

AUDIO TRANSCRIPT

The Brief: Erin Belieu

Jenn Habel: This week's guest is Erin Belieu. She and I spoke about short books, hospital corners, and Boston University's Room 222.

Erin Belieu: There was a sense of being aware of that lineage of that room and it felt really I don't know...

JH: Belieu is the author of five books of poetry, all published by Copper Canyon Press. Her most recent collection is *Come-Hither Honeycomb*, which appeared in February. This is The Brief. I'm Jenn Habel.

JH: Hi Erin.

EB: Hey!

JH: Hello? I think it's working.

[Crosstalk]

JH: Oh. I'm sorry, too. It's frustrating, too, because the app just asked me to update it yesterday and before updating it, it would ring just on my normal phone number, so if I hadn't been diligent and updated it, we wouldn't have had a problem.

EB: It's always Russian roulette with the update, isn't it?

JH: I know. I always sit there with my finger poised on it, then I hit it, and I regret it. Have you been doing any events for your new book?

EB: Oh yeah. I'm in interview mode.

JH: [Laughs] Well, I was going to ask you if you've settled into any new patterns, or if you are a routine-oriented person on a usual day?

EB: Probably a little column A, little column B. The thing is, I'm one of those people who's always over-committed at a very high level, so a lot of my day is just determined by whatever deadline I'm trying to hit. Whether that deadline's for writing or a deadline for teaching. It's funny because I really loathe deadlines and I have designed my life to be just a series of deadlines. But I'm the kind of person where I probably would be slothful if I didn't have the deadline, so it's good that I've organized myself in this manner or I would just sit and watch Netflix and eat Cheetos or something. I do get a lot of work done, so that's good.

JH: Are you a regular writer or more sporadic?

EB: Oh, you know, I'm terrible. The whole "write every day" thing. I feel like I understand the virtues of that, and I think it works for a lot of people, and they probably have much better habits again than I do. A lot of my work, a lot of my poems--like three quarters for me of poetry is mind work because of the way I work. And again, I feel like there are a hundred different ways to arrive at the place you want to get at, but for me, it's always been just a lot of working it in my head before it comes to the page because, for me, I almost always need a sense that I know what the true trajectories in the poem are. I always talk to my students about how I think there are two fundamental trajectories in poems, which are the intellectual trajectory and the emotional trajectory. Those usually for me have to arrive at an approach. Maybe it's because I was a competitive diver for so many years that I need an approach, right? I need like I'm going to walk to this door and that feels like that will be a place to leap from that can launch me through a poem onto the two trajectories. So a lot of time I'm spending time just kind of working in my mind, trying on different stances and ways to come in. I always have to find a door in. I don't think everybody's like that. I think they can work kind of backward. And again, as we both know, there's no hundred percent rule in art of any kind. But generally I'm casting about shaping, fixing, thinking narrative, thinking stance, thinking about what has inherent drama. And then, once I hit the page, I start following sound patterns and rhythms and images to sort of lead me through the poem's jungle, as it were.

JH: When you're doing that kind of thinking, does that happen just as you're going about your normal business? Or you have to kind of [crosstalk] block out time? Okay, you can do it just through your days, through your life.

EB: Yes, which I think is why sometimes poets get the reputation for being addled. [laughs] I remember I was Derek Walcott's personal assistant in Boston for a couple of years and I remember Derek, who obviously was brilliant, he has a Nobel Prize. I would bring him from his house to the T to go like three stops to get out at the office. And I would pick him up sometimes because Derek was not paying attention to what other people were paying attention to. I don't know that I can claim Derek's level of attention in a different sort of way, but I mean I realize that's why some things in my house are a little Rube Goldberg because I'm usually half distracted working on something else in my head. [Crosstalk] That was a very circuitous explanation, but it was the highest level—I really admired that about him, too: he was like, "Yes, I am paying attention to great poetry, so I'm actively not going to pay attention to those other things" because he always had his antenna up at a Nobel Prize level. Do you know what I mean?

JH: Mm-hmm. And I guess, you know, had people around him that enabled him to do that.

EB: It helps if you have a personal assistant making sure that you don't get hit by a car on Comm Ave. [laughter]

JH: I was actually going to ask you about Room 222 at Boston University because when I was going through the AWP panel list I saw that there was a panel about that room and confessional poetry, and it made me wonder what your memories are of it, what the room was like, what it was like to study in it.

EB: I remember being aware that, you know, when you get there and knowing that Plath and Lowell and Sexton and Starbucks were in that space, which I think has to look pretty similar still to what it looked like then, just kind of pleasant. It had nice windows, if I remember correctly, but sort of a pleasant, unassuming classroom, but also knowing that you're sitting in the chairs of the great. I remember Carl Phillips, who is one of my oldest, dearest friends, was in the same class with me at BU, and I remember during that first week of classes us coming out of this fabled room and taking the T to The Ritz by the Commons and drinking stingers and martinis and cheers-ing like, "To Sylvia Plath! To Robert Lowell!". And so there was a sense of being aware of that lineage and that room, and it felt like you were a part of something. And that meant something to me because Plath was, of course, one of the very first poets I ever fell in love with.

JH: Yeah, me too. I have a very strong memory of my first encounters with her poems. It was in college, and I went to Wake Forest and it was a pretty traditional curriculum there. [crosstalk] I'd been in so many years of poetry classes before actually ever having a more contemporary female poet on the syllabus and [crosstalk] deceased, but, I mean, it was like a shock to me. The professor asked if anyone wanted to read one of the poems out loud, and I kind of uncharacteristically raised my hand to do it. It was just kind of a transformative moment for me.

EB: It's very powerful, and I think a lot of women—hopefully that has changed considerably now, I hope it has. But I remember, you know, I'm a woman in my 50s and there were just not women on the syllabus. I mean it just sounds so odd to say that now, but they're just were not anything. There weren't women, there weren't really people of color, there was just a multitude of the beautiful voices in the world that were not taught, and so I could see that being a really... I'm sure that's why so many of us fastened onto, I mean beyond her brilliance, just feeling like, "Oh! Here's a woman writing poems at the most incendiary, beautiful, highest level. She was such a role model". I really hope that's not the case anymore.

JH: Yeah, I have to think that that's changing. I do this visiting writers series, and one of the things I think is really great about it is introducing the students to living writers. So that you don't think of writers as being these necessarily like lofty beings that you can't picture yourself as, which was my experience [crosstalk]. Although I guess [laughing] Derek Walcott kind of in his own world is maybe an inaccessible thing to see. But you know what I mean, just that you could picture yourself [crosstalk] writing a poem.

EB: No, it was absolutely essential to me, and this is one of my big passions. A lot of school systems now don't have the budget, and there's all kinds of political reasons for this as well, but they just don't have the kind of arts enrichment that they had when I was coming up, and those budgets have just been slashed, and so I started out by making... when I realized poetry wasn't

being taught in my son's—my son went to an A+ school system but there was no poetry beyond, "It's Thanksgiving, we're going to write a poem about a turkey or something." And so for every year of his class starting in third grade, I just volunteered to do a poetry unit, and by the time he got to high school I actually set up a reading series for his high school because I was running the reading series at FSU and oftentimes there would be known [inaudible] or whatever, and I'd just say, "Would you come to give an hour to my son's high school? I'll give you 200 bucks," and of course, every single one of them was like, "Oh, don't even pay me, of course I will do that". And so we managed to set up this reading series and then publishers would often give books so that everybody in school could have the book, and I just remember what that meant to me. There was a writer named Michael Anania who had some national reputation who was from Nebraska. I remember him coming into my high school creative writing class and how life-changing it was for me to see a living writer who was actually from my home state. It just completely revised my idea of what might be possible, and so I had all kinds of writers in that period, and I'm hoping that it shone a little light for that kid, you know what I mean? It just breaks my heart that there's so little funding and that creative writing really gets short shrift in a way that it didn't when I was coming up. So, I'm a one woman writers-in-the-schools project [inaudible].

JH: Yeah, that's amazing that you did that. [crosstalk] It's nice to hear that all those poets were also willing to do it.

EB: [inaudible]. And fiction writers too. People who get paid real money.

JH: [laughs] Even writers that actually are used to getting paid, yeah, are willing to do it. That's good. So one thing that I found so pleasing about your new book was its length. I wanted to ask you about that because it's on the shorter side for books of poems these days. And I was really surprised at how much I loved that about it, which is not to say...I was thinking I'll bring this up and it sounds like I'm criticizing the book as I'm trying to ask you a question about it and I promise I'm not, because, to me, it felt like you had to have so much confidence in each poem in the book. Because each poem has to... [crosstalk] sort of stand out and do its work. I just wanted to know more about your thinking about that in putting this book together.

EB: I mean, my caveat is that this is for me and I don't judge anyone else who makes other choices. I will also say that my notion of a collection of poetry is, how shall I say it? That I want to have that confidence. That I want each poem in the book to stand on its own, and that there is something really... and it's funny how many people have said this to me as I've been talking about this book like, "Wow! It's really concise. It's really tight." And that's kind of one of the things that really matters to me is creating, you know, how we say to my students you want to be able to bounce a quarter off of it. And that might be a little too much. I mean sometimes I actually have to work away from that impulse, which is let's have hospital corners on everything. But I wanted that sense of a tight, very concise, well-considered, hopefully, collection where each poem sort of has its own kind of like radiating quality in the book. And I think that's more traditional. I'm not exactly sure, I have some theories, but poetry books have just gotten bigger and bigger and bigger over time. I think that has more to do with marketing than it necessarily

has to do sometimes with what a collection of poems had been like. You go back and look at the great poets of the early to mid-20th century, their books were not 100 pages long. I loved that model of the kind of old-school, beautifully curated collection of poems, because not everything I write needs to go into a collection of poetry. Does that make sense?

JH: It definitely does and sometimes I can lose sight of thinking about each poem because I'm thinking so much about this larger context that they're sitting in. Every single poem just has to be its own good thing. That's kind of... [crosstalk] my reaction to your book.

EB: You see this [inaudible]. Thank you. And you see this at readings, too, sometimes with emerging poets where it does, and again, bless their hearts, I'm not flagging anyone about this because we all feel nervous when we're giving readings and etcetera. But this idea that I'll just bombard people with some until maybe something hits, does not radiate confidence. Right?

JH: Yeah.

EB: Which is why reading over your time should be a felony to begin with. [laughter]

JH: Yeah.

EB: Oh! You want me to do 20 minutes? Okay, I'm going to do 45 and I'm just going to read. I can be like a gumball machine and I'm going to shoot stuff at you until I feel like maybe something will land, and that does not radiate confidence for me. [crosstalk] Always leave them wanting more, right? That seems like a good idea.

JH: Do you think people read longer or shorter in these virtual events?

EB: I think people just do the same thing they've always done, which are the people who go over their time are the same people who go over their time, and the other people stick with their time. I hope I do a good job when I do a reading. I really hope to, and I make an effort to. I will also say I'm not a natural—the idea that I spend my life, one, hitting deadlines and, two, having people stare at me. [laughter] I cannot tell you how much I do not enjoy being looked at. So again, that I have kind of weirdly, pathologically chosen this to be a big chunk of what I do with my life is a little odd because I'm not a person who ever wanted to be on a stage. I'm not particularly comfortable with that, but at the same time, if people have kindly shown up to listen to you read your poems, you should probably make an effort. So I'm never that person who wants to be there any longer. I think virtual events are pretty much the same as every other event. People are going to be who they are. That's what I love about a human beings, just our complete absurdity, including myself, right? It's a complete lack of self-awareness. In the way that I don't see cats struggling with. [laughter]

JH: Yeah. Yeah. Well, before we hang up, would you mind reading a poem?

EB: No, I don't mind at all. Is there any one in particular that you would like to hear?

JH: Do you have your book nearby?

EB: I do indeed.

JH: How about "As for the Heart"?

EB: "As for the Heart." I like that poem because the speaker's son makes an appearance.
[reads poem]

As for the Heart

I am come to the age
of pondering my lastness:

buying what seems likely
my final winter coat at Macy's,
or when a glossy magazine
(so very blithely)
asks me to *renew*. As for

my heart, that ever-pixilated
tweener, how tediously long
I've been expected to baby
her complaints,
(unLOVED unLOVED),

alarmed and stubborn clock,
refusing to listen even as
the more intrepid tried.

Now, she mostly mutters
to herself, though
occasionally there's
some clanging, a tinny sound,

like the radiator in a Southie
triple decker, fractious as
a pair of cowboy boots
in a laundromat's dryer.

It's always been
this joke the old ones know—
in such a state

of nearly doneness,

the world grows sweeter,
as if our later days
were underscored with music
from the nocturne's saddest
oboe hidden in the trees.

Just yesterday,
while standing in the kitchen,
my son complained nonstop
about his AP Psych class
while wolfing warmed-up
bucatini from a crazed,
pink china bowl.

Shiny, kvetching creature.
Even if I could tell him
what he doesn't want to know,
I wouldn't. But now

the pissy storm that's spent
all afternoon flapping like
a dirty sheet
has wandered off
to spook some other
neighborhood.

There's one barbed weed
pushing up greenly through
my scruffy loropetalum.

And it falls on me, this little
cold rain the day has left.

JH: Erin, thank you so much. [crosstalk] It's been great to talk to you.

EB: It's great to talk to you as well. Thanks, I mean, really, thank you for your attention to the book, much appreciated. I'll talk to you later.

JH: Okay. Bye-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. You can find the whole season at soundcloud.com/ellistonpoetryroom. Thanks for listening.