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>> Each year thousands of booklovers of all ages visit the nation's capital to celebrate the joys of reading and lifelong literacy at the National Book Festival sponsored by the Library of Congress and hosted by First Lady Laura Bush. Now in its eighth year, this free event held on the National Mall Saturday, September 27th, will spark readers' passion for learning as they interact with the nation's bestselling authors, illustrators and poets. Even if you can't attend the festival in person, you can participate online. These podcasts with well-known authors are available through the National Book Festival website. That's www.loc.gov/bookfest.

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I'm Matt Raymond coming to you from the Library of Congress and I'm pleased to be joined by Kay Ryan. She is recently appointed by the Library of Congress as the new poet laureate of the United States, or the more specific title, Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry. She's the 16th person to hold that title. And she'll be joining us at the National Book Festival, as well as opening the library's literary season on October 16th. A resident of Marin County, California, Ryan has carved out a unique niche in the poetry world with highly accessible poems using what she calls recombinant rhymes along with a healthy dose of wit, insight and even puns. She has written six books of poetry and a limited edition artist's book along with a number of essays. Her latest book, *The Niagara River*, was published in 2005 by Grove Press. But she has also spent a great part of her life, more than 30 years in fact, teaching remedial English part-time at the College of Marin in Kentfield, California. And we are absolutely delighted to have you with us. Thank you for making time, Ms. Ryan.

>> Oh, the pleasure is mine.

>> My first question, how does it feel to be the poet laureate?

>> Well, it feels very strange. I mean, it's sort of like I've been boiled maybe a little too fast. You know the old story about boiling frogs so gradually that it doesn't know it got boiled. I've been living out of the spotlight for most of my life, and it's a very sudden elevation.

>> How did you first become interested in poetry?

>> You know, poetry really came and got me. I was always interested in language, just -- I was just bewitched as a child when anybody would say something special. I remember I was at like something like third grade and a girl said to me, "Don't broadcast it." And I thought, "Oh, what a devastating phrase; I'm going to use it myself." So I was always very, very sensitive to language. But I really only buy the -- only at the age of about 30 did I realize that I was just not going to be able to avoid really writing poetry as a lifetime occupation. I had resisted it. I loved reading it. I was an undergraduate and graduate student of literature. But I think that I hadn't wanted to be a poet because I saw

it as something that really required the whole self. It required a kind of exposure that seemed obnoxious to me; I didn't want to be exposed in that way. I want to be funny, or I wanted to be more distant. So it was - - I was reluctant to be something so all-exposing and [inaudible] all-consuming as well.

>> Now, were there people who told you to indeed broadcast it? I mean, were there some role models or people who encouraged and inspired you as you were beginning your work?

>> Well, of course I was inspired by the masters of literature and English. I was very compelled by poetry in general, literature in general. It was thrilling. I went to community college and I remember my very first English -- just English survey course, it was, you know survey English and composition as well. And I remember being introduced to reading short stories and understanding that they had a strong intellectual component, that they could be thought of as more than stories, that they were working on a number of levels at once. And it was very exciting to my mind, which enjoyed work and enjoyed moving quickly. But I hadn't really somehow understood literature so much as a brain stimulant. And as soon as I, as soon as I got that, I really became compelled by literature.

>> Now, from everything that I've read and learned about you, you are unique. You're not, I guess, very easily categorized. And you've really sort of, as I said earlier, carved out your own place. How would you describe your own style?

>> Well, first of all, I'm going to go back to that word unique. I am convinced that every poet is unique and that in fact that is the very requirement of poetry. That if it is genuine, something's been said in a way that it hasn't been said before. The subject matter is never unique: it's loss or hope or despair or love or something of that sort. But it's got to be unique. As to my writing, I think maybe one of the most distinguishing things about it is that I discovered at a fairly early point in my writing development that I just adored rhyme. And yet I -- this was, say, in the 1970s and rhyme was very frowned upon. So I think I began insinuating it into my work in really strange ways, not direct end-rhyme or not "shoe, blue, new, crew" sort of rhyme. But all sorts of hashing up of sounds and sticking them in funny places. So I would say that the rhyming quality is very distinctive and the kind of rhyme is distinctive in my work. Also my poems are extremely short. I -- they're sometimes called miniature, but I certainly don't think they're miniature; they're just short. So rhyme-y, strangely rhyme-y and short. And maybe I would also add really interested in the processes of the mind and the exhilarations of the mind. And also I think I would say playful.

>> Now, I saw this phrase, recombinant, recombinant -- I'm having a hard time to pronounce that -- rhyme. Is that the type of rhyme that you're talking about?

>> I made that term up a long time ago. I was thinking about like recombinant DNA where you chop up a bunch of DNA up and stick it together in different ways and make a purple ants or glow in the dark rhinoceri,

And I take the sounds in words and maybe rematch them or off-match them in reverse, in following words or hash the syllables of one word up and redistribute it in several others later on. And it works I think kind of subliminally on people; you don't really notice it so much right away but then later you think, "Huh, what was that?" One time my -- my brother's not a big reader of poetry, but he's a nice brother. And I had a new book, and he dutifully sat down and read it front to back the way very few actual readers of poetry would do. And at the end he looked up and he said, "You know," he said, "When I was reading that it didn't seem to rhyme at all. But now it seems like it all rhymed." And I thought that was one of the greatest compliments I'd ever had.

>> Very subtle -- it insinuates itself into you, I suppose.

>> Well, I hope so. Sometimes it's very broad and pounds you over the head, and I like that.

>> Well, this would seem a natural spot to ask if you'd like to read any of your work for us?

>> Well, sure I would. I'm always glad to do that. And you know, I thought I would read a poem that has to do with -- well the title of the poem is Limelight, and that's also another kind of thing I like to do is take a word or phrase like say "limelight." But we know how to use it -- it means to be the focus of attention. But to think about the phrase, limelight, and the reason I want to -- I want to read this poem is because I suddenly find myself in the limelight, and this is a comment on limelight. "Lime light. One can't work by limelight. A bowlful right at one's elbow produces no more than a baleful glow against the kitchen table. The fruit purveyor's whole unstable pyramid doesn't equal what daylight did."

>> Are there any other works that you'd like to read for us?

>> Oh, sure. How much time do you have?

>> As much time as you'd like.

>> Here, I'm going to read you a poem called Home to Roost, and of course, I'm thinking there of the phrase "your chickens are coming home to roost." And that's always said to us in a very -- usually a kind of smug and certainly minatory, critical way because they're never good chickens; they're always chickens of bad decisions you made. So here's that poem. "Home to roost. The chickens are circling and blotting out the day. The sun is bright, but the chickens are in the way. Yet the sky is dark with chickens, dense with them. They turn, and then they turn again. These are the chickens you let loose one at a time, and small. Various breeds. Now they have come home to roost, all the same kind, at the same speed."

>> I would expect that your fans would get to hear more of your poetry at both the National Book Festival on the 27th of September and the opening of the literary season on October 16th. I know that you've participated

in the book festival in the past; why do you feel it's important to participate?

>> Well, first of all, I would say that it's really a lot of fun to do. It's just great to see those white tents up all over the mall and people just swarming and so excited and happy. I think it's important to participate because books are such an exhilarating and central and liberating part of our country. It's just a wonderful thing to say, "Hey, it's book day." I can't think of anything that we can all agree upon more than the centrality of books in our mental lives.

>> Why is poetry important?

>> You know, that's the kind of giant question one hopes one is never asked. But I will give it my best.

>> Okay.

>> I think -- I'm going to say from my own point of view that it's the most secret, the most private form of communication in language. And that when I find a poet who means something to me, my first impulse is to keep my mouth shut, to keep it my secret. I think that poems are transmissions from the depths of whoever wrote them to the depths of the reader, and to a greater extent than I think with any other kind of reading, the reader of a poem is making that poem, is inhabiting those words in the most personal sort of way. And that doesn't mean you read a poem and you just make it whatever you want to be. But that it goes so -- it's operating so deeply in you that it is the most special kind of reading.

>> When we think back over the history of poetry, hundreds if not thousands of years, names like Shakespeare and Keats and Shelly and Wordsworth and Frost; do you think that people today are more or less in tune with poetry than we have been in the past?

>> You know, I -- that's the kind of question that I absolutely doesn't concern me. I don't worry about it. I think of poetry as like money that you find on the ground, or money that's been lost for a thousand years or 2,000 years. It doesn't matter when you find it; it's valuable. It keeps all its value. It may have much more value. So it can wait for us, and it doesn't matter how many people at any particular date in any particular city are looking at it. It can wait and it's -- in my mind, it's never in trouble.

>> Have you ever received feedback from your fans that's been especially moving or inspirational to you in any way?

>> Well, I do find -- I do get feedback. I -- it doesn't seem to stick though, thank God. Because, you know, if you're writing, you can't write to correct what someone doesn't like and you certainly can't write to repeat what they did like. So I find it very gratifying to my animal self; you know, we all like praise. But I don't find it in any way useful to my writing self.

>> I've always been very interested in being able to talk with authors and poets and find out how they approach their work individually. I -- you know, sometimes there are idiosyncrasies or particular methods that they hue to. Are there special places that you do your writing or where you find your inspiration? Or do you wake up in the middle of the night and scribble something down on a pad?

>> Well, you know, I sometimes say that I don't write in response to inspiration. I don't -- I certainly don't wait for inspiration. I find that I have to start and rub some words together and maybe they'll get warm, you know, I'll get a little spark from them. The inspiration comes after starting for the most part. And I'm willing to start quite mechanically. There may be an idea of something that irritates me, I've just jotted a few words down. And just -- then I would use those words as a title maybe. And then just try to get something going and then, the beauty of writing poems for me is that I don't do much thinking when I'm not writing. I have a strangely empty mind. And when I set myself to task, usually in the morning and usually lying in bed with a yellow tablet and a pen, when I set myself to task of just starting to do some writing not knowing at all what it will be, I gain access to my own mind in a way that I just don't otherwise have it. So the process itself of putting the pen to the paper and beginning to use words in a - in the most accurate way that I can and the freest way that I can sort of begins some kind of brain machinery that's otherwise latent.

>> Now, you're also a teacher, and I think, again, that's something that is fairly unique about you and your background and being a well-rounded human being, I guess you could say.

>> Well, I don't know that I am well-rounded; I think I'm probably pretty lopsided. But I think the thing that makes me unusual as a writer/teacher isn't that I'm a teacher because so many writers by choice or requirement teach particularly creative writing. But in my case, I have taught remedial English at a community college for, well, over 30 years, although I'm actually not doing this semester. And I would say that one of the main affects this had on me, I would guess, is that it has made me desperate to communicate simple things. You know, I mean like I might want to get across the objective case or something like that or main ideas or supporting details or Lord knows what, how to you use a semi-colon. And I will reach in desperation for the wildest metaphor to bring across to my students some main element of grammar or composition.

>> This would also seem to be a natural place for me to ask if you have any advice that you would offer young people or even older people. My mother for instance has recently gotten into amateur poetry writing; what would you tell them if they're budding poets in their own right?

>> Well, I want to say first it's all amateur, you know? It's all amateur. I don't think that -- whoever the poet -- they ever believe that they've mastered it and that they're ever going to necessarily get one more poem that they can present to the world without shame. I would say be disobedient. I would say don't be cowed. I would say read a great deal. Read, read, read. And don't necessarily read poetry; read science, read philosophy, read the newspaper, read murder mysteries. I would add,

and love language and have the largest arsenal that you could possibly have. You don't have to use it all, but you have it.

>> Kay Ryan, the poet laureate of the United States. I always like to end these interviews by asking people what's coming next for them. I have a feeling that the answer might be something of a whirlwind.

>> Oh, what I'm going to be doing next?

>> Yes.

>> I actually -- I don't know. I expect all of this is going to descend on my head very shortly. But I just got back from a really nice run in the hills of Marin County, and I'm looking forward to doing the laundry now.

>> Easy enough. Well, thank you very much, Ms. Ryan. We're excited to hear more from you at the National Book Festival on Saturday September 27th on the National Mall from 10:00 AM to 5:00 PM. The event is free and open to the public and if you would like more details and a complete list of participating authors, you can visit www.loc.gov/bookfest. This is Matt Raymond from the Library of Congress. Thank you very much for listening.

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