Alumnus/Alumna of the month

Introduction
Jo Balmer graduated from the UCL Department of Greek and Latin in 1981 with a BA honours degree in Classics and Ancient History. She is now a poet and freelance translator.

What did you enjoy most about your time in Greek and Latin and at UCL?
I found the way you could integrate studies, not just of language and literature but also of ancient history, art, philosophy, archaeology – and therefore build a complete picture of a particular world – very intellectually satisfying. It was lovely being in a smaller department where teaching was very focused and everyone knew everyone else. Of course, the social life was pretty good too . . .

What was your career path like after leaving UCL?
I left UCL in 1981, when Britain was in the middle of recession and unemployment was at its highest since the 1930s, so, as for so many of my contemporaries, finding full-time employment, or even grants for post-graduate courses, was difficult for quite a while – as it is again for many graduates today. At the time it seemed very bleak but now I realise there were benefits too; without these obstacles, I might never have followed a path of freelance writing. And so in 1984, when I was 25, I published my first book, *Sappho: Poems and Fragments*, and that was that. I am also glad I delayed my PhD as, at the time, I would never had dreamed of working in Translation Studies or Creative Writing, as I was able to do much later on at UEA.

What do you like most about your current job?
To me, writing is a vocation rather than job, which is just as well as it offers about the same remuneration! I enjoy the discipline of working on my own and the huge pleasure you get when something goes well – finding the right word for a translation, thinking of a good rhyme, having a flash of inspiration for an image. There is also a great feeling of satisfaction when you complete an 800-word article or book review and know you’ve just about got in everything you needed/wanted to say. But I also enjoy teaching commitments and attending conferences, those exciting exchange of ideas.
What was your first-ever job?
Probably picking blackcurrants for Ribena with a school friend, aged 14. We were paid about 25p a box, nothing if we left in any stalks or leaves. I was also a very poor shop assistant (at Heals and Dickins & Jones), a reasonable bar maid and a hopeless dishwasher in a cafe as I’m allergic to washing-up liquid.

What has been your favourite job?
The present one.

In what way did your studies help you in your subsequent work?
In so many ways, maybe in every way. Obviously the knowledge I gained of Greek and Latin texts was crucial but I also learnt the ability to be analytical, to exercise critical judgement, as well as to work away at things which might seem impossible at first, and to have the patience to wait for solutions to open themselves up. Being at UCL, among students of so many different nationalities and backgrounds, also helped me develop an interest in other literatures and cultures.

What do you remember most about your time in UCL Greek and Latin?
Academically, lectures in Gustave Tuck or the small seminar rooms in what was then the Classics corridor in the main building (in which, incredibly, you could smoke in those days so we would all be pickled in nicotine after an hour’s class). Socially, endless coffee and gossip in the CCB (now the Bloomsbury Theatre) or the South Cloisters, the annual student & staff Saturnalia celebrations – and the amazing ‘Caligula Club’ toga party we had in 1979 to celebrate the eruption of Pompeii; Eric Handley came as a Saxon, complete with blond pigtails, while two Ancient History students (one who went on to be a very eminent civil servant), dressed up as Roman soldiers and had their ‘weapons’ confiscated by the Beadles on their way in – after that, the night is a bit of a blur . . . I was also very involved in the Union and spent a lot of time there too.

Who at UCL (past or present) has most influenced you?
That is very hard to say as we were lucky to have many distinguished teachers at the time; Eric Handley, who taught us Greek drama, Alan Griffiths who introduced us to then new ideas such as structuralism, Bob Sharples who made ancient philosophy comprehensible to all and Herwig Maehler who was so kind and patient in Greek Lyric tutorials - once he’d recovered from the fact that none of us knew any German. I did a Joint Honours degree with History and think I was particularly fortunate with my Ancient History tutors and lecturers– Fergus Millar, John North, Wendy Davies and above all Tim Cornell who, as well as being an inspirational teacher, has always been incredibly kind and supportive even long after I left.

Of my fellow students, it is interesting that so many have remained involved with classics – Amanda Cater, of course, who was until recently administrator of the Department, while several others became lecturers or teachers of Greek and Latin. Clearly, we were all enthused by our time at UCL.

Of what are you most proud about UCL?
The fact that it seems to go from strength to strength academically and is now recognised as one of the very top universities in the world (which, of course, we all always knew . . .). I am also very proud of its liberal founding principles and its truly international student body.

What is your favourite part of UCL?
South Cloisters or the Bloomsbury Theatre cafe. I wiled away a lot of days in both.
**What, in your opinion, would improve UCL?**
It’s so long since I was there that I wouldn’t really know. Maybe better accommodation for students – it was pretty awful in our day – but that might already have happened . . .

**Tell me something about yourself that most people don’t know!**
I have an artificial heart valve and am a huge fan of Formula 1 (the two are unconnected!).