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“Art saves lives,” says Lemn Sissay.

“Family is a set of disputed memories between one group of people over a lifetime. I sort of realised that at eighteen I had nobody to dispute the memory of me.” Poet Lemn Sissay appeared at the Edinburgh International Book Festival in an event chaired by Scottish poet Jenny Lindsay to discuss his new autobiography *My Name is Why*.

Sissay’s book looks at his life. From his early years in foster care, to being removed from his foster parents at twelve and placed in care homes that he describes as “orwellian and kafkaesque,” to his thirty-year battle to gain access to his files.

“I proved all these things. I took the government to court before I did this book... I have proved this legally, emotionally. They stole my family, they imprisoned me, they changed my name, they gave me to inadequate and incapable foster parents.”

Born to an Ethiopian immigrant in England, Sissay was taken from his mother and placed with a foster family at three months old. Sissay’s family had three children of their own, by the time he joined them, the cracks in the familial unit had already begun to show, and Sissay says that his role in the household was to be “the fall guy.”

“Dysfunction is at the heart of all function families. The problem with a child, when they come into a foster child or a child of care, they put pressure, because they’re another person. By the way, having a child puts pressure on a family in exactly the same way... and often that child becomes the fall guy for the dysfunction that’s already in this foster family.

“The worst thing about this, is that child will then take the blame. It’s easy. We’ve got a whole narrative, ‘we went out to save this child and he was just too much, too challenging.’”

For Sissay, he was his family’s fall guy. Exaggerated reports of his actions and behaviour would be reported back to social workers, with perfectly normal if slightly naughty, depictions of him as a child

heightened until he was described as a thief and had threatened to kill the entire family except his foster sister.

Sissay says these deliberate exaggerations by his foster family turned him from a normal child to a reviewed experiment. “That exaggeration, very slight, then gets reported to the social worker, that then becomes a case in my files against me.

“Normal childhood actions of being a little naughty, became weaponised. Now, it is the nature of childhood that you will be bad. That’s the nature of childhood, but when a child in care, a threat to the institution as to their pure innocence and need for care, then them being bad, which is a natural thing that a child will do, is seen as a threat to the institution. Therefore we need rules to contain them from being bad, from being their natural self.

“Anybody who has got a child, will know, and some people here have had children who’ve taken drugs, children who’ve got drunk, children who stay out late at night, children who have sworn in the front room, children who have threatened to run away, children who have said the most hurtful things to their parents that they don’t believe that their own child could say that. A child in care does any of that, they are locked away, they get told they are intrinsically bad human beings and they are not, and they never were.”

For Sissay, the hole his foster parents left inside him when her was put into a care home at twelve will never be filled. He is glaringly aware of the fact that he doesn’t have a familial support system around him during Christmases and birthdays, but that poetry does help fill the gap in its own way.

“Art saves lives, it literally save lives. It doesn’t hide, the truth will out, however unpalatable it might be and how it may not fit with any institutional ideas of how a human being can do. Art is how we translate the human spirit. That’s why you have art and religions. That’s why people sing. That’s why we read poems at funerals and weddings, we need some bridge between the spiritual, the physical, the past, the present, the future. Something that lifts us to a higher place, that celebrates our humanity.

“Poetry does that. It is a warrior for the human spirit.”