Love What You Love Podcast
Episode 35: Poetry with Barbara Ras
March 23, 2021

Welcome to *Love What You Love*; I'm Julie Rose. I'm insatiably curious about people and the world around us, and absolutely in love with passion and unselfconscious enthusiasm. Every other week I geek out with someone about the thing that they love, and then I share it with you.

Welcome back! Or, Welcome! Happy Spring! As you can probably guess, spring is my favorite. I'm so lucky to live in San Jose where spring lasts for months, and months, and months. It's an echo of a time that the area was not Silicon Valley, but instead, The Valley of Heart's Delight. Sure, it's still cold and rainy at the start, but the first blossoms appear in early January, usually quince and almond, followed by peach and cherry. And then February is absolutely a cloud of plum blossoms. March means redbuds and even more cherries, and all of the trees leafing out.

March also means my birthday, yay! Y'all, I turned 50 at the beginning of March. WHAT! How did that happen? How?? I am grateful, though. Also, shoutout to listener Arshia, who also has a March birthday, and honestly, sent me one of the sweetest Instagram messages I have ever gotten. Yay, Pisces.

With that gushing done, it's time to meet this week's guest. You probably know that I love the poem "You Can't Have It All" by poet Barbara Ras. In fact, I love it so much I asked her permission to read it on an episode, which was Episode 24. And she also gave me permission to release that reading as a standalone recording, which you can also find in this podcast feed. Well, of course I had to get her on the show.

Barbara has an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Oregon, and multiple fellowships, including from the Guggenheim Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation, among others. Her poems have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Tin House*, *Granta*, and *Orion*, as well as other magazines and anthologies. She's released four collections of poetry: *Bite Every Sorrow*, *One Hidden Stuff*, *The Last Skin*, and *The Blues of Heaven*, which was just released on March 9th.

As you might imagine, it was an absolute treat for me to chat with Barbara. We talked poetry as dance, rhythms as close as your heart, poetry in translation, Amanda Gorman, busting myths about poetry, and so much more. So find out why Barbara loves poetry and why you might learn to love it, too.

Julie: Hello, Barbara! Thank you so much for joining me today.

Barbara: Hello, Julie. It is such a joy to be with you!

Julie: I'm so excited! [laughs]

Barbara: Thank you. Me too.

Julie: So, you have an MFA in Creative Writing, you've had multiple poetry fellowships, you have four collections of poetry, been published in *The New Yorker*, and lots of anthologies. When did you start and why did you start writing poetry?

Barbara: To answer the first part of the question, I started writing after I graduated from college. I went to a workshop at the Cambridge Women's Center. It was my first poetry workshop. I had never taken a class in poetry writing in college because I was too timid. I was a very, very shy student. And I was actually going to this course at the Cambridge

Women's Center with great trepidation, even though I found, many years later, the book of our instructor… It was her first book, and on the back of the book she listed her identity as "Typist and Astrologer," [laughs] which, decades later, was charming and also gave me reason to think, "Why was I so intimidated and so scared?"

Well, what happened at the class was something that changed my life, because I met my best friend in life and poetry, Ellen Doré Watson. We were baby poets, we glommed on to each other, we had just one of those attractions that – how can I say it – that ended in bonding for a lifetime. We bonded through poetry, through life, through travels, and she is still my best friend today, four decades later. We haven't lived in the same place very often, but we have kept in touch diligently and devotedly. She is one of the people who has kept me alive in poetry and I owe her a huge debt.

So, that was my first experience in writing poetry. What brought me to poetry and what introduced me to my love of poetry was taking courses as an undergraduate from a brilliant teacher, George Nitchie, and during my senior year he proposed that I write an independent study on the *Duino Elegies* by Rilke. The series is infamously difficult. I was a good student and a decent reader of poetry, but the *Duino Elegies* is not something that an early reader of poetry… or even a sophisticated reader of poetry can get to the depths or the heights of.

So there I was, swimming in the deep end of the pool, trying to make sense of this ecstatic series of poems by one of the 20th century's greatest poets. And I did something that was really outside of my comfort zone. It was just a remarkable thing. And after that, it wasn't that I thought, "I want to be the next Rilke." I thought, "I want to live in the space of poetry. I want to devote myself to reading poetry, and maybe I even want to write poetry." So that was the beginning.

Julie: Did you love poetry as a child? What introduced you to poetry?

Barbara: I grew up in a household that had a few books, but I read no poetry to speak of as a child. I haunted the library and I read voraciously. I was a pretty lonely kid. I didn't have a lot of friends until junior high and high school, but I spent a lot of my early childhood reading. I think that loneliness as a child was later responded to by poetry because poetry reveals so much to you about feelings, and about a person's soul, and about being in the world in different ways. So, I felt as though I had discovered a world and poetry opened a world to me that I had never had access to before.

Julie: What was the first poem that you can remember, as a young person, that just, kind of, blew your mind? Like, "Wow, what the hell is this?"

Barbara: Well… [laughs] Don't laugh. A poem that I was taken with, mostly because of its rhythm and its music was "Annabel Lee" by Edgar Allan Poe, and… I don't want to say any more about that.

Julie: [laughs] There's no shame! That's awesome. I'm curious to know, you did this senior thesis on Rilke and then you finally got the courage to take this poetry class. So, what was the impetus for that? Was there something in your life where you're just like, "I have to do this"? Was there some conflict in your life where you're like, "I gotta get my feelings out somehow" through poetry?

Barbara: It was just a yearning to write; a strong desire. And I wanted to learn. From there I took other classes, and then did my MFA, and kept writing, and here I am still writing.

Julie: Do you write other kinds of fiction or non-fiction? What are the benefits and the constraints of writing poetry versus other kinds of writing?

Barbara: I would love to say that I wrote in other genres, however, I worked as a book publisher for 40 years and it was a pretty consuming career. 50 weeks a year, 50-60 hours a week. Publishing will take everything you've got and more. So, I didn't really have time for developing other genres. I've written other things but I haven't written anything that I would consider an accomplished work. I'm very good at writing jacket copy.

Julie: [laughs] That's a very special skill!

Barbara: I shouldn't say *very* good, but in any case… I think poetry suited both my temperament and my sensibility, but it also suited my available time. I wrote very slowly. I would start a poem and then weeks, months later I would still be working on it because I would write in little spurts, and you know, the second shift after coming home and dealing with all of the things that one deals with after work. And then I had a child and that put the second shift into a much later, shorter constricted period of time.

So, I've written slowly, and many poets of my age have written many more books. I find it amazing that I've managed to do what I've done, and I actually also feel very grateful to have had the success that I've had… Maybe success isn't the right word. But to have received the honors that I've received and the attention, I feel very, very lucky.

Julie: It's amazing what people can do during a life when, you know, there's so much else coming at you; carving out that time to be creative. What would inspire a poem for you during this time? Was it a word? A phrase? A feeling? How did that work?

Barbara: Well, all of those three things. Feelings, I think, are one of the strongest elements in poetry, and it's something that I feel is the most… The emotional content of a poem is what hooks me. I feel that I want my poems to have emotional power. But what starts a poem is a wide range of things. It could be a snippet of overheard conversation. It could be a tidbit of something that I heard on the news. It could be a rhythm, a beat that I hear in my head and I want to fill in with words. It could be a line from something I've read that I want to expand on, or maybe borrow, and then give attribution to in some way. It could be something from a movie.

I also write with material that comes from dreams, and that's something that isn't really promoted by poets in general. Often, poets object to the idea of writing poems from dreams.

Julie: Why?

Barbara: I think because many of them can be… bad, to put it bluntly.

Julie: [laughs] Okay. Fair enough.

Barbara: However, I was persuaded by something I read in an interview with Jim Harrison, the writer, novelist, poet, who said, "Only in the West would we ignore 50% of our conscious life as source material." And from there on, if I had a dream that inspired or entered a poem, then I gave myself permission to use that material.

But I also want to say something about the way in which I approach a poem. It may start in a dream, for example, and I may not even identify it as a dream. I may just use an image and then the poem will go somewhere else. What I do intentionally, but also instinctively, is to push my poems as far as it'll go out into the world while also retaining personal stories, personal memories, and at the same time existing in different time

zones. What I mean by zones, I mean existing in the past, existing in memories, existing in things that are in the present, and also the future.

I like to range widely in time in my poems, and also range widely in an emotional register. So, while I start with some of the things that I've mentioned, I very rarely end up there. And I think the poems range in a, sort of, meditative way, sometimes narrative, sometimes associative. They cover a lot of distance, in my opinion.

Julie: When you get inspired, you sit down to write a poem, do you have a plan, or are you taking dictation?

Barbara: [laughs] Oh god… Give me dictation any day! I would love to have a hot wire right up there to some muse, or angel, or the spirit of any of my beloved poets who have flown from the planet.

I don't have a plan. I start mostly with one of the sources that I mentioned, and I write. And I write, and I write, and I write. Sometimes it goes nowhere, and then I revise. I revise endlessly, and I take things out, and I put things in, and I let the poem lead me to where it wants to go because I think poems really have a mind of their own. And often, something that you think you wanted to write about turns into a wholly different subject, and something that you were planning goes out the window.

So, I follow my instinct. Sometimes, what is amazing to me, is that I'll sleep on a poem (not necessarily under my pillow) and I'll wake up with a key to a problem that had been an obstacle in the poem and I'll be stuck. I'll have hit the wall, I won't know what to do, and my unconscious delivers some answer, some way to get beyond that place where I've literally been stumped.

Julie: You say you revise and revise. Do you get a few lines down and then revise those? Or do you get the whole poem down and then revise, revise, revise?

Barbara: Both. And I also… After I've published a poem, I revise it. And when I'm doing a reading from one of my published books I will often have lines that have been rewritten and I'll read the rewritten lines. I heard a great… Maybe it wasn't an interview, maybe I read this, but it might've been an audio interview with Zadie Smith. She said, "You wouldn't believe all the authors in the green room. They've got their novels and they're scribbling revisions on all the pages before they go out onto the stage to read from their work." And I thought, "Oh my god, someone as brilliant as Zadie Smith does it." One of my mentors, Ellen Bryant Voigt, said this brilliant line, "It's all revisions until you die." [laughs]

Julie: [laughs] Oh my god. But that's actually kind of nice and hopeful too.

Barbara: Of course.

Julie: I want to switch gears just a little bit. At the inauguration, I think everybody knows, Biden had the poet Amanda Gorman speak. It's interesting what poetry can do for a country. What do you think poetry can do for a person? Either reading it or writing it?

Barbara: Well, I think poetry can bring solace. I think it can bring exaltation. It can bring sorrow and pain. But there's something about the experience of having even painful experiences embodied in a poem that is elevating because the words capture something so perfectly that it becomes beautiful. So, sadness can become beautiful, and pain can be transformed into beauty. I also think that funny poems can bring you

up and lift your spirits. Funny poems can also hide little chunks of wisdom. So, those are some things I think poetry can do for a person. Does that answer your question?

Julie: Yeah, absolutely. And I'm curious what your take is on… you know, somebody could go watch a sad movie. They could go read a happy book. Why read a poem? Is it just the concentration of the emotion?

Barbara: You took the words right out of my mouth. The concentration. The concision. The way words can be reinvented in a line to take on a depth of meaning. So, a word that can be a common word can appear in an image and begin to glimmer. Or something can have a tonal sparkle that you've never experienced before. And language becomes transformed. It becomes elevated. And I don't mean elevated in a way that isn't accessible to every reader. I think every reader should read poetry for the words. The words just mean what they say, they convey feeling, and there's no secret. There's no key that you have to have to understand poetry. You just have to open yourself to it.

And it also works on a physical level. I think poetry lodges in the body through breath because, of course, our earliest poetry was oral. It was based on memory, and on rhythm, and on breath. So, we had lines that… you know, prose was broken into lines that could be remembered, and we still have line breaks in poetry that are units of breath. Those units actually reflect something physical; the breath of the body. And that physicality is close to our hearts. It's the breath of life.

So, I think that poetry hits us physically in a way that… Of course, any good writing can have a physical impact, but I think that poetry can be even more physical, particularly because it's based so strongly on imagery, and metaphor, and devices that are concentrated, as you said, and that also are like song, and like dance in language.

Julie: You have a new poetry collection that just came out in early March, called *The Blues of Heaven*. What inspired it? What connects it thematically, if anything?

Barbara: There are a couple of themes that run through the book. I didn't start out saying, "I'm going to write a book that has these themes." I write poems and not books that are intentional explorations of a theme or some content. But I have obsessions in any given period, and one of the things that was a very strong experience during the writing of this book was the loss of my only sibling, my older brother who died a very untimely death at age 62.

So, I have a lot of poems about my grief of losing him, poems that reflect back to our childhood together, experiences of our family together, which was a very insulated family. And all of my grandparents immigrated from Poland or parts of… They were all Polish, but they came from, like, Belarus or Lithuania, but they were Polish in their ethnicity. So in my family, there were two kinds of people: people who spoke Polish and people who didn't. The people who didn't were outsiders, so my brother and I were very close and we inhabited this world that was, in a lot of ways, very foreign to outsiders. So, that's one of the themes, my brother.

Another theme is the various ways in which our political lives have been affected by war, climate change, the ignorance of our leaders, the denial of so much truth in the world. So, many of the poems speak to political issues that need to be witnessed. And often, a poem will be political in its entirety, but sometimes the political message sneaks in in the way that I said before. A poem may start with a dream, or an idea, or an image, or a rhythm, and sometimes I'll think about something that happened and…

One of the poems in this book is titled "The Day a Crucial Button Fell Off My Blouse." And the first line begins, "Into the toilet." And then the poem ends with some facts about the horrible events in Pakistan during a heatwave that killed innumerable people, and the last line of the poem says something like, "And on this day, I ask, who the hell will dig a trench for me in 128 degrees?" That just shows you where a poem can start, and where it can end, and how something can sneak in that is a political statement.

Julie: Is this a more political collection than your previous?

Barbara: I've always had political content, but I think this one has more.

Julie: So Barbara, please, give us a selection from the book.

Barbara: Okay. I'm going to start this poem… It's actually the first poem in the book and it is a memory of my brother and my family. It's called "Salad Days."

How easy then, the fun house at Lincoln Park
before it grew into a field of weeds, you could buy
five tickets for a buck from a blank face in a booth
and enter the dark with your brother to be scared
by tilting floors, phony doors, corpses
bursting out of coffins, and once out into blue sky
run breathless to your mother and father, happy,
you could have called them salad days,
but why would you — no one in your family
had read Shakespeare — so you bought
French fries, doused them with malt vinegar,
the four of you, competing for your share
of potatoes improved by salt and grease,
and nothing in those early evenings free
of care could have prepared you
to be the last one left, the one
with grief to spare.

Julie: Ah… Wow. That gave me chills. That's… [reflective pause] That one just kind of rocked me a little bit. Sorry.

Do you have poems that you love that are still sitting in the drawer that you won't share with anyone?

Barbara: No. I am… because I'm a slow writer and because, as I said, I had this career that was pretty intense and time-consuming, when I started a poem I would usually finish it. I would write, and write, and write until it was polished. And I do that less… I'll toss away first drafts much more readily now and begin something else, but I don't have anything that is some precious gem that is hidden away from all eyes. I think that whenever I've

gotten anything going, and when I have… you know, when the spirit is moving me, I just want to keep going and I want to make the most of it.

Julie: You teach courses in poetry as well. Do you think you approach it differently than someone who is not a poet?

Barbara: Well, most poets who teach poetry, teach poetry *writing*. They teach workshops where… And there are different kinds of workshops. Some workshops focus on generating a poem. They're called generative workshops, where prompts will be given and the poets will then write in response to prompts from the workshop leader. Sometimes poets will bring what they consider a finished poem or a draft that they've taken as far as they can go and the group will discuss the poem and the workshop leader will offer hints, or praise, or directions, or ideas in response to the poem.

Often a workshop will combine looking at writing by other poets. So, a workshop leader or someone who teaches in a university, a faculty member, will bring in poems by poets that illustrate certain kinds of things. They can be used as models for the range of approaches to a poem. It could be a letter poem, or it could be a love poem. It could be a poem that is in a particular form like sonnets, or villanelles, or any other number of formal kinds of techniques.

So, there are lots of ways of introducing people to poetry, and when I teach I like to use examples from other poets who I love in order to introduce students to a range of possibilities. One of the things that I'm particularly interested in is poetry in translation. I love to introduce anyone who will listen to me to poets from other countries and from other cultures. I think translation is one of the most precious gifts that we have that can bring us work across from another language. I think poetry in translation gives us a wealth and a world of experience that's just invaluable.

Julie: When did you say, "Oh my gosh, I just absolutely love writing poetry. This is what I want to do."? Was there a moment?

Barbara: I think it was more of an evolution, more of a moving towards the idea of writing poetry. I didn't have the audacity to say, "I'm a poet and I'm going to write poetry." It was something that I yearned for and I grew into.

Julie: Are there misconceptions about poetry that you really want to dispel?

Barbara: Yes, that it is difficult. Poetry isn't difficult. There are some poets that can be less accessible than others, but poetry is an expression of personal experience. It's a window into the world. It's a way of using language that is beautiful. If you pay attention to the feeling of the poem, if you come away with only a feeling, that's enough. So, the idea that poetry is difficult and can't be read by everyone, I think, is a notion I would like to dispel. I would like to see more people reading poetry. And God bless Amanda Gorman. She is a wonder. And for her to open people's hearts to poetry, may that go forward and may that spirit inform the millions who heard her and the people who will pursue poetry as a result of her beautiful introduction.

Julie: Yes. Amen. Before we close, are you willing to read another selection from the new collection?

Barbara: Sure. You know, I tend to write long poems. Here's one that's not too long, and I think it's one that represents a number of things that I've talked about. It's called "Flags."

For some reason we chose an island off Italy to bring a typewriter
for repair, and meanwhile, chianti and lounging on the balcony, pondering
if Kafka had in fact invented the hard hat, and who came up with the idea
of hotel maids folding toilet paper into triangles, pointless points.
Imagine the cumulative moments the world bloody wide spent thus,
instead of indulging in a decent foot soak, thinking perhaps about
a grandmother in the village, her mother's mother who greets her
by taking both her hands and rubbing them long enough
to wring out hundreds of secrets. "Never forget the names of our breads,"
she will say, and together they'll sit, staring at the horizon, one thing
we have in common, seeing as we, too, are looking out at it now,
the horizon, holding up the entire sky, all day pulling down the sun,
that golden child reluctant to go to bed, and when there is wind,
sending rolls of whipped cream to our shores. But forget flags,
the horizon refuses flags, none of that vain flappery,
whether the Saltire of Scotland, the eagles of Albania, the wounded
sheet of Latvia, flags flown in theaters, colonies, operations,
flags carried in the Children's Crusade, rags, no doubt, flags for
genocide after genocide after genocide
we find it humanly possible to abide.

Julie: Wow. Wow! [reflective pause] It's so interesting how… the tonal shifts in a poem, but they're seamless. It's really fascinating how you do that. And I love the word 'flappery'. [laughs] That's amazing.

Barbara: Thank you, Julie.

Julie: Oh, Barbara. I know we've been wanting to do this for a while. I'm so glad we got a chance to talk finally. Thank you so, so much for being on the show today.

Barbara: Julie, the pleasure was all mine. And I thank you for your attention and for all the wonderful things you bring to your podcast and all of the people that you have introduced us to. What an amazing enterprise you've embarked on.

You can get Barbara's latest collection, *The Blues of Heaven*, anywhere you get books.

Unfortunately, my recording software died, unbeknownst to me, while Barbara was giving me some great resources for getting started in poetry. I will add all of those to the show notes for you.

Just a reminder that you can find this podcast on Instagram @LoveWhatYouLovePod, and on Twitter, @WhatYouLovePod, and the website is LoveWhatYouLovePod.com. And we're on Patreon! Find us at Patreon.com/LoveWhatYouLovePod. A massive thank you to all of my patrons. You make this show possible.

All of the transcripts for *Love What You Love* are available for everyone on the website. Thanks to Emily White, transcription doyenne and proprietress of The Wordary. If you need transcripts, reach out to her at Emily@TheWordary.com. The music for *Love What You Love* is called "Inspiring Hope" by Pink-Sounds. A link to that artist is included in the show notes.

As always, thank you so, so much for listening. Let's hang out again soon.

Links:

Find Barbara at Poets.org

Find *The Blues of Heaven* anywhere you get books

Poetry Resources:

Academy of American Poets; Poets.org

The Poetry Foundation

Barbara's Favorite Nonprofits:

EarthJustice.org

The Merwin Conservancy

Poets.org

My Favorite Nonprofits:

Humane Society of Silicon Valley

Towncats.org

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