

From the Catbird Seat: Season 1, Episode 6

National Book Festival Youth Poetry Slam

Interview Between Rob Casper and Juan Felipe Herrera

Juan Felipe Herrera: Robbie?

Rob Casper: Juan Felipe, how you doing?

JFH: Pretty good.

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, and you just heard Rob Casper, the head of the Poetry and Literature Center, on the line with former Poet Laureate Juan Felipe Herrera. We'll get back to that conversation in just a minute, I promise.

If this is your first time tuning in, here's some background: Each week, we pull from our 80 years of archived recordings to listen to celebrated poets reading and discussing their work here at the Library. On this first season, we're revisiting some of the Poetry and Literature Center's events from the last five years, and we'll bring on some special guests to talk about them with us. All of the event recordings you'll hear this season are available as video webcasts on the Library's website.

On today's episode, we're going back to the 2015 Youth Poetry Slam at the National Book Festival. The Youth Poetry Slam event debuted at the Festival just a year earlier, in 2014, as a collaboration between the Library of Congress, the Literature Division of the National Endowment for the Arts, and Split This Rock, a national poetry organization with deep roots here in D.C. Each year, the Slam brings champions from some of the top youth slam groups around the country to compete.

At the time of the 2015 National Book Festival, Juan Felipe Herrera was just a few days into his tenure as the 21st Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry; along with sharing his own work at the Festival, he also served as a judge for the Youth Slam event. Lucky for you, we got Juan Felipe on the phone to talk about that experience. If you've ever had the pleasure of sharing space with Juan Felipe, you know his generosity of thought goes above and beyond all expectation, and this conversation is no different. Here he is with Rob Casper, head of the Poetry and Literature Center.

Interview Between Rob Casper and Juan Felipe Herrera

RC: Well, you just talked about being a judge in the poetry world at large; what does it mean to be a judge for youth poetry slams? So, you have these kids, in this case, from, uh, D.C., but also from Houston, Chicago, and Los Angeles, up there performing their poems, and you have to instantly come up with a score; you and two other judges. What's that experience like?

JFH: Yeah, at first it—it's a tough experience because you do have to score. And as you know poetry is impossible to score. And so is young people's spirit, and great energy, and you know, amazing

improvisation, and amazing voices, and what they're talking about. So, maybe you're not jumping up and down on fire but your poem is a very deep poem. Or maybe you're jumping up and down on fire and your poem is more of an image poem, and doesn't necessarily have the ribs and bones of society's ills. So, it is tough to judge in like, what—? Ten seconds? Ten to twenty seconds to put down that score.

RC: Right.

JFH: But you know what, I notice the readers' tenderness, their honesty, I notice their openness and their amazing ability to stand up before a mega audience and launch poems that perhaps they haven't really shared at all, in terms of a large audience. Or even a medium-sized audience. So that meant a lot to me; that went into the score for me. As well as, you know, the poem. So I had to be very open. Judging slams and performers requires more openness than perhaps judging a poem on a page. 'Cause all you have is the page. So then all you have are the words, and all you have is the "construction of the materials," and, as Ed Hirsch would say, the poem. On stage you have a whole new universe of new figures and items that you need to look at. You have to be quick; you have to be open. So for me, I was really impressed by all of them. Really inspired by all of them. So I gave them all their scores. That's what I did.

RC: I'm wondering—you've had very different experiences at the National Book Festival, which, for those of you who haven't been here, is a huge one-day event now at the Convention Center in Washington, D.C., that brings over one hundred thousand people to the Library and to the capital to celebrate books. Juan Felipe, you've been a judge of the Poetry Slam, you've also read from your own poetry, and you've read from your children's books. Can you talk about those different experiences and how being a slam judge fits into that?

JFH: Uh, well, you know, they're all related, you know. It's—the poetry world, sometimes we think of it as just odd-looking poems that don't make sense, and go in a book that's on a shelf, and with these lands, and the Library of Congress's event, and everything you do, Rob, at the Poetry and Literature Center at the Library of Congress, where I have—I had my office, and Tracy K. Smith, our new Laureate has her office . . . it's a much bigger world that we're talking about. So yes, I judged the slam, I read poetry from my books at the Festival, and I also address young people, with my children's books—all those things are happening in the poetry world and the writing world and the literary world at large. So it's a very dynamic world. For me, it's lovely because I believe that writers, poets, in this case, in my case, but in many cases, uh, we write poetry, yes, we also write stories and essays and reviews and we write for children and we write for toddlers and we read for seniors, and we go to the hospitals and we read there, and work with, uh, juvenile centers, juvenile homes where youth are incarcerated, and on. So, poetry's part of our entire society. And active throughout all levels of our society, not just a poem in a book on the shelf.

RC: You've been involved with many National Book Festivals; you've seen the range of readers who come to the National Book Festival. Some of our most celebrated poets and writers. What do you think all of those writers—those writers who come into the Library, and the capital, with a lifetime's worth of

writing behind them, with the country's greatest accolades that they've received, what do you think they can learn from the slammers who you got a chance to hear and judge in 2015?

JFH: I think they can learn to remember that we're still, uh, we're still, poetry's still coming alive and being elevated, and they can remember that they're not alone in weaving the threads of being, you know, which is really digging deep into the core of what's taking place, not only in our society in nature, on earth and beyond, to make us one, and I think young people are doing that with their new voices, and new words, and new arrangements, and new experiences, and elder poets, can, uh, smile a little bit. And say, it wasn't just me alone digging deep all my life; now we have a new generation digging deep and the rest of their lives, they're going to follow a similar trail, but it will be a new path. And that is a beautiful insight, piece of enlightenment that the elder poets, I think, will smile upon. And also connect with. And—and become one amazing community of poets, you know, sometimes we go out there and we're digging and digging and writing and writing, and we get this sense of isolation, and our poems begin to falter a bit. But when we see the young generations, we kind of see ourselves and then we see new faces and a new, new way of putting meaning together, and a new way of—a new attempt to thread and weave on our loom that one poem of being, where we finally can embrace all, the big all, the biggest picture possible. And that is fulfillment.

RC: Okay. And that's—there's nowhere else to go now. We're done.

JFH: [laughs]

RC: All right, Juan Felipe, thank you for being the sweet, enchanting, enlightening Poet Laureate that you are.

JFH: [laughs] Well thanks, Rob, you go deep, I go deep, you know?

Webcast Intro

Anne Holmes: If that conversation didn't energize you, well, don't worry—we're only going to crank it up from here on out. Now, we'll hear from four of the competing slammers from the event—Mila, Maya, Antoine, and Rukmeeni. Without further ado, I'm going to let the evening's emcee, Kosi Dunn, take it from here.

Webcast Clip 1

Kosi Dunn: All right, all right, all right, all right. My name is Kosi Dunn. I am 20 years old. I'm also a junior at the University of Maryland College Park. Go Terps. Whoo. I am studying English, a little bit of film, and a little bit of business in the Robert Smith Business School for Innovation and Entrepreneurship. I'm interested in storytelling, telling stories, because they matter, because each and every single person who touches this stage is attempting to change you. You, right there, we're going to change you. It's going to happen. I hope you're ready. All right. So I'm supposed to tell you all what a poetry slam is. Raise your hand if you are new to this thing we call a poetry slam. Mm-hmm. They lying in the front. Why you lying? All right, all right, all right, all right. And so a poetry slam was created in 1984 by a Chicago construction worker named Mark Smith.

Crowd: No way.

Kosi Dunn: Ah. So you know the dude, the thing. It is a game in which we perform poetry. Our performed poetry is judged on a numerical scale of zero to 10. Yes, we are putting arbitrary numbers to incredibly sympathetic, empathetic life-changing poetry. I don't know who started this. He must be ridiculous, that Mark Smith.

Crowd: No way.

Kosi Dunn: Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha. Poets have three minutes, three minutes, to present their original work with a 10-second grace period. After 3:10, the poets will lose .5 points for every 10 seconds they go over. This reminds me of a quote by a man, you may have heard of him, his name was William Shakespeare. It said, "Brevity"—say brevity—

Crowd: Brevity—

Kosi Dunn: —is the soul—

Crowd: —is the soul—

Kosi Dunn: —of wit.

Crowd: —of wit.

Kosi Dunn: Okay. You all learned something today. We're going to change lives, you all. Okay. After two rounds, the poets with the highest scores are declared the winners. But the point is not the point. The point is the what?

[Multiple Speakers]

Kosi Dunn: The point is the what?

[Multiple Speakers]

Kosi Dunn: The point is the huh?

[Multiple Speakers]

Kosi Dunn: All right. See, slam is stupid. Say slam is stupid.

[Multiple Speakers]

Kosi Dunn: It's a game. Say it's a game.

[Multiple Speakers]

Kosi Dunn: That makes no sense, really. But it has grown in popularity all over the world and is now an international phenomenon bringing more and more people into the world of poetry and creative writing each year. If you spoke in word, poetry is an interactive art. Say interactive.

[Multiple Speakers]

Kosi Dunn: So everybody in this room has a job to do tonight. You all, you and you and you, cameraperson. I'm not taking you out of this. We have a job today, okay? Our job is to show love to the poets and make a lot of noise for the poems. Could you all do that? Could you all show love, please?

[Cheering]

Webcast Clip 2

We're going to keep it moving. On deck, we have Kamal. And coming up to the stage we have Mila.

[Applause and Cheering]

Mila: In the tragedy of Othello, Shakespeare writes of two characters, and the tender love they share, ruined at the hands of a manipulative and selfish man by the name of Iago. Now, not to spoil anything, but by the last act of the play, both the lovers are dead. Iago, however, remains still alive. He, as opposed to dying, is arrested and sentenced to torture. The greatest torture of all being a silence he self-inflicts to avoid being proven guilty. Quote, "Demand me nothing. What you know you know. From this time forth I never will speak word," unquote. I have been thinking a lot about this ending lately. It seems, to myself at least, for lack of voice there is no greater death. And yet I have seen us writers and readers, poets and people, stomaching a forced-fed quiet, watching our words as they have been taken from our mouths and our libraries. We are accepting this self-doubt society has rooted in all of us. Following the censorship in search of success, all living to leave legacies crafted from the same 26 letters as if that wasn't hard enough. Quote, "There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you," unquote. Maya Angelou and her autobiography, one of the most challenged books of all time where she describes this same silence, the lesson unlearned. The book removed from shelves, her story remaining unheard, taking away a little girl's opportunity to have something to relate to, reinserting the agony, the unsettling sadness. I know why the caged bird sings. The caged bird sings of freedom. We are all caged birds singing that same song. Quote, "I nearly always write just as I nearly always breathe," unquote. John Steinbeck in a letter to his editor. Tell me, if there are writers, there must also be erasers for love. There is hate. For mice, there are men. There are people who pursue Steinbeck's oxygen. Others who'd prefer his words burn. They would rather breathe the carbon. Quote, "A book is a loaded gun in the house next door. Burn it. Take a shot from the weapon, breach man's mind. Who knows who might be the target of the well-read man," unquote. Ray Bradbury, Fahrenheit 451. There is a war against word happening. Make home of the front line. Your voice is both armor and weapon. Remember, sticks and stones have broken bones, but our words have always cut deeper, been able to burn you where the sun can't, been there to protect you when the night couldn't. If silence is golden, then our words must be stardust, must be incalculable, must be unpalatable. Have you ever thought maybe libraries are so quiet because the words are so loud? Shh. Just listen [applause]. You can hear them aching even now.

[Applause and Cheering]

Webcast Clip 3

Kosi Dunn: Indeed, it is all free. Poet Mila had a 28.6. Give it up for the poet. And we will have on deck, Antoine. Coming up to the stage, please welcome Maya, you all. Please welcome Maya.

[Applause and Cheering]

[Laughter]

[Inaudible Speaker]

Maya: Two households, both alike in dignity. In fair Chicago, where we lay our scene where there aren't any flowers to pluck petals from in winter, no. "He loves me, he loves me not." This poem is for fine Juliet and Romeo who took two trains and then a bus to get where the El wouldn't go. They only spoke in poetry. Romeo wrote similes more beautiful than any pick-up line. Rosaline is a distant memory, and he keeps Juliet's love letters underneath bullet casings in his dresser. They take each photo together like it will be their last because it could be. Selfies from the me-me generation, CC: generation, the stop-and-frisk-street-law generation, these photos are the documents for the undocumented and Arthur Lawrence said, "Unpredictable endings were it." Made million dollar, billion dollar franchises. Some reason, this ending, the dying ending, seems so predictable. Why does it seem so predictable? The Montague's will say, "They died for nothing. No reason to be caught behind the bullet." The Capulet's will say they died because, well, Juliet was busy learning AP sign— . Romeo was learning the sings of gangs and everybody says, "This is what happens when white girls hang with black boys." And the cops will say, "They died for walking home after dark. Everybody knows you don't walk on the South Side past five." Only because they weren't old enough to get their driver's licenses yet. But somehow they were old enough to die. And Chicago says, "They will live forever. Cause more change dead than they ever could have alive." But our politicians forget them too quickly when a Florida courthouse puts a boy on trial and seem to fail to remember he's already dead. Maybe the reason we remember Shakespeare is because they were right. Maybe, if instead of just the script being property, Romeo and Juliet were. Maybe if Romeo and Juliet weren't just actors in the 1%, Shakespeare would be seen in fringe festivals instead of our classrooms where Fitzpatrick calls everyone outside of Europe savages. And Romeo and Juliet will say they died for love. For Romeo, dying with Juliet was the happiest and saddest moment of his life. So you can meet me at the morgue where the next classic might play out. Because what's better than a surprise ending than one with the headlines you ignore and none of us will sashay offstage into death like in musicals, but will leave just as quietly.

[Applause and Cheering]

Webcast Clip 4

Kosi Dunn: Also, please note that the poet Kamal received a 27.3. But we are carrying on. On deck we have Rukmeeni. Coming up to the stage we have Antoine. Please make some noise you all.

[Applause and Cheering]

Antoine: I sit in English class. May as well be sitting in how to idolize the English class. British Lit has never had me lit. Just had me sit and read about a white protagonist. The main character is most likely a Christian who has access to limitless adventures because of their privilege.

[Applause and Cheering]

Antoine: Reading Narnia and I've got to say the wardrobe doesn't suit me. How is it that the book is diverse enough to feature woodland creatures and talking beavers, but citizens of the one Muslim kingdom worship a demon. I'm just saying the only two citizens who are considered fiendish are Princess Aravis who runs off with the white boy, aka treason, and a guard who converts to worship Aslan the lion, aka feline Jesus.

[Laughter]

Antoine: In Curtis Sittenfeld's *Prep*, Darden is described as the class's cool black guy. He dark, he tall, he's straight from the Bronx. His skin be synonymous with his basketball. He even got a gold chain to show his enslavement to a white office pen and page. Everyone has seen the move, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, but who knew that in the novel *Oompa Loompas* were shot the colored African slaves. Every paragraph I picked makes me feel degraded, but I must read every page because I will be graded. Education system worried about my racist progress reports. May I report on the education system's lack of racial progress because I spent 12 years reading the same press about private schools. The same ones being built. But my public education is capitalized. This for every minority whose house on Mango Street being gentrified for those who see slave catchers in the rye and boys with the heads a pig-headed artless on a stick like the *Lord of the Flies* classic literature. Be the classic hall pass for white *Pride and Prejudice* make everyone as colorblind as *Oedipus*. If we really live in a post-racial time, why the clockwork still orange? Can we read Chimamanda Adichie? She tells how not to stereotype and the danger of a single story. So maybe we could learn about Latino glory instead of thinking Mexico just a hell-hole lying south of the border.

[Applause and Cheering]

Antoine: Maybe we can read Angela Davis. She tells how prisons are obsolete so black and brown couldn't—black and brown kids wouldn't think that masscar's races is the only thing that awaits them in these streets. Or maybe Amy Tan in the opposite of faith, so people who haven't seen members of the opposite race would have an image of diversity that diverges from a token black friend. And black and brown kids wouldn't need Sparknotes just to comprehend and then maybe—

[Applause]

Antoine: —just maybe I wouldn't feel three-fifths of a human after reading just three-fifths of a novel.

Crowd: Ooh.

[Applause and Cheering]

Webcast Clip 5

Kosi Dunn: All right, all right. It's my job as host to make sure the temperature in the room is all good and whatnot for the next poet. From low to high, we have a 9.7, a 9.9, and our first 10 of the evening.

[Cheering]

Kosi Dunn: But again, who cares? We care about the incredible poem that just touched the stage. The boy who just touched stage, and the last poet who touched stage, Maya received a 28.0. We are going to keep it moving. Up next, on deck, I mean, we have Kenya. Coming up to the stage now, please make some noise for Rukmeeni.

[Applause and Cheering]

Kosi Dunn: All the way to the stage. All the way to the stage.

[Applause and Cheering]

Rukmeeni: The first story I ever loved was Ali Baba, or [inaudible]. Ali Baba and the 40 Thieves. I read it more than 40 times because the idea of a world where one woman could save her family with a mob boss and marry the man she loved enthralled me. I wanted to be her. Or if not, at least be her best friend. I thought I could slip away into her world. But lesson one, escape is never as easy as climbing a beanstalk.

Crowd: Right.

Rukmeeni: When I grew past fairy tales, sugar sweet cotton candy and ferris wheels I thought, like every child does, that I was grown up. I tried coffee for the first time. Hated it. But loved the idea of bitter. Tried bitter melon. I hated it. But loved the idea of loving it. I read the series of Unfortunate Events as the testimony of a bitter man. Following cocoa tears left by bitter children less than two. Don't be afraid to be an unforgettable taste. When memories are imprinted forever, the fire that brands them is white snow. A pale fury unmatched by any but the man who could make memories changelings. The Night Circus convinced me magic was real. Not sleight of hand card tricks or foggy spectacles that magic so bright, reality seems like a lucid dream. Lesson three. When the world spins around you, hold yourself tighter. She keeps a two-fisted hold on the sword, her only protector. When I felt scared. Mistaken for willing in a London alley merch store, I ran. She didn't run. Catherine of Aragon never runs because Catherine of Aragon is never mistaken. The first time I read the Constant Princess I was floored by her bravery. The second time I was stunned by her stupidity. Lesson four. Survival is always more important than pride. Survival is a goal we can all grasp, at least for a little while. Pride, it seems, is a commodity sold by privilege. I didn't realize the privilege I carried when I held my head high until I saw the heads bowed. They were the help. The Help was a book that taught me fear, hatred and blind discrimination are the real monsters in the closet. Taught me that fortune is a bigot, or worse, that she doesn't exist at all. Taught me lesson five. Don't ever forget whose bones you are standing on and whose stories have saved you. Five lessons, five lives, countless mistakes. The rest of my life to make more. The rest of my life to collect stories and people like shoes, bodies to step into when the real world swallows me. I'll

read miles with them. Walk pages and two big clouds and with every blister I'll remember the stories that opened my eyes.

[Cheering and Applause]

Conclusion

Anne Holmes: That's it for today's episode. If you thought we might reveal the winner of the 2015 youth poetry slam—sorry to disappoint you. You'll just have to watch or listen to the full event—you know it'll be worth it.

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.