

Armitage, Simon: The role of the poet function poetry society

Simon Armitage on what it means to be a poet.

In the old days, if you carried one of those British passports that looked like a pocket bible, as well as your name, address and distinguishing features, there was a space for stating your occupation. It was a big deal for some people to be able to put the word "Poet" in that space; it implied you were one of a very rare species and should be treated accordingly at immigration and customs control. It also implied that you made a living by writing poems. These days, the new, lightweight EC passports don't require such a declaration, and only on your tax returns do you need to say what you're up to, and how much you get for it.

Being a poet is the best job in the world, but it has its mysteries. For instance, I'm never sure what I'm supposed to do in a morning after I've read the paper and taken the empties down to the bottle bank. Write poems, presumably, but poems are like policemen - there's never one around when you need one, or they're like buses - you wait for ages then three come along at once. Daytime television is another option, but it's bad for the soul, so eventually you've got to get out of the house and go and do something.

Truth is, it's either a feast or a famine for most of us. Weeks go by without a single thought coming into the brain or an offer of work; the next minute you're splitting at the seams with good ideas and the phone never stops ringing. Only the truly famous ever make enough money by just selling books, so the rest of us tend to get by giving readings, writing reviews, or teaching.

Every now and again, though, you're asked to do something so bizarre or unusual or weird that you end up saying yes just for the hell of it, and hell is very often what it turns out to be. I once appeared in Vogue magazine under the pretext of talking about contemporary poetry. In actual fact I was only there to fill up half a page because Naomi Campbell was washing her hair that month, and when they took one look at the clothes I was wearing, out came the mobile phones. Quicker than you could say Paul Smith, a van pulled up at the side door and two dozen swanky new shirts were brought in, carried on a pole, the way that wild animals are carried back from the woods by hunters. I chose a dark blue cotton number with heat-printed acrylic knots emblazoned on it, which actually looked like an underwater photograph of low-intelligence sea-creature startled by a flashlight. When I asked if I could keep it, the women in charge glanced at the £120 price tag and said "It's yours". This was in the days when £120 was £120. When the picture came out, half of it was my mug shot, the other half was the shirt, and I never did work out if the clothes were advertising the poet or the other way round. I've still got it, but it faded badly in the wash.

But there are worse ways to keep the wolf from the door. For instance, I once had to go to Tasmania. And I've been on some pretty ugly-looking television programmes and some pretty dumb-sounding radio stations. All part of the service, I guess, although I never regretted turning down a voice-over for a beer commercial, even though they were going to pay me a small fortune. Someone from an

advertising agency phoned up and said they were looking a for a poet with northern accent who wasn't a Scouser and wasn't a Geordie. I was still vaguely interested when they told me that the beer wasn't a beer at all, it was a lager. All goes down the same hole, I thought. But when they announced that the poem had been written by one of their "creative", that was the last straw. Poets like poems; they like their own poems best of all, and they like the poems of other poets, but after that, it's a problem. This is very difficult to explain, except to remind people of the impossibility of eating three Jacob's cream-crackers in one minute without a drink. Can't be done - not for any money, not for anyone.

Calling yourself a poet can be to do with what you put in your passport, but at the end of the day it's to do with what you read, and what you write. It's about what you put in your mind, and after that, what comes out of your mouth when you open it.

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