

Portrait of an Artist: Antony Dunn

The local poet talks to [Fiona Parker](#) about his formative years, translating poetry and life as a poetical subject

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Antony Dunn is an award-winning Leeds-based poet and is author of a number of books including *Pilots and Navigators*, *Flying Fish* and *Bugs*.

The first piece of poetry Antony remembers composing was at primary school. "I remember I wrote a very long poem about winter when I was at primary school and I was quite pleased with it and it went up on the board outside the Headmaster's office." It was not until Antony was a teenager, however, that his literary flair began to manifest itself in the form of lyrics, which he wrote for a band he had with school friends at St. Peter's School in York.

"I was in a pop group when I first went to grown up school. I wrote hundreds of lyrics for this pop group and we recorded bits and pieces and some of these song lyrics got into the hands of one of the teachers at the school, Dave Hughes." Hughes went on to give Antony feedback on his work and started telling him

how he could improve the lyrics. Eventually Antony made the transition from writing lyrics to writing poetry. By the time Antony was sixteen, he was in his words “obsessed with poetry”.

After school, Antony worked at a theatre in York for a year and throughout the placement, he lived with his then girlfriend’s family. Her father was the proud owner of an extensive collection of books and before long, Antony’s girlfriend was forced to compete with the library for Antony’s free time. “I used to read them all, all the time. This was before the internet was a daily part of anybody’s life, so the only access to poetry you had was books. It’s quite hard to get accidental access to books of poetry, so to suddenly find yourself in a house which was heaving with the stuff was wonderful.”

Antony went on to read English at St. Catherine’s College, Oxford and since graduating in 1993, he has received both the Newdigate Prize (1995) and an Eric Gregory Award (2000).

He has a keen interest in translation but is aware of the potential damage a careless translator can cause. He was unable to publish one Chinese poem in particular, which discussed the Tiananmen Square massacre. He was unable to carry across the impenetrability of a “very complex metaphor” in the original poem. “In conversation with some of my colleagues, it became clear that I could not publish my translated version because it would just land him in trouble... We can’t get ourselves into that kind of trouble here. It’s sobering to be reminded that other people do have to be careful.”

Antony is now a married man with a son, who was the product of years of heart-breaking IVF cycles. He has documented several hardships in his life through the medium of poetry. However, he maintains it is not a “way out” of negative feeling. “You’ll always get somebody who will comfort you by saying: “Oh well there is probably going to be a poem in it for you, isn’t there.” At which point I generally want to smash their face in because poetry is not a way of salving yourself out of pain and any suggestion that that is why we do it makes me really cross.”

Antony’s life has been far from black and white. However, when it comes to imaginative composition, forget high and flighty writing, he believes wholeheartedly in the power of plain and honest verse. “If there are too many adjectives and adverbs, I get the feeling that somebody is trying to manipulate my sensations and I resent that and then I resist it. If somebody is just telling me the truth, I find it utterly compelling.”



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