

From the Library of Congress in Washington, DC.

Sheryl Cannady: I'm Sheryl Cannady at the Library of Congress. Joining me is Pulitzer Prize winning poet Charles Wright, who is the Library of Congress's 20th Poet Laureate consultant in poetry.

My first question Mr. Wright is when did you first begin to read and write poetry?

Charles Wright: Well, of all strange things it was when I was in the army serving in Italy in 1959. I read a poem that I really liked in the location in which it was written by a man named Ezra Pound whom I sure the library is quite well-aware of out of Lake Garda, Sirmione Peninsula. It was a poem called Blandula, Tenulla, Vagula. And it really hit me.

A friend of mine who was already writing poetry, named Harold Schimmel, had given me selected poems of Pound and said, "When you go out there read this poem out on the peninsula." And I did and I was totally taken with it, you know? And I think I said before I tried to write pros but I couldn't tell a story and here was something that didn't have a narrative line: it had an imagistic line from front to back or top to bottom.

And so I said, "Gee." And so I read more of Pound and then sort of read whatever I could get my hands on, which wasn't a lot in the library of Camp \_\_\_\_\_ in Verona, but there were bookstores downtown that carried English language books and so on and so forth. But that's when I started when I was 23 years old.

Sheryl Cannady: Which poets have been your greatest influence?

Charles Wright: That's tough. You know every poet you read influences you; if it's only for five minutes or for a couple of years. There's a time in your writing life when every week you have a new favorite poet because that's the one you've read that week and it can go from John \_\_\_\_\_ to Arthur van \_\_\_\_\_ to whoever.

I think my two favorite poets would be Emily Dickenson and Gerard Manley Hopkins.

Sheryl Cannady: What did you like about them? What resonated with you?

Charles Wright: Well, Emily Dickenson's content subject matter, what she wrote about, the kind of impossibility of transcending this ordinary life and knowing that that was impossible, and that struck a bell with me.

Hopkins: I love the music of his poetry, I love the way he wrote actually and his strange and enthralling kind of metrics, and he was a big influence on me for a while I guess for a long time.

Sheryl Cannady: Now how have your southern roots influenced your work?

Charles Wright: Oh, I don't know. I don't come out of a southern narrative tradition but I am a southerner and so therefore I guess I have southern roots in my poetry, although I don't think it's necessary. I don't write a lot about east Tennessee and western North Carolina where I grew up I did write about that.

And I like being a southerner so maybe that's had something to do with it. But I don't really write on southern themes as such.

Sheryl Cannady: Well you continue to be exceptionally prolific. What inspires you?

Charles Wright: What inspired me? Fear.

Sheryl Cannady: Fear?

Charles Wright: Fear that I wouldn't get anything done. I don't know. I finally found something I could do: which was writing poetry. If I did it well or not I've never known, but I could do it. And so that's what I did: I sort of didn't do anything else once I discovered poetry.

I used to play golf a lot and I loved golf. I got to the point where I when I would play golf and I would if I had a couple of bad shots, by the second or third hole I'd just forget about golf and I'd be thinking about the poem I was writing which is not a good thing if you're on the golf course.

But that's I don't know why I'm so prolific; I just had the I had nothing else to do and so I sat down and wrote.

Sheryl Cannady: Well, you obviously love words.

Charles Wright: I do like words. I like the music of words. I like the music of poetry. I like the music of language. And since I have no capacity for music itself although my mother was quite musical and my first cousin, her brother's two boys are Johnny and Edgar Winter who were quite famous in their day the albino rock and roll singers and they so there's been music all through my mother's family but I didn't get any of it: I got my father's Austrian tone-deafness.

Sheryl Cannady: What was your reaction to being appointed poet laureate?

Charles Wright: Fear again I guess. I don't know. You know I I don't really know. I said, "Well, I guess I better do it," because I've known people who did do it and it was obviously doable but I'm not really a public person so it was some skepticism on my part.

But it's gone all right, you know, and so I'm fairly happy I did so.

Sheryl Cannady: Well, we're happy that you're poet laureate.

Charles Wright: Well thank you.

Sheryl Cannady: What do you hope to accomplish during your tenure?

Charles Wright: I don't have any set schedule or any set program. I hope to do the three or four things that I'm required to do as well as I can and the readings seem to go okay, and then I have something around the first of March and then I have a thing at the end of April, so I will try to do those as best I can.

I've done a fundraiser and I'm sure Rob Gash will have something else for me to do before too long. But I don't have a program: I just try to stay out of jail, I don't know.

Sheryl Cannady: Well, I would think that you will inspire others to, if nothing else, be more interested in knowing more about poetry.

Charles Wright: Well, I hope so. You know, it's been a lifesaver for me, and you have to read it seriously before it gets to you it gets through to you. Because poetry you know is a kind of separate language: it's a language that how can I say says less and means more. And so you have to the contracting of language into some kind of musical instrument is really quite necessary I think no matter how extensive a musical play it has or how sort of simple of musical play it has.

The difference between Carlos Williams and Gerard Manley Hopkins is gigantic but they're both great poets, you know, and Williams is quite spare and Hopkins is quite lush.

So however you feel call to do it is how you should do it. Actually you should try everything, you know: you should try everything if you're a poet and see what you like. And if you don't like it you don't have to do it: I mean you're not a bad person if you can't write poetry; it's okay.

Sheryl Cannady: You're a retired professor at the University of Virginia. Is that what you taught your students? What lessons did you impart to them?

Charles Wright: Well, I don't know. I taught mostly workshops I did workshops because the English department was so full of noted scholars in all the other fields that I didn't really have much else to do. I did a form and theory course for a while, which is various forms of poetry. And I would try to get them to work very hard at what they were doing, that's all.

I got you know I was very lucky because I had wonderful graduate students and upper-division students who always wanted to be in the class, so I didn't really have to impart anything to them: I could suggest things. If people are good you don't teach them; they learn and they pick up stuff because they're already on their way.

People that are not good you could talk around their poems, you could talk about the what might be going, you could because Donald \_\_\_\_\_ once said you could teach them notions of lousy, you could teach them prayer and you could teach them strict attention.

Sheryl Cannady: As an English professor what is your opinion of today's young writers?

Charles Wright: Well, I'm a retired English professor: I haven't been teaching for about five years, so I don't really know I don't think they've read anything; that's the main problem. They don't read. And that's what you've got to do if you want to write poetry. Theodore Roethke said, "You want to write? There's the library. You've got to go in and read."

And that's what I always suggest to people because they really don't read much: they read current stuff and what's hip; but they've got to know everything, you know? You've got to know everything. I didn't know everything but I tried, you know, I tried to read as much as I could. And so that's what I would try to impart to them.

Sheryl Cannady: What role have libraries played in your life and work?

Charles Wright: Well, that's where all the books are. So I would go in there and read some. I wasn't a great library rat when I was in college, although I did spend a lot of time there. And a library plays a huge role in any writer's life: that's just a fact, because you go to it for sustenance, you go to it for some peace and quiet, and you know you go to it so you can steal things from other poets where nobody can see you.

Sheryl Cannady: What changes have you noticed in the art of poetry during your career?

Charles Wright: Well, it's gone from when I first started from a very formal approach to poetry the new criticism to and after 50 years to a sort of totally abstract and non-formal view of it; although any poet who is any good is formal in his own way: he writes his poems formally but to the drum that he hears, not exactly the drum he's been given, which is your received meters and received structures and that sort of thing.

So that's been the big difference is that it is loosened up I think for the better and if you're smart you'll know all the other stuff, then you can do what you want to because you'll know what you're not doing. It's very important to know what you're not doing and why you're not doing it.

Sheryl Cannady: Well, thank you very much. It's been a pleasure speaking with you. Thanks for an enlightening conversation.

Charles Wright: Thank you Cheryl.

Sheryl Cannady: I look forward to your next visit at the library and hearing you play the instrument of words.

Charles Wright: The sacred heart: that's the voice.

Female: This has been a presentation of the Library of Congress.

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