

A secret scribbler is officially appointed Edinburgh Makar

Poet, Michael Pedersen, is enthusiastic about his latest position as Edinburgh Makar. This will be the next chapter in his literary career which began when he was secretly penning verses in Scots as a schoolboy.

Pedersen recalled with a chuckle: "I remember hiding my poems in my golf bag at first, trying not to let friends find them. I just loved words." And he wrote in Scots, so that even if someone did find them they would not be able to understand the words very easily.

His path to becoming the seventh Edinburgh Makar from the beginning of October has not been a completely straight line. In his teenage years at Portobello High School where he had supportive English teachers, he showed a certain zeal for creative writing which his teachers encouraged. His was the first year to study for Advanced Highers, and he used as much of the Creative writing portfolio part of the course as he could, since it was "something I enjoyed doing". But he admits that he didn't take making a career out of writing for granted. He knew he would always write, but he did not go on to study English at university.

He studied law at Durham to try and appease family concerns,

and then took what his father called a “kamikaze career plan” – eventually quitting his job as a London lawyer to pursue poetry full-time. He had enjoyed the legal studies however saying that even then there was a literary angle. He said: “The old cases read like Chaucerian poetry, pretty indecipherable stuff. It takes a pickaxe to get through to the definition underneath it. And then the case names – like *Carlill v Carbolic Smoke Ball Co* – they all sounded like books. The advocacy was your sort of theatrical thespianic, sort of Shakespearean monologue. I tried to study law with a literary hook in it, and it worked. I really loved it.”



Michael Pedersen the seventh Edinburgh Makar

Neu!Reekie!

His risk paid off after collaborating with fellow poet, Kevin Williamson, to found Neu!Reekie! a production company which staged more than 200 live shows featuring arts of all genres. The duo also published anthologies of poems under the same

name. Far from being centred only in Edinburgh the company spread its wings worldwide to Japan, Indonesia, the US and New Zealand. They hosted an arts festival of scale for Hull City of Culture, and set up twelve months of writing residencies in Northern Ireland.

Pedersen said: "We wanted to be the biggest literary night in Scotland, but appeal to all the music heads at the same time." It was during this time he met Scott Hutchison, of Frightened Rabbit. When he wrote *Oyster* it was Hutchison who illustrated it. Following Scott's death, Michael wrote his book *Boy Friends* exploring his grief at the sudden loss of his close friend.

Edinburgh Makar

He will take over the honorary role from current Makar, Hannah Lavery and, as Makar, Pedersen plans to use his platform to inspire the next generation of Scottish poets.

He said: "I want to work with a group of Scottish state schools to get more kids writing poetry. I want to make us "fess up" to writing poetry on a big public scale."

One of the duties of the Makar is to write some verse about the winner of The Edinburgh Award. This year it is Mel Young, MBE, who is President and Founder of the Homeless World Cup, and co-founder of The Big Issue.

For Pedersen, living in the east of the city gives him an advantage with this particular commission. He explained that he lived round the corner from the Young family while growing up, and he really wanted to be friends with Young's two sons who he thought were "super cool". He used to knock on their door asking if the boys were coming out to play. Now he is busy organising to have a coffee or a beer with their father to write a poem about him.

The first City of Literature is celebrating its 20th anniversary this year, and Edinburgh is 900. Pedersen also points out that the National Library is 100 years old next year “so maybe there’s a poem to be written about that”.

Michael is currently the Writer in Residence at University of Edinburgh and is halfway through his term there with events planned in October at the Edinburgh Futures Institute. On 8 October he will be in conversation with Bernardine Evaristo on 8 October. He explained that it is important to him that all tickets are free to students and the public. And on 25 October Edinburgh is hosting the UNESCO Cities of Literature World Conference. On the final day Pedersen will put on a “big show” with Holly McNish and Conor O’Brien the singer-songwriter and sole long-term member of the Irish band, The Villagers. Pedersen lauds the Irishman saying the band has been twice nominated for the Mercuries and has two Ivor Novello wins. The event will be a “literary chat show of a night. It’s going to be great.”

Council welcome

Culture Convener, Cllr Val Walker, said: “I would like to begin by thanking Hannah Lavery as our outgoing Edinburgh Makar for her generous contribution to the cultural life of Edinburgh residents. Hannah has been an enthusiastic and hardworking advocate for poetry and the written word, engaging with a diverse range of people in many different settings including community writing groups, cultural organisations, theatres and festivals, contemporary poets and dramatists and the Council’s Museums and Galleries team. I wish her all the very best for her future endeavours.

“At the same time, I’m very much looking forward to welcoming Michael Pedersen into the role. Michael was a pupil at Portobello High School and is currently Writer in Residence at The University of Edinburgh. His work is honest, fearless and

witty with a strong focus on mental health and friendship. I am looking forward to seeing Michael engage with our younger community members and to hearing his perspective on Edinburgh 900, as we celebrate 900 years of the city's history over the next twelve months."

The Edinburgh Makar is a civic post instituted in 2002 by the City of Edinburgh Council. The writer is selected and nominated by representatives of the Scottish Poetry Library, Scottish PEN, The Saltire Society, Edinburgh City of Literature Trust and the Council. Pedersen will be officially installed at a civic event on 1 October at the City Chambers before an invited audience.

