

AUDIO TRANSCRIPT

The Brief: Dan O'Brien

Jenn Habel: This week's guest is poet and playwright Dan O'Brien. Earlier this year, he published his fourth collection of poems, *Our Cancers*, which chronicles his and his wife's experience of living with and through cancer. In 2015 his wife, the actress and comedian Jessica St. Clair, was diagnosed with breast cancer, and six months later Dan was diagnosed with colon cancer. Thankfully they are both now cancer free.

This is The Brief. I'm Jenn Habel.

Dan O'Brien: Hello.

JH: Hi, Dan. It's Jenn.

DO'B: Hey, how are you? Sorry about that, I think I missed your first, your first attempt. I'm glad it worked this time.

JH: Yeah, here we are.

DO'B: Yeah.

JH: So it's morning here, but afternoon there, right? How long are you going to be over there?

DO'B: We're going to be here probably another four weeks, maybe another six weeks, because my wife is on a TV show that shoots here, and it's kind of elastic, like when they'll finish filming. Part of that is, you know, having to do with whether or not they have to shut down for COVID, which, knock on wood, hasn't been an issue yet. But like, if that happens, that could delay things. You know, probably another month, and then I think we'll be back. And we've been here since August, so it's been, it's been a few months.

JH: I guess we're all getting better at living with the uncertainty of not knowing, like how long it's going to take or when.

DO'B: Yeah.

JH: Yeah, well, you know, this is like, in every conversation in life it's like easy to let COVID be the entire conversation. I'm going to [inaudible] [laughter] I want to ask you about your book, which is such a good book [crosstalk]. I've been really looking forward to this. And the first thing I want to ask you about was something that you wrote in the introduction, namely that the poems came to you in fragments. So, I was just wondering, could you talk a little bit about what that experience was like, and how it was maybe different from your normal writing process?

DO'B: You know, I think I'm a fairly unconscious writer under normal circumstances, at least when it comes to, you know, the first draft or the rough draft of something, whether it's a play or poetry or even prose. You know, I don't—it's very difficult for me, to choose what to write or to feel like—I mean, one reason as a playwright I've never worked in TV is I think I would just be terrible at having an assignment, you know. So I really do have to kind of follow my intuition. But these poems, because they came out of such an intensely traumatic time, I think that intuitive, you know, wellspring was just overflowing. I think I just, you know—I mean, I was grateful for that feeling. I was grateful to feel like some expression was happening, kind of through me. And that it was giving me some opportunity to find, you know, a form or the right language for the experience. Again, I'm saying find it, but often it did feel like I was following the impulse. I think part of it was also I was writing these things, these poems, these fragments on the go, you know, in so many ways, whether it was between hospital visits, doctor visits, trying to care for our daughter while all this was happening. It was a long period of not feeling like I had a few hours to sit at my desk and ruminate on what my wife and I were experiencing. It was, it was almost like there was no room for these poems to come unless they sort of made themselves known or obvious to me. But in other ways, I think it was just the result of the trauma, I mean, a good portion of the collection are just memories of past trauma, you know, so of course, obviously, what my mind was doing was trying to relate what we were going through to experiences we'd had or I've had in my life previously—other traumas, whether that's involving a difficult childhood, or the second fragment in the book, you know, has to do with being present near the World Trade Center and sort of that very public trauma and how it may or may not be related to my wife and I then developing cancer at the same time, 13 years later, 14 years later. So, you know, there's a lot happening on a kind of subconscious or unconscious level. And again, I was really grateful when that was happening because on a conscious level I did feel speechless. When something that overwhelming happens—It's one thing when your spouse gets a diagnosis of Stage 2B breast cancer that's, you know, that's serious. And then six months later I'm diagnosed with Stage 4, but treatable, and even perhaps, knock on wood, curable colon cancer, it's very difficult to know what to do with that information [laughs]. How to make sense of it, I guess, you know. And for me, I'm sure this is not unique, I just feel like, you know, writing, I came to writing as a kid out of trauma as a way to have control, to find some sort of meaning or sense out of what felt completely uncontrollable, which was, in my case, emotional verbal abuse from my parents and a suicidal sibling—things that I couldn't really understand but were affecting me on a deep level. And writing--and reading, reading certain writers first (those are the writers that gave me the idea to write myself)--was a way to feel like I could, I guess, make sense out of the chaos.

JH: I thought of the line from “The Wasteland” “These fragments I have shored against my ruins” when I was thinking about the composition of the book. I guess what you're talking about, too, about how you came to writing in the first place, is ways of sort of shoring yourself up. I'm curious when you were writing, when they were coming to you, were they coming to you in the form that they're in in the book and these short lines and three-line stanzas? Or were they kind of more all over the place?

DO'B: So they really, they really did come to me in those three-line stanzas. I mean it changed a lot over the years, because they came to feel to me almost like little prayers that I wanted to continually test and to some degree rework to find the sort of, the greater meaning in them. Originally there were probably 200, maybe more, fragments like this. And now there's 101, so a lot of it was winnowing, winnowing it down, but it was also trying to find, trying to unlock, the potential in each fragment—what was it trying to tell me about myself, you know, what was it going to reveal to me. Yeah, the three-line thing was there from the beginning, and I think, in some ways, it had to do with the breath. I mean, even when I read it I end up doing something that I hope isn't annoying for people to hear, but there's a kind of measured slow, but breathless quality to it, almost like the poems are trying to slow down time or something. Someone who read these fragments earlier, a friend of mine, said he found them very emphatic, which I think he meant just the degree of emphasis being placed on each word in each very short line. And I responded to that comment in terms of, yeah, you know, when you're in the midst of whatever the disaster is it's an emphatic experience, everything seems to mean something or many things seem to mean something. But also I think one reaches out for, and tries to cling to, sometimes very small things for stability or meaning. And that's all sort of working backwards, you know, the way they really started to come to me or came to me is in these little, these tercets. Over time, I did try to pay a lot of attention to the meter. It's not in any sort of regular meter, but I felt like there was a lot of meaning in the rhythm of the lines as well. I knew from the beginning that they would be very spare, that it would be an exercise, in many ways, in minimalism. The experience of what my wife and I were going through, you know, this is maybe too corny, but we were being sort of stripped down to our essentials, in many ways, just as humans, you know.

JH: Yeah, Yeah.

DO'B: We were just trying to survive. And so the idea of writing poems that were fuller in some way just didn't seem right. I'm working on a collection, on a manuscript now, that's about being a so-called survivor. And it's been interesting to me how those poems are all prose poems, and so suddenly after I came through this year and a half, two years of treatment, suddenly I wanted to talk, a lot. I wanted to write these poems that, I call them prose poems but they're, some of them are close to dramatic monologue. And I enjoy that tension. Some of them are very linguistically inventive and dense, and some of them are very chatty, but there's a release into survivorship, I guess you could say, with these poems. This was trying to chronicle a very stark period of time, you know, and starkly beautiful. I mean when you're stripped down in the midst of trauma like that, it's a cliché but you are so much more aware of the value of love in your relationships and sort of existential, you know, values in your life. That's all I could really focus on.

JH: That's fascinating to me about how your form has shifted between those two projects. I connected the short lines in this book to a desire to maybe slow time down in some way and just to pay attention. Would you read the last poem in the book?

DO'B: Sure. So this is 101:

There is beauty
I may never
recover

nobody can
suspend
the moment

pedaling
my bicycle
in pursuit

of my wife
on hers with
our daughter as

night falls
moon rises
daughter laughs

JH: That “nobody can suspend the moment.” You know, I felt like--in some ways poetry is always trying to do that in some way--but it’s particularly poignant in the context of this book. Did you—I’m curious that it’s 101 poems, rather than 100, that you messed with the symmetry of the two sections, of 50 poems in the first and 51 in the second.

DO'B: Do you know, well, at first it was just instinct. Obviously, there was one impulse for it to mirror, for the two sections to mirror, because my wife and I went through a kind of mirroring experience. She was, she was receiving her final chemo infusion the day I was diagnosed, and then they literally helped her down the hallway with her IV bag into another room where I was waiting to find out that I was diagnosed with Stage 4 colon cancer.

JH: That’s incredible.

DO'B: So you know, the sense of a mirroring effect or twinning effect, or a hinge or a fulcrum, was so obvious to me that I wanted to incorporate it into the collection. And I just, you know, the 101 was in some ways maybe an act of willful willfulness or something to break this symmetry sort of. You know, if I kept the symmetry, I felt like the story would end, and maybe in some ways our lives would end, and by just that extra poem. Now, because the book’s a lot of things, obviously, when I was writing it had no idea that both my wife and I would still be here five years later. So many of the poems are not optimistic or not hopeful, but I think there is a theme of at least the will to survive, to live to, you know, to push through the sort of

closed system of something, of a perfect mirroring. So really that's all the 101 is: to sort of make a step towards something ongoing.

JH: In one of the late poems the speaker confesses, you know, he sometimes misses the war, as it's called. I was interested in that poem and the tercet that reads, "He is concerned / he may unlearn / his wisdom." I'm just wondering about what that wisdom is, or how if you remember you felt at the time when you were writing this poem?

DO'B: I do. Yeah, I mean, I would say that poem, in some ways, feels like the most dangerous poem to have written in the collection, you know, because there's nothing—I've not been through anything more terrifying than what we've been through, to feel and acknowledge at times that you may, or that one might, miss the clarity of a near-death experience. The comparison of cancer to war is problematic in all kinds of ways. Yet, at the same time, I know the metaphor was helpful to me when I was in treatment. And I did relate it to—you know, for years, I've worked with this war reporter named Paul Watson. I've adapted some of his work and written about him in poetry and playwriting, and, you know, the theme, the big theme, in all of his work is that when he's been in the war zone, he has experienced that heightened clarity about what seems to matter in life. He feels awake to life in a way that maybe he doesn't or hasn't in his so-called normal life, and that's how I often felt during treatment. I did feel like I was less distracted by ego, by I guess more creaturely concerns. It was interesting to me in the months when it first started to creep back, in the months after treatment when I started to feel kind of, at moments, almost normal again, you know, I would suddenly start to have some of the old normal thoughts. Just everyday worries and concerns about relationships or career or whatever. And on one hand, that was incredibly disappointing, because I felt like I was slipping back into a way of seeing the world that I didn't want to slip back into. On the other hand, I felt like, Oh I'm doing this now and thinking these thoughts now because I'm actually the animal of, you know, my body is actually thinking like an animal, is worried about paying the bills. Which is strange for a poet to equate publishing a poem to paying the bills. But it's a similar idea, you know, that you're, that you're trying to work and make work that matters to people and connect to people. So, you know, I appreciate the ambiguity of that feeling, but there is something difficult or challenging about that. People talk about the gift of cancer, for example—I put that in quotes because it's a terrible, terrible thing. And sometimes people, often people say that in a way that's kind of an expression of toxic positivity or something, you know. But I think what's worthwhile or useful or truthful in that idea and that phrase is just what we're talking about: that you do have such a heightened and near-constant sense of the value of love and your relationships, and other people, not just staying alive for yourself, but staying alive for family and friends, you know.

JH: Has the experience had any impact upon your thoughts about whether or not people can change? Or to what extent they can change?

DO'B: Yeah, it does. Because when I felt that return of older ways, or pre-cancer ways of thinking, or being, I have thought to myself, Well, this is interesting, like how elastic am I. Because when you're going through a trauma like that you think, This is going to change me

forever. It might change me to the point of killing me, you know, it could be the ultimate change. But I certainly can't come through this the same person. And then, I think if you're lucky enough to recover—I mean, I relate it often to how I think of my work as a playwright. The theater and playwriting are so much about identity. My point of view on trauma right now is that trauma, large and small, whatever, you know, it's almost always going to lead to a change of your idea of self. It's not going to be an instant change, it's going to be a slow piecing—you know, who I thought I was before cancer: somebody who'd never even been hospitalized for anything, to suddenly have emergency surgery for Stage 4 colon cancer, you know, in an instant, my conception of myself, in many ways, felt shattered. And of course, what I realized in the year since is that I'm still the same person, but I'm revised. That was even again sort of the impulse in the spareness of the language. I didn't want a lot of metaphor. Just in the midst of trauma, a language that meant something else or alluded to something else just felt kind of flimsier. And I really needed to find the poetic language that, that was still evocative and musical but wasn't a stand-in for something else, if that makes sense.

JH: Yeah, it does. This is not quite the same thing, but I was listening to—or, no, I was reading—an interview the other day with Mary Ruefle. And she was saying that inside each poem, she thinks you can find a shorter poem.

DO'B: Oh, that's great.

JH: Except for haiku. You can't get something shorter than a haiku [laughter]. But I feel like, in your poem, in these poems, you know, you can't—I don't think you can find a shorter poem very well inside the poems in this book.

DO'B: That's good to hear. Because I do feel—Another friend read them, read them early on and said, this is a somewhat comical comparison, but he said they felt like little yoga poses [laughter].

JH: Oh, that's great [laughter].

DO'B: And I related to that in terms of like, each time I would return to the poems over many years and decide which ones could be shorter or different or should be thrown out, or whatever it is, I was always trying to say, Well, how can I? How can I stretch it even more? How can I, you know, make that shape or that form even tighter?

JH: Well, sometimes you get down to where it was just, it was just the three lines of the poem itself, like, one that I thought was incredibly powerful was “Will these words / be my voice / haunting you.” You know, that's the whole—

DO'B: Yeah

JH: Yeah, it's just like, you just, you could have said more, but that—it just exists there. As a yoga pose [laughter]. That's a terrible yoga pose! I don't want to do that one. [laughter]

DO'B: But I think you know, even like, I remember writing that poem. I mean, another reason why the poems found the form they have is—Or, for example, when I was in the midst of chemo, like after you've done weeks and weeks of it, months, really. And you know, in the beginning it's a cumulative effect, so the first few rounds, you feel kind of sick but you recover pretty quickly. By the end, you know, the last few rounds, you're really knocked flat. And you really—I would have to decide, okay, when am I going to attempt the stairs today. Because I know I've only got one attempt in me [laughs]. And it was a similar approach with some of these poems, it was like, okay, I've got this thing, this emotional, spiritual impetus to express what I'm going through, to reach out through language. But I, you know, I don't have the capability right now to write a sonnet or villanelle. So it's got to come out in this hyper stripped-down spare expression.

JH: Would you read one more poem before we hang up?

DO'B: Sure.

JH: Is there any one in particular you would like to, or you want me to suggest one?

DO'B: You know, I love the poem about my daughter.

JH: Oh that's so funny. I was going to say either 83 or 84. So yeah, 83.

DO'B: Oh, great. So 83:

In the vision
our child is
a woman

gazing across
a cozy table
at me

some locale
holy to us
like Carmel

sometime sleepy
like mid-
afternoon in this

courtyard with leaves

glinting the season
shouldn't matter

but it does
matter that
I am being

looked after
with quizzical
aggravation and

affection
I am certain
I am pleased

she contains
our features
commingling

her hair like
her mother's
copper curling

like my hair
used to like
our allusive

conversation
foundering on
the mundane

Her mother
with any luck is
running late

Our daughter
wears a dress of
Marian blue

a healer
from birth
she is why

we are here

simply sharing
a meal

JH: Thank you, Dan. This has been so nice.

DO'B: Well, thank you. Thanks for giving me the opportunity. I hope I made enough sense [laughter]. You know how it is to try to figure out, you know you write to sort of figure out why you're writing. So I hope I made enough sense, but I'm really grateful for the kind words and for the opportunity. So thanks.

JH: Thank you. Okay, I'll let you get back to your day. Thank you again.

DO'B: Oh, thank you.

JH: All right. Thanks, Dan. Bye-bye.

DO'B: Okay, thanks. Bye.

JH: The Brief is affiliated with the Elliston Poetry Room and the Department of English at the University of Cincinnati. It's produced by Michael C. Peterson. We are grateful to Cincinnati artist Man Watching the Stars for allowing us to use his beautiful music in this episode. You can find additional episodes of The Brief at soundcloud.com/ellistonpoetryroom. Thanks for listening.