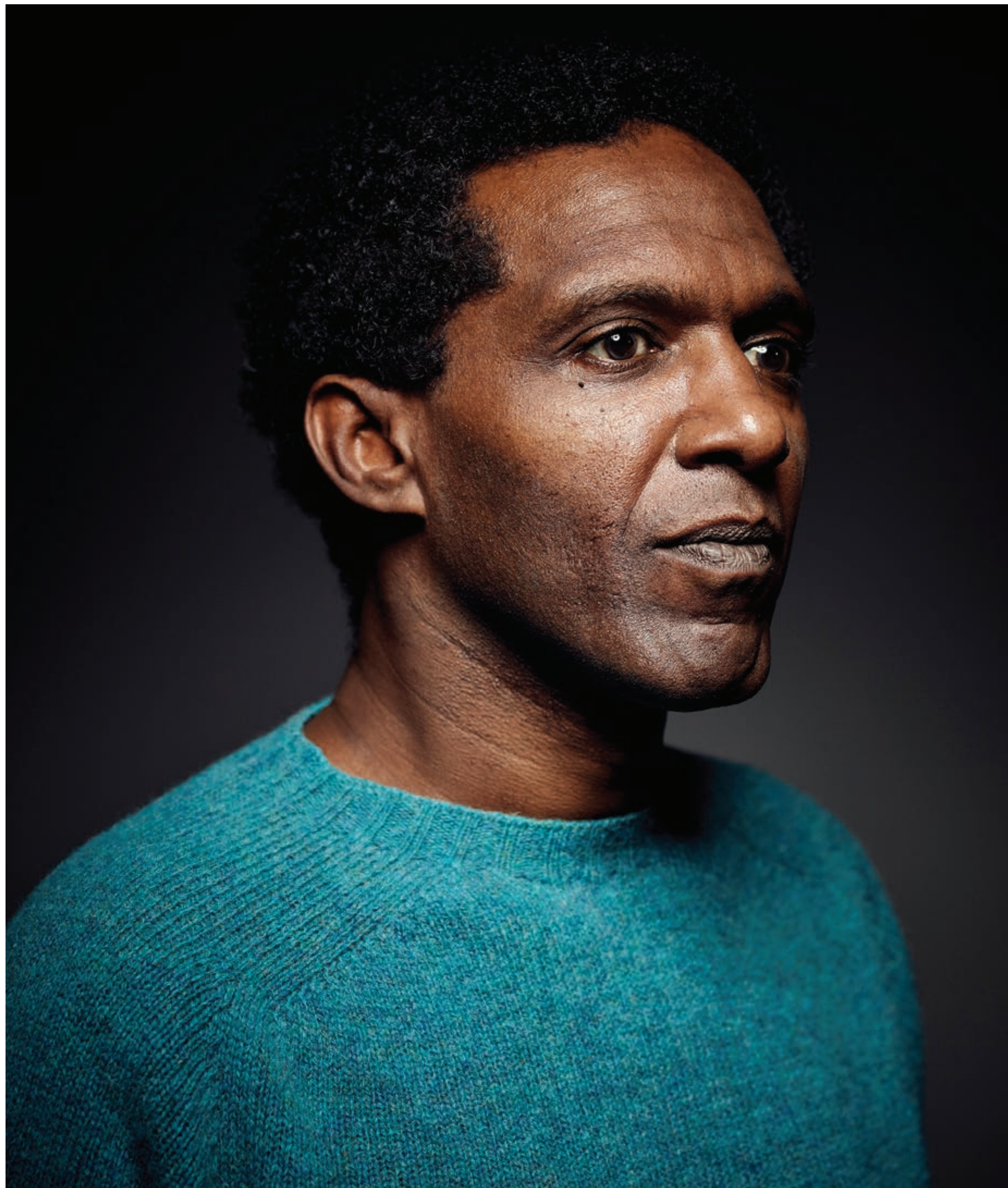
Imprisoned in the care system

Lemn Sissay talks to **Sarah Meyrick** about delving into his experience of foster care, why forgiveness can be life-giving, and how he got his Christmas back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LEMN SISSAY is a busy man. In the past month alone, he has had gigs in Somerset, Gloucestershire, Middlesbrough, London, Sydney, Bristol, Cambridge, and Addis Ababa. Every performance is different, but, at the moment, most revolve around his memoir, *My Name Is Why*.

Published in August, the book was a chart-topper on publication, remains in the *Sunday Times* bestseller list, and keeps being named as one of the best books of 2019 in the seasonal round-ups.

Added to which, it's very nearly Christmas, when the charity that he founded rolls up its sleeves to deliver Christmas dinners up and down the country for people who grew up in care.

He brushes off the suggestion of a hectic schedule. "I'm a lucky man," he says. "As long as I'm in the present, I enjoy it." And the truth is, the 52-year-old poet has been much in demand for some years. He is, after all, an award-winning writer, performer, playwright, and broadcaster. He was the official poet for the London 2012 Olympics. He has appeared on BBC Radio 4's *Desert Island Discs*, was awarded the MBE for services to literature in 2010, and won the PEN Pinter Prize earlier this year.

Along the way, he has picked up a clutch of honorary doctorates, and is Chancellor of Manchester University.

In the light of all the accolades, it would be easy to assume that Sissay's pathway through life had been a breeze.

But, as his memoir shows, that could hardly be further from the truth. His childhood is a complex story of abandonment and deceit, neglect and confusion. "How does a government steal a child and then imprison him?" he writes in the preface. "How does it keep it a secret? This story is how."

The bare facts are these. Sissay's mother was a young Ethiopian woman who came to the UK to study, and found herself unexpectedly pregnant. Lemn was born in 1967; two months later, he was taken into care. His mother was asked to sign adoption papers, but refused; she wanted him back when she could manage better.

Social services placed the baby Lemn into long-term foster care, advising the foster family to treat this as adoption. They were white, working-class people with aspirations: the husband a teacher, the wife a nurse. Lemn Sissay became Norman Greenwood, Norman being the name of the social worker who had arranged his placement, and Greenwood the family surname.

To start with, the arrangement worked. The Greenwoods went on to have a son and two daughters of their own. "Norman" thus had siblings, parents, cousins, and grandparents. "They were my mum and dad. This was my family," he says. And he was a happy child, "inquisitive and unafraid". But he was the only black boy in the village, and strangers spat on him from buses; at school, he encountered violent, racist bullying.

He gradually came to the understanding that he had been abandoned by his birth mother, and that his foster parents were the only people willing to take in a "coloured" baby, and were mad to suffer for it.

Tensions grew, coming to a head when he was 12 and was caught stealing some biscuits from the tin. He had smoked the occasional cigarette, and from time to time stayed out late. The Greenwoods — fire-and-brimstone Baptists — saw this as the work of the devil.

One day, his foster parents accused him of not loving them. He denied it — and was told to go away and pray.

"I studied the question for a day and a night," he writes. "I prayed to God, and I read the Bible to see if a passage would answer the question." By morning, after much soul-searching, he thought he was home and dry. "'I mustn't love you,' I said. 'But I will ask God for forgiveness . . . and *learn* to love you.'"

If he thought he had come up with the textbook answer they wanted of him, he could not have been more wrong; within hours, he had been abruptly removed from the family home and taken to a children's home. All contact with his foster family was cut off.

> I took the Government to court for stealing my childhood and stealing my mother. There's also evidence that they stole my father

Even setting aside the trauma of his removal, the institutions charged with his care over the next five years were appalling. Wood End, for example, a "dystopian" place where officers meted out horrific abuse, was a remand centre where social services dumped children deemed to be problematic. His mental health plummeted. Locked inside him was the belief that, somehow, he deserved this.

Worse was to come: he discovered his name had been changed (Lemn means "Why" in Amharic), and that his birth mother had made strenuous, if unsuccessful, efforts to reclaim him. He saw her pleading letter. "How can I get Lemn back?" she wrote in 1968. "He needs to be in his country, with his own colour, his own people. I don't want him to face discrimination."

"They lied to me. Someone did love me. My mother," Sissay writes. "My birth mother did nothing wrong. She was not poor. She was not destitute. She did not abandon me. She did nothing other than find herself pregnant while in England and ask for help."

THIS is not by any means the first time Sissay has spoken about his upbringing. He told his story on *Desert Island Discs* in 2015, for example, and in 2017 performed a stage show, *The Report*, at the Royal Court, based on a psychologist's report on his mental-health struggles as a direct result of his upbringing.

Yet this is the first time that he has attempted a memoir. A mixture of narrative, reflection, and scans of the reports documenting his progress through the care system, the book is an unflinching account of a brutal childhood. Chapters are prefaced with short poems, which demonstrate an extraordinary degree of resilience and optimism, and a determined refusal to be bitter.

Why now? Part of the answer lies in the completion of a 34-year battle with Wigan Council to get hold of his records. Otherwise, he had no family, no photos, no letters. "I've been trying to get hold of the files since I left care at the age of 18," he says.

"It is imperative to my well-being that I could see myself and my childhood. Until then [it was] described by unrelatable witnesses who are not there to confirm what was particular and important."

He finally received his files in 2015. "Once I received [them], I could see what had happened. I took the Government to court for stealing my childhood and stealing my mother. There's also evidence in the files that they stole my father. I had to work out how to address that legally.

"Once the legal case was dealt with — we settled out of court — I could start [on the book]. There was a clear line." He also received a full apology. "People say I am exposing myself in the book, but my whole life is on public record in those files."

I wonder whether writing the book has been in any way cathartic? "I don't see it as a cathartic process. I try to live in my circumstances as best as I can." The time to write a book is when you are at peace with everyone. "You shouldn't write a book if you can't handle it. It will bring things up." He believes that he has produced "a beautiful book about pain and redemption. . . Every time someone reads it, I can breathe a little more."

IN SPITE of his experiences, he is remarkably understanding of the pressures on social workers. There is a third Norman in the narrative: Norman Mills, another social worker, whose compassionate reports pepper the memoir. Mr Mills did everything in his power to prevent Lemn's removal from the Greenwoods.

"He is a shining light in a very dark story," Sissay says now. "He could see something was wrong, but couldn't stop anything."

Mr Mills, long since retired, sometimes joins him on stage. "He's a friend now. Audiences always applaud him. . . He can be at peace with his past. He was part of an institution that doesn't respect social

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workers any more than it respects children."

Sissay frequently meets social workers who are distressed by their powerlessness. "I did an event recently where a social worker came up to me in tears. She knows what she's doing isn't good enough. She's not allowed to build relationships with children, and she can't hug them, and she has to drop them off in places she doesn't want to, and she was heartbroken. Social workers suffer, too; they are asked not to use their instincts."

Even more impressively, perhaps, Sissay has forgiven his foster mother. The Greenwoods were "good people who did bad things", he says. "I went to see her and I forgave her properly."

What he hadn't appreciated was how much this would help him. "I didn't realise that forgiveness would allow me to empathise with her. I'd lost a certain empathy. I came to understand that forgiveness is a key to life for the forgiver. Until then, I thought it was a ruse. But it was very powerful."

> His foster parents' religious faith has left him with a significant legacy

How did she respond? "It's important not to want a result. That's a trap," he says. "I was OK with any response; it didn't really matter. But she said at the end: 'Now I can breathe again!' But if she couldn't breathe, she could have called me. She also said: 'You *were* a naughty boy, you know.' But I was a child: the worst I ever did was steal a biscuit."

The meeting with his foster mother also allowed him to reconnect with his brother, Christopher. "I never ever saw my brother and sisters since the age of 12. In my twenties, I'd have articles written [about me], and hoped to God they would contact me, but no joy.

"My foster parents made out to them that this was all my doing. But I met my brother when he dropped my foster mother off, and I said: 'Hey, it's lovely to see you!' And he said: 'I can't remember anything, Lemn.' Even though he was *ten*, or maybe 11, and I was his only brother."

His foster parents had rewritten the past for the benefit of the entire family. "The story is: 'We fostered a child and he wasn't grateful. He's in care, our naughty kid.' But what child *should* be grateful for being fostered?"

He recognises now that his mother also suffered from post-natal depression. "[But] they did a number on me," he says. It was clear they didn't know how to take responsibility for what had happened. "But I understand that 30 years of misinformation would not unravel in one conversation. That is for her to come to terms with, in herself and with her God."

HIS foster parents' religious faith has left him with a significant legacy. "They taught me religion, and the only way I knew how to understand the world when I was cut off from them at the age of 12 was through the books I'd read as a child, which was the Bible, basically, and books about the Bible. I only understood the world through symbolism."

That understanding sowed the seeds of poetry. His first collection, *Tender Fingers in a Clenched Fist*, came out in 1988 when he was just 21. He sold it wherever he could perform.

Unsurprisingly, he's drawn to the stories of other orphans and foster children (Cinderella, Batman, Harry Potter, Heathcliff, Jane Eyre, Moses), and points out the stories of adoption in religious traditions. "Moses was adopted," he says. "A person outside the family structures was able to have deep understanding of it. An adopted person knows where the marks of dysfunction are in a family, and that's something that's inside the teaching of all the faiths."

> For a child in care, your main familial experience is in school

Has any remnant of religious faith survived the shipwreck of his early years? "I have a strong belief in belief," he says. "I believe in people who believe. I believe in faith. I believe in a power higher than myself. That's all I've got. And that's all I need, and that's beautiful. I'm at one with Christians and Muslims and Jewish people, whatever they are.

"I think faith has got to be our back story and fundamental base. I believe we need to believe, to be a community of believers. If not, we'll be in danger.

"Believers [are the ones] setting up charities, social enterprises, and these are humane. I say this not as a light thing, but a serious one." He adds that he practises daily meditation. "I believe in all forms of meditation and prayer. To be honest, I need it."

Imagine Oscar Wilde in prison, on Christmas Day, he goes on. "Christmas Day is the worst day ever. The protagonist sits alone, and these are the moments when we turn and find something bigger than us. Oscar Wilde did that. And I feel honestly extremely lucky to know what's important in life."

This has helped him reach a place of reconciliation. "I guess it's about realising there is a power greater than me that is somehow running things. That allows me to live in the present and recognise we are all unique and have unique experiences in life."

POETRY is a remarkably hard field in which to succeed. Judged from the outside, Sissay has achieved considerable success. From his perspective, however, the plaudits have limited meaning.

"My criteria for success is never, ever the accolades, or the doctorates, and I don't meant that lightly," he says. "It's like living a double life. When you are picking up an award, you are also picking up an award with no family to go home to. I have no one to prove anything against or towards."

This leaves him with a "big unmanageable sense of sorrow". The only way he can counter it is "by being kind to myself and to others, and that's a daily project". That said, there have been one or two people who encouraged him when he was growing up, and who made a lasting difference.

"They say that teachers spend more time with their pupils than with their own family," he points out. "Well, for a child in care, your main familial experience is in school. Teachers offer children stability. I loved poetry, and there was a teacher who gave me a book. That moment of kindness makes a difference when the institution is all about unkindness."

That teacher, Mr Unsworth, has also become a friend, along with Mr Mills, and will appear in a BBC documentary about his life which Sissay is currently making.

Sissay describes a recent Mr Unsworth moment of his own. A woman, Vaishali Dinakaran, posted a message on Twitter about having attended a class that Sissay gave a dozen years ago in her native India: "The workshop was phenomenal. And I still have a copy of the poem that he magicked out of me that day." She emailed Sissay to thank him, and, when he replied, it was "a huge deal" for an 18-year-old aspiring writer. "She's now a journalist," Sissay says, with delight.

SISSAY has said previously that his head is in London, his heart is in Manchester, and his soul is in Addis Ababa. He spent a week earlier this month in Ethiopia in the company of Alan Yentob, for an episode of his BBC *Imagine* series. Alongside promotional events in connection with the memoir, they were filming the Ethiopian part of his life story. Sissay first met his mother when he was 21, after a long search.

Their relationship is "not uncomplicated". His mother had married a government minister, and was working for the UN in Gambia. Today, she lives in New York, and they are "as close as she can allow herself to be". His father, an airline pilot, died in 1974 before they had a chance to meet.

He also has brothers and sisters around the world. "I have a suitably complex relationship with my family. . . There's no real reason why they should have taken me on board. . . . I can't get what I never had, and my adult life is not about forcing it."

CHRISTMAS, meanwhile, has always been an especially poignant season. As far as he's concerned, the festival divides the world into two. While one group gathers around the domestic hearth, the other stands outside the window in the cold, looking in. A child of the care system is always going to be in the latter camp. "I've seen that look on their faces when you ask: 'How was your Christmas?'"

This is the thinking behind his Christmas Dinners project, which started in Manchester in 2013, to put on a special meal for care-leavers aged between 18 and 25. "It's a reminder of everything I never had," he says. It has grown organically. This year, up and down the country in at least 26 locations, groups of up to 50 young people will be invited to lunch and made to feel truly special for the day.

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Each event follows a prescribed format, but is independent and locally resourced. Every young person invited comes by referral, which means that presents are personal.

Of all his achievements, this is the one he is proudest of. "It's the most beautiful thing," he says. "I didn't realise it was going to be so good. But I got my Christmas back."

My Name is Why: A memoir *is published by Canongate at £16.99* (CT Bookshop £15.30).