

Context: Ciaran Carson and 'Belfast Confetti'

Ciaran Carson (1948–)

Ciaran Carson was born in 1948 in Belfast, Northern Ireland. He is very much a son of that city, graduating from Queen's University, Belfast, and living there still now. His first language is Irish and he says that 'I write in English, but the ghost of Irish hovers behind it; and English itself is full of ghostly presences'. His name is in many ways symbolic of his Irish identity – Ciaran is a Catholic name, whereas Carson is Protestant. Apparently one of his ancestors enthusiastically converted to Protestantism.

Influenced by writers such as Paul Muldoon, C.K. Williams and Louis MacNeice in particular, Carson extends traditionally based Irish vernacular storytelling in verse that uses a 'long line' style – a feature of 'Belfast Confetti'. Much of his writing is influenced by music, particularly jigs and other traditional forms. In an interview in the *New Yorker* magazine, he says, 'The more I write, the more I think that music and song are fundamental to what I write. Especially the genre of song known in the Irish language as *sean-nós* (old-style). Its sound-structure is always at the back of my mind.'

Violence and its effects often lie at the centre of Carson's poetry, unsurprising perhaps given that he grew up and lived in Belfast during the 'Troubles'.

'Belfast Confetti'

'Belfast Confetti' (1990) won the *Irish Times* Irish Literature Prize for Poetry. The title of the poem initially suggests a celebration, but the phrase 'Belfast Confetti' pre-dates the poem and refers to the screws, bolts and nails that were placed in IRA bombs as shrapnel.

The poem is about the aftermath of an IRA bomb attack. Even the language itself becomes a weapon: the bomb in 'Belfast Confetti' is loaded ironmongery as well as a 'fount of broken type'.

'Belfast Confetti' reveals a fascination with language itself. Influenced by James Joyce's street language in *Dubliners* and *Ulysses*, the poem explores how written language echoes the sounds of a city in turmoil.

Carson has said, 'I'm not that interested in ideologies. I'm interested in the words, and how they sound to me, how words connect with experience.' This can certainly be seen in the poem, where he does not seem to take sides, and does not say whether he condemns the bombing or not. It is about the effect on people and the power of words.

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