

*Marybeth Niederkorn*

264: For the Love of Poetry

Gabriela Pereira: Hello, and welcome, word nerds, to DIY MFA Radio, the show that will help you write more, write better, write smarter. I'm Gabriela Pereira, instigator of DIY MFA, and your host for this podcast. Now, let's talk writing. Hello. Hello, word nerds. Gabriela here, and welcome back to DIY MFA Radio. Our show notes are at diymfa.com/264 because it's Episode 264.

Now, today I have the pleasure of introducing you to our guest, the award-winning journalist, essayist, and poet Marybeth Niederkorn.

Marybeth's work has appeared in *The Gasconade Review*, *Trailer Park Quarterly*, *Red Fez*, and others. A Southeast Missouri native, her work is expressive of her background and roots while still managing to be, well, kind of hilarious – actually, a lot hilarious.

Educated at Southeast Missouri State University, she holds degrees in philosophy and in professional writing, and makes her living as a copywriter for Recruiters Websites. She and her husband Dave live in rural Missouri. Her first full-length poetry collection is *Times Knew Roamin'*, which we'll be discussing today.

So, welcome Marybeth. It is so great to have you here.

Marybeth Niederkorn: Thank you for having me.

GP: So, I always like to start by asking about the story behind the story – or I guess in this case, the story behind the poetry. Can you tell us why you chose to write this collection of poems?

MN: Poetry for me really comes from a place of strong emotion; and frustration is one of those emotions. I spent a year teaching, tutoring students at a community college in a writing lab after I completed my Master's degree.

And it was by turns, the most frustrating and rewarding experience I think I've ever had. And a lot of this poetry was kind of born from that experience. You know, there's nothing direct that happened that I translated immediately into a poem. It was kind of an amalgamation of a lot of experiences that I had repeatedly.

GP: So, one of the things that comes up in several of the poems is the idea of the travel 'to and from' this tutoring center, writing center. And, of course, I can totally relate to that because I remember back when I was in grad school, I was collecting research at two very different, rather collecting data at two very different elementary schools in the Ithaca surrounding area.

And so, like driving to each of those schools was a very different experience. One of them was in a very impoverished, depressed area of western New York; and another was a much wealthier town close to Ithaca.



And so, I remember the travel 'to and from' was almost like a narrative, in and of itself. Can you talk a little bit about how travel relates to the poems in this collection?

MN: Oh, definitely. The travel is almost a character in this narrative itself. It's more than a backdrop, I think. It informs so heavily the distance that I'm going, the thought processes, the rumination over a lot of things that I was struggling with at the time.

Now, traveling through southeast Missouri is kind of a strange thing, in itself, because a lot of people who live here don't really get out beyond the city much; they think of a 10-mile drive as a long drive. [laughs] Right.

I tell people this, and they think that's kind of amazing if they live in an area with any kind of a commute. My commute, my daily commute is about 20 minutes now; and I live out in the country, and that's a fairly long commute for people around here.

So, this hour-and-15-minute drive I was making every day through country that I have known my whole life. I was born and raised in southeast Missouri, spent a lot of time driving on Interstate-55 on family trips to St. Louis; and then south again, family trips to, say, Sikeston, Missouri.

And it's really breathtaking the beauty of this area. But there's not much else between those long stretches; you don't see a lot of towns between, say, Jackson and Perryville.

And that was something I was really trying to capture with these poems is that when you're on that interstate, you're on your own and you figure things out for yourself.

You don't realize it until you're 10 miles from the next gas station, and you're on empty. You know, there's a certain amount of resourcefulness that you need to build into your trips and you have to plan them accordingly.

GP: Yeah. And there's also, I think, when you have those long stretches of travel, there's, like you said, those, sort of, rumination. It's almost like our minds become like a landscape, in and of themselves; and they often mirror the landscape.

Like I remember when I would commute near here in New York City, commuting out to New Jersey for my first official job-- It was a very different mental space that I was navigating, trying to commute over the George Washington Bridge and, you know, on the Palisades Parkway versus when I was in Ithaca commuting to the places where I was collecting data for this study that I was doing where it was like all in the woods and I was all by myself.

And you know, there was literally, like you described – nothing there, although different landscape. Can you talk a little bit about how the mindscape is sort of reflected in the poetry itself? Like, how does poetry help to capture that feeling of both the travel and the mental space?

MN: So, there are floating metaphors throughout the work. I tried to keep this collection very conversational; and at the same time, a little bit abstract because I wanted people to be able to put themselves into my position where I was feeling a lot of emotions – and I was dealing with a lot of expectations of myself, and of my students, and of the landscape itself.

The way my travel informed the way I wrote the poetry, I tried to go for a rhythmic feel because the road noise almost becomes a song in itself. It has a lyrical quality to it. And I thought that would be really beautiful if I could capture it and play with it in some small way, to have it reflected in the work.



GP: That's interesting also what you were saying about like the rhythmic aspect because one of the things I definitely noticed is sort of playing with the different forms and the shape of the words like visually, not just like audio-wise, but visually on the page. Can you talk about that aspect of the poetry?

MN: Absolutely. One of my favorite things to do with poetry is be very conscious of the shape of the words – and how they form together, how they look on the page.

There's one poem, in particular, that I wrote about a particular car that I saw every day on this same stretch of road. And that poem is written in the shape of Missouri because the shape of Missouri is outlined on the highway signs. And I thought that was kind of a cool connection.

But more than that, the way the words interplay with each other and the way they connect with the reader is really what underpins most of what this collection does. I am always looking for ways to connect with a reader, especially someone who has never been to Missouri and has never driven these gorgeous but treacherous two-lane highways.

And that was really my intent was to pull together a little bit of additional meaning beyond what's on the page in the words themselves. And I think really that's the aim of all poets everywhere is to pull a little more meaning out of the words they use.

GP: Absolutely. I think that's one of the things that makes poetry so different from prose is that there's that added element of like the shape, the sound, the visuals of the words; like, it's sort of higher than when you're doing prose where it's more focused on the meaning.

Whereas I think in poetry, it's also about like how the meaning is reflected in the words themselves, in the image, and in the sounds, and whatnot. So, I love that. What about the meta-aspect? Because there are a couple of poems in this collection that are kind of meta, and they're sort of hilarious, and I really liked them. So, like, what inspired you to go there?

MN: [laughs] So, are you talking about the poems where I talk about the students, and the teaching experience, and grammar as though I'm trying to explain how language works to the--

GP: That, and the other one that really jumped out at me was the slam poem; and sort of like--

Marybeth Niederkorn: Oh.

GP: You know, it almost felt like satire of a slam poem; and yet, also a slam poem, and like, yeah-- Can you talk about that poem?

MN: Sure, absolutely. I love slam poetry. It was introduced to me when I was in graduate school. Once again, as a poet in southeast Missouri, the poetry scene here in Cape Girardeau is alive and thriving, but it's also necessarily a little bit limited.

We don't have quite the same scope and range that, say, a New York City does. But I was introduced to slam poetry, fell in love with it when I was in graduate school because I was working through a lot of anger, at the time, as a lot of, I think, women do.

I heard a statistic somewhere that the more advanced degrees you have as a woman, the more likely you are to be divorced. And with divorce, I think one of the biggest fallouts from that is anger.



And especially in my case, I was angry at myself for a lot of reasons; and working through that, through slam poetry was extraordinarily just moving and beautiful.

And I felt a way to express and articulate what I hadn't been able to express or articulate in any other ways. And I really wanted a tribute to that particular crystallization for myself in this collection because I didn't want to include the slam poems themselves because those are something separate from what I was trying to do with this book.

But I really have such gratitude and appreciation for what the form is able to do. Cristin O'Keefe Aptowicz is my absolute hero; I love her so much. [laughs] I actually had the opportunity to meet her while I was in graduate school and made a complete idiot of myself; it was great, because her poem about Crack Squirrels, I was explaining to her that I remembered about Crack Squirrels.

And so, I had this very involved one-sided conversation with her, and she was just kind of standing there very graciously but, oh, she's so great. Anyhow, so, Crack Squirrels, but I couldn't really do much about crack squirrels in this particular collection.

So, I thought, well, I wanted to write a little bit about the experience of writing a slam poem. So, that's what happened.

GP: So, while you were talking, I had to Google 'crack squirrels' because like I had no idea what that was about and I just-- For our listeners, if you Google 'crack squirrels', the wealth of hilarity is, yeah, just awesome.

MN: So great.

GP: It's awesome. But here's the thing that I love about poetry, it's like a lot of people tend to think-- And I'll confess, I was sort of like this back in the day where I thought poetry was pretentious, inaccessible – like, I wasn't smart enough or it was written in a way that I couldn't get it.

Like, it was almost like code, right? And I did kind of have like a certain level of like, 'Oh, I'm not going to-- like, it's not for me, I'm not a poet, I can't do poetry.' And I resisted it for a long time, and it was only when I started reading poetry that kind of poked fun at the genre that I started to get like, 'Oh, that's what it's about.'

And so, for me, these like sort of metapoems are actually the most delicious ever. Like whenever I read them, like Billy Collins' Workshop is one of my favorite poems because I just love the idea of like a poem that completely makes fun of the writing workshop environment; and it is so true.

[laughter]

MN: Yes, and I mean, I think that is definitely an important thing to remember about poetry is that it's about getting to the larger truth, right? It's about getting to, kind of, what's underneath the surface of what you think about in your day-to-day life.

I, for one, have always really loved and gravitated toward poetry that's like confessional – like Mary Oliver, for instance, is a goddess; she's amazing. And I really like Billy Collins. And most of my poetry, I think, could be very easily classified as more pedestrian as opposed to more highbrow, I think.

But I have never considered that anything other than simply what it is. I strive to write poems that people can get something out of, even if they don't read poetry. And I think that's really important



because I could write sonnets and sestinas that are perfectly true to form, and beautiful, and mean absolutely nothing.

And when people read them, they'll come to me and say, "Well, what's this about?" And I won't be able to tell them.

[laughter]

MN: And that to me, if I can write something and say to somebody, "This is what this means," I feel like we can really connect that way; and I like that.

GP: Yeah, it's interesting for me, like, so I always like resisted more contemporary poetry until I discovered like, you know, metapoems and the more accessible stuff.

But the things that I loved, and this was true when I was a teenager, I loved like Shakespeare sonnets or sort of poems that had a form because, for me, it kind of gave me something to hold onto that I then could understand and I could get it in a way.

Like even if I didn't understand exactly what Shakespeare was going for in all of those sonnets, there was something about the structure of it that anchored me in a way that like free verse; I felt like I was just sort of falling out of an airplane without, you know, a parachute or something.

MN: Mm-hmm. Oh, absolutely. And I think, structured poetry is another one of my favorites. It's really great. It reminds me of music really, because we have whining lyrics that are roughly the same line-length. So, it kind of speaks to a bigger part of our cultural expression.

And I think that's really interesting, and that's fun to explore. And the other thing I like about formal poetry is that it kind of pushes you into a corner; and so, you surprise yourself with the metaphors you come up with or the rhymes you come up with or the way words kind of take on additional meaning, especially in kind of a limited space.

GP: Yeah. It's almost like a puzzle. It's like you have to like figure out the puzzle; and there's something kind of fun, and yeah-- It kind of works a part of my brain that I wouldn't normally exercise, which is kind of awesome.

So, one of the things that I love about this collection is the Oxford comma poems, and the poems about teaching and about writing. Having worked in a writing center – both in college and in grad school – I can totally relate to the frustrations that come from being a tutor or, you know, instructor in one of those scenarios.

So, can you talk a little bit about the role that the poetry fit between your relationship as a teacher and sort of teaching this stuff, and then like also writing these poems on these topics?

MN: So, as I said, the biggest impetus for me for a poem is a strong emotion. And when you have spent 20 hours a week, explaining to students who don't want to be there, how to use commas, which nobody really knows how to use commas; this is the number one question that I always get from people.

See, when you're writing professionally, you're working in a room with other writers and the question always comes up, "Should there be a comma here?" Friends of mine will ask me, "How do you use commas?"



And I'll say, "Well, if you're writing for a newspaper, there's one way - if you're writing for the general public, there's another way." I basically tell people, "Okay, when your teacher told you to pause for breath and put a comma there, don't do that – that's not the way you do it, you use commas to set apart clauses." And, "Oh, okay, that makes sense."

You know, and the Oxford comma is such a heated debate, and I really love this. The wordsmiths get so up in arms about how to lay out a sentence, and it's great – but to me, clarity is really the most important thing.

And I kind of had to abandon the idea that English has rules because we have conventions; we don't really have rules because I had so many students who would sit in front of me just weeping because they couldn't get comma usage right.

And that was really powerful to me because they felt like they were failing. They felt like they weren't even good at speaking their native language, you know?

And I had students who were international students; they were from China, they were from the United Arab Emirates. We had students from South Africa, you know; there were students from all over the world; and they were struggling with this, the native speakers were struggling with this.

And I finally said, "To heck with it, let's just talk about separating your ideas and go from there." You know, you have to start with the most basic building blocks. And a lot of these students just weren't interested in the higher thought processes because; here I am getting my Master's degree, working with some of the texts that are considered the height of 'Western thought'.

And the cognitive dissonance between reading Cicero; and then 10 minutes later being in the writing lab, working with a student who's struggling with the 'Subject Verb Agreement' problem. That was really, really breathtaking for me. It was difficult, it was challenging, and it was just as tough for me as for the students in a lot of respects.

GP: I can so so relate to that. And it's interesting, like there's so much in what you just said that we need to unpack, but one of them is what you were saying about the ideas and the thought process.

I think a lot of times, people think of writing as a mechanical thing; that you're just sort of following the rules and you're putting the words on the page, but it's all driven by the thinking.

And so, I remember back when I was in college and I was in the writing, like I was a writing tutor in the writing center and we would have these weekly meetings where all the tutors would come in – basically, we'd commiserate in like how much we were stressed out and the crazy stuff that happened at the tutoring center that week.

And one of the topics that came up again and again was this idea that if the writing was unclear, then the thinking was unclear. And it was like, how do we help these other students, these peers of ours, think more clearly about their topics as opposed to worrying about the writing on the page?

The writing to a certain degree is more ancillary. It's about clarifying the thinking and the thought process than it is about working on the writing itself.

MN: Mm-hmm. Oh, absolutely. The thinking part was what really stressed me out. And students who didn't have a lot of practice thinking clearly, you know; they arrive at a community college, they're in the basic writing course, they're trying to understand what is being asked of them.



And I mean, you really have to start at the very bottom and work your way up. I mean, you have to refresh them on basics that they learned in elementary school; that's a long time ago, that's a lot of reach. They've had a lot of life happen between understanding the grammar mechanics and where they are now.

And you're absolutely right; the thinking and the clarity of understanding what you're writing about really comes through. If you don't understand what you're writing about, that's going to be pretty obvious when your final product is out there.

GP: Absolutely. And you know, it's interesting also because-- And I'm going to sound like I'm about to blast 'theme' against the literary gods, but I actually think that things like spelling and grammar are cosmetic issues.

I've always been a believer that if you don't have – like, those are things that you can fix after the facts. If the ideas aren't clearly presented, then there's nothing to fix. Like no amount of tweaking your grammar or your word choice is going to help you improve a paper that is a complete jumbled mess of ideas.

And I remember as a tutor, and again, in grad school as a TA, and also working in the writing center, one of the biggest frustrations was that the professors weren't teaching thinking; they were trying to just get students to regurgitate stuff at them, but they weren't actually teaching students how to reason their way out of, you know, whatever the assignment was.

And that to me, was really difficult. Like, you can't do that in the half-hour tutoring session. You can't get a student to clarify the entire thought process behind their essay in 30 minutes; it's impossible.

MN: Yes. And I think that's a big reason why I came out of this experience with so much more respect for instructors and teachers because what they are doing is so much bigger than what my capabilities and strengths really are.

It's like you say, there's so much more going on behind what they're being asked to do. Students are being asked to do surface-level things with the assumption that they have all of the tools and the understanding of how to use them, and how can you plant a garden if you don't know how to dig a hole?

GP: Yeah.

MN: Yeah. And that was something I ran into over and over again with my students; and it's scary for them, and it's hard for them. And when they've been told their entire lives that they don't really, you know, that they're not smart enough to do this – or rather that's what they've been hearing – it's just so challenging.

I didn't expect teaching, tutoring to be as emotional as it was because there's such a desire on the part of the student to be done with it – any way, shape, or form.

And as the instructor, your role is to get them to slow down and think through what they're doing, and provide a reasoning for it. And, oh man, that is difficult. There are reasons that I am no longer in teaching. I loved my time tutoring.

I loved being a teaching, you know, a graduate assistant at Southeast Missouri State University. It was a wonderful moving experience that taught me probably as much as it taught the students.



But at the same time, I'm glad that I have moved into a different career path where I'm encountering words in a different way, where I'm using them instead of teaching them.

GP: Yeah.

MN: If that makes sense.

GP: It totally makes sense. It's funny for me, I think it's the disruptive rebel in me that I think having had those experiences, I knew I had to like revolutionize it – like, I had to tear it apart.

And I think that's a big part of why DIY MFA exists is like, this is the education I wish I had had, and that I wish I had been allowed to impart when I was in these other teaching roles under other teaching umbrellas; and I was just like, 'I can't find the school that works for me, I'm going to start my own version of a school.'

[laughter]

MN: And, thank goodness you did.

[laughter]

GP: Yeah. Yeah. Well, it's an adventure – right, word nerds? It is definitely an adventure. But I think one of the things that, you know, is coming up a lot in this conversation is sort of that there's sort of two realms in the writing space; there's the logistical, mechanical sort of rule-based or convention-based realm – but then there's the conceptual realm.

And there's like the, which includes the themes and the bigger Why behind why we write something and the emotions we want to impart. And often, we're presented those two realms as though they're at odds with each other. Like they can't really coexist – or one is more important than the other.

And really, I think what I saw in your, in Times Knew Roamin' – I keep seeing it as Roamin because it's without the apostrophe in the title of the document; and I'm like, 'Wait, that's not what it is,' – Times Knew Roamin', is that those two elements, the two realms actually have to coexist; they have to overlap.

So, can you talk a little bit about that tension between the more conventions-based side of the writer brain versus the more emotion theme-driven, image-driven side of the writer's brain?

MN: Sure. And to me, when you are looking at the difference between the grammar mechanics and story mechanics – and your more conceptual aspects, you need the tools in order to build the house. But the house is not an end, in itself.

You know, you want to live in a house, you want to create memories in a house, you want to interact with a house. So, the grammar mechanics are deeply important to the process. They are central to the process, but they are not the entire process.

GP: Right.

MN: And that is something that, to me, grammar and spelling and being able to put sentences together into paragraphs, into pages, that's something that I have been very fluent with from a very early age; that was never something I struggled with.



And the storytelling aspect draws me deeply because it's not so much that I have a lot of intense experiences that I desperately need to get out there so that people understand what it's like to be me.

I mean, there are some writers who have some life stories, right? And they are compelling stories, and they are beautiful, and they are intense; and you need to be present for that. And, I don't really have that going for me, you know?

So, I'm trying to pull a more conceptual, more of a human experience, kind of, thing as opposed to a me-experience kind of thing. And to me, you learn the instrument, so you can play the song – but you're playing the song not just for yourself, you're trying to build community with it, right?

GP: Mm-hmm.

MN: And, that's really what writing is about to me, is the community of it and bringing people together, sharing experiences. It's not so much about self-expression; it's more about finding common ground between people, because we have so much more in common than not. And I think now more than ever, that's desperately important.

GP: I wholeheartedly agree.

MN: I don't know if that helps.

GP: No, it totally does. And it's interesting when you were talking about like, that it's not so much about self-expression as it is about building community. I think in a way, like, I feel the same way.

And I think that a lot of the narrative around creativity and creative expression has been focused on, sort of, the, 'in words to out' expression. Like, you know, it's, to get your voice out there and to be out there.

But really, it is about like, having your work be received is as important as you getting your work out into the world. And I think often, we forget that receiving end of the equation.

It reminds me of like that, you know, old cliché, like if a tree falls in a forest – like if a book doesn't get read, does it truly matter? Like, is there a reason for it being written?

And I don't know, I mean, maybe there is a reason, but how is that different from a journal that you bury in, you know, a drawer? How is it different if you don't have someone receiving the work?

MN: Right. That's really been my big motivating factor throughout my entire writing experience, is I want people to read what I write.

GP: There's also a certain, like when people read what you write, I don't know, it feels different to me. Like my approach, the way I approach something when I know no one's ever going to read it.

Like, back when I was a teenager and I had a diary; it was a very different attitude, a very different voice, a very different – like, I was very whiny back then. I'm not whiny when I know that my word nerds are going to read a newsletter. Like, there's a certain level of self-awareness that is probably a good thing.

MN: Yes, I agree. And I think there's value in every kind of writing, don't get me wrong. I mean, there is definitely a place for the high concept literary work that is intense and brooding and a tapestry of language; definitely, there's a place for that.



There is a place for the whiny, introspective writing that you do in a journal or when nobody's watching. And in fact, I think that's deeply important in itself for not just nurturing of a writer, but maintenance of your writing thought process. I think it's deeply important.

And I also think it's important for that recognition to come whenever someone, a complete stranger reads your work, find something in it to appreciate and understand; and that right there, is just so precious, I think.

GP: Yeah. Another thing that you said before when you were talking about, sort of, the two parts of the writing – the mechanics versus the conceptual – was the idea of grammar and spelling as being tools.

And I completely agree; they're tools in the sense that you have to use them, and you have to use them well. And in many ways, like tools, they could be misused, right? Like you can manipulate grammar to manipulate the meaning of something.

So, these tools can be equally powerful as they are dangerous so they can be good and bad. But there's also an element of like, the tools have to serve the purpose.

And I think a lot of times, writers get hung up on just using the tools; and they're not-- Like they're hammering nails, but they're not really thinking about what they're hammering nails into and what the purpose of the hammering of the nails actually is.

MN: Oh, yes, I absolutely agree. I think it's very important for writers to always be thinking of the blueprint and of that finished project. And I think a lot in terms of concrete metaphors, I think that's pretty obvious.

[laughter]

MN: I grew up on a farm, and so there were constant cycles of, 'Okay, we plant, we watch the seeds germinate, and we watched them grow into crops and we watched them bear – so then we have to plow them, harvest them, take them to the market.'

And beyond that, there were the constant repairs on buildings and fences. There was tending the livestock. And I really think that writing has a lot of parallels to that process. It's very cyclical.

And a lot of the labor that we as writers do, bears fruit; and that fruit is not the end in itself. That fruit needs to be taken out to other people who then hopefully, pay us for it and ingest it; and they're also nourished.

So, I feel like there's definitely interdependency between the writer, the process, the reader, the editor; everyone has a part in this. And I think the interconnectivity really appeals to me on a basic level, because when you're writing, you're not really in a vacuum.

You're pulling all of your own experiences, the experiences that you've learned about from other people and from other entertainment sources. You know, you're using your culture, your geographical location, everything that you have built your entire life on - you're pulling it all together into every piece you write.

And the editor will look at it and make changes to strengthen the document. They can look at it from a place of impartiality, which is very helpful; and they can make it speak to a wider audience, and then hopefully, the audience reads it and gathers something from it as well.



So, you're speaking to a much larger process than just the mechanics of putting the words on the page. And I think it's really important for writers to remember that.

GP: I love that. And to build on that metaphor of like the cyclical bearing fruit, there's even an additional layer, right? And you alluded to it, the idea that once your work bears fruit, it may then nourish someone else who may then produce their work – you know, like a chef using the vegetables in their own creative recipe or what have you.

And so, there's also this element of like longevity, of passing on. And like, that we are connected to the writers who came before us; we're also connected to the writers who come after us and who draw from our work to produce their own, you know, creative projects.

So, like, I think there's something-- Yeah, there's something really cool about that idea of like the writing ecosystem. Ecosystem, that's the word that kept coming up in my mind as you were talking.

MN: Yes, I could not agree more. I love that.

GP: And it is like, in many ways, I think people think of writing as such a solitary thing; and yet, like as we are discussing, it really isn't a solitary pursuit at all.

MN: Mm-hmm. I mean, I think that is really paramount in the writing process because you're putting together words – yes, but you're also putting together so much more than just that. And some of the most satisfying relationships I've had in my life have been with other writers.

I mean, there are writers I got to know when I was in my late teens, early 20s; we're still in communication with each other, and it's really great. I bought a novel that one of my writing mentors, recently published his first novel after years as an editor of Poetry Journal.

And, it was-- It's really fantastic to watch writers move from one stage to another. And it's fascinating to me to see who resonates where and their work resonates with them, and how that goes. I don't know; it's just something that now that I'm getting a little older, it's really interesting. And, I've been-- It's been on my mind quite a lot lately.

GP: Absolutely. So, pulling on that idea, the idea of like transferring genres and whatnot – I mean, you chose to write about these emotions as poetry, as a collection of poems. What made you choose this form for this narrative?

I mean, earlier you referred to this as a conversation; I would imagine conversation with the reader or maybe a conversation with yourself, but like, why poetry as opposed to a novel or a memoir?

MN: Well, for a lot of reasons, many of them pragmatic, I guess you'd say. I wasn't really interested in telling this story as a novel because I felt that it had been done, and that I would not have been able to bring something substantially different to it.

And it felt limiting to try to put it into the form of a novel. Same with a memoir; I didn't really feel comfortable doing that because I felt that it would be too specific, and that it would probably intrude on stories that weren't really mine to tell.

So, with poetry, I had a little bit more flexibility as far as, 'Okay, poetry isn't going to be fact-checked the way a novel or a memoir would – so there's a little bit less stringent expectation that a factual retelling will be central to the story's mechanics.'

This story was about, loosely, about the year that I spent teaching at the community college, but I also wrote some of these poems while I was in graduate school; I wrote some of them after I had stopped tutoring at that school.

So, there were a lot of reasons that I wanted to kind of steer clear of a more prose-based form. And prose too has a certain substance to it that poetry just doesn't have; it's a sledgehammer versus a scalpel. And I wasn't really interested in that for this particular story that I was trying to tell.

GP: I think there's also an element, like going back to that word, 'conversation', there's an element of conversational-ness that you can achieve in a sequence of poems that is much harder to achieve in a narrative.

Like, for instance, the fact that we have like one poem that's something like, 'So, how do you use a comma?' And then, the next one's like, 'No, wait, this is how you--' You know? And this is several poems later, but it's like the poems themselves are having a conversation with each other.

And then, we get that feeling of the conversation in your mind without you having to didactically tell us like, "And then I was thinking about this," which would've had to happen at some point. Like, we would have to have that voiceover moment if this was a narrative, where you don't need that in a poem.

MN: Right. And I love narrative; it's my favorite form to write in, but it's like you say, there has to be a lot more connection between the ideas and there is a lot more experience passing back-and-forth.

And that's something that really appeals to me about that genre. I love writing prose, but poetry – for this story, especially, each poem had several threads. And if I could find ways to kind of loop those threads together between the poems, I felt like that was telling a story in itself.

So, yes, the connections were, maybe not quite as strong as they would be in prose, but they didn't have to be.

GP: Absolutely. So, before we wrap things up, I just realized I didn't ask you the most important question of all, which is Oxford comma – Pro or Con?

MN: Oh, you're going to hate this answer. [laughs] I say, it depends. Does it create an unintentional set? I had dinner with my godparents; Barack Obama and Oprah Winfrey.

In that case, I say, 'Yes, use an Oxford comma,' because you don't want people to think that Barack Obama and Oprah Winfrey are your godparents, which-- Okay, maybe you do want to think that, but that muddies your meaning to not use it.

However, I made my living as a journalist. I'm now a copywriter, where we use Associated Press style; and the Associated Press says, "No Oxford comma".

So, depending on the audience you're writing for and the style you're writing in, use the Oxford comma or don't. To me, I think clarity is more important than whether you adhere to a convention which may or may not be applicable in every situation.

GP: That is probably the most diplomatic 'Oxford comma answer' I have ever heard.

[laughter]



MN: Oh, diplomatic – that's me.

[laughter]

GP: So, I always end with the same question, and I'm having so much fun during this interview; I don't even want it to end, but we have both writing to do. So, I need to know, what is your number one tip for writers?

MN: Network. Network, network, network, network. You're a writer. You're going to write – okay, that's a given, I think. But if you're going to be successful in this industry – and it is an industry – network... talk to people, reach out to people.

If there's a writer you admire, send them a note and say, "Hey, I really admire such and such thing you did for this reason." You know, be concise, be specific.

But some of my favorite interactions have been when I have emailed just a one-paragraph, "Hey, I liked that thing you did," and I got a response of, "Oh my gosh, thank you so much," because there are some aspects of the writing process that are deeply lonely. If you never hear back from a member of your audience, you never know whether what you wrote has actually had an impact on anyone. So that's very important.

But more, I think it's really, really important to develop friendships with the other people in this industry. As I said, I have a, what I consider a good friend who we met because I submitted poetry to his journal in 2001; and we've stayed connected over the years.

And there are people I've met at conventions – Gen Con in Indianapolis, I met a few Science Fiction and Fantasy writers who are building huge, huge careers. And there are others who maybe the huge, huge career isn't what they're building, but they write hilarious one-liners on Twitter or Facebook... like, it's great.

It really enriches the experience from my perspective. And I know writers will say, 'Oh, I hate networking.' Well, sure, you hate networking – a lot of writers are pretty introverted, and we don't really like, talking to strangers because it's draining and it's scary.

And, what if they hate us? And, what if they're silently mocking us to everybody behind us? Well, sure, sure, that's going to happen; you're going to meet some jerks, right?

But by and large, what's really important to me is to meet people who are doing interesting things in the writing world and see what you can learn from them and see if you can create a genuine connection with them that will last through years and decades and will benefit you in ways that you can't even imagine.

GP: I love that answer. And I second it wholeheartedly. I'll also add that while, yes, there are always going to be some jerks out there, having been in the writing universe for quite some time, I can attest to the fact that the writing space has far fewer jerks than a lot of other career paths.

[laughter]

GP: So, you know, like, yeah-- It's often that like the people around you are much more, they're as introverted as you are. Like I know that when I go to a writing conference or some event with other writers, I'm not going to be the only introvert in the room.



Whereas if I go to an entrepreneurship conference, I might very well be; and it's a lot more introverted or a lot more disconcerting.

MN: Absolutely.

GP: So yes, such great advice. Thank you so much, Marybeth, for being on the show.

MN: Thank you, Gabriela. This was wonderful.

GP: All right, word nerds. Thanks so much for listening. Keep writing and keep being awesome.