Insights into Ledbury Poetry Festival 2018: Our Intern Katharina Picks Her Favourite Events

I was particularly inspired by the female poets so far, and the very different perspectives they offered on women’s lives — in all their diversity. Sabrina Mahfouz, for example, presented poems from her collection *How You Might Know Me* (Out-Spoken Press, 2016), which gives a voice to women working in the sex industry in such a creative way that I could not resist buying the book. I read it back to back in the night after the event!

In another great event, Cecilia Knapp shared some very personal and yet-unpublished work that focuses on the female body, on loss, and the close bonds between women — I can’t wait for her debut collection to come out next year.

The women I saw on stage(s) at Ledbury Poetry Festival all made a real connection with the audience, whether reading, like Caroline Bird from her surreal and bitterly funny *In These Days of Prohibition* (Carcanet, 2017), or performing their poetry with their whole body in motion, like Joelle Taylor. Joelle made her audience (and me!) laugh and cry and share her rage about what needs to be changed in society: the glass — and class — ceilings that are still in place but that, I feel, get little cracks with every one of her performance from *Songs That My Enemy Taught Me* (Out-Spoken Press, 2017).

Hollie McNish is another great performer, as everyone who has seen her live will certainly agree. She made me forget completely that she is actually promoting her most recent collection *Plum* (Picador Poetry, 2017) because of her humorous and conversational way of mixing personal (and political) comments with her short poems. Her set feels more like listening to a very intelligent friend, a witty fellow feminist, sharing her views on such varied topics as sex-ed, her own “fucking delicious shoulders” or ghost poos (I won’t explain, you’ll have to do your own research…).

I also witnessed academic excellence when two of the Ledbury Emerging Poetry Critics unpacked two of Wallace Stevens’ poems yesterday. Maryam Hessavi dared delving into the complex subject of the poet’s social and moral responsibility; she chose to talk about the not very well-known poem by Stevens entitled “Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery” (and she also discussed reasons why scholars might have frequently ‘overlooked’ this poem from 1935 despite marking a transition in Stevens’ oeuvre). Srishti Krishnamoorthy-Cavell, by contrast, picked the all-time favourite “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” to comment on the philosophical question implied in the poem: How do poets (not) know ‘things as they are’ when representing the world in poetry. I wish these fabulous critics had had more time than just 20 minutes each to develop and discuss their thought-provoking ideas.

We are only half-way through the festival now, so there are still a lot of events to look forward to. I’ll definitely go to the other two Emerging Poetry Critics events on Sunday (July 8); there’s one on Emily Dickinson at 10am and one on Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s poetry at 2pm, both at the Baptist Hall, one of the very nice and cool (as one happily adds these days) venues.

To stick to my political and feminist theme, and because I am a huge fan of Kim Moore, I’ll also definitely attend the conversation about and readings from the #MeToo anthology tomorrow (Thursday) 6pm at the Burgage Hall featuring Kim Moore, Pascale Petit, Deborah Alma and Roz Goddard.

As a German (or should I say European) intern at this festival, I am also very happy that LPF is still part of the Versopolis programme, a pan-European platform promoting the exchange of poetry. This year we get the chance to meet poets from France, Poland, and Croatia, and I particularly like how you get to listen to their poetry in the original as well as in excellent English translations. And the best thing is: These 20 minute readings on Saturday (all at the Panelled Room in the Master’s House) are FREE — plus, you get lovely pamphlets with the poems and their translations as a present!

Of course, I would not want to miss the big Versoplis finale on Sunday (July 8, 5pm-7pm, again free but ticketed) either, when all the Versopolis poets, including the British ‘Versopolisers’ Sasha Dugdale, Sandeep Parmar and Mererid Hopwood, are going to read again at Burgage Hall. This celebration of poetry will also be the final event of 85 (!) events at Ledbury Poetry Festival 2018 —

BUT: I already know that I will want to come back for the festival in 2019! This year is my third year as an event-manager and intern, and I always looking forward to these 10 days in summer not only because the events are so inspiring for me as a poetry enthusiast, but also, most importantly, because this festival is run by a great team — with Phillippa, Chloe and Sandra forming a perfect ‘triumfeminat’ supported by the trustees — and with wonderful people working at the box office, on the tech team, and as grips as well as lots and lots of volunteers (including the interns) who do event-managing, stewarding, Hospitality shifts, driving —literally anything that needs to be done to make Ledbury Poetry Festival so successful and enjoyable!