

An Interview with Leslie Harrison

Conducted by Lauren Simmers

Leslie Harrison is the author of *The Book of Endings* (University of Akron Press, 2017) and *Displacement* (Mariner Books, 2009). Born in Germany, Harrison was raised mostly in New Hampshire. She holds graduate degrees from Johns Hopkins University and University of California, Irvine. Her poems have appeared in journals including *Kenyon Review*, *FIELD*, *Poetry*, *New Republic*, *Subtropics*, *Orion*, *Barn Owl Review*, *Antioch Review*, *Pleiades*, among others. Harrison has held a fellowship at Bread Loaf Writers' Conference as well as a scholarship and fellowship at Sewanee Writers' conference. She was the Phillip Roth Resident in Poetry at Bucknell University for the fall of 2010. In 2011 the National Endowment for the arts awarded Harrison a fellowship in literature. In 2017 her book *The Book of Endings* was a National Book Award Finalist in Poetry. She currently serves as a full-time faculty member at Towson University.

Did your relationship with your poetry, especially *The Book of Endings*, change after you became a finalist for the National Book Award?

Well... I got a lot busier.

Funny but true. In the months right after the finalist list was announced, I didn't have any time at all to write and it was funny/not funny that writing made me too busy to write.

Other than that, it doesn't seem to have changed how I do what I do, and how I feel about it.

Since the death of your mother was part of the inspiration for writing *The Book of Endings*, was it your hope that the universal theme of loss would resonate with readers, including those who do not typically search for answers or comfort in poetry?

Wow. It is my hope now. Thank you! The truth is that I've always felt like writers write what they have to write. I've joked that I would watch a great actor read the phone book—anything they do would be amazing. So I feel like I follow writers that way too—whatever they are doing, it is the talent, the angle of their intersection with the world and their materials, their craft that interests me as much as the subject.

I was writing what I had to write. That it has resonated with some people is a gift. It is all we want, as writers, to find people who will read our work. I have been so bowled over, so astonished by other writers. It has been my dream to do that to someone else—have my poems really matter to them the way some poems matter to me.

Did you have a literary inspiration for *The Book of Endings*, or any particular books that you would recommend to readers?

I wish I had a bibliography for the book. That would be totally cool. The problem is that I read a LOT. Really a lot. Like multiple books a week. Often it isn't one book or another that I can point to, but the entire ongoing mess of reading 5 or 10 books at once and the ways they talk to each other. Weirdly, I tried to read other books of poems that engaged with grief so

directly and I couldn't do it. At one point I went on a search for a happy poem to see if they existed. I read my friends' books, their friends' books, the books of strangers, books recommended by other poets.

Here's a cliché question that I'm sure you've gotten a thousand times: What advice do you give to beginning writers of any genre?

It is always a good question, because when we're starting out, so much of the world of writing is a mystery. Students ask me how they know what genre they should write, how to establish a good writing practice, how to figure out who they should read. I had a thousand questions when I was starting out too. My main answers are these:

1. Read. Treat it like a road map. Read someone you love and figure out who they read and then who those people read. Read everything. Watch TV. At least one of the poems in *The Book of Endings* was inspired by the TV show *Supernatural*, which I love. Lots of friends pay a lot of attention to visual art. The world is a text and paying attention to it in that way is a great practice for a writer. Try to read with particular attentions—to language and sound, or to story or to character or to pacing. But mostly just find the things that inspire and wreck you and devour them and find some more.

2. Write. I always think about doctors when I give this advice. They go to college, med school, internship, residency—spend most of a decade studying—and then they can “practice” medicine. Writing too is a practice. You do it to do it. You get better. There are some poems that I have put away or thrown away as failures because I don't have the skill, the craft to make them right. Not yet. Someday maybe I will. Until then, I practice; I write.

3. Find mentors. Whether this is teachers, friends, a writing group, a formal mentorship, or just careful attention to the

craft of amazing writers, who can be your mentors without ever knowing it, it helps to have someone a little further along the path as a guide.

What's next for you, as a writer? Is there a well-deserved vacation on the way or are you more motivated than ever to create?

I've had a really busy year that included, just this week, selling one house and buying another. So I'm looking forward to the semester being over at the end of May so I can devote many hours to reading and writing. I have a massive list of books I want to read, and I am excited to, as the British say, get stuck in.

I heard a friend give some young writers some amazing advice once, and I plan to follow it. She said we all write because we love to, because it makes us happy. Sometimes the part of writing that is the author's life—readings, and awards and submissions and all that—tries to kill our joy, our pleasure in writing. So my goal is to be joyful and write.