

>> This is Matt Raymond at the Library of Congress. Since 2001 hundreds of thousands of booklovers of all ages have gathered in Washington, D.C. to celebrate reading at the Library of Congress National Book Festival. This year the library commemorates a decade of words and wonder at the tenth annual National Book Festival. President and Mrs. Obama are honorary chairs of this event which provides D.C. locals and visitors from across the country and around the world the opportunity to see and meet their favorite authors, illustrators and poets. The festival which is free and open to the public will be held on September 25, 2010 from 10 to 5:30 on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. rain or shine. There are certain titles that are appended to people's names that have a way of making you sit up and take notice and Pulitzer Prize winner is one of those and I'm pleased to be joined today by one of those select few. Rae Armantrout is the recipient of the 2010 Pulitzer Prize for poetry for her book "Versed" as well as the 2010 National Book Critics Award. Ms. Armantrout will be featured in the Poetry and Prose Pavilion at this year's National Book Festival where she will be talking about her new book which is of course her most recently published book of poetry and thank you so much for joining me today, Rae Armantrout.

>> Oh, thank you Matt for having me.

>> Well first of all congratulations on winning the 2010 Pulitzer Prize. What does that honor mean to you?

>> Well first of all it was a complete shock. I had not been expecting it. I hadn't been following it on Twitter or anything like that. It was completely a bolt from the blue and someone from my university called me and said the Press are going to want to talk to you and I said, "About what?" And she said, "You don't know, do you?" I said, "Know what?" I was getting increasingly paranoid. "Is my office on fire?" And so that's how I found out. I was not the first to know and well, it's obviously a huge honor. It's amazing to me how much attention this one prize seems to get. I mean for a while my world just kind of turned upside down. There were so many people wanting to get in contact with me for all sorts of different reasons. For instance, people were sending me blank index cards and asking me to sign them. They wanted my signature.

>> So you're not going to forge any checks or anything?

>> Or I've been asked to address Chambers of Congress as if I have anything to say about business. So it's been wild.

>> Well, it's been a few months. Has the novelty worn off?

>> Yeah, I mean in the end you realize that you are the same person you always were and your poems are no better or worse than they ever were and this, a prize is great but a prize is just a prize so you have to kind of come down at some point.

>> I came across this phrase, "little fart bombs." That's what the Pulitzer selection committee described your poems as. The fart bomb that sort of goes off late, I guess. What does that mean to you?

>> Well I like that statement whoever came up with it. I take it as a compliment. I mean, I think it's an experience that I go through, that is hearing something or seeing something and taking it in quickly and then later thinking, what was that? What did that mean? You know doing that double take and I guess I do hope to set that up for my readers, to have something, to write something that appears to mean one thing at first and then suddenly you realize you can see it another way, that there might be a second level of reality hidden behind the first if you will, behind the curtain. So I think they were picking up on that maybe.

>> Now your new book "Versed" which of course is the prize winner is broken into two parts. The first is titled "Versed" and the second "Dark Matter." Why did you segment your work that way and what is the significance of that? Well, I was writing a book that I thought would be called "Versed" and to some extent I was coming out of a personal dark period. I was kind of recovering from my mother's death and the poems in the "Versed" section some of them are a bit playful I guess, enjoying language and the world and you know, it wasn't all light in the first section because after all I get my material from whatever's around me and including the news and the news had been rather grim in those years. I mean, it was kind of the worst of the fighting in Iraq and the news about Abu Ghraib and so if you take in what's around you then your work, my work couldn't possibly have been all light, but there was a kind of sense of vitality to that first half I think and then in the midst of writing "Versed" or what I thought was in the midst of writing "Versed" I found out that I had cancer and not only that but I had a very rare cancer that's usually fatal and that was four and a half years ago and am still in remission, so apparently I was an exception to the rule but I was told that this did not have a good prognosis and so that's when I started writing "Dark Matter." Actually the last poems in "Versed" are kind of when I'm just told about that and go to the hospital and--so the crisis moment kind of comes at the end of the "Versed" section and then after I've been at home from the hospital a couple of months I just feel like I'm in a new world. When you're given news like that everything seems strange. Nothing is the same as it was. Time certainly isn't the same as it was because you know on the one hand you see that it's very finite, possibly time and then on the other hand it seems to become really dense. Everything is meaningful in a different way. And you sort of feel like a stranger, like no one else is having your experience so no one else is quite in your world. So the poems in Dark Matter are dealing with that state of mind.

>> And it's wonderful to hear that about your health. Is it difficult to write about something that's that personal or an inspiration that comes from such a personal place or is it really more therapeutic?

>> Well, all of the above. I guess I didn't think of it oddly as being a particularly personal place when I was writing about it. I know I said that it made me feel like a stranger and it did in a way. I felt cut off but on the other hand one knows that everyone is going to go through something like that. Everyone will die and many others will know that we're dying before we die and so I didn't really think of it as being unique to me. I thought of it as being I guess part of the human condition and not every poem that's in the second half is specifically

about death. I think it just kind of reflects, they, the poems kind of reflect the new state of mind I was in after the news and the different way that I look at things.

>> Well I would definitely be remiss if I had a Pulitzer Prize winning poet and didn't offer her the chance to read some of her work. Would you like to share maybe a couple of poems with us?

>> Yeah, I'll read "Scumble" which is from the first section "Versed." One of the poems that I said was more playful and kind of about the pleasure I take in language so, "Scumble." "What if I were turned on by seemingly innocent words such as scumble, pinky or extrapolate? What if I maneuvered conversation in the hope that others would pronounce these words? Perhaps the excitement would come from the way the other person touched them lightly and carelessly with his tongue. What if of was such a hot button? Scumble of bushes. What if there were a hidden pleasure in calling one thing by another's name?" So that was "Scumble" and then I'll read a poem called "On Your Way." This was a prose poem and it was the first poem that I wrote after I came home from the surgery I had for my cancer.

>> Is this from the second section of the book?

>> It's kind of at the end of the first section. There's a kind of transition period there and this is loosely based on the Egyptian Book of the Dead so that's where the strange imagery comes from. "On Your Way." "On your way to the Sea of Reeds you will meet the soul devouring demons. You've heard it all before and you believe it. Why not? Why would they lie? You must wear the beetle amulet to avoid being consumed but it's also true that you can't really know until it's actually happening, 'til you have a sort of knowledge which even if later confirmed in each detail is still not real knowledge. He will weigh your heart and if it's too heavy you'll be swallowed up. What is this extra element that is mingled in when you arrive at the ordained spot?" And then I could just read one more that is from the second section.

>> Sure.

>> It's dedicated to my son Aaron [inaudible] who's a biologist. He and I were having a little argument because he thought that I was anthropomorphizing evolution when we were discussing it. It's really hard to talk about scientific concepts like evolution without using anthropomorphic language so I just kept doing it. But since then this is in the second section of the book I guess it takes a kind of dark view on life, so maybe and on biology so maybe you'll hear that in it. "Simple." "Complex systems can arise from simple rules. It's not that we want to survive, it's that we've been drugged and made to act as if we do while all the while the sea breaks and rolls painlessly under. If we're not copying it we're lonely. Is this the knowledge that demands to be passed down? Time is made from swatches of heaven and hell. If we're not killing it, we're hungry."

>> It's clear that you take relish in words as you said. You're a founding member of I guess you could say of a group movement known as language poetry. What is a language poet?

>> Well that is a really complex question with many answers but I think that one way we can look at it is that language poets came of age so to speak, poetically speaking anyway in the time of the Vietnam War and the time of Watergate and we became very much aware of language as spin. Maybe not even as much as we see today but enough to make us aware that there were ideological purposes encoded in language and perhaps for that reason we wanted to sort of break language down to its smaller components or slow people up as they read it and maybe make them look at the words and the phrases almost individually and then see how those units of language could be recombined and re-formed so that there wasn't just one way to look at things or one way to say things. And I think that the group itself has separated a bit but I think that's still something that I'm interested in doing and that's what I was talking about before when I was answering your questions about fart bombs has something to do with that, that I want people to do a double take and think twice, to think really, what does that mean when I hear a particular phrase? What's the purposes behind that? Who's speaking that phrase? And I think that in my poems and maybe the poems of other language poets you can't assume that there's just one voice. You know, poets always used to talk about finding their voice but I think that we're surrounded by voices and I'm finding the voices, plural and kind of trying to trace them back to their origins. Who is speaking these different roles? So there's a way in which my poems are kind of poly-vocal and I think that is also perhaps characteristic perhaps of language poetry.

>> Your poems are brief but at the same time they've been described as hitting very deep, resonate emotional notes at the same time. That almost would seem on its face to be, I don't know oxymoronic or a contradiction, so how do you do that? How do you take something so small and pack that kind of punch into it I guess?

>> Well, really I think that's characteristic of poetry. I mean, I started reading poetry when I was a teen-ager. Well, my mother read me poetry but I started reading it on my own when I was a teen-ager and I started reading Japanese poets like Basho who obviously were writing haiku and so that's a really intense example of compression and then I got interested in William Carlos Williams and as you know some of his poems are very short but at least for me they packed a punch or Emily Dickinson who can write a poem of just a few lines that has you thinking forever. And so those simply were my models and I think of that as being really almost the essence of poetry that it condenses and compresses meaning so that perhaps later once you swallowed that pill or whatever it can expand in your mind later.

>> You are a Southern Californian. I guess you spent just about your entire life there. How has your, has your state had an effect on your work? It seems that especially the language poets tend to be a West Coast kind of movement. Does geography, does place have an impact on your writing?

>> Well first of all the language poetry movement started both in the Bay Area and in New York but nonetheless.

>> There's essentially a West Coast school, correct?

>> There is a West Coast side of it yeah that's pretty strong. And so I have lived most of my life in San Diego although I did live for about ten years in Berkeley and San Francisco as well but I grew up in San Diego and I think that did have an effect on my writing. San Diego is an odd kind of place. On the one hand it's a tourist town with a lot of theme parks and tourist attractions and on the other hand, obviously there's a huge military presence here. The Navy is here. There's a big Marine base called Camp Pendleton so you can never get away from that. If there's a war the troops or even if there isn't the ships are always coming home and being greeted by loved ones or in the case of Camp Pendleton there's always a mobilization going on or there's always the list of the Marines at Pendleton who were killed somewhere, so you can maybe you can never get away from the image of the United States as the military superpower anywhere but it's really brought home to you here that you live in a kind of military state and yet as I said, there's this other side that's all Legoland and Sea World and playtime. And so I think maybe that dissonance if you will, that sense of there being two realities, maybe one covering the other somewhat probably is almost basic to my poetry as a kind of proto-irony, a basic level of irony that I was attuned to I think from growing up in San Diego. And then I think the landscape gets in too. I mean, if you read enough of my poems you'll hear and see the names of a lot of the local plants and maybe birds and it's a kind of an arid landscape which means that you can sort of see a long ways. We still have wild canyons here that haven't been built over because the landscape is a little bit rugged and I like that, so there is a sense that the city is interacting with nature.

>> In addition to your own writing you also teach poetry at the University of California San Diego. Can someone really be taught to be a poet?

>> You know everyone always asks that. Well most importantly I think people can be taught to read poetry and so that is what we know we can do and lot of times people are lured in by the idea of writing poetry and they don't turn out to be poets but maybe they do turn out to be readers or people who like poetry, so that's what happens more often. I think if we weren't exposed to poetry we would never be poets. I mean to be a poet you have to read a lot of poetry. I do believe that and you can do that on your own or you can be led to do that in some sort of educational setting. And but I do think that a love for words and a sensitivity for words is maybe just more active in some people than others from the very beginning, the way some people are attuned to music say, so I don't know the real answer. Some of my students have gone on to be poets whose names you might recognize and a lot of them haven't but some have. And I don't know what I have to do with that but I do think that I can show them, I can sort of show them what to read. I can see where they are and I can say, "Oh, well what you need to do is you need to read so-and-so and then you need to read so-and-so." And maybe that's helpful.

>> How much of your own inspiration do you get from reading verses from other places?

>> Well I do read poetry a lot and I think I get rhythms. I don't write in meter, not traditional meter but that doesn't mean that my work isn't rhythmic. I think I'm very sensitive to what you might call cadence and I pick up rhythms from writers that I read and sometimes it's poetry but it might be prose. It might be Beckett say. Another way that I get inspired by reading is actually to read something completely outside my field. I like to read science, I mean science for lay people physics and biology and pick up some of terminology from that. I guess partly I'm just really interested in questions of origin. How did things come to be as they are and so that attracts me to science but also often there's a lot of metaphor in science, especially in physics because I mean the real language of physics is mathematics and so when physicists try to tell us what they're discovering they have to resort to metaphor just like poets do and sometimes I'm inspired by as well as puzzled by but that can be the same thing, the metaphors that they use. So that's another source but definitely language. I reach out to other people's language and sort of balance off of it in various ways.

>> One of the more interesting things that I read that you're involved in is a project called The Grand Piano. Tell me a little bit about that.

>> Well, that is a series of ten books and we have finish today tenth so the project is essentially completed but the last volume hasn't come out yet. So there are ten writers and we wrote these ten volumes and it started out as a kind of collective memoir of our days in San Francisco in the late '70s and early '80s when we all lived in that area and so it was a kind of exercise in memory because of course you find out pretty rapidly that everyone remembers events differently and you kind of have to come to terms with that but it's not all set in the '70s. I mean that's sort of the motif or the scene that we keep coming back to but our current lives and current thinking gets into it too. And I think it's interesting just to hear--I mean we get lumped together as a group but just to see when you read this how different our voices are, how similar some of our concerns may be and yet what different individuals we are and so again it's a kind of a play of voices. I don't know if you're familiar with the Virginia Woolf book called "The Waves" but it's an experimental novel where there is no narration per se. You only hear the voices of these old friends and so it will have just one character's name and it will be that character's thoughts mainly, interior monologue and then it goes on to the next character's thoughts and so it's a little bit like that.

>> You have written ten books. "Versed" is the tenth and you are currently at work on an 11th book called "Money Shot." Is there anything you can tell us about that?

>> Yeah, a few things. It's not about porn although the term money shot refers to porn. I wrote it over the last couple of years and of course or maybe the last year and a half and of course what's been happening, what's been in the news then is what they call the financial meltdown. I object a little bit to the word meltdown because that makes it sound like

some sort of natural occurrence but whereas in fact it was a whole lot of financial chicanery that caused a lot of harm and again, it's not that every poem is about that. It's not that every poem tries to analyze derivatives or something but that language of financial collapse and fear and economic hardship and trickery and deceit that language and those images were all around me so that comes into the book and I guess the title "Money Shot" comes a bit from thinking about money as a kind of pornography maybe because like I said the money shot is a term as you probably won't the admit to knowing.

>> No, of course not, no.

>> Well Rae Armantrout thank you so much for your time. It's been great to speak with you today.

>> Oh, well thanks for having me.

>> And we look forward to actually seeing you in person at the Poetry and Prose Pavilion at the National Book Festival September 25, 2010 from 10 to 5:30 on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. For more information and to vote for your favorite National Book Festival author you can visit us online at [loc.gov/bookfest](http://loc.gov/bookfest). From the Library of Congress I'm Matt Raymond. Thank you so much for listening.