

>> From the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.

>> This is Rob Casper at the Library of Congress. Late September will mark the 12th year that booklovers of all ages have gathered in Washington, D.C. to celebrate the written word at the Library of Congress National Book Festival. The festival which is free and open to the public will be two days this year; Saturday, September 22nd and Sunday, September 23, 2012. The festival will take place between 9th and 14th Streets on the National Mall, rain or shine. Hours will be from 10:00 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Saturday the 22nd and from Noon to 5:30 p.m. on Sunday the 23rd. For more details visit www.loc.gov/bookfest. And now it is my pleasure to introduce Stephen Dunn, whose latest book is titled, "Here and Now." Dunn is the author of 16 poetry collections including the 2001 Pulitzer Prize winner, "Different Hours." He lives in Frostburg, Maryland with his wife, the write, Barbara Hurd. Thank you so much for joining us Mr. Dunn.

>> Happy to do it.

>> Well let me start with a question based on your bio. As I said, you've written 16 books of poetry. So my question is, simply put, how do you continue to turn to the form and one that's always so quick to make you start again?

>> It's a good question. I don't know the real answer to it. I could make up one.

>> Go ahead, make one up.

>> I tend to put myself in places where I could work, which is usually a quiet room and see what happens. And I rarely these days have a plan. I do have a notebook that I keep rather full throughout the year, which I never look at until I go to say Yaddo or McDowell. And it's not anything of mine in the notebook, it's usually 50 sentences by other people, which often stir poems. And I count on that a little bit, but not always. I just find myself, this is what I do. You know it's like my job. And to translate experience and I've been doing it for a long time. And it seems that I, I'm surprised that I always seem to have a next thing.

>> Now that makes sense, that makes sense. I wonder about those statements you collect. Do you in responding to them argue against them? Do you elaborate on them?

>> I often use them directly to begin a poem and then try to screw them up a little bit so that they will be mine, rather than the person's. And sometimes I give credit to the person they come from or I don't. If I screw them up enough, I change the syntax, I make them enough of mine, transform them another words then I-- I believe it was Einstein who said when asked about creativity, he said, "Creativity is learning how to cover up your sources."

>> Um huh.

>> And I understood that perfectly. So a good many of my poems take their inspiration if you'd like from something that somebody else has thought or said and I try to transform it into something of mine. But that's one of the ways I work. The other way is just to sit down and see what happens.

>> Yea, they certainly both make sense. In reading your new collection it was hard not to see Ars Poetica all over the place or arguments for poetry.

>> Uh huh.

>> The first poem "The Puritan and the World" does not disappoint in that regard.

>> Uh huh.

>> And I wanted to ask if you think your poems try to quote, "Quiet the world as it continues to spin and dazzle."

>> [laughter] No I just try to get it right, you know. It's-- I think one of the original impulses for my writing was that other people's versions of the world didn't make a lot of sense to me. So, to impose or write something to make sense of my experience hopefully other people's experience has always been somewhat of a motive. I think you're right about the artist collection notion. I think the second section in the book mostly deals with that. The Puritan one seems to me, well I suspect every American has you scratch in American and you have a little bit of Puritan in there. But I see that as a persona poem.

>> Yea.

>> I'm not that person as much as I know that person. I don't think I am that person, but I try to make a credible Puritan in that poem.

>> Is it fun to play with the range of who you may be as speaker and a persona that you may be putting on to try out? Do you find that you're often aware of whether or not the voice is quote unquote, "Your voice" or one that allows you some creative leap?

>> Yes, I am, but I think my poems feel right to me when they're in something like my voice, even though the contents of that voice may be somewhat different than or a good deal different than I am. One of the things I learned about my books in the past several years is that even when the poems feel very desperate to me or I don't know quite how they're going to hang together, they always seem to others to hang together because of some consistency of voice.

>> Do people respond to a consistency of voice that is tonal or is it a sort of way in which you deal with the subject matter?

>> I think-- tonal is nice. Yes, I think it's tone. A good bit of it is tone and it's also mixed with let's see what I should-- a certain kind of dialectic movement down the page where my philosophical tendency is to,

every time I hear myself making a statement I almost always hear its opposite.

>> Um huh.

>> So I work that way, dialectically and try to cover that up a little bit so that everything seems as if it's seamless and I mean I think our lives are kind of absurd and strange and I think one of my jobs as a poet is to normalize that strange and to just try to get the world right.

>> Well it's interesting that you bring up that, that contrariness that I wanted to talk to you about. Do you think that that's a way in which you celebrate moving against even an argument that you might create, that there is something about that movement that poems most perfectly capture or that sort of feed into the power of a poem?

>> Yea, I was looking at this is maybe tangential but I was looking at famous people's last words and the one I like best was Ibsen's, which was, "On the contrary."

>> That was the last thing he said?

>> Yea, that was the last thing he said. [laughter]

>> What a way to end, wow.

>> That pleased me a great deal. I can imagine if I was alert enough at that time saying something like that. But, and I think I am somewhat of a contrary, at least in my house I'm known that way. My wife always accuses me of saying no first before I say anything like a maybe or a yes. And I think, I-- that makes me somewhat obnoxious as a person perhaps, but I think it's very useful for the art to arrive at a better yes.

>> Yea.

>> And I imagine to question things to, to argue against what's accepted or expected.

>> Yea, the I-- I mean if poets are not going to war against the acceptable or the overused, I don't know who is. I mean I think you know that great statement by Paul Eluard, "There is another world, but it is in this one." That's one of my credos.

>> Uh huh.

>> And I think one of the things I'm always after is that other world that exists in this one.

>> Well and it's interesting reading your poems again in the new collection. It made me think about how much you invest imaginatively in both honoring and enlarging the world that you know or that we recognize. And it made me want to ask you about that cliché, that writing cliché that, of course, has value, write what you know and how you feel about that.

>> I try to write what I don't know. The-- Franz Kline, the abstract expressionist he had a wonderful statement that I think applies to what I do in poetry or what I would like to do in poetry. He said, if I write, "If I paint what you know, I bore you. If I paint what I know, I bore myself, so I paint what I don't know." And my poems are I think in process are always moving toward things that I did not yet know or I half knew. I probably half knew.

>> Yea.

>> Half knew them and found some way to articulate them. At least that's what I'm most pleased with, where I am in a poem. If I don't startle myself you know I feel I'm, I'm just a smart guy speaking. You know, reasonably smart guy speaking and that's, and there are a lot of those folks around. You know I'm a poet when I start to make discoveries.

>> Yea, but the world that your poems create is so familiar and there's a real art to creating discoveries within a world that readers can recognize within a world--

>> Yea.

>> That you know, that's part of say a conversation you could have with a friend.

>> Well I like you-- I like hearing you say that. That, of course, takes all the precision and hard work you can muster.

>> Yes.

>> To give that sense of credibility and simplicity. Yea, I do strive for that and I love when people say I'm honest, for example. I feel I'm a rather close personality who at least in poems I say as much as I-- I reveal as much as I think is useful to the poem.

>> Yea.

>> Rather than spilling my guts or anything like that. And people mostly think I'm telling the truth, which is very nice. I'm telling you, I'm telling as much of what I can or what the poem will bear, I think.

>> Yea.

>> And it's very different from, from uttering things.

>> Yea.

>> I think it's-- one of the things I find with my students, for example, when they start to become good they change from being utterers to makers. They-- the poem has to be a made thing.

>> Yea.

>> Makes all the difference.

>> Now, that makes sense. My last question is just about the issue of tone in your poems. Do you think poems work best to, as ways to balance say humor and sadness or loss and to sort of live in the tension of those two or, or insight and a kind of unknowing.

>> Well, I do like poems where I can manage multiple tones. I think that always approaches something like what is our lives, that there is humor and serious-- that humor can be blended with seriousness or that it-- seriousness arises out of humor or-- I mean it comes down to how we look at the world and you know it seems like a rather absurd place to me. I mean tone is essentially author's attitude towards subject and there are various ways of conveying that. But, you know I'm often reading poems where I can't divine tone at all and then I don't know where I am.

>> Reading other people's poems?

>> Other people's poems, yea.

>> Yea. And you can hear when your poems click into a tone? That sounds like you. That's moving forward. That's sort of embracing all these things or balancing all these things?

>> Yea, well you know my friend Dave Smith says, he has a wonderful essay called, "The Second Self." And he said when we're writing well we click in, we trip into our second selves who are smarter, more moral, and separate than we are. And I think-- I recognize when I'm in that mode, when my poems do click in and I'm writing them with my second self, which is always where I feel most comfortable. And it's kind of masked to, which permits you to say things that your regular self wouldn't be able to say.

>> Are you surprised by the things that you say that may be more critical or more stark? Or are you surprised by the things that you say that may be more hopeful or more generous?

>> That's a great question. I think, I think I am surprised when I can achieve any delicacy of thought. Anything that is-- I think the bold things, the shocking things that one could say are easier to arrive at than the great delicacies. And I'm pleased when I arrive at some kind of-- ethereal, ethereal is the wrong word. But some kind of quality of mind is that, is hard to achieve. And I mean it's why-- in the third section of "Here and Now", there are a lot of political poems which I'm pleased, some of which I'm very pleased by because I think they're the hardest poems to write. Because when you write political poems you usually know your ideas in advance. So how to surprise yourself, how to make the poems yours or the subject yours and not fall into finalities is an achievement. I think I-- there's probably two, or three or four in that section where I thought I managed that.

>> Well and that's certainly important to the goings on here in Washington, D.C., the Capitol City.

>> Yes.

>> Well thank you so much for your time. We've been hearing from Stephen Dunn who will appear on Sunday, September 23rd in the Poetry and Pros Pavilion at the National Book Festival on the National Mall. Mr. Dunn thanks so much.

>> Thanks Rob, bye.

>> Bye-bye.

>> This has been a presentation of the Library of Congress. Visit us at loc.gov.