Breaking Down the Gates: an Interview with Alumni Aaron Kent

## Aaron Kent studied Creative Writing at Falmouth from 2012-2015. After graduating he taught in Wales and started Broken Sleep Books, which writer Andrew MacMillan has called 'An innovative, exciting, and vital press in the dreamscape of UK publishing.'

**Rupert Loydell**: Hi Aaron. I remember when I first met you that you very proudly told me you were number 1 in the Amazon performance poetry rankings. I was amazed, not only by that success but also by the fact you had decided to come to Falmouth University as a successful writer and a mature student! Can you talk a little bit about that decision, and what you hoped to learn?

**Aaron Kent**: I wasn’t even slightly successful really, the Kindle charts, at least back then, were just dictated by how many of your friends and family you could convince to buy your book, but you could also rig it a bit by making the price as low as a quid, or even set it as free, and Amazon would count those sales and you’d move up the chart.

I enrolled with Falmouth as I wanted to be a teacher, I’d left the military as a submariner a year earlier and was very lost in the world. My military qualifications were worth UCAS points, so I looked through the courses and, having always been an avid reader, decided to plump for English on the basis that it looked like Haruki Murakami was on the reading list.

**Rupert**: Did university live up to your hopes and ambition? How did it change you as a writer?

**Aaron**: We didn’t read Murakami, but I did widen my interests and reading material. This, I think, was one of the most important aspects of my experience. My poetry reading, up to that point, had been almost non-existent, so my poetry was this vague, insular, self-determined bilge that came from a vacuum. Reading work I loved and hated made me a better writer. Even to this day, if I feel stuck I will go and read a wide array of poems in the hope they make the words dance in ways I want to, or in hopes they fail to do so and I can see why it didn’t work for me.

**Rupert**: When did you decide to start Broken Sleep Books?

**Aaron**: At the start of 2018. I was a media studies lecturer at Truro College and was teaching Photoshop, InDesign, and website design as part of a module on portfolios. I wanted to learn more and be better with Adobe so spent some time working with it, utilising it to see what I could do and how better I could teach it. I had edited a few manuscripts for free as a gesture online and one of them I felt deserved to be published. I had the software, I had the knowledge, and I had the manuscript, so I put that together and Broken Sleep Books was born.

## Rupert: You're a very different publisher to most small presses. Your website states that you are 'A working-class indie publisher putting access to the arts at the forefront of what we do', and that you 'particularly wish to dismantle the gentrification of creative arts, and encourage more working-class, LGBTQ+, and POC writers to submit'. How does that work out for you in practice? Are you getting the submissions you want? How do you encourage access to poetry, which many people feel is a difficult genre?

## Aaron: Here’s the thing: a lot of people ignore poetry because poetry ignores a lot of people. Growing up in Redruth, a town full of poverty, one crushed by Tory governments, I didn’t set out to work in the arts, because I didn’t think it was possible to work in the arts. I didn’t read poetry, or books at all, really, because I didn’t have the time. In school I was messing around or fighting, and at home I was busy playing football or walking the streets with friends. There was no time for the arts, and I didn’t know anybody who was in the arts. This, for me, is because the big publishers and gatekeepers don’t want to allow us lowlifes in. One author told me I publish too much and as such let too many people have a book, but that, to me, reeks of gentrification, that idea that we should reserve the privilege of poetry for those with existing connections. So, I publish what deserves to be published, and what deserves to be read. I’d like to move the cultural capital away from London, and spread access wider, because people who tell me poetry won’t thrive in Carmarthen or Wrexham or Dumbarton are wrong – it doesn’t thrive there because it doesn’t go there, if you bring it to people you’ll be surprised by how much people contribute. So that’s what I want to do with Broken Sleep, dismantle geographic locations as cultural capitals, allow low socioeconomic people to engage with the arts either passively or actively, and break down the gates that have been erected by the people who use them purely to serve themselves.

**Rupert**: When you graduated from Falmouth University you spent some time as a teacher, I believe. How was that? I mean, one of the best things about being a lecturer is engaging with the students (as opposed to administration, for instance!); was that the same for you?

**Aaron**: I enjoyed it a lot, and I still tutor 5 hours a week in the evenings for students who are first language Cymraeg. I loved seeing how students grew and changed and found their passions through the years, and I thoroughly enjoyed the comradery of good teachers.

**Rupert**: You visited the university recently to talk about your work to the students, but also shared your near-death experiences as a result of illness. How has that changed your attitude to... I was going to say writing and publishing, but think it was bigger than that. So, how has that informed your life?

**Aaron**: It affects me life quite significantly in both the way it changed my trajectory and the way it hovers around my daily life. The main change was to stop teaching, I had gone in one day, and 6 weeks later returned home. My children were 9 months old and 3 years old, I nearly lost them. I spent a week in a coma on life support followed by a week in ICU, then 2 weeks in a Neuro ward and 2 weeks in a stroke rehab hospital. I came home, held my kids, and knew there were more important things for me than teaching full-time. So I took Broken Sleep Books full-time and now I get to do every school run with Emma, my wife. I get to put the kids to bed, be home while they’re sick, and do this all while supporting my family from publishing poetry.

It does, however, affect me personally in some ways. Every time I have a headache a small part of me tells me I’m having another brain haemorrhage, and I worry about my health a lot. I’ve used it to good affect in ways too, though, most significantly in my recent work with Stroke, Mind, and Shift Design to help create better provisions for mental health care post-stroke.

**Rupert**: How does politics (small p) inform Broken Sleep? The website is pretty forthright, stating that 'Politically we are left wing, and have no interest in misogynists, racist, sexists, the alt-right, or dickheads in general'. Have you managed to keep that kind of writers and writers away?

**Aaron**: You’ll always get some assholes, but mostly I’ve been very lucky. I think by making it so clear we’ve put ourselves front and centre with our expectations, and as such we find we tend not to get the people we don’t want.

**Rupert**: Can I ask you about how J.H. Prynne, a notoriously 'difficult' poet, fits into this all? You've spoken about how exciting you personally find his work, and I think I'm right in saying your press' slogan comes from him, and that you have published him.

**Aaron**: I think, with Jeremy, the key is to enjoy the word his words sing rather than try to decipher meaning. They’re songs as much as they are poems, and if the experience of reading these syntactically odd texts works for you then that’s a victory.

I’ve become friends with Jeremy, and I find the poetry he likes most is the poetry you least expect. I think people expect him to purely like ‘difficult’ poetry, but his tastes are so varied and wide-ranging. He just loves poetry, and if he enjoys what he’s reading then that’s the key.

Both our name and slogan come from his poem *Smaller than the Radius of the Planet*: ‘I **lay out my unrest** like white lines on the slope so that something out of **broken sleep** may land there.’

**Rupert**: Can or does writing change the world?

**Aaron**: That’s such a wide question, but I think the writing itself may not change anything, but the people it speaks to may change things. To repeat what I said in a recent interview with National Poetry Library: ‘Barnett Newman's paintings made me believe in the complexity of something that appears so simple, Black Country New Road's music made me believe in the rhythm and beauty of mixing genre, and Ross Gay's poetry made me believe in the glory of life from the tiniest flower growing to the passing of family members.’ This is what I want from art and writing, the ability to make people see things anew, to think fresh, to engage in different ways.

**Rupert**: Any thoughts or advice for our students or those thinking about applying?

**Aaron**: I think it’s worth doing if the Tory government gets ousted before they destroy the arts and dismantle access for future generations

**Rupert**: Thanks for your time Aaron.

Broken Sleep Books are at https://www.brokensleepbooks.com/