

From the Catbird Seat: Season 1, Episode 2

The Life of a Poet

Introduction

Anne Holmes: Welcome to “From the Catbird Seat,” a poetry podcast from the Poetry & Literature Center at the Library of Congress. I’m Anne Holmes, the Center’s digital content manager.

If this is your first time tuning into the podcast, here’s the format: Each week, we pull from our nearly 80 years of archived recordings to listen to celebrated poets reading and discussing their work here at the Library. For our first season, we’re exploring some of the Poetry and Literature Center’s signature events from the last five years or so, and we’ll also host some special guests who can take us behind the scenes a bit. All of the recordings you’ll hear this season are available as video webcasts on the Library’s website.

With that, let’s get started.

In April of 2013, an intimate crowd gathered at the Hill Center at the Old Naval Hospital here in Washington, D.C., for the inaugural installment of the “Hill Center Poetry Series.” D. C. native and poet Elizabeth Alexander joined Ron Charles of The Washington Post’s Book World for an hour-long conversation that navigated the relationship between the poet’s work and biography.

Five years and nearly twenty poets later, this little experiment of a poetry series is now a cornerstone of our event season at the Poetry and Literature Center. What began as the “Hill Center Poetry Series” soon became “The Life of a Poet”—a name better fitting these long-form, expansive conversations that Ron Charles takes on. Ron comes to each interview with armfuls of notes and questions and quotes, not to mention a selection of poems for the featured poet to read—oftentimes poems that the poet hasn’t read or recalled in decades.

So, on today’s episode, we go behind the scenes with Ron Charles and Rob Casper, the head of the Poetry and Literature Center, to find out how these interviews take shape; about Ron’s experience of reading a poets’ entire body of work in one sitting; how much he prepares for each interview (spoiler alert: it’s A LOT); and the emotional twists and turns that make each interview tick. We’ll also revisit some particularly charged moments from the series.

Okay, let’s listen.

Interview between Rob Casper and Ron Charles

Rob Casper: Could you paint us a picture of what happens in that room, for those of—the people who are listening to this podcast who haven’t had the experience or can’t have the experience of going to a Life of a Poet event?

Ron Charles: It's a little bit like church, you know, you can listen to it on the radio, you can watch it on TV, but it's nothing like being there in the room. It starts a few minutes before we go into the room, we meet in—I guess what you'd call a "green room;" it's somebody's office, and we talk for no more than about twenty minutes. But I found that it's essential to establish some sort of rapport with the poet: get a sense of how comfortable they are, to maybe flesh out what they're uncomfortable talking about, and just to relax them about the whole process. Then we go into the room. There are about a hundred chairs, lately they've been full; we walk to the center, we walk up onto a little platform, we put on our microphones, I usually talk to a few people in the audience, 'cause now, you know, I know them, they've come back week after week; I wave to my wife, and an old colleague from Book World who always comes, and then we just . . . begin, talking about the poet's work. Usually the poets are a little nervous at first, and I've done it so many times now, I can honestly say I'm not nervous—the poets are a little guarded sometimes, but pretty soon, they get into it. And since we're sitting so close to our audience, they're right there all around us, reacting to us, it feels very intimate, very involved; it's a really intense literary experience. Like none other that I've had.

Rob Casper: Well, and talk about the format. And how you developed the format.

Ron Charles: The format as it is now, um . . . I get ahold of every book the poet has published, every collection the poet has published. Some of them are, you know, prolific nonfiction writers too; I can't do all of that. Uh, and in the days leading up to the interview, I read in one or two sessions every poem they've written. Which is a weird experience! And an experience the poets never had either. I mean, few poets sit down and read all their work in two days. And most editors don't do that either. And so, I read all the poems, pretty much, you know, from beginning to end. And get a sense of the whole arc of their poetic career. And then I start to notice—or create, or imagine—themes that they have returned to, or developed, or sometimes even moved away from, and then I start to take notes, and I identify usually four, five, of these issues, and I start to build an hour's interview around those themes. And then when we go in for the, uh—oh, and I also, of course, identify about twenty poems throughout their career, and I mark them, and spread those throughout the interview, and so when I sit down and begin talking to them, I'll raise some issue, usually very broadly, 'cause I want the poet to speak about whatever she'd like to talk about. Then she'll talk, and I'll say, "And would you read us a poem about that?" And I hand her the book, and she'll say "Oh! Oh! I haven't read this poem in years!"

Rob Casper: Right.

Ron Charles: And then she'll read it. And it's really delightful because the poets are discovering their old work, some of them, you know, as I said, for the first time in a long, long time. We've had some funny reactions—poets have noticed errors in the poems—

Rob Casper: Right.

Ron Charles: —many poets notice things they want changed, or that they would change now that they're more mature poets. Other poets are delighted by their past work; some, you can tell, are a little embarrassed by what they now consider sort of juvenile work. So it's—it ranges. And then we work through the poems—not chronologically, but thematically. So sometimes we might end on a very old

poem, or we might end on a very new poem; it doesn't have anything to do with history so much as the progression of these issues in their work.

Webcast intro

Anne Holmes: To get more familiar with the format and atmosphere that Ron is describing, let's listen to a segment from *The Life of a Poet* with Mary Ruefle, which took place at the Hill Center in May 2015.

Webcast clip from *The Life of a Poet*: Mary Ruefle

Ron Charles: In one of your poems you say, "one pair of eyes is simply not enough." And I -- listening and looking are the essential activities of your poems, do you agree with that?

Mary Ruefle: I totally agree with that.

Ron Charles: Okay.

Mary Ruefle: Yeah, paying attention to, yeah.

Ron Charles: Yes, they're all about -- well I get the sense that you think poetry is an act of extreme and inspired attention.

Mary Ruefle: Yes, I do. I do.

Ron Charles: You write in one of your poems, they noticed, you see, that I was a noticing kind of person. In another poem you say, poetry is a tourist, it wears cameras around its neck and takes nice pictures of deadly things [laughter].

Mary Ruefle: True.

Ron Charles: In a poem called *The Late* [inaudible] in April includes these lines, every time you are amazed you are a poet amazed at exactly the right thing. That's the key, looking.

Mary Ruefle: I think all poets are noticers and pay attention, but we pay attention to different things. Hence, the wide variety of poetic concerns and subjects and styles. Some people pay attention to -- The evolution of their past. And some people pay attention to language, always a great thing to pay attention to. And some people pay attention to what they see, like a flower, nature, or if they live, or urban things, and urban. You know, you pay attention to different things.

Ron Charles: Your poems make us pay more attention, I think. They sort of train us to pay attention.

Mary Ruefle: Well that's the greatest compliment that anyone could give another person, to pay more attention to the world around you.

Ron Charles: And sometimes it's very ordinary things. In one of your poems this line struck me, the elaborate stillness of a hard-boiled egg wrapped in wax paper at the bottom of a lunch pail.

Mary Ruefle: Hard-boiled eggs, have you really looked at a hard-boiled egg and they have that sheen.

Ron Charles: The elaborate stillness.

Mary Ruefle: And then Bob Dylan has that great line, speaking of poetry, in which it's a song, he's totally ripping off the Scottish poet Robbie Burns, it's my heart's in the highland and he walks into a restaurant and he compares the waitress's long legs to a shiny hard-boiled egg [laughter]. I don't know, that just popped into my mind. You said hard-boiled egg and I said they're amazing and I thought of that line.

Ron Charles: That's good.

Mary Ruefle: I mean, hard-boiled eggs, they're everywhere [laughter], they're everywhere. Once you start thinking about them you see them everywhere.

Ron Charles: That poem ends by the way, so you see it all, everything, so terribly clear.

My little sticky notes here. Here's a poem about looking and seeing, all your poems are but that one struck me in particular.

Mary Ruefle: Oh, early. This is my first book. Wow, okay. I haven't read this in 40 years, A Street.

[Mary Ruefle reads "A Street"]

It's a really early poem. This dates from about '75, 1975. I haven't read it in ages. And I see all sorts of interesting things in it that I did then, like consistently that I would never do now.

Ron Charles: Interesting.

Mary Ruefle: But that was, yeah, yeah. I was in an apartment and it was on the third story of a building and I had a chair right next to the window, and I would sit and just look out the window. Thank you for that.

Interview/webcast segue

Anne Holmes: That's such an incredible moment, when she's transported back 40 years to the physical space in and around the poem. It's the kind of moment that helps create and build this intimacy that the poet, and Ron Charles, and the whole audience share during a Life of a Poet conversation.

We'll hear more event clips shortly. For now, let's go back to the interview between Ron Charles and Rob Casper.

Interview between Rob Casper and Ron Charles

Rob Casper: Yeah, and—I think one of the ways you manage to get, uh, the, the audience engaged and push into new territory with the poets featured is to talk about emotional issues, and that often has to do with, with um, the poet's background, or what they're writing about. There have been some, actually, pretty fraught moments, and um, powerful moments, in the series—when you talk through some emotional issues, uh, and even spiritual issues, with, um, with the poets we've featured. Maybe you could talk about a few?

Ron Charles: Yeah, uh, that's certainly true, I've—a couple times . . . not lost control, but certainly been really overwhelmed and moved by the kind of things these writers have gone through and the way they've written about them. The example I remember most, and will never forget, is Ed Hirsch: when we had him on the series, he was just about to publish that long, great poem about the loss of his son. It hadn't appeared yet, but I'd gotten a galley of it, and I'd read it, and was devastated by it. And I asked him, just before we went on, you know, would you mind talking about this? And he was visibly surprised that I had a copy of it, uh, and said, "I—I can't read that. I can't read from that work, yet, in public. But we can talk about it." And so, uh, we did. Toward the end of that interview, I asked him questions about his son, and the challenges of memorializing someone that you love, that you lost far too early and that you never should have lost at all. Uh, and how you do that in a way that is respectful to him, and to the art. And I thought his answers were incredibly moving and profound.

Webcast intro

Anne Holmes: Let's listen to a part of this "Life of a Poet" conversation with Ed Hirsch that Ron and Rob are talking about. It took place at the Hill Center in April 2014, right before Hirsch's book, *Gabriel*, had officially been released. And just a note: Hirsch references a poem in here called "Blunt Mourning," which he reads just a few minutes earlier in the interview. It's an elegiac poem he wrote upon the death of his mother-in-law, Gertrude.

Webcast clip from *The Life of a Poet: Edward Hirsch*

Ron Charles: You've written a book called *Gabriel*, to borrow a phrase from one of your earlier poems, reads like "a white grief stricken whale."

Edward Hirsch: I haven't really talked about this. I was—I told you before that I was surprised you had read it yet, I didn't know the proofs were out. I'm not really sure how to talk about it, except to say that it's important to try and memorialize people, and there's something really awful about writing an elegy for someone who is younger than you. Part of the nature of the fact of "Blunt Mourning," for example, is it's really awful, but you do expect your parents to die in front of you, and it is part of your job to see them through, and that's what I felt I was doing with Janet's—what Janet and I were doing and then what I tried to do in my poem, and try and dramatize the last moments of Gertrude's life. But there's something really unnatural about losing a child, and there's something unnatural about having to write an elegy for your child, but I felt that I wanted people to know what he was like.

Ron Charles: The book takes us through his whole life, from the adoption, through his childhood, through his adolescence, till he dies at 22 in 2011.

Edward Hirsch: I become one of the feature, it's not the only feature of the book, but one of the features of the book is I become *Gabriel*'s biographer, and I tell his story in poems, but I do tell his story. And I tried really hard to capture his personality, his outlandishness, and his ...

Ron Charles: Impulsiveness.

Edward Hirsch: ... impulsivity. I tried to create a form to capture his impulsivity, his wildness really, and so that people would have a feeling for what he was like.

Ron Charles: It's an absolutely devastating book. At one point you say "I'm scared of rounding him up, of turning him into a story." So I can imagine why you would write such a thing. Why publish this intensely private tragedy?

Edward Hirsch: I'm not sure of the answer to that, actually. I don't know exactly the answer to that.

Ron Charles: Many parents will find comfort in this, who have gone through this experience.

Edward Hirsch: Well, that would be a consolation, and that would be one answer, but you can't claim that for yourself. I'm certainly not the only one. Other people, in fact, everyone is initiated at some point into a kind of grief that is unbearable to them. I don't think anyone escapes this. It may not be your child, but you—I have a poem about this in the book, about everyone is carrying an invisible bag of cement on their shoulders, and that's why it takes courage to get up in the morning and step out into the day because everyone is carrying an invisible bag of cement. And it's—if they seem like they don't it's only because they're either too young or you don't know them because no one escapes unscathed with this. If you love people, the price of loving them is losing them, and one of the things that poetry can do is to try and give you something of them back, and if not them at least can memorialize how you felt about them. It may not give them—you may not have them back, because you don't, but you can at least say what you felt. And one of the things that poetry does is leave a record of what it felt for us to be here. And I just, I guess I wanted to leave something behind of what I felt about this and capture something of his, of what he was like.

[Interview/webcast segue](#)

Anne Holmes: The whole conversation with Ed Hirsch is so wide-ranging and funny and tender, but this moment in particular really demonstrates the intimacy that the Life of a Poet can create, and the trust that emerges and takes root throughout.

Now, back to Ron and Rob.

[Interview between Rob Casper and Ron Charles](#)

Rob Casper: Right. Now—I've never—I'm never not surprised by what happens at some point over the course of one of these events. I think of your interview with Alice Fulton, and the penultimate poem you asked her to read, which is this big long poem, this big long sort of emotionally-powerful poem, and then you ended with a sort of lighthearted poem. Uh, which is actually what you did with Rae Armantrout very recently too. Which brings me to the question of, how did you decide in the course of the interview to insert which poem? And how do you decide which poem you want to conclude with?

Ron Charles: I prepare too much. I have enough material for about two and a half, three hours.

Rob Casper: [laughs] Yeah.

Ron Charles: And as we talk, I scratch pages off or sections out. Like, things aren't working, or we don't want to go in that direction . . . or very often, poets over-anticipate my questions, and so further

questions don't work anymore. So I'm editing as I go—but, I also have a page at the end, where I say, “end with this poem.” So, no matter where we go, or what we're doing, I know we're going to end on that poem. Because: I don't want the hour to end on something particularly dreary or tragic.

Rob Casper: Right

Ron Charles: Not that it's Pollyanna; many of these poems—most of these poets, you know, don't write anything like that. But I do want to end on something uplifting, or witty, or something a little lighter, to get us out the door, than perhaps we've talked about during the hour.

Rob Casper: Sometimes we need that!

Ron Charles: Definitely, yeah! Some of these discussions have been—you know, you just feel devastated. So it's nice to end on something that maybe—a little different tone. Because they're going to go talk to the poet, then, and there's a book signing, and that should be more of a—of something that we maybe embrace.

Webcast segue

Anne Holmes: Back in November 2015, Alice Fulton joined Ron Charles for a Life of a Poet conversation that, as Rob and Ron just mentioned, stands out in part because of its pretty weighty tonal shift toward the end. After discussing Alice Fulton's relationship to religion and faith, and how those themes play out in her poems, the conversation shifts toward elegy, and she's asked to read “Doha: Meltdown Elegy,” a long poem written after her mother's death in 2009. Let's listen to the last few minutes of The Life of a Poet with Alice Fulton, from the closing section of “Doha: Meltdown Elegy.”

Webcast clip from The Life of a Poet: Alice Fulton

[reads “Doha Melt-down Elegy”]

Ron Charles: Incredible process you take us through. About grief, of course, but it's also, it moves us beyond that in a way that the mourning does and if you don't [inaudible]. Incredibly powerful poem.

Alice Fulton: Oh well thank you. I have to say truthfully I didn't know if it was any good at all. When I finished it [inaudible] and I'm really not sure about that last line. That's how it is when you write poetry [inaudible]. You know that feeling you get to the end, it's the hard part. It's the part everyone waits for, I think, when you read poems. You hope at the end you're going to be given something and I didn't know that I had written something good, but it was all I could do and then I tried to revise it and fix it up and make it a little better and I could change a word here and a word there, but in the end I had to go with it. Kind of flat ending, it was just what it was. What it was.

Ron Charles: Help? Did writing the poem help?

Alice Fulton: No. Sorry. I know, it'd be great if poetry really did console us in that way, but you know there's certain things you go through, of course, that art does not console you for, I think. Art has its limitations. Poetry has its limitations and I can't say it consoled me. I didn't even know if it was good. So maybe if I knew that, I would've felt, well okay it was worth, I did something. I made a piece of art, but no there was no consolation.

Ron Charles: I was out of questions. Those aren't questions we're going to work out, right? Why did he make us to die? And that's not a question we're going to answer.

Alice Fulton: Right. There's no answer to some of this stuff and sometimes you just have to live with the fact that you're not ever going to be consoled. It's something that you can change and things will be different and you'll go on and there'll be happy moments, of course, but being consoled or getting over something just sometimes doesn't ever happen.

Ron Charles: In one of your poems you say mockingly, "most people want blurbish blobs of praise [laughter], but I can't help myself. "

I have lots of blurbish blobs of praise for you. Would you finish by reading a poem called "Sequel"?

Alice Fulton: Oh that's a nice happy poem. I'd like to end on a happy note.

Ron Charles: That's what I thought. That's what I was hoping for.

Alice Fulton: [reads "Sequel"]

Ron Charles: It's such an honor to talk to you tonight. I am so glad you came.

[Interview/webcast segue](#)

Anne Holmes: The turn from grief and elegy toward levity is so sudden here, but it really gives everyone, including the poet, a chance to catch their breath. This conversation is also just a gorgeous example of the range of a Life of a Poet event, really pushing the element of surprise all the way through.

Before we wrap up today's episode, let's hear some final words from Ron Charles and Rob Casper.

[Interview between Rob Casper and Ron Charles](#)

Rob Casper: Given your experience—as you said, when you started, you wanted to learn about poetry, experience poetry in a new way, uh, through this series—given the experience of talking to these seventeen poets over the course of four years, what might you say you understand about poetry's place in our culture, and the work that these poets are doing?

Ron Charles: I've learned the kind of poetry I like. I like a kind of thematically complex lyric poetry. Not all these poets write that, but I've learned to like—you know, to appreciate all of them, and to like all of them, honestly. But I've also developed my own preferences, which is nice; I would have been able to say that four years ago—"What kind of poetry do you like?" "I don't know, I like Emily Dickinson, I like, you know, whatever I studied in school"—but now I really could say. Uh, all these poets address issues that we're going through as a country in ways that no one other form of literature does. Some of them

do it in very direct ways; people like Brian Turner, you know, uh, can write about war, uh, and his experience, uh, in the Iraq war in a very, you know, direct, and, I would say, uh, in a way that everyone, you know, can see immediately—but they're all responding to the culture. Uh, and I think, you know, if you're just experiencing America through journalism, television, pop music, maybe a few novels a year, if you're not also reading a couple of collections of modern poetry every year, you're really missing part of who we are. And I would encourage people not to be intimidated. Even by the first few poems. You just keep reading. Don't worry about whether you understand it. Just keep reading until you feel something.

Rob Casper: Well, I can't think of a better place to stop than there. Thanks, Ron.

Ron Charles: Thank you, Rob. It's been great to host this series.

Conclusion

Anne Holmes: Thank you for joining us on "From the Catbird Seat." To learn more about poetry past, present, and future at the Library of Congress, visit us at loc.gov/poetry. You can watch or listen to the full events featured on today's episode by going to loc.gov/discover, and clicking on "Video Webcasts." We'll be back next week for another episode. Stay tuned.