



Harbour Doubts

Bebe Ashley, Banshee Press, 2025, 78 pp., ISBN: 978-1-917161-00-8, €12.00 (paperback)

Eloise O'Dwyer-Armay

Bebe Ashley's prizewinning second collection charts the poet's efforts to qualify as a British Sign Language interpreter. Intershot with enquiries into the nature of language as it is spoken and signed, and the process of leaving and finding home, *Harbour Doubts* is a collection that tangles with the burning desire to communicate in the isolation of a late capitalist, post-pandemic world. It's also a love letter to the delights of linguistics and language, a three-dimensional exploration of words and the body. Bringing together meditations on language as mediated through sound, sign, vision, and film, this exciting sophomore collection cements Bebe Ashley's reputation as a fearless experimenter.

Banshee Press, 2025

Harbour Doubts brings together meditations on language and your journey to qualify as a BSL interpreter. Tell us more about your PhD work at the Seamus Heaney Centre. This is where Harbour Doubts first came about.

We have both creative and critical elements in our PhDs. My creative project was a version of *Harbour Doubts* and in my critical element, I specifically looked at *Magma 69: The Deaf Issue*. It took me a long time to find a project that I felt was ambitious but one that I could realistically complete with my skillset. Ultimately, I was interested in *Magma's* publication history, especially in the context of The Equality Act (2010)'s 'protected characteristics' as *Magma* have several themed issues which focus on one of these protected characteristics. Now that I've passed my viva, I'm looking forward to dedicating more of my time to creative experimentation!

In Harbour Doubts, you talk about the pull to speak a language that no one in your surroundings speaks. Why this pull?

I think that poem speaks to a particular time in my life. I love talking about sign language with anybody but now, I get really excited when I meet people that I can sign with. Sometimes I'm so excited that I lose all sense of grammar and later I'll be able to list all the signs that I could've signed more accurately if only I'd slowed down to gather my thoughts.

What have you learned from your training as a British Sign Language (BSL) interpreter and learning of Irish Sign Language about d/Deaf representation in society?

I withdrew my application for the interpreting course, so I've only completed a couple of casual and com-

munity-based interpreting courses over the years. So although I still watch shows on BSL Zone or See Hear, I've noticed in the wider entertainment industry there has been an increased visibility of d/Deaf people and more nuanced representation. Sometimes this seems to be after legal cases such as seeing more interpreters at concerts. Recently, I really enjoyed *Code of Silence* not just for Rose Ayling-Ellis's performance but for how the lipreading elements of the show were integral to the whole show and not just one single scene or guest actor. *Only Murders in the Building* also had a fantastic ambient sound episode from the perspective of the series' Deaf character. I hope with more d/Deaf people being given opportunity, we'll see more creative and experimental choices like this.

BSL is classified as a severely endangered language (Deaf Ex-Mainstreamers Group - DEX). What do you think is your role as a hearing speaker in keeping the language alive?

I think we all have a responsibility to protect severely endangered languages. There are several minority languages in the United Kingdom and Ireland, so even if British or Irish Sign Language isn't for you, there are several other languages you could take an interest in and help protect instead. As a hearing person, I believe it's very important to support d/Deaf-led campaigns and education. In learning sign language, you don't only learn vocabulary, but you become much better informed in d/Deaf History and Culture. I'm also trying to use any visibility *Harbour Doubts* might bring as an opportunity to collaborate with the d/Deaf community in the UK and Ireland. For example, my first event with Belfast Book Festival is a collaboration between myself and one of my BSL tutors.

Has learning BSL impacted the way you write poetry in English? Do you use literal translations in poems from BSL?

Learning BSL has impacted how I engage with any form of language. I'm often considering if I know or remember how to sign something, how I could restructure something so that I would know how to sign it, or how I would literally sign what I really mean if I'm being too abstract in English. Another example that I think of most clearly here is how I have translated the title of the book in BSL. In the title, I sign Harbour as Look-After or Care-for.

The third part of the book - [harbour doubts] - is an experimental translation of a British Sign Language speech. The original publication for the Ivan Juritz Prize has a picture of the sign, a translation into English and a poetic commentary. What do you think multilingualism and translation can do for communication in the context of a neoliberal world that pushes individual isolation?

In our current society, I think we are losing a sense of community. I think of some of Yoko Tawada's work which often includes a group of characters from a range of places and who speak many and multiple languages as they work towards a common goal. People are often encouraged to assimilate and conform to the same standards, and I think translation and multilingualism can help create an individual experience of living that is worth protecting.

Your journey follows your efforts and flags your failure in qualifying as a BSL interpreter. Do you think it is important to write narratives about failures? Do you think they somewhat create a counterculture to modernity's success mythology?

I found it quite freeing to write a narrative arc that didn't necessarily end in success or achievement. I feel conflicted about this though because the publication of the book, to me, marks a significant moment of success and achievement so the book comes to represent achievement even without me qualifying as an interpreter. So many people I started writing alongside seem to have stopped and I wonder if part of this is the relentlessness of poetry and of the publishing industry. It feels like you have to be working all the time.

Social media is horrendous for only showing the highlights and forming this curated version of the self that is so inauthentic. I don't believe I am the best poet of my cohort, but I kept writing and applying for opportunities to experience and learn new things and this helped so to write authentically about a goal I had that I didn't achieve felt like a way to reclaim an honesty that is somewhat lost in modern society.

Tell us about your project on Braille and 3D printing. It seems that you are being playful with languages and exploring what different messages we can harvest from each medium, while expanding which mediums are considered artistic.

I switched to learning braille in the pandemic. Learning sign language was a very social activity and when that stopped, I enrolled in a distance learning course and shut myself away in my bedroom with all these printouts from the course. I loved the order of it and how the braille cells build upon themselves. Part of me wonders if I would have learnt braille if I hadn't been looking for so much structure and routine during the pandemic. Again, the 3D printing element developed in the pandemic because although I started with a Perkins brailler and heavyweight paper, I couldn't help but wonder how I could continue to create work when we weren't supposed to share materials and I questioned whether all the antibacterial hand gel we were using could degrade the paper over time. The 3D printing element aimed to create something with more permanence.

What have you learned about the power of poetry as a language to narrate and make sense of our complex world?

I think poetry can be essential in helping people make sense of themselves and the world around us. If you look in standard bookshops so many of the poetry books they stock are anthologies aimed at helping people navigate really big moments in their lives whether that be weddings, funerals. If you look in bookshops that have a more developed contemporary poetry section, you'll find collections from such a vast array of difference and experience. I feel closer to other people when I read poetry as I get a glimpse of how they see and interpret our world.