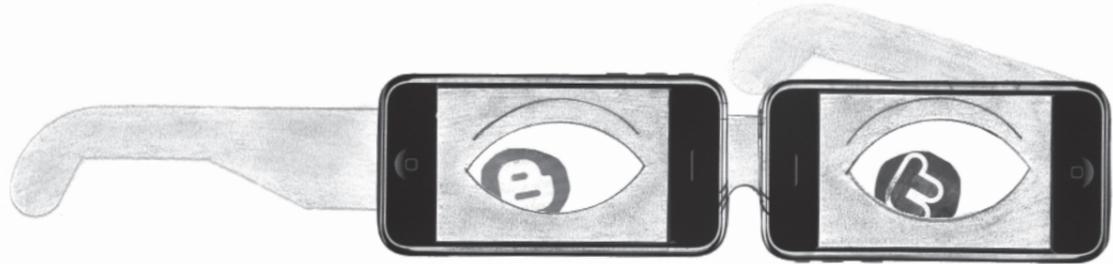


Looking to venture online?

You want a presence online but should you set up a static site or a blog? Do you commission a web designer or do it yourself? Poet and self-confessed part-time geek **Kona Macphee**, who has several sites, shares her experiences



It's increasingly common for writers to have their own website and, some argue, increasingly essential. Fortunately, it's much less difficult than it used to be to have a web presence of your own. If you're contemplating setting up your own website, here are some things to think about.

Brochure or blog?

A brochure site is a set of mostly static web pages, which won't change much from month to month. A blog, on the other hand, is a continually growing set of (usually short) written pieces, known as 'posts', generally presented in chronological order with the newest material first. (Note, most blog software lets you have a hybrid site that includes some brochure-type content in static 'pages', as well as your stream of blog posts.)

A brochure website is good for:

- Providing biographical details
- Presenting samples of your work
- Showcasing pamphlets or books
- Listing forthcoming events
- Allowing readers to contact you

If you're looking to promote your writing, then simply putting up a brochure website won't make a lot of difference; it's highly unlikely that anyone will 'discover' you by serendipitously stumbling across it. Most newly created websites receive very little spontaneous traffic, and any visits to your brochure site are most likely to come from people who already know you (or your name), and want to find out something more about you.

A blog is good for:

- Providing an ongoing outlet for your creativity
- Building an online audience

A blog can be a more effective promotional tool than a static site if it harnesses the internet equivalent of 'word of mouth' – people emailing your posts to friends, linking to them from their own blogs, or sharing them via social media such as Facebook and Twitter. However, this will only happen

if your content is compelling enough, i.e. if you have something interesting to say, and can say it engagingly. Be warned, many 'online readers' (people who regularly visit a blog) will never translate into 'offline readers' (people who buy books, go to readings, etc.).

A neglected blog is a real turn-off for readers. You need to be willing to update your blog regularly (several times a week at least, if you want a returning readership – the web has a very short attention span).

Designer or DIY?

If you prefer to have somebody else to build your site, you are unlikely, unless you have bottomless pockets, to want a large web design agency with big corporate clients. The best way to find a smaller or local designer is by word of mouth; ask around! If you don't know anyone to ask, take a look at the websites of local writers or local businesses, and find out who created them.

Should you look to someone else to build your site, do have some idea of what you want before you meet with them. It will help if you can take along some links to websites that (a) have the basic structure that you want (other writers' sites, for example) and (b) have a design/style that you like. Bear in mind that smaller or semi-amateur website developers may not be skilled graphic designers, so your best bet is to aim for something clean and simple.

If you're even vaguely IT-literate (for example, a regular internet user who is competent with programs like Word), consider getting your feet wet by building your own site. The simplest way is to use blogging software, which is designed to make it easy to create web content without worrying about the technical details.

You may want to experiment and, if so, I'd recommend setting up a free account at a blog-hosting site such as blogger.com or wordpress.com. (I'd

particularly recommend wordpress.com as its underlying publishing software, WordPress, is both flexible and user-friendly.) You don't have to blog; if you create pages rather than posts, you can build a simple brochure site. Google 'wordpress static site' – you'll find lots of articles about this.

With or without a shop?

Tools such as PayPal and Google Checkout make it comparatively simple to accept credit card payments via your own website. However, be aware that an online shop on your own site is unlikely to produce vast sales, and it can be very difficult to compete on price with big online sellers like Amazon and the Book Depository. Additionally, packing and posting even a few books can become quite time-consuming. If your publications are available from Amazon, then using their 'Amazon Associates' referral package (where you direct visitors to your book on their site, and they pay you a commission on any sales) may be more time- and cost-effective than selling the books yourself.

A word of caution

A website can provide an easy way for readers to contact you directly, either via email (the simplest option) or via a contact form on your site. Unless you're Seamus Heaney, you're unlikely to be deluged by unmanageable amounts of fan mail. If you're not willing to respond briefly to genuine messages received via your website, don't include contact details or a contact form; your loyal readers will be justifiably disappointed if their messages of appreciation go unacknowledged.

Kona Macphee's latest collection is Perfect Blue, published by Bloodaxe Books. She also offers one-to-one Poetry Surgeries on behalf of the Poetry Society at the Scottish Poetry Library, Edinburgh. www.poetrysociety.org.uk/content/membershipsurgery/



www.thingwright.com

This is my personal site and a gallery of things I've made and done. It was built using custom publishing scripts written by me (I'm a part-time geek) and updated occasionally.

potw.thingwright.com

My Poem Of The Week Blog is based on

WordPress, with a customised theme to match the look of the thingwright site. I update it weekly with a new poem and a commentary.

www.konamacphee.com

My poetry brochure site, built using custom scripts. Updated occasionally.

pb.konamacphee.com

A brochure site for my latest collection *Perfect Blue*. Again built using custom scripts and updated occasionally.

twitter.com/konamacphee

facebook.com/kona.macphee

A light-hearted Twitter feed, usually updated at least daily, and duplicated in my Facebook page.

MEMBERS' POEMS 'HOME'

EVE JACKSON BAROMETER

The pressure never alters in our house:
he taps the glass each morning
to remind the golfer in mid-swing to get on with it,
the pink buds posing on the branch be done with blossoming,
falling leaves, swept up and binned;
as for the umbrella, open wide and be of some use or better still
clamp shut on the harried little man who's about to whinge.

The pressure never alters in our house
whether he is there or not
his presence demands we tidy our voices away
leaving only webs woven to catch our failings in.
One look at mother and our opinions cease mid-swing:
look of someone caught in a downpour,
as if marriage should have come with a weather warning.

PAUL STEPHENSON ON SUNDAYS

Dad dilly-dallies, consummates the garage,
and Mum shilly-shallies inside sieved clouds

while Son self-raises, pulls massive wheelies,
as weeds gather along snapdragon alleys. On Sundays

Dad fathoms Mum's new-fangled gizmo
and Mum levels Dad's spirit, holds the pencil

while Son checks out nobody going down
the slide, sees a see-saw horizontal. On Sundays

Dad blows a gasket, regrets screw plugs and Mum
slides a spatula underneath, laments margarine. Come evening

Dad swaps D.I.Y. for I.P.A. and Mum folds in tablespoons
of powder; both get pally pally. On Sundays they forget

to prepare Mondays and by Marmite, *Songs of Praise*
finally over (thank God), there's little to show except crumbs

of a half-risen sponge, two hammered dovetail joints
and the extra surface for balancing very light objects.

SARAH JAMES REMORTGAGED

We pretend it's a game – moving
boxes and things. When my sons play-
fold me into cardboard, I feel strangely safe,
like a snail that knows home
is always there on its back.

Then they lift the flap.

WENDY SEARLE COMING BACK

Horizons keep soliciting. Time's imperceptible:
a shift of lines dividing inky shadow
from hot brilliance, or bells rinsing the hills
at evening, the sign for villagers to follow
donkeys down steep terraces before the land
sinks under a sea of stars. But we must leave,
pining on paths that funnel us to ever blander
roads, accelerate, twisting necks to seize
a glimpse of grandeur receding, disgruntled
by the slap of rain like a sodden blanket
smothering the strait, vistas truncated
to trucks, billboards, shop-fronts reflecting traffic
until we're back, like outsize Alices,
shoe-horned into the flat, bereft of magic.

CASE STUDY

My websites are mostly built using hand-coded scripts that I wrote myself, but I chose to use WordPress for my Poem Of The Week blog for ease of updating.

I did the graphic design myself, partly to keep costs down, and partly because I'd like to become more skilled at it and need the practice!

Apart from my blog, most of my sites are fairly static; it wouldn't be feasible to run so many sites if I had to update them all on a near-daily basis. I've recently started using Twitter as a low-overhead way to produce playful daily content.