

August 8, 2017 - Matthew Zapruder is an American poet, editor, translator, and professor who has published four volumes of poetry. His new book, *Why Poetry*, argues that the way we've been taught to read poetry is often also the very thing that prevents us from enjoying it. He explores what poems are, and how we can read them so that we can, as Walt Whitman wrote, "possess the origin of all poems" without the aid of any teacher or expert. "When I try to write a poem, I have this fantasy that the poems I write are for anyone, that anybody would like them in the right situation," says Zapruder. "Not that everybody will like them, but that anyone could like them."



As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2364 words.

Tags: Writing, Poetry, Inspiration, Process, Independence, Adversity, Anxiety.

# Matthew Zapruder on how to write and read poems

**In addition to being a poet you are a teacher and an editor. How do you balance the demands of your work life with your writing life?**

For a long time it wasn't a problem. Even with those two jobs—teaching and editing—I still had plenty of time to write. I would find times that were free. My schedule was pretty flexible so I could block out the times.

Things got crazy once I had a kid and got busier. Plus, I've been doing other editing projects. I'm editing the New York Times magazine poetry page and some other things right now. I've had to be super disciplined about making time to write. When I realize things have gotten totally out of control I start blocking out time on my calendar: a couple of hours, at least several times a week, if not more. I just get cracking. I have a lot of "process" days, which is what I do to write poems. If I have a certain specific amount of time to do a process, I can get into the writing more quickly that way. I think that's really good for people who have more or less completely fucked up schedules. There's other reasons why I'm interested in those things too, but one of the good things about "process based" writing is that you can jump into it.

**What do you mean by "process based" writing?**

When I was first starting to write poems seriously I stumbled into this kind of activity. I discovered certain types of generative processes. For instance, I would take a notebook and I would, at the exact same time of every day, write 10 lines without thinking. I would do that for 30 days. After that I would take the third line out of each page and cut them out and and move them around. Doing that kind of work is about not trying to write something, but just writing and then dealing with what you've done.

Of course, as I got to know more about poetry, I realized there's a huge tradition of that kind of behavior. People have done things like that for years. Over time I got interested in adapting those types of behaviors and exploring them and coming up with new writing exercises for myself. I don't like the term "writing exercises"—that sounds a little lame. I think of them as process-based writing activities. I've spent a lot of time thinking about them and trying them out and working on them. It's not the only way that I write, but it's an interest of mine. When you asked me about scheduling or trying to write, especially when you are busy, that's immediately what came to mind.

**It alleviates a certain amount of stress around writer's block if there's an activity you can immediately dive into.**

Absolutely. I also have some ideas that are more philosophical—or maybe even spiritual—that have to do with my faith in language as material. I'm interested in allowing as much of my unconscious to come through. I think my own consciousness is not so interesting and I don't generally write to express myself. I write to find deep truths for myself and for other people and to make poems that feel like they're connected with a deep, essential aspect of human experience. Even if the poems themselves are very specific or particular, somehow they're connected to those forces. That's what I'm looking for in poetry. I need to get out of myself, in a way. I believe in language and I want to subject myself to it. That's why I like working with found text or just putting myself out into the world where other people are talking, listening to what they're saying, walking by signs and looking at newspapers and things. Picking up on the glimpses of truth in language, then trying to work that into the poems.

It gets easier too, the more you actually write and experiment. When you've been making work that really feels meaningful to you and hopefully also to other people, then it gets easier to get lost. I fail constantly, but it never feels like wasted time, even if you end up going down paths that turn out to be dead ends or a cul-de-sac. It sucks, especially if that's happening a lot, but I try not to worry about

that because I feel like all of these things usually lead somewhere.

It's funny, I'm looking at a book right now, this biography of Isamu Noguchi. When I was living in New York, fifteen years ago, I used to go to the Noguchi Museum a lot. I love him. He's a great artist. I wanted to write a poem about him. So I went to the museum maybe a dozen times and scribbled down all kinds of notes—little bits of text from his catalog, quotes from the films they had playing there, conversations I overheard, thoughts I had. I generated all of this text and turned it into a poem... and the poem was really bad. Very long and very bad. It felt like months of work that all came to nothing in the end.

Earlier this year, over a decade later, I got asked to do this project where I would write something based on Noguchi. I thought about all that work I had done back then and I sat down and basically wrote the poem from memory. I just re-did it. All those experiences and all that work I had previously done had sunk in and I totally remembered it. When I was writing the poem I was able to summon up the feeling of being in those gardens or watching the movies about his life or things like that. It was there for me and so that ended up being the fruit of that work. It wasn't wasted effort or unused knowledge.

**Your new book is called *Why Poetry?* and it speaks to why so many people don't read poetry now and why perhaps poetry isn't valued in the same way it used to be. Can you give me the short version of why you think that is?**

It's a complicated question. One reason is that people think poetry is hard and their idea about what's hard about it is wrong. They think it's hard because you have to decode it, but that's actually not what's hard about poetry. What's hard about poetry is just accepting what is actually being said and not doing what we're taught to do in school all the time, which is to translate things or decode them or try to unpack what they really mean. It's not about that.

The other thing is that people think poetry is hard because we have a mistaken idea about what it's for and what it is. We don't understand why people make poems at all. We think, or we're taught to think, that there are basically these riddles or messages that are hidden inside these containers called poems, which makes the poems just these annoyances and distractions. I can't tell you how many times I've heard this: *Why don't they just say what they mean? Why do they make it so complicated?* I think that would be a completely reasonable question if poems were what people typically say they are, but they aren't what people say they are. They're not. They aren't riddles. Those are really the two things that keep people from reading poetry: This idea that they're hard, coded messages and this general confusion about why people would make them at all.

The irony of it is that most people I know have had an experience at some point with poetry, either with reading it or writing it, where they cut through all that stuff. They have this personal, individual encounter with a poem and they forget to treat it like it's a secret message, and they totally understand why it's necessary, because clearly it says something in some way that could never be said otherwise. That's something I try to touch base with a little bit in the book—remember that experience, that is the real experience. Not all this stuff that's in your high school English class or that you're taught in order to get the right answer on the test.

**Students are often uncomfortable with the ambiguity of poetry. They want to know exactly what it means. They want there to be one correct interpretation.**

It's not their fault. They're taught to treat poetry that way. I spent an undue amount of time looking at the textbooks that students have to read and the standardized test they have to take. The way those things talk about poetry is just horrendous. It's no wonder nobody likes it. If this is what they say poetry actually is, then I don't like that either.

There's usually a lot you can say about the surface of poems, but when you get past the surface, a poem is a site of generative discussion and conversation and ongoing understanding. I compare it to a friendship. You meet somebody new, you go out for coffee with them, they're a new friend. If, at the end of your first coffee date, you're like "I totally get this person, I understand everything about them!", that actually wouldn't be a very successful interaction. You'd be excited if there were things you wanted to know more about the person. It's fun because together you are creating this experience of ongoing conversation and gaining a deeper understanding. I think that's true for reading a poem. If you could just get the idea on the first read, you probably wouldn't be that interested in it.

**As a poet, what do you think of as being your most important resources? Also, do you share your work with other people while you're working on it?**

I think the most important resource for poets are other poets. I think that all poets, more or less, belong to this tribe. When you find a fellow poet and you talk to them, you recognize them even if you've never met them. I think of all these far flung tribe of poets, spread out all across the world. I think about them when I write.

I do send people work sometimes, but not so much to be critiqued or for feedback but more for connection and communication. If I'm not working on poems for a while, I start to feel really bad and really disconnected. My life is such that there are times when I just need to get going and not think about it too much. Right now, unfortunately, my community is pretty spread out. Many of us are very busy with professional and/or personal things so it's not so easy to get together at a bar or coffee shop. I really need to have my friends in my life in some kind of way, all the time, the people that have known me since my early twenties when I started seriously writing poetry. They're my closest friends. They're intimately

involved in my imagination.

**Poets occupy a weird spot in the literary landscape these days. It's a strange thing when your chosen medium is something that, by and large, is disregarded by a big part of the popular culture.**

I always love it at a party when you say you're a poet and people literally take a step back. It's like you've suddenly grown a giant beard and you're wearing a purple gown with stars on it and you're about to unfurl a scroll and start reading your poems aloud to them. People physically recoil. You're like, "It's okay, I promise you. I'm not going to start doing a spoken word performance or ask you to read my manuscript. (laughs)

When I try to write a poem, I have this fantasy that the poems I write are for anyone, that anybody would like them in the right situation. Not that *everybody* will like them, but that anyone *could* like them. They're not written for a specific type of person or somebody with a specific level of education. I try to orient myself towards the human part of everybody. Maybe I don't always succeed at that, or it doesn't really work or I'm mistaken or something, but when I'm writing, I imagine everybody could be someone who I could connect with. That might also just be a way that I preserve or sustain myself. I need to believe that.

There's also the flip side of being the poet at the party. You go to the party and you're the poet and you feel bad because you're not writing a screenplay or your book's not on the *New York Times* best-seller list. On the other hand, you often are a person who the coolest people at the party are actually gonna want to talk to or have a connection with about their work. Like, "Oh, that's amazing, you actually do that?" It's so foreign to most people that it's actually kind of exotic. I've found that being a poet is often a password or an entryway to those kinds of interactions. I wouldn't trade that for anything.

Matthew Zapruder recommends:

**To listen:** anything by the band Victoire or Gabriel Kahane

**To read:** The Lice. W.S. Merwin's book, published 50 years ago. I wrote an introduction to this reissue from Copper Canyon, in an updated edition which includes facsimile reproductions of his drafts

**To read:** Red Clocks. Leni Zumas's brilliant and harrowing new novel, which follows several women in a dystopian US Pacific Northwest

**To look at:** art by Teresita Fernandez

**To watch:** Foyle's War on Netflix. I have found this slow, almost boring police procedural centered around a man of honor during WWII in a small town in southern England to be particularly reassuring and mesmerizing in these troubled times

Name

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Vocation

Poet

Fact

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