



Tales from The Leeds Library

season 2

S2E4: Ian Harker - poet and Marketing and Comms at The Leeds Library

Transcript

00:00:14 Molly

Hello and welcome to tales from the Leeds Library. The Leeds Library's Podcast series in which we talk to members of our extended community about their lives, their work and their relationship to books, libraries and literature. Founded in 1768, the Leeds Library is the oldest surviving subscription library in the UK and throughout this series we'll also be diving periodically into the Library's rich history to find out what makes us and our members one of the most interesting and unique cultural institutions in Leeds and the UK. I'm Molly Magrath, the Projects Assistant at the Leeds Library and today our guest is Ian Harker. Ian is the author of a pamphlet, 'The End of the Sky' and a collection 'Rules of Survival' through Templar Poetry and hopes to publish his second pamphlet, 'A-Z of Superstitions' through Yaffle Press this year. He's a co-founder of Saboteur Award nominated Strix Magazine, which is soon to be relaunched, and he has placed in competitions including the Bridport Troubadour and BBC Proms poetry competition and is an organiser of the Leeds Lit Fest. Most importantly, however, Ian is the newly appointed Marketing and Communications Officer here at the Leeds Library, and we're going to be talking to him about his role here as well as his poetry work.

So, hello Ian, thanks very much for joining me on this podcast. So, we're going to talk a bit about Library stuff later on, but I want to talk a bit first about your writing and your poetry. So just give us a bit of background. How did you first start writing, and was it something that you were always interested in from a young age? Or did you come to it later as an adult?

00:02:00 Ian

I think I started writing poems when I started reading poems for pleasure and that's when I when I started wanting to write them myself, when I was studying poems at school I never really got that urge somehow. I don't know, it was something that you studied at school, and it was like a finished version of a poem that you took apart in a classroom. And it never really seemed to have any relevance to like life and the idea that I might actually write something like that myself, but when I started reading it myself for pleasure, probably when I was about 18/19 and that's when I started writing it myself. But I guess the earliest thing I can remember, and it probably did have a big impact, probably bigger than I can really trace, is at primary school. It was. It was a world book there and our teacher Mrs Geldard, shout out to Mrs Geldard at Lower Wortley Primary School, because she read us Roald Dahl's Revolting Rhymes and I just remember being absolutely mesmerised. I'm

gobsmacked as well because, you know, there's knickers in there. There's machine guns and I can still remember; I can still see that moment when I was sitting there listening to these poems and just being absolutely blown away.

00:03:31 Molly

Yeah, I have a formative memory of reading Roald Dahl's like adult short stories for the first time. I don't know if you've read them, but they're horrific, they're really gory and like creepy, and they're horrible and I remember thinking like 'Oh yeah, Roald Dahl. These are kids stories I'll enjoy these' and being like horrified.

00:03:40 Ian

Really, no, I haven't read them.

00:03:50 Molly

But I'm wondering like if once started writing, once you started reading for pleasure, did that come from a kind of an impulse towards self-expression, or were you more kind of interested in the kind of you know, playing with words and the mechanics of the language? Or was it both?

00:04:13 Ian

Yeah, kind of both, but for self-expression mainly, or rather I suppose I just loved poems so much that I wanted to do it myself. I guess that that was the impulse and self-expression mainly. But I have come to combine the two. I like poets that do a lot of different things and that can include just playing with sounds and having fun.

00:04:40 Molly

Yeah, exactly. So, what kind of themes are you drawn to in your work and have they changed over the years? And if so, how?

00:04:52 Ian

I always struggle to say what exactly is I write about. I guess how I write has changed as I've got a bit older, I think when I first started writing particularly you go through a phase, or many writers go through a phase where they imitate the writers and the performers that they most love. And for me, that's essential, really, it's how you learn. You learn by copying and eventually you sort of come out of that a bit and develop your own and voice. Once I'd stopped doing that, I guess I started writing about anything that fell at my feet, and I was like 'oh, write a poem about that, oh write a poem about that'. So, it was impulsive in a way. Now I've got a bit older, I find myself writing less but writing, hopefully better, and maybe writing more quality than quantity and actually noting down things that I want to write about and just accepting that writing about that will come when it wants to. So, I've never been someone that can force myself to write a poem, I've got to let it come, which is difficult when you're commissioned to write something, but you know, staring at a blank page and thinking how am I going to do this - nothing worse for me, but you know, you can get there.

00:06:30 Molly

So those ideas need kind of time to percolate in your brain and develop more fully and

00:06:38 Ian

And sometimes you just need to think about the subject that it is you want to write about a bit more.

00:06:42 Molly

Yeah. I'm going to put you on the spot a little bit because I haven't actually written this down, but what kind of poets do you remember reading that first really inspired you when you were 18, and well I guess do you have any big kind of inspirations or influences?

00:07:01 Ian

Yeah, I mean the the biggest one for me is Paul Durcan who I did come to a bit later but he's an Irish poet, absolutely fantastic writer, I can't begin to express my admiration for his work, and again because he does so many different things. And very often he does it all at once, so he can write about so many different kinds of things. And when you think he's being deadly serious, maybe he's not, maybe he's being funny. And when you think he's being funny, he's actually being deadly serious. He's got such a light touch and such incredible humanity and kindness that shows through really in Paul Durkin's work. So, Paul Durkin is definitely top of the list. But early poets I mean, Philip Larkin was the first one. High Windows, the collection 'High windows', I just I read that and read that over and over again. I mean he's a bit grumpy. And I look at some of his work now and say OK, Philip yeah, OK, whatever! But I still do love Philip Larkin, and High Windows. Louis MacNeice, another poet that I completely fell in love with and still am in love with. He had amazing hats as well, and so that's always a good sign for me.

00:08:31 Molly

So, can you tell me a little bit about your upcoming pamphlet, which is an A to Z of superstitions which is going to be published through Yaffle Press later this year?

00:08:41 Ian

Yes, yeah. I guess it's an example of write what you know of being a cliché but being true. it's a very Leeds collection, many of the poems in it are about people that I knew in my childhood and people's pasts in my childhood, so A to Z of superstitions is a little bit of a joke, but it's also kind of, you know, that family stories and people you knew from a long time ago, they do kind of become fixed stars in your life, almost like superstitions and so it's telling the stories of their lives and my life and Leeds.

00:09:26 Molly

I really like that idea of, and I think poetry does this really well actually, of mythologizing your own life in a way and creating this kind of language, yeah, almost like a mythology around your own life, which is super.

00:09:39 Ian

Oh yeah, poets love that, and they'll put them themselves at the centre of their mythology as well, usually.

00:09:43 Molly

Exactly exactly. But really like, you know self-referential. I think this is your second collection and you have a pamphlet as well. Second pamphlet, sorry. Do you find that your work gets I guess denser and builds on itself the more that you write, or is each collection kind of a discrete separate thing by itself?

00:10:08 Ian

I think it feels very, uh, it feels very unique when you're writing it, but I was reading some of the pamphlet the other day, *The end of the Sky*. And I could see a lot of similarities actually with A to Z of superstitions, for example. So, I guess when you're writing it, it does feel very, you are very close to it and very in the moment and it can feel unique but actually probably when you step back from it a little bit later on you probably see more similarities, I guess.

00:10:48 Molly

Yeah, well, I guess it's always all your own work, isn't it. Do you feel that you have a kind of set voice now, that you've found that is kind of your own? Or do you? I mean, I suppose writing is always an evolving process, but do you feel like you have kind more to learn?

00:11:04 Ian

If I feel like there's an Ian Harker poem coming on, I always try to stop writing it or always try and write it in a different way. Because really poetry is just surprising language. And if there is an Ian Harker poem coming on, surely that means that you must have written that before and I mean there is a danger to that, in trying to be different all the time, but you have to fight against writing the same thing and writing the same thing in exactly the same way.

00:11:48 Molly

That's quite a good piece of advice, actually. If you feel that something is too you, you should step away from it. I don't know. I yeah, I think that's really interesting. So, I mean, you have this pamphlet coming out, but you also have done some publishing, you co-founded *Strix* magazine, which is a poetry magazine of poetry and fiction, and I am I right in saying that it's Leeds based?

00:12:19 Ian

Yeah, no it takes submissions from all over the country and over the world. But it's Leeds based.

00:12:25 Molly

Yeah, so can you tell me a bit about *Strix* and kind of how it came to be and where the idea came from?

00:12:32 Ian

Yeah, I mean *Rules of Survival* was coming out. This would have been 2017 and there'd been a huge amount of work going into to that to get the manuscript ready in it. I mean, it was two years after the pamphlet, but they still fell hard on each other's heels. And so I was still reading from the pamphlet in places but also getting the book together and so there was a huge burst of activity and then I clicked send on the the you know, the final manuscript and it was all done, and it's agreed. And then I was sort of sitting there thinking 'oh okay, what do I do now?' And so that seemed like the perfect moment to, I don't want to be that guy, but put something back you know, do something of use to the community that that made me succeed as a writer, and pull my weight?

00:13:42 Molly

Yeah, and what's the process of putting *Strix* together like in comparison to writing and do you think the process of editing and looking through submissions has changed or affected your work in any way? I know that you have loads and loads and loads of submissions and you're quite

selective which makes it this quite compact magazine, but then everything in it is really amazing. So yeah, has that process kind of informed the way that you write or think about writing?

00:14:18 Ian

I think it does, but I have to compartmentalise Strix and, say Leeds Lit Fest and my Day Job. With my own writing I can't really work in the same headspace I suppose, and so I've had to keep each of those things separate. And if it's influenced my writing, it's only when I've actually gone back to issues of Strix and, like you said, read back the work and thought 'that's really good'. You know it is when you're publishing it, when you're going through 1000 submissions you know what you've got is good, but you're under pressure and you need to make a decision and editors disagree with each other, and we see different things and we see different things from different perspectives. But ultimately you come back to it you and think, oh, that's really good. So I mean, if Strix has taught me anything it's how write really good poems because they show you how to do it.

00:15:30 Molly

Yeah, yeah. So it's not just you editing, you coedit, you're part of a team?

00:15:40 Ian

Yeah and yeah, Andrew Lambert and I are the poetry editors. And on SJ Bradley is the fiction writer.

00:15:44 Molly

Oh OK, yeah, I've heard of her work. I'm interested in when you're going through these submissions if it's more of a head or a heart decision when you're kind of stuck in deciding what to include or what you think is really good, how that decision gets made. If you see something and you think, oh technically, that's really good, but I don't love it. Or if you're gut says Oh my God, this is amazing but your head's maybe a bit like unsure as to why.

00:16:16 Ian

I don't think I've ever made a decision based on my head. It's always been heart and for me the poems that I want to publish are always the ones that have just leapt off the page and said, I'm the one. You know, it's a total when Harry met Sally moment. But Andrew comes to poetry from a bit of a different perspective from me, 'cause his background is graphics and typography, so he's got a different eye and a different field for things than me, a different taste I suppose ultimately. And I'll say, for example, I'm not sure about that, but then Andrew will put his perspective on it and we'll either agree or have a duel.

00:17:01 Molly

And does Andrew do the the typography for it? 'cause I've seen a couple of the pamphlets and they're amazing, they're these kind of really long thin volumes but then they have like tracing paper pages and these amazing illustrations. They're really gorgeous. How long does one kind of take to put together?

00:17:11 Ian

Yeah no he does all that yeah. I mean in it time wise I can say that the submission windows are a month and then once we've got all the work finalised you're may be talking 2, maybe three weeks until it either goes off to the printer or comes back from the printer. In terms of how much work Andrew does, I don't know. He has this this magic dust that he sprinkles over it and whatever he

touches he man he makes it look amazing and I guess there's a combined decades of experience in there. Uhm, so exactly you know timing it? How much work goes in? Hard to say, but the turnaround for one issue is about two months from submission to print.

00:18:20 Molly

That's quite, I guess quite quick, but then it must be very, very intense. I imagine reading thousands of submissions it kind of fries your brain a little bit.

00:18:27 Ian

Yeah it is, it does. But that's the enjoyable part. You know, there's no other reason for setting up a magazine. And I love reading all of the submissions. We do read all the submissions. I love reading them all, I've never not loved a single submission.

00:18:50 Molly

Yeah, so you're obviously really involved in the the Leeds poetry scene and you're from near Leeds and you know you work at the library and with the Leeds Lit Fest, all of this stuff, what do you think are some of the best things about the Leeds literature scene at the moment. Are there any organisations or events or poets or publications that are doing really good things apart from Strix, obviously and Ian Harker's newest publication, those go without saying.

00:19:24 Ian

A few years ago, I can't remember. Time is no longer really a thing, is it? A few years ago, the Guardian published a piece about the DIY scene in in Leeds and it was a bit of a puff piece in a way, it was kind of journalistic writing, but I think it is true. You know there's a truth at the heart of it that not just in Leeds, the whole country is writing is supported by networks of people who work incredibly hard for no money, less than no money because they you know they pay out of pocket expenses for themselves, passionate individuals who just make things happen because they want it to happen, and I think Leeds is really really good for that. I joined the Leeds Writers circle in in 2006 for example, an absolutely incredible group of people and again, all run by volunteers, Fictions of every kind, Leeds poetry stanza, Word Club. All of these groups you know, nights, workshops, spoken word, and Leeds is seething with those kinds of organisations, and it's a real strength for the city. I remember talking to a publisher once, I'm not being coy I just can't remember who it was, and she said that she'd gone to university in London in the 70s and the only type of literature event down there at the time was you went to a book launch, you got a free glass of wine, the publisher stood up and said how marvellous they were, the writers stood up and said how marvellous they were then everyone went home. And in terms of getting published, it was all a case of, well, you need to get to know the right people. And whereas now in Leeds over the last few years I've seen people walk into spoken word nights for the first time ever, performed for the first time ever, and they've been picked up by publishers who just loved their work and they've been encouraged by the grassroots of the writers of the city, and nurtured and I think Leeds is really really good for that.

00:21:53 Molly

You're right, and I think there is a real, there are strong connections between these groups, these different writing groups, but they also have strong connections with these kind of smaller publishers, poetry publishers, and that ties into a lot of the work that we're kind of wanting to do with the library which is about supporting you know that kind of, I don't want to call it a food chain, but you know that food chain, you have spaces for people to try out their work and practise

it and get criticism, then you have you know, those people are able to perfect it and then get the top and then you know.

00:22:30 Ian

Yeah, yeah, an ecosystem.

00:22:37 Molly

An ecosystem! that's a much nicer way of putting it. I guess then, conversely, what do you think that we could be doing better in Leeds to support up and coming writers? What do you think we don't do so well, or we could do better at?

00:22:50 Ian

Well, I mean, I think it's easy to engage people who are already engaged, so you know you set out your stall at Leeds Lit Fest every year, and people who really want to seek you out will seek you out. And I think the real work going forward in the future needs to be with pre-existing organisations that that can put you in touch with people who aren't engaged and who have always thought they want to start writing and performing, but have I've never done, or maybe you've never even considered writing and performing. It's getting to those hard-to-reach people, and I suppose that work comes from schools primarily and community organisations 'cause like I said the earliest memory of poetry for me is being read a poem at school, and that's the perfect time and the perfect context to inspire people. You know, in the early years of life. And so I guess there needs to be more work with schools and community organisations to get to people who wouldn't necessarily pick up a brochure about Leeds Lit Fest.

00:24:04 Molly

Yeah, and actually I think I guess ironically, for you, know the spoken word groups and things like that they're not necessarily great at shouting about themselves. I don't know, I always think of literature and reading as quite a kind of insular thing that you do by yourself, so I think those communities aren't necessarily always the loudest, right?

00:24:32 Ian

Or they are but it takes such a huge amount of work to run an organisation like that. You know when usually the people running it have all got full time jobs as well. You know it social media and the internet are vital tools, but they can be very difficult to be heard on. And again, it's about reaching harder to reach people who are not already engaged. And it can take all of your work as an organiser of the spoken word night just to do the spoken word night.

00:25:17 Molly

Yeah, well yeah no. I mean as we know coming off the back of the Leeds Lit Fest which I mean actually was great and you know, I think that there's good energy going forward for this kind of work that we're you know, doing at the library, which is about supporting up and coming writers and being a writers hub in the city and being a concrete place for these kind of writerly communities to come and meet and gather which is really exciting. But I mean, so for those listeners who don't know Ian has recently joined the library as the new marketing and Communications officer. So it's a really interesting time to be joining the library at the moment. So how have you found your first month or so here so far?

00:26:06 Ian

I can't believe it's a month for the first thing 'cause yeah, second week was Leeds Lit Fest and then the third week was then announcing the the acquisition of 15 Commercial St.

00:26:14 Molly

That felt like a year.

And so I'm now just coming down and thinking oh right? OK, I've got a job to do. It's been extremely busy but wonderful at the same time. And I'm looking forward to contributing to and helping to shape the next chapter of the Library's history.

00:26:49 Molly

Yeah, I mean, what are you looking forward to over the coming months at the library and well, I mean more specifically, what can people listening so members and members of the public look forward to at the library?

00:27:03 Ian

So really, I guess the library is getting back to normal now after COVID, and so for people who are members of the library the film club is back up and running and the the members craft club has just restarted, the book group has just restarted as well, and if you're not a member yet, we've started rerunning tours of the library, including tours this week.

00:27:34 Molly

And you're doing one tomorrow.

00:27:35 Ian

I'm doing one tomorrow. I did one today impromptu to some of the volunteers from the Department of Transport who are working next door and who we suddenly realised needed a tour. So, and I jumped in at the last moment. But yeah, it's I'm just looking forward to getting to know our members and getting to be a part of the community.

00:27:57 Molly

Yeah come say hello members, if you're in. And today we've been moving all of the books, so most of the library's collection is stored in this building but actually, a lot of it was at Mill Hill Chapel. And it's now, not. It's now next door at 15 Commercial St which is really exciting thanks to the hard graft of everyone today.

00:28:25 Ian

And yeah, including member volunteers who responded to the call.

00:28:27 Molly

Exactly, yeah. So that's been really exciting and yeah, I guess a lot of the stuff that we'll be doing over the next few months is kind of working out what to do with those and what to do with the building next door, which is really exciting. So, my final question is, how can people find out more about you and how can they get their hands on your writing? Would you like to promo anything?

00:28:57 Ian

Yeah, so you can find out more about me on Twitter at Ian underscore, underscore, Harker and Rules of Survival is available at templarpodcasts.com, as in Knights Templar Templar.

00:29:14 Molly

And keep your eyes out for the A – Z of superstitions.

00:29:18 Ian

Via Yaffle Press.

00:29:19 Molly

And Strix is relaunching, I've heard rumours. Yeah, very exciting so and I imagine there will be a kind of submission process for that.

00:29:23 Ian

Yep, yes it will be, yeah new submissions starting up. Yes, yeah, yeah.

00:29:30 Molly

OK thank you so much Ian. I hope that members will come and say hello and have a chat.

00:29:36 Ian

Thank you.

00:29:41 Molly

He's very friendly, I promise.

00:29:44 Molly

This has been a podcast from the Leeds Library. Links to more information about our guests and any works talked about can be found in the description. If you'd like to find out more about the Leeds library and any of our upcoming events, please visit our website at www.theleedslibrary.org.uk or you can follow us on Twitter, Instagram or Facebook at the Leeds Library. Thank you for listening and keep your eyes and ears peeled for more Tales from the Leeds Library in our future episodes released every Wednesday.