Edinburgh International Book Festival 2023 – Don Paterson

The poet Don Paterson says his Scottish identity only became apparent to him when he moved to London at the age of 20.

Before that he'd crossed the border precisely once, for a 'terrible' family holiday at Whitley Bay. In London you had either to hang on to your Scottishness or 'turn Cockney' to fit in. And he wasn't about to do the latter.

'The one place you can't hear yourself being Scottish is in Scotland.'

That's not the only reason he came back, but he seems glad to be here. These days he lives in Kirriemuir, but he grew up in 1970s Dundee. He's just written a book about his first twenty years, *Toy Fights: A Boyhood* and he's at the Edinburgh International Book Festival to discuss it with the director of V & A Dundee, **Leonie Bell**.

Bell begins by asking Paterson just how he managed to remember what happened almost 40 years ago – did he keep diaries? He didn't, and his family photo albums, though there were many, had been so 'over-archived' by his aunts that he didn't know most people in the pictures.

But Paterson's greatest passion in life is music (after playing guitar for the Celtic jazz band Lammas for years he later formed Don Paterson Situation, and earlier this month he performed at the Rose Theatre with Graham Stephenson), so it was to music that he turned. He'd recall an album, think about what he'd been doing when he heard it (and how he felt when his Uncle Billy borrowed it – 'cross'), and the memories began to surface.

He'd first thought of writing a memoir fifteen years ago, but once he'd got his hands on the publisher's advance he spent it on a guitar. Then four years ago his Dad died from dementia; suddenly it felt like the right time, that his memories might chime with others.

It is, says Bell, a very funny book, covering a time when parts of Dundee, notably shopping centres and large stores, were thriving. In 1966 the Tay Bridge finally replaced the ferry crossing to Fife; Paterson's family used it to visit his grandparents. But deindustrialisation was rearing its head in the area; jute mills, mines and railways were already shedding staff

> *'Dundee has been very poor for a very long time….things seems normal to Dundonians that wouldn't to people elsewhere.'*

The book, says Bell, pulsates with rage about poverty and our failure to do anything about it. It's certainly an issue about which Paterson feels very strongly, and not just in relation to Dundee; it affects vast swathes of Scotland, urban and rural. He's especially critical of social media

‘(it) makes toddlers of us all…we aren’t always focusing on the issues where we could make the greatest change. People only attach themselves to causes for which they’ll receive some peer prestige. We need to think about non-sexy causes and what we can do about them, but they’re not popular.’

Although he’s a supporter of the independence movement, like many he has no problem with England – but plenty with Westminster

‘You need to invest in people and communities and give them hope. Austerity does not work. It doesn’t touch the middle classes.’

Paterson grew up on a council estate. He attended Kirkton High School, at that time merged with a borstal and he avoided trouble by keeping his head down and making friends with the big kids

‘I was like the prisoner who writes Valentines for the hard men.’

He tells hilarious stories about his time in the Boys Brigade (badges) and then the Junior Red Cross, (bizarre field exercises and medals, including one for ‘wound design.’). Weird to think how we were all so militarised then, says Bell (and with different groups for different classes too; Scouts were for Dundee High School boys)

‘It was the last gasp of National Service.’

His dad, uncle and brother all worked for DC Thomson. At 16 he left school and joined them, though he didn’t last long. Sacked for getting high in the toilets, he moved to London, hoping to make it as a musician. When his landlady’s television picture was so poor that he couldn’t see the

snooker, he turned over to BBC2, and there he encountered Tony Harrison

> *‘the first poet I’d ever seen who wasn’t dead’*

He was hooked – but that’s another story, one that didn’t start till he was 22, so we’ll have to wait for part two too the memoir to hear about it, and also the fact that, with no higher education whatsoever, he’s taught poetry on the MLitt course at St Andrews University for the last twenty years.

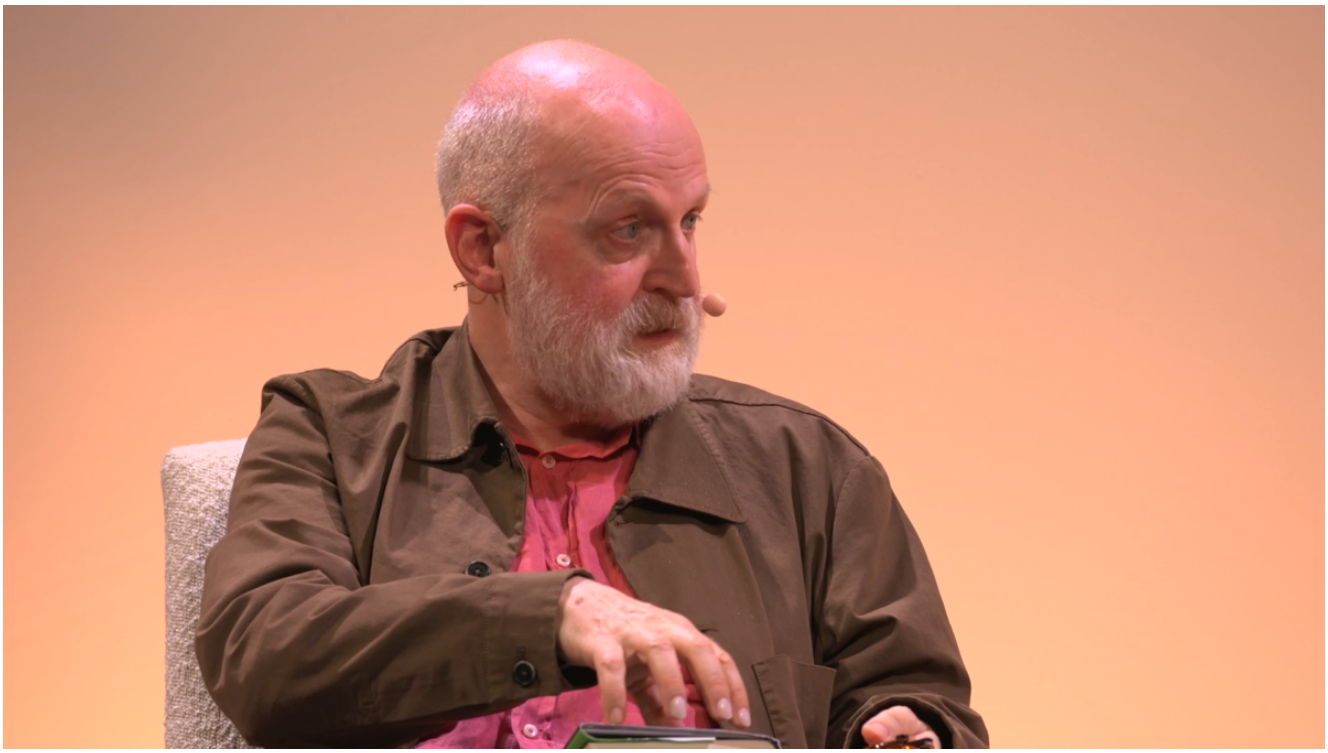


Image: Edinburgh International Book Festival

Returning to his youth in Dundee, Bell asks him about the mental health crisis he suffered as a teenager, and his time in Ninewells Hospital. He’s managed to make some of it sound very funny, but surely it was it difficult to write about, especially in lockdown?

It was unpleasant, says Paterson, but lockdown gave him the chance to dredge it all up for the first time. He only recently read his diagnosis, which was ‘an adolescent schizophrenic episode.’

Bell refers to Grayson Perry, who has talked about the

fragmentation of self; does this resonate with Paterson?

> *‘Yes, you have to reconstruct it, but sometimes a reboot mechanism kicks in, a voice you can trust.’*

When he was discharged, Paterson convalesced by having his friends round all night. His Mum and Dad didn’t even complain about the non-stop use of the bathroom right outside their bedroom door. His friends thought his Dad – a musician in his spare time – was cool, but he didn’t – there were plenty of run-ins. Like most teenagers he needed to challenge his parents. His grandfather was a Free Church minister and his mother belonged to the kirk; he wanted to please her but also wanted to be a rebel. His solution was to embrace the Charismatic Pentecostal movement.

> *‘Was she worried?’*
> *‘Yes, and she was right to be.’*

He talks in the book about being embarrassed to admit to being a poet. Poetry, he says, is not like other arts, there is no set routine, you don’t go to your studio every morning and put in your hours

> *‘Poetry is more of a diagnosis, a certain way of thinking about language…it’s almost a syndrome that comes with obsessive addictive personalities, and in males, the inability to drive a car. If a male poet says he can drive don’t get in a car with him.’*

Paterson has a wide range of interests himself, some of which could be seen as obsessions; he’s obviously into music and poetry, but the list also includes US billiards and origami (the origami phase leads to another very funny story involving a girl and a £10 note out of which he made a peacock.) He does have limits though; he gave up stamp collecting after two weeks

> *‘I realised it was a waste of time; what had we progressed through that?’*

Writing a memoir can be tricky when the people you mention in it are still alive; people can have very different recollections of the same incident. How, asks Bell, did his family take it? Did he check with them all before publishing?

He did not, the only person he consulted was his Mum and he didn’t want any problems there. The rest of the family only read it once it was in the shops

> *‘You can’t form a committee to establish the veracity of your memories. You need to make sure you’re as hard on yourself as on others, but you do have to call out bad behaviour – although there has to be some responsibility to the living. I’m still smoothing over the cracks; it’ll take another year.’ (Laughs.)*

Going back once again to thoughts on his homeland, he sees devolution as a force for good, something that has increased Scotland’s self-confidence

> *‘self-consciousness is the death of art, and that’s always been in problem in Scotland. We don’t know who we are yet and we won’t find out till we’re allowed to do so.’*

Similarly, although he says he could never live in Dundee now, he feels it’s changed over the last few years, and is recovering some pride in itself. It’s hard, though, to get hold of Dundee’s identity

> *‘It’s like Calvino’s ‘Hidden Cities‘, a lot of cities imposed on top of one another, a fascinating dog’s dinner. It’s so enclosed, so socially interconnected. I love it and it drives me round the bend.’*

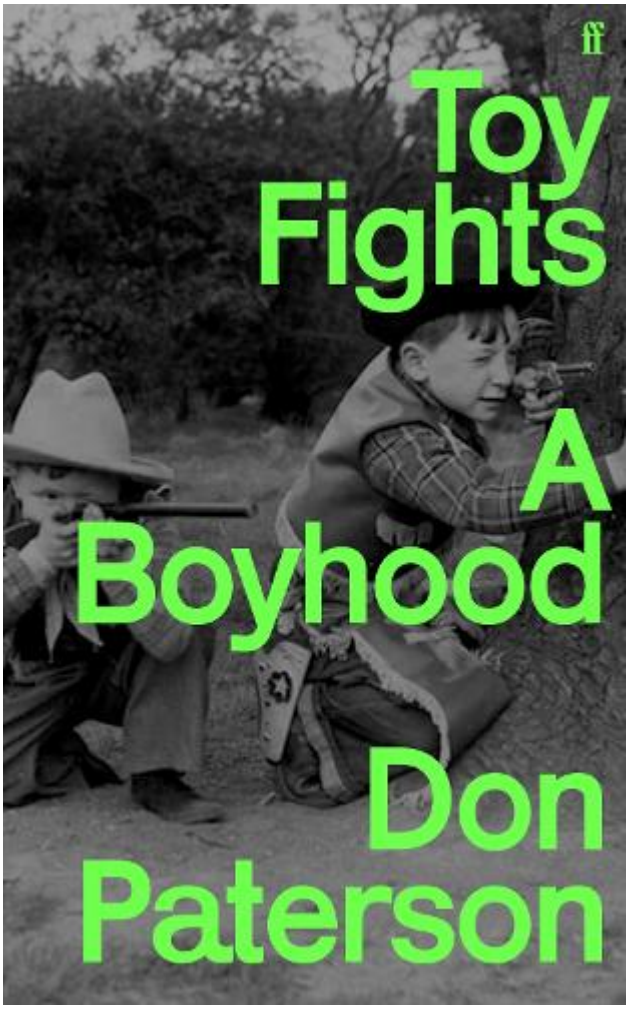
And Paterson, wherever he lives, is still a Dundonian through and through. He tells a story about a student at St Andrew's who, after a lecture, came up to tell him he'd 'need to work on his accent' to make himself understood to him and his friends; 'I should've failed him on the spot.'

Instead he reminded him that St Andrew's was once a Scottish fort, he himself was born only ten miles away, and that they were in his country, not theirs

> *'And I'd even had my lecture voice on!'*

Paterson says his initial intention was to write about playing in a club band in Dundee, but that would've only produced a pamphlet. Instead we can all enjoy reading about a very particular childhood, rooted in a very particular Scottish city – one that has produced one of Scotland's most outstanding and celebrated living poets.

Toy Fights: A Boyhood by Don Paterson is published by Faber.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