

'Burnt Dress' reads like a book you had to write. To what extent was the book a kind of imaginative therapy, a rite of passage for you?

'It was only until I reached 40, with my son starting school, that I found myself suddenly able to look at my past experience in a critically cool, even way and I knew then that I was ready to write about it. I didn't want come across as hysterical or martyred, neither of which I was. But hitherto I'd been very angry about my mother indeed: passionate and hopelessly verbose whenever the subject had come up.

'So it took two decades or so before I felt I could address the subject in an, almost, objective way. The book has, I hope, resonance for all mothers and daughters but – without sounding evangelical about it - I felt that it might be helpful to the offspring of bi-polar parents in particular. We are an entirely unsung and unrecognised group: not so abused that we are taken into care, but we are abandoned, nevertheless, in a very frightening, unpredictable world that, from the outside, can look completely normal. This was especially true of us because my family was well off.

'There is no polemic at all concerning the suitability of the bi-polar as parents. They are difficult to quantify: not wholly insane but on sanity's border, going in and out of phase, through high-flown mania, rabid psychotic anger, profound depression and round and round again. It's considered desperately politically incorrect to even broach the matter of the mentally ill and parenthood. But children suffer in this situation if bi-polar parents are unmonitored by an, ideally, in-house, sane adult.

'I was a confusing mix of my mother's mental nurse, whipping boy, prisoner, confidante and home-help: true of all children to an extent, no doubt, but not in such an extreme way. In an ideal world, no child should have to experience life alone with a bi-polar parent and I feel very strongly about this.

You employ several modes of expression in the poems, ranging from lyrical free verse to satires with tight-knit rhyme schemes, and also prose poetry. Can you say a bit about how this formal diversity came about?

'The diversity came about as an instinctive response to mirror some of the more crazy situations one found oneself in: the bi-polar might be tremendous fun as they climb up to a high, but, once on one, their emotional tide tends to change unexpectedly, terrifyingly, and these moments, whilst frightening, can also be intensely comical, viewed in retrospect, I should add.

'So, 'Ferris Wheel' had to have a kind of satirical matter-of-factness about it, I felt, though I was aware that it can seem almost cruelly detached at times. 'Foreign Holiday', too. They were both highly disturbing occasions but, as

so often, memory tempers the painful aspects leaving some simply very comical images to speak for themselves.

‘Anyway, I felt it was my prerogative to bring humour into some of the poems! I thereby sanction it for the reader, no? Insanity is dark subject, after all. A couple of images in ‘Burnt Dress’ itself are, I can say - with apologies to my own long-faded teenage anguish - hilarious. They needed rhyme to make them seem throwaway, almost intentionally terse – perhaps even with the tone of my mother ghosting them: – “don’t be pathetic!” I think the ultimate impact can, at times, be more impressive.

‘There is some quite steely stuff, too, which was my response to my mother’s cruelty and it can come over as cruel itself: some of the moods in ‘Maiden Voyage’, ‘Tables Turned’ and ‘Passport Control’ I find still totally understandable, but I’m surprised by how uncompromising they are. They were, though, about sheer survival. They stand for what they are, and I still stand by them! I should add that reading Nietzsche’s “Be careful when you fight the monsters, lest you become one” had profound resonance for me – I knew I had to watch out.

‘The free-verse, without, I hope, being intellectually lazy, reflects my mother’s random behaviour and my quizzical response to it – quite frankly I was forced into asking questions and drawing conclusions many children and young adults don’t have to consider – and one tumbled after another. “Visiting a Parent...” reflects the sense of just blindly following the dominant adult and taking in what you see along the way. ‘Playground Tug of War’ has short economic verses that have an almost cartoon frame-to-frame feel, which is how I remember that particular day. None of them are in any way free form, they have all gone through many incarnations on their way to completion.

What would you say to those who accuse you of merely adding to the so-called misery memoir genre?

‘I hate the idea of dishing up one’s despair for cash. But, actually, I think I’m making my reader work a bit harder by choosing poetry as my medium.

‘I’m not merely being sensationalist about my experiences to please voyeuristic types, I see no point in that. And, as I said earlier, my experience is dwarfed by the dire stuff found in the majority of misery memoirs, although I’ve hardly read any. And for that reason I doubt I will be read by many. I do think that it could prove to be an interesting read for the children of the manic! I hope they will let me know.

The overall theme of Burnt Dress seems to be one of the possibility of escape, of redemption, if you like, from the circumstances of

one's own upbringing. To what extent would you say a person's fate is dictated by their childhood experience?

'Yes. Unoriginal though it is to reiterate it, I believe that childhood experience is fundamental to the future well-being of us all as healthy individuals. If it was unhappy that must be recognised and, ideally, fought free of, but if it was reasonably happy it is usually ignored and taken for granted – the pay-off for humanity is that those who've had a happy childhood are generally capable of going on to reproduce that positive experience for their own children. People are capable of handing on happiness as well as misery, pace Larkin. But very few people turn round and actually thank their parents for a happy childhood, much less write volumes of poetry about it, do they?

'In order to fight free of an embattled childhood you need to come to consciousness about it – and that's the challenge. If you don't pursue some sort of understanding of it - or accommodation with it - then it will, in some way, pursue or haunt you. Your files are all there, (see 'Doctor, Doctor') at some point you need to go and have a look at them!

'I believe that many depressives, manic or otherwise, include people who cannot, for whatever reasons, analyse, and therefore come to terms with, their childhoods. I think I would have risked insanity myself had I not found myself, with the help of some key friendships and mentoring, able to analyse what had happened in childhood and teenagery.

'A degree of self-loathing and quite ingrained anger were hurdles enough. One crucial point for me was that I totally refused to contemplate taking any residual negativity into my own parenting. The horrendous thought of visiting the sort of psychotic anger and psychological abuse I experienced on to my child was a massive spur, I think, to processing it all.

'I hope people who read the volume feel it is redemptive, though, because it certainly felt like that to me!

What, if it's not too intrusive a question, is your relationship like now with your mother?

'It's locked permanently in 'Garden Centre' mode! Several decades have tempered things between us. The molten lava of it all has finally, in a line from 'Meeting of Minds' "turned to stone along the flooded lane."

'There are taboo subjects, of course, and it would still be far too dangerous to rake over old battles. My mother has always been very vague about them, glossing over them, that's all she can manage by way of a kind of tragi-comical apology. But I have held off trying to publish *Burnt Dress* for many years: writing the volume has been about healing myself, not hurting her and I would hate it to be viewed as vengeful in any way.

'Without being whimsical, I can appreciate the more positive things she gave to us as children and 'Short Chapter' glances at that. These were moments of truce and peace, and when I re-read a poem like 'Short Chapter' I feel them very strongly: elusive and almost hallowed times. Over the decades, I've also come to realise that being taken away from her for good as children would have been even more damaging to us than being left with her on our own.

'When she was away in mental hospitals it was traumatising, when she came back, it could be traumatising, but I have the sense that losing her all together would, I think, have made redemption that much more unachievable.