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Silas House

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AN *APPALACHIAN REVIEW*
CONVERSATION

GEORGE ELLA LYON

George Ella Lyon is a treasure of American literature. Born in Harlan County, Kentucky, she served as Kentucky Poet Laureate in 2015 through 2017. She is the award-winning author of many acclaimed poetry collections, picture books, novels for young adults and adults, a memoir, and plays, and she was one of the earliest contributors to this magazine. Lyon has

received numerous awards for her work, and her iconic poem "Where I'm From" has been used as a model for writers in classrooms around the globe.

Lyon recently spoke with current Kentucky Poet Laureate Silas House for his podcast *Writing Lessons*, which focuses on a different topic of creative writing in each episode. House says, "On a personal note, I must tell you that George Ella was also one of the earliest established writers to encourage me as a writer myself, and for that, I am forever grateful. Many other writers will tell you that she is one of the people who first influenced and inspired them."

Lyon and House's conversation centered on writing for children and "the deliciousness of words," and has been lightly edited for length and clarity.

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SILAS HOUSE: George Ella, I think of you primarily as a poet, but you've written so much for children, so when I thought about doing a show about picture books, I thought, *I'm going to go straight to the expert.* Everybody seems to think they can write a book for children. They think, for some reason, that's the easiest kind of writing. I would argue that it's one of the more difficult kinds of writing. What do you say to that?

GEORGE ELLA LYON: Well, I usually say, at the beginning of a picture book workshop or a writing for children workshop, that you gotta get assumptions out of the way. One of them is that it's easy. Another one is that it won't require much of you emotionally—you can keep your distance—which kills any writing, of course. And the other one is: you'll make a lot of money. So, if you can get over that, we can go on.

George Ella Lyon
Photo: Ann W. Olson

I think when people think it's easy, they think [about] the number of words and not realizing that it's harder to be brief, for one thing. And those words have to do so much. I don't think they have a real respect for children. Paula Fox, a writer for children, said, "Children are not a race apart but ourselves when new." And it's that newness, that wonder that they bring that's so…it gives us life. It takes us back to what's essential. And they ask the real questions that we sometimes just pretend we have answers for, or we don't have answers, so we just go on and do what we're doing. You know, the children just get at the heart of things, and so they require your full heart and all the artistry you can bring to it.

SH: Right, you can't fool them.

GEL: No. And you better not preach to them or think you're going to set them straight. 'Cause that's deadly. Also, just because you make up stories for your grandchildren doesn't mean that they're going to work for books.

SH: I think a lot of people think that writing is easy because telling stories is part of our everyday life. But writing is very different than just telling a story, and it requires a craft being really honed and studied with years and years of work.

GEL: Yeah, and you have to have Olympic patience.

SH: For sure.

GEL: And you have to be stubborn, you know, because of the rejection you're gonna go through, and because a lot of projects just don't work out.

Then you come to find out that it isn't a picture book after all. It might be an essay, or something else, but it's not a picture book. And, when you do the dummy, which is the mockup of where the pages turn, many times that's when you realize it's not a picture book. The page turns don't do a thing for it. Maybe it's a poem, but it's not a picture book. So you just have to read a lot. I mean, people will tell me they wanna write for children and I ask *what books do you read?* And they don't. Or they say, *Where the Wild Things Are*, which is a great book, but—

SH: It's not the only book.

GEL: It's not the only book! You need to read widely and wildly and study.

SH: What are the most important elements of writing a book for children, whether that be picture book, middle grade novel, young adult novel, whatever?

GEL: I think it's the voice. It might be the voice of a character, but it might not. But it's the voice that comes in at the level of the child's world. And I feel like I have sort of an inner four- or five-year-old, and an inner thirteen- or fourteen-year-old. And, you know, I can call on that. Not that the characters are me, I don't mean that. I listen. I listen to children, all the time. I mean, I have written down things from school visits, I've written down things from my own kids. But, yeah, I would say it's the voice. It's the voice with any piece of writing. That's where you struggle, and struggle, and struggle, and then suddenly, if it's gonna be there, it's there. And then you may have tons of writing yet to do, but you have the traction and the momentum because that voice is going to lead you where

you need to go, and where it wants to go. So you have to trust that—you can't force it.

SH: Yeah, I would say voice is the key to all writing. Robert Morgan was an early teacher of mine, a great writer, a great person, and he told me once that it's not so much about the story you're telling as it's about how you're telling the story. And that has always stuck with me, and it's such a simple thing that really shapes the way that you think about a piece of writing, once you repeat that to yourself.

GEL: Right, right. It's a gift when you get there, but you have to go [down that] road.

SH: Exactly. Right, it's like those—they sound really simple when they're said aloud, but it's really complex figuring out how to do it. It's almost like it's easier said than done.

GEL: I always feel, with any piece of writing, the moment that I'm waiting for is when it has something I couldn't give it.

SH: That's where the magic is.

GEL: That's where the magic is. And that's where the voice is—it's like all you can do for your garden, but you can't make beans.

SH: Yeah, I tell my students all the time that when it becomes organic is when you know you're on the right path—when things just start popping up. So I love that you used the garden, because that's exactly what it's like. Let's talk about picture books specifically. What are the key elements of a picture book?

GEL: As I was saying, the emotion, the voice, the deliciousness of the words and the way they harmonize, because children are enchanted by that. It's a big step to reading when children start saying the words of the book and turning the pages—because they've gotten that story shape into themselves—and it's partly because the words have so many sound connections and rhythm connections that they're easy to internalize. So the sound, the rhythm, the emotional trajectory.

Most picture books are thirty-two to forty or forty-eight pages long, and so I compare it to tapdancing in the telephone booth...You don't have much space, you don't have much time, so you have to be as distilled as you can, and you have to make the pages turn, so there's a whole lot to choreograph. My editor I used to work with used to say that it can be like a little play. And, if you think about it that way, how it goes along a flow of pages, where the height of it is, where the turn is, you can sometimes strengthen that by changing what's on what page. And, for me, the dummy's really helpful for that because it's just the same number of pages. If it's thirty-two, you take eight pages, fold them and staple them, and you've got thirty-two pages, and I use Post-it notes for the words, and that way, if it's on the wrong page, I can move it easily. It makes me more flexible, and that's helpful in the process. Plus, if I erase a lot, it makes me think of when I was little and I'd erase through the page, and then I'd cry and all that, so I don't want to do that. But I do read it aloud and turn the pages. I mean, I read everything aloud.

SH: Me too.

GEL: [By doing that] I can tell when I'm faking it. I can tell when the energy drops.

SH: One thing that you said made me think about how psychological the act of writing must be. You must think about things that maybe the reader isn't thinking about when they're reading it, but something registers somewhere in their brain. For instance, the way we use white space, or where to turn the page, and things like that, are really important.

GEL: Right, right. And it's also—sound and rhythm and voice are in your body, so you're not just responding with your brain. And I have taken videos of my grandchildren as they're coming along in their relationship with books, and Julian, who's almost a year old—his mom was reading him *Goodnight Moon*, and he kisses the page now.

SH: That'll melt your heart.

GEL: Yeah. This is how the magic happens, you know. The reaction to books, the trying to get into books. I heard about a little boy, who, his mom found him in the morning—he was a toddler—he had taken off his PJs, he had taken off his diaper, had opened *Goodnight Moon* and he was standing on it as if he could get in there. So, you know, the depth of the reality, the depth of attention, that a child brings to the picture book—it has to be worthy. You're in relationship with this reader.

SH: This is important stuff.

GEL: It's really important.

SH: You mentioned having an inner child, an inner teenager, et cetera, so maybe that's part of the answer to this—but I'm just wondering, when you're writing novels

for young readers, whether it's young adult or middle grade, how do you strike the balance of not condescending to them, but also not writing in a way that is too adult, or that goes over their head?

GEL: Again, I think it's the voice, and the depth of the character. I mean, they are intensely *becoming*. From day one, from the womb, they are intensely becoming, and they are questioning...where they're envisioning what could be, because they're not separate yet from the child world or the parental world. It's the difference between being inside or being outside. I mean, you have to be outside to condescend, right—unless there's some psychological condition I don't know about. But you have to be *in*. And if you're really in there, the character is gonna carry who the reader will be. Not that I think middle grade and young adult books are just for readers those ages. Some of them are for—the best of them are for everybody. The picture books as well...

SH: What are some picture books that would be good for aspiring picture book writers to look at?

GEL: Two of my favorites are—and they're very different—one is called *All the World*. It rhymes. It's a poem. And of course they can be poems and not rhyme, but this one does rhyme. It goes through the day so incredibly with this one family, but they're part of a whole community on this little island. And it goes from the beach in the morning, and it takes you through the farmers market, and playing at a tree, and getting caught in this huge rain storm, and going in a restaurant, a diner. But all the people—it accumulates with the people they see at the farmer's market, and one stop to the next. At the end, it's evening, and they're all gathered in this house on the

point of the island. They're playing music, and they're all ages and they're all genders and colors. It's just this celebration of community and the wonders of the world. So, that's one, especially because of the illustrations. You can see how the poem, the text, is opened up in such an extraordinary way by those illustrations.

And then there's a book by Patrick McDonnell, and he is both the illustrator and the writer, and it's called *Me, Jane*, and it's about Jane Goodall as a little girl. There's no parents in it, there's no siblings, there's no where she was born, it's just about her and her relationship to the natural world. It's so spare, and the page turn at the very end took my breath away. I'm not gonna tell you what it is, but…[the book] even has a double-spread, which is from her childhood notebook.

SH: You have mentioned the phrase *the page turn* several times. Would you say that's sort of akin to enjambment in poetry, [where] enjambment can be like the end of the line keeps going, so it leads your eye on? [Of course] that's one thing that enjambment does, but another thing...is that it can change the meaning—you think the line means one thing, then, when you keep reading, it means something else. Is the page turner similar to enjambment, do you think?

GEL: It can work that way. It can also—you can be very surprised when you turn the page. It can be a quiet shift. It can be something really dramatic that changes. You can come to a full stop too, sometimes, at the end. But what you can't do is start over. The narrative has to keep going. We don't have time. You may get, sometimes, a wordless spread in the middle of a picture book. And that's just right for the book.

And sometimes the illustrator decides that; the writer doesn't decide that. But the page turns can speed it up, they can slow it down, and so can [a] line, in the way a line is moving in a poem. So you can just study the way that's done in different picture books.

And I wanted to say that there are different picture books for much older kids, too. There's a book called *The Little Ships*, I'd say for fourth- and fifth-graders, by Louise Borden, and it's about the evacuation of Dunkirk. She tells it from the point of view of a child who she imagines went over with her dad. And researching that—if you think you don't have to go through any trouble to write a picture book, she found a man who had been one of the soldiers. She wrote to him. She went to England and interviewed him. She crossed the Channel in one of the little boats with him on the anniversary. And had she gotten paid for this? No! No, she was out on a limb.

SH: You do what you have to do for the book.

GEL: You do. You follow it. And it's extraordinary.

SH: Just for the benefit of anyone who's thinking about writing picture books and trying to learn more—it's important for us to point out that, most of the time, the writer does not get to pick the illustrator. Can you talk a little bit about that?

GEL: People think you get to tell the illustrator what to do. Well, nobody told you what to do, and it's not your business. Your business is the words on the page, and it doesn't matter what your grandmother looked like...the illustrator has his or her vision. You have to let go.

SH: Yeah, it's a collaboration.

GEL: It is a collaboration, but very odd, because you may have never met and you may never meet, and it's the editor who communicates with both of you. The editor is the spine of the book, in that sense.

SH: You used a phrase earlier that I just loved, "the deliciousness of the words." When I think about your writing, one thing I think about is your fantastical way of using language—the unexpected, the sensory, the interesting. I just think you think about language in a very specific way. And when I think about my favorite writers, I think that a lot of the time, I could maybe read the writing and know who they were because of their certain style and the way they approach language. How do you foster that? How do you make that work better, so that it becomes organic for you as a writer?

GEL: You ask beautiful questions. I'm so glad you said that about the senses, because I should have said that in talking about picture books, that the sensory is so important. I mean, that's what brings something alive, and children are alive to their toes. Things haven't been compartmentalized. My son was sitting on the floor when he was three, and he stood up and fell down, and he didn't know what happened. I said, *Oh, your foot's asleep*. And he said, *No, I got stars in my shoe*.

SH: And that's exactly how it feels.

GEL: And that's almost better! So he didn't need my old handed-down saying, he had his own. And so, again, that refreshment. That wonder. I grew up with good talkers and

story-tellers, and I had [the] King James [Bible] and the hymns, and I was read to. And, especially because my daddy read poetry to me, I just thought—well, that's it. That's it.

Something in my own soul responded to the intensity of the language, the melodies, the drama. These weren't poems for kids, and so he once said to me, *I think you must feel about words the way I do about numbers*. And I felt so seen. I mean, I was grown then—or what passes for grown. But I think metaphorically. I just do, and I think I came with that. But when I was revising *Borrowed Children*, the first novel I did for kids—it would be a middle grade—the last thing I had to do was go through with a metaphor rake and take some of them out, because it can get to be too much. And sometimes, like any technique of writing or any aspect of writing, it can become reflexive. Then it's gotta go, because it's subtracting from the work of the work.

SH: Yeah, I think one of the best writing lessons we can give aspiring writers is to encourage them to revise more. More and more, I talk to people who seem to think you just sit down and it all pours out of you, and you print it out and send it out and it gets published. And, as a young writer, I think that revision was probably ten percent of my process and now it's probably ninety percent of my process.

GEL: Yeah, people do not want to hear that. They just don't have any idea.

SH: But I think once you see how it makes your writing bloom you can come to love it, right?

GEL: Oh, yeah. There's this wonderful book called *Art and Fear: The Perils and Joys of Artmaking*, and they say that—they're photographers—but that creating happens between you and the thing you're creating. Between creator and the thing. And you have to let it speak back to you. So part of the joy of revision is you get to listen more, and you're not in that first draft, falling in love sort of state that can be so intoxicating. I used to say that first drafts are like falling in love and second drafts are like marriage. You know, from then on, you've gotta work on this stuff. It's not just [gasps]. There's life to be worked out, but you learn.

SH: What's the best writing lesson you've ever learned that you can articulate in just a couple of minutes?

GEL: I was doing a workshop with fifth-graders in Boyd County, [Kentucky], and I was doing this "Where I'm From" exercise, which is a poem [of mine] that's basically a list of experiences where you're from. And this boy said, "I'm from baseball."

So I said, "Do you play, or do you just watch?"

He said, "Oh, I play."

And I said, "What position?"

He said, "I'm a catcher."

And I said, "Oh, God, I don't think I could stand that mask over my face."

He said, "Oh, I even like it when sweat gets in my eyes."

I said, “Okay, put that in.”

The line he came up with is, “I’m from the sweat behind the catcher’s mask.”

SH: Oh, that’s great.

GEL: And I said, “Wow.”

He said, “Oh, I get it, you don’t want me to tell you about it—you want me to put you there.”

I said, “Yeah, I knew I came here to learn something.”

But that’s it, you know. That’s the miracle, when it happens. That’s why we read, too, isn’t it? I mean, we read for information, obviously, and we read to learn to think better, but we want to be there. We want to have this other experience; we want our lives to be wider and deeper. So, just put us there. Put us there. ■