



Joseph Fasano - Interview Transcript

(Unedited)

Parul - LWS: [00:00:00] And welcome to the London Writer Salon podcast. I'm Parl. I'm your host and the co-founder of the London Writer Salon. And our salon interviews are transfer us to go behind the scenes of a writer's journey and dig into the stories behind the stories. And just about each week, we invite to the salon on a writer creative to explore the craft of writing, the art of building a writing career, and the reality of navigating the creative world.

And today our guest is Joseph Fasano. Joseph is a professor and award-winning writer whose poems, novels, and other writings have been translated into more than a dozen languages. His books of poetry include *The Crossing*, *Vincent Inheritance*, and *Fugue For Other Hands*. His novels include *the Swallows of Lu Netto*.

And the heart of every wild thing. He's won some awards including the Cider Press Review book Award, the Rattle Poetry Prize, and he was nominated for the Poets Prize. His latest book is *The Magic Words*, simple Poetry Prompts [00:01:00] that unlock the creativity in everyone. It's a fantastic book. We'll be digging into that soon, but today I'll be talking to Joseph about his journey in into the Creative World, how he became a poet, a novelist, tips for how we might unlock our inner poet, and really a chance for us to see how he has navigated the creative life.

I've prepared some questions for Joseph, but if, but around an hour or so in, if you have any questions, you will have a chance to ask Joseph them yourself. So do chime in on the chat if you have any questions, and we'll try to get to that at the end. Without further ado, welcome to the London Writer Salon Joseph,

Joseph Fasano: It's wonderful to be here at Bar. Thank you for having me.

Parul - LWS: so pleased to have you here. Now I'm gonna take you back to when you were a teenager. Poetry seems to have been in your blood for quite some time. You wrote a poem when you're around 15 when you lost horse, and I believe your mother saved that poem for you. I'd love to start off by just you sharing that with us.

Joseph Fasano: Sure, this will take us back about 30 [00:02:00] years. It's a little handwritten scrap that is about an animal. But I have actually founded some comfort in my life as I've lost people over the years. It's simply called gallop. I used to brush your hair when we were young together. Now I find a last strand in the planter and walk out and give it to the wind again. We can't save the dead, but we can free them.

Parul - LWS: That's beautiful. And so in that time in your life around that age, what were you being influenced by? What were you reading?

I.

Joseph Fasano: very funny because early in my life I was of course always drawn to what words could do. I was drawn to language, I was drawn to books. I was a reader, but I was actually very passionate about [00:03:00] mathematics and about, sciences. And during those teenage years, I was as certain as any teenager can be about anything that I was going to pursue. Physics and mathematics, particularly astrophysics. I was so drawn to astronomy. And so at that time, as much time as I would spend reading, would also spend gazing through the telescope and, hacking out. I tried to teach myself some more complex mathematics when I was younger because the curriculum in the high school that I was at wasn't really offering those things. As far as writing goes I was I always loved poetry from an early age. I remember, of course, as an American discovering Whitman and thinking about music of that language, that expansive language that wanted to swallow the whole world. but as I say, I was also tinkering around with mathematics and physics and I did that all, through the first two years of my university career I had a major [00:04:00] change.

Parul - LWS: So you switched to philosophy.

Joseph Fasano: I switched to philosophy. I was at that time so I did my undergraduate at Harvard University, which was a very unusual thing for a young man from a little town called Goshen, New York. Very small town. I don't think anybody had gone to university like that from that place. But I remember working very hard when I was a young man.

I wanted to, my hometown, but I wanted to get out of it, as it were. And I was at Harvard, I started studying mathematics and physics. And I, and for many reasons I felt that it wasn't really for me something was missing. And I think what was missing was turning that lens from the external toward the internal. Something in me was saying, look at yourself. Look at the mystery within the human, I started to think, okay, I was writing more, I was spending whole evenings in [00:05:00] the library stacks discovering Gerard Manley Hopkins discovering, that really up my soul. And when it came time to switch I ended up switching to philosophy because it gave me so many things to think about. And Harvard's philosophy department is more analytical in nature which is not really where my philosophical interests lie now. But at that point, it wasn't too much of a leap from mathematics and the sciences to to that kind of philosophy.

Parul - LWS: And what about the jump from philosophy to then studying poetry? You, you studied at a graduate level, poetry at Columbia.

Joseph Fasano: So when I was studying philosophy at Harvard I focused on philosophy of LED vichtenstein, especially the later philosophy post philosophy, which concerns itself a lot with meaning and language. Vichtenstein famously said, the meaning of a word is its use in the language game. this was a revelation for me because when I was studying mathematics and physics, there was a relationship I [00:06:00] had to truth. That was a correspondence theory as it were. Or there was the idea that I was using language to try to reach some external truth that was objective and beyond the mind of the human being. And the more I studied philosophy and read the philosophy of K and then looked at Wittgenstein, it was like I became interested in a word, epistemology, how we know what we know, is language, what are these metaphors that we think are simply ornamental, but really betray the fundamental ways we perceive the world. so I think I needed that philosophical foundation. I. To justify to myself that I was going to be doing poetry. There was no way to stop it. It felt like it chose me. But with all that I felt empowered to move into it. And after I finished undergraduate I took a year or two, I forget I did my MFA at Columbia, which was for the most part very great.

I, I worked with teachers who are [00:07:00] all gone now. But I worked with Mark Strand and Richard Howard, Lucy Brock, Brodo and that was for the most part, very wonderful experience. There, there was no turning back.

Parul - LWS: What do you think that MFA taught you in terms of writing poetry? How do you use it today?

Joseph Fasano: See, this is a tricky topic because. I think there are a lot of different ki MFA programs. I'm someone who cares a great deal about the craft of poetry, for example

Parul - LWS: I.

Joseph Fasano: prosody, the Study of Rhythm, what's really going on in a poem. you can get an MFA without studying those fundamentals which I find, ridiculous and absurd be like saying you could get an MFA in musical composition without knowing what a, a minor chord is or a, and it's regrettable that when one says these things, it sounds elitist in some level, but really it's just about passion for the art form. So I would say Columbia program is very good.

I did learn those [00:08:00] things and I later came to teach some of those things in that program in other places. But, honestly, I would say that for people thinking about do you get the MFA? Do you not? Yeah. One of the things it does is it gives you, I remember walking around the streets of New York saying, you know what? into a little debt here. I'm taking out some loans to pay for an apartment, but I'm giving myself the gift of focusing for, say, two years on my writing. I'm, I am, to push myself forward more quickly than I would've if I weren't giving myself that space. And you also learn things that are off the page. You learn, for example, how to sit in a poetry workshop if that's your fate, and you learn what to listen to and you learn what voices not to listen to. Which I think is incredibly helpful, especially if you become a writer with any public audience. So the MFA is like a training ground, hopefully in poetic craft, but also in how to be what you call the title of this interview, a poet or a writer in the [00:09:00] world.

Parul - LWS: If somebody doesn't want to do the MFA and they're listening in and they're thinking, but I want some of that grounding. What, so you talked about attending workshops and understanding what to listen to, what not listen, what not to listen to. Is there anything else that someone might do to gain some of that grounding for themselves?

Joseph Fasano: so the number one thing somebody needs when we're talking, especially about poetry is to really have a deep familiarity with the craft, right? You have to know is an inversion in a line of rising double meter? What is a medial sura? This is not just so that you can read Keats.

This is so that you can write free verse. That's the thing. You need these things. I don't wanna, it's awkward because I don't wanna plug what I'm doing, but I'll ho I hope that other people are doing this too. I will say that lately, after about 20 years of teaching in the university system, I've been doing a lot of online coursework so that people who say, Hey, look, whether they have an MFA and never learned those things, or they just want to come back to writing, or they say I don't wanna do the [00:10:00] MFA, but I'm really well read and I want these foundations.

What I do is I try to offer classes on those particular topics. As I say, I hope other people are doing that too. And the good thing is I think, as much as social media can be, have its negative side, I think

we're living in a time where there's a real positive side of social media for building communities, right?

So for. Offering resources like that from people like myself who have taught in the university systems, but wanna say, look, maybe you're not in those rooms. I can still, we could still offer this to you. And I get some, I get great fulfillment out of doing that because you end up working with a group of people with a broad range of life experience and perspectives more so than the typical classroom environment, which is full of usually wonderful young people. But a narrow range of at least age group.

Parul - LWS: So if someone wanted more information I guess that's on your website, Joseph asani.net.

Joseph Fasano: [00:11:00] Yeah, actually my social media feeds are the best place and the academy that I've started to offer these courses is simply called the Fasano Academy, and there's a website for that as well. And Google Search will pop it up. And I just ran my intro poetry course two weeks ago. And it was wonderful. And I, I'm, as I say, I'm passionate about trying to democratize the information in a real way. And you wouldn't want to, know, it's tough. You gotta do your research because, if you're gonna go get an MFA, especially if they're not paying you full funding just make sure, make ask questions.

What are the courses that you're going to take? Are you gonna take courses in, in Poetic Craft or are you only going to take courses? In in things beyond that or outside of that?

Parul - LWS: And so you've been writing poetry for a very long time, and I'm curious about some of the earlier days of your poetry writing. What did that look like? So maybe you had a bit of grounding 'cause you'd, or maybe even during or before [00:12:00] the MFA, what did those attempts look like? Were you simply scribbling stream of conscious

Joseph Fasano: No,

Parul - LWS: into.

Joseph Fasano: like it looked like obsession, which is what my mind, what my life usually looks like. So what I would do is when I started I would read poems like anyone, and I would say, this is intoxicating. What the heck has happened here? How did the writer create this effect? And I would go through anthologies of poetry and I would write a, write the PA poem that I admired out by hand to see if I could understand how it moved.

I would type it out, I would count the syllables. I would try, and then I would read as many books as I could on craft, on the history of poetry. How does someone fit into the general trajectory? How is, Gerard Medley Hopkins doing something rhythmically that other poets were not doing before? And so I just poured myself into it and loved it. And I remember early on though, telling myself, don't just read your contemporaries. There's a lot of, even back then there was a lot of necessary discussion about the canon and what it was and what it [00:13:00] didn't include. But I said, you can't have an opinion on it if you don't read it, Joseph.

So read it. And I found many things that I loved. And

Parul - LWS: Can you name a few poets that you would recommend if someone wants to go back into the cannon and read out

Joseph Fasano: for

Parul - LWS: poets?

Joseph Fasano: I tend to be drawn to who really attack the spiritual. And John Dunn's, holy sonnets meant a great deal to me early on and still do. I've mentioned Gerard Manley Hopkins, for example, with his incredible system of sprung rhythm. But it, without knowing the technique it has just such a rich, unique music

Parul - LWS: both? Could you say both those names? Just a little bit slower please.

Joseph Fasano: Oh, I'm sorry. Yes. I tend to speak quickly. So John Dunn, of course, and then Gerard Manley Hopkins. Hopkins was Jesuit who really was a very complicated man, and he wanted to write a poetry portrayed his belief in divinity and in, in the inherent nature of God and the universe. But he was also very spartan by nature, and yet his [00:14:00] poetry was very lush, syntactically lush.

And I think that he that tension made for very interesting poetry. he was one figure. Early on, of course, I mentioned Whitman. You can't imitate Whitman, but you can learn from him, what it's like to try to include things in your poetry that you might not have thought how to place. In what you thought of was a pawn. So falling in love with those poets. But then very quickly I started to read relatively contemporary poets. I remember being profoundly enamored what were called the Deep Image Poets. And that was a movement in American poetics English language, poetics in general. After the Second World War.

Poetry had been at that time very dominated by. TS Elliot called the New Criticism. And the new criticism was very heady. I love Elliot, but it was very heady very intellectual imitating the [00:15:00] metaphysical poets. history tends to move by a pendulum, doesn't it? We have one sort of way of thinking and the pendulum swings.

So the pendulum swung in the late fifties and early 1960s toward deep psychological work, confessional stuff, digging into the shadow side, the irrational side. And I started to read poets like Kennel, James Wright, Robert Bly, Sylvia Platt, poets that a lot of people end up coming toward. remember just being drunk with that language. I.

Parul - LWS: And of course you started writing and you found some success in those early days. Was there a particular poem that was a tipping point for you that had a good reception?

Joseph Fasano: I wrote a poem when

Parul - LWS: I.

Joseph Fasano: I started. I think I had written down a few lines of this poem early in my undergraduate career. And and then the full [00:16:00] poem came to me when I was living in New York on hundred 11th Street when I was in graduate school. And after I finished graduate school I'm

just old enough that my early submissions were sent out, in the mailbox and you waited at the end of the driveway to see what would happen.

And so I sent off this poem to magazine that had a literary rise. And of course, at that early stage, I had reconciled myself to a life of art. I'll probably be starving my whole life. I got a phone call that I had won this literary prize that certainly helped me get started in my career.

Shall I read this poem for you?

Parul - LWS: Yes, please. And what was the prize that you had won?

Joseph Fasano: the Rattle Poetry Prize.

Parul - LWS: Wonderful. Please read it and tell us what it's called.

Joseph Fasano: so this is a poem called Mahler in New York. It's a persona poem in the voice of the composer, Gustav Mahler. At that time, as I say, I was living in New York, persona poems help us access parts of ourselves that perhaps we might [00:17:00] not speak in or through we are closer to our own voice or wearing our own mask. This is is and is not in the voice of Gustav Mahler. So it's called Mahler in New York. Now, when I go out, the wind pulls me into the grave. I go out part the hair of a child I left behind, and he pushes his face into my cuffs to smell the wind. If I carry my father with me, it is the way a horse carries autumn in its mane. If I remember my brother, it is as if a buck had knelt down in a room I was in. I kneel and the wind kneels down in me. is it to have a history, flock buried in the blindness of winter? Try crawling with two violins into the hallway of your father's hearse. It is [00:18:00] filled with sparrows. Sometimes I go to the field and the field is bare. There is the wind, which entrusts me. There is a woman walking with a pail of milk, a man who tilts his bread in the sun. There. Is the black heart of a mare in the milk is it the wind the way it goes? I don't know about the wind, about the way it goes. All I know is that sometimes someone will pick up the black violin of his childhood and start playing that it sits there on his shoulder like a thin gray falcon, asleep in its blinders, and that we carry each other this way it is the way we would like to be carried sometimes with mercy, sometimes without.[00:19:00]

Parul - LWS: Gorgeous. It's really lovely to hear you read and I will invite you to read a few more times throughout this interview and I, in fact, we might even end up dissecting one of those poems a little bit later. But I wanna go back to the practical element of all of this. So you were writing poetry, submitting them to journals and you, and to awards, and you won a prize.

What was that? What was the movement from that to then getting your first poetry collection deal from other hands?

Joseph Fasano: So I had I guess I had won that prize in about 2008 and, surprisingly enough, and the cost of living was less than I was able to take the money I had won from that prize and buy a beaten up old 92 Chevy. Around in that for a little while and lived in the Hudson Valley and I took a teaching job at Manhattanville University and in Westchester, and I was teaching there and as I was teaching, I was writing. So I, I just did that. I taught and I wrote, and I dedicated [00:20:00] myself to trying to put together add things to the manuscript I had written when I was a graduate student. I knew when I finished graduate school that I didn't have a book yet. I maybe could have published something, but I'm glad that I didn't because I needed to wait until it ripened. And so the book went through many different forms and I had sent it, especially in the states. Fortunately, or

unfortunately, is mostly published through contests. and so unlike for example, fiction where, I have would have an, I have an agent and the agent would send it out on submission, and that has its own positives and negatives. Poetry is mostly submitted through contests. There's no money in poetry. I love that. I say we're free of the marketplace. So you submit it to a competition. It's read by some judges it's read by a panel of editors. For example, I was an editor at Alice James books later in my career and I read a lot there. Anyway a lot has to go right because you have to have a book that you feel is strong and [00:21:00] then it has to connect to the aesthetics of the judge. So a lot of ambivalent feelings we can have about the contest system. I got a call in 2011 from Cider Press Review out in San Diego.

A woman, lovely woman the name of Ruth Foley, was my editor out there, and she said that the poet Jean Marie Beaumont had, had selected my first book *Feud for Other Hands*. So that was wonderful. And it came out in 2013. And from there I, I published a lot of books pretty quickly.

I published two more books with Cider Press and then I went on to novels and

Parul - LWS: I have a few practical questions. I know I understand the process of submitting a novel. I understand a lot less about how to get a poetry collection published. First of all, are there many poetry publishers out there in the states, in the uk from what you understand?

Joseph Fasano: I don't know why I wanna say this, but they're both too few and too [00:22:00] many. I, I don't know if I really believe that. Yes, there are. There are so many people doing, God's work. They're just trying as hard as they can whether it's a micro press or a small press. and so you could publish through, one of those and then you might not get, you might not get a lot of help in publicizing the book.

It depends what your goals are, right? Some people just wanna say, this is my first thing, the poet Robert Lowell put out his first book with a very small press, and then he revised it in, won the poet, sir, with a second sort of. Book or version of it so you can really do whatever you'd like. But,

Parul - LWS: and do a lot of these publishers take direct submissions? Is that how it tends to work? These independent,

Joseph Fasano: tend to work that way. It tends to work that sometimes a publisher will have an open reading period, but usually it will be through a contest and usually it will be for a fee. And that's how the publishers run. So for example, as I say, I worked at Alice James books which is a wonderful poetry press in the United States. It has a decades long [00:23:00] history. I was very proud to work there. We took submissions. It was a nonprofit. He used the money for the submissions to

Parul - LWS: I.

Joseph Fasano: the contest and print the books. And so then there will be some finalists selected there. The board will select a winner of the prize and maybe publish another book as well.

But usually it's that kind of system. It's writers saying, here's my manuscript. I'm going to send it out to five or 10 competitions and see what happens. It's easy. For me to say, because I've gone through that process and I'm somewhat on the other side of the desk, so it, I have to be careful about what I say I also wanna say what I mean, think that. We are at a moment of an absolute revolution in publishing to publish something, to make something public. What does that even mean? I don't

think there's anything comparable to our age now than maybe the invention of the printing press. You can make your stuff available online. You can have it be seen by people, but we also still want, you want [00:24:00] an editor to, to be a voice for you and check you.

Sometimes, you don't want a world where maybe everything can just be out there right away. So it's a very tricky space to navigate right now. But I do think we have a lot of wonderful publishers who are doing really good work to publish books they believe in, even if there's no. Financial benefit for doing that, and that's what art needs, which is why it's such a disaster that the current administration we have in this country is aiming to cut funding from National Endowment for the Arts.

For example, my current publisher, BOA Additions, which is just my dream publisher, they're absolutely amazing. They've published so many poets I admire and I publish now with them. The NEA had promised them funding and the current administration cut it. And we all know why, of course silence artists, so it's tricky, but most of the poetry publishing comes from public funding government funding or as I say, a nonprofit where people are submitting fees to help pay for the publication of the [00:25:00] books.

Parul - LWS: And if someone's looking to understand who the different players are, the publishers are in this space with poetry, is there anywhere that you would guide them? Any resources online that they could search?

Joseph Fasano: question. There used to, I, it's been a long time since I've done that kind of browsing around, but there used to be a website called, I believe it's called New Pages. Some people may have heard of, and I remember used to, I used to go around there. The poet and Writers Magazine has a free resource online where you can scroll through and see different contests and contest deadlines. A little while since I've done that or helped my students go through that process. But yeah, I see the link coming up on the chat, so I must not have misspoken entirely.

Parul - LWS: Yeah, we'll share and we'll share that as well. As we publish the interview, I'd like to talk about your latest collection, which was published in 2024. That's the last song of the world. Now, at this point, you'd published several collections, and I'm curious about having gone through this process several times.[00:26:00]

Did you do anything differently? Had you learned certain lessons, having published a number of collections that meant you approached this collection, whether it was in the writing or the editing? Maybe even marketing that you did

Joseph Fasano: No.

Parul - LWS: you did differently.

Joseph Fasano: sure. I think that I suppose most writers are probably like me, that if you look at your bookshelf in that little section of your own books that you keep little tokens of. For years I didn't even do that. And then I thought, okay, let me at least hang on to them. I each one, you probably only realize in retrospect how much you were trying to do something a little different. My second book, for example, was a book called Inheritance. I really wanted to work with longer poems that braided in different narratives, different ideas, different perceptions to give a sense of what it's

like to have a, an active mind in the contemporary world. My third book was a book length poem that was in the voice of a particular person.

So I was always trying to do something a little bit different, when I [00:27:00] came to between the years 2018 and 2024. So there was that gap between collections of poems. I had published a book called *The Crossing* a Collection of Poems in 2018, and then I hadn't published a collection of poems for a few years because I was writing novels. I was still writing poems. But I must say that as I was getting these sentences out of me and the pages were adding up on the manuscripts of the novels on my desk. I returned to the shorter form of the lyric poem, and the last song of the world does have one or two or a couple longer poems, but for the most part comes back to the shorter, tight lyric poem, which is something I'm very interested in these days. so I would say that's something I was really aiming to do in this book.

Parul - LWS: And what is it? Why is it you wanted to do that? Is that because you felt more connected to the poem when you wrote that [00:28:00] way or because you felt that the reader was connecting with the.

Joseph Fasano: that's a really good question, and I think we have to look at that because, for example, these days when we look at social media, it's not very easy to share long poems. I always told myself though, I don't wanna reverse engineer anything I'm doing artistically. You gotta try to be in good faith with yourself.

We can trick ourselves, but I said to myself, look, I don't want to write short poems because they're gonna fit on a social media feed. If I'm writing short poems, then those are gonna be the ones that I'm gonna going to share and it's gonna work out. So I wanted social media to be a forum, not a forum, right?

And no. The reason I came back to the shorter poem is because I felt I had done so much work with the long dramatic monologue in a book I wrote called *Vincent*. And in this sort of sprawling fragmentary narrative mosaics of the crossing and *Inheritance*, I wanted the song like poem, I wanted this sort of very [00:29:00] brief moment in time, the impossible attempt to freeze a moment.

Parul - LWS: I love that. I've been thinking about that in regards to short stories. How do you have the world on a pin? How do you reduce a moment? And I'd love to hear an example. Maybe if you could read us a poem from that collection, the *Last Song of the World*. I'd love to hear an example.

Joseph Fasano: I would love to. So this is just a two stands poem called *Penelope and Odysseus*. And I imagine because we're speaking to other writers that needs no introduction. I will only say that I became very interested in the last couple years of my life the pitfalls of romantic over romanticizing a certain kind of love. that, I'm very interested in the real kind of love that in which two people pay the bills together, in which two people work out the messiness of life. And so this poem is written from that idea of stepping out of the myths and stepping into the mess of our lives. It's called *Penelope and Odysseus*, [00:30:00] not the moment when he slays the suitors in the palace. Their wild cries thicker than history, not the moment when he shows them all his great deeds, the dark scars, where they tied him from the sirens. Not the moment someone touches him in wonder and feels Hector's death, the flames of Troy, no land. Not any of those moments, no, not those. But the moment he stands face to face with only her and takes off the last of his armor and she comes to him and touches his shoulder, history is what happens when we step out of the myths and see the real mess standing before us. is what happens after that.

Parul - LWS: That's beautiful. I love that. [00:31:00] I love what you're trying to do with that as well.

Joseph Fasano: thank you.

Parul - LWS: Now, you have been for a long time, I feel like trying to preach the gospel of the, of poetry. You talk about poetry, what will come to your social media and a little bit, you have a following there, and this feels like it's culminated in your latest book, which is the magic words, simple poetry prompts that unlock the creativity in everyone.

Can you tell us a little bit about. What this book means to you.

Joseph Fasano: It is interesting that you say preaching the gospel. I'm someone who, I'm the very last person on earth who expected that he would come into a life of faith. And sure enough, I've had transformative experiences in my recent life that have brought me to that place. And the magic words is a book I couldn't have imagined writing even five years ago, let alone 10, 15, 20 years ago or more. I [00:32:00] think like a lot of writers, I shrouded myself the I don't know if I shrouded myself in willful difficulty in my writing, but there was always a an insecurity that can manifest itself by by not opening the doors wide democratically to art. I think so many people talk about accessibility in art as though it's a pejorative. Certainly you don't wanna write something that reduces the mystery of the world. But at the same time, I began working with children and I was on a visit to a school, a very aptly named Whitman Elementary School in New Jersey some years ago. the children wanted to learn about poetry. And on the way there, I thought, what am I going to do?

How am I going to introduce them to this art? And so I decided what they need is form. They have the imagination. And so I took some of the things that I know and have learned about constructing a poem. and I put together the, essentially these prompts that are fill in the blanks. They encourage the students to think about parts of [00:33:00] speech.

They encourage the students to think about image work come coming up with images from their subconscious. They don't have to worry too much about meaning. And these children used these prompts as a beginning and then they would write these wonderful things. And from there I started sharing with their permission and their parents' permission, I started sharing a few of these online. it took off. And I think it took off because coming out of the pandemic, I think so many people had so much inside. were things they weren't saying, there were things they weren't saying to themselves. this book is written for people who don't think of themselves as poets or even as writers or maybe who are having issues with communication. And so I started to get these miraculous emails of people saying, I know this was written for children, but my 95-year-old mother who's struggling with dementia wrote this poem. Or my my child who was autistic, wrote this poem. And as we started to share those [00:34:00] more and more, we realized there's a community here. There's people who really to be creating apart from those people who think of themselves as professional writers. And which is an imprint of Penguin Random House. And I put together this book, the Magic Words, and it's been just an unbelievable journey to see. And I travel and I talk to kids.

I talk to adults. I've had people use this book in prisons in elder care communities. I really feel it's a small part of the service that I can give back.

Parul - LWS: Actually, you open this book by saying poetry is what happens when we let ourselves be. I wonder if you can talk a little bit about that.

Joseph Fasano: I think in writing that line, in the introduction, I was thinking about the fact that as much as I've spoken in our chat today about my passion for craft, I don't think you can just sit down and write a poem spontaneously with, without really, I. Knowing craft and knowing form, actually paradoxically [00:35:00] frees us.

That's the great truth about art form is freedom. Form is not a constraint. There are forms in life, whether it be they societal forms or someone forcing you to write a sonnet when you don't want to. That are constraints that are artificial. But for the most part, when you really write something, be it a short story, a novel, an essay, a poem, or a concerto, you have found the forms that liberate precisely what needed to be articulated. And in that sense, this is why Yates used to say, I rhyme so that I can think. You can substitute rhyme for anything, but as much as I believe in that, I think that we are in a place right now where we could do some societal healing if people did connect with the complexity of their own imagination. Not everybody has to be a poet, but if we could all think a little more poetically, because what is poetic thinking? It's thinking as Keith said, that holds what he called negative capability. The ability to hold two conflicting [00:36:00] notions in our minds without any premature grasping after resolution. And what does the dark side of social media do except. Create more binary thinking. You agree or you disagree, it's black or it's white, it's this, or it's that. We all know this well. Part of the project that I don't really talk about this side of it, but I'm happy to say it here, is to just introduce a poetic way of thinking to more people, to young people, to people where they say, Hey, I wrote this thing, or most of the words are fasano's because it's just a prompt I filled in.

But when I was done, it looked like something I wanted to say, and it was much more complex than agreeing or disagreeing with a tweet or a social media post. So when I say poetry is what happens when we let ourselves be, maybe a poem doesn't happen when we just let ourselves be unless we've got the craft in our hands. But poetry with a capital P, the poetic way of thinking, holding ambivalence is holding ambiguities, holding complexities. If we could do more of that [00:37:00] and if we could, poetry and art be a larger part of the curriculum in schools. Unfortunately, creativity has been put on the shelf as some sort of luxury, cultural luxury, whereas really it's the bedrock of the health of any civilization. We've gotta try to do more and more of that, and so I hope that I'm doing my small part with a little book like this.

Parul - LWS: You certainly, if anyone just goes onto social media and has a look at your feed, you'll see the input that's coming in. The things that you are sharing, like you say, across the age ranges. I'd love to go into one of these templates. So the book is divided into themes, anger, love, silliness, and with within each section you've given us.

A template that, that anyone can use to, to create poetry. And I wonder if we might pick up on one of these examples maybe self-acceptance or maybe another one, and just talk a little bit around about, around that, the prompts and the template you're creating. And I guess [00:38:00] how we might use that if someone here,

Joseph Fasano: do that.

Parul - LWS: yeah.

Joseph Fasano: As I look at that page that you talk about, so the magic words is arranged with 51 prompts, and each one has a bit of an introduction. So the introduction is just very short. Pardon

me? And it speaks to a little bit about theme is a tough word because poems are very rarely orchestrate themselves around just one thing.

But I begin by putting us into a kind of headspace, right? And so for the self-acceptance prompt, I say, Audre Lord once wrote, nothing I accept about myself can be used against me to diminish me. go on to say a few more things about, what we mean by self-acceptance and the prompt itself.

It's funny, do you remember those? I don't know if you had these where you were, but remember the old Mad Libs series that it was fill in the blank according to a part of speech, and we used to get a good laugh outta that going on road trips in the late eighties and early nineties.

And the game there was that you fill in the blank with a certain part of speech without knowing what the context is, and that's what made it normally humorous. [00:39:00] in, in the magic words, what you're doing is you're reading through the prompt first and you're looking at the blanks that are there.

So it's quite the opposite of that. So this begins, for example, the blank cannot help being blank. The blank cannot help being blank. And I guide the writer through those blanks. So the first one, I say, okay, put an animal here, put an adjective here, put a plant here, put an adjective there. Now it may sound all a little bit arbitrary, a little bit hokey, but when you do it, the idea is you can unlatch from your conscious thinking. can allow for. You've read the line, you have a semi-conscious sense of what it's about, and now you allow your mind to conjure an image that comes up. You say, might say, I don't know why I thought of an eagle, but I'm gonna put an eagle there. I don't know why I thought of a cactus. I'm gonna put a cactus there.

And as you go through the piece, you find that material is coming up from the unconscious. So one way to use the magic words is to do it quite literally the way a five or a 6-year-old or a [00:40:00] 92-year-old might, if they choose to fill in the blanks and that's their piece for the day. It's like a journaling exercise. Another way might be that's a starting point. And I started there and those images came up, and now that they came up, I ask myself. Why was I thinking about an eagle in a cactus? Why was I thinking about the moon in the pine trees looking my sister in a long silk dress. What is that?

And you begin to change the words that I've presented in the prompt and form the poem from there. And that's where it dovetails into some of the exercises I give at the end of the book, which are a little bit more freeform. So I hope in that way the book has these layers to it of accessibility and of use.

Parul - LWS: De definitely, and I, when I was going through this, I just, in my head was answering the blanks, and then what I came out with was something rough, but it was something, and I might just go through it. I don't have it written down, but I thought it [00:41:00] was interesting because I read it out loud to myself and I was like, oh, I didn't expect to not hate it because, it's a template you're creating on the fly.

If I were to read this self-acceptance poem, and this is just me filling in the blanks and I'm making it up on the fly, it sounds like this, the tiger cannot help being fierce. The lily cannot help being vulnerable. The moon cannot help being cold, and I cannot help being Pearl. Even in my sleep, I dream of tears even in my sadness.

I love my son. I swim in the rivers of my darkness. I climb through the mountains of my mind. I travel for years and years. And on the other side is me, beautiful me, my poetic self is running in the wind. And that's just [00:42:00] me on the fly trying to create this. And I was taken aback by the fact that I had a form.

And you're doing this for so many people. There are thousands of people online creating this and submitting it to you. And so my question to you is, okay, so I have this. And so anyone who buys this book or uses the prompts online can run through this. Can you tell me why you've used this kind of rhythm and structure?

What is going on that makes you feel like a story?

Joseph Fasano: right? So

Parul - LWS: I.

Joseph Fasano: the hope. Is that what someone will do, like yourself. So you've just filled in the blanks and you've created this thing, which by the way is striking. And now the hope is you say exactly that question you asked. So someone who's a younger child, someone who's not too interested, just wants to journal, might say, okay, there it is. It helped me with something. It was cathartic. I'll move on with my day. But a writer, you [00:43:00] might look at it and you might say, what happened there? And then you turn toward the back of the book, and I give some examples, okay, what's going on with rhythm? What's going on with repetition? How might a poem use some of these techniques? And my intention at some point is to write another volume that gets more into, I'm currently writing sort of a textbook about poetry. So people can refer to, okay, now I wanna learn about those. This, the magic words is like the gateway. This is hopefully the gateway drug into poetry where people say, something happened there. I know that Fasano is using some techniques with repetition, with certain rhythms, cadences of the English language, that sort of thing. how could I use that myself in my work? And that's what a lot of my teaching does. We focus on, for example, what you mentioned, cadence, rhythm, masistic work where lines break. But this poem, this book is written so that you can feel it before you think it, which is very strange. So in other words, the journey into [00:44:00] writing is often I either do the intellectual work or I just feel it. This book is written so that if you can follow me, you feel the intellectual work. You

Parul - LWS: You've done that. You've done that for us.

Joseph Fasano: yes, exactly.

Parul - LWS: I.

Joseph Fasano: but you're still not just spontaneously writing something on the page. You're being guided to just as I did when I was a young boy and I wrote out by hand poems that I liked and I couldn't have said then, oh, that's an inversion, that's a trochaic foot. But I felt that trying to give people that experience which I hope is intoxicating and leads people into the art of poetry.

Parul - LWS: I know a lot of people who write poetry just very much without any training at all, just have thoughts or an experience and they put it down on the page. Given what you're teaching here, is there any advice that you would give someone who wants to start asking these same questions but about their own work?

I've written a piece, I like it, I know it's very amateur. [00:45:00] How can I make this more professional? How can I make this connect better with the reader?

Joseph Fasano: I think so. I think that, so I mentioned this textbook that I'm writing right now, and I try to break it up into a couple different sections. I think that. One of the major things that, that you have to think of when you're writing a verse is rhythm and cadence. The English language is a profoundly rhythmic language, mostly because of our inheritance from the Germanic languages. So you know much more than for example, ancient Greek, which had its own prosody. And so we have this term we've inherited from the French free verse. and of course everybody makes jokes about it. TSE said, no verse is really free. that's right. What he means is that I would, I use a different term, I call it organic verse, what I mean is that free or organic verse is simply poetry that does not have a preconception of the forms that it will be using, but that as it goes [00:46:00] along. Understands what forms it needs to find on a more local level. For example, there's a beautiful poem by Denise Levertov, great poet, 20th century poet. The poem is called Cadman. Cadman is a half historical, probably half apocryphal figure who's thought of as one of the first poets to write in a language we might recognize as English northumbrian, really? And this poem is in his voice. It's a persona poem, and it begins awkwardly because he's stumbling, he can't find the language. And toward the end, it finds its stride, and it says That hand of fire touched my lips and scorched my tongue and pulled my voice into the ring of the dance. You can hear it now, we could get technical and say it's trochaic at first bump Babu, and then into the ring of the dance Babu. And when I show that to my students, they say, oh my goodness, he learned how to walk and then he learned how to dance. I can feel it. [00:47:00] And, you can't write that poem if we don't know what to do with cadences. How to speed up a line, how to slow down a line, how to use what we call double or triple meters. One of the best things two people can tell me, if I see someone write something on one of my poems, or sometimes even if I get criticism oh, where's the craft in this poem? I don't need you to see it. I just need you to feel it, to know it's there. So some of my poems will engage internal rhyme or end on a very strict five beat line. and it's invisible. You can't quite tell. But I think the craft work has to go. I. Has to be behind that. So the advice would be to study these techniques. And as I say, there are a lot of places you can go. some books that are better than others. There are MFAs or there are, as I say, individual classes, seek out writers you admire. I can't be the only one out there who answers my email, so there's probably, people write to me and I'll, I might give them, try to give them some advice or tell 'em they [00:48:00] could work with me. We live in a good age for auto didacticism and for individual instruction. And I think seeking that out, finding your community of fellow writers, such as you have here.

Parul - LWS: What are some common mistakes that you see writers make in the early days of writing poetry? Things that we could consider. We're working our second and third drafts of a poem. I.

Joseph Fasano: It's a difficult question. I think everybody has such a unique, one thing I will say is this. See, poetry is a unique art form insofar as if we were painters. might go to a museum one day sit down with our palettes and imitate and we would learn like that. We would copy. Now we would look at a Caravaggio and study the way he works with light and try to copy something.

You can't do that in poetry. Really. Whatcha gonna do simply, as I say, write out as I was doing the language. think more poets need to be not afraid in their earlier career [00:49:00] of imitating, because the point is, I think the mistake that a lot of very young writers make is they think they have to publish everything and they have to publish right away. I think probably I'm the last generation who have social media at the beginning. So yes, now I'm really passionate about putting things

online, but I'll speak for myself and say I don't think that would've helped me if I had been 19, 18 years old. I. And putting stuff online. There are a lot of people who are more talented than I am, probably writing things at that age that are really great. But I think giving yourself the time to imitate in your notebook see how other poets moved through the page, to have your solitary apprenticeship to study, to read and then think about publication. So you asked earlier if you know this question about are there a lot of publishers, poetry publishers? And that's the only thing I meant when I said there are too many. Of course there aren't too many. I want there to be a lot of poetry out there. these [00:50:00] days, if you've written a poem, you get it out there somewhere, if you really wanted to, it might be on somebody's blog, you might share it on your social, whatever it might be. And I, that's fine. I'm a big advocate for actually undermining a little bit of the system. That I'll share a lot of my new work online. I would, I always talk to my younger students and I say, onto it for a second. Let it ripen on the vine and you could share it if you really want to. But not everything has to be out there in the world. So quickly. again, I it's relative to where you are, and that's why I don't wanna sound hypocritical in saying that, but if I were speaking especially to younger writers I would say that

Parul - LWS: If I want to write about a moment in time, so say something happened to me and I'm trying to, maybe, I'm still early in my poetry writing. Are there any prompts that you could give me to help me [00:51:00] explore my memory, my imagination,

Joseph Fasano: yes,

Parul - LWS: or what I see in front of me?

Joseph Fasano: Especially if it's something that you feel has happened to you, I'll speak from my own experience. The best thing you can do is trick yourself because you can never come right at it. for example not to get too personal, but my grandfather passed away yesterday I couldn't sit down. Thank you. And I couldn't sit down and write about that. You need time to take it in. But even when I do, I think that the prompt that I would suggest to myself and therefore suggest to others is I do these exercises where you come at it in a slanted way. So you don't sit down and say something about your grandfather. You say to yourself, I'm gonna write about, I'm gonna write five lines about an animal and the way it moves through the world. I'm gonna see if that unlocks my unconscious, a memory that I might have about my grandfather. And so I might begin with something. The way a horse moves through the lemon trees, the, something about the [00:52:00] strength of its withers.

Something about the vulnerability and the narrowness of its ankles. Aha. Now all of a sudden I'm writing about my grandfather and vulnerability and strength 'cause I've gotten there through an image. And that's one way we can come at poetry and this is what I think Emily Dickinson means when she says, tell the truth, but tell its land. don't, in poetry, you hear this a lot, we don't wanna observe the truth intentionally to be artful or ornamental. And that would be us as the writer avoiding a truth. Instead when Dickinson says, tell the truth, but tell it sl. I think she means a poem is a landscape that witnesses what it's like to be a human being that we can't quite approach it head on with that lightning that would blind us all. So there's a subtle difference between I'm writing this poem [00:53:00] and it wants to be a little bit cryptic, and that's what it's like to be a human being, thinking about something troubling or when my poetic conscience knows that the poem really does want to go into something and I am using craft and artfulness to avoid it. And I think we have to, we're always honing our ability to tell where one ends and one begins. But that's what I would say par to do an exercise like that. And I have many that I give to my students, but the animal one tends to really resonate with people because it puts us in the body.

Parul - LWS: So it sounds like you're choosing a constraint in order to unleash the imagination and maybe the

Joseph Fasano: I think that's a

Parul - LWS: subconscious.

Joseph Fasano: it. I think that's a beautiful way to put it. And just as I say, you know that's what I think we discover again and again, that form and freedom are not enemies it comes to art. It's that moment where just as we're speaking now in language that is hopefully mostly grammatic from my [00:54:00] end,

There, it's only the constraint that allows the expression.

Parul - LWS: And if I would, if I wanted to say, do an exercise where I sit and I maybe sit in the garden or in a park and just watch the world go by and I want to collect what I see, collect words to put into a poem, what, how might I approach that? What, how might a poet approach that?

Joseph Fasano: I think the best thing that you can do is. Reading is inhaling, writing is exhaling. You can't have the breath until you do the inhaling. So it's just, if you're walking around and you're saying, my goodness, there's something about the call of the birds this morning and the way that locomotive that went by interrupted it, that just speaks to

Parul - LWS: Okay.

Joseph Fasano: If you're finding that it's very difficult to get started on the page, read poems, get the sounds of something in your ear, latch onto a phrase, latch onto a cadence, say, oh my goodness, what was Cummings doing here? What was [00:55:00] Dunn doing here? What was Plath doing here? What would contemporary poets doing here? and poems tend to start not with an idea, with a phrase of music or with an image. And so the best thing I think you can do like in a chemical solution, if you were to put something in. Things that are dissolved in the solution suddenly gather and precipitate and crystallize around it. That's what you need to begin a poem. You don't always start at the beginning. It's image that came to me the moon in the pine trees or a phrase that I woke up thinking about. I'm gonna put it on the page and I'm gonna play telescope and expand on it. Connect it metaphorically to something build the poem. Poems tend to, in my experience, ACCR accrue in that way and grow. It really is like a process of organic growth.

Parul - LWS: I'd love to look a little bit at your writing process, if you don't mind and maybe there's a poem [00:56:00] we could explore. If there's a poem that you particularly love, I'd love for you to read it and then for us to just discuss a little bit about how that came to be and how you ended up editing it.

If there's a poem that you particularly love, I'd love for you to read that.

Joseph Fasano: I don't know if I would speak of any poems as things that I love, but I'll speak of a short poem of mine, that quite a few people have read for better or worse. And I think it comes from an interesting place at least. And then I'll try to speak about things that then I'm happy to speak about here that I don't normally speak about, which is process.

So there was a poem that I wrote quite literally for the exact occasion that the title articulates, which is for a student who used AI to write a paper. I tend to write some poems these days that are occasional or that are epistolary or that are aimed at a particular audience. So I wrote this very short poem, thinking about artificial intelligence in our world today and. Very often people do understand this poem. I think the one thing to [00:57:00] keep in mind is it's not a poem about doing homework. It's a poem about how we get caught up in shortcuts and when we get caught up in shortcuts and what seem like the innocuous parts of our lives, we can end up in very serious situations where we might look into the eyes of someone we love and think, I've forgotten how to do the work. I've forgotten how to do work. And so I'll just read the short poem and then I'll say one or two remarks about the craft of it. that the craft is anything remarkable or that this poem should be held up as an exemplar, but just to show you a sense of my process. So it goes like this. Now I let it fall back in the grasses. I hear you. know this. Life is hard. Now I know your days are precious on this earth, but what are you trying to be free of the living, miraculous task of it. Love is for the ones who love the work. So I drafted that poem and as I was going through it, [00:58:00] I reminded myself that don't think poetry works well when it's self-righteous.

When it's like I know the truth and you don't. 'cause Lord knows I don't know the truth. I think we need to always meet the reader at a place of compassion and understanding. And isn't that true about being a teacher or being a father? Both of which I am. And so I wanted to make sure I had that. I hear you.

I know this. Life is hard now. People are balancing many things. People are struggling. I know your days are precious on this earth. And then there's a craft technique that I have in this poem that I hope is invisible until we look at it. And it's something I call burying the rhyme. And I share this with my students and I'm happy to share it with your listeners. Mentioned earlier that the great poet Yates said, I rhyme so that I can think. But Yates was thinking about rhyme in, in, in his own way. And Yates was, writing at a time. Very often when he was thinking about rhyme, he was more than likely thinking about end [00:59:00] rhyme at the end of a line.

Of course, Yates is, was a great master and he knew about and used techniques such as internal rhyme and various different things. The point is that when people look at maybe free verse or contemporary, what I call organic verse, they might look at it and say rhyme isn't being used. And of course, that's mostly true of end rhyme. And let me use this quick analogy. If we were traveling in a car in those old FM radio stations and a radio station popped on for just two or three seconds, very quickly you'd be able to say, oh, that's 1950s station. That's a sixties station, that's a seventies station. Why? Because for the most part, every era has its music.

Its sound. Its sound is related to its sensibility. And so if we were to look at a poem nowadays, let's say a strictly written Shakespearean sonnet with five beat lines and a rhyming couplet at the end, and so on and so forth, there are people who write beautiful, successful sonnets nowadays.

I. [01:00:00] I would say for the most part it might ring as a little nostalgic. The music for some reason doesn't ring as the music of our age. Now that's a very deep question we could get into at another time. Like why is that? What is it about chaos and order and what we feel is too ordered or true or not true? But I think that what poems always need to have, even if they're not using the techniques of earlier ages of poetry, is at least a feeling of inevitability. What all we wanna do when we write a poem is have the reader feel when we get to the end. It had to be that way. And we can use any number of techniques to do that. And one technique that I often use when I'm writing free or what I call organic verse is I'll do something called burying the rhyme. And I'll place at the, usually

at the end of a line or a terminal stop a couple lines up from the end of the poem, I will put a word that rhymes with the final word of the poem. As a matter of fact, I'm writing a chapter in my [01:01:00] textbook on poetry now about the mathematics of poetry. this is not meant to be overly academic. It's meant to be the way that we look at the shape of an oak leaf or the circulatory system of an elephant. And we say nature abides by mathematical laws made.

And we find those beautiful. And so if you look at a lot of the poems that I have, you will see these. I don't need the reader to know this, but I do it. see that, oh, maybe seven lines through. He put a rhyming word and then seven lines later, there's a word that rhymes at the end. I refer to those as gestures in the poem, and the reader just feels it.

So here, for example, the last line is work. Love is for the ones who love the work. if you can hear the word that I used. It's a half rhyme earlier. Now. I let it fall back in the grasses. I hear you. I know this. Life is hard. Now I [01:02:00] know your days are precious on this earth, but what are you trying to be free of?

The living, the miraculous task of it. Love is for the ones who love the work

Parul - LWS: I hear it now.

Joseph Fasano: and you hear it and so again, then when I come to the final line, I'm also using, we call a five beat line. Love is for the ones who love the work bump, which we perceive as hopefully interesting, if not beautiful. Both because the five beat line is the strongest line in English. The history of English prosody and also because look at my hand, we have five fingers, and five is a number that resonates with us. So I know I'm saying a lot to your question, but the point is, think about these things a great deal. How is poetry related to the mathematics of nature? So that when someone reads a poem, just feel and my little poems maybe just touch what other great poems can really do, but they feel [01:03:00] a rightness about it in a mysterious way that you look at an oak leaf and say, there it is, right. That's what we're all aiming for. Whether I'll ever achieve that, I don't know. That's very much part of my process, and it comes out a little in the composition and a little in the revision.

Parul - LWS: Great, thank you. So a little bit of a time check for me. I have a few more questions for Joseph. If you have any questions, please do put them in the chat and we'll have, you'll have an opportunity to ask Joseph yourself. Joseph, I wanna ask you a little bit about your writing rituals. So first of all, do you have any rituals that matter to you that you've taken on to help you focus?

Joseph Fasano: Know I have rituals that help me not write. I'm I'm always for better or worse writing or sketching out an idea carrying a notebook with me. Strangely enough, at this point in my life, what I actually need [01:04:00] are things that me away from that space. I'm someone who does a lot of prayer.

I do centering prayer, reflection, time in nature. so the rituals of getting into the writing are less the problem than making sure I'm also coming out of that space at least consciously breathing in the world. And and breathing in as much as I'm breathing out,

Parul - LWS: And where do you write? Do you have

Joseph Fasano: alright, all

Parul - LWS: a at home?

Joseph Fasano: If I'm working on a novel, it will be at wherever my writing desk is. My first novel I wrote in a couple different places. I was down in the Southern United States for a little while. I wrote most of it in New York. My next novel I wrote mostly in in quarantine, during the pandemic in New York City.

And I'm usually just right at my writing desk and I'll check in the morning and I'll try to check out at night. Poems on the other hand will come with me. They'll travel with me either in my head or [01:05:00] literally in my hands or in a notebook. And I'm always carrying, as it were, a bunch of them with me. I might be driving on a road, pull to the side and say, okay, I finally found those two or three lines that go here. Poetry, I find, except for those rare poems that come out all at once, I find poetry to be that kind of gathering, accruing experience, and and so I can work on poems really wherever I am. And sometimes at any time of the day or night.

Parul - LWS: What's your approach to structure? Do you think about structure for your novels or your poetry beforehand, or is it something that you've just learned now in the.

Joseph Fasano: I think as I've suggested, I think what happens is you. I'm no athlete, but I would imagine it's like the way an athlete has muscle memory where you train to have certain behaviors and then they all flow together when it's game time. I think what you can do is you can get certain craft in your hands, as it were, so that you're more likely to accomplish the draft of the poem.

[01:06:00] Let's say when it happens, then you go in and you listen to it. What is this trying to be? How do I now more consciously shape it? Hopefully not from an external sense, but allowing the form to blossom from within when it comes to novels. God, anyone who's written a novel will know some, you get to a point a couple years in where you think, why have I created this problem for myself?

It's a massive puzzle. Sometimes that can be interesting and delightful, and other times it can be tricky. I. The novels that I've written, I have usually begun with a general sense only of where the plot is going. I'm more, I like to get familiar with the characters very deeply, so I learn about my characters.

I free write about my characters. I put charts up on the wall. What is their birthday? What is their favorite flavor of ice cream? What do they dream about? Doesn't matter if none of this gets in the book. And then I let the story unfold from the characters, and usually I'll get to a point where I say, okay, I [01:07:00] know where this has to go, and I'll start to chart it out from there.

Parul - LWS: I heard you say that you wrote several novels that didn't work, but that time wasn't wasted for you. I'm curious about what you learned from the earlier attempts that writing a novel that you've then used for your published novels.

Joseph Fasano: Yeah, some of them were, so in my first novel, was just a story in me that I had to come out and I wrote that. And then between my first and my second novel, I wrote two others. That so far I just have not been able to bring to success. I think one of the things I've learned is that, in a way when you're trying to write something like a novel you're always trying to solve some problems. It could be, for example, something like moving from writing a first person novel to writing a third person novel, and you wanna learn more about really how third person, the magic that third person

can do. with the two novels that I've shelved one of [01:08:00] them I felt I had this phenomenal, I still feel I have this phenomenal idea for this plot, I can't really find the voice of the character. And so I've learned something in drafting that about I. Plot and weaving in subplot. the novel itself doesn't work, in my opinion, because the character really doesn't come to life. He's wooden and just doesn't work. So I think that's a way in which you can learn an aspect of writing, if the book doesn't come together with all the aspects that it needs. And you also learn how to self edit and censor yourself. And unfortunately, you can get to a point in your career where you where you don't doubt yourself enough in a way. You begin by doubting yourself too much, and then you get to a point where you say, oh, but no, I never wanna do that.

And put something out that I'm not. One doesn't, you don't really mind if the reviews are positive or negative really did what you needed to do. But if you put something out that you're not behind, that's just [01:09:00] gonna tear you up,

Parul - LWS: looks like we have some time for more questions. I don't see any questions in the chat. We've had some submitted beforehand. I'll get to those in a moment. I'd like to talk a little bit just to close out I'd like to talk about your use of social media because it's, I noticed that both on X and on Instagram, you have, I think, 90,000 followers on either channel.

Can you tell us a little bit about your relationship with those channels? Has it been useful for you as a poet? And if so, how is it simply just having a, a place to reach an audience? Anything else you can tell us about that?

Joseph Fasano: It's about community really. It's about, the fact that the writing life can be very isolating. And I imagine if that's the case for me, it's the case for a lot of people. And there was a point in my life I talked about my faith. I touched on that a moment ago a few moments ago, and there was a point at which I decided, look, it's very [01:10:00] clear, as we all know, that social media can be just absolutely toxic and like anything, but there are these corners where people have genuinely reached out to people and said, look, this is something I'm doing. We can gather around in a little community here. In my case, it's a lot of people who care about ways in which language can be used. For good, for clarity, for beauty, for mystery, not for the kind of political manipulation and. Pure advertising and that sort of stuff that you see all the time. so I started to focus on social media. I don't know I didn't use it at all when I was beginning my career. I was not in that place. I needed to be in my own little shell and I needed to write and find my voice. But at some point I started to think of it not just as self-promotion. I think of it as service, like giving back to a community.

And that's what I try to do with my poetry prompts. Here are some resources, here are some tools.

Parul - LWS: It is a lovely [01:11:00] part of the internet actually going on. Your social media feed is a breath of fresh air 'cause it's just about poetry and craft and ideas.

Joseph Fasano: Thanks. Yeah. No I hope so. And, also because as I say, I believe that publishing is changing. I like the idea of being able to say, Hey, I've written something a couple months ago, and and I do wanna share it with people, or I've written something that I think is timely and I, and if I were to publish it in x, y, Z review, it would, come out in a year or two.

And so I think there's that part of it too. But no I have a really wonderful relationship with a lot of the people on my social media, in my social media communities, and I've done some programming

around that. So it started, during the pandemic, I was doing something I think a lot of people were doing.

I was reading poems aloud, and giving people a connection to the human voice. During lockdown, I started a program called The Poem for You series, where I brought in friends and colleagues, writers, actors, who would read poems to other people by request. I did another program called the Poetry [01:12:00] Lifeline. People would write in and say, I just want to hear a poem today. Either I want you to read this one to me, or just a poem about grief, or a poem about joy. And I got together a community, so it was very interesting. At some point it would be one person who would request and I would connect them to the next person who requested. And just digitally, there were these people reading poems to each other all around the world. Of course I do all that work for free. I just enjoy it. I think it's something that, I need, I would need at certain times. So know. I think in those spaces, as long as you're authentic and doing something that you really feel can be of service people are gonna respond to that.

And and it gives me a lot of, it gives me a lot of joy. I.

Parul - LWS: So if someone here wanted to start sharing their work online, is the advice simply to find a cadence and stick to it? Is there anything else you would do? Advice that they do?

Joseph Fasano: No I, as you say, I would think that if you're beginning, your work, and think those, [01:13:00] the channels that are in place are still very good at honing the excellence of what you're trying to do. So I would still, submit to literary journals and if you're not doing the MFA, study craft and those sorts of things, but if you've got a body of work and you feel like you wanna share it there's, yeah, we have this basis where you can do that but don't go into it like expecting a certain response or something because that's gonna shape your work and you're gonna start writing your work like for an audience or for a particular, and that's just never the way art should be, artists should make audiences more than audiences should make art. So as soon as you start thinking like, oh, I wanna post this thing just because it's going to be popular, or this is a hot button issue, you're probably not really writing anymore. You're just doing a kind of a kind of marketing which can get really bad.

There are a lot of times where, you know, even though I have a nice audience, I'll just unplug for a while and I'll tell everybody, I need to go into my silence and my solitude and find what's true in my voice right now. What am I trying to write? What am I trying to say? it [01:14:00] ends up connecting with an audience, that's great. Sometimes the poems that you're not the proudest of or you don't feel that have done your most interesting work, connect with more people. But if you've done it in good faith and it helps people, that's great. That's great. But there's a whole, it's funny because I think there, there are some people who know my work through what's posted online, and I'm very proud of that work. And, but there's only a certain tip of the iceberg that can be seen there. And I can't post my whole novels. I can't post my longer poems. So I would hope that people people would then use that to explore, the books that I spent years writing and think, oh, maybe there's this whole other side, person.

But that's how I think about social media in general. Hopefully it's a gateway that people can enter into, if not my work, of course, than just poetry, art. What language can do?

Parul - LWS: We have a couple of questions. Thank you so much. We have a couple of questions that have been submitted beforehand, so I'm [01:15:00] gonna turn to those. As there are no questions in

the chat at the moment, I will leave the videos off. If you'd like to turn your video on, let me know and then I'll enable that for you.

Colleen asks, what were the most important actions you took and events that happened along your path as a poet? Now, obviously we've covered some of this, but maybe there's a relatively quick answer to that idea.

Joseph Fasano: A relatively quick answer to that actions that I took,

Parul - LWS: Actions you took and events that happened along your path as a poet.

Joseph Fasano: I would say events would be the great writers that I met working with Mark Strand was a revelation. He didn't tell me much about my poetry. Instead he talked to me about being strong and being a poet and following your vision. I remember when I gave him my manuscript of my. He and Richard Howard were my readers, my thesis manuscript readers at Columbia University. And I walked into the meeting expecting, a conversation. Of course I knew them well. I, by then I had spoken to and [01:16:00] they looked at me and Mark said, oh, I'm not too worried about you. And I thought that's it. And then we instead talked more about the life of poem what we've been talking about today, following your vision, not compromising what you really wanna do, just because it's not something that gets accepted to a particular literary journal. So that would be something, that the great people that, that I've had the privilege of working with, mark, I say, Richard Howard, Lucy Brock, Brodo, and others,

Parul - LWS: That's beautiful. Liz asks what does it mean to you when your art helps someone? I.

Joseph Fasano: means everything to me. rather I. is gonna sound disingenuous I really feel this way. would rather get a note from somebody saying this thing that you wrote made me feel understood, even if it's about the darkest thing in the world, [01:17:00] than I would win a iterate, then I would like to win another literary prize or something like that. the prizes are nice and because it, people in your field respect you and it shows that but like to feel that somebody has been assuaged and they're aloneness. Because I think anyone who reads my work knows that I have a beautiful life, but at the core of it, like a lot of people, there're very often, there's very often a real deep aloneness. And if I've written something to help somebody feel that, that's understood in them. It means everything to me.

Parul - LWS: I believe that. And maybe one final question for me as we close out. You spoke, you've spoken about being part of a monastic order. Can you tell me a little bit about spirituality or how you see your spirituality connected to your creativity?

Joseph Fasano: I'm writing my memoir now, [01:18:00] finally. And it is the story of my life and art, but it's also the story about how about two years ago I had a this topic turned some people off, but I can only be true to myself. And I had a really, a religious conversion. I was at a place in my life where I just, that was the last thing I would've expected. and it came to me and I started visiting a monastery in upstate New York called Holy Cross Monastery in West Park. And and I've become an associate of that order which just means that I'm associated with the community in a way that I, in whatever ways I feel I can give back. And so I try every day to follow rule of life. that rule of life was developed with the help of a wonderful man named Brother Bernard up at that monastery. And I try to do one piece of that is worship in my life. Another piece of it is practicing the modest gifts that I have and sharing them in a way that can be of service. [01:19:00] So I never thought of my work that way when I was younger, and I don't really let it determine what I'm writing. I don't wanna write

things that are dogmatic or that I don't censor myself I will try to even on a day when I don't wanna share something, if I feel like sharing it will help somebody, I'll try to do that. Or I'll set aside a couple hours a day to try to answer emails or correspondence or letters or things like that because I want to. And so that's the way in which my service hopefully, interacts with my artistic life. I just think that however modest your gifts might be, there's just a point at which you have to use them maybe your audience will appreciate this or not, but. I think we all know that writers can be wonderful people and they could also be, raging narcissists. And sometimes you go to a poetry conference or literary conference and you're just like, nobody is listening to anybody. [01:20:00] Everyone's just waiting for their turn to get up and read and it just can be very empty very quickly. And I don't know. I think that we have this, again, binary thinking, right? It's either you're writing this kind of poetry that doesn't care in some sense, that is like insent and pushes back, or you're writing this sentimental stuff that's like a Hallmark card. No. What about the whole great middle ground of life? you are writing for somebody else. You are writing something that hopefully is not willfully obscure. It's as complex as life could be. But so I, my spiritual beliefs dovetail with my aesthetics. In that way, that's always changing. But that I'm always thinking about.

Parul - LWS: Thank you for sharing that, and thank you for being honest. I love that you have, that you are true to, you're, you are truthful about who you are. Joseph, what parting line might you leave us with? We're a room of writers [01:21:00] or an audience of writers who tonight or tomorrow will pick up the pen or go back to our laptops and start writing?

Is there anything you would have us think about or consider?

Joseph Fasano: Yeah. There's one thing that I would say sometimes, Louise Glick used to speak about the weakest part in our homes or in our pieces of writing maybe end ending up what we think is the weakest ends up being the strongest. And I think it's because we confuse weakness with vulnerability. And so I would say. Try to do the thing in your poem or in your piece that you think poetry can't do or you think fiction can't do that you think is ugly that you think you know?

No, imagine Whitman writing in his notebooks, those first couple lines of his great poems and thinking, people are not gonna think this if they're gonna think, this is not poetry, I'm gonna do it. Or I mentioned Hopkins, people are gonna think this sounds mad, but I'm gonna do it. so we have a lot of like really competent poets these days and that's wonderful. [01:22:00] risk the weirdness on the occasional ugliness of greatness. And we may never get there, but we could try that.

Parul - LWS: I am taking that to heart. I will think of that when I next write. Thank you so much, Joseph. What's next for you? What are you working on now? You alluded to a memoir and also a second book.

Joseph Fasano: Yes, I'm working on a memoir and I'm putting together a volume of my, selected and new poems, which will come out in 2027. And I'm putting the finishing touches on a small book that I've written for my son who's only three and a half years old. And that book will come out in December with Malin House Press outta Chicago, and I'm very proud of it.

It's a little fable and I hope it's for the child in all of us.

Parul - LWS: Great. I look forward to seeing your work. Definitely consider us firm fans. If someone wants to stay in touch with you or reach out to you, what's the best way to do that? Is it on Instagram

Joseph Fasano: Yes. I think the

Parul - LWS: next?[01:23:00]

Joseph Fasano: would be to be on on Instagram. And or really I'm on all the social media feeds. That's the easiest way to get in touch with me. Again, Fasano Academy. I have a website but my email is just the Fasano academy@gmail.com and me or someone on my team is always checking that.

So that'll go right to me. And yeah, email, reach out anytime I do the best that I can. I'll be taking on some new students in the next couple weeks and months. And I usually offer a class. Once once a month, a group class on a particular topic. I'm also doing on July 27th, I'm doing a free online webinar talking about spirituality and these, some of these topics we touched on here, healing, healing the soul through, through contemplative practice. But all that stuff is on my social media. If people want to plug in there and reach out and I'm here.

Parul - LWS: Great. Thank you so much, Joseph. I'm so pleased we got to have this chat. It's been really soulful, actually diving into your work, your craft, how you think about [01:24:00] creativity. And friends, thank you for sticking around. I invite you to unmute yourself. You can also turn your video on if you fancy it, let Joseph see the lovely writers who've been in this room, and let's give Joseph a London writer salon.

Round of applause. Thank you so much.

Chrissie Loveday: Thank you.

seb: Thank you.

Joseph Fasano: Thank you everyone. So wonderful to see your faces. Thank you.

Parul - LWS: Thank you so much, Joseph. And thank you everyone for coming here. Thank you for being here. We're gonna, we're recording this. We're gonna produce this and send the notes out afterwards. And if you have any questions for Joseph, please do reach out to him. But that's it. Have a lovely rest of your day.

So pleased that we could do this.

Joseph Fasano: Bye

Parul - LWS: so much. Thanks Joseph. Thanks friends. Bye.