

Grizzly Times Podcast
Episode 45
Transcription
Interview with Ellen Bass
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Louisa Willcox: This is Louisa Willcox with Grizzly Times and I'm delighted today to be here with Ellen Bass. Ellen is an acclaimed poet who has won many awards, including Pushcart Prizes, the Lamda Literary Award and the Pablo Neruda Prize, to mention a few. Her latest collection of poems, *Indigo*, was published by Copper Canyon Press this spring and it's been called an instant classic and I can testify that my own copy is pretty dog-eared. *Indigo* also includes a gorgeous poem entitled "Grizzly." Ellen teaches widely, including in the MFA writing program at Pacific University, and she founded poetry workshops at Salinas Valley State Prison and the Santa Cruz California jails. Welcome and so great to have you.

Ellen Bass: Oh, I'm very happy to be talking with you.

L: Ellen, you contacted us after Sun Magazine published an interview with David and me about our work on behalf of the grizzly bear last winter. And you sent us your poem "Grizzly." Would you mind if we began this conversation with you reading that poem?

E: Oh yes I'd be happy to read it, thank you.

"Grizzly"

She grazes in a meadow, sulfur blossoms spilling

from her jaw.

At this moment she seems so calm, she could be holy,

if what that means is something like being

wholly unaware of the good she gives,

how even her rooting tills the soil

and even her shitting ferries the seeds

and even her bathing is a joy to behold

as I am beholding her this morning

as she leans over a water hole, her shadow first

and then her reflection on the skin of the water,

then the splash as she enters, the pond opening,

*rippling, and the scritch as she scrubs
her head with her paw, the great planet
of her head that she dunks and raises, shaking
the water in wide arcs, spraying
the lens of the hidden camera. And now
she climbs out, water rivering off her fur.
She is drying that huge head
in the long grasses.
And here she hunkers
over a bison carcass, slowly ripping free
the shoulder. Those precision instruments
that work with an ease that seems—yes—delicate.
Blood stains the river and stains
the snowbank and stains the rock.
Vessel carrying the chemicals of life—
hair and bone, flagella and bloom.
She carries them, lumbering forward
as she sinks her teeth and feeds.*

L: Thank you. Ellen when we spoke I asked you about your trip to Yellowstone, assuming that you had been to Yellowstone, because that's the only place left where grizzlies and bison still coexist as they once did throughout the Northern Hemisphere. And you said: "No." Maybe you can explain the context, and perhaps why this bear worked on you.

E: Well, I've never been to Yellowstone, although I had been trying to get to Yellowstone for the last three or four years. My wife and I kept making plans to go and then something would foil those plans. So, I feel like Yellowstone had been on my mind and I'd been yearning toward it for a few years, before I encountered a newsletter. And I'm not sure what it was now. I think it was actually a call about – it was something that came into my inbox, and I think it was asking for me to do sign something about protecting the bears right outside of Yellowstone.

And you get so many things in your inbox that are really important and about so many species, and so many aspects of our living world that are endangered. And a lot of them I don't attend to because there are so many. But once in a while something just grabs me -- and I guess it was

in a way just a kind of serendipity that this just grabbed me. And I started reading about it and then I started reading more about it, just that way in which you can kind of go from one thing to another online so easily, and actually bump into a lot of very important information from people who know a lot about what's going on. So, I got more and more into it.

And then I bumped into these videos of this one bear who I started watching, this bear bathing, and I was just mesmerized, I was just entranced. And the sound was pretty good on this video, and so I could not only see the bear I could hear, I could hear the water splashing when the bear came out of the water. I could hear that sound of her rubbing her -- I call her "her," I don't really know -- rubbing her head on grasses. And I just couldn't stop watching this over and over, and then also watching this bear eating the bison.

As I try and describe in the poem, this extreme delicacy -- I mean her claws were so long and she just seemed like somebody handling chopsticks really carefully and precisely. She wasn't just sort of just destroying this bison even though she was pulling it apart, but she was doing it with no more force than was needed. And because her claws were so strong and so sharp, not a lot of force was needed. So it was very delicate maneuver as she was -- I just could picture myself so easily, I don't know what I could compare it to, like maybe eating hardshell crab or something like that where you just have a lot of maneuvering to do to eat the thing. And I was just amazed at watching it.

And I wanted just to try and capture it in language. And I didn't really have a message, I just wanted to capture it and I wanted to honor this bear. I wanted to admire the bear and just take this photograph, kind of living photograph in words, so that I could have that relationship with what I had seen with that image. And then hopefully the other people would see that image.

And I don't really -- I can't write something expecting it to do some heavy lifting in the world. That's not what a poem is to me. It's not a position paper, although those are extremely important. It's not a call to arms in some way, although that's very very important. A poem for me is just a place to explore something, to enter into it more deeply, pay attention to it. And it was as I say, it was just a joy to watch this bear, you could feel that the bear liked going into that pond, that it felt good. And it was a joy to write the poem and try to find language to communicate that.

L: To me, one thing I appreciated about this poem is the importance of seeing. This was a poem about seeing a bear, seeing it from several different levels. And as someone who has been an advocate for grizzlies for a long time, I can get into a bit of automatic pilot -- the heavy lifting here is we have to stop trophy hunting or whatever. But if bears or animals of any kind are to have a future, the heavy lifting is just to slow down and see. And that's what you helped me do with this poem.

E: Thank you. Yes, yes. That slowing down is I think at the heart of why I want to write any poem. I'm not really a slow-down person in a lot of ways. My motor runs pretty fast. And so I really need poetry because that's a place where it doesn't happen fast for me. I really have to

slow down, and I want to slow down. And like I tell my students, "Poetry is not efficient." You can't find the most efficient way to write a poem.

So to be able to slow down and be with this bear, even just in my little laptop screen just to be able to watch this bear over and over, and take my time to try and make language that conveys a little bit of what I saw with this bear was wonderful, slowing down. And of course, I know we need to slow down. And it's not like me telling other people: "You should slow down." I'm always telling myself: "You should slow down."

L: Many of your poems are about illness, death, dying, sadness, loss. How does poetry help you cope with grief and loss?

E: I feel very fortunate to have poetry. I think that we all need some way to cope with loss and death and grief, and I think art is one way, I think everyone must have their own way. But I find being able to make a poem – it is interesting that you're asking that question right after we talk about slowing down, because I think they're related for me, that in making a poem I have to slow down. And it's a space, almost like a physical space in which to be with the feelings.

And it's a way to be with them but not just wash around aimlessly in them, or kind of persevere and go over the same aspects of them over and over, or just be overwhelmed by them. It's a way that I'm close to the feelings but not too close, and I have to be deeply in the feelings, but also I have to be a little bit removed from the feelings. So, it's almost like the ideal closeness or distance. It's the kind of holding the feelings at the ideal distance/closeness to be able to be with them but not be overwhelmed by them. And then to be able to investigate them and be curious about them.

I like most people don't want to have negative feelings, hard feelings and most of us would just rather be happy. But that's not always an option. And so when there are these difficult feelings of grief and loss and fear, which I think is one of the hardest emotions of all, then how do I be with these feelings? So, one way is to just try and get away from them, but that's not very workable if you want to be believed or at least somewhat fully rooted in your life. You can't just run away from them and still be present -- then you're running away from your whole life.

So being able to be curious about the feelings, and look at them, and investigate them and try and understand the nature of them, try and explore them, that's what happens in the making of a poem. And in that process, trying to be curious about my life and the lives of those around me, and these relationships both with people and with animals, and with plants even sometimes, and things, the things of the world. That's what I get to do in making a poem.

And also, especially with death, when someone has died, writing about them is a way to for me to bring them back. So for example, I find more and more -- my mother died about 10 years ago, and I find more and more that I just want to find ways to write about her, because it brings me so close to her when I can do that. And I always have a little bit of real kind of wrenching, a little just kind of shiver, of wrenching grief, if I write a poem about my mother that I can't show

it to her. But the bigger feeling is that I get to remember her so vividly when I'm able to write about her.

L: Ellen, many of your poems are filled with humor such as delighting in grease as you cook pork chops, or your envy of seeing a man with gorgeous indigo tattoos jogging down the street with his infant in a stroller. Maybe you can share a bit about where your inspirations come from.

E: I think they're pretty eclectic. And it's interesting because sometimes there are people and experiences that are really important to me and central to my life, and I've never been able to write about them successfully. And other times, there's something that seems so peripheral and kind of random, and yet somehow I have an entrance there into writing a poem. And some things are obvious, like of course my mother would be important to me. But many times, the inspiration does seem like it's so accidental. And yet there it is. So, it's a bit of a mystery to me what turns out to be the inspiration of a poem and what doesn't to a certain extent.

For example, my best friend is somebody who has been my best friend for over 50 years. And I love her so deeply, and I think she's such an interesting person, and the way we met is so interesting. And I have so much to say that I could write an essay about -- about her and our relationship and what it means to me. And she's a visual artist. And I have never been able to write a successful poem about her. And I've tried oh so many times -- and why is that? I have no idea. None at all.

And yet somebody else -- I mean I have a poem from way back about a man that I sat next to on a plane, and we both went to sleep. And I had a cold, but I was still glad to be next to him, because he was very large and the plane was very cold, and so I was getting a little warmth from him. So, I mean it's like -- this is somebody I've never even spoken to, and yet he wound up being the inspiration for a poem. And I can't get one single poem about this woman who I am so deeply attached to. So, the inspirations are not within my control. But I am always on the lookout for them. I always have my antenna out for them and I'm always hoping for them, but what catches and what doesn't is a little bit mysterious or a lot mysterious to me.

Some things seem more obvious, like a lot of the poems in my most recent book *Indigo* are my grappling with a time in my life where my wife was going through a serious illness. And these poems are my grappling with my experience of that, not with her experience but with my own. And so that seems more obvious, like of course that would be something that I would want to write about, because it was so prominent in my life then. But much of it is mysterious.

L: For many of us who see what's happening to this planet, ice sheets collapsing in the arctic or protests more recently over police brutality, it's easier than ever to just get consumed by anger and condemnation. And the speed of mainstream and social media seems to encourage us to have quick judgments about so many things. How does writing poetry affect your instincts to judge or perhaps to look away?

E: I don't think it makes me want to look away. I think poetry always makes you want to look at. And so I don't think it makes me want to look away, but it definitely affects that instinct to judge. And I don't mean by that that I'm neutral. I'm certainly distressed by so many things that are going on. And I think that so many things that are going on are wrong, there's no doubt about it. I mean police brutality against Black lives is abhorrent to me. And so I have that judgment, but I can't make a poem out of that judgment. I have to -- in order to make a poem, I have to enter from, I have to find some way in.

It's the same thing about the climate crisis. I can't just say "this is a disastrous thing that's happening to our planet." I need some way in in order to explore and I think that's -- anything you say about poetry there are examples of poems that do the opposite of what you say a poem needs to do and are incredibly successful. So there's no statement that applies across the board, but I think I can talk about me and the way that I need to enter into a poem, which is from a place of curiosity, from a place of trying to discover something I don't already know. So, I feel very confident that I know that police brutality is just a horrible, horrible terror, and I have a very clear judgment about it. But I can't write a poem from that judgment. I have to write a poem to try and explore something that I didn't already know before I began to write the poem.

And if we then also -- well let me say this, I admire so much the poems that are written about these crucial, big topics and events and issues of our day. They're very, very hard for me to write. When I am able to manage to write a poem about something that is a large social, public, political concern, I'm so grateful because they're few and far between for me. And if I could, I would write more of them. And it's always my hope that I will. But I'm at the mercy of what I'm permitted to write by the gods of poetry. It's like when -- you know I don't believe in a muse really, but just kind of talking metaphorically -- when the muse offers me something, I just have to say "yes" to whatever it is.

And often I have to be overriding a strong feeling or thought which says, "oh this is too trivial, there's so many important things going on. I shouldn't be writing about this very small thing -- whatever that might be -- that very personal small thing." But I have to just override that and write what I'm given to write, or what I'm allowed access into, or what I have the skills to write and be grateful for that. And I also know from many years of writing -- I've been writing for over half a century -- I know that I'm always teaching myself something. In these poems that I feel are less monumental, I may be teaching myself something that I will need to write a poem that speaks to these larger issues. So I always have to trust -- going back to that trusting that nothing is wasted, and that the time that I spend writing a poem that is about something very small, or that time that I spend writing a poem that ultimately fails, which most of them do, that nothing is wasted. And that I never know what it is that I am preparing myself for.

And I'd just say something maybe about judging in poems that aren't about larger issues. I have to spend a certain kind of judgment there as well, because again, even if it's just about something in my own personal or domestic sphere, the whole essence of writing a poem for me to a certain extent is about paying attention and discovery. So if my judgment is too firm and

rigid, then I really can't discover anything because I'm entering again, from a position of feeling that I know it all. And if I know it all, then that's not an authentic poem.

L: I really loved your poem "Reincarnation" and in it, there's a little bit that you wrote, "The oyster persists in filtering sea water and fashioning the daily irritations into luster." Do you see yourself as a figurative oyster?

E: Well that's such a wonderful thing to ask. I wasn't thinking of myself of course when I wrote that, but that is quite a lovely photo. It's like a photograph that caught me in a good light. I love that image, and I don't know that I am capable of doing that all the time. But in a way yes, I think that what one does in poetry is to try to take suffering and the daily irritations and turn them into art, to make art out of them.

L: Ellen, you've worked a lot with survivors of abuse and trauma. How do you see the relationship between writing and healing? And do you think there are any lessons here for those traumatized by what we're doing to the planet?

E: I discovered many things about writing and healing in that work. One of the things I discovered is that writing for survivors of abuse and trauma turned out to be extremely healing. And I of course asked myself a lot of questions about why that might be so. And one of the things that I came up with in asking that -- a kind of theory that I came up with -- is that when you are writing, as opposed to talking to someone, you're not picking up subtle or not so subtle responses from the person you're talking to. So even if that person is a wonderful listener and a compassionate listener, they're still responding in the way that they hold their body, and whether they blink or don't blink, or little sounds they make, or what they might say back to you. So, in some way you're in relationship. And although that can be supportive, it also is another factor.

Whereas, when you're writing, no one is responding. And so, it's just between you and you. And there's a way in which -- I didn't know this but it was reflected back to me after I had been doing this work for some time -- that when people write, they do put themselves into a kind of trance, a kind of hypnotic trance. And so, they have the possibility of going very deeply into the experience and to some extent reliving the experience. But this time, they're going through it again but they're more in control of it, because they are writing it down. And as I was talking before, they're holding it at a different distance. It's not necessarily overwhelming them.

Although I should say too that it can be overwhelming, and so one of the things that I learned in this process is that it's important for people who are writing about their own trauma to have safety put in place. And there's many ways in which people can put that safety in place, for example, making a container for that writing. So that they might do something before they start and when they finish that makes a safer space for it. Like lighting a candle or having a little bell or something like that. And they can do things like having time that is structured for after the writing, where they can do something that is comforting like have a cup of tea quietly, or take a little walk, or something that helps them make the transition back out of those depths and is

soothing. So, we learned a lot in the process of how to make sure that the writing is not retraumatizing.

But yes, the writing turned out to be extremely healing. And one of the things that was startling was how quickly people could re-enter the traumatic experience, compared to how quickly they might enter it just talking, for example, to a therapist, which might take a number of weeks before they felt comfortable or secure enough to share. Whereas in the writing, they might just plunge in in the first hour. And so again, we learned to talk about how to titrate that so that they didn't plunge in too quickly. But it's definitely a kind of a greased chute for going deeply.

And I learned in the work just how quick that could be. And it is deeply, deeply healing, and in a way it's a little bit maybe too facile to say that it's only healing, because it's also very demanding and exhausting. And so when somebody who does have severe trauma is working with writing, it is important to do it in a way that they can create or someone can help them create some structure around it. But yes, it's an incredible tool.

And then your question, are there lessons here for those traumatized by what we are doing to this planet? This is such an important and big question. I'm thinking about how to respond to that. I think that one thing is that writing is the way that we communicate with each other a lot these days. We are a very written culture. Of course, we're also an oral culture more and more with opportunities like this one in a podcast, but we do write to each other a tremendous amount. And I would never have known about the plight of these grizzlies around Yellowstone had somebody not written about them and emailed that to me and to many, many other people. So, I think that's very important.

But I'm thinking about personal writing for those of us who are traumatized by what we're doing to the planet, and I think the thing that writing does is it gives us a space to acknowledge to ourselves what we feel. And I think that that is really essential because a lot of the time, we can't every minute of the day be acknowledging how traumatized I think I would say we all are by what we're doing to this planet. Whether we're really conscious of it or not, we are I think all living in a way that we feel that trauma, and it may be subterranean. So writing is one place, it's not the only place, but it's one place where we can stop and not run away from it, acknowledge it, and maybe explore it.

And I think that although that is painful -- maybe I shouldn't say although that is painful, and then go on in the same sentence to say something else -- maybe that should just really have its own sentence and say, "It is painful." Full stop. And acknowledge how traumatized we are by what we're doing to this planet and how traumatized other creatures are and how -- I don't know if you can use the word traumatized to apply to the planet itself, but let's do that -- how traumatized the planet itself is. I think that stopping to acknowledge that, and to notice what we feel, and to explore what we feel, discover what we feel, I think that that is necessary, I think it's a positive thing. It's a painful thing and I think it's a necessary thing, because I think that the work that we do and the way that we live, the more conscious we are of that, then we will make more of our decisions based on that. It's hard to make decisions on something that

you're not conscious of. If we don't allow ourselves to be conscious, then we can't act in accordance with what we're conscious of because we're not conscious of it.

So, I think that writing is not the only avenue, I think there are lots of avenues, but I think it is one avenue. And I think that this is a place where -- thinking about that question earlier about judgment, I think there is a place where it is important to be able to say what our opinions and our judgments are. And then I think it's also important to go beyond them and to really investigate our own experience, our own feelings, and to investigate the world, the living world that still is here. I think that this is where appreciation and love come in, because I think it's probably most useful to be guided not only by our fear -- and I will say horror -- at what is being lost. Our fear and our horror are really important, but I don't think those are the only useful guides. I think that our love of what remains and our appreciation of it, and our interaction with it, are also really important guides.

L: Ellen, I really appreciate the approach you're offering here, and it makes me reflect on my many years as an advocate, as a professional advocate for wildlife and wild places. And in the groups that I have worked with, and what I've seen in the conservation movement, there is not really an approach, a skillful approach for dealing with a lot of us feel, which is grief over climate change, over extermination of species, over destruction of places that we love. And often that grief is transmogrified into anger, lashing out against government officials typically or corporations. And maybe that's deserved, but what you're getting at is I think a broader approach rooted in love, love of this planet, of other beings. And that's very helpful. And I guess I wish conservation groups engaged in this work would realize in a more sophisticated way the toll that the work itself has on the people.

E: I can only imagine.

L: Yeah, it's hard. It's hard and especially if you've got this narrative of: "Oh I have to be professional, I can't let this show." Yes, you can't let it show in a meeting with the Forest Service maybe, but you have to find a way of dealing with the feelings.

E: That's really intriguing Louisa. I think about Johanna Macy's work around nuclear issues and her workshops that she has run, making room for people to talk about their grief and their fear. And I'm not really an activist at all in the area of conservation even though I care a lot, and I'm certainly not a professional activist. And so, I don't know a lot about how these organizations and circles operate and what's available. And what you're saying that just really intrigues me of how wonderful it would be, if that could be offered? And if people doing this work would want to have something like that. Do you they would want that?

L: Mm Hm. I mean I worry a lot about the younger generation coming up in the world of climate change and energy, some of these really difficult issues -- and they're in their teens, which is incredibly laudable. But they are going to need some help in navigating not just the political world and social problems, but their internal landscape. What we have left them is such a massive challenge.

E: My daughter-in-law is doing work now with young people, high school age mostly and a little bit younger and a little bit older, with using creativity to grapple with their feelings and their feeling responses, their thoughts and feelings around the climate crisis. And they're making videos. And it's really been rewarding and exciting. And these young people have so many feelings, and they're so welcoming of this opportunity. And the videos that they're making are really incredible. I mean I think that they're more convincing than anything that I've seen on television or that comes through kind of professionally made online, because they have such immediacy and they're so authentic and real. They just -- they really knock me out. She's doing a Ph.D on this, she's just finishing it at UC Davis and wants to find ways to just keep doing more and more of this. But yes, the young people need this so much.

L: That's such exciting work. That's really wonderful to hear. And just the simple power of an authentic voice. And as someone who polished up my testimony to Congress and all this and yes, I thought it was powerful at the time, but it was so produced, much of what I did.

E: And I imagine that's necessary when you are dealing with Congress.

L: Yes, to some extent but if that's all you do --

E: Yes, right, is there a place -- and it would be very interesting wouldn't it? If some of the people who were involved, who are involved in doing this work day in and day out could have -- and even some of the older people could have a place for their own feelings.

L: Mm Hm. Yeah, I think that's important. In retirement I have had a lot of opportunity to reflect and actually invite feelings that I had really pushed away because they were overwhelming and I had deadlines, and it wasn't kind of encouraged. But I agree, it would be important especially to younger people coming into it that hope to stay with the challenges that we have left them.

E: Right, right. Yeah, I think about all the young people in the Sunrise Movement and other movements who are working so hard now.

L: You have spoken about a resurgence in poetry in this country. Maybe you can share about what you're seeing, why this resurgence may be happening and what it imports.

E: Yes, this is quite amazing. Poetry is alive and well. There are more readers by far of poetry now than there were 20 years ago. I'm a chancellor of the Academy of American Poets, and the number of people who have subscribed -- they send out a poem every day called Poem a Day, and the number of people who have subscribed to that has risen dramatically, even in the last five years. And the number of readers has just skyrocketed.

And I think that there are a few things that really are reasons why this has happened. And I'll say that the main increase is with young people and people of color. And so I think one thing

that's happened is there is a huge number increase of poets of color who are writing today. And I think that there's a lot more support for poets of color than there ever was. And also whenever a group comes into more power and more freedom, then poetry is right there. So we saw it in women's poetry, for example in the early '70s, all through the '70s. And we now are really seeing it with an incredible increase in excellent poets of color writing.

And the other thing I think is that in difficult times, people turn to poetry. And these are certainly the most difficult times that -- I'm 73, so that's certainly the most difficult times that I've ever seen both nationally and for the planet as a whole. So, I think that these are two really big factors. I also think that Spoken word has been a conduit for young people who first encounter Spoken word and then come into poetry on the page as well.

So, I think that all of these things have contributed to it. And although poetry is certainly not popular in the way that music or film is, it is definitely much more important to more people than it has been in a long long time in this country.

L: Well, Ellen, this has been a delight and an honor, and I want to thank you. This is Louisa Willcox with Grizzly Times and I'm here today with Ellen Bass. Thank you so much.

E: Oh, it's my pleasure Louisa. I love talking to you. And I am so appreciative of the work that you have done and that those who you've worked with have done for the grizzlies.