

In Interview: Joanna Fuhrman and Susanna Fry

Jennifer Bartlett: How did you come into the Mentor/Mentee relationship?

Susanna Fry: Joanna and I met at the Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church. She was teaching a poetry workshop, and I was in her class. The workshop was an amazing experience. There were many great women poets in the class and I knew that it was vital for me as a poet to continue to work with her. Shortly after the workshop ended I moved out of Brooklyn to a small town in rural Pennsylvania. I asked Joanna if she would work with me while I was gone and she did.

Joanna Fuhrman: Susanna stood out in a class that had a remarkable number of terrific and serious poets.

JB: I'm interested in Susanna's attraction to the Poetry Project. Different groups tend to gather around a different aesthetic. Although the Project is one of the more inclusive places, it tends to champion poets that derive from a Beat/New York School sensibility. I guess I would like to know if you (and Joanna) agree with this and, if so, how does this inform your work and your relationship?

JF: I had been taking poetry workshops at the New School and Kathy Ossip had encouraged me to check out the Poetry Project, as she used a lot of the New York School poets in the workshop and saw that I was particularly attracted to them. I don't recall exactly when I first got interested in the Beat/New York School aesthetic, although I won a few prizes for my poetry in college and used the money to buy a couple of Diane DiPrima books and a plane ticket to San Francisco. Recently I looked through old books that I had when I was a child and for my tenth birthday my godfather had given me the wonderful book, *Talking to the Sun: An Illustrated Anthology of Poems for Young People* edited by Kenneth Koch. It is full of New York School poets and great art. I think that encouraged me too.

I had lived in Brooklyn for a couple of years before I actually signed up for a workshop at the Poetry Project. The summer before I started I heard about a workshop that Bernadette Mayer was giving at her home in upstate NY, I went there too. That was an amazing experience! I remember the first night of Joanna's workshop being very intimidated that I was at the Poetry Project but Joanna immediately made me feel comfortable. There were so many people the first night of the workshop and by the second or third class there was significantly less. I also remember that we had to write something on index cards and I wrote some sort of joke I don't remember but I think it might have been in bad taste and the people in my group looked at me funny. I had been going to other workshops earlier that year but I always felt misunderstood and like the class was

always picking apart everything I wrote. As if no matter what I wrote it would not be "good enough". At the Poetry Project I never really felt that way. I think that the fact that we met at the Poetry Project informs our relationship as relating to poetry in a similar way.

JB: How do you define mentorship as it pertains to your relationship?

SF: When I try to describe my relationship to Joanna I end up saying things like: she's not a real person anymore, she lives in my brain. When I write I don't really think about her — I've taken on parts of her — her words spit out of my mouth like my own. I imagine this is just like a parent's ideas seeping into the child's brain. Oozing out of their skin. Molding them. When I share this with Joanna she laughs real loud, slaps her knee, tells me I'm overthinking.

JF: It's organic. Not static. I'm flattered.

JB: Susanna, have you ever had moments of rebellion? How have you 'moved through' Joanna's voice to find your own?

SF: Joanna has influenced my work by consistently challenging me. I know when she looks at my poems that she is going to take them seriously and respond to them honestly. It's different from being in a workshop setting where the physical and personal get in the way, working online insists that the work stand alone. I do feel that Joanna has molded and changed my work, but this is not to say that I simply mimic her or do just what she says. One of the reasons that she is such an amazing woman to work with is that she encourages me to rebel. My confidence has increased while working with Joanna. Again, I think some of this is due to our working online and not in the workshop setting. I am more secure in taking risks. It has always been hard for me to talk in person, I'm always hiding something, but once my body and face are hidden I am able to reveal the truth.

JB: Susanna, did you ever consider extending your education to Naropa or another formal MFA program?

SF: For many years I struggled with the idea of the MFA program and wanting to be involved with one, have a poetry community, focus on my work. However I also felt like I was doing that already. Working with Joanna, teaching, working with other women poets that I met along the way, this is my poetry community. What really kept me from actually sending off the applications to graduate school was all the hoops that you have to jump through and the fact that many of the programs that I would want to be involved in are highly selective. Once I moved

out of New York to a small rural town in Northwestern PA I had a lot of time to work on my poetry and focus on my writing. I still do struggle with the fact that I do not have an MFA but I don't really feel like it has held me back in any way. Many of my friends are very anti-MFA and have encouraged me not to worry so much that I do not have the degree. I think about how I would like to have more time to write and immerse myself with poetry but this might be a constant struggle that I will have for the rest of my life. I have been in workshop situations which I felt were highly competitive and social and I really don't work well in those environments. I think too that I am afraid that an MFA program might be similar and that scares me.

JB: Can you tell me a little about how you collaborated on the poem we're including in this How2 piece?

SF: Joanna started with the first line and then emailed it to me. We went back and forth changing, adding, moving words/phrases around. It's strange because I would get lines that Joanna wrote and feel as if I had written them. In fact when I first showed the poem to my husband he could not tell which lines were mine and which were Joanna's. I was convinced that this poem was about my walk to the train station every morning.

JB: Joanna, many people talk about the role of the poet as citizen or political entity. Do you think part of a poet's 'job' is to mentor or teach the later generation?

JF: I wouldn't say that it's every poet's job to mentor or teach. Still, for me teaching is part of how I envision my life as a poet. It seems to me to be a particularly difficult and marginal way to live, especially now as more and more emphasis in education is placed on that which is easy to quantify. I've watched Teachers & Writers, really the most groundbreaking and idealistic organization I have known, shrink from a roster of over one hundred writers to less than twenty. Many schools no longer bring poets into the classroom because they have to spend so much time preparing students for standardized tests. There's also a new blueprint for arts education in NYC. Under the blueprint, creative writing is no longer considered an art form. On top of that, there's been a move towards Lucy Calkins' Writers Workshop model, which is a step forward in some ways, since it emphasizes the importance of revision, but it also de-emphasizes poetry and the role of the imagination. While I think revision is central to what I want to teach. I am also interested in exposing students to a wide range of poetry and having them get a feeling of what it means to experiment with language. A lot of my poetry teaching involves suggesting limits to help circumvent the clichés of the conscious mind. I've always admired the T&W motto "educating the imagination." More than anything, I think the role of the visiting poet is to give students a space where they can connect with the power of creativity.

I have been thinking about Jack Spicer's lecture in which he says that only poets should read poetry, and in a way I agree with him. I think poets read and understand poetry in a way that is fundamentally different than the way that non-poets do. But, I think my definition of who a poet might be is different from Spicer. My work with younger children has shown me that we are all born poets. The secret is to find ways to reconnect older children and adults to the sense of magic they lost as they matured. I think almost anyone is capable of being a poet, and that part of my job as a poetry teacher is to help sweep away the utilitarian and clichéd approaches to language. I don't assume that the kids I teach will necessarily identify themselves, but I hope that writing and reading will help open them to new ways of thinking and feeling. Part of why I think it's important to have poets teaching in public schools or teaching classes in public libraries is to expand the future audience for poetry. I tend to see my own poetry as part of my life's work of bringing poetry into the world. On the best teaching days, I feel like some sort of poetry midwife, helping to bring living creatures into the world. This feeling can be even greater than what I feel writing my own poems. On the worst days though I feel like a ghost of poetry, lurking in the margins of academic intuitions as a freelancer or an adjunct, speaking a language that few around me seem to understand. There are weeks when the burden of having so little job security and juggling so many different little jobs can feel like an impediment to writing itself. In other words, I think poets should do whatever they can to make sure they are still able to write. Being a poet is difficult enough. But I also think that poetry mentorship, like poetry friendships can also be a way of creating community, and I do believe that community, even just a community of two, is needed for poetry to flourish. Wittgenstein famously wrote, "There is no private language." Poetry can be the most internal solitary act, but it helps to feel there is someone one can share work with or share what one is reading with. Naturally, the poets one respects are going to be better readers than a random person on the street.

JB: What is your age difference? How does this positively or negatively affect your working together?

SF: Joanna and I are close in age, about five years difference. This closeness grounds us.

JF: I think the fact that I'm youngish might help make me less of an authority figure. I think sometimes it's just as important to learn how to not listen to one's teacher as to listen. (Though, of course, I always want all of my suggestions followed— this feeling is not something I'm proud of.)