

Context: Simon Armitage and 'Out of the Blue'

Simon Armitage (1963–)

Simon Armitage was born in 1963 in the village of Marsden, West Yorkshire, and has lived for most of his life in the surrounding area. His grandparents also lived in Marsden and his sister and her family lived nearby. He studied Geography at Portsmouth University, returning to his parents' home after graduating.

His experiences as a young man in Yorkshire have been a major influence on his writing. He's lived for most of his life close to Saddleworth Moor and has said: 'I did spend an awful lot of time when I was 13 or 14 just roaming around these moors. It's just great thinking time.'

The industrial background of Yorkshire has also been a key influence on Armitage's poetry. He sees himself as a craftsman and links his writing back to the history of Yorkshire:

I was never going to be a Bohemian because I'm from a part of the world where we make things. And I wanted to make things as well but I didn't want to make tractors and engines which a lot of kids from school wanted to do. You need a role model to show you what things to make.

Armitage's family also features in his poetry; his father was a probation officer, as was Armitage himself until 1994, and he has written extensively about him in his collection of essays *All Points North*. Armitage writes about his father's work in the tyre trade, as well as about watching a pantomime he directed and produced.

Adolescence and growing up are common themes in Armitage's work and he visits schools and colleges regularly to discuss poetry and his own work with young people. His poetry often deals with aspects of modern life; his use of contemporary language and Northern dialect add to the 'down to earth' feel of his work, while his musical understanding and wit give his writing a vivid, lively feel.

Armitage believes that he does not 'own' the way that the poems should be read:

Poetry is a very compact language, so you can think about whether there is another meaning to some of the words; it can be like looking into a pond – will something else come into focus? One thing you shouldn't do is assume there's some kind of key that will 'turn' this poem, or that there's some code that you've got to press.

In a recent interview, he talked specifically about form and style:

I tend to think that poems come pre-packaged, and that when the idea suggests itself to me the form comes with it: I sort of see it in my mind's eye – particularly with poems that come as blocks of text...I think I do imagine these things to be pre-determined in some way – that they are somehow in concert with the whole idea of the poem and with the style of the poem – style is everything to me, in writing. I think that is what people are interested in in poems.

Awards for his work include a BAFTA, an Ivor Novello Award and the *Sunday Times* Young Writer of the Year award. In addition to the poetry for which he is best known, his reach extends to film, radio and television, stage plays, novels, essays and a translation of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

‘Out of the Blue’

The extract in the Anthology is from a longer poem, ‘Out of the Blue’, which tells the story of the 9/11 attacks from the point of view of an English trader working in the World Trade Center’s North Tower at the time.

The poem begins as the trader embarks on his working day. Everything seems ordinary. As the poem progresses, we see the impact of the attacks and his growing understanding of the personal consequences as he is unable to escape. In the extract ‘You have picked me out’, he sees people leaping and falling from the towers and realises that his situation is hopeless.

The poem ‘Out of the Blue’ was commissioned by Channel 5 and broadcast on the fifth anniversary of the World Trade Center attacks as part of a documentary of the same name. Rufus Sewell narrated the poem for the film, which won the Royal Television Society Documentary Award in 2006. The poem itself has been described as a ‘salty, unflinching poem’. According to the poet, he deliberately avoided writing a political poem, instead aiming to create a piece that was ‘commemorative and elegiac’ and would ‘give those inside a voice’.

Out of the Blue was also used as the title for a volume which collects this and two other poems by Armitage on the theme of conflict: ‘We May Allow Ourselves a Brief Period of Rejoicing’ and ‘Cambodia’. The former was a Channel 5 commission for the 60th anniversary of VE Day and the latter commissioned by the BBC for its radio drama *The Violence of Silence*, set in Cambodia 30 years after the rise of the Khmer Rouge.

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