

## Hedgehog Poetry Press- The Minds behind the Madness

### A Series of Interviews at Home with the Hoglet Poets

Beginning with *A Restricted View* from *Under the Hedge* to *Sticklebacks* and on to *The Cult of the Spiny Hog*, along with a classic collection of inspirational writers, Mark Davidson and his poets are turning hoglets into must-have bookshelf desirables. Over a series of interviews with the poets and Mark himself, we'll explore what it takes to put pen to page, poem into print and pamphlet onto that prized position on every reader's bookshelf.

And so we begin...

Thank you so much for taking the time to share your ruminations and routines with us today.

Let's start right in with your latest collection...

#### **1 Why did you write this collection, what is it about and what would you like the reader to take away after they turn the last page and find that perfectly prized place for it on their bookshelf?**

I suspect my answer to this one will be different to other interviewees in so much as *Larksong Static* is a 'Selected' sequence, taken from my first three collections and various pamphlets. Though, the fundamental question of *why* I might have written it is universally applicable, I guess. In and of itself, writing is such an odd pursuit, particularly now, in these almost post-literate times. And poetry somewhat blurs the distinction between audience & practice; since, more than any other literary artform, it tends to be read most by people who themselves write. So, understanding the vague madness or love that moves one to write verse is perhaps not so difficult for the poetry readership. What this collection – or any other – is 'about', in a specific sense, is also far less important than it might be with, say, a novel; since poetry is about leaving interstitial spaces of detail, context and meaning in each poem, for the reader to inhabit. In this additional sense, poetry is a facilitative and participatory artform, which is why one of its chief social powers is an innate ability to promote human empathy. What the reader wants to take away from my stuff is, then, entirely up to them. Though I suspect they might intuit a distinctive voice and, hopefully, my poetry stinks of its own fox because that is what I look for in other's work.

#### **2 My chillout time comes from cooking, endless hours lost in the kitchen along with a blaring radio of eclectic tunes and golden oldies, but I can only chill when the cupboards are well stocked with the basic ingredients. Firstly, what is your chillout routine, your escape from the pen and all the pondering and, secondly, what are the basic ingredients you need when it comes to settling down to write- what factors or futons make the best mix for your creations?**

My chillout has no set routine, which is what allows me that quality of relaxation in the first place. Presently, this tends to be dominated by the existence of a rather wonderful 7-year-old son, Fíonn, who sings his life into being each day and demands the sort of attention that's a pleasure to give. Besides that, us walking on the lovely beach in Gardenstown with our border-collie, is another source of great relaxation. Artistically, I've been a songwriter far longer than I've been a poet and

it's a discipline I've found myself revisiting in a big way this year. I suggested to my band from the mid-80s that we might record the album which eluded us back then before one of us croaks, so this is planned for 2021 (in so much as *anything* can be planned these days). I've been cracking on with writing and demoing the music to send out as WAV files to the rest of the band throughout this year. Innocents Abroad's *Late Spring* should come out on nice heavy-duty vinyl, sometime in 2022. What's good for me with this project is that I'm not responsible for the lyrics. I just wanted to shut up and play my guitar and rediscover my old sound engineering chops, which nowadays you can do on a laptop without needing to haunt the studios I once worked in. So, the plectrum is my escape from the pen. Should anyone be remotely interested in stuff I've done in the past, this playlist on Soundcloud is half-decent: <https://soundcloud.com/user-666655071/sets>

In terms of writing conditions, the poem or the deadline dictate to me far more than any 'routine' as such. I'm just not that kind of writer. Poetry's great power comes from its own insistence upon coming into being, and this can arrive from anywhere at any time and doesn't always have to result in a poem. Larkin had something interesting to say on this subject: about how, often, the best poems are lost but those that are written, nevertheless, satisfy the deep need for their own existence. I paraphrase.

### **3 Sticking with the cooking analogy for a moment, do you follow a specific recipe for writing or do you throw all the ingredients into the bowl and see what happens?**

I don't, Damien, no. Poems can announce themselves quite randomly, or sometimes they're carried about in my head for months or even years. I'm quite willing to lose some in this way, just so long as the ones that do get written receive the attention they demand of me...and then the real discipline of redrafting, editing and knowing when to set aside.

### **4 In these days of social media, you're nothing if you're not seen and in these unsettling, uncertain days of Covid, seeing, listening and buying has moved online and readings and live launches in libraries and lounges are a rare happening or else there is a limit to the amount of people in attendance. How are you dealing with having new collections coming out right now? What is your way of being seen? How are you coping with the fact that being a writer today also requires a certain amount of spotlight, certainly more than the days of Ms. Dickenson?**

We tend, these days, to panic somewhat and fail to credit poetry with its great ability to linger, often beyond the lifetime of its author. I think this is maybe because we're conflating it with a 'status' conferring product as opposed to what it, more truly, is: marks in time, which, if done well transcend their historical moment of composition, if even only for family or those who knew us. Surely, this is a magical gift in such a superficial and soulless world. Actually, this has *always* been poetry's gift, we've just lost sight of the fact and fail to make our peace with it in the face of performative pressures that confuse career path with artistic journey. After working in the music industry, I came gladly into the poetry world because I thought – wrongly as it turns out – that its tiny economies of scale would filter out the bullshit. As ever, Seamus Heaney has a quote to sum it up for me: when asked why there was so much bitching and back-biting in the poetry world, he said, "Ah, what you have to understand is that the stakes are so low." For me, then, the best way of 'being seen' is to be a seeing being who produces work good enough to last beyond the fads of contemporary taste. Same applies with a lot of music: some of that 80s stuff sounds comical to my ears now, because it was so obsessed with the production techniques of the time that it lost itself in the mix. Poetry puts down deeper roots. Live with that and forget some bogus notion of a

'career'. I've seen that world. It makes me laugh. And the reason I like Mark Davidson so much is that he totally *gets* this. He does his thing and produces beautiful books. We should do likewise. Of course, I'm prone to social media, like anyone else. It's our not-so-secret shame. But you'll find I am self-promotion *lite*. There's a law of diminishing dignity which kicks in if you're not careful. My books sell out in their own good time. My readers like my stuff well enough. That'll do me. I am literally *just* getting over COVID as I write this and I can tell you, the last thing on my mind was whether my book was getting attention. Good books can take care of themselves.

**5 Speaking of being seen and getting noticed, how important are acceptances from writing journals and how do you deal with the rejection which comes, no matter how much acclaim you have received? The reality we must learn is that not everyone is going to love our work, which can be heart breaking as we're basically offering up our poetic babies to be loved, though no one loves a baby as much as the parent. So what keeps you going? Head up and move on or hide out and wait till the hurt passes? What encouragement do you have for others starting out?**

You will have correctly intuited that I am a bit 'old school' in some respects, so my ass is of rhino hide. Though this state-of-affairs comes at the end of a long process. Nowadays, I tell my students that the sooner they learn to *love* their rejections the better it'll be for them. They always teach you something, if only to confirm your suspicions of certain magazines or publishers' wider agendas, which might not necessarily be to do with publishing the best poetry but something else. That is entirely their prerogative and there's no use upsetting yourself over it. More often, it's because your work is not quite good enough yet or doesn't quite fit the drift of a specific issue, or just misses out because the editor had 20 poems competing for each slot and you came second behind the one that made it. Similarly, with competitions, it's a lottery. My best collection, *The Unreturning* got returned by a 'major' poetry imprint from the big-name editor who had clearly *not* got where I was coming from and dismissed the book out of hand. HOWEVER, he *had*, at least, engaged with it on the terms the book demanded, so while he missed the point and went on to publish palpably inferior stuff that will nonetheless find an easier audience, it was the result of proper engagement. There's the breaks. The same book has just got a great review from Siobhan Campbell in *Poetry Ireland* because she, too, engaged with it on its own terms and was smart enough to see what it was about. As I say, good books can take care of themselves. Same with individual poems. Simon Armitage once told me that he papered his bedroom walls with all the rejections he got early in his writing. It happens to all of us. So, my advice is to get used to the disappointment and use it as a form of editing. I've been a magazine editor, so I know how impossible the task can be at times, though we always *tried* to publish the poems we felt deserved an outlet.

**6 If you had to pick one piece of your own writing that most represents you what would it be and why and would you like to share it or part of it here with us?**

Writers are always most in love with their latest work, so it's impossible – and a bit reductive – to tie yourself down to one piece of work. And, as with the music I've made, I've always tried to make the next work different from what has gone before. Nevertheless, it would be disingenuous of me to ignore the fact that many poets achieve a quiet form of immortality via a single poem. I did my PhD in Great War poetry and this was particularly the case with many of those writers. So, today, for the sake of argument, let's say that I pin my own sad little hopes on this excerpt from a longer poem sequence called *Gardenstown*, about where I now live:

Two hours back, you crept across  
the sand to wait in darkness

on the rumour of otter and mink  
alive in the dingle of Pishlinn Burn  
or Den of Findon. Nothing came  
but the dawn, nothing moved  
but the shore's slow reveal of kelp  
and the raptor's dark covenant  
with the brae. Nothing brought  
nothing but Crovie's cute one-liner,  
the skerry light's cry for help  
and the crescent gather of wave  
off Pecking Craig: all give-and-take  
and give, then taken-back-again.  
No Eastering here but a coastline  
of wave-cut and stonechat;  
no inscape but a buckled mind's  
frailty for the April Lyrids'  
random scatter of meaning  
on the heaven-empty primrose.  
Despite us all, spring comes  
to the bay's proscenium  
in a spike of wild orchids  
at the foot of Castle Hill;  
with sea-campion and vetch;  
with violet and stitchwort,  
ragged-robin and celandine;  
in the flitting of wren and pipit,  
irruptions of gannet on water  
and the musical comedy of eiders.  
The tide slackens and stills  
to the morning's mood,  
its lines flatten, its breathing  
short. You walk out to the point  
below the Head, inhale deeply  
the coconut flowering of gorse  
that has swept its wildfire  
down the hillside.....

**7 Writing poetry, more so than any other writing form, is often the art of peeling back, removing the unnecessary, eliminating lines to uncover the hidden truth- how bare does it get for you? How difficult is it, at times, to tell your story within the lines and framework of a poem? How comfortable is it to be naked with so few words to cover over the possible discomfort or is it just a part of the process you get used to?**

I agree with you Damien: this *is* one of poetry's unique charms. When I run workshops, I tell my students that poetry is very much like *JENGA*: what you're aiming for with each poem, is the last viable and free-standing structure possible; whereby to add one word would be superfluous and to take out one more would bring the whole thing down. I've actually had groups play *JENGA* as an act of kinaesthetic learning about the editing/ re-drafting process. In terms of nakedness, I'd suggest that the 'sex' poem sequence at the beginning of my second collection *Cur* speaks to my ease with poetry's occasional demand for absolute frankness.

**8 When it comes to titles, our pieces as I said, are like children- each needing special consideration and attention- how do you name your poems, short stories, collections or novels- is the name a starting point, a midway consideration or a summation of the**

**theme afterwards? Sometimes I worry when I come up with a really great title it might overpower the poem itself- is there a balance between the two?**

I'd say you should always try to work your poem titles as hard as possible: to provide context which allows you to strip back the need within the poem; or take the poem off into another direction completely by way of dislocation, say; or as a hook line from within the poem itself. There are many aspects of this fine art. In terms of naming whole collections, similar terms apply. For my first collection, *The Waiting Hillside*, I stole a trick from the great American novelist John Irving and made the title the final phrase of the book, so that it seemed like the whole drift of it was towards its final moment. It was a way of conferring some sense of structure on a collection that might, otherwise, seem like a disparate group of poems. With *Cur* I simply wanted a very strong central image that reflected the visceral nature of some aspects of male sexuality celebrated at the heart of the book. I doubled down on this with the wonderful cover image I found from a female Australian artist. *The Unreturning* was a way of describing the Great War dead that I'd not come across until I was waiting to meet a friend for coffee one day beside the war memorial in Lutterworth, Leicestershire. I think if you do come up with a great title for something, the onus is upon you to make what follows live up to it. So, a good title might be a useful spur to get you to up your game.

**9 For myself, writing started in childhood as a purely cathartic process, even if I was too young to fully understand this, it was a way of self-analysing and coming to an understanding of the world and my place within it. How did you find your way to writing and what was it about the process that kept you hooked?**

I honestly don't think I can better your description of it here, Damien. It was the same for me. Nurtured, perhaps, by a few significant friends or teachers. You'll notice that *Larksong Static* is dedicated to the memory of two wonderful English teachers I had in my raggy-arsed comprehensive school in the 1970s and early '80s: Bob Lewis and Gerry Breen.

**10 For the most things that fulfil me in life, the surrounding visuals are very important, and over the past few years the relationship between the photograph I take and poem I write becomes integral to the success of both- sometimes I never know which inspired the other more. What is your favourite accompaniment while creating a piece of writing?**

Again, I find some resonance of my own with this. Oblique meditations on your own practice, via a secondary form, can work wonders for your poetry at times. While writing *The Waiting Hillside*, which is a time-torn collection of sorts, I too, did a lot of photography because I find it quite close to poetry's deep-wired relationship with time and the moment, and the ephemerality of the moment that can yet be fixed in time through art. By the time I was writing *Cur*, my love of the visual arts – in particular, 20<sup>th</sup> century British and European artists – was parlayed into a sequence of *ekphrastic* responses to favourite art works; which was, in itself, an oblique love letter to my son's mother who's an art historian and curator. As a subject for new poetry, the Great War is its own literary and artistic chronotope encouraging integration across time, space and culture. So, *The Unreturning* always aspired towards that German notion of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, which was appropriate for the times it described, I guess. However, the book precluded any cover artwork, since it is impossible to use a World War One based image that doesn't lead expectation in some way, and I wanted the poems to speak for themselves. Hence the title and the Payne's Grey only. And now, as is evident from the very fine linocut that is the cover of *Larksong Static*, I'm doing a lot of collaborative work with the great printmaker of the Banffshire coast, Bryan Angus, whose work I admire and with whom I share a certain outlook and sensibility. Poetry ought to be able to stand on its own two feet on the page but, like everything else, the overall aesthetic package is important

not only at a cosmetic level but as a genuine agent of change for the way you write. Visual art certainly helped get me beyond the potential bondage of that lyric 'T', for instance.

**11 The more I write, the more it becomes my oxygen, the more my hand shapes itself to the shape of my favourite pen or now my iPhone which has replaced the laptop as the most at-hand instrument to record my thoughts, and these days I have to catch them quick or they are lost forever. As a kid I wanted to be a famous fashion designer and lived in 4 different countries working for various fashion brands, though the writing was always there. Since then, cooking and photography have come more into the forefront. What were your childhood dreams, what were the jobs that followed to fulfil them or just fill time and what, other than writing, would you consider doing in order to express yourself?**

I think I may have already answered this in passing. But I recall my childhood dreams involved living in Ireland or northern Scotland, so that's OK because I do. If I stick with those, I'd have also been a big number 9 for Everton and smashed a hat-trick against Liverpool, or, as per my only English vice, scored a Test century in a tight Ashes match. So much for childhood. As I got older, I fell into the classic traps of English culture and its odious class-system: I did Literature at university but, being the first kid from my working-class family to go to university felt I had no permission to actually 'write culture' myself. So, I parlayed my creativity into rock music, from where I could more easily access a wonderful array of empowered punk & post-punk role models. This lasted pretty much until an afternoon on Uffington Hill in 2004, when suddenly flying a kite with an 8 year-old appeared to be more rock n'roll than the latest album I was working on, and the complicated epiphanies of that moment no longer seemed capable of being reflected in the classic verse-chorus-verse-chorus-chorus structures of a pop song. I was 42 and needed to know better. However, after years of abeyance, the muscle memory takes me back to that world with ease and I'm happy to mix the two. That OK for you?

**Thank you so much for taking the time to share your thoughts, insights and mental workings with us. It's been a pleasure to dive inside your head from the comfort of our own armchairs. Before we depart, if you were to leave us with one line, one phrase, one lyric, a one-liner or a once-in-a-life-time admission, either yours or someone else's, what would it be?**

Somewhere in the heaven  
Of lost futures  
The lives we might have lived  
Have found their own fulfillment.

Derek Mahon (*Leaves*)