poetry. We've eschewed discussions of poetic value, of how good your writing actually is, to consider whether it will in fact sell and what you will do to help drive those sales. We've side-stepped the issue of seeing your work in print—if this was your sole desire, it would be better to spare the publisher's cash and the efforts of their staff, and print the book yourself.

Before you can write you need to read, and before you can read you need to buy (remember that the public lending right doesn't feed the publisher's staff). At this point, let's consider who actually buys poetry.

There are many thousands of poetry publications produced every year around the world (yes, thousands), ranging from the strictly amateur to the corporate window-dressing of publishing conglomerates. Some are given away, some stored under the bed or in the garage, a small percentage are sold direct or even through bookstores.

Take a pencil and some paper and write down everyone you know who buys poetry and ask yourself these ten questions:

- 1 How do they hear about the books?
- 2 Which places do they buy them from?
- 3 Do they buy anthologies or single author volumes?
- 4 Do they buy works from a particular publisher, or from a range of publishers?
- 5 Do they buy the works of particular authors, or try unfamiliar names?
- 6 Do they buy contemporary poetry, or the works of historical authors?
- 7 Do they shop for poetry regularly?
- 8 How much do you think they spend on poetry each year?
- 9 How many poetry titles do you think they buy each year?
- 10 Why do you think that they buy it?

Now you have your list, ask yourself the same questions.

What can you deduce from this kind of survey? Well, one thing to be aware of, if you believe you are au fait with contemporary poetry, less than 20% of new titles are actually sold in bookshops. Far more titles are sold direct. If this doesn't match your experience, you've missed out on an awful lot of new poetry.

Statistically, most poetry sold in bookstores is sold to women, most of that is sold to people over 50 years of age, and most of that sold has been written by dead authors. But there is

little research as to where the other 80% of titles is actually being sold.

Unless you, and the people you know, are buying poetry, there will be no market for selling books. An important lesson to learn in considering making a submission is how committed you are to helping others buy books: furnishing them with your enthusiasm for the art, and convincing them that spending their money on poetry will add value to their lives. Make it your business to increase the size of the market. Without readers, there is no future for publishers, and no room at the inn for you. The more people you encourage to buy poetry, the bigger the potential market for you.

## Reading all the Books you have Bought

So you have acquired a few thousand new poetry books for your personal library (just kidding), and are wincing at all the money you have had to earn and spend on this stuff, now let's consider reading it all.

Publishers come in all shapes and sizes; some, but not all, are interested in publishing work which significantly extends poetry. Opinion will be hotly divided on exactly how poetry is to be extended. However, most publishers will agree that new poetry should endeavour to be precisely that: new. It is often astonishing how poorly read aspiring poets are, and how many have failed the first hurdle to rise above their idols and pass beyond emulation into the realms of real writing—writing which has its context in the present, here in this very moment,

addressing the current state of poetry and its practice and reception in the broad community of the living art. There ought to be a law about this:

“Poets are not allowed to submit a new manuscript until they have read two hundred single-author volumes of poetry, published since 1980.”

In fact, there ought to be several laws about it:

“Poets writing in the manner of the nineteenth-century Romantics are advised to seek publishers from the same era.”

So many submissions are too derivative to be worth publishing. We’ve read the originals and don’t need a karaoke version of Heaney, Plath or Larkin. Where poetry is concerned, regurgitation never aids digestion.

Perhaps the most frustrating thing for publishers is receiving manuscripts which clearly don’t fit their lists, addressed “To whom it may concern” or “Dear Editor”. Sending the wrong material to someone you cannot be bothered to discover the name of and expecting some response other than the bin would be testing providence in the best of circumstances. Find out about the publishers you are wishing to submit to, learn about their editors, buy their books, read their poets, and discover for yourself whether your writing might be of interest to them.

Never let your abstract desire to be published rush ahead of the desire to consume other people's poetry. Being a reader is, in fact, far more important than being a writer. Remember to read beyond your own prejudices; the aspiring poet should read everything. Okay, not everything, just everything I publish.

## Becoming a Player

The world of poetry is not a world of isolated individual practitioners. Hermits in their caves. If you currently find yourself in this position, you should try to get out more. The world of poetry is a very busy place, filled with a wide range of professionals, most of whom are eager to tell you about their talents.

The world of poetry is not filled with gentle suffering creatures (to call upon Eliot). It is not fair, just, or particularly caring. It can be supportive, but it is not a self-help group. It is not a world based upon power sharing. In fact, the world of poetry can be a bear pit and, like any industry, it is competitive and has moments of confrontation and even dirty tricks. Be prepared to take some knocks along the way.

The most frequent knocks will be rejection. Many poets could paper a bedroom with their rejection slips. You'll receive your fair share of these, too. The source of these will be the magazines you are going to successfully submit to before sending a collection to a publisher.

Spend time getting your poems printed in magazines large and small. Focus on magazines (print and Web) which really matter. Spend a lot of time working out which ones are the

best. You'll know that from the contents as much as by the list of poets printed in the contributor notes. Building a pedigree as a writer is vitally important, and it will help a publisher to contextualise your work, and even to discover it. Search out magazines, subscribe to them and support them—they are the scouts and trackers of the poetry world, discovering and often nurturing new talent.

Another important feature of succeeding as a poet is to write reviews. Engaging with other work and actively reviewing it is a great way to build your own experience of poetry, its cause and effect, and you won't want to waste your time reviewing material you don't engage with—even if that engagement is intense dislike. Set your sights high. Aim to be a feature writer for *The Guardian*, *The Boston Review*, or *The Age*. No point spending your expensive time writing reviews for venues with no readership. You may not be successful in placing reviews and finding a sympathetic literary editor, but there's no harm in testing your mettle in the best forums. Above all, ensure your work and where it appears builds your credibility as an expert. Glorious amateurs aren't required.

A side-effect of such endeavours is that the poetry you believe matters will eventually be given air space. Many poets continue to write reviews and serious criticism for precisely this reason; maintaining their position as experts and defending the poetry they want to succeed. They are building ramparts around the castle. If you don't like what's on offer, you'll need some siege equipment and a tactical plan of action.

## 50 Dos and Don'ts

That's enough background. Let's take a look at the dos and don'ts of preparing a submission:

- 1 First off, read submissions guidelines carefully. Many publishers don't currently take submissions and find their poets from out in those literary communities you're going to spend your time discovering and playing a part in.
- 2 Don't ask for feedback on your poems. It's not the publisher's job to act as your advisor.
- 3 Don't write to ask for submission guidelines. Check the publishers Web site for details. If you haven't access to the Web, go to an internet café.
- 4 Do check whether a publisher is currently accepting submissions, Web sites often give detailed information.
- 5 Make yourself a player. A mover and shaker. If you are out there participating in literature, publishers will notice you.
- 6 Keep submission letters brief. Editors are ferociously busy people. Spend time planning what message you want to get across, and take time to ensure you've got it down in writing, clearly and concisely.
- 7 Be completely familiar with the publisher's list. If you haven't bought any of their books, why should they bother to publish you? And don't get caught out pretending.

- 8 At the same time as planning a submission, prepare a marketing plan for how you will personally promote your book. That's for the publisher when you get accepted.
- 9 Make sure you include your magazine publishing history, citing where and when your poems have appeared.
- 10 Find out the name of the person you are submitting to. Find out what they like. Find out where they live. Follow them to work. Alright, just kidding, but find out their name.
- 11 Don't threaten the editor, or be overly familiar.
- 12 Don't set deadlines for responses.
- 13 Avoid the common pitfall of purchasing a book as a form of making a submission. Editors can be bought, but only for six figure sums involving a contract of employment.
- 14 Avoid portentous, weighty titles: "The Succulent Dark of My Fading Time," "Dread Fires of The Iron Soul," etc., are sure to raise the hackles of every editor.
- 15 Don't spend time explaining why your work is important.
- 16 Don't justify your work through a negative reading of contemporary poetry. "All this modern poetry is just rubbish; please find enclosed my 20,000 line *Life of Hephaestus* written in Alexandrines."
- 17 Do check your spelling. Especially the words you think you know how to spell.

- 18 Do take care with punctuation, and take special care with apostrophes.
19. Echoing Raymond Carver, “No cheap tricks.”
20. Avoid sending poems on the death of your cat, mother or Biology teacher. Or how crap your life is. Or about bee-keeping.
21. Beware of sending poems which contain wild metaphor, clever descriptions of everyday phenomena, and make novel use of dialect and idioms, all ending with a stunning epiphany. It’s a tired old template now. Descriptive writing can be very dull.
- 22 Poems on the wondrous nature of God’s creation aren’t.
- 23 Manuscripts containing helpful marginal notes about what you are meaning at this point, or how to typeset the stanza or line are profoundly annoying.
- 24 Avoid hyperbole, cliché, saturated adjectives, and extended simile. High-powered writing is never weakened by such features. Precision is everything in writing, even being precisely vague.
- 25 Learn the rules in order to break them.
- 26 Do break the rules. We are all so bored of the rules, especially the ones taught to you on writing retreats.
- 27 An aside, if someone talks to you about finding your “voice,” they’re trying to sell you snake oil.
- 28 Do not centre on the page everything you write.
- 29 Do not set the whole manuscript in italics.
- 30 Do avoid fads, like workshop poems in strict forms—sonnets, villanelles and sestinas can be truly

marvellous, but writing exercises rarely make for saleable goods.

- 31 Do not put © Copyright Denise Cuthbert 2005 on the bottom of every page. No one, especially the editor of a publishing house, is going to abuse the rights to your poems.
- 32 Do send an envelope big enough to use to send your manuscript back to you.
- 33 Do supply full postage or international reply coupons, if accepted by the country you are submitting to.
- 34 Do not set the manuscript in 18 point bold Helvetica. Choose a font that looks like a book typeface in the appropriate size and weight.
- 35 So many people write on 8.5 × 11.5 inch or A4 paper that they forget that most trade books are around 5.5 × 8.5 inch or 216 × 140mm in format—be aware of the likely size of the printed page.
- 36 Don't ask for a receipt for your manuscript.
- 37 Don't ring up chasing progress the week following your submission. Be patient. Publishers accepting manuscripts may receive several hundred per week. Even working 12 hour days no editor can keep pace with the deluge of submissions.
- 38 If rejected don't waste time demanding to know why. Dust yourself down and move on.
- 39 Do mention if you have been recommended by another poet from the list.
- 40 Don't name drop unless the names explicitly bear upon the nature of the submission.

- 41 Don't waste time sending expensive bound volumes of your work.
- 42 Do send a sample of six to ten poems.
- 43 Do send some brief endorsements or review quotes, but not those from your mother or English tutor.
- 44 Don't handwrite your letter to the editor.
- 45 Don't handwrite the poems.
- 46 Don't include your photograph—especially the moody one with the Fedora.
- 47 Do spend time researching and planning your submission. Choose the best poems to suit the publisher's list.
- 48 Don't let a friend or family member submit on your behalf. They're your poems, have the conviction to make their case.
- 49 Do tell the publisher why you think the poems will suit their list.
- 50 Finally, don't give up hope. If you believe in your writing, keep on reading and developing your skills. Keep on building your profile. Spread your enthusiasm.

In this chapter, you've learned about what publishing (as opposed to literature) is primarily about: selling books and making profits. You've learned that you are an active participant in that process. You may be a novice right now, but by the end of this book, you'll be on your way to becoming an expert. Back in point 6 of my "dos and don'ts," I spoke of preparing a

marketing plan, the 101 items in the rest of this book will help you to prepare it and to carry it out.

## 2

### Building your Profile

**Y**ou may have spent a great deal of time considering how to get into print, especially if you read the first chapter of this book. You may have spent a small mortgage on attending courses and workshops, even degrees and MFAs, to improve your writing. You may have spent half your life developing your critical thinking—firming up your grasp of post-structuralist theory, the Frankfurt School, or ideas of rhizomes, semiotics, fields, *ostranenie*, simulacra and simulation. On the other hand, you may want to invoke some demons, call upon the Muses, entertain, shock or enlighten; make things real and create some “stays against time” within the chaotic, if shared world, of language. Let’s take all this as read.

As a poet, there’s little doubt that you will have invested enormous amounts of effort into the consideration of the social, aesthetic, psychological and political context for creating your works, building those systems of constraint from which your authentic art will emerge violently into the world. However, it is extremely unlikely that you will have spent any