

Wombwell Rainbow Interviews: Martin Malone

1. What inspired you to write poetry?

You know I really can't recall now. Something I always say to my students is that, after painting the tally on the cave wall, I think the very next thing humans do is try to physically construct their thoughts and poetry is the readiest reckoner there is for that. I'm not trying to be glib. I think almost everyone is in love enough, or grieving a loss enough, at some point in their lives to turn to getting their thoughts down on paper in what can best be described as a poem. This struck me, when 6-months after my father's death, I came across some writing by my mother in which she was dealing with her grief and which could be best-recognised as poetry. My mother left school at 15, she's not educated in the traditions of 'the Muse' but its elemental template produced poetry in her at a moment of extremity. So, I think the 'inspiration to write poetry' is pretty much hard-wired into us all.

Beyond that, I was always – and remain – a weird kid whose aspirations were skewed in this direction, somehow. So, I always wrote stuff, as many of us do in our teens. And, like most of us, I stopped. My particular reasons for doing so were possibly tied up in the same issues of permission that get so over-performed these days on social media. In my case, here was I, a working-class kid from the north-east, the first of my family to go to university and studying – of all things – English Literature. Faced with 'the canon', I simply took my ball home and drifted towards what appeared to be more egalitarian artforms: specifically, rock and pop. For 20-years, I detoured around bands, music production, song-writing, singing, gigging and the like. Until I found myself, at 42, feeling the law of diminishing dignity kick in, suddenly stumbling across the complicated epiphany of fatherhood on Uffington Hill, and emotionally ready to write poetry. So, I did.

2. Who introduced you to poetry?

First, the Catholic Masses I was dragged to 3-4 times a week, then Dad's Irish and C&W records. Thirdly, school and two great teachers I had at English Martyrs Comprehensive in Hartlepool during the 1970s. Gerry Brean was a great wee fella from Belfast who taught me 'O' Level English Literature and who I would *love* to have a pint with now if I could track him down. If only to thank him for taking us all to see The Clash. Secondly, Bob Lewis, who taught me at A-level. He had a brilliant back-story, an arch sense of humour, warned me about Tony Blair from the get-go and who I did once track down, to a home for retired teachers in Bishop Auckland. I took him my first collection. Tragically, he'd had a stroke and all his language would then allow him was a broad smile and the words, 'Yabba-Dabba-Dooh!' Life has a sadness you can't invent sometimes.

3. How aware were you of the dominating presence of older poets?

Awareness is a state that's all-too-often retro-fitted to make ourselves look smarter than we are. I suppose, like most of my generation (certainly the few of us working-class kids who made it as far as university), I just accepted what was put in front of me and said 'Thank you' for some great poetry. This was the late-70s/ early 80s, debates about canonicity, cultural hegemony and the end of Leavisite hierarchies were only just beginning in this country, really. It'd be self-serving and disingenuous to pretend that I was 'hip' to the sort of conversations we take as read these days. What I will say is that *Nine Modern Poets* nurtured a love for poetry and introduced me to some fucking good stuff. And when I got to university, Liverpool had a very traditional English Literature degree. I read *Beowulf* in the original Anglo-Saxon, for goodness sake. But *absolutely none* of it went to waste. And, overall, I *like* older poets. When I interviewed for my MA at MMU I told them: 'Well I'm alright up until about 1925 but after that, you'll have to educate me'. And they did. I've seen some outrageously high-handed and censorious social media posts these past few years, attacking people for daring to have

the genuine preferences they have, rather than falling in behind the latest current consensus on what we *ought* to be liking. People can no more help their age, gender and cultural inheritance than they can their sexuality, intersectionality or skin colour. We'd do well to remember that. Many agendas are ***rightfully*** (underlined, italicized and in bold) having their moment, but I fear that many folk who presume to speak for them are utterly misusing this moment (all-too often for their own short-term gains). It ought to grieve us: firstly, because they're seeking to replace a wrong-headed culture with another wrong-headed culture, secondly because change *must* come but not like this, sweet Jesus, not like this! Send us a way forward other than this petti-fogging shit-storm of tedious social media performance. It's so co-opted and middle-class. We tend to connive in what we deplore, in order to deplore in what we connive. Many of the people who embody the issues others purport to speak for are still voiceless, by dint of social inequality and the evils of rampant capitalism above all else. If that viewpoint damns me in the eyes of the current 'scene', then so be it. I'll away to *their* gulag. If it's problematical, then good! Part of poetry's function is to stick in the craw, not to nurture some bogus notion of a 'career' and harvest consensus in the form of social media 'likes'.

4. What is your daily writing routine?

Don't have one. Not through mere hobbyism, lack of discipline or work ethic but sheer opportunity. For all my education and cultural mobility, I still face the sort of life-economising my father did: I *have* to work full-time for a living, look after my wee son, live in as harmonious a manner with my rapidly dying planet as I can, and look after my ageing mother as best as I may also. I write when I can and afford myself a wry laugh at this state of affairs.

5. What motivates you to write?

Well, that hard-wired human thing I alluded to earlier and the same sort of weirdness which motivated me as a kid. It's a mixed blessing really. But I'll be doing it until the day I die.

6. What is your work ethic?

See my earlier answer. I hope I've modelled a fierce work ethic when it comes to writing, editing and teaching against the backdrop of need for full-time employment elsewhere, in order to put food on the table. But who knows, really? I've not had to go down the pit or work in a shipyard like my Dad. However, you cut it, I'm lucky in that.

7. How do the writers you read when you were young influence you today?

Well, it's akin to the music you love when you're young, isn't it? That Camus quote which Scott Walker uses on the cover of 'Scott 4': "A man's work is nothing but this slow trek to rediscover, through the detours of art, those two or three great and simple images in whose presence his heart first opened." Their influence, then, is lingering: Ted Hughes, R.S. Thomas, Wilfred Owen, Gerard Manley-Hopkins, Thomas Hardy, D.H. Lawrence, Seamus Heaney. As well, interestingly, as Jane Austen, George Eliot and an amazing Victorian novelist called Margaret Oliphant, who bequeathed me an aspirational model of work in the face of insurmountable domestic odds. Then, there's Shakespeare. There's *always* Shakespeare... And a huge list of inspirational songwriters and bands. How could they *not* exert an intricate complex of lingering influences? I mean, my most recently published poem is about sitting around in Liverpool waiting for an REM tour to come to town.

8. Who of today's writers do you admire the most and why?

Many of them might be novelists, actually. I love John Irving, who has much to teach poets. I think James Hawes entertainingly chronicles where it all turned to shit back in the nineties and noughties. I respect where my old mate, Peter Mills, is trying to take writing about rock music. For all we have our personal differences, I think Kim Moore's poem 'My Sort' says something important, and importantly inconvenient, about the white working-class. I have a number of friends whose work I massively respect: Roy Marshall, Keith Hutson, Richard Skinner, Neil Young, Chuck Lauder, Christopher James, Dawn Gorman, Virginia Astley, Hilda Sheehan, Carole Bromley, Sharon Black, Robin Houghton. All of whom are labouring away quietly, in possession of no little talent, and enriching the scene significantly without picking up any of the baubles used by the publishing industry as its selling tools. But once you start with this it becomes a bit of a list. There a lot of good and under-rated people out there who deserve more attention. In terms of 'famous folk', Patterson is pretty good, Simon Armitage is, well, a bit of a genius really, as is Robin Robertson. Niall Campbell is the real deal, as is Zaff Kunial, Dan O'Brien and Kei Miller. I am a huge fan of both Frances Leviston and Vona Groarke, among others. I'm a sucker for Irish poetry, adore Heaney, Muldoon, Derek Mahon and Michael Longley. I'm always conscious of who I might be leaving out when asked questions like this. The poetry commonwealth is rich isn't it? I've not even got beyond these shores yet.... As to 'why', we've just not got the space here to answer that one.

9. Why do you write?

There is absolutely no logical reason for my doing so, just an inescapable necessity that always outruns me. Frankly, it's a pain in the ass, at times but I certainly wouldn't change it. Writing, when it's going well, makes you bombproof. Even when it's *not* going well, it's good. As Ted Kooser points out, when you're writing a poem, there's one less scoundrel in the world.

10. What would you say to someone who asked you "How do you become a writer?"

I'm pretty sure you know *if* before you turn your thoughts to 'how'. If it's the other way around, then... well, I'd not presume to say it doesn't work but it would work in a way I can't fully comprehend. The advice I was always given as a sound-engineer was *Just don't do it, it's a nightmare. Given that, if you still want to do it then you've a chance of making it work.* If you've not the leg up of nepotistic advantage (as in all walks of life, there's a lot of it about), then the same advice holds for writing also. I could talk about things like 'always keep your eyes open, notice things, maintain your openness to new ideas, viewpoints etc'. Or suggest daily writing exercises, workshops, courses, reading lists. But, really, there are loads of 'How-To-Be' books out there. Go buy some of them.

11. Tell me about the writing projects you have on at the moment.

Well, I am being ultra-patient in trying to place my latest collection – which has been written for 18-months – with the specific publisher I'd like it to come out with. Beyond that, I'm simply using the interim as bonus time to start sketching out directions for my fourth and fifth collections and accumulating some new material, as and when it appears. I did a wonderful month's residency at Sumburgh Head lighthouse on Shetland back in April and the handful of poems I got written there are coming out as a *Stickleback* micro-pamphlet with Hedgehog Press some time next year. As I say, I find myself with a pair of new collections on the go: *The Trick of Stars* which is just a steady accumulation of material I like, and a more thematically linked set of poems to do with my time in bands and as a fan of rock n' roll. Away from poetry, I continue to write a fair few reviews for journals like *Poetry Ireland* and *Stand*, I'm putting together a bid for a Leverhulme Fellowship in order to write a book about the influence of Punk and Post-punk on what could loosely be described as the

'Armitage generation' of poets, and I'm hoping to find time to complete my critical monograph on Great War poetry, *Lighted by Troy's Last Shadow*. If I get through all of that, it'll be time for a rest...and maybe a novel.