

[ Music ]

>> Hello. I'm Cheryl Kennedy from the Library of Congress. The National Book Festival is in its seventh year, and it has attracted tens of thousands of book lovers of all ages to the nation's capital to celebrate reading and lifelong literacy. This free event is sponsored and organized by the Library of Congress and hosted by First Lady, Laura Bush. This year the festival will take place on Saturday, September 29th on the National Mall in Washington, DC. Festival goers will meet and interact with 70 best-selling authors, illustrators and poets. There will be activities for the entire family. If you're unable to attend in person, we invite you to experience the festival online. Our podcast interview series, with well-known authors along with webcasts from the festival, will be available through the National Book Festival's website at [loc.gov/bookfest](http://loc.gov/bookfest).

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>> We now have the honor of talking with Charles Simic, who was recently appointed by the Librarian of Congress as the nation's Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry. The author of 18 books of poetry. He has been recognized with several awards including the Pulitzer Prize for poetry for *The World Doesn't End*. Simic's most recent poetry album, *My Noiseless Entourage*, again demonstrates his ability to engage readers with a brilliant and unexpected use of imagery. Currently a Professor Emeritus of creative writing and literature at the University of New Hampshire. He is also a translator, essayist and editor. Welcome Mr. Simic. On making your appointment, the Librarian of Congress, James H. Billington said, quote, the range of Charles Simic's imagination is evident in his stunning and unusual imagery. He handles language with a skill of a master craftsman, yet his poems are easily assessable, often meditative and surprising. He has given us a rich body of highly organized poetry with shades of darkness and flashes of ironic humor. How did you feel about your appointment as the Nation's Poet Laureate?

>> Charles Simic: Well, I mean, I was, you know, surprised, overwhelmed, honored, lots of emotions and, you know, very pleased. It was a complete surprise. I came home carrying some groceries and from the car and the phone rang and, you know, I came in and answered the phone and found out. So yes, it was quite something.

>> Now you said that you didn't speak English until you were 15?

>> Charles Simic: Right.

>> Tell me, how did you manage the English language so effectively?

>> Charles Simic: Well, I mean, I, you know, I started out -- you know, I first started being [inaudible] before I came to this country, but I didn't know really very, very much but then you are forced to learn quickly once you get here. I had to go to school, and that's a school I wanted to go to the movies, which I did, plenty of, and, you know, watch television, listen to a radio. I think we were, you know, little. My brother and I was younger. I think we watched television when we first

came to this country, maybe ten hours a day at least, and our parents did not object because they thought this was very good, you know, we learn English. And I'm sure that's how we learned.

>> So that's one example of too much television being very educational.

>> Charles Simic: Extremely educational. We watched everything, I mean, from movies to, you know, game shows, sitcoms, news, because everything was so strange and interesting. You know, going to the movies also. I mean, I've seen American movies before I came to this country. But when I saw them in Europe, in Yugoslavia and France, they had subtitles and, you know, we read subtitles. And -- but now we -- there were no subtitles referred to follow the action on the screen ourselves. So you know, how it happens, it's difficult to describe.

[ Inaudible ]

>> Charles Simic: Although it takes, too, many years to really be able to, you know, to speak the language and write the language.

>> What makes your poetry so assessable?

>> Charles Simic: Well, I try to, you know, communicate to someone out there, an ideal reader. I almost feel that, you know, poetry ought to be enjoyed by a much wider audience. I want the reader out there to know at least, you know, what the poem is about, where the poem is taking place. I mean, just some very simple sort of information that would engage them to other [inaudible]. In order to have that, I mean, I try to make the poems accessible.

>> You said that you watched a lot of television and watched many movies. The old adage, an image is worth a thousand words, as a poet how do you feel about that?

>> Charles Simic: Well, I think that's true. You know, I loved images. I started as a painter. That was before I wrote poetry. I used to draw and paint all the time, and I anticipated that I would become a painter. So in addition to going to museums, I looked at art books, go to the library, you know, bring home art books. So I always looked at images. And you know, movies, I mean I'm like everyone else. You know, I've seen thousands of movies in my life, and I was young. I mean, imagery in the movies, I mean, images that, you know, stuck with me. And it's difficult to forget that everyone is writing a poem or one, in the sense, wants to, had duplicated that in some fashion to have memorable images to [inaudible] recalls memorable images from their films.

>> Now artists draw from a myriad of things in their environment to fuel the creative process. What do you draw from?

>> Charles Simic: Lots of different things. I mean, I -- just about everything that has ever happened to me, you know, what I see. Might, you know, get up in the morning and you look out my window and, you know, walk out into the world. Also not just my own life but, you know, the life of my family, my friends. Beyond that, you know, the things that go

on in the world. The world is a beautiful place but it's also a nasty place. So there are, you know, lots of things to influence me that have come from outside. So it's also a combination between many private experiences and memories and this larger reality, which is the reality in which we all live.

>> Charles Simic: A reviewer wrote that you had the ability to unite the real with the abstract in poems that lend themselves to numerous interpretations, much like dreams, whether you're using the metaphor of a dog, the self or speaking to the sunlight. Would you read some of your poetry?

>> Sure. This poem comes from my most recent book called, *My Noiseless Entourage*, and it's a poem called *My Turn to Confess*. A dog trying to write a poem on why he barks, That's me, dear reader! They were about to kick me out of the library But I warned them, My master is invisible and all-powerful. Still, they kept dragging me out by the tail. In the park the birds spoke freely of their own vexations.

>> Charles Simic: On the bench, I saw an old woman Cutting her white curly hair with imaginary scissors While staring into a small pocket mirror. I didn't't say anything then, But that night I lay slumped on the floor, Chewing on a pencil, Sighing from time to time, Growling, too, at something out there I could not bring myself to name.

>> Now that's really wonderful. Do you incorporate that kind of sense of humor in much of your poetry?

>> Charles Simic: Well, I mean, yes, because, I mean, humor is something that I -- I mean, it's part of my [inaudible] life. The comedy, there's always tragedy but there's also comedy and often they're side-by-side. And so if humor comes in, it just comes without me, you know, having to think about it consciously. It's there because my outlook is like that.

>> Could you read *Self-Portrait in Bed*?

>> Charles Simic: Yes. And this is in the same book, describes me in bed in a rooming house in New York City. I guess this would be 1959. And you can -- you'll see it from the poem I obviously have a very, very bad cold. *Self-Portrait in Bed*. For imaginary visitors, I had a chair Made of cane I found in the trash. There was a hole where its seat was And its legs were wobbly But it still gave a dignified appearance. I myself never sat in it, though With the help of a pillow one could do that Carefully, with knees drawn together The way she did once, Leaning back to laugh at her discomfort. The lamp on the night table Did what it could to bestow An air of mystery to the room. There was a mirror, too, that made Everything waver as in a fishbowl If I happened to look that way, Red-nosed, about to sneeze, With a thick wool cap pulled over my ears, Reading some Russian in bed, Worrying about my soul, I'm sure. This is called *To Dreams*, and it sort of addresses the strange thing, Halloween, time to time. We dream obsessively about something that happened, in my case, you know, 50, 60 years ago. I'm almost 70 years old. So you know, a long time ago. Nothing very dramatic or, I mean, there's nothing obvious about it, but one keeps, you know, going back to the same room, the same

wall one was looking at 55 years ago or [inaudible], whatever it is. Anyway, here's a poem To Dreams. I'm still living at all the old addresses, Wearing dark glasses even indoors, On the hush-hush sharing my bed With phantoms, visiting the kitchen. After midnight to check the faucet. I'm late for school, and when I get there No one seems to recognize me. I sit disowned, sequestered and withdrawn. These small shops open only at night Where I make my unobtrusive purchases, These back-door movie houses in seedy neighborhoods Still showing grainy films of my life. The hero always full of extravagant hope Losing it all in the end? -- whatever it was -- Then walking out into the cold, disbelieving light Waiting close-lipped at the exit.

>> Harvard review said about you, there are few poets writing in America today who share his lavish appetite for the bizarre, his inexhaustible repertoire of indelible characters and gestures. Simic is perhaps our most disquieting muse.

>> Charles Simic: I mean, I don't think that I, you know, look out for bizarre. I mean, bizarre is all around us. I remember reading a few years ago that some incredible percentage of Americans wrote poems. I mean, something like [inaudible] 30 percent or 28 percent say that they believed that they've been kidnapped by UFO's and taken for a ride in, you know, UFO's. That's pretty bizarre. You write poetry that tops that. And so it keeps coming. [inaudible] poems, you know, look at things, look at the world from perhaps an unusual angle, but everything I talk about is there. Sometimes people say about me that I'm a surrealist, that I'm this; I'm that, but really a hard realist. What may seem bizarre is only a surface. Underneath that there's the hard reality in which we all live.

>> Maybe it's better to say fantastic and unexpected imagery.

>> Charles Simic: I think that's much better.

>> Yes. Do you have a favorite poem and, if so, would it be yours? Or would it be someone else's?

>> Charles Simic: Oh, I think it would be someone else's. I mean, I have many, many favorite poems but none of them are mine. I mean, I like some of my poems, but they're great poems by, you know, by Walt Whitman, by Emily Dickinson, Robert Frost and a good number of other poets, that I prefer to edit my poems.

>> Well, is there a particular poem that you've written that you really liked a lot or that other people?

>> Charles Simic: Oh, yes. I mean, I like, you know, a number of them. I mean, I like one of my earlier poems. It's called Prodigy, so I'm playing chess. I like the poem called Fork, [inaudible] an early poem. I like a poem called Stone, also an early poem. A later poem called Shelley, like the name of the great dramatic poet. It's a New York City poem. Yeah, I think, you know, there's certainly some poems that I like.

>> Now I understand, like one of our previous Poet Laureate Ted Kooser, that you started writing poetry in high school to get the attention of girls.

>> Charles Simic: Yeah.

>> Did it work?

>> Charles Simic: Not as well as I anticipated. It worked better for a friend of mine, but it helped the fact that he was much better looking than I was.

>> Now turning to the role of poetry in our everyday lives, why do you feel it's important for people, especially young people, to read and be aware of poetry?

>> Charles Simic: I mean, poetry, that makes you go back, you know, especially through [inaudible] poet from the beginning of every poetry, real poetry skill. And now it's, you know, 25 centuries old, that it's a place where, you know, the life that most think of life for an individual takes place. It tells about what it means to exist, you know, look at the stars at night to, you know, think about your life, to fall in love, to fall out of love, you know, to do all sorts of things as human beings do and then think about them. It's also a place where [inaudible] is supreme. I mean, one uses imagination in poetry really, and there is some poets relies so much on imagination. Poets are short.

>> Charles Simic: I mean, most poems are, you know 15, 20 lines. That is a bit longer. But how do you tackle that interesting stuff in such a small space? Well, it requires imagination, the use of metaphors, similes, you know, other figures of speech. So I think for a reader, who, a young reader, it is that encounter. When reading poetry, one is in mind that one also has imagination, that one also has an intimate life, that one also thinks about, you know, what it all means, thinks about God, thinks about the universe, thinks about the future, the past. That brings it so forcefully together as a good poem.

>> Is that what you mean when you said poetry reminds people of their own humanity?

>> Charles Simic: Yes, that's what I mean.

>> What advice would you offer budding poets?

>> Charles Simic: Well, who is to say? I mean, they have to write and they have to read a lot. You know, you write to, you know, make mistakes and get better. But again, the arts, you have to expose yourself to what other people have done. Poets, all the poets I've ever known are great readers. They read everything. If you want to be a movie director, you have to watch, you know, hundreds of hundreds of movies. If you're going to be a painter, you go look at a lot of paintings. So it's the reading that educates you as much as your own writing. You read, you read. Again, you know, you read the great poets of the past and you look at your own writing and you say well, this is not so good. You know, I got to try

again, try a different way. And -- but that's how everyone who has ever written has worked.

>> Well, of course, we're certainly excited about you being at the National Book Festival on September 29th in the Poetry Pavilion.

>> Charles Simic: Thank you. I look forward to it too.

>> What can we expect to hear from you on the 29th?

>> Charles Simic: It's a good question, and I have no idea. I'm going to read some poems, probably early, middle and late, just to give some idea of the range of my poetry, but I don't have a program yet.

>> Well, you talked about the importance of reading. And obviously the National Book Festival promotes reading and lifelong literacy. What advice would you offer parents to encourage their children to read?

>> Charles Simic: Well, I think they should take them to, you know, a local library. Local libraries are wonderful places. And sadly they're often, as you know, empty, especially, you know, summer months when, you know, there's no one in there. In the winter old people come to get warm, but in the summer it's empty. I was lucky when I was young. I mean, we didn't have much money, so to buy books; so I went to the library, local library. There was a great library when I was in high school in Oak Park, Illinois. And I give, I would say, to parents, you know, take them there, show them all the kinds of books. There are all kinds of books, you know, big books on art, books about animals, every subject and, you know, go browse. Take the books off the shelves, you know, show it to them. That worked for me.

>> Why do you think it's important for an institution, like the Library of Congress, the nation's library, to take a leading role in promoting reading in lifelong literacy?

>> Charles Simic: Well, because unfortunately we don't read as much as we used to. I did watch a lot of television when I was a kid, but I also read a lot of books and, you know, I taught for many years. I was a professor. And in the last 35 years especially I've noticed, and not just me but all my colleagues, how much less students read and [inaudible] is very simple. There are too many other distractions, not just television now but, you know, the computer, the web and the Internet. So that really is a problem. The students read less and less and they know less and less. And if you want to have a true democracy, you have to have a well-read population.

>> What would you want your readers to take away from your reading and presentation at the National Book Festival?

>> Charles Simic: Well, I think that the most important thing, like with any, you know, performance, if you're going to a play and any other kind of, you know, cultural event, you want to enjoy themselves. You know, I don't, you know, have a specific idea in mind. I mean, I'm not, you know, a minister, you know, who's delivering a sermon. So once you take away a

specific kind of message, no, it won't be like that. The poems will be about very different kinds of subjects. And -- but I want them to listen to a language, to interesting ideas, images and enjoy themselves.

>> Well, I'd like to close out our conversation today with your words from a poem that you will probably read at the National Book Festival.

>> Charles Simic: I will read the poem Prodigy, the one that I mentioned; Prodigy. I grew up bent over a chessboard. I loved the word endgame. All my cousins looked worried. It was a small house near a Roman graveyard. Planes and tanks shook its windowpanes. A retired professor of astronomy taught me how to play. That must have been in 1944. In the set we were using, the paint had almost chipped off the black pieces. The white King was missing and had to be substituted for. I'm told but do not believe that, that summer I witnessed men hung from telephone poles. I remember my mother blindfolding me a lot. She had a way of tucking my head suddenly under her overcoat. In chess, too, the professor told me, the masters play blindfolded, the great ones on several boards at the same time.

>> Well, that's brilliant. What's next on your busy schedule?

>> Charles Simic: I just finished a book of poems, which is going to come out in February. And I mean, I'm teaching one course at the University of New Hampshire. So that's pretty much it for now.

>> [music] Well, thank you very much, Mr. Simic. The National Book Festival is free and open to the public and will take place on the National Mall between 7th and 14th streets Northwest from 10 AM to 5 PM on September 29. For details and a complete list of participating authors visit [loc.gov/bookfest](http://loc.gov/bookfest). Thank you for listening.

[ Silence ]