



**Thank you for taking the time to complete the feature questions below**

**Introduction:**

Maggie Sawkins lives in Southsea where she has organised the Tongues & Grooves Poetry and Music Club since 2003. She began writing poetry at the age of nine and had her first poem published in 'Hampshire Poets' when she was seventeen. Her poetry collections include *Charcot's Pet* (Flarestack), *The Zig Zag Woman* (Two Ravens Press) and *Zones of Avoidance* (Cinnamon Press). In 2013 she won the Ted Hughes Award for New Work in Poetry for her live literature production, *Zones of Avoidance*, which has been performed at literature festivals and theatres throughout the country. Maggie runs creative writing workshops in community and healthcare settings. Her most recent projects have included the Pinned-Up Festival at Erlestoke Prison, and workshops for people living with dementia. She also enjoys swimming, Pilates and walking the dog.



**History:**

**Please, tell us about yourself, where were you born and raised? What was life like growing up in childhood? A bit about your family?**

I was brought up in Leigh Park, a huge housing estate north of Portsmouth. My parents had nothing in common apart from a sense of abandonment and a love of animals. My father was a manic-depressive and an anarchist, and my mother, who had an aversion to snakes, was an Irish Catholic with high principles (my dad had a large snake tattooed across his back). As you might imagine there were plenty of sparks flying around in our house, and even after my dad left when I was thirteen there was little peace. The only subject I liked at school was English and I was awarded with some book tokens after achieving the best exam result in my last year. I went off to our local bookshop and bought Jean Paul Sartre's, *Nausea*, and the *Children of Albion* poetry anthology. After completing a secretarial course, I left home to do temp work in London in 1972. After that everything went haywire.

**Random question: What is the earliest childhood memory you can remember?**

My earliest memory is of me as a baby sitting on my father's knee. I am in the dining room of our council house watching my older brother running round and round the room hollering like a Red Indian. This memory was so vivid that I carried it around me with for much of my childhood. Now it's just a memory of a memory, although it has found its way into one of my poems.

**What education course did you follow and where did life take you after this?**

I went to Broomfield Secondary School in Leigh Park. Because I was good at English I was persuaded to take a secretarial course at Highbury College. However, my heart wasn't in it and I used to hang around with students taking English Literature, wishing I was one of



them. I studied English part-time in my thirties and went on to gain a distinction in an MA in Creative Writing. My need for poetry, which began when I was a child, has become an essential part of my life.

**Would you like to share how you got involved in Mental Health?**

When I was growing up I was aware that my father wasn't 'quite right'. He used to veer from being great fun and carefree (to the point of recklessness in retrospect), to being unable to answer the door. It wasn't until I was older that I became familiar with the label 'manic-depressive'. My eldest daughter was diagnosed with schizophrenia when she was in her early twenties and this has had a huge impact on my life. I've always been interested in psychology and what makes us human beings tick, and have read widely about different 'conditions'. As a tutor at South Downs College I taught creative writing to groups of people affected by mental ill health and later became the mental health support needs co-ordinator.

**Please tell us more about your website Hooked on Words and the work that you do?**

Since leaving South Downs College four years ago I've been working freelance on creative writing projects and workshops in community and health care settings. I set up my website Hooked on Words <https://hookedonwords.me/> to promote my work in this field.

**What has been some of the best moments of your life and career?**

Going back to full time education and taking an English degree at the age of 35 was a fantastic experience. Without my degree, I'd probably still be stuck in an office job. I fell into teaching by chance after working as a volunteer in an adult literacy class. I found it so rewarding that I decided to study for a teaching qualification. I feel privileged to be able to work at something that I feel passionate about. The biggest highlight of all though was winning the 2013 Ted Hughes Award for New Work in Poetry for my live literature production, Zones of Avoidance.

**What projects are you currently working on?**

Now I'm running writing for well-being workshops at Portsmouth Museum. Then in June I'll be delivering some poetry workshops in London for the Survivors Poetry organisation. They've just received some Arts Council funding for an exciting poetry mentoring and performance project.

**Do you have any 'coping strategies' that you use?**

It might surprise people to learn that I'm quite an anxious person. I've always had difficulty sleeping and when I was younger had to give up work because of prolonged insomnia. I try to orchestrate my working life so that I don't have too many early starts (one of the bonuses of being self-employed). I try to eat well (mainly vegetables), I do Pilates and swimming



once a week, and have just taken up regular meditation. Night times are worse – if I can't sleep these days I get up and make a cup of ginger tea and honey. Someone recommended the mantra '*This too will pass*' and I find that quite calming in the middle of the night. I've learnt a couple of poems by heart and sometimes recite those silently to myself. Being involved in projects and keeping busy helps me to stay focussed and happy. I hope I don't come across as a 'do-gooder', but knowing that you've made a positive difference to someone's life, is a wonderful affirmation.

### **How do you view the journey of recovery?**

This is a tricky one. I think everyone's journey is different and perhaps there's a sense of inevitability about whatever course you take. For me it was about acknowledging that I needed help, asking for help and accepting it. However, things didn't really improve until I realised that the only person who could help me feel better was I.

### **What does the future hold for you?**

I'm taking part in the All in the Mind Arts Festival in Basingstoke on June 18<sup>th</sup>. The festival aims to challenge preconceived ideas about mental health and brings together local artists, young people and the wider community. It aims to celebrate the artistic achievements of people with experience of mental health issues. Hopefully there'll be opportunities to take 'Zones of Avoidance' to some more venues/organisations. It's an important piece of work that deserves a wider audience.

### **Favourite Quote?**

*"...In the depth of winter I finally learned that there was in me an invincible summer..."*

- Albert Camus

### **Web links**

<https://hookedonwords.me/>

<https://zonesofavoidance.wordpress.com/>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ySq-aEZiz4U>

### **Social Media links**

Twitter: [@SawkinsMaggie](https://twitter.com/SawkinsMaggie) (<https://twitter.com/SawkinsMaggie>)

Facebook: [@maggigeraldinesawkins](https://m.facebook.com/maggigeraldinesawkins) (<https://m.facebook.com/maggigeraldinesawkins/>)