On the Writing Biz & the Writing Itself: An Interview with Patty Seyburn

As part of the annual Tabula Poetica Reading Series, Patty Seyburn visited Chapman University on September 28, 2010. Her afternoon talk was entitled "To Be or Not to Be...Funny," and she gave a reading that evening.

Patricia Harriman and Tiffany Monroe: How does a collection of individual poems become a book? Is it your inkling to write on particular themes so that poems hold together as a collection grows? Or do you write poem by poem, then find the connecting threads when you’ve accumulated a batch? Would you suggest to an aspiring poet that one approach has particular advantages?

Patty Seyburn: Generally, I choose Option B: writing one poem at a time, then finding the connecting threads between them. That was certainly true of my first book, and really, it’s quite a shock when you did not think you had obsessions, dominant images, or even unusual, recurring words. On reviewing the poems that became my first book, I realized there were numerous stones; some of that book deals with mortality, so both the gravestone and the small stones that Jewish people place atop graves in memory of the dead make appearances. I ended up writing the poem "Stone Notes" as a result of that realization; it’s a poem that unifies the stone imagery.

I love the idea of writing a thematic book. When I first read Louise Gluck’s The Wild Iris, I realized that was a possibility. It’s sort of a trendy thing to do, I think, so I balk at that, but I have grown to like the idea of series of poems, crowns of sonnets, to exploring a concern that won’t release your attention, or to devoting one’s self to a form that requires
repetition to master. As I wrote Mechanical Cluster, I was more aware that the poems would have a relationship with one another, but I was still committed to individual poems. Hilarity contains a section of poems named for times of night, along with other poems that address dream and nightmare—the whole section is really a paean to being awake at night, which I was a great deal during my first pregnancy. I have two manuscripts circulating at publishers, and one of them, Deuce, is centered around language’s relationship to numbers. Though the poems were written individually, when I realized that was happening, it provided an organizing principle for the collection.

As far as advice for young writers, I would approach the first manuscript or two by writing the best, discrete poems you can write, rather than worrying about how they connect. They will enter a dialogue with one another when they become part of a whole manuscript, and the writer will realize what parts of the discussion, if any, are missing. If a young writer takes on the larger thematic project from the beginning, I think it could distract them from committing to each, individual poem. Which is always what will resonate with a reader. No reader can quote a whole book. But he or she can quote a line from a poem that mattered.

Harriman and Monroe: Your poetry contains allusions to mythology and science. What do you like to read outside of the field of literature? How does your reading inform your poetry?

Seyburn: Aside from modern poetry, I read poetry by Eastern European and Latin American authors, and various forms of nonfiction. But it’s very unprogrammatic, very random. For a while we had a subscription to Scientific American, and that was productive for me—great metaphoric language. I’ll stumble across a historical figure who sounds compelling—composer Cecile Chaminade, Una Jeffers—and I’ll read whatever I can find about or by that
person. I’ll get stuck on a jazz album (like Miles Davis’s *Kind of Blue*), and I’ll listen obsessively and find old reviews, interviews, etc.

I also like the mythologies and scriptures of various traditions, and am very taken with Hebrew interpretive texts—*Midrash*—which I started studying when I lived in Houston. I’ll get waylaid by something my kids are studying—the Blue Morpho Butterfly, for example—and start reading about that, go find a book or article. I didn’t grow up with much of a relationship to nature, so I tend to like the quirky aspects of this world’s creatures, critters, and freakish fauna. Which is to say that any given thing can capture my fancy, so my reading has some breadth and occasionally, true depth.

Honestly, mostly, I read poems and scholarship about poetry. I’ll stand by the advice given me by Sir Frank Kermode, for whom I did some meaningful photocopying when doing my graduate work. He told me (and I am paraphrasing) that the best scholarship is the book you find next to the book you were looking for. These days, that holds true for the website, as well.

**Harriman and Monroe:** You mentioned, when you visited our class, that several poems in your work are about the beach, an ostensibly trite subject, and yet you glean rich facets of perspective from the ocean and the sand. How can a poet use everyday—or often-used—subject matter to explore larger connections?

**Seyburn:** Well, you have to read what strong writers have written about that subject, such as Tennyson’s "Break, Break, Break," from which I borrow title and inspiration for two poems in *Hilarity*. You can’t isolate yourself from what’s been done: it’s part of your inheritance, and it will help you elude cliché. If I’ve got a spider in a poem, I have Whitman’s "Noiseless, Patient" as well as the Itsy Bitsy one
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on my shoulder. If a blackberry (fruit, not device) enters a poem, I’ve got Robert Hass’s "Meditation at Lagunitas" to keep me company.

Aside from those literary friendships (which sometimes seem more substantial than the face-to-face!), when you are working with a familiar or oft-used image, you must be aware that you’re on dangerous and promising ground; but really, it’s all dangerous, so why not? If you’re not taking a risk in a poem, of some sort—be it tone, subject matter, diction, whatever—why bother? Fix lamps. If you’re going to use a moon in your poem, know that many moons have found their way into print, and know that yours has to be unlike any other. Which, of course, it is.

Harriman and Monroe: It can take quite a long time for a poetry manuscript to be accepted for publication. What kinds of revision did the manuscript go through? How long after your first manuscript was completed did you see the book in print?

Seyburn: I wrote my first book, Diasporadic, while I was a doctoral student at the University of Houston from 1994-1997. The book was published in 1998. Most of those poems were thoroughly scrutinized during my time in the graduate program. By the time they entered the manuscript, they were well-cooked. During my last year in Houston, I took a manuscript workshop taught by Cynthia MacDonald. During that class, I learned how to see the themes running through the book, how to identify the gaps, what might be missing in order to present a work of some cohesion. I know that poets have not always wanted cohesion in their manuscripts, but I wanted to believe, and do believe, that I had projects or obsessions infiltrating or underscoring the bulk of my best work. After that class in spring of 1997, I started sending out the manuscript. It was picked up the next spring.
At the time, the waiting seemed endless. I came to realize how lucky I was. The next book took three years to get picked up, and the one after that, three or four. You lose count. You can’t let it take your energy away from writing poems.

Harriman and Monroe: Hilarity, your most recent collection, is your third book publication. Did your previous books help the manuscript find a publisher more quickly? How does previous publication affect the way you view what’s next in your writing and your career?

Seyburn: The only way that my previous books helped find a publisher for Hilarity is that I realized it was possible—that it had happened, and would happen again. Other than that, very few small or university presses have the resources to keep their authors. Their commitment is to the prize or award that accompanies publication, and to promoting new work, which is a wonderful thing. Having had three books published has taught me a little more patience—but not too much.

Harriman and Monroe: What advice do you give your own students about writing poetry and the business of poetry?

Seyburn: I tell them to spend the precious time they have in school writing poetry, critiquing each others’ work (which is the only way to become a strong editor of your own work), and building a writing community. Too much time spend on the po-biz aspect only takes time away from the writing, and makes poetry seem like an actual career, which it most certainly is not. It’s an entirely different animal. A gift. I tell them, even if you are a raging success (which, in poetry terms, means you publish a book or two), no one will ever pay your work as much attention as it is receiving currently, in workshop. Each week, in my graduate poetry seminar, students have their poems scrutinized, challenged, engaged. When I read the occasional review of my work, my
immediate impulse is to write a really obsequious thank-you note.

**Harriman and Monroe:** You hold a Ph.D. as well as an MFA in Creative Writing and even a third graduate degree in Journalism. Why did you pursue more than one graduate degree? Do you think it’s becoming increasingly important for creative writers who want academic positions to go beyond the MFA?

**Seyburn:** I was raised to be able to take care of myself, which is why my first two degrees are in journalism. After my first Master’s, I moved to New York, had a series of decent jobs, and proved I could do so.

At the same time, I started making a commitment to poetry, and eventually, I wanted to put poems at the center of my life. So I went back to graduate school for an MFA, also knowing I’d have to opportunity to teach. If I liked teaching—which I did, a great deal—I’d find a way to do that and write poetry. I continued on for the Ph.D. because I wanted more time to write, I wanted to work with the amazing faculty at University of Houston, and I suspected that having the degree would make me more marketable. Which it did.

I think poets who know they want to teach at the college level should definitely consider the Ph.D. For fiction writers, it does not seem as important. They seem to be able to make a living outside of the academy more easily than we poets do. Though there aren’t a lot of big poetry or fiction firms out there. No Christmas bonuses. On the other hand, if you really can’t stomach the idea of reading a lot of pre-twentieth-century literature, the Ph.D. is not for you. I wanted that challenge, and knew having intelligent people guide me could only broaden by aesthetic and improve my poetry. Now Coleridge and Keats are among my go-to guys.
Harriman and Monroe: In addition to writing poetry, you also teach poetry to undergraduate and graduate students. What is the relationship between your writing and your teaching?

Seyburn: Ideally, they feed one another. By teaching how to read and write poems, I am constantly reminded of how I must conduct myself as a reader and writer. My life is as busy as the next person’s, and I, too, can start reading too quickly, writing without attending to each word, each sound. Teaching reminds me. I harangue my students, and in doing so, force myself to step up. I make up assignments that they are required to execute, and I often do them, too. (Some are quite complicated, so I have to see if they work!)

When I am teaching a poem, I have to have a greater understanding of it than my students do—at least, going in. They teach me, as well, through their comments and poems. I tell them at the beginning of the semester: each of your poems needs to teach both of us something, and as you progress, they will. I think they don’t believe it, at first, but by semester’s end, they write poems that I am proud to have any hand in, at all. I think my students are terrific—a diverse, motivated, kind and smart group of kids—and I have many who take more than one class from me, even, the same workshop over again. Each time I teach a workshop I choose different books and assignments, in deference to the fact that I will have some of the same faces.

Also, I never want to present even an ounce of over-familiarity or complacency: each semester, it’s crucial that I bring the necessary passion for poetry to the classroom, and assigning new books ensures that.

Of course, the challenge is that they both take time away from one another. Sometimes in class, I’ll start taking notes and wish (just a little) that, right then, I could step away
and work on a poem. But as in many aspects of life, a little deprivation or delay makes the time I can spend on the poem all the sweeter.

Harriman and Monroe: Describe your process of moving from an idea to a finished poem.

Seyburn: I start out by being sort of a collagist, mentally. I get stuck on an image or phrase, and if it’s worthwhile (which it decides, uninfluenced by me), it takes on a magnetic quality, and starts attracting other phrases, images, bits of memory, incidental sounds. If I’m good, I jot them down, usually in a variety of places, and I start to worry them while I’m lying in bed with one of my kids, or running (slowly) three miles, or driving somewhere. I do some of my best thinking while driving; I am from Detroit, so cars are comfortable locations for me, wherever the destination. Once the associations and sounds have started to pile up, they make their way to paper, or to keyboard.

I’d like to tell you that I write on a certain esoteric notepad with a specific writing implement and a cheap but hard-to-find brand of Scotch at my elbow, but I don’t have time to indulge in all that. I find my way to a tablet or computer, and get down what I can, and print it out, and carry it around in my purse or pocket, taking it out while I’m waiting for a student in office hours (should be grading papers), picking up a kid from soccer (should be watching), or am involved in some other activity that, in theory, requires all of my attention, but manages to receive much less. I scribble in the margins, return to the computer when I can. I try to note where I think the poem has some interesting potential for diversion or digression, where it might break open and take off on its own. I’m always on the lookout for that, because at some point, I start to trust the poem more than I trust myself.
I start reading the poem aloud, listening for where the line breaks can do work versus functioning in a more pedestrian manner, listening to whatever rhythm I have consciously or unconsciously pumped into the poem. Then I try to figure out if I want to go with that or fight it, whether the poem needs more tension in the music: Should the lineation play against whatever kind of meter, be it strict or soft, is operating? Are the vowels stretching out? What’s the tone, the attitude of the poem? Is there a visual component to the poem? How much white space do I need? Are the verbs working hard? Is, God forbid, anything too cliché, too familiar, too clever? I like wit in poems, but am allergic to clever. Clever says, hey, look at me. Can’t stand that.

As far as how the poem gets finished, over time, it goes through numerous revisions, some a few words, some that focus mostly on line and stanza, some that try to give the diction energy, vitality, a quixotic quality. More reading aloud, more printing out, more away from the page, back to the page. After my initial serious flirtation with the poem—when I have a solid first draft—I try to ignore it for a few days, which becomes a month, and sometimes a few months. It loses its immediate appeal, which is good, because it also loses its immediate power over me, making the necessary cuts easier to handle. A few months away from a poem makes me cavalier about cutting the first thirty lines. You had to go, I say. After that, the poem seems to come into itself, and the final revisions are more like tinkering: a word that is not pulling its weight, or stanza that I rush through whenever I read it (boring) and so must be cut. I’m brutal with my own work—generally more gentle with my students’ work. (Though not always!) But they know it must be done, because the poem matters more than the initial impulse.

The poem matters more than most things.
Harriman and Monroe: When you met with students while you were at Chapman University, you said, "poetry is really about rigor, about commitment." Can you expand on what you meant by rigor and commitment in a writing life?

Seyburn: I am generally baffled by writers who don’t write, though there are moments/periods in life where other commitments are so pressing that the time simply does not seem to be there. Still, writing is, to be obvious, the defining act of the writer. The romantic notions that follow us around—how neurotic we all are, perpetually disenchanted and disenfranchised, wandering around thinking deep thoughts—it’s just not true of most of the strong writers I’ve known, worked with, admired.

On balance, we’re a pretty middle class bunch, in that we’re deeply devoted to our work, to some shape of a family or community. I think being a writer carries with it a great deal of responsibility, both to ourselves and to, for lack of an even more hoary term, posterity. What we understand of the past comes largely from literature and art. But now I’m getting too big.

What I mean to say is: if you want to write, you can’t wait for the muse. Pen to paper. Fingers to keyboard. Lipstick to cocktail napkin. I’m going to end up sounding like a footwear ad, but what I can say? To make strong work takes time, attention, focus, scrutiny, willingness to feel and take risks, at the page and away from the page. It’s not a casual affair, but as it does give immeasurable pleasure. But you have to love the interim stages, the sense that you are constantly undergoing a process that may or may not take you anywhere. It’s all about Keats and Negative Capability, for me. Oh, trite: you have to embrace the journey of each poem.
by Patricia Harriman and Tiffany Monroe

Harriman and Monroe: How do you carve out time to write? Do you write at the same time every day? How else do you discipline yourself to allow time to write?

Seyburn: I wish I were a writer who carved out time every day, and I encourage my students to do so. Having young children and teaching makes that difficult for me. As I write this, my daughter is sleeping with a high fever, and I know I’ll be up in a few hours comforting her, which would throw off a plan to rise at 6 a.m. for some early morning time with the muse. And some version of that is typical.

Nonetheless, over the long haul, I am good at carving out bits of time, of doing what I call "getting out of my own way." I don’t need the muse to knock; I have poems in many stages of development, and depending on my mood and how much time I have, I can delve into something relatively unformed and riff, or I can mess with lineation of something much closer to (some stage of) completion. That’s probably the way I manage to produce.

I’m also pretty good at integrating what I teach with my writing, that is, using books and writers that I feel I have something to learn from as well, so time I spend preparing for class is also time that funnels, on some level, into my own work. I tell my students: there are forty-eight half-hours in a day. Can you devote just one of them to writing? It’s hard to say no to that. And once you get the bug, it’s hard to stop after that half-hour. So you end up not doing other things you promised you would do. That happens to me, over and over. But generally, making headway in a poem makes other activities seem less worthwhile. I do give myself assignments, and accept assignments from friends, and depending on the semester, set aside certain periods of time that I devote exclusively to writing. But I can’t say it’s as ritualized as I’d like it to be. New Year’s Resolution #42.