

Culture clinic: Simon Armitage

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This week, Simon Armitage submits to a little light therapy from Kate Weinberg

Patient's notes

Name: Simon Armitage

Age: 44

Job: Poet

Last book read: The Language Instinct by Steven Pinker

Last film seen: Sexy Beast

Last music heard: Magpie by Stephen Fretwell

Last dose of live culture: Peter Grimes, with Opera North

Patient examination

If you could have been born in a different century, which would it be?

Looking backwards, I suspect this is the only century in which the likes of me could have prospered. And I don't fancy the future very much - too much consciousness and not enough chlorophyll. So now is good.

The ending of which book/film/TV series has most disappointed you?

I've just finished watching the whole of the series Six Feet Under, the most intelligent and moving television ever made, and the ending is disappointing in the sense that all that can follow is oblivion.

What has been your greatest discovery online?

It's <http://www.abebooks.com/>. You can search for pretty much anything ever published without driving to Hay-on-Wye or embarrassing yourself in front of learned book sellers and their smelly cats.

If you had to be stranded in any one place in the world, where would that be?

I wouldn't mind getting stranded at home a bit more. It's warm and comfortable here, the people are nice and the food and music are to my taste.

What, in human history, do you wish had never been invented?

The electronic handbrake as favoured by VW. What is the problem to which the electronic handbrake is the answer?

Name something or someone you truly believe in.

The Ordnance Survey.

Who, in the whole of history, would you most like to sit next to on a long-haul flight?

Icarus. Just for the look on his face when the sun starts coming up.

Which public figure do you think is most overrated?

Buzz Lightyear. If he doesn't think he's a toy, how come he stops talking when the adults come in to the room?



Rhyme with reason: should Simon Armitage leave his comfort zone with Tootsie and Bowie?

What question are you never asked and most want to answer?

I'd like someone to ask me if it's true that I only ever answer questions with questions, so I could say: "Who told you that?"

What would be your fantasy other job?

Bowling green attendant in St Ives, Cornwall. Good book, radio, beer in a cool box, English summer, slow trade.

Our diagnosis

Come off it, you must be one of a handful of poets who manages to make a good living this century. Times were much better for your trade in ye olden days. With a bit of sucking up to them, patrons would pay for poets to hang around with quills and parchment looking pensive. But the reason you want to stick around in the present - just like the reason you want to be stranded at home - is that you're pretty pleased with who you are and where you are. Great. But you're a poet, for crying out loud - you're supposed to be out expanding your soul, not sitting around being cosy. Hasn't anyone told you about that great muse called Risk?

Our prescription

- Recommended film: Tootsie (1982)

Michael Dorsey (Dustin Hoffman) is a brilliant actor with a terrible temperament who hasn't been able to get any work since he complained that the tomato that he was playing in a TV commercial wasn't properly motivated. So he dresses up as "Dorothy Michaels" to perform in a TV soap and falls in love with his co-star, Julie (Jessica Lange), a bruised single mother who thinks he's a she. On the surface, it's a neat little comedy; but beneath the sequined dress, there's a powerful lesson about the rewards of risk-taking.

- Recommended book: Unreasonable Behaviour by Don McCullin

I was a little frightened about prescribing you a book, so here's one with pictures in it. McCullin's compelling autobiography tells of his 30 years' experience in war zones all over the world. The gang warfare of his deprived childhood earned him the kind of courage that you get medals for, but it is the other emotional sort of bravery that forms the heart of this book. A kick in the pants and beautifully written.

- Recommended music: Low by David Bowie (1977)

At the height of his cocaine-fuelled glam-rock days, Bowie took his biggest gamble yet and disappeared to Berlin to try to kick his habit and concentrate on developing his art. The result was this album, an entirely different sound from his previous work, which could have cost him his fanbase. Despite, or because of, its original sound and difficult ideas, Low not only revitalised its maker, but eventually became a huge critical success. So, take a punt on life: Icarus got his wings burnt because he went too far, not because he dared.

- Simon Armitage will take part in Sky Arts' Friday Night Hijack season on March 7 from 8pm.
- Next week: Gordon Ramsay
- kate.weinberg@telegraph.co.uk

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