

Photo © Will Wilkinson

There are very few contemporary poets who need, as they say, no introduction. Like an episode of *The Simpsons*, Roger McGough has something for us all. There's a myriad contexts from which you may know him: as a member of the 1960s' band The Scaffold (you will remember Lily the Pink), from an English Lit class at school where you will have studied his Mersey beat poetry, or *Poetry Please* on Radio 4. You may even recognise his distinctive voice with its still discernible Liverpool accent in television commercials.

For someone who seems to have done everything, the title of his latest collection, *As Far As I Know*, suggests a hint of self-deprecation. This, I find, is typical of McGough. 'It's the opposite of arrogance really, as what it's really saying is that I only know so much.'

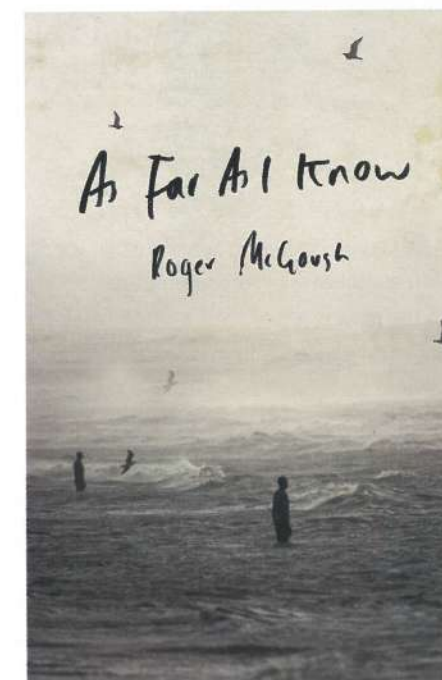
So what can we expect from this brand new collection? 'Different voices, really. People mistakenly always think the voice is the poet's, and sometimes it is. The fun is trying to find when it really is and when it's not.'

I am totally charmed by McGough's irony, witticisms and mastery at word play he is so well-known for, I feel privileged to be listening to his lovely voice.

He tells me of a poem of a smug old man on his deathbed dictating to his wife on how he'd like her to behave when he's gone. There's two parts to the poem, where McGough gives a voice to his wife who has been having an affair. And there's another poem about a butcher's shop - 'the friendly face of the abattoir'. He recites a poem he curiously states is about beds. 'Islamabad, facing Mecca, death row bed, the electric blanket is still used in Arkansas and Missouri.'

McGough has lived in Barnes for twenty years. 'I lived in Notting Hill before moving here and I do miss Notting Hill's edginess.' Far from being edgy, Barnes is quaint and is often described as a village surrounded by London. 'Yes, all the reasons people love it for I was suspicious

of it for - being a scouser!' His wife, Hilary, is involved in the Barnes Community Association (BCA) and helps with the Barnes Summer Fair. And if you're lucky, you might bump into McGough at Barnes' local farmers' market on Saturdays - he's very fond of it.



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In December 2011 McGough was made President of the Poetry Society. In 2004 he was made CBE and in 2006 he received an honorary degree at Roehampton University. These are just a few accolades. I ask him whether this kind of recognition is important to him. 'You never really seek it or think about it. Nor do I mix with people who want to get those things. What I'm saying is that if you're part of a peer group who aspires to have those things - medals, recognition -

you'll aspire to it. It's never been that way for me so it always comes as a nice surprise.'

I'm usually suspicious of successful people who downplay the importance of recognition. It's easy to think recognition isn't important - when you already have it. But I believe McGough. He seems to have an acute sense of self-awareness and is pleasantly modest, almost shy of his own success. 'With popularity and recognition, there's always a comeback for these kinds of things. Sociologically, it's all very interesting, Liverpool poets, working class poetry. If you're going to be a writer then that's what you do, it doesn't really matter what anyone says.' He does say that being honoured with the Freedom of the City of Liverpool is something he feels very special about.

I believe there are two types of writers, those who write to communicate something to the world and those who are introspective and write to make sense of the world for themselves. So which one is he? 'It seems to be introspective,' he says, 'as even though I've been talking about my writing, I've done a bad job of quoting any of my poems! You think you'll be quoting quite easily and you never do. You're right in the middle of writing a poem and you're giving your voice to something and you're in it. And when it's gone it's gone.'

There's a Japanese term, 'mono non aware,' which is used to describe the awareness of the impermanence of things, or the transience of things, and the wistful sadness that comes with their passing. I wonder whether this is how McGough would describe poetry as he talks about writing as quite fleeting. 'It's about getting close to someone. And as you know in our world of celebrity, which is noisy and loud, and continuously saying, "Give me, give me, look at me, look at me", poetry can be seen as very reflective. It's the quiet side of you.'

Roger McGough: the quiet genius? I hope he likes the description though I fear he may disagree with the 'genius' bit.

*As Far As I Know* is published by Viking Adult