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Interview with Jeanne Murray Walker

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Dr. Jeanne Murray Walker has written six volumes of poems. She has contributed many poems and essays to periodicals such as Poetry and The American Poetry Review and written scripts for theatre plays that have been produced in the United States and in London. Among her many awards and honors are seven Pennsylvania State Arts Council Fellowships and a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship. Walker teaches poetry and script writing at the University of Delaware.



CR: What is your motivation to write?

JMW: I don't know what it is. Anyone who had any sense wouldn't be doing this. I think it is a great mystery why human beings need language, need symbols. I guess people who write maybe need them more than others. Or people who paint or sculpt. I know that I need to do it and I know that it's something that makes me happy. My goal is to use it for the good of other people as well as satisfy my own needs, because I think that poetry is about communication. I think it can do a number of things for people, especially right now. We're so speedy, and technological language has really flattened a lot of things out for us. I think poetry can remind us that there are a lot of other ways of talking about the world, and that's really important. It slows us down a little bit, gives us moments of reflection. I also think it teaches us how to read our own lives.

In the way that I was talking about: something happens to you, it's an image, you might dream about it, it's something that comes up from time to time in your memory—what does it mean? Everybody has that happen, not just people who write. I think that by learning to read poetry or by reading poetry, in some ways *that's* poetry, that's metaphor. It's about metaphor. I think that poetry does something for people that is essential and human. I could go on. I think it is possible to satisfy your own need to write as well as to make a difference for other people. I know that because other writers have made a difference to me.

CR: You said poetry does things for you. What does it do for you personally?

JMW: It does different things depending on whom I'm reading. On one level there's gossip. I'm thinking about that new book of Elizabeth Bishop's that just came out*: I can't wait to get my hands on stuff she wouldn't publish because it wasn't good enough. What is it that she was keeping around because she didn't want anyone to see it? Well, you can only care about that if you know Elizabeth Bishop's work a little bit, so it matters to you. So there's that level.

There's also the level of just needing solace or needing consolation. I think in the culture after 9/11 there was a turn to poetry to consolation in a way that I haven't seen for a while. Maybe that happened after WWII as well; I'm not sure. There was that attempt to get quiet and read texts for that. I think I read to find out about other people's human experience so that I can have a better sense of what my own experience means, to compare notes with people. It is just an amazing fact to me that I can compare notes with Shakespeare or notes with Dickens. These people are available to you. And it's astonishing. The act of reading and writing preserves them in that way.

CR: What is your writing process?

JMW: First, I put something down on paper, and then I revise it—a lot of times. I do sometimes do a little research before I write, particularly for the theater. It's necessary to know facts for the theater. I think it's sometimes necessary to know facts for poetry as well.

CR: You mentioned "reading in gobs." Do you write "in gobs," or are you more methodical about it?

JMW: Yeah, I do. Part of it has to do with when I have time. But some of it doesn't. It's that mystery. You just feel that words are more accessible at some times than at others. I suppose that's linked to what our forbearers have always said, that it comes from Mount Olympus or it comes from the Holy Spirit. I very much feel that I am just a conduit, in a sort of way, of the word. It doesn't just come at a steady pace. I [write] when it's available.

CR: Have you tried it the other way, the Stafford way, and knocked out a poem every day no matter what?

JMW: I have. It's not that it doesn't work for me. I think I could write

**Bishop, Elizabeth*. Edgar Allan Poe & The Juke-Box: Uncollected Poems, Drafts, and Fragments. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007.

something (even if it was pretty bad) every day. The problem that I have is that all of a sudden the entire creative writing department at the University of Delaware lands in your lap and you have to manage arguments to the committees and to the chair and to the dean and to the provost about why you need a couple of people in creative writing, and then you have to chair the committee that searches for them. And before you know it, the morning you were supposed to use writing is [spent] emailing all your colleagues. It never fails that the time I'm supposed to spend writing gets invaded by other duties that I've agreed to do or that I feel need to be done. If you stop, it takes a while to start up again.

CR: In what way does your faith inform your writing?

JMW: I have an answer to that, and I am going to tell you the answer tonight. It is a complicated answer, and it is not by primary characteristics like whether it has a swear word in it or whether it has sex in it or whether it gets published by a Christian publisher. All of which have, I think, been used as indicators. It has to do with what Coleridge talked about in his *Biographia Literaria* where he talks about the primary and the secondary imagination. The primary imagination is the imagination of God and the ongoing act of creating. And the secondary imagination is our ability to understand that as human beings. And, if you seek coherence at the heart of the world and not just an environment of stuff that is out there and unrelated, my argument would be that the coherence that you seek is God's coherence, and that's what it means. My faith in the creed—my belief that Jesus came into history and that God keeps cohering on an ongoing basis—is what makes me a Christian poet or writer. But I don't like that term. I have a tendency to feel that it has been abused.

CR: Abused in what sense?

JMW: I think it is misunderstood. I would say that the great writers are writing things that are essentially Christian because whatever is true is God's truth. But nobody calls them great Christian writers. Nobody would ever say that about Dickens. They would say that about some writers. It seems to me whatever is true in their work is Christian. I think the whole question is really complicated by the fact that in the 40s and 50s, the publishing industry split. I would gather it split because secular presses would not publish work that assented to Christianity. So presses were devoted to publishing work that was Christian. I think that has probably been a problem. I know there are just really bad potboilers that get published by these Christian presses and that have nothing whatsoever to do with real faith or depth of

understanding or belief or coherence. They're really just being kind of funded and written. I've met some of these people. I think sometimes that's what Christian writing is thought of sometimes—if it's published by a Christian press, then it's a Christian book and it gets put in Christian book stores. I think there is now a reuniting of those two streams, and there are a lot of secular publications that will publish work that is religious. Not all of them will, but a lot of them. I've had *Poetry* magazine publish stuff of mine that is deeply, without any question, Christian.

CR: When people are reading your poems, what is one thing that you want people to understand?

JMW: I would like them to have an experience of poetry and have that whatever-it-gives that it gives us. It gives us that sense of not being alone, that sense of how we use symbols in the world (we all think that way), releases people from the technology. I love my computer, but we all tend to get flattened by that.

People who write poetry are really just human beings. It's a way of communicating. It seemed impossible for me to do that. I really do believe that not everyone can be a poet, because not everyone can make metaphor. I think that that's really at the heart of what a poet is. A lot of people make metaphor, and everyone thinks in metaphor at least some of the time. If you can do that, then, like Yeats, you can teach yourself how to be a poet. It takes a lot of hard work. I don't think you can just toss out poems. I think it's a serious study. But I do think a lot of people could do it if they set their minds to it.

Why would people ever want to write poetry? You do it because you have to. There's something that drives you to do it. I think a lot of people might be able to do it if they were driven to. Whenever students come to my office and show me their work, I remember that I took poems to a professor. I wrote a poem about blueberries that I had just picked in Vermont. I said, "Am I going to be able to be a poet?" And he said, "Honey, I have no idea. Do you have the fortitude? Are you going to be able to keep doing it?" And really, that's the answer. No matter how brilliant a student is, it's really about the long haul.