

Season Two, Episode Five: Writing Toward Hope: How Poetry Helps Students Find Their Voice

INTRO:

Welcome to Red Hen Radio, a podcast brought to you by Red Hen Press. We're a nonprofit publisher fostering diverse stories every year. On this podcast, you'll get to hear from the people who are inside the literary world, the authors and publishing professionals who are working hard to keep independent literature thriving. Stay with us as we introduce you to today's segment.

KATE GALE:

I'm Kate Gale, I'm the publisher of Red Hen Press, and I'm delighted to be here today on our podcast with Bonnie. Bonnie, do you want to introduce yourself?

BONNIE KAPLAN:

Thank you, Kate. My name is Bonnie S. Kaplan, and it's my privilege to be a part of the WITS program—the Writing in the Schools program—with Red Hand Press for...I think close to four years now. I'm a semi-retired teacher, but I think staying connected is so important. I worked in programs of parole and probation for close to thirty years in an adult basic literacy. I facilitated a school on the seventh floor of the Weingart Center in Skid Row for ten years.

KATE GALE:

Well, that must have been a place where you came away with a lot of stories.

BONNIE KAPLAN:

I did, and that's one of the reasons I loved my work, is the stories and the resilience of my students.

KATE GALE:

Me as well. When we were first starting Writing in the Schools, my kids were very young. And I remember that my son was joking one day while he was doing his homework that some of the kids in his class were saying, “you know, wouldn't it be great if we could just drop out of school and go and play at the park?” And so I said to him, you know, there are kids that drop out of school in middle school and they don't go back. And, you know, by high school, some of them are doing sort of odd jobs, but often, after that, it's very hard for them to get jobs.

You know, it ended up being this whole conversation about kids dropping out of school. And he was like, really? So why do they drop out of school? And I said, “Well, you know, it's because there's not that much going on in the school that's interesting to them.” And I kept thinking about that whole idea of what it is that is interesting to a kid in school. We always talk about how STEM is supposed to be the interesting thing; for some, kids it is.

But for many, many kids, what gets them excited about going to school is the arts. But the arts have been cut from many, many schools. LAUSD is a massive school district, and for much of the district, there aren't arts. Based on that, I started to find out whether Red Hen could get grants to send some of our writers into the schools. And some of the first writers that went out were Chris Abani, Doug Kearney. When Tom Sleigh came in and won the Kingsley Tufts, he went out to Pacoima and taught poetry in our Writing in the Schools program. And so it had such a great origin in terms of these big writers going out and teaching in the Writing in the Schools program. We feel so lucky to be continuing this tradition of sending writers who are active writers, you know, who are actively out there in their life—writing work, getting it published, performing it in public—who are actively out there working on the building blocks of their own writing life.

They're teaching, they're writing, they're sending work to other writers, and then they're going into the classroom and working with students.

And, you know, it's not of concern to me whether the students become writers later. I want them to be thinkers. I want their world to be bigger and dreamier. I want them to have this experience of living in the world of the imagination, because I feel like we all need more time in that world of the imagination.

I've jumped into the classroom from time to time and gotten to work with the students, and every time, I feel like my own cup is so full; that the students have given me so much more than I could have possibly given them. So I wanted to start off by saying, could you tell us something amazing that happened to you in a Writing in the Schools classroom?

BONNIE KAPLAN:

I think every time I go in, it's amazing. I'm always surprised by how the students are just thirsty for something different, like you say. And I come out of a fine arts background. I ended up being a poet, but they all have their hands into something creative. I mean, they're making their own little graphic novels. Or in terms of Elliot, you know, Elliot is an arts magnet [school]. So they all choose a track in the arts.

I guess what surprised me very recently was the haiku that came out of my special ed class. It actually made me cry because it was about Altadena. And I feel this incredible bond with the students at Elliot. I started there in...I think 2022, and then the fire happened in January of '25. I lost my home. I lived just behind Elliot. I used to walk to my classes there to teach and work with the students through COVID. I was working with them after that. And then the fire.

So they're incredibly resilient. The kiddos...I feel bonded to them in a way. I think the most amazing thing was going back for the first time last spring, right after the fire, and having this

feeling of what we've all been through. And not let's talk about it, but let's just write. Let's just open up to that part of ourselves.

KATE GALE:

I remember, after the fire, you know, we knew you had lost your home, and I was talking with our Board Chair about it, and she said, “Do you think that Bonnie will come back in the fall to teach, or do you think she's too much in shock over losing her home?” And I said, “Bonnie's coming back this spring.” Yeah. And she was quite surprised at you, Bonnie. So you are...you are quite a trooper, I must say. You were back in the classroom with those students.

BONNIE KAPLAN:

Yeah, well, it's about art and creativity as a point of healing. And I wasn't gonna miss out on that. I wasn't. You know, when I walk down the halls at Elliot, students know me, they remember me, and it...it just really charges me with a lot of pride.

KATE GALE:

So I have another question. I've jumped into classrooms once in a while, and one of the things that we all find is that we'll meet students who'll say, “You know, I'm not that smart. My English isn't that great. I wish I were better at things. I'm not really a writer.” Sometimes, “I'm not really a poet,” but just like, “I'm not really a writer.”

And a lot of times, there will be a reason. Sometimes they feel like language gets in the way. A lot of times, there's some idea that someone else in their family is the smart one, but not them. When we were running the Writing in the Schools program this summer, Piper and I were in the room. I could feel that sort of family order with the kids, you know, some of them feeling like someone else in the family is the smart one who tells the stories, and that maybe I'm not that person.

I have my own thoughts about that. I am the second child, and the unfortunate one that wasn't supposed to do anything with their life. But I'm curious how you approach that when a kid tells you, “I can't write, I'm not the writer,” you know.

BONNIE KAPLAN:

You know, I don't go in with the feeling that there is...gonna have that happen. I mean, if somebody tells me I hate poetry or poetry's stupid—that hasn't actually happened—but I would let them sit out and watch and draw if they want, or just observe if they want.

Also, the past three or four years I've been working with the Unusual Suspects Theater Company. So I try to bring a little bit of improv into the room. I bring video poems in my PowerPoints. I engage the students in games. I don't make it all about, you know, “you have to write,” because

I'm really there just for them to have fun. First and foremost. Let's have some fun together, you know. I just wanna honor what every student's feeling.

I think, actually, one of the big incentives is the anthology, because I constantly use student work as the examples that I read back with the students, or they read them from the PowerPoint. But also, like, how great is it to bring home a book that you're in to your family? So I'm holding it up all the time. You know, let's look at it and touch it and tell them it's in your library, and it's gonna be here. It's gonna be here.

KATE GALE:

Yeah, no, I think that whole invitation to just come up with something that isn't necessarily going to be a poem. You know, I always remember this one girl telling me, "I don't think I can write something." And I said, you know, "Why don't you just tell me a story and I'll just kind of take notes on your story?"

And the story was the story of her coming to the United States. And it sort of started with...she wakes up in El Salvador, and she's there with her mother, and her dad is already there in the United States. And he calls them on the phone and says, "You're gonna come to the United States." And he had made some arrangements...and so, she's just telling me this. And she said, "At the end, I want it to say Estados Unidos, Estados Unidos, Estados Unidos."

And so I had kind of written it out and showed it to her, and she was kind of making some notes on it, and so it was, you know, in her voice. And then at the end, she was kind of getting ready to read it out loud. And she said, "Do you think everyone will know what I mean here at the end?"

And I said, "Yes...well, no." Because the thing about her having made that choice to end it in Spanish is that, of course, she was going to be thinking in Spanish when she woke up in El Salvador. And it really punched it at the end. And I just loved that so much because I felt like she doesn't realize it, but instinctively, she's a writer, right? Because she's seated us with her in the heart of this poem, which is her waking up in another country and having a yearning to change her life.

And like that's that's the Rilke moment. You must change your life, right? And so in a way, what's funny is that when you're just having a conversation with them, they find their way towards their own dreams.

Since you mentioned the anthology, I wanted to see if there's any poems from the anthology that you wanted to read that you particularly like to teach.

BONNIE KAPLAN:

The last anthology, the 2024-2025, *The Independent Ant*. There's a persona poem, and I do like to teach the persona poem, called "Egg" and everybody loves this poem.

"Egg" by Catherine Hampton

Look at the world I'm born into
The farmer's delicate hands and the sun shining on me,
warming my shell.

Look, I'm being placed delicately into a truck
that has flowers and big bold letters saying
Sunshine Farms printed on the side.

Then my farmer dropped me off at a big building called Ralph's.

I am then escorted to my very own shelf in the giant house,
just dedicated to me and my egg friends.
My neighbors are so lovely, but I must say,
there's something off about this place.
Everyone seems so nervous.

I go to bed feeling a sense of joy, but a bit of confusion.
It's morning now, and although the sun isn't shining
and there are no warm hands around me, I'm still happy.

Look, a nice man is coming my way.
He picks me up, and I feel the coziness once again.
He drives me home to an even more beautiful house.
He puts me on the shelf and gets out some olive oil and butter.

When the pan gets sizzling, he picks me up. He's holding me over the pan.

HEEEEEELLLLLLLLLLLLLPPPPPPPPPP.

SPLAT.

KATE GALE:

So much fun. And part of what's fun about it is that we're ahead of the egg in a way, because we do sense the egg...might be getting scrambled.

BONNIE KAPLAN:

Yeah. A little innocence to that egg that I love, and the feeling of being held over and over in so many different places, and then just being crushed. I mean, the middle schoolers, they just...their feelings are big. Whenever they write, their feelings are big. I love that.

KATE GALE:

Yeah. It is that funny time between elementary school and high school when you feel like you understand everything about the world. It's a great time to be alive.

Do you feel like the students get a lot of their own personal stories into the work?

BONNIE KAPLAN:

I do, because I encourage that in their work. One of the ways I do that is I teach the ode poem, and in the ode poem—just like Neruda, who's famous for his odes, of course—we talk about the gifts that we receive in life and the culture that we grow up in and how we can sort of honor that in our work. And so sometimes we just start with, what are the foods of your culture? What is your favorite thing your grandmother makes you or your mom? Then it gets into, like, the fast food, too.

But I think the ode often talks about places that these students have lived. There's an ode to the Golden Gate Bridge from a student who lived in the Bay Area that's just stunning. And, like your poem that you were talking about, coming from different lands and what it's like to be, you know, eleven today. There's a lot to talk about.

KATE GALE:

Well, it's interesting. You and I have been in workshops together and so on. And one of the things when you're teaching adults in workshops is you often say, “We need to get real with this. Let's get some real details. We want details that we can hear and feel and smell.”

And one of the things that Piper and I noticed this summer with the students is that everything felt very visceral. I think that tendency to write about food and place...because again, when you're in middle school and high school, you're living in that present. And so the tendency is to write about places you've lived. If you came from another country, you're gonna remember that. And then food is a very visceral thing. I felt like we were never saying to them, “write into your senses,” because they were living with their senses. And that's fantastic.

You know, like that egg poem is so sensory, right? The warmth and the light—or lack thereof—and that kind of thing. That is what's so great about working with kids, writing into that kind of sense.

Do you feel like when you're working with the students in some way that you're changing their kind of frame of mind about writing or thinking?

BONNIE KAPLAN:

I don't know if I go in trying to change anybody's frame of mind, but in terms of art, I want them to know just from the get-go not to censor themselves; that this is play to some respect, because I'm a playful teacher. That's what I bring to it, really. In middle school, play is very important, still. Very important. I think in high school, maybe it becomes more like...sports is what play is.

I often talk about—I haven't been doing since the fire, but—what is one childhood toy that you still play with? What is one that you don't play with anymore? And it really speaks to them. Because, you know, they're also on their screens so much. And I'm trying to say like, okay, you know, if you want to write a persona poem about a video game, we come to know that those characters don't have a lot of meat. You know, there's not much to them to talk about. They're avatars; they're like emojis for life. And I wanna talk about what they're doing, like, off of the screen.

KATE GALE:

You know, what I think about when I think about teaching poetry, writing poetry, reading poetry...is I think of poetry as the ballet of language. There's different kinds of ways that we can write, but I think of poetry as sort of stripped-down language, you know. And I also think that when you're inviting kids into that poetic space, that you're inviting them into a sort of sacred space.

When we were working this summer, it was a publishing program, and we started off with writing, and I felt like we were really just kind of having fun with it. But I do think that there is this element of taking poetry and writing seriously—understanding that it takes a minute to edit a poem, doesn't come out right the first time, and of entering that sort of sacred space—that's good for kids to realize. It's something where you're working on a level of mastery and excellence. You're not just writing one draft. And in a way, that's a big ask for a middle schooler, especially in a six-week class. So I'm wondering how you wrestle with that angel.

BONNIE KAPLAN:

That's a really good question. I do hope and want the students to take the short time that I'm there very seriously. And I think part of it is that we may start out very simply with maybe a free write or a list poem the first time, but to organize their work, to keep their work in a place where they know where it is, to continually build upon the last lesson in terms of what's expected of both the examples that I bring and the diverse poems that I bring in. And then in the end, you know, it's really by the fifth week that we are editing and we're talking about compression and line breaks and things like that. But you can only do so much.

They choose the poem they want. I can kinda weigh in and say, you know, “I really love this one,” but ultimately, I want them to choose the poem that goes into the anthology. And it’s the anthology itself that speaks to the seriousness. And I tell them from the first day, “This is Red Hen Press publishing your work. You know, this is an important and renowned world press. You’re getting published in this book in sixth grade or seventh grade. So let’s take it seriously and really work on something that we’ll be proud of.”

Sometimes students only want to put their first names when they turn their poem into Mary or Red Hen. And I always encourage them to put their whole name because I feel like their family wants to see that. You know, when you bring that book home, to see your family name in this book is something to be so proud of. And it goes beyond the classroom. For me, it’s like, I know the parents are gonna be getting this.

KATE GALE:

So, Bonnie, I’ve known you for many years. I know that you are always working on your own writing and on your own performance. And I wondered if you could read us one of your poems.

BONNIE KAPLAN:

Sure, sure. There was a call quite a long time ago, I wanna say over ten years ago, to write a poem about the theme of bridges, and our friend Alice—who was then the head of Poetry of America—was judging it. I’m like, I know, I’m gonna write a poem about wildlife crossings. And this was over a decade ago. And since then, you know, wildlife crossings have really become something important. We have the Annenberg Wildlife Crossing opening this year at the end of the year. And this is my poem that I wrote, and that had like more drafts than any other poem I’ve ever written. Yeah, I’m sure you have one of those. So it’s called “Wildlife Crossings” by Bonnie S. Kaplan. And it was published in *The Nature of Our Times*, which is an online publication.

“Wildlife Crossings” by Bonnie S. Kaplan

We all hit
the brakes during morning
rush on the Hollywood Freeway.
A mother duck and her young ones
shuffle safely across, the only honking
hers, commanding four wildly lucky ducklings.
Guided by sunrise and hunger, endangered
Florida panthers prowl shrinking terrain. Animals
who don’t know the future traverse highways, zigzagging.
A camel crossing in Kuwait, an elk overpass in Banff,

these culverts and corridors stitch together land
severed by highway, invaded by interstates,
our open road — their dissipating gene pool.
We make necessary reparations for wildlife,
dig a desert underpass for the tortoise,
reroute the deer in the headlights.
We all need to travel
safely home.

KATE GALE:

I like that.

BONNIE KAPLAN:

It's one I can read to kids of mine. Some of my stuff's kinda dark, and yeah, I don't know if I wanna share it.

KATE GALE:

Yeah. You know, I think that we all do a little dark writing these days. I think that brings me to a question I wanted to ask as we are winding up here. You know, a lot of the students that I used to...even when I was bouncing in and out of this before the pandemic, I felt like a lot of our students live very challenging lives. You know, they have parents working multiple jobs, some of them had grandparents dropping in on them, but I felt like they lived very challenging lives. And when they were writing about that, I felt like there was often this sort of mixed tension in the classroom.

There was this one poem, that I think ended up in one of the anthologies, written by this girl. She actually read this poem at the benefit. But it started off with her having pancakes with her brother, and then they go to the park and they're flying a kite, and then they come home and they have some tortillas and they're talking, and they see the grandmother...and as she was reading it to me, her draft of it, I thought, "Did this teacher not tell this kid that a poem needs to make a turn at some point? It can't just wander on with these pancakes and so on."

And there's winding to the end of the poem, and the last line of the poem was "And then I kissed my brother goodbye. He went back to prison."

And it was just like, my goodness. And when she read it out loud, the room just stopped. And you thought, *wow*. And I remember thinking, I'd visited the classroom a couple of times, that there were a lot of kids that had some moment in their life that was really difficult for them to deal with. And that they were understanding by being in the writing class that writing is a way that we get to think about our lives.

So again, even if they didn't become professional writers, that writing allows us to have a different way of experiencing our lives. And so I wondered what your experience with that has been. And again, I know since you worked in the prison program that you must have had some of that experience there. But in the classroom, you know, the kids are going to hopefully go on to live wonderful and fulfilling lives. What has been your thought about that?

BONNIE KAPLAN:

I think that poetry is the perfect container to express deep emotion and life experience, and how we get to that in the classroom, I'm still working on, and I think it's by bringing in certain examples, deeper examples, for the students—maybe especially now that I get to teach eighth graders. Yay! But it's also about memory. It's like honoring your memory through the senses. And stuff comes up when you do that, you know, naturally.

I did have one poem a student wrote, that she felt comfortable enough writing it and showing it to me, that I did...pass it on to the teacher, because it was a little worrisome to me, her feelings. But how great that that came up, that that even happened, and that we could talk about it.

KALE GALE:

Yeah. I mean, as writers, when we're writing in our journals, we certainly would write down if we were feeling unhappy or scared. And often we kind of write through to the other side. And so that's what I've thought about, is that if students came away with nothing else but that writing is partly a way of processing your feelings and finding your way to another way of thinking about your life.

So do you have another poem you'd like to share?

BONNIE KAPLAN:

Yeah, I just wanna...again, this is my special ed class. I guess I feel like I'm the special one that gets to teach this. It's been an amazing experience working with this group of kids. And by the way, I want to give a shout-out to all my teachers at Elliot that are now at McKinley. Every single one of them has been wonderful, really. I could name them, but...this is just a list poem, really short, called

“Things I'm Scared Of”

The dark

Mazes

Spiders

Home alone

A dark hallway

A lockdown

KATE GALE:

Hmm. It's a good list. I think, yeah, being able to talk about that and think about it and roll it over in your head... You know, what are you scared of?

Yeah, it's funny when you read that... I went to a writer's residency, and it was only like a year ago, it wasn't very long ago... everybody had to wear masks and be separated and everything. And I hadn't really realized that I still had so much, like, COVID trauma. But I was so unhappy there the first few days.

I realized I did not enjoy being isolated. I did not enjoy the whole thing. It wasn't so much wearing the mask, but just being isolated made me feel like I was back during COVID. I was deeply unhappy. I wanted to leave. I was like, no, I don't want to be back during COVID.

I was also thinking about how much my husband had loved being isolated during COVID. He was just like, "I can be just with Kate at the house. This is so great." I was like, "No, it's not. I need to go to lunch with my friends." I missed Gale's restaurant so much. Gale, this is for you. Your food is so yummy. I like going to lunch there. Piper and I were just at lunch there the other day.

So, here's to Writing in the Schools. It's such an amazing, blessed part of our whole publishing house. We all love it. And Bonnie, we are so, so blessed to have you being part of it. Thank you so much for coming and visiting us here today.

BONNIE KAPLAN:

Thank you, Kate. And thank you for setting this up just to talk about it. It's certainly a program we're supporting. Very honored to be working in it and continuing to be a part of it. Thank you.

KATE GALE:

Thank you so much.

OUTRO:

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