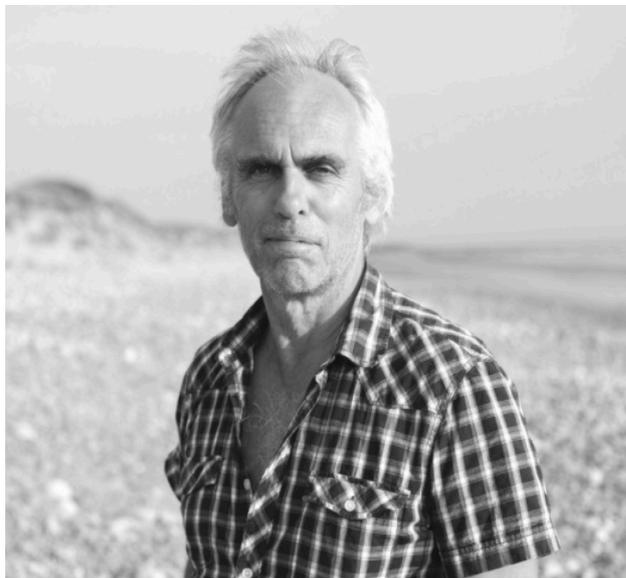


IN CONVERSATION WITH ROBERT MINHINNICK



Robert Minhinnick is a Welsh poet, novelist, short story writer and essayist. He has won the Forward Prize twice, along with Wales Book of the Year a record three times – most recently for his poetry collection, *Diary of the Last Man* (Carcenet, 2017). *Diary of the Last Man* was also shortlisted for the T.S. Eliot Prize and has been made into a film, directed by Eamon Bourke. He is former editor of *Poetry Wales* and co-founder of *Friends of the Earth Cymru* and *Sustainable Wales*.

Q. The broad theme of *Black Bough* issue 2 is ‘space and cosmos’. What draws you out of Earth’s atmosphere in your poetry?

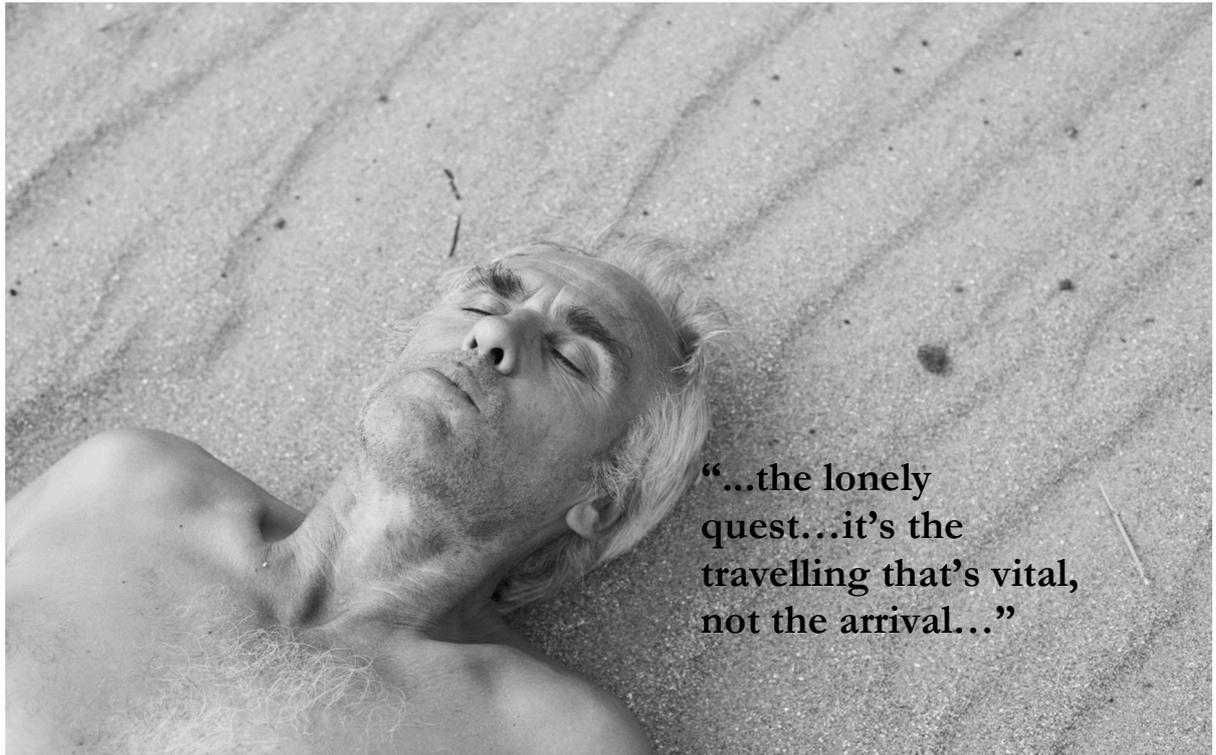
A. Stars. Constellations. The planets... That’s my mother’s influence, encouraging astronomy. And general curiosity about scientists and the idea of ‘the quest’. Often, the lonely quest. Quests are journeys. Of course, it’s the travelling that’s vital, not the arrival...

Q. ‘To the Ninth Planet’, published for the first time in *Black Bough*, is subtitled ‘After William Blake’s ‘To the Evening Star’. Why did you choose to respond to Blake’s sonnet?

A. I was commissioned to write a response to a William Blake poem in a series titled ‘Voice and Echo’. I chose ‘To the Evening Star’. Not my favourite Blake, but a challenge. Ian McMillan and Nick Drake also provided responses, and all were performed in Shakespeare’s Globe in London. My reader was Meera Syal, and she was marvellous. This is the only time ‘To the Ninth Planet’ has ever been heard or read. I’ve never performed it. The poem has been hanging about for two years.

Q. Another new poem, ‘Saltwort’, is also a kind of meditation on an ‘evening star’ and there is a feeling of deep, elemental communion (that we also see in *Diary of the Last Man*) between the otherworldly, intangible and remote and the immediate physicality – the life, rock and salt – of Earth. Can you elaborate on this chemistry in your poetry?

A. ‘Saltwort’ was written after sleeping outside in Kenfig dunes, beside a driftwood fire. Alpheratz had been very visible, but at early dawn it had vanished. I’ve always loved both the flower, finding it remarkable, growing in such unpropitious places, and the Arabic poetry of the star’s name. My writing comprises particularities and attempts to avoid abstractions...It’s about looking ever more closely at things...



Q. In *Diary of the Last Man*, the poetic voice memorably asks ‘how might the atom atone?’ Your new poem ‘The Atomsmasher’ considers Welsh physicist Dr Lyn Evans’s involvement in the discovery of the Higgs Boson particle. Furthermore, issue 2 of *Black Bough* celebrates the Apollo 11 moon landing and the first British astronaut in space, and yet space exploration is a notoriously expensive and polluting venture. Could you talk a little about the tension between environmentalism and scientific discovery in your poetry?

A. This is a fragment of a long diary poem I kept in 2012 when refurbishing the *Sustainable Wales* office. It’s a chaotic but not arbitrary outpouring, of which lines are continually rewritten and occur in other writing. This Lyn Evans piece is a description of his lecture in Swansea mixed up with images about my allotment.

Scientific discovery is vital. I believe wholeheartedly in it. Environmentalism is about not ruining what you inherit. Thus *The Dunes* has an essay about the Welsh language place names of the Merthyr Mawr dunes in south Wales, and why they are important...

“...It’s about looking ever more closely at things...”

Q. What are your current writing projects?

A. First, a novel, *Nia*, to be published by Seren in autumn 2019. This is about exploration and one character's dreams. And second, a collaboration with the artist, Dan Llywelyn Hall, on a volume titled *The Dunes*. His art, my writings. This is ongoing, deliciously organic...

Q. Do you have any advice for aspiring poets?

A. Read! More widely than poetry. And reread. Rereading is vital.

Q. *Black Bough* is part of a wider democratisation of the poetry world, where many online publishers provide more exposure and opportunities for new poets to publish their work. Can you comment on this development in poetry publishing?

A. Some poets I know will have nothing to do with on-line publishing, but this is nonsense and damagingly narrow. Writing, like all art, is what human beings do, and is unstoppable. If technology allows it, fine. But it demands craft and time...And talent!

AN INTERVIEW WITH GUEST READER LAURA WAINWRIGHT.