



An Interview with
Tony Barnstone
author of
Tongue
of **WAR**

winner of the John Ciardi Prize for Poetry
selected by B. H. Fairchild

Interview by Karen I. Johnson



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When I read poetry I rarely think of poems as history. I imagine that many individuals interested in reading about World War II would not think to look in the poetry section of a book store or library. Yet, when I read Tongue of War and your notes on the poems, my opinion that poetry is not history changed. I think poetry can be both poetry and history. Your research was extensive and the poems are grounded in fact. How would you classify your book and would you be surprised to find it on a shelf in the history section?

Although the characters and stories in this book are sometimes fictional, they are always grounded in historical events. Though the characters are often composites of many historical figures, their thoughts and moral dilemmas and what happens to them are all based upon what I call “poetic journalism”: extensive research into diaries, letters, oral histories and histories, in addition to my own interviews with veterans and their families. I believe that when poets tackle extraordinary historical events such as the dropping of the atom bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the bombing of Pearl Harbor and the Rape of Nanjing, they take on a deep responsibility to channel the imagination into actual events as experienced by actual people. In a sense, these poems are a kind of historical translation: the original language is the historical event as recorded by those who were part of it. The translation is a sonnet or a villanelle or a blank verse poem that speaks in their vernacular and that sticks to the facts as they recorded them. As with traditional journalism and traditional translation, poetic journalism or historical translation needs to be true both to the letter and to the spirit of the original events. In brief, I would be delighted to find the book in the history section of a bookstore!

When I read Tongue of War, I thought not only about war but also about the Peace Museum in Caen, France. There, the museum tells the story of war, particularly World War II waged in Europe, from multiple views, with the hope that by showing the atrocities of war, future generations will be reluctant to wage war. Although your introduction makes no mention of peace, the epigraph quoting a country-western song and Albert Einstein does talk about peace. Is it your thought that this book of war poetry told in differing tongues of often unspeakable actions can work to promote peace while honoring those of the World War II generation?

Yes, my deep desire in this book is to help my readers get in touch with our common humanity. I hope to do this by faithfully recording warring points of views, so that readers who come in with an historical agenda will find themselves having to consider not only poems that promote their agenda but also poems that challenge that point of view. My hope is that the book will be translated into Japanese and perhaps speak to the Japanese readership in the same way that it does to American readers. In a shattered world, you might glimpse a vision of the whole by collating the fragments.

Finally, I can see by the notes on the poems that you did an enormous amount of research reading historical accounts and conducting interviews before creating these poems. How long have you been working on this book?

I've been researching the book for fourteen years, ever since I had dinner with Brigadier General Paul Tibbets in 1995 (the story is related in the introduction to the book).

