

Writing for Birtwistle

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David Harsent: The pity, and poetry, of war

David Harsent has a double life as a writer of crime fiction and an award-winning poet. He tells Christina Patterson about his taste for difficulty

David Harsent discovered poetry after falling down the stairs. A dreamy ten-year old setting off for Sunday school, he decided it would be quicker to slide down the bannister. He slipped, fell 30 feet and landed on a concrete floor. It was while he was recovering that one of the "regiment of women" who made up his home life - "great grandmother, grandmother, mother, aunt" - brought him a book of stories and poems. "They were border ballads," he tells me. "I didn't really know who had written them or where they came from, but I was transfixed. I went to the library and asked if they had some more."

For this son of a bricklayer, it was the start of a passion that would never let him go, a passion that this year landed him one of Britain's top poetry prizes. Harsent's extraordinary collection, *Legion* (Faber, £8.99), won the £10,000 Forward Prize, was shortlisted for the Whitbread poetry award and is also in the running for the T S Eliot Prize (also £10,000), which will be announced on Monday. A good year could get even better.

David Harsent is not, in any case, a starving poet in a garret. He lives with his wife, the actor Julia Watson, in a large, semi-detached house in Barnes. It is airy and elegant, full of beautiful pictures and artefacts. "It's taken us 12 years to do it up," he explains a touch apologetically as we march up the stairs to his study. It is an attic, but a very posh one - a book-lined bastion of civilisation, with a huge desk, a cosy cluster of armchairs and a vast picture window overlooking a green oasis outside. "Sometimes you can see green parakeets in the trees," he tells me, before sinking into one of the armchairs. "They usually turn up around the cocktail hour. They are," he adds, "very loud."

It's a far cry from the flat over a post office in Princes Risborough which he and his mother escaped to, fleeing German bombs. Harsent didn't meet his father until he was six. "Even when the war was over, and other men were being demobbed, he had a year to go," he explains, as a huge cat leaps into his lap and purrs. "He was badly wounded, patched up and sent back to the frontline. When he finally came home, I was just aware of this deep-voiced, hairy-chested man coming along and messing up the house full of women I lived with."

It is also a far cry from his own first married home: "We lived in a two-up, two-down hovel in the middle of a field, with no lav and two kids, for six years. There was a little bank of three loos at the top of the garden. There were one or two severe winters and you had to take a candle and break the water trap."

It sounds, in fact, like a parody of the life of an impoverished poet, but Harsent had a day job, too. Having left school at 16 with no qualifications - the teachers were "thugs, atrocious people" - he went to work in a bookshop. He stayed for ten years. It was a colleague, the wonderfully named Henry de Beaufort Saunders, who elicited the shy confession that he, too, was keen on poetry. "He showed me the translations he'd done of Baudelaire," Harsent confides. "I found you could write poetry about having a mistress and getting the clap. It seemed a pretty good idea to me."

It was not, however, the model of poetry he pursued. After work at the shop, and when the children had gone to bed, he toiled away at short, highly charged, ostensibly personal poems and started sending them off to magazines. "I didn't know that the poems I'd been getting rejected from the *New Review* I was sending to the same man at the TLS," he chuckles. "In the end, he sent me a note saying, 'I've been watching the progress of your work for some time, would you like to come and have a drink?'" "He", it turns out, was Ian Hamilton, poet and legendary editor of the *New Review*, whose ferocious criticism, and encouragement, played a key part in the early careers of Martin Amis, Christopher Hitchens and Julian Barnes.

It was Hamilton who persuaded him to send his poems off to Oxford University Press, who published his first collection, *A Violent Country*, and continued to publish him for nearly 25 years. And it was Hamilton who, many years later, made a comment that would cause a dramatic change of direction: "I sent him a copy of *News from the Front* [Harsent's 1993 collection] and Ian wrote me a letter about it. He said 'this book is impeccable, you know how to do it, but why don't you try lengthening your line?' So I did."

The upshot was *A Bird's Idea of Flight*, the first of his collections to be published by Faber. Darkly disturbing and brilliantly inventive, it is a poetic journey, told in a variety of voices, through discovery, disillusionment and death. "Uncompromising", "unnerving" and "difficult" were among the words used by the critics. Martin Amis wrote of "pleasure and surprise". Along with the "new freedom" triggered by "this kind of loping line", Harsent discovered the joys and challenges of the dramatic sequence. As an impulse, it has always been there, but Hamilton's throwaway comment propelled it, almost literally, to centre stage. "My whole effort in poetry has been to use a lyrical vocabulary to construct a narrative sequence," he explains. "It's a fiction, of course, a sustained act of imagination."

This technical departure in his work matched some equally radical changes in his life. After a successful career in publishing - "Concorde-ing to New York for breakfast, that kind of thing" - Harsent "committed publishing suicide" by taking on a job he knew would come to grief. When it did, he decided to write a thriller.

"Poetry has a structure and a thriller has a structure," he says. "Crime fiction is the last vestige of the 19th-century novel in a way - enormous character, sin, redemption, a three-part structure. So I thought, 'I'll have a crack at that.'" The book did well and the thriller writer Jack Curtis (actually the name of Harsent's grandfather) was born. More recently, he has metamorphosed into David Lawrence ("for marketing reasons"). Curtis and Lawrence have both served Harsent the poet well.

At about the same time, Harsent received a phone call out of the blue. "Roughly speaking, it was, 'Hello, it's Harry Birtwistle. Do you want to write an opera?' 'Well, go on then' - a bit like that," he confides. "Then we met and talked and he said, 'It's *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', and I nearly fainted. As he was going out of the door, I said, 'Where's it to go on?' and he said, 'The Royal Opera House', and I thought, 'Oh right, Mum will be pleased.'" Since then, they have collaborated on a song cycle, *The Woman and the Hare*, and on an opera called *The Minotaur*, scheduled for the Opera House for 2008. Not bad for a boy whose qualifications, on a recent form for a writing fellowship at Sheffield Hallam University, could only be described as "trivial".

Clearly, Harsent likes a challenge. Like his fellow poet and autodidact Don Paterson, he likes to challenge his readers, too. *Legion* is a dazzling, difficult collection of dispatches from a war zone, full of stark snapshots of war's routine miseries: the "after-smell of fear/ round everything", the boy reduced to " 'residue' between the wheel and the wheel-arch", the man who "drew a hood/ over the trembling head of each blonde daughter/ and shot them where they stood".

The war is unnamed, but there are clear echoes of Bosnia, which Harsent visited several times. Originally sent by the British Council, he did readings at the Writers' Union in Sarajevo - the poet and war criminal Radovan Karadzic, he later discovered, was in the audience - and translated the work of the poet Goran Simic. There are also, he says, images of the Second World War, culled from his father's rare revelations of life at the front. And then, of course, there's Iraq. "I'm not really a political animal," he confides, "but I had this feeling when we went into that war that a step had been taken that was just irrevocable."

Legion took David Harsent by surprise. He found himself writing "these short poems that were often in voices" and "didn't know what was happening until they started to get titles". Poetry is, in any case, as he wrote in a recent article, "a matter of seepage, of slow accumulation" - a process, in fact, that works slowly for both poet and reader. It is already clear, however, that in his ninth poetry collection, this multi-talented writer, poet and librettist has written an anthem for doomed youth that is truly a testament to our troubled times.

Biography: David Harsent

David Harsent was born in Devon in 1942. He grew up in Buckinghamshire and left school at 16 to work in a bookshop. After working in publishing for many years, he embarked on a new life - under the names Jack Curtis and David Lawrence - as a writer of crime fiction. His poetry collections include *Selected Poems*, *News from the Front*, *A Bird's Idea of Flight* and *Marriage*. His new collection, *Legion* (Faber, £8.99), was shortlisted for the Whitbread poetry award, won this year's Forward Prize and has been shortlisted for the T S Eliot Prize. David Harsent has also collaborated on operas and song cycles with Sir Harrison Birtwhistle and written for stage and television. He lives with his wife, the actor Julia Watson, and their daughter Hannah, in Barnes.