

Simon Armitage

The Yorkshire writer talks to [Laura Connor](#) about his 'true' calling as a poet, and what influences lie behind his new book

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Music has been an important influence on Armitage's work, which his new book chronicles with recognisable self-effacement

Simon Armitage walked into the new Bowland Lecture Theatre on Wednesday evening with an undeniable air of embarrassment. The pristine new room, which sits in the imposing state-of-the-art complex between Vanbrugh and Langwith, the Berrick Saul Building, was overrun with students, tutors and members of the general public alike, sitting up the aisles and along the stairs, anticipating Armitage's humble Yorkshire voice to paint the silence with his poetry.

Despite being the winner of numerous literary accolades, including the *Sunday Times*' coveted Author of the Year award and a Forward Prize, Armitage's every joke and anecdote ached with a sense of dry self-deprecation. Every stanza of poetry was appreciatively followed by a unanimous cackle of laughter from his otherwise obediently silent audience; at which moments, Armitage would invariably go on to blush.

But how is it that he so effortlessly manages to work humour into his poems, when often the preponderant themes are centred on broken dreams, failure and desperation?

"Often the poems are funnier than I think they are... A lot of the poems I think are deadly serious seem to have people rolling around in the aisles," Armitage replies with characteristic modesty.

He hesitates for a moment, musing over a more considered response, and continues: "Sometimes it is a device for engaging... It is a recognisable form of human contact that develops a sort of bridge. Of course it [humour] can be smokescreen as well on some occasions... It's quite often dark humour [that I use]."

As Armitage develops his reasoning behind the literary devices he has made his own, he instantly snaps back into the unpretentious colloquial comedian that emanates from all of his work: "I don't know, I'm hilarious!"

The prosaic, yet musical, pace of his answers reflect the careful balance of comedy and tragedy that he creates in his poems. This is seen in one of the pieces he read from a collection on Wednesday, 'You're Beautiful'.

Do not be deceived by the seeming romantic simplicity of the title. The poem combines lines such as, "I am ugly because desperation is impossible to hide" with the raw integrity of "I am ugly for saying love at first sight is another form of mistaken identity".

How is it that Armitage expects poems such as these to be read? "I think you try and build a 'voice' in the poem," he replies, hesitantly, "But some of these newer poems, well, I have no idea how to read them and they feel quite awkward sometimes in my throat. I absolutely accept the idea that once you've published a poem and then it's out there it's not really a poem anymore. It belongs to other people."

And how about the audience he has in mind when developing his thoughts into published matter? Who is it that he is really writing for? "I don't really write with an audience in mind... I don't write for myself... I write the things I want to write about and in the style I want to write in."

He continues, succinctly: "I see myself as a communicator."

As a senior lecturer at Manchester Metropolitan University, Armitage is constantly confronted with questions of readership and the nature of the relationship between writer and reader. "I try to tell my students that one of the techniques you have to develop as a writer is to be able to put yourself in the position of the reader," he says.

The Shout

We went out
into the school yard together, me and the boy
whose name and face

I don't remember. We were testing the range
of the human voice:
he had to shout for all he was worth,

I had to raise an arm
from across the divide to signal back
that the sound had carried.

He called from over the park - I lifted an arm.
Out of bounds,
he yelled from the end of the road,

from the foot of the hill,
from beyond the look-out post of Fretwell's Farm -
I lifted an arm.

He left town, went on to be twenty years dead
with a gunshot hole
in the roof of his mouth, in Western Australia.

Boy with the name and face I don't remember,
you can stop shouting now, I can still hear you.

From the book *Universal Home Doctor*

"I think that's absolutely crucial. Some people cannot and some people don't want to, and just want to write the way they want to write..." He emphasises: "But for me it's absolutely critical."

Armitage's new book *Gig* is a combination of prose and poetry, chronicling his passion for music, and his ultimate failure in embracing it fully as a musician.

He explains how he is a product of the era-defining punk-rock generation, and how his home town – Huddersfield – was at the apex of the northern punk belt scene of the 1970s and '80s.

"I'm of that generation that has a sort of wonky spine through carrying tons of vinyl!"

But why did he never pursue such a significant passion and allow it to reach commercial fruition? *Gig* details in scrapbook fashion Armitage's attempted writing and recording of what he describes as a "revved-up pop, driven on an irresistible dance rhythm" album.

He replies simply: "Because I never did anything about it... I mean I ask myself that question and the answer is that there is no equipment, no talent, no contacts. I am a pretty determined person and it makes me think that if I had really wanted to go down that route I would have done..."

But surely his commercial and academic success as a writer has to be just as professionally and personally fulfilling for Armitage? He replies in the affirmative: "Yes, I would say that poetry is my true calling... poetry is what I want to do more than anything. It's the thing that I value most... I think it's how I see myself, I think other people see me as a poet."

As if embarrassed by his semi-sentimental effusion about his clichéd 'true' calling, Armitage adds: "I like being a poet: it's cool!"

That is not to say that he does not have doubts about the nature of his career, especially as a poet who began his working life in a somewhat modest manner.

Armitage worked as a probation officer and a supermarket shelf-stacker before finding literary success: "I wonder why I became a poet without any particular background or pedigree," he admits. "[It] requires you to be very quick witted with a sharp tongue. You don't want to write poems everyday... but there is always this urge to write."

I would love to direct some criticism in Armitage's way. His poetry seems to perpetuate this populist wave of accessible literature which can sometimes read like a poor man's Phillip Larkin: equally strong in cynical sentiment, without the same lyrical delicacy.

But I find it hard to say such things and be truly genuine. Armitage is just too damn nice.

Gig: The Life and Times of a Rock-star Fantasist is available now.



One comment

AQA Anthology

26 Jan '10 at 5:17 pm

It is a shame that to many of my generation, he will always be the author of those poems we had rammed down our throats during our GCSEs. I'm still haunted by those burning scissors.

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