'Yes you can,' Harry pointed into the middle distance. 'Look over there!'

And, sure enough, when they both turned towards the sea, they saw the distinctive fins breaking the indigo waves: a rapid, soaring movement just under the surface. Moments later, a number of the pod broke cover, arcing in pairs above the ocean, disappearing just as swiftly as they appeared. Bottlenosed, with dark markings on their slippery grey bodies. The more Harry and Jolene looked, the more dolphins they saw. Sleek torpedoes in the deep blue water; dolphins everywhere. A frenzy of leaping, descending, rising; the spray exploding with every corkscrewing crash-dive; the sun flashing across their perfect aerodynamic forms. Harry smiled with satisfaction. He had travelled thousands of miles for the warmer waters, and had finally found them here, where he always knew he would.

JUDE COOK is the author of the novels *Byron Easy* (2013) and *Jacob's Advice* (2020). In 2025, he launched a new press, Conduit Books. He reviews fiction for *The Guardian*, *The Spectator*, *Literary Review*, and the *TLS*, and his short fiction has appeared in *The Moth* and *The Tangerine*. In 2017, he was longlisted for the Pin Drop RA Short Story Award, and in 2018 for the Colm Tóibín International Short Story Award. He is an Associate Lecturer in Creative Writing at the University of Westminster and, in 2025, was a judge for the Republic of Consciousness Prize for small presses.

In Conversation with Harry Josephine Giles

Harry Josephine Giles is a writer and performer from Orkney. Her verse novel *Deep Wheel Orcadia* (Picador) won the Arthur C. Clarke Award for science fiction. Her poetry collections *The Games* (Out-Spoken Press) and *Tonguit* (Freight Books) were, between them, shortlisted for the Forward Prize for Best First Collection, the Saltire Prize, and the Edwin Morgan Poetry Award. Harry Josephine has a PhD in Creative Writing from the University of Stirling.

Can you summarise *Deep Wheel Orcadia* for our readers?

Photograph by Rich Dyson

A gay love story in space, set in a space station that is not entirely unlike Orkney, my home archipelago off the north of Scotland. It's using science fiction and an outer space setting to think through some ideas about remoteness, social change, small communities, and projecting that into a future space.

There are a couple of protagonists, but it's as much a community book as a hero's journey book. I wanted to have this tapestry of people and moments and scenes.

The other thing about *Deep Wheel Orcadia* that's significant is that it's written in a form of the Orkney language, a form of Scots, which is a language that I grew up with. There's a playful English translation along with it as well.

Why did you pick this form — a verse novel?

I think form, for me, comes after following the idea for a while. The book began with a period of research into the last century of Orkney language writings. I was working in the archives and I was doing a bit of my own writing in Orkney language. At the same time, I was reading about other approaches that folk have taken to [writing in] minority languages. And I started getting interested in science fiction as a method.

A thing about minority languages is that they're often taken to be languages of the past. When you move into a science-fiction space, you're projecting this language into the future. So that's why I started following science fiction. I started just writing some scenes without knowing where I was going. Orkney became a space station and I liked it! And then I kept following it.

I wanted to do some kind of sustained narrative. I think sustained narrative is actually quite a good way of getting people to pay attention to language. If you give them a love story, if you can give them a space mystery, if you can give them some plot hooks, you know, they might sit with you for some of your experiments with language.

I suppose the last thing I'd say is that the novel has ossified as a form over the last 100 years. You know, we now have an idea of what a novel is, but what does this word mean? It's a new form of writing. So, what's really novel here is that I'm working in a language that isn't often written. And I want to write something new. I want to make up a new form for that. And yes, there've been lots of verse novels, but I tried to find my own form that suited my purposes.

Do you find that writing initially in the Orkney dialect of Scots shaped the piece in a way that writing it in English initially wouldn't have?

It's a really interesting question. Orkney folk tend not to be very expressive and they tend to be people of quite few words. I am unusual in this regard. I am a very expressive person, I am quite a flamboyant person. You know, it takes all sorts! But, culturally, it's a quiet place of few words. You can say a lot with a little. And I suspect working in that register is one of the things that tipped me towards this form, this approach of short scenes.

Each scene is a picture of an interaction or one thing that's happening and there are only a couple of times when something particularly dramatic happens. It's mostly a scene of two people talking or one person thinking and there might be like two lines of dialogue. For me that comes from a certain sort of cultural space and a certain register of speaking and thinking.

***Deep Wheel Orcadia* was recently translated into Polish by Krzysztof Bartnicki, who mirrored your Scots main text / English translation structure by translating the Scots verse into coastal dialects of Polish and the English verse into standard Polish. How does it feel for your work to be sparking dialogues on minority languages globally?**

It is beyond all my expectations of what this book was going to do. That people in a totally different language context, a totally different minority language context, would find something for themselves in it and then reinterpret it in their own way. That is the best possible gift for any writer, it's astonishing.

My only sadness is that I don't know enough about the Polish context. But you know, whenever I speak to people in a different minority language context we always find commonalities in the dynamics that are going on. You have to understand the differences and not immediately assume that everything's the same, but there are a lot of commonalities, particularly within a European nation state context. But not everybody has an Académie Française.

Has the way you've approached translation and the cross-intelligibility of your work changed as you've moved through projects?

There's no one answer about how to do translation. I would say that rather than my approach to translation necessarily evolving over time or having a particular trajectory, it's more that I've gained a broader palette of techniques.

I've used all sorts of different approaches. I've used page foot glossaries, I've used alternate versions, I've used the prose translation method that I used in *Deep Wheel Orcadia*, I've used not translating things at all.

For *Deep Wheel Orcadia*, I wanted a translation method that both made the book and the language a bit more accessible to a general audience, and also asked some questions about what English does. One that made English a little bit knotty and a little bit messy and minoritised English on the page.

For *Them!*, the whole intention of that poetry collection was for it to be written for other trans readers. And so I had no interest in explaining anything to a broader audience. In fact, knowing that a broader audience was going to pick it up, I wanted to put some blocks in place. I wanted to make things difficult for them. I wanted them to confront what they couldn't understand. The reader of that book is supposed to encounter a bunch of words and not quite know what sense they're supposed to make of it. In a way, the whole book is an argument against making sense of trans experience, and for living in unknowability and living in the mess of it.

What inspired your choice of the space station as opposed to any other science-fiction setting?

I wanted somewhere that was at a human scale. Orkney's got an interesting history with regards to empire and travel. We've been a staging post for a couple of different empires because we've got good harbours, we've got good waters, we've got good land, and you can [sail] to either side of the [British] archipelago, right?

We were extensively colonised by the Norse and a lot of ships sailed from there. We were similarly used as a major staging post for the British Empire. A lot of the big colonial voyages would have Orkney as their last kind of place to take on fuel and food and crew before they went away. We were Britain's biggest naval base until the end of the Second World War.

We have this kind of role of being a place where all the big ships and all the big empires come and move through: it's a staging post for colonisation. So that's why the space station metaphor. We're not a giant metropolis. We're not, you know, a big new planet. We're not a frontier place. We are the service station of empires. And so I needed a kind of sci-fi equivalent of that.

And then after the end of the Second World War with the shift from sea travel to air travel, we suddenly become peripheral again. We've become an edge of things. We are no longer really very important in any way to empire until they find oil in the North Sea and then oil in the North Sea becomes very important for a while. But that starts to fade and then they figured out Orkney has enormous wind and tidal resources. So now we're an energy centre in a different kind of way.

How do you approach writing about science?

I do a lot of research and then I use as little of it as possible. At least for the kind of science fiction that I'm writing.

I've just given you this blurb about changing travel and changing energy patterns and that's a major theme of the book. The book is happening at a time when I'm imagining faster than light travel and communication is just starting to come online for this galactic human civilisation.

Faster-than-light communication and travel pose existential threats to the coherence of any sci-fi universe. Every sci-fi writer can either handwave the causality problems and just pretend that there aren't any, which is what most sci-fi writers do, or they admit that there's a causality problem and then you're stuck with having really, really long journeys.

I dug into the science and the theoretical science of this and it's just sitting in the background of the book. There's maybe two or three lines where it's referenced explicitly and the rest of it is just thematic. If you know any of this stuff, then it's there. If you don't know this stuff, you might get some

ideas about it, but it might just be a little bit mysterious.

It was important to me that I had a robust understanding of what was going on. But I'm not what they call a hard science-fiction writer, I'm not interested in explaining to an audience how all of this science works.

I'm interested in how these scientific ideas and technologies shape a society and shape people's emotional reality. That's what I'm writing about. The way that technology shapes society, the way that that social change influences technology.

If you live on a space station, how does that change your social relations? If you live in an extractive economy, how does that change your social relations? What are your feelings about that? That's my approach to it.

Science-fiction verse is blossoming in popularity with readers and critics alike: *Deep Wheel Orcadia* was the first ever verse winner of the Arthur C. Clarke Award for Science Fiction, William Letford's *From Our Own Fire* was released to acclaim, and the genre-shaping Nebula Awards will include a new category for science fiction poetry starting in 2026. Do you have any thoughts on why this form is finding new success at this time?

Gosh, that's the first time anyone's asked me that question. I think we are living in a moment of sort of genre saturation, where the tropes of science fiction and — to a lesser degree — fantasy have become one of the dominant cultural forms of the period, certainly in the Anglosphere. Whether it's Marvel films or epic science-fiction TV shows or *Black Mirror*, science fiction is now at the heart of popular culture. It's the mainstream of popular culture, which I don't think it's ever been before.

If science fiction has been mainstreamed, how do you make it interesting again? How do you use science fiction to see new things again? How do you speculate again when all the tropes are so overplayed and so exhausted? And they are, they're exhausted.

I think poetry is an answer to that because poetry is where language experimentation happens, it's where narrative experimentation happens. It's where story and trope question themselves and fall apart and expand in possibility. It's where everything is uncertain and you're constantly making language new. So, I wonder if this is people who love the form and love the genre, trying to refresh it at a time when it's getting culturally exhausted.

We're in a national and global climate where science is oversimplified and weaponised to justify the exclusion of trans people from civil rights. Was the character of Darling, a trans woman escaping 'her father's wantneed of corporate sons', in part a response to that?

Well, no, because I started writing this in 2014. It was published in 2021, and things were not where they are right now.

In my research for *Deep Wheel Orcadia* I got really interested in what I called the boring gender utopia or default gender diversity, which has become a certain tendency within science fiction. You have science fiction where there are lots of trans characters, there are lots of pronouns floating around, there are all sorts of different forms of gender. They're all encountering each other. We've all learned our lessons from Le Guin and Butler and this has become kind of the default setting.

As a Marxist, I find this quite frustrating because gender is social economy, gender is economic relations. You can't have a *Star Trek*-style utopia of diversity without considering how you get there economically and how childcare has been rearranged, right?

People read Darling as a trans character, which is true, more or less. A physical transition is described in the novel. But fewer people have talked to me about the fact that literally everyone in the space station is potentially trans. There's a whole scene where people take on new names and pronouns; I announce it very, very clearly. This space station is somewhere where everyone can be trans, but in a different way. Because what gender means in that social context, which is a communitarian context — somewhere where resources and work are shared, where there's a

certain amount of collective responsibility for each other — what gender means in that context is completely different to what gender means in Darling's context, which is implied to be a sort of corporatist patriarchy. A system of some form that she can't fit into. And so her form of transition is in relation to the political economy of her home. And because that is a bit closer to the one that we live in and because her physical transition is named, that looks a little bit more like my transition in reality.

So, what I was actually responding to was how gender shows up within science fiction and trying to do it in a slightly different way.

Could you recommend some books for our readers?

Unquenchable Fire by Rachel Pollock, I think one of the greatest SFF writers of the last century and criminally underread because they're a trans woman. *Unquenchable Fire* is a novel of religious bureaucracy in which a woman is fated to give birth to a Messiah figure and wants to pursue an abortion. If that's not an interesting approach to gender and science fiction, I don't know what is.

Sea-Witch by Never Angeline Nørth is a very weird art-poetry-myth-fantasy-transition diary-experimental compendium. It's one of my favourite books.

I'm going to recommend Margaret Killjoy's *Danielle Cain* novellas because they're fun. What if Buffy the Vampire Slayer were a trans anarchist demonologist?

Could you tell us what you're working on at the moment?

I have just sent my agent a manuscript of a book of fables. They're very short stories that are partly rooted in Orkney oral culture and partly rooted in the Italo Calvino / Franz Kafka tradition of the modernist fable. They're about art and political change and being trapped in ever looping stories. That's going to be the next book of mine that comes out, hopefully.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.