

The Library of America Interviews Lloyd Schwartz about Elizabeth Bishop

In connection with the publication in October 2007 of *Elizabeth Bishop: Poems, Prose, and Letters*, edited by Robert Giroux and Lloyd Schwartz, Rich Kelley conducted this exclusive interview for The Library of America e-Newsletter.

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Critics now consider Elizabeth Bishop one of the great poets of the 20th century, but they have a bit of problem placing her. Marianne Moore was an early mentor and Robert Lowell raved about her first book of poems and became a close friend, yet her poems are not confessional. Some people say she reminds them of Wallace Stevens, others of Robert Frost. How would you characterize Elizabeth Bishop's achievement and why is she so difficult to place?

Maybe what makes her hard to place is exactly what makes her different from anyone else. The more we learn about her the more we realize that her biography has a lot more to do with both the kind of poet she was and with the subject of her poems than first meets the eye. Here was someone who grew up essentially an orphan. Her father died when she was only a few months old. Her mother had a series of nervous breakdowns, was not able to take care of her, and was institutionalized when Bishop was four. Elizabeth never saw her again even though her mother lived for 18 more years. She was brought up by her grandparents and her aunts and farmed out to private schools. She had to fend for herself.

This difference was also true of her as a writer. From an early age she had passions about poets and some of those very first poets she loved were eccentric choices: Gerard Manley Hopkins, George Herbert, Poe, Emily Dickinson. One of her most brilliant essays was "Gerard Manley Hopkins: Notes on Timing in His Poetry." This essay is more personal and shows more of her talent than even the early poems in which she was imitating Hopkins. She uses an amazing image of a shooting gallery to describe how a poet creates a poem. She's

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already thinking very independently. And she has an uncanny ability to come up with inspired images, an ability which is going to stay with her for her entire career. Maybe being an only and lonely child encouraged her to lose herself in her own thoughts, to find and create her own images.

That reminds me of the wonderful profile of Elizabeth Bishop that Helen McNeil wrote for the PBS Voices and Visions series where she remarked that poetry, scientific observation, and the surreal insights of dreams all require self-forgetfulness and Bishop actually used all three different ways of seeing.

Yes, that phrase about self-forgetfulness comes from one of the most extraordinary letters she ever wrote—which we are publishing in full for the first time in this volume—a letter to Anne Stevenson. It has a much quoted paragraph about Darwin:

[R]eading Darwin, one admires the beautiful solid case being built up out of his endless heroic *observations*, almost unconsciously or automatic—and then comes a sudden relaxation, a forgetful phrase, and one *feels* the strangeness of his undertaking, sees the lonely young man, his eyes fixed on facts and minute details, sinking or sliding giddily off into the unknown. What one seems to want in art, in experiencing it, is the same thing that is necessary for its creation, a self-forgetful, perfectly useless concentration.

The word “useless” has quite a charge there. She uses it in a similar way in “The End of March” when she writes about retiring to “write down useless notes.”

It conveys her consistent self-doubt. She was absolutely sure that what she was doing was the best she could possibly do (which is why it could take her 20 years to finish a poem) and at the same time she was never convinced that writing poetry was useful to the world. It was something that she *had* to do, that she loved to do, that satisfied her and tormented her. I think of Keats’s letters where he is never sure that being a poet is doing a great service to the world. She felt that way too.

Her first book of poems is North & South, her third Questions of Travel, her last Geography III. One of her most famous poems is “The Map.” Why is travel and geography so important to Elizabeth Bishop’s work?

She was certainly a traveler, even when she was a child. She was born in

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Worcester, Massachusetts, then brought up in Nova Scotia. She went to school in Boston and Poughkeepsie, lived in New York City, traveled to Paris. Her small inheritance gave her a little independence and one of the things she did was travel. She never went to the Far East, but she traveled to Europe and North Africa, lived in Key West and Mexico, and spent on and off close to 20 years in Brazil. She hadn't intended to stay there—what she intended was a trip around Cape Horn. What's beneath the surface of all her traveling is what she asks at the end of her poem "Questions of Travel": "should we have stayed at home,/ wherever that may be." She was essentially an orphan, without roots, looking for a home. The impulse to travel came from a sense that she wasn't at home any place in the world. The closest she came to having a real home was living in Brazil, in this very exotic place where, at first, she couldn't speak the language and where she knew absolutely no one except the person she was in love with.

She lived in Brazil from 1951 to 1966. How did that affect her poetry?

It had several interesting results. One of them was that it gave her an entirely new subject matter. She was no longer just a tourist. She had a whole new world of images and situations to write about. Most of those poems are in *Questions of Travel*. But even in her later years, she continued to write about Brazil. The last poem she ever finished, "Pink Dog," is about Carnival. "Crusoe in England" is a thinly veiled autobiographical poem about her life in Brazil. And she kept returning even after she stopped living there full time. She had bought an old house from the 1690s in Ouro Preto that she restored. She couldn't sell it so she still had a connection there.

"Crusoe in England" seems a lament about leaving.

It's a poem of retrospect but it's very much about the time she spent in Brazil. Finding a home there was temporary but it lasted quite a while. Brazil opened the floodgates to write about her childhood in Massachusetts and Nova Scotia. The traumatic experience of being orphaned, of having a mother who lost her mind and couldn't be her mother—these were subjects she had certainly tried to write about, but never to her satisfaction until she started living in Brazil. So while she was writing poems about poor children in the *favelas* of Rio and Amazon witch doctors and the Spanish invasion of Latin America, she was also writing amazing stories and poems about her childhood in Nova Scotia. "Filling Station" was from this period. "In the Village," "Gwendolyn," "First Death in Nova Scotia," "Sestina." They come pouring out of her in Brazil. She was also working on a translation of a best-selling book in Portuguese, the

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diary of a young girl in a small mining community in Brazil in the 1890s. She identified with this girl and decided to translate it. It was a way of reliving her own childhood, or the childhood she never had. The Library of America volume includes Bishop's long introduction to this book.

In many poems like "The Monument" or "The Unbeliever" or "Sestina" the images are often quite surreal. What is Bishop's connection to surrealism?

This was the new avant-garde art that had captivated her as a student at Vassar. She was very interested in Kafka. Her story "In Prison" is very self-consciously inspired by Kafka. (It's the story about a person who wants to be in prison because he's freer there than in the outside world—the opposite of traveling.) You see references in her letters to Dali and Schwitters and other surrealists. From an early age she had very sophisticated tastes. She was drawn to Auden and Marianne Moore because these were the most advanced writers of the time—on the cutting edge. Our volume includes translations of poems by Max Jacob and the Brazilian fabulist Clarice Lispector. She connected to these writers. You can see surrealistic elements in her poems, even in an autobiographical poem like "Sestina" where the almanac turns into a kind of living Disney creature.

Bishop was writing at the same time as Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and Adrienne Rich and many feminist critics revere her work Yet there doesn't seem to be any kind of agenda in Bishop's work and in fact she detested being viewed as a woman poet. Why was that? Why did she resist this affiliation?

In the 1930s there was a kind of genre of women's writing—magazine writing, "women's poetry"—that ghettoized women writers and that serious women writers did not want to be connected with. She spent the formative years of her life resisting that classification. When the feminist movement came along, she felt that she had been a feminist all her life without being part of a movement. She saw this as another way of pigeonholing and limiting who she was and what her writing was. She didn't want to be regarded as a women poet. She loved Robert Lowell but when he wrote a blurb saying that she wrote the best poems by a woman, she wished he hadn't put it that way. Why didn't he just say "one of the best poets" period?

I remember an occasion when Elizabeth Bishop had a dinner party and Adrienne Rich was one of the guests. Everyone present knew that Adrienne Rich disapproved of Elizabeth Bishop's refusal to be included in women-only anthologies. People were nervous about whether Adrienne Rich was going to

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get polemical and challenge Bishop on her decision. Everything was very cordial and pleasant and no controversial issues were raised until Adrienne Rich was putting on her coat at the end of the party. She turned around and said, “Elizabeth, I can’t leave without saying that I wish you would allow your poems to be included in anthologies devoted to woman poets. You’re a very important poet in that respect.” And Bishop said, “Well, there’s a reason for that and I’m not going to change my mind about it.” And Adrienne Rich said, “You know, Elizabeth, you’d have more readers that way.” And Bishop said, “Well, Adrienne, I’ll just have to be content with the readers I have.”

She was more concerned with principles than readers.

Yes. She felt that she had spent her whole life being the poet she was, not being “a woman poet.” There’s this wonderful fragment of an essay that we include in the book. It’s a literary statement called “Writing poetry is an unnatural act . . .” It was an essay that she was invited to write that she never completed. In it she makes her great statement of self-definition, although she’s not actually talking about herself. “The three qualities I admire in the poetry I like best are: *Accuracy, Spontaneity, Mystery*. My three ‘favorite’ poets—not the best poets, whom we all admire, but favorite in the sense of one’s ‘best friends,’ etc. are Herbert, Hopkins, and Baudelaire.” I can’t think of three qualities that seem so contradictory yet describe her work more accurately and vividly.

Do you have a favorite Bishop poem?

I have a lot of favorites. There’s an early poem I love called “Cirque d’Hiver” about a little mechanical horse, and the ballerina who is not as intelligent that dances on his back. She looks at that toy and identifies with it. The last line of the poem is very poignant, devastating:

Facing each other desperately—
his eye is like a star—
we stare and say, “Well, we have come this far.”

She sees her life as a poet as going through these mechanical gestures for the amusement of the onlooker. I dearly love that poem. Though “In the Waiting Room” is way up there too.

The volume features many uncollected poems. What criteria did you and Robert Giroux use in deciding which poems to include?

Those poems were mostly among the unpublished poems, drafts, and

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fragments that were included in Alice Quinn's *Edgar Allan Poe & the Jukebox*. They were much debated. That was a controversial book, but we felt those poems added a lot to what we know about Elizabeth Bishop the poet. We chose the ones that we felt were either completely finished or seemed to be close to finished. They expand our sense of her repertoire. There are a number of finished poems, including "Breakfast Song" and several others that she left behind in Brazil. They were mostly love poems, that she couldn't bring herself to publish even though she was desperate to publish more poems.

There's one poem that a friend, David Stang, a rare book dealer, found in an auction catalog. The catalog was offering a 1927 Modern Library edition of *Jude the Obscure*—not worth anything except that it had a couple of drafts by Elizabeth Bishop, in her handwriting, on the inside covers and one of them was a complete poem. The first line is "I am neither here nor there." This poem foreshadows many of her major themes, including a line about never feeling at home.

Would some of these uncollected poems merit being among her published work?

I think "Breakfast Song" is a masterpiece. And there's a story behind it that I include in the book's notes. It dates from when Elizabeth was living in Cambridge. She came to Harvard in 1971 to replace Robert Lowell and teach. I had loved her work for years, and I was thrilled when Frank Bidart introduced us after her first Harvard reading. Then I got to know her a little. In January of 1974, she fell down the stairs in a local café and broke her shoulder and was in the Harvard infirmary. I also lived in Cambridge. It was over Christmas break. No one else she knew was in town, so she phoned to ask me if I would mind going to her apartment (all of two blocks away) and getting her keys, her handbag, her mail, some books, and a notebook. I wound up visiting her every day. But on the first day that I brought her her things she was taken out of her room for X-rays or something and I'm sitting in the room waiting for her with nothing to do and nothing to read— except for this steno notebook. I opened it and there on the top page was a short poem called "Breakfast Song." It was a love poem and I knew to whom it was written. I was floored by it. I had never seen anything by her so direct and honest about both her being in love and her fear of death. It reminded me of Shakespeare. It also had an element of sexuality in it—it has a line "last night I slept with you." Very powerful, written with great economy. I loved this poem and I wanted to be able to read it again and again and I had a fear—it wasn't anything I actually articulated to myself—that there

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was a chance she would never publish it. I tore out a blank page and copied the poem. I wasn't going to do anything with it. I just wanted to read it. She never published it in her lifetime. I figured that when scholars and critics combed through her papers that they would find it and publish it. But the notebook was never found. Twenty years later there were some rumblings that Farrar, Straus & Giroux was going to do a new edition of her collected poems and I thought they better have the poem, so I finally sent it to Bob Giroux and to Alice Methfessel, the executor of the Bishop estate. There are a few phrases from that poem that have been found in her notebooks. But neither the complete poem nor the notebook has ever been found.

This volume features more than 100 pages of her fiction. Did she turn to fiction to try something different than she was doing in her poetry?

She was serious about writing fiction as far back as her student days. And some of her stories are every bit as good as her poems. Some are wilder than her poems, fantastical. "In the Village" and "Gwendolyn" are among her most moving autobiographical works. This volume includes just about everything she published, going back to her high school and undergraduate magazines, including many things that have never been collected (or published) before. Bob Giroux edited a story that was published in *Grand Street* but it came out after the *Collected Prose of Elizabeth Bishop*. It's called "Was It in His Hand?" It reminds me a little bit of *Member of the Wedding*. Of course, she was best known as a poet and regarded herself primarily as a poet. The prizes she won were all for her poetry, not for her prose. And she had an exclusive contract with *The New Yorker* for her poems, but *The New Yorker* took three of her stories.

You include 100 pages or so of her literary statements and reviews in the book but also almost 200 pages of her personal essays, reminiscences, and reporting, including the quite hilarious "The U.S.A. School of Writing." We see quite another side of Elizabeth Bishop in her nonfiction. What occasioned her essays?

She was a *writer*. Some prose she wrote because she thought it would reach a wider audience than any poems would. Some pieces she wrote as favors to friends. There's a wonderful statement about an artist, Wesley Wehr, who was a friend of hers. She thought it was one of her best pieces of writing. It was going to be the introduction to a catalog that was never published. It's been quoted in scholarly and biographical books but the whole piece has never been published before.

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Do you have any favorite pieces?

I love “The U.S.A. School of Writing.” She had a very droll, very sly sense of humor. One of her obligations when she was the Consultant to the Library of Congress (before it was called Poet Laureate) was to contribute to the *United States Quarterly Book Review*. She wrote a wonderful review of a new collection by e. e. cummings by calling him “the famous man of little-letters.” She was an inspired prose writer. I love the essay on Hopkins she wrote as an undergraduate with the image of the shooting gallery, and her moving portrait of the primitive artist Gregorio Valdes.

In her review of One Art, the collection of Elizabeth Bishop’s letters that Robert Giroux edited, Helen Vendler wrote that “we read poets’ letters to share, for a moment, what it would be like to live with the alert eye and the accurate phrasing of the writer.” What do we discover about what it was like to be Elizabeth Bishop in the 53 letters you have included in this volume?

Because I knew her, I know her voice. I hear more of her real speaking voice in her letters than I do even in her poems. She was very careful about her letters. She wrote drafts and sometimes apologized for not writing more carefully. The letters show the way her mind just leaped from one thing to another, without calculation. How funny she was—even the most trivial things would catch her eye. Her sense of people, how people interact and her observations of what people did and said—it’s very precious to have that. She didn’t like to talk about poetry, especially *her* poetry, but she does do that in some of her letters. They remind me so much of Keats’s letters. We have a sense of both her social and her literary mind embodied in these letters. The letters in this volume are completely unedited. This is the first time any of them have been published in the form she actually sent them. Some of them are very moving documents about very personal things. She never wrote in any other way about the death of Lota de Macedo Soares, her companion of 15 years who committed suicide while visiting her in New York. For a poet who worked so hard at projecting her thoughts and images in her poems, there’s something unmediated about these letters. They’re very close to the way she was as a person. And they’re wonderfully written.

What’s great about a book like this is that you can see in one volume the development of a writer over time. How did her writing change over her lifetime?

One thing that happened is that she became increasingly personal,

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increasingly confident about including her real feelings in her writing. In one of her very greatest poems, “In the Waiting Room,” she writes “you are an *I*, / you are an *Elizabeth*.” She actually mentions her own name in a poem. It was unimaginable that she could do that ten years before. The later poems contain a kind of key to her early poems. After you read her later poems, her early poems began to seem more direct, more “confessional” than they at first seemed to be. It’s interesting to recall the reactions to her early work. Oscar Williams acclaimed her as a miniaturist—and many people continued to see her as a miniaturist. But Robert Lowell’s review of her first book is one of the smartest, most penetrating reviews anyone ever wrote of her books. Both he and Randall Jarrell were on to the scope of her work early on.

Didn’t Lowell actually say that he considered Bishop to be the better poet?

Yes, it’s ironic that it was Bishop, who was famous for being reticent and not autobiographical, who inspired Lowell to write the poems in *Life Studies*, or at least to write them in the style he did. If Lowell is the father of confessional poetry, it may be that Bishop is the mother of confessional poetry because in some way she allowed him to do that.

How did you become involved with the work of Elizabeth Bishop?

My mentor as an undergraduate at Queens College, Mary Doyle Curran, was really the person who introduced me to contemporary poetry. Robert Lowell. Elizabeth. James Wright. It was thrilling to be able to meet Bishop when she came to live in the same city where I lived. I got to know her slowly during her years in Cambridge. I was teaching at a state college in Boston which was closing down, and wondering if I could ever finish my graduate degree dissertation on Yeats. It occurred to me that maybe I should change my topic to Elizabeth Bishop. I thought I needed to ask her how she felt about this because if she was nervous about a friend writing a PhD thesis about her, then I just wouldn’t do it. Considering how private she was, I fully expected she would say “oh no, I would be very uncomfortable.” As it turns out, I had completely underestimated her maternal instinct. She was willing to do anything to get this young person to finish his PhD, even if it meant writing about her. She not only agreed and encouraged me to do it, she said, “If you have any questions I’d be happy to meet with you”—something we could never do as friends because she didn’t like to discuss her poetry, even with her friends. I spent a wonderful year listening to her telling me great stories about who her poems were about and how she came to write them, although she would never actually explain a poem to me. When I asked her once about the meaning of a line, her response was, “But

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it's obvious." I brought a copy of my dissertation to her when she was in the hospital with a very serious asthma attack and she said that reading it cheered her up. Then I edited a collection of essays about her and she made a number of suggestions about it, but it was very hard to get a book about Elizabeth Bishop published in 1976. This changed after her death in 1979. In 1983 Donald Hall was starting a new series called Under Discussion with the University of Michigan press and asked to publish that collection, sight unseen. It was the first volume in his series.

Any final words?

I think she's a very great poet. There's an honesty, a lack of pretension. You know, she much preferred Mozart to Beethoven, and there's something profoundly Mozartean about her work—not the delicate musical-snuffbox Mozart but *The Marriage of Figaro* and *Così fan tutte*—classical, with a humane sense of human complexity—how people are complicated, how life is complicated, and how sometimes art can make beautiful very deep and even painful things. People think of her as very painterly and as a very elegant and beautiful writer, which she was; but she didn't flinch from what was painful or ugly. She took some of the scariest and most hideous images and made them interesting and bearable because she could write about them so vividly. There's a wonderful passage in a poem about Rio called "Going to a Bakery," where she's looking at pastries in a glass case and—I guess they're made with corn meal—she says they look like yellow fever victims. Take her description of "The Fish" in what for years was her most famous poem—with the sea lice crawling through the entrails of the fish—absolutely grotesque and hideous but dazzlingly written. That's an important side of what she wrote. She wasn't just a "pretty" writer. She was interested in everything, even horrible and disgusting things. Perhaps her most famous poem now is "One Art." It's a poem that people connect with because it's about human loss, which she deals with in both a witty and a piercingly poignant way, not moralistic or pompous. She's trying to teach *herself* something. She's lecturing not us but *herself* on how to deal with loss.

She could be very funny. And her writing is about as beautiful as poetry can get. Yet under all of it is a profoundly tragic sense of the limitations of human possibility. "In the Waiting Room" is certainly an example of this kind of poem. So is "At the Fishhouses." She had a very painful and traumatic life and had to face some pretty awful things: being orphaned, the suicide of the person she loved most, serious illnesses. She was able to carry on, she persisted, much like that mechanical horse. Underlying what a wide variety of people admire in her is an absolutely rock-solid human understanding, and even in poetry that's very rare.