

From the Catbird Seat: Season 1, Episode 8

Poet Laureate Charles Wright

Introduction

Anne Holmes: Welcome to “From the Catbird Seat,” a poetry podcast from the Poetry & Literature Center at the Library of Congress. I’m Anne Holmes, the Center’s digital content manager.

This is the eighth and final episode of our first season. If you’re just tuning in, you can, of course, still go back and listen to the first seven episodes, and we hope you do. Here’s a little about what we’ve been up to this season: Each week, we’ve listened to archived recordings of celebrated poets reading and discussing their work here at the Library. For this first season, we’ve explored some of the Library’s signature events from the last five years, and we’ve hosted a bunch of special guests who took us behind the scenes of those events. All of the featured event recordings from this season are available as video webcasts on the Library’s website.

We decided to end our first season of “From the Catbird Seat” much like we began it—with a celebratory inaugural occasion. Just three Septembers before Tracy K. Smith walked out onto the stage of the Coolidge Auditorium for the first time as Poet Laureate, Charles Wright had opened his laureateship in the same tradition.

Last spring, the Poetry and Literature Center staff took a road trip down to Charlottesville, Virginia, to catch up with Charles Wright. After a little prodding, he opened up about his year in the Catbird Seat, starting with that opening reading in September 2014. Before we listen to some highlights from that event, here are some reflections from the laureate himself in conversation with Rob Casper.

Interview Between Rob Casper and Charles Wright

Robert Casper: So the purpose of this conversation is simply to introduce people to, uh, the selections from the opening reading you did as Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry. So I thought we’d take the opportunity to talk a little bit about your Laureateship, what it was like and what it meant to you. And maybe you could begin by just telling the story of how you reconsidered the Laureateship.

Charles Wright: Well, you were all having so much fun at the Southern Writers’ Conference reading the year before. I said, “Hell, maybe I’ll do this.” You know? And so, I thought it was time anyhow, uh, if I was ever going to do it. And my wife wanted me to do it so therefore I did it.

RC: Yeah, yeah. What do you remember of that first reading?

CW: Uh. A lot of people there. And uh. Of course the spontaneous standing ovation at the end, I will never forget. That’s a joke.

RC: *laughs*

CW: Oh, I did have one. It just seemed to go well. I’ve done, as everybody has, hundreds and hundreds of readings. And mostly, they all go okay. You know? But some of them go better than others and this

was one of the really good ones, I thought, it seemed to be. People seemed to want to be there. They hadn't been frog marched in from class to hear it. You know? And that sort of thing. And they seemed to be wanting to be there. And everybody was very intent. And uh, it was just a good time, you know, if you can have a good time at a reading. But I thought it was okay. And then of course, once I get to doing stuff, I don't like being in front of people. But of course as soon as I get up there in front of people, the ham in me takes over and I, I, start enjoying it. I start winging comments and things like that and that usually goes okay.

RC: Yeah.

CW: And I, I remember I used one dirty word which was then bleeped out of my thing when I heard it. I couldn't believe it.

RC: Well, we are the Library of Congress.

CW: C'mon. Have you never heard "son of a bitch" before?

RC: *laughs*

CW: Yeah. But yes, I did, I did say that. And I've regretted it to this day.

RC: *laughs*

RC: Have you done a lot of readings that cover the range of your work, in that way?

CW: No, usually you always read the latest thing you've done. You know, everybody does that. And uh, I did start farther back, at your suggestion, which was a good suggestion, because it seemed to really work out well. And uh, no, I usually don't. But I remember I started with, I can't remember what it was, I guess it was uh, "Mt. Caribou At Night", or something like that. Uh. Or maybe it was "Self-Portrait." Anyhow. Uh. And then I went through a bunch of books, you know. Cherry-picking here and there. Hoping to find one that would work for the audience *laughs* you know, you never know? I don't have any funny stuff. I mean, Jesus. My friend James Tate, Jim Tate, you know, he could make a baboon laugh. The poems were funny. I don't know if his commentary was funny but the poems were always so funny. But once I get into it, it usually goes okay. One time, I remember in a reading. When I was a child, I had this stammer because I was always so hyped up. I would get ahead of myself and then there would come a time when I wanted to say something, and I knew what I wanted to say, but I couldn't get it out. You know? And by golly, it came back to me at the age of whatever, forty-something. And I, I couldn't get it out. So I kind of circled it and said, you know, I used to do this when I was a kid. And I would have to sneak up on it and then I got it going but I was just amazed that it came back after you know, forty years. And uh, I don't stammer much anymore.

RC: But do you think that experience is analogous to what it means to write a poem, that kind of circling around what you mean to say but you get ahead of?

CW: Uh, you just made that up didn't you?

RC: Um-hm.

CW: Uh-huh.

RC: It sounded good.

CW: Sounded good.

RC: What do you think?

CW: Well, I think it sounds like a bunch of crap.

RC: *laughs*

CW: No, I don't know, I guess you could say that. Uh. Mmm. Well you do circle around, you know, until you get what you want to say and then you, sort of, bulldoze on through.

RC: Um-hm.

CW: Or slide on through, or sleep on through, or however you, you go through. And uh, so yeah, maybe so.

RC: I mean, I say that in part because it was fun to say but also because your poems do have uh, such a dynamism to their movement. You know? I mean, visually, rhetorically in terms of how you build image after image after image. I remember being struck by that right away when I first read Bloodlines.

CW: Well yeah, I go from image to image. That's because I can't tell a story. So there's no narrative storyline in most of my poems. There are always stacks of images leading, I hope, from the first one to the last one. But the storyline isn't very overt. It's always, sort of, under the poems. And, uh. And I am visual because I don't really have much to say, but I can look and describe what I see.

RC: Um-hm.

CW: And then suddenly I realize I do have a lot to say but it comes out through the images and not a story. And, uh. I don't know. I've always said it was kind of a sotto narrativa, an under-narrative. It's in my poems. And, uh. Every once in a while, it'll come out, come up, and then it'll go back to more images and then it'll come out and up and back to more images. But after a while, you realize that the images are the story.

RC: Um-hm.

CW: And, uh. And you thank god for that. Yeah.

RC: I was struck when you were the Laureate and when you did interviews at how you promoted a sense of humility about poetry. Like you said, um, you were very willing to talk about how much you loved it and how much it changed your life, how indebted you were to it. And I also felt that for younger poets and readers of poetry, having that kind of humility come from the Poet Laureate was instructive.

CW: Well you know what they say. Well, “He’s really humble. You know. He’s got a lot to be humble about.” You know. So that’s part of it.

RC: *laughs*

CW: Well, you hope it’s instructive. My problem is I don’t like telling anybody what to do. I’ve now been a teacher for fifty years, for God’s sakes. I try not to tell them what to do, but I tell them what they might be happier doing than what they were doing at the time. Uh. But you know, you have to be—in the face of the power of poetry, you have to be humble otherwise you’ll get run through with a stob. Uh. You can’t. You know. Poetry’s king and you’re just the jester. That’s all. So you, you pay homage to it. And do the best you can.

RC: Do you think of the position differently, having done your stint?

CW: Well, I guess I have to say yes. Although, I think my stint was different from most people’s stint, except maybe Louise Glück’s. And, uh, yeah. I think of it a little differently. I’m glad I did it, and I wasn’t sure I would be glad I did it at all. But I was glad to have done it. And hell, I’d do it again, you know, if I could do it the same way. *laughs*

RC: Yeah, me too.

CW: So. Let’s put thirty to that.

RC: That’s the perfect end.

Webcast Segue

Anne Holmes: That perfect ending is the perfect introduction to Charles Wright’s opening reading, so let’s sit back and listen to some poems from that occasion.

Webcast Clip from Charles Wright: Inaugural Reading as Poet Laureate

Charles Wright: This poem is called “Mt. Caribou at Night.” Mt. Caribou is a mountain up in Montana, northwest Montana, which can be seen from the place we go in the summer. My last book was called Caribou which is supposed to have a picture of a mountain on it, but they sent me all those horns, and I said, “well it’s a nice a picture, so what the hell, let’s use it,” since the titles of my poems have very little to do with the poems and the covers of my books have little to do with the poems themselves too. There’s a little story behind this. The Yaak Valley in northwest Montana is at 4000 feet, and it really gets cold up there in the winter. This was told to me—I have no idea if it was true, but years ago a man named Walter Smoot died up there, and he was one of the very early settlers, and nobody would bury him, because they all disliked him intensely for some reason. So a couple of people, three people I think, sat around drinking and said, what are we going to do with old Walt for God sakes? And they said, I don’t know, I hate that son of a bitch, you know, what are we going to do? And finally one guy, John Phalen said, ah hell I’ll bury the son of a bitch let’s go. So they went to this little bench, which eventually became the official cemetery for the area, and John started digging and started digging and started digging, the ground was frozen solid of course. He was digging and digging and I guess the whiskey

started to wear off a little bit and he said, "that's it, I've had it," let's bury him right here. We'll bury him seated up. So they stuck him in there and put his head down over his knees and put the dirt on top of him and there lies Walter Smoot to this day.

[Charles Wright reads "Mount Caribou at Night" from The Southern Cross]

CW: This is a longer poem, not that long, forty-one pages. It's called "California Dreaming," which is the last poem I wrote before we left California to come to Virginia over thirty years ago. Of course the title is from a very famous song by The Mamas and the Papas from the 60s called "California Dreaming."

[reads "California Dreaming" from The Other Side of the River]

CW: This is called "Under the Nine Trees in January." In our backyard in Charlottesville, at one time, there were twenty-one fruit trees planted by the people who had fixed the house up before us and sold it to us, but apparently one of them had been kind of nasty to the people who were putting the trees in the landscaping back there, and so they put all the fruit trees inside coffee cans and planted them. So one by one they all died; we went from twenty-one to nine and then we went down to none, but I got in there when there were still nine and that's what this poem is about.

[reads "Under the Nine Trees in January" from Chickamauga]

CW: This is called "Bedtime Story."

[reads "Bedtime Story" from Scar Tissue]

[Applause]

CW: "The Shadow and Smoke." I attribute this thing to Che Guevara because that's where I read it, but it seems to me he's got to be a Japanese koan from at least two to three thousand years ago.

[reads "The Shadow and Smoke" from Caribou]

CW: And a poem I always close my readings with. I've never read it before in my life, but it seems like I should. It's called "Lullaby."

[reads "Lullaby" from Caribou]

CW: Thank you all very much.

[Applause]

Conclusion

Anne Holmes: Thank you for joining us this season 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 soon for another season. Stay tuned.