

From the Catbird Seat: Season 1, Episode 3

Rebecca Johnson Bobbitt National Prize for Poetry

Introduction

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

If this is your first time joining us, here’s the gist: Each week, we pull from our nearly 80 years of archived recordings to listen to poets reading and discussing their work at the Library of Congress. This season, we’re exploring some of the Poetry and Literature Center’s key events from the last five years. We also bring on 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.

The Rebekah Bobbitt Johnson National Prize for Poetry was established at the Library of Congress in 1988, and has been awarded biennially since 1990. This \$10,000 prize recognizes the most distinguished book of poetry written by an American poet and published during the preceding two years, or it recognizes the lifetime achievement of an American poet.

The winner of the prize is chosen by a three-member jury, and each member is appointed by a selection committee made up of the Librarian of Congress, the Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry, and the Bobbitt family.

On today’s episode, we’re going to check in with the three jurors of the 2016 Rebekah Bobbitt Johnson National Prize for Poetry: Mary Szybist, appointed by Librarian of Congress Carla Hayden; Danielle Legros Georges, appointed by Poet Laureate Juan Felipe Herrera; and Betty Sue Flowers, the long-time juror appointed by the Bobbitt family. In early 2017, over the course of one month, these three jurors convened over phone calls and e-mails to discuss the 130 books submitted for prize consideration. In the end, they emerged with two winners: Claudia Rankine, for her book *Citizen*; and Nathaniel Mackey, for lifetime achievement.

Betty Sue, Mary, and Danielle talked to us recently about their experiences as jurors for the Bobbitt Prize, and how they came to select both Rankine and Mackey; in a minute, you’ll hear their phone conversation with Rob Casper, the head of the Poetry and Literature Center, and then we’ll play some clips from the prize reading with the two winners. But first, here’s a little on the origin of the prize.

Rebekah Johnson Bobbitt was one of President Lyndon B. Johnson’s three sisters. In the early 1930s, years before her brother’s election to the U.S. House of Representatives, and decades before his presidency, Rebekah was a graduate student in D.C., where she also worked in the cataloguing department at the Library of Congress. It was here at the Library where she fell in love with co-worker and fellow Texan, Oscar Price Bobbitt. The two were married in 1941. Speaking at the Library 50-some years later, their son, Philip C. Bobbitt, revealed some background on his parents’ romance. He had discovered a cache of old index cards on which were typed, instead of catalog numbers, excerpts of poems. Essentially, here were the notes cataloging his parents’ Library love story. When Rebekah

Johnson Bobbitt died in 1978, Philip and his father decided to endow a memorial in her name—and, owing to this history of love and poetry at the Library of Congress, the Rebekah Johnson Bobbitt National Prize for Poetry was established 10 years later.

It's been almost 30 years since James Merrill won the first Bobbitt Prize for Poetry. Now, let's hear from Betty Sue Flowers, Mary Szybist, and Danielle Legros Georges on selecting the most recent winners.

Interview Between Rob Casper and Betty Sue Flowers, Mary Szybist, and Danielle Legros Georges

Rob Casper: So my first question is just about the fact that it's been almost a year since the three of you met as judges for the Bobbitt Prize, and I'd love to have you talk a little bit about what it was like to work together on this—of course, you didn't meet in person, you were communicating via email and by telephone.

Betty Sue Flowers: Well, I can start by saying that these two were a delight to work with, and, although our lists at some point were very different, through conversation we came to an agreement on our final selections. So it's very nice, given how many books there were that we judged; it's very nice that we could actually have a conversation and come to an agreement, rather than come in and fight it out with our favorites.

Danielle Legros Georges: It's Danielle here. For me, it was really exciting to read and discuss together very recent work—work that allowed us to enter into the important conversations that are taking place today, giving us a sense of the priorities and the preoccupations and experimentations of cultural workers and artists working today. What better than being able to talk about something you really like with astute colleagues and practitioners and appreciators of poetry?

Mary Szybist: Yeah, I was struck early on that our three initial lists, I think, didn't have a ton of overlap and I think, Betty Sue, you had said early on that often when judges get together the lists, you know, have four or five books, at least, in common, and I think initially ours didn't. And so it was really sort of wonderful to be able to talk through things together, and that was one thing I really loved about this—is I did not feel rushed in our conversations. I felt like we were really able to take our time and sort of went through book by book. And, for me, maybe one of the best things about the process is that there's some poets that we talked about that, you know, didn't end up with the prizes, but I became converts to their work just through talking through. And that was really exciting and wonderful.

RC: I think it's interesting that, as you discussed, you came in with different perspectives, and different lists, and then found a way to not only come to select winners but to get excited about this sort of larger group of poets and books of poems that you were discussing. I wonder, was there something that you can name in the kind of conversation you had (other than the fact that it wasn't rushed, as you said, Mary) that made it so magical and fruitful?

DLG: Yeah, I think that we were very interested in the opinions of our colleagues. For me, certainly, I was open to learning about texts through a lens that was different than mine.

BSF: That's exactly what I was going to say! This is Betty Sue. I said—I was thinking, one of the things that made it a pleasure was the deep appreciation for each other's opinions, and I would go back and re-read some of the books that I hadn't ranked as highly and come to a new appreciation because of what Danielle and Mary said. It was a learning experience for me. So that part was lovely. I felt I was back in poetry class, but in a very different, lovely way.

MS: Yeah, no, I felt very much the same. I think one thing that really maybe was a little different for me in this conversation than maybe some other conversations I've been in is that the three of us talked to each other at length unmoderated; that it was just the three of us and I think we felt a sense of trust that, you know, we could speak candidly with each other. And part of the conversation always felt not just sort of what we were bringing with our educated eyes, but also a very human sense of talking to each other and what actually moved us and had sort of opened us. And that was—that set things apart for me, and really made things memorable and really got me thinking harder about a lot.

RC: I just have one more question to ask, and that really is a question about the winners you selected for the prize. Only once before has the Bobbitt Prize been selected for both Lifetime Achievement and for a collection of poems published in the previous two years, and I'd love to have you talk about how you decided to honor both Claudia Rankine's book *Citizen* and Nathaniel Mackey for Lifetime Achievement.

BSF: Well I can speak about *Citizen*, I think, or begin the discussion about *Citizen*, which seemed to be both an important document of its time and also a way to advance poetry. I mean, there were things that she was doing that taught me a lot, at least in my own practice, and seemed important to its time, so that seemed an ideal book to choose for what's happening now, I would say.

DLG: Yeah, we felt it was a daring book, a brave book, taking on white supremacy, whiteness as a construct, whiteness in the American imagination, and we felt that it deserved attention for that. She looks at micro- and macro-aggression. It's a book that's taking on difficult subject matter well.

BSF: Yes, in a very interesting way.

DLG: Yes.

BSF: Very moving, too.

MS: Yeah, absolutely. As we were talking about these books, there was a way in which for me these two books actually really spoke to each other as a pair. I mean, I think they're both really visionary books—Mackey's almost in a kind of mythological, visionary sense and Claudia Rankine's *Citizen* almost in the old prophet way of looking deeply into the present. Even the way that they use the pronouns, the sort of really, I think, tremendously interesting way Rankine uses the wandering "you" and the way Mackey uses the wandering "we" with the band of travelers that both pulls in and challenges. I would add that, for me, *Citizen* did so much work in terms of challenging our visual education, and Mackey in some ways with the aural, the hearing—even on the level of vibration—the hearing making us re-hear and re-see. And *Citizen* with so much of the visuals—the Nick Cave movement of the leap and the surrealism and

the photos and the video accompaniments. They both, I think, are really expanding the sense of what a poem and a long poem can be and how it speaks to us now.

RC: Yeah and I know you had Nate Mackey's most recent book to consider, and I also can see how he as a poet made sense for Lifetime Achievement, in part because that book was a continuation of his project. Did you think a lot about that, and about what he's been doing throughout his career?

DLG: I think we did take that into account. He has written a number of books; he's worked in poetry, in fiction, he's written an influential book of literary theory, so he's worked in criticism, he's edited an avant-garde literary journal, so we were taking all of that into account in responding to his work.

MS: Yeah, absolutely—from Splay Anthem to Nod House, to sort of long, serial imagination of this band of travelers. But, yeah, everything Danielle just mentioned, absolutely, as well.

BSF: Yeah I think it was the first time we had an ongoing discussion—a lively discussion—about someone's contribution to poetry, which went beyond writing poetry. So much that he's done. So "Lifetime Achievement" was, for the first time in this prize, I think, broader than being a poet. It was kind of an interesting opening up for me.

RC: That's amazing to hear, and I'm not surprised. I'm not surprised that the three of you found a way to re-imagine the Bobbitt Prize and what constitutes "Lifetime Achievement" as you also at the same time honored a book that as you said captured this moment in our culture, in our history, in terms of what poetry can accomplish in contending with those things, so powerfully.

Webcast Intro

Anne Holmes: In April 2017, Claudia Rankine and Nathaniel Mackey traveled to the Library to accept the prize and read from their work. Here they are.

Webcast Clip from Bobbitt Prize Reading with Nathaniel Mackey & Claudia Rankine

Claudia Rankine: [reads "Some years there exists a wanting to escape..." from Citizen: An American Lyric]

Thank you very much.

[Applause]

Nathaniel Mackey: Thank you, Claudia, for your very deep and stirring reading. And thanks to the Library of Congress, and the Bobbitt Family for bringing us here. Claudia and I read together 15 years ago at the University of Chicago, with Ed Roberson. So it's nice to be reunited.

The phrase "lifetime achievement" has a rather ominous ring. [Laughter] And I'm going to read recent work that hasn't been published in book form yet. I'm not done yet. [Laughter] And—

I just wanted to let you know. [Laughter] The poem I'll begin with, since we're here in Washington, DC, it's the last poem in a volume that will be called Tej Bet. And it's—I only work—I only write, you know, a couple of poems. One is called "Song of the Andoumboulou," and the other is called "Mu." And they go

on. The book that I most recently published, "Blue Fasa," ends with "Song of the Andoumboulou 110." And Tej Bet ends with this one, "Song of the Andoumboulou 160." And those of you acquainted with the work know that it's come to be a kind of song of migration, the migration of a traveling group known as "we." In a country called "Nub." It bears some resemblance to this country, a world—a planet called "Nub" bears some resemblance to this planet.

And this one was recently published in The Nation back in the fall. Even though it was written a few years ago, it was actually written around the time of the midterm elections.

[reads "Song of the Andoumboulou 160" from "Tej Bet"]

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.