

Books Cubed: Reads, Reviews & Rants. Ep 3 - Todd Explains poetry

Melissa: Good Adventures everybody! This is Episode three of Books Cubed: Reads, Reviews and Rants and I'm Melissa Banczak your host and um, I'm gonna start with catching up with any comments from the last two episodes... and I did have a couple. I'm gonna go to those .. they're here somewhere...

Okay. Um, from Episode 1, E. Suzanne Hill said, "Melissa, love your style... hot flash recovery and all... too, too great!" Signed, a friend of Jason O'Brian. Mwah! And, Jason is a filmmaker – really good filmmaker. I'm gonna put a link in the show notes to his stuff. He's in festivals and he did this great film about cuddling- years before anybody else was talking about it and then Carrie, who I interviewed last week, wrote a nice note: "Thanks, Melissa! You're a wonderful show host. I love being on your show." And I loved having you. I got some nice comments from people who didn't leave messages on here; but to comment on Facebook or sent me messages. So, if you like the show, leave a comment...subscribe. Leave a comment. Let me know what you think. Now, let's see...

What have I been doing? I've been writing/trying to write. I don't know. I've been distracted by a lot of stuff lately, so I need to get my butt sitting in the chair - which is the best way to do it.

Did you guys catch Doctor Who last night? The new Doctor Who was on. Jodie Whittaker is great! Loved her on *Attack the Block* and on *Broadchurch*. I loved it. I thought it was great. I am a huge *Doctor Who* fan and I absolutely loved it! So, did you watch? Did you like it? Let me know in the comments.

Caught A Star Is Born...Bradley Cooper can sing! Oh my God... Wow! Lady Gaga sounded great. Because of my cochlear implant, I really am catching up on music, so I don't know any of her music. I heard her sing Jazz once and that's good; but I really couldn't hear very well, so it's it's been fun catching music.

So, this week I have got an interview with my friend, Todd, who is a poet and there were some issues. I was gonna say, "Let's get to it"; but I had some issues with the audio and with the video so bear with me – this is gonna be audio only.

So, this was my expression for the entire interview, (HUH? Look) cuz I just don't get poetry! I just don't get it. I... I just don't get it. So, he's a poet. I enjoy his poems. I think I do... I guess I do? He's in my the writing group. I'm a member of the Florida Writers Association and he's in the local chapter that I'm in, and we have Critique Night a couple times a month. So he will read and we have several poets and you know it gets to critique, and they'll say to me, "Well, what'd you think?" And I say, I don't know what to think. His poetry is just... I just don't get it. So I said, "Todd please talk to me about poetry." So we have a conversation about poetry and like I said, if there was video this was my expression as he's explaining poetry, cuz I just... you know and I have a picture that I put over the top of the video so you can see what he looks like. So let's get to it, okay?

Melissa: So as I said before, the audio is choppy for my portion and the video is not very great - so this is going to be audio only. Let me tell you a little about Todd, first. Todd Hendrix is a self-described “writer in progress” who enjoys writing short fiction and poetry. He recently earned his BA in English from the University of Central Florida and has had his poetry published in *The Cypress Dome*. He also believes that there's a haiku for everything. I started out talking a little bit about how I guess the poetry that I really paid a lot of attention to was in music; and I lost most of my hearing from the eighties on, so songs from the 60s and 70s are what I listened to. And, the protest songs of the 60s and 70s are what I really loved. And so, I...(chuckle) so, like poetry...AH!

Outside of music, I just don't know what to think about poetry, so my first question was talking about music and then.. help.

Todd: You said, music and that's actually one of the interesting things about Poetry is that it's it's an emotional thing. It's supposed to grab your heart. It's supposed to grab your emotions. It's supposed to take you for a ride - kind of similar to experiencing a roller coaster. The other day, we were talking and I kind of told you about the artichoke [?] thing. It's supposed to make you feel something you didn't know you were supposed to feel.

Melissa: Okay, so Todd and I are part of the Florida Writers Association and our local chapter here, we have critic night a couple times a month. We have a couple of poets and they will read a poem and then they go around the table and it gets to me and everybody's looking at me... and I have no clue where to even start critiquing a poem.

Todd: Well, you're talking about the critiquing process of critiquing poetry. It's a lot different than critiquing a piece of prose. In prose, you're looking to see if things work . You're looking to see if people are confused. You're looking to see if the character connects. You're looking... I mean, like all these different layers, with prose that you have to deal with. With poetry, it's a feeling. It's not whether some -I mean, because, okay I love to critique, you know. That's what I'm, yeah. I have an opinion about everything and I do - but yeah...don't come to our group if you don't wear your armor. It's a good possibility I I may say something; but with poetry, what it is... it's about condensing all of those words into the least amount of confusion so that you get, like, it's... it's my wife makes Turkey Soup at the end of Thanksgiving. She takes all of the stuff. Throws into a pot, puts water, and it just boils down... boils down ...boils down... boils down, so at the very end, you have this stock and it is such a powerful flavor. That's what poetry is. You're boiling it ... you're boiling it down... you're boiling it down and it's not necessarily always about understanding the words, or whether or not they work, as a sentence. Poetry probably breaks more rules and grammar than anything else and that's okay, because the ultimate goal is to get it to a point where you, as a reader, are experiencing it.

Todd: Ursula Le Guin, who I'm reading a book about her .. it's called *Conversations with Ursula Le Guin*, and she makes a comment in the book. It's poetry is kind of like listening to people talk on the other side of the wall. You can't hear what they're saying; but you can tell whether or not they're happy or they're sad...or you can, you know what they're conveying just by the tone.. by the pitch and that has to do with a rhythm of - she's talking about rhythm and poetry. Even with the rhythm, it's the words. It's all of it works together to, to elicit those feelings at it.

Melissa: So as a novice to poetry, where do I start?

Todd: {laughs} It's kind of like asking somebody that's never listened to music, what kind of music they like, cause there are all kinds. I personally like Robert Frost. I like Charles Bukowski. There are... Anne Sexton's actually somebody who kind of hits in me. I like poetry that I can sit down and I don't have to try to figure out what they're talking about. I'm not a fan of Sylvia Plath. I don't particularly care for Allen Ginsberg, you know; but because they're talking about things that it takes... and some people are like that. I think it's Judy Hirschfeld ...she writes...I think that's her name. She kind of falls in between. She's great. Very complicated poetry; but it's very deep poetry. Uses a lot of science, so sometimes I don't want to sit down and read something that's going to make me have to figure out what they're talking about. I want to be able; but at the same time I want to read something that doesn't just go "Roses are red, Violets are blue", you know? I want something with sticking power and I think to some degree you can kind of take the kind of music you like and start there. Uh, Robert Frost is always great. He's a prolific poet. Shakespeare- everybody seems to hate on him; but when it comes to a sonnet and some of the poetry that he wrote he knew what he was doing. It's when you understand and that's, that's another part of poetry, as you kind of sometimes have to understand the structure. A sonnet. It's fourteen lines long and about the eighth line and it switches and it changes the whole meaning in a sonnet. And when you learn that and you read the poem, you're looking for it. So, in the process of looking for it, you know, like, oh there it is! I get it!

I love Haiku. I write a lot of Haiku and it's modern day Haiku. It's not official Japanese Haiku, which is normally about nature; but like my wife...she doesn't necessarily understand Haiku because it's like, you're stuck with this rhythm of five seven five. There's the structure you're required to write inside of and you're attempting to, get an emotion and an image in very very little words. I find that kind of challenge to be fun.

There are all kinds of different poetry. If you like rhyming poetry, Shel Silverstein. Phenomenal.

Melissa: [muffled]..better

Todd: Yeah, but he does a great job. I mean he's very funny... is very, very witty. Very, very simple; but at the same time. And, that's the beauty of poetry. Poetry says this - good poetry- not all poetry. Poetry says this; but somewhere down here, there's something else that's going on. And then, discovering what that something else is, you kind of feel like you've been let in on a secret. It was like, "Haha, I got that. Yeah I see what they're doing, there." And, again, there's an emotion to that. It's like when you read a good book and the writer does such a great job of setting up the twist at the end, that you're like "Ah..yeah, yeah!"

Poetry that does that but it does it in a very short form factor. We have to define something here: by good poetry and good poetry is, is very subjective. What I think is good poetry, other people may think is trash. Music, same thing. With good poetry, though, when you deal with meter and rhythm... when you deal with the way that a poet goes through and puts the words on the page ...where there's there's a structure to poetry that you don't get in prose. You've got what are called enjambments and it's where the end of a line stops and the new one comes in.

Gwendolyn Brooks is a very famous poet who wrote "We Be Cool" and it starts with We be cool, we, and then it goes to the next line... we you know,stay in school, we. And every line ends with we and it's such a strong sound that it creates a rhythm - so you got this rhythm without music.

Langston Hughes. I love Langston Hughes. Going back to the 1920s and the Harlem Renaissance, he does a similar thing and he was very influential in Jazz and also very influenced *by* the whole Jazz, Blues and all of that R&B that was going on back then. I love the Jazz stuff. He repeats and he does this thing that he goes about.

When you get into a little bit older like Emily Dickinson's - people like that - When you start reading their poetry, they create a rhythm with the words... with the way the syllables play off of each other. You know, when we were in Elementary School, we learned this onomato.. not onomatopoeia...That's the wrong thing. This is one of my brain goes, "fyew!" Uh.. *Iambic* pentameter where it's like, da da da da da da... you know, except it's five beats or it's ten beats because it's da da da da da da da da da ... that rhythm creates a sing-songness to it, I personally don't particularly care for doggerel poetry, which is "Roses are red, Violets are blue"; but even in that simplistic aspect, you can hear it. It's roses are *red* . It's just up down, up down, up down... and that rhythm creates the song, "Twinkle Twinkle, Little Star". It's a poem that has a song beat to it, so poetry can do that without the actual music - and word choice plays into it. You've got this repetition of words, which in prose and again in the group, you hear me say it, it's like in prose you don't want the repetition of a word. In poetry, that repetition actually creates a rhythm, so you've also got alliteration - which is using the same word over, or the same letter over and over again.

Todd: At the beginning you know, - of course, I don't have anything off the top of my head; but you know something that's virtually all S's and then you have the rhyming patterns where you have perfect rhymes. You know Dr. Seuss? "I will not with a fox. I will not in a box." Great... "I don't like green eggs and ham, Sam-I-Am" That's perfect end rhyming. I mean where consonants and assonance is...where the consonant rhymes or the vowel rhymes, and you can play with, like, book and look sound alike- but you can find other words that have that "oo" sound in it, and it will sound like it rhymes. And, in that, you create this haunting aspect to a poem and again, it depends on what you're trying to do with the poem. So, when you read it out loud (by the way poetry should be read out loud - not in your head). When you read it, you hear it. It plays on the tongue. It plays on the emotions. It plays in the head. It's all of the stuff mingling together, like a really good Lasagna. I love Lasagna..(chuckle) It's great, you know, it all mixes together... so that when you're doing it -when you're reading it all at once- you're getting that one just awesome bite of good stuff and you don't necessarily understand why you like it - you just know that you like it .

You know, the one poem I read, you kind of turned to me and you went.. "Oh! Do you want a hug?" and that was kind of the point of the poem, is I was trying to create this emotion inside of you -the reader -that created a reaction.

Melissa: And, it did! It did.

Todd: Yeah and then prose...you know if you write a short story you got 2,500 words a novel. You know, eighty-nine thousand words. In a poem ...you've got, \ you know, average poem being what? 20 lines long? You got 20 lines. Grand total, like, 150 words and you just gotta just get it in there and just pull all of that out.

So that's why I like poetry.. (laughs)

Melissa: And I will take a look at some Robert Frost and revisit some Poe and I know. My dad used to read me "The Raven" at Halloween. It was like the Christmas thing at Christmas but "The Raven" was at Halloween for me.

Todd: "The Raven" is a great poem! Everybody loves it. It's a really interesting thing about "The Raven", is nobody remembers how long it is. It's so much longer than we remember.

Melissa: Ooh, it is. It's a long poem.

Todd: It's an incredibly long poem. Yeah. Not to me . You know, not like his "Annabel Lee". You know that's quick and down and dirty. Well, even in "The Raven", that's a neat thing about "The Raven". For as long as it is, he does such a masterful job with that repetition. He does such a great job with the rhyming. In the way that he

Todd: meters things out in the lines, you can almost feel the descent into madness that this guy is dealing with,

Melissa: Yeah!

Todd: And and it's just this, this... you're going and you're gone and you're experiencing that and again. You get that in prose, you know...“Tell-tale heart” “Cask of Amontillado”. I love Poe! Hey, he's what I cut my teeth on, when it comes to most of my writing, you know, but then again, he's an American icon. You get that in those stories but at the same time you get it in a much longer form, so it brews..this stew kind of thing. But with that poem it's like it's just this constant... constant – and it doesn't let up - and that I think is a big difference with with those two forms.

Melissa: And it's not subtle. Subtle just doesn't work for me, and I think that sometimes the problem with some of the poems that I hear is that it's too subtle. I don't know what they want me to be feeling or thinking.

Todd: And, and that's a big problem with, I'm going to call them amateur poets. I struggled with this. I still struggle with this. My teachers have nailed me on this. Poetry is supposed to be concrete and we'll say something like. you know, “I fell head-over-heels in love” What's love? You know? And it goes to that “show, don't tell” . When we're writing we keep telling everybody “show us what you mean” and poets seem to think that, and again it's this: This is bad poetry. Poets tend to give us this idea of here's this very amorphous word that doesn't mean anything because it can mean everything and, with poetry- because we are dealing with such a small form-factor- it needs to be specific instead of being so general because we want everybody to understand it. Well, again, going through what we tell people who write prose -Be specific, because more people will relate to the specific than they will to the general. That's a big deal with poetry. It's why I don't like Sylvia Plath. I felt a lot of her poetry, you kind of had to know what she was talking about or you spent too much time trying to figure out what in the world she was talking about; but Anne Sexton... I may have the name of the poem right. I think it's called“The Belles of Bedlam”. It's a great poem. And it's a poem written about her in Bedlam and Bedlam being an insane asylum, or I'm sorry, an asylum. Not an insane asylum, that she was in and it's about ringing. This lady comes in to teach people how to ring bells but it's such this incredibly impactful thing.. She's describing specifics things that I would, you know, if you were saying , “Oh. Here I was, in an asylum. No. No. No... she's describing the chairs and the way the teacher looks, About this lady. About how her smile is and about this and it's very specific, so that's the problem that I think a lot of people run into with poetry is they're experiencing what I call bad poetry because it's, you know, it's

Todd: dealing with these grand and these generalizations and it's just not a good thing.

Melissa: I was thinking you had a collection of poems that were out, because you have really good poems! I like your poems- I love the one, you read a poem.... It was just...when he was done... It was just gut-wrenching and I turned to him when we were done and I said , “Oh my God! You need a hug”!

Todd: [laughs]

Melissa: It was great. I mean, it was one of the poems in the group that I actually felt like I could comment on.

Todd: Well, because I write poetry that I want to read, I think it's a very important fact in poetry I tend to write. Somebody actually, in one of my classes, he gave me a really awesome compliment. He told me I reminded him of Charles Bukowski the name I mentioned earlier and I was, like, well thanks! Didn't want to seem stupid, so I had to go figure out who Charles Bukowski was [chuckle]- so,,, good poet; but yet you know, he wrote what he said. He said what he wrote - there was depth to it. There was a little bit more going on but you don't get done with his poems, going what was he talking about? You kind of understood what he's talking about. That's what I want to read so that's what I tend to write and I appreciate the compliment.

Melissa: OK, well, get to work on your book! And I will see you at, ah... what's that coffee house?

Todd: Barnes and Nobles..

Melissa: Yeah

Todd: Starbucks.

Melissa: The coffee house where we try to put our backs to each other (??)

Todd: And, I will talk to you later, Melissa.

Melissa: Thanks.. bye bye!

Todd: Bye.

Melissa: So, thanks, Todd, I think I have a better understanding of poetry now. I'm gonna go back and look at some of the poets that you talked about. And for everyone listening today, if you have a favorite poet or if you are a poet, leave a comment and let me know about the poems that mean something to you... and have a great week and read a good book!