

# the HARLEQUIN

Annie Finch

## An interview with Annie Finch

American poet Annie Finch is the author of more than twenty books of poetry, plays, translation, literary essays, textbooks and anthologies. Finch has been celebrated as “a major poet” (Charles Altieri) and “an American original” (Ron Siliman), one who “occupies a unique place in American poetry” (Molly Peacock). Finch’s poetry collections include *Eve*, *Calendars*, *Among the Goddesses*, and most recently *Spells: New and Selected Poems* (Wesleyan University Press, 2013).

Finch’s work has been honored with the Sarasvati Award and the Robert Fitzgerald Award. Her poems have appeared in *Kenyon Review*, *Agni*, *Field*, *Hudson Review*, *Harvard Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Poetry*, *American Scholar*, *Yale Review*, *Partisan Review*, and *Paris Review* and in anthologies including *The Norton Anthology of World Poetry* and *The Penguin Book of Twentieth-Century American Poetry*. Her creative collaborations have been produced at Carnegie Hall, the Spoleto Festival, and New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art, and her translation of the *Complete Poems of Louise Labe* was honored by the Society for the Study of Early Modern Women. Her books of poetics include *Villanelles*, *The Ghost of Meter*, *The Body of Poetry*, and *A Poet’s Craft: A Comprehensive Guide to Making and Sharing Your Poetry*.

**Harlequin:** We’d like to start by asking you about spells. How has the form of traditional spells influenced your understanding of poetry, and is your interest in them purely poetical? To what extent has their magical and mystical associations shaped your view of poetry, and of the world?

**Annie Finch:** My experience of poetry since the beginning has been magical, and my interest in spells is a natural extension of that. Poetry is at root a ceremonial art, and the forms of poetry are never forms alone, but ways of invoking power that is greater than the power of words: the power of magic.

**H:** That ceremonial aspect has always, I think, made your readers more aware of poetry’s oral tradition. With that in mind has your relationship with the physical page changed over time, and is blank space on a page before you sit down to write now more accurately described as a silence?

**AF:** Yes, my relationship with the physical page has changed a lot. I wrote the earliest poems in *Spells*, such as “The August Porch” and the title poem “Spells,” on a manual typewriter. While even then, the first stirrings of a poem would usually arrive via a voice in my head, I wrote in free verse and retyped

obsessively for the sake of the linebreaks. It was the poem on the page, typewriter keys dug into onionskin on a white field, that carried the strongest poetic charge. The most recent poems in *Spells*, mostly in falling meters, were composed by an entirely different process, often composed away from the page entirely, line after line arising in my mind like waves.

**H:** You use repetition to great effect in your poetry, repeating words, lines, entire stanzas within some poems. The effect this can have is mysterious at times; Marjorie Perloff once described a Yeats repetition as “locking in meaning” by way of the technique. What is your sense of how repetition works in poetry, and could you perhaps share one of your favourite examples?

**AF:** Repetition is a physical force, not a mental one, and I respond to it kinetically and intuitively when I encounter it in a poem. That’s how I understand Marjorie’s remark: that repetition moves meaning below consciousness and locks it into the unconscious or the body. This is in large part how rituals work their magic. Some of the repeating poetic patterns that move me the most are syntactical; a folk poem I included in *A Poet’s Craft*, “A Man of Double Deed,” is one example.

**H:** You recently said in an interview with *American Poetry Review* that you hadn’t attempted certain poetical forms because of the “ethical or political implications of seeming to appropriate them”. Could you tell us more about this notion? Is there a feeling that certain forms are “owned” by certain schools and cultures within poetry that are seen to have developed or mastered them?

**AF:** It’s a matter not as much of ownership as of taste. Every form carries its own historical and cultural baggage, and for a poem to work truly, in an aesthetic sense, the deep understanding, desire, and need to use that particular form for that particular poem needs to be strong enough to overcome the history. This is true of any form, including free verse. In the case of a form fraught with politically-weighted history, the implications of the choice can be quite close to the surface. For example, the blues has such a strong history of use by African American poets that I haven’t yet encountered a poetic situation where I would think my choice to use it, as a European American, given the long history of exploitation of other aspects of African American culture by European Americans, would feel like it was in good taste. But that might change, as it has changed with other forms.

**H:** So in that sense it becomes impossible to separate the form from the sentiments of the poem, and perhaps impossible even to separate the poet and her identity from the text, too. Was that a consideration in your “coming out” as Wiccan, and do you think it had changed the way people approach your work, or the way you approach writing?

**AF:** That's an interesting parallel, and I agree. I believe that both a consciously chosen identity and a consciously chosen poetic form (as opposed to habitual, unconscious choices) function like Yeats' idea of the mask: they allow a greater freedom and a more universal reality to emerge. My writing had been inspired by earth-centred spirituality for a long time before I chose to "come out." Claiming my spiritual identity gave me more freedom, not only spiritually but aesthetically, because I could assume understanding of a wider context around my work rather than reinventing the wheel for each poem. As for whether it has changed how people approach my work, I believe that knowing about my spirituality may help solve what to some people in the U.S. remains a mystery – how a feminist and political progressive could also be committed to working in strict form. I also imagine that eventually it may serve as a bridge to an audience of readers who are interested in earth-centred spirituality.

**H:** Your poetry seems always to reach for a sense of universality outside of any sense of place and time. Is there a deliberate attempt to obscure the 'setting' of your verses, and to what extent does a specific sense of history and geography feature in the composition of your poems?

**AF:** My poetry has been that way as long as I can remember. It insists on being that way – when I was maturing as a poet I tried to create contemporary settings so it would be more like the other contemporary poetry I was reading, but to no avail – so no obscuration is necessary. I now acknowledge that lyric poetry for me is an overheard conversation with my most immediate environment – the forest I'm walking in, the beach I'm standing on, the body I'm caressing, the building or lamp-post I'm pausing under – so immediate that what grounds the conversation in time and space is not any context I could describe, but simply who is speaking.

I think a lot about politics and history, but rather than changing the content of my poems, those wider forces continually change me. As I change, I bring a new self to each poetic encounter. Another way to put it is that my Muse speaks (literally, since I hear her words in my mind) in archetypal terms, in a voice that is deeply affected by, because it is in perpetual conversation with, the self the world and I have created – through geography, history, politics, popular culture, food, health, relationships, spirituality, psychological growth, and so on – for her to work with.

**H:** Do you feel that a new chapter in your career has been prompted by your releasing your *Selected Poems*? How did you go about choosing the poems for that book, and did the process make you think any differently about the kind of poems you'd like to write in the future?

**AF:** Yes, I do feel that the release of *Spells: New and Selected Poems* has prompted a new chapter in my career, both internally and externally. Even more than most selected poems, this book has provided closure, because it finally addresses the gaps and tangles in my complex publication history before *Spells*. What do I mean by gaps and tangles? Two of my earlier books combined poems written over many decades; two were published decades after they were first completed; and one, consisting of dozens of “lost poems,” was never published at all. *Spells* selects and arranges all those periods of poetry into chronological order for the first time, so in effect it tells the story of my growth as a poet, and I chose the poems largely with that story in mind.

I feel that the process of assembling the book has freed me in a number of ways. In relation to the external literary world, it has freed me of the burden of secret knowledge about what my hidden poetry was “really” like. In relation to my inner self, it has revealed to me a fuller trajectory of my growth as a poet and deepened my commitment to honour the individuality and integrity of that trajectory in the future. At the moment my hunch is that, post-*Spells*, I am moving beyond the intricacy and ambiguity of some of my earlier work and increasingly towards a more simple, luminescent sort of poem that serves as a purer gift to the reader.

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