



WRITERS IN CONVERSATION

**Interview with Robin Robertson, Random House, London,
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Katrina Naomi

Robin Robertson has published five collections of poetry: A Painted Field, Slow Air, Swithering, The Wrecking Light and Hill of Doors, as well as Sailing the Forest: Selected Poems. Robertson (born 1955) was brought up on the north-east coast of Scotland. His poetry has received numerous awards, including the E. M. Forster Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters and he is the first poet to have won all three categories of the Forward Prize. He lives in London.

Katrina Naomi interviewed Robertson in the early stages of her PhD research at Goldsmiths (University of London). The title of her thesis is 'Beyond Gentility: Violence in the Poetry of Sharon Olds, Pascale Petit, Peter Redgrove and Robin Robertson'.

KN – I know you didn't publish your first book until you were in your forties but you must have been writing for a long time before that?

RR – Yes, I began as a teenager, and remained an earnest, self-important, self-dramatising, adolescent lyric poet for a long time. Then I graduated from Aberdeen University...

KN – In English?

RR – Yes, a four-year honours degree then a postgraduate degree in Canada. With that degree, you're simultaneously a student and a teacher. I was Alastair MacLeod's teaching assistant, he's a wonderful story-writer; do you know his work?

KN – No, not at all.

RR – He's very good. I also took a writing seminar with him, which helped crystallise and evacuate some of the worst of the stuff. He helped me understand what pretentious, overblown nonsense I was writing. So I was able to draw a line. As a result, I'm not haunted by juvenilia. Then I entered the world of publishing, which slowed the next phase ...

KN – I've read in other interviews that you say that you need to get other people's voices out of your head before you can write?

RR – Yes it isn't conducive to be editing other texts when trying to write your own. I was also helping to bring up a couple of daughters which militated against writing. I developed a pattern of going away, on retreat, as a way of releasing the tension. Yes, so that's why I didn't publish till later on.

KN – And did you write poetry from the start?

RR – Yes. I've never really been interested in writing anything else. Poetry is the thing that gives me most pleasure, offers the most difficulty and risk.

KN – How do you feel about me writing my PhD on your poetry and having singled out violence as my theme?

RR – I'm flattered by any attention. [Pause] I don't even think of my writing as being particularly violent; it's more a way, I think, of *avoiding* violence, which I've always loathed. Where I'm from, violence is inherent in the landscape – the natural, elemental violence of the north-east coast of Scotland. Then there were the skinhead gangs and the American roughnecks off the oil rigs, drinking and fighting. There was physical violence, certainly, and the ever-present *possibility* of it. Aberdeen was a sort of frontier town.

KN – There's a real sense of threat in some of your poems, such as 'At Dusk' and 'Anxiety # 5'.

RR – Yes, though that's slightly different from overt violence. That unease, that anxiety, the sense of threat, that's certainly something I'm interested in. It tends not to be the threat of physical violence, though, but of something that's otherworldly, beyond my ken.

KN – Why do you feel you write about violence? Where does it come from for you? Banville in the *New York Review of Books* suggests that your heart operation has played a role?

RR – The heart complaint and the Scottish landscape are implacable, extreme facts, beyond my ability to control – they're imposed, external forces. I had the operation after a congenital heart murmur began to announce itself with a sort of mewling sound. One of the doctors told me it was a 'seagull murmur' – given that name because the noise was like a seabird calling and crying from inside. I was about thirty. The operation was – and still is – an invasive, medieval intrusion: your sternum is sawn open and the ribs are pulled back under tension to expose the organs, held like an open trap; they work on you for a few hours then they let you snap shut again and sew up the chest. Then you're on anticoagulants for life. Unfortunately, they left some stuff inside so I had to be opened up again a little later. The wound wouldn't stop bleeding. I'm actually writing a poem at the moment called 'A&E' about this second incident. I was in Camberwell Casualty on a Saturday night, can you imagine? It was like *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* ... Anyway: during a bypass operation your blood is circulating outside the body – and this process can bring about a change in people, it can lead to all sorts of things ... It was an incredible violence to have done to me, in order to keep me alive. An

interesting thing to have happened: something outside of my control. A very early and profound taste of mortality.

KN – I've also read that you walked past a slaughterhouse every day on your way to school. Is that true? It also features in a poem too, sorry I can't remember offhand which one.

RR – It's 'Actaeon: The Early Years' from *Swithering*. Yes – it was the longer route to school. The normal route was quicker, but you ran the risk of getting beaten up; the longer route had the bonus of going past the abattoir. It had a big open doorway, and I got further and further inside each time. The men working on the carcasses were most amused by my interest.

KN – But how old were you?

RR – Oh, about eight or nine.

KN – Not much of a place for a child then?

RR – No it probably wasn't. And, again, this was an early brush with mortality. [Pause] In a city you don't see so much death.

KN – Is any subject off-limits?

RR – [Pause] Try me.

KN – Oh, no, I meant in your writing. Is there any topic that you'd think you wouldn't want to write about or would stop yourself writing about?

RR – Well I'm not going to write about my daughter's rectum or a dead lover's nipple hairs ... [pause] I seldom set out to write on a subject. I gather words, phrases, images, sometimes whole lines, and store them. Eventually a connection is made between my current preoccupations – conscious and unconscious – and the lines, phrases and images; they start to join up. Some of these strings of words might have been in a notebook for twenty years, sitting waiting for the right partners. I don't start by thinking I'm going to tackle a subject or a theme. The actual creative process is probably best described as a mild trance. I'm not directing operations, there's some other force drawing things together (but then you'll say that's my subconscious mind) and it seems to proceed almost on its own. I get a rough shape of the thing, then carve it as if it were wood or stone, removing all that's redundant; then I begin to see what the poem might really be about, and I start to hear the sound of the thing. Then I just reinforce those musical patterns and lash the poem down.

KN – But has there been anything you've written and you think, no I really don't want to go there?

RR – 'Actaeon: The Early Years' is not strictly autobiographical but does contain some aspects of my childhood. I was aware when I finished it that it was a problematic piece – largely

because of how the mother was presented. I showed it to my brother, whom I'm close to, and he agreed it was difficult but that it wasn't really up to him to say. Then I showed it to my editor, Don Paterson, and said I was concerned about my mother's reaction. And he said, 'Well it's not true is it?' And I told him that quite a lot of it was. I ended up deciding that it belonged in the book. I had not set out to be gratuitously cruel, simply attempted to get to part of the truth. Poems regularly go in directions that I don't expect (which is part of the excitement of writing) but I don't think I've ever held a poem back if either the content or the handling was open to misinterpretation or likely to cause hurt.

I get very frustrated when some readers impose an autobiographical lattice on stuff I write. There are people who trawl through my books looking for references to themselves. What's in these books is not autobiographical: it's an accretion of words and images, impulses and experiences, sense memories, all passed through the 'streamy well of the unconscious' – changed and charged by it. It's the subconscious; that's what I subscribe to.

KN – Do you think the 'Gentility Principle' is still an issue in terms of how English critics and audiences react to poetry?

RR – Without it, there wouldn't have been the Movement. I wasn't sure of Larkin when I was young, but I've come to admire his work. [Pause] But as to critical reactions, these aren't terribly important to me. There are few interesting critics of poetry in this country. I'm always glad of a good review – but it's a very small world and negative reviews often seem to have some agenda to them.

[Pause] If someone was writing a 15-word description of my poetry, it wouldn't entirely surprise me if 'violence' cropped up. This, of course, makes me uncomfortable – but then all lazy, scribbled shorthand descriptions make me uncomfortable. We all try to avoid being pigeonholed ... I do write about unease and threat – that turbulence and undertow – this has been part of the work since my first book and continues into the new poems I'm writing now. But I hope there are many other threads to my work – a stitchwork of threads – characters like poor Strindberg pop up every now and again, Ovid is a constant, as is the fascination with myth, and the landscape of my childhood ... I like the way the poems speak to each other across the books.

KN – Do you get different reactions to your work from men and women?

RR – My audiences seem to be made up largely of middle-aged women. It's mostly women who come up after a reading and they're almost always charming [laughs]. Women read more than men, and read more *poetry* than men, so it's not really a surprise. If it's in the States, they'll say 'I really like your *voice*', if they're parents they'll tell me they enjoyed 'Donegal', perhaps because it's straightforward and overtly sentimental. Then, there are the people who *don't* come up after a reading ... I have no idea what *they* think ...

I wouldn't want, would hate, to be regarded as a masculine poet, it's so undermining. [Pause] I don't see poetry in terms of gender anyway. Ted Hughes is a good example of a very masculine poet, but he goes beyond that into another zone. It's really never crossed my

mind, gender. Sharon Olds has some of the most shocking, brutally frank poems about relationships and the body, so does that make her masculine or super-feminine?

KN – No neither. It's one of the reasons that I've chosen the four poets that I have, because none of you write to so-called 'traditional' gender roles. OK next question. Do you think there's a danger of 'sexing up' what might otherwise be a dull poem, with violence or violent imagery – perhaps with the idea that violence sells?

RR – Well poetry sells so little anyway!

KN – OK disregarding the selling angle.

RR – Well I really disagree that there's anything gratuitous in what I write. I certainly don't intend there to be. The poems arrive more often by accident than design. A good example would be 'At Roane Head', which I consider to be very much embedded in north-east Scotland, for its language, imagery, folklore. But it was written one Christmas in a boathouse on the Norfolk Broads, surrounded by ducks, in two hours. I wrote it without any sense of what I'd be writing. There I was in this idyllic lakeland, writing about physically handicapped children who are slaughtered. It was as much a surprise to me as it was to the characters in the poem – all that grief. Still, I like it well enough. I end most of my readings with it.

KN – And it certainly hasn't done you any harm has it?

RR – [Smiles] No, it hasn't.

KN – Several critics have accused your poetry of being gratuitously violent: David Cooke in *Poetry London*, says that your poems are 'obsessed with ritual and violence to a degree which seems gratuitous'; Banville in the *New York Review of Books* mentions the poems can be 'suspect' and that they 'hint of the gratuitous' and James Quinn in *Poetry Ireland*, re 'The Flaying of Marsyas' wrote, 'I felt that the only excuse for the lengthy account of the flaying of the hubristic singer was Robertson's own delight in rendering the grisly details of dismemberment in an exquisite literary language'. How do you respond to this?

RR – Ovid in the original is much worse! 'The Flaying of Marsyas' was a commission. I was to write a version of the poem – not a translation. I took the Ovidian story and put a modern spin on it. The original narrative is shocking in its descriptions of brutal punishment and physical violence. The way I saw it was that this kind of torture is still happening around the world, where the outsider or the weaker party is subject to a system of brutality. I wanted to make this poem feel as if it were happening in Northern Ireland, Rwanda or Afghanistan. I thought it was justified. There's no way you could retell it *without* violence. I left out Ovid's 'happy ending', with all the woodland creatures gathered round. That would have been much too Walt Disney. I didn't see that you could have a happy ending to a story like that.

KN – I've been doing a rather unscientific tally of each poets' books, looking at whether the amount of violence or violent imagery in each book diminishes as they go on. I wondered if

poets' books might become less violent as they continue to be published. But in your case you seem to be fairly consistent – on average about half of the poems in each book contain violent imagery or content.

RR – Oh really [laughs].

KN – Yes but the most violent of your books by my reckoning is *Slow Air*, which I should say is actually my favourite.

RR – Really? No one else tends to choose that book as a favourite. That book's really about loss ...

KN – What can we expect for your next collection?

RR – I'm far ahead of myself [laughs], I've already got thirty pages of a new book. I'm going to the badlands of west Texas in April for a month to write. The book's already in some kind of inchoate form. I'd love to write about the desert, I'd be very encouraged by that: so different from the north-east coast of Scotland. And there have been significant changes in my circumstances. I now have a place to write in London, so I've settled into a different mode of working and I think I'm more optimistic. [Pause] Which is a worry.

I have my own thematic labels for my books: *Slow Air* was grief, *Swithering* was stasis or paralysis, and the last book was a book of leaving or trying to leave. But the next one? It will have a different direction while still being true to my themes [laughs]. It seems to have houses and homes in it, which is quite a departure.

KN – Is there anything to do with the subject of violence and your writing that I haven't asked you about that you'd like to discuss?

RR – [Pause] You can't ignore violence. It's in our myths and folk-tales. It's in life. And living in London there's a definite undercurrent of threat: it feels dangerous to me – the speed of it, that undertow of barely suppressed anger. If you're a writer, you have to be sensible to what's around you, and you pick up things like tension and threat; I'm interested in all of this, and the effects it has on people. There's a fairly constant stream of anxiety about one thing or another – it's palpable and it's important.

KN – I'm thinking that people who write about violence aren't angry or brutal, that they're actually against violence. It's a way for us to try and understand violence, and if we can understand it, that might help to stop it.

RR – Yes, that's right. But violence is accompanied by the *fear* of violence; which is another anxiety. I'm writing about that at the moment.

KN – And when do you hope the new book will be out?

RR – Next year.

KN – But all the others have been out every four years.

RR – Yes, I know. Whatever next?

KN – Well good luck with it and thanks very much for your help.

***Katrina Naomi** holds a PhD in creative writing from Goldsmiths (University of London). Her thesis was on violence in contemporary poetry. Her latest publication is *Hooligans* (Rack Press, 2015), inspired by the Suffragettes. She was the inaugural writer-in-residence at the Bronte Parsonage Museum and is currently working on the project 'Film V. Poetry' with the visual artist, Tim Ridley. www.katrinanaomi.co.uk*