

S2E14 The Poetics of Parenting: Poet and Educator Ben Berman's Take on Writing While Parenting

[00:00:00] **Ben:** Embracing my children in the life of a father in particular. I want to say parent, but I think father for me gives me both immediacy and some distance in terms of the expectations and the reality of how much you can sometimes be involved thinking of that as the writing material. So I'm not choosing, I'm merging the two, right?

I'm trying to find a way to say that the most complex themes are often right in front of us. And if what is right in front of us is a four-year-old throwing her socks in the toilet, I want to make room for that in my poetry as well. So for me, I think that allowed the choice to dissolve. And to say, I'm not going to try to write some great literature that's detached from the reality of my life.

And of my life, my children are the most wonderful and important thing to me. As difficult as parenting is, that's like, where my heart always is. And to really think about, well, how do you make that? [00:01:00] Your creative engagement as opposed to thinking of them in opposition to one another.

[00:01:09] **Kaitlin:** I'm your host, Kaitlin Solimine and this is the Postpartum Production Podcast. Here we hold conversations about the intersection of caregiving, creative practice, and capitalist production, as well as what it means to be producing art while also being a parent in modern society. Find out more@www.postpartumproduction.com where you can also sign up for our newsletter.

We are capping off our season of Conversations on the Postpartum Production Podcast today with Ben Berman, who is the author of three books of poems and the new collection of humorous and literary essays, *Writing While Parenting*. He has won the Peace [00:02:00] Corps Award for the Best Book of Poetry, has twice been shortlisted for the Massachusetts Book Awards, and has received awards from the Massachusetts Cultural Council, New England Poetry Club, and Somerville Arts Council.

He's been teaching for 25 years and currently teaches creative writing classes at Brookline High School. He lives in the Boston area with his wife and two daughters. We are excited to share this with you and also wanted to say that we

appreciate you for continuing to come back to us to listen to these conversations and we welcome your feedback.

So please find us online at www.postpartumproduction.com. And as we conclude the season, we'll continue to look back at so much that we've learned this year and in these conversations in a forthcoming compilation episode, which we hope you will enjoy. But in the meantime, we would love to hear from you.

So please find us on Instagram at [00:03:00] Postpartum Production Podcast. And we welcome anything and everything. And at the podcast, we're also excited that our next season will be an even deeper dive into childbirth and art and the intersection of creativity and the birth process.

So, Expect a lot more there coming in 2024. And for now, we hope that you will enjoy this conversation with Ben.

I have to admit, you are the first, I assume, male-identifying author and creative person that we have had. We've had one chiropractor, but that was more about other subject matters. And this is very clearly about writing while parenting the title of your book. So. I'm excited to hear not just about [00:04:00] the book, but about your work in general, how you've come to care enough to write about the subject matter as well.

And I think you did it so thoughtfully and tenderly and I really, really enjoyed reading it and I have to admit to you. that I actually read a lot of it to my daughter. So hopefully that's OK. She was really excited about how old your children were and who they were. And she loves hearing stories written by parents.

She actually said that. So it's like bedtime reading to her as well. So I'm curious. Mostly, knowing that you have worked as a poet, you are a teacher as well, why, why this book? Why you felt like you needed to sit and write an entire book in and around the subject matter of writing while parenting?

[00:04:46] **Ben:** Yeah. I was working on a couple other books of poetry while working on this book. My first book of poetry came out when my older daughter was two and my wife was five months pregnant with [00:05:00] our second daughter. And so I think from the get-go, writing and parenting and really trying to immerse myself in both has been the narrative.

And I started writing these essays when my kids were one and three for an organization in Boston called Grub Street. And it was sort of like a monthly column that I was... Working on and try to figure out how to use funny stories from the world of parenting to talk about writing. But it was as a break from the poetry that I was doing, which was also about parenting as well.

It wasn't so different, but I think in a very different style. And the more I was writing them, the more it became just not a once-a-month thing, right? It was actually where my mind was going more often because I was starting to really see the process of it as incredibly freeing. There were so many times where I was really convinced there was no way I was going to be able to balance writing and parenting and teaching full-time.

There were times where I think I resented that, [00:06:00] right? Where like, the amount of effort and time and emotional energy that it takes to be so present and help raise young kids was so draining that I couldn't figure out how to do that. How to both write... And you know, I'd be the best father I could be. And so writing about it gave me an outlet, right?

But it also allowed me to see the world that I was living in, and the experiences that I was having in the moment, as the material of the writing. And to be able to probe it and see it as not just a hassle, and never just a duty or something that I was obligated to do, but like as a moment for real transcendence, and interrogation and investigation, and connections.

I think that... Poetry is so different than parenting in some ways, it's peaceful, it's slow, it's deeply contemplative, and my kids are not like that, they are like crazy and hilarious and just full of energy. And so sometimes just finding a way to [00:07:00] see connections between those things too, like there was an energy to that, that was really fun to yoke and explore.

[00:07:06] **Kaitlin:** Hmm. I feel that in your work and I also feel that tension because you talk about, for example, I mean, there's so much, I have lots of notes in terms of different quotes that I loved in different moments, but this tension between the playfulness and the doggedness and what it takes to be a writer, but also what it takes to be the parent that I can feel in the work that you want to be, right?

You have a certain standard. in your creative life. You have a standard in your parenting life, and I'd love to hear what that is or how you were able to or not at the moments that maybe it felt a lot harder. What that looks like on a daily

basis, especially as your children have grown since you first started working on this book.

[00:07:46] **Ben:** Yeah, I think if it were up to me, I would spend many hours alone a day. I think I'm probably at my core an introvert and really love writing and really love solitude. But I live a life [00:08:00] that is like a, I'm an introvert in an extrovert's job, right? So I teach in a high school. It's a great job. I teach creative writing.

I teach very fun, interesting kids. I'm with my daughters for most of the day. So for me, there was a need to sort of balance the two to really be able to hold. How do I have this space to just be deeply alone? And how do I have this space to be so involved in other people's lives? Right? And I think those are the standards that I try to honor, right?

And within that, trying to find how they complemented each other. So one of the things that I love about young kids is they are just so playful. They just move into play and into imaginative play so much more quickly than I ever can as an adult. And so for me, I would often watch my daughters and aspire to their level of playfulness, right?

But then also find the time in the early hours [00:09:00] of the day to apply it to poetry or whatever type of writing I was doing.

[00:09:05] **Kaitlin:** You know, as mothers, for whatever reason, there tends to be more of this bodily demand on the mother's body. And there's a lot that we can unpack there and that I've done, in fact, on recent podcasts, like with Amanda Monty, his book just came out.

I'm curious your relationship to Your identity as a father in the family that you are in this family structure that you inhabit. I would just love to hear more about what that means to you, how that sits in your creative life and this book and what you have to say about that

[00:09:38] **Ben:** identity. Yeah, I mean, well, first of all, I am super aware of the privilege of not having carried my kids in my body and given birth to them.

Just the demands on my wife's body and how exhausting that is, right? Even just how much energy it takes to produce milk and feed kids. I feel as though she sacrificed so [00:10:00] much, not always by choice. Just in terms of the role that she played. And for me, there were many moments where I was filled with incredible gratitude and awe.

And many moments where I was jealous. Especially when my kids were young and seeing them bond so through the body with my wife. Well, I was like, Hey, look at me, I'm folding the socks. Look what I'm doing. There's like this weird detachment as a dad to young, young babies. Actually, one of the first times that I really started writing about my kids in the world of poetry came from language around breastfeeding.

So when my wife explained what a letdown was and explained what self-expression was, I was like, wait a minute, those are from the world of poetry. I'm the person who's supposed to be exploring letdowns and self-expression. You're just like this natural liquid gold coming in. So for me, there was a, there's always this, I think, sense of, of knowing the incredible privilege that I have in so many different ways and not ever [00:11:00] trying to take advantage of that.

Right? Not like thinking that whatever I've been able to do is purely out of effort or, or skill, but I think also trying to work around that, really trying to be as domestic and as present as possible and to not sort of take all of the male credit that you sometimes get with the low standards sometimes.

Mm

[00:11:22] **Kaitlin:** hmm. Mm hmm. Yeah, I can sense that in the work. There's a. There's a sense of inquiry, a sense of responsibility. And also I can sense this overarching philosophy, and I'm curious how you would define how you think about and interact with the work that you do as both a parent and a writer.

[00:11:44] **Ben:** Yeah, that's that's a really interesting question and one of which I think I sometimes struggle to articulate on a philosophical level for me It's often on a very much a gut level, right?

I think that I tend to be the kind of dad that's [00:12:00] always on his hands and knees That's where I'm most comfortable playing with my kids. And I think that's also true of my writing I like to jump right in and play around and make it messy I often think about when my younger daughter would get angry at me when she was like two or three.

She would simultaneously run into my arms and try to hit me. And it was both so much rage and seeking solace for me. And that's how I think about my poems too, or my stories or essays. Like, I want that level of run to me. Hate me and need me to hold you. I like that kind of immersiveness. Mm-hmm. . Mm-hmm. .

I don't dunno if that's a philosophy as much as just a, a way of enjoying my time with them.

[00:12:46] **Kaitlin:** Mm. No, I sense that It's funny 'cause literally in my notes right next to me, I have the both and I like every single piece of your book was always looking at seemingly opposites, but at the tension between them, at the space, between them [00:13:00] at how to hold them both. Simultaneously. So, for example, you talk about reverence and irreverence.

You talk about, like I was saying before, the playfulness and the doggedness. You talk about, gosh, there are so many great moments, but you quote a lot of really lovely writers and, and lovely quotes that I think speak to the whole of your work. So for example, I wrote the Ross Gay quote that you quoted when you say, when we pay attention, we find ourselves.

in the midst of an almost constant, if subtle, caretaking. And I don't know if that's specifically referencing the both-and, but I guess it is because you're saying you're paying attention, but you care to, I mean, those are seemingly opposite things. You're looking and holding at the same time. Right?

Yeah. I mean,

[00:13:46] **Ben:** it's, it's, it's very hard to both be in the moment. And to detach and be thinking about the moment. When I'm parenting, not that, not that we're ever not parenting, but when I'm fully there, like, poet brain is totally off. I am [00:14:00] not making meaning. I am not deeply contemplative. I am not watching from afar, right?

But the next morning, there's this totally other me. That's able to sit with that material and bring in this other sense of awareness and caretaking. And sometimes they merge, and sometimes there's a huge gap between them, and I write in order to bring them together. But it's, it's not like it's this contemplative practice where everything evens out in the end.

You still get incredibly frustrated, or... Say the wrong thing and but the poetry or the writing tends to give me a chance to be very aware of it and to engage it and to try to understand it

[00:14:37] **Kaitlin:** So from a logistical standpoint when you're in that moment And yet you're processing the next day because I know you reference a lot of specific conversations or specific moments with your children.

How are you able to draw those details so well when you're not literally taking notes in the moment?

[00:14:55] **Ben:** Yeah, it just comes from constant journaling every morning before I would start to [00:15:00] move towards. Any type of shaped writing, I would often just record everything that went on in the day. Little, little moments and funny things that the kids said.

A lot of times my wife and I or my brothers and I will just text each other the hilarious and wild things that we said. So sometimes it's just a collection of things. And especially when I was like really tired from not sleeping ever, I wasn't ever shaping anything into poems or essays. I was just recording.

It was just like trying to just stay engaged in a routine, even if nothing was coming up. Mm

[00:15:32] **Kaitlin:** hmm. So talk to me about that early caregiving moment and the exhaustion, because we talk a lot on this podcast about what production is, what that means, and how we unpack that. I'd love to hear from your perspective what your relationship is with what is considered productive art.

[00:15:50] **Ben:** Yeah. So, when I was writing poems in my first couple of books, I had the time. to sit down with great attention [00:16:00] and spend an hour with spotlight focus on a single word or a single line. And by the time my kids were one and three, I no longer had the capacity to do that. I was just up too often. And my younger daughter in particular was often up in the middle of the night.

And I would just be bouncing with her on one of those exercise balls. And sometimes after I drank coffee, I was still bouncing with her. And my mind was just dreaming. It was like, almost like lucid dreaming. And I was able to visualize stories and scenes. In a way that felt as ecstatic as if I was typing.

And so oftentimes I would just bounce with her for an hour, just watching my mind dream. And then I would put her down and just try to record everything that I dreamt. And in many ways, my writing shifted from poetry to essay writing. And I've been working much more on fiction and novels for the past few years, because of [00:17:00] that change where it was not about.

The incredible focus on a line, but just moving to a space of dreaminess and trying to capture it. And so for me, I don't know if I'm that interested in, in product. I mean, sometimes I am, but for me, it's the process and the feeling of

the process. Right. So even if I'm just driving in the, sometimes when we would travel, we would get up at three and put the kids in, they'd sleep in the car and I would drink coffee and just that feeling of free dreaming, right?

Where you're just watching your mind go wherever it goes. I think that's what I want out of any creative experience. So it didn't always produce much, but in terms of the feeling of it, it was as close to this feeling of creative ecstasy as, as I tend to reach.

[00:17:44] **Kaitlin:** You talk in your book as well about teaching and how to teach writing.

So I'm curious, is there a way to teach that? And this is something we actually talked about more in the last season, what a creative moment feels like, how to access that, especially for someone who is [00:18:00] exhausted, who is caregiving, who is obviously carrying a lot of other demands on their time, on their bodies, on their attention.

[00:18:08] **Ben:** I think it's a question that I have learned a lot about over the many years of teaching. So this is my 25th year teaching in the classroom this year. I mostly teach creative writing classes these days. And my master's is not in writing, but in creative studies and the psychology of creativity. And there's two researchers named Beth Hennessey and Teresa Amabile.

And they've written a lot about how in order to do anything creative, you need a combination of skill and craft, but also you need creative thinking skills and you need to be driven by intrinsic motivation. And then the fourth thing is you need an environment that encourages play. And I think that when I first started teaching, I really focused almost entirely on craft and graded the written product as the [00:19:00] end all, right?

That was the thing that we were working to, and I think that's how I learned to write. But I think as my understanding of what it takes to do something creative has grown, and to understand how it's often in conflict with so many of the systems of school. And I think of privilege too, right? In terms of who's writing as a final product, am I privileging when I'm the one who's making the decision of what's good and what's not good, right?

So I think opening up the gates of what it takes to write and what it means to teach writing. So a lot of times I'm not just focusing on craft, I'm really focusing on, well, what is creative process, and what is flexible thinking, and how do you

think divergently, and what does it mean to just free write, and I'm much more interested in helping kids understand how to think like a writer.

Are you filling your notebooks with observations? Are you finding moments to write about the things that are deep in your heart? Are you being vulnerable? To me that's as important as what ends up in the story or the screenplay or the poem [00:20:00] because oftentimes it's the failings that lead to much more intense learning in the end.

Right? So you might have a great final piece, but that's because you emulated something that someone else did. Doesn't mean that you got a blank page and understood how to work from there. So the thing I like about teaching is that there's a lot of pushback, right? The ideas are beautiful in my head in August, and then I've got the 25 kids in my poetry class, and I'm like, oh right, I'm teaching you, I'm not teaching the poem.

And so I think it, those constraints and those realities, When you can read very quickly in a room who's engaged and who's not engaged, it forces you to really think creatively about what you believe and how to not just teach it the way you do it, but really help other people figure out what matters to them.

Yeah.

[00:20:49] **Kaitlin:** And I think that also obviously resonates with parenting, right? Because you have two children, as you mentioned, they were one and three when you started this. They're 10 and 12 now. Like that's a [00:21:00] really big difference in terms of how they're engaging with the world, engaging with you. Tell me, because mine are a little bit younger and I think, oh yeah, you had asked by the way, before we started recording, you had asked how old my kids are.

They are almost two, almost five and almost eight. Oh my goodness. Yeah. So I've got like a range of the school age and then also still the baby. And I'm still definitely in the fog. I'd love to hear your experience of both parenting them and also the writing and the relationship to parenting them as they've grown.

[00:21:33] **Ben:** Yeah. Well, what's interesting is that by the time my older daughter was eight, I no longer felt comfortable writing about her. It was almost as though something had turned, and she was her own person, and I didn't want to share the stories about her, as much as when my younger daughter was six at the time.

She was still saying the wildest things, and I was like, That's great material! Keep going! Like, there's something about seeing your kids as people, and really, [00:22:00] really realizing they're not just your kids anymore. And I didn't feel like I had the right. To continue writing about them. I think that probably helped me figure out where the end of the book was more than anything else.

Cause as it's gotten more complicated, the parenting, as my daughters have gotten older, their relationships, their inner life, it's, it's just very complex. It just doesn't feel like my story to tell anymore.

[00:22:25] **Kaitlin:** I'm assuming they know about this book.

[00:22:27] **Ben:** Yes, they both read it. They both came to, uh, the, the opening launch was great in that, um, there were maybe a hundred, 120 people in a theater through a bookstore.

And I did the reading and there was a Q and a afterwards. And there was someone in the audience who raised his hand and was like, I don't know you, I've never met you, but you're really funny. Would you ever consider being a standup comedian? I sort of gave an answer, and then my younger daughter had her hand up next.

And the woman who was [00:23:00] hosting the event called on her, not even knowing she was my daughter. And my daughter in front of everyone was like, I just want to say, you're not that funny. And it was just like, great moment. We're often like the jokes that are her expense as well, right? Like she's the one who's often saying the ridiculous things.

So, you know, it's, it's very, they're sweet about it. I think they're slightly embarrassed in some ways, but for the most part, I think it's been very, very positive and I hope it stays positive and that they don't ever feel any other way about it.

[00:23:31] **Kaitlin:** What is their relationship with the work that you do as a whole?

[00:23:35] **Ben:** They don't know any of the newer stuff. I'm not someone who talks about it with them. They love anything that I've written about them. I've really only shared the things that I think they would receive well. I think even some of the pieces in, in this book that might be a little bit more complicated about just the challenges of parenting go over their head a little bit.

And they're more interested in the really [00:24:00] funny things that they've said. I think they, yeah, I think they're still trying to figure out what it means to see their dad as a writer. We walked by the poetry section in the library. Couple months ago and one of my books was featured and my younger daughter looked at it and then loudly announced I don't have time for dumb poems and kept walking to the graphic novel.

So I think they're funny about it They're kind of a little dismissive of it. Yeah

[00:24:27] **Kaitlin:** Maybe that's the age at which they are right now too, right? That'll I'm sure shift over time and What are the different relationships with your work as they grow and change too?

[00:24:37] **Ben:** We'll see, we'll see. There's a poem that I wrote that is in cement in the town that we live in.

It's like in the sidewalk. And it happens to be right near their favorite restaurant, a Japanese restaurant. And whenever we go there, they love to run to the poem. And step on it and pretend to spit on it. And they're always [00:25:00] like, let's go get some gum. We'll throw it on the sidewalk. So there's this very playful, preteen show that they like to put on.

[00:25:08] **Kaitlin:** I'm curious too, because your wife's character, if you will, in the book, I think is also really tenderly wrought. And I just can feel a lot of respect that you have for her and the work that she does within your family unit. So I'd love to hear more about. That and the relationship with writing while parenting obviously includes her too.

And so I'd love to hear more about her relationship with your work as well.

[00:25:32] **Ben:** Yeah, it's something that I try to be very careful and thoughtful about, right? And very humbly ask her permission before I ever publish anything with her in it. And she's always so supportive and so kind. But I, I think that there are violations when you start telling someone else's story.

Or when you start seeing someone else as a character in your stories. And so, I, I try to always make myself the butt of whatever [00:26:00] joke, both in life and, and in writing. I think there's, I like to write from a place of, of vulnerability, more than ever celebrating anything. But I, I do think that it's something that my, they, they all come way before anything I could ever write.

To me, just my relationship with my daughters and my wife are front and center. And sometimes that's hard when you're trying to write non-fiction, right? Sometimes it's hard when you're trying to tell stories that matter. There were many, many stories that I could have written about or that I did write about.

And chose not to put in the book because it's public, but also feel very good about that.

[00:26:41] **Kaitlin:** I haven't had a chance, unfortunately, to read all of your work, but you talk about form as the shape of content. So I'm curious how you saw that. Play out in this work or how you approach it. I'm personally really interested in the interplay of form and content in creative work [00:27:00] and to the point where it probably actually is to the detriment of my own sanity and my work itself.

But I'd love to hear. I realized too, after reading your book, going back to the first chapter, I was like, Oh look, form. Okay. All right. I get it. Remind me actually the title of the first chapter is "*Finding the Right Frame.*" Right. So thinking about that, I think frame form, I was thinking about how you play with that.

There is a playfulness in the book, but as you mentioned, the kind of constraints that you have on your work and whether or not that relates, I don't know, maybe this is too far of a stretch, but whether or not that relates to parenting and the work that you do. In the domestic scene as well.

[00:27:42] **Ben:** Yeah. Yeah. In terms of poetry, I'm very interested in the relationship between form and content.

The book before writing while parenting was called Then Again. And I worked in a, in a form that came organically based on what I was writing about, but essentially I would take a single [00:28:00] word and I would write down every single meaning and sense of that word, and I would then write a story in three parts.

And each part would explore a different meaning of the word. And then the title word would connect to the next word. It would be like a synonym. And it would keep going until it made this giant word loop. And I became interested in the incredible interconnectedness of words. How one just leads to the next.

How they all have this similarity. While exploring the deep disconnects of my own life. So one story, I did the Peace Corps after college where I lived for a

few years in rural Zimbabwe. And so one would be sitting there and I would be slaughtering a goat or doing something that was like something I would have done at 21.

And then the next one, I am holding my daughter and trying to put her to sleep while coiled up in a hammock. And the pieces I tried to make as different as possible. As the words were as [00:29:00] similar as possible. So it allowed what we were talking about earlier with the contradictions. It allowed me to give voice to the interplay between how deeply connected everything is and what sometimes feels as though they are incredibly disparate moments of our being.

And so I've always been interested in that in the poetry and in the essays, it became a very different way of thinking. First of all, I was writing. For an audience, right? Because so many of them were written for various publications. And with the idea of trying to talk about writing and craft. So it was a little bit of a different thing than just writing for myself and following my own imagination.

But often times I would try to think about what is the relationship between story and essay. So how do I root these in some sort of story about my children and not just use, sometimes using as jumping point, but sometimes thread it throughout. And then where are the stopping points where I can philosophize and make connections and talk about poetry?

Um, yeah. And so I became interested in this much [00:30:00] looser form of how do you shape it? What does it mean? And how do you make sure that the form doesn't become a formula so that you just write the same piece again and again, and just fill in the spaces. But that you're constantly discovering new things as you're inventing new forms and new ways of writing about it.

Mm hmm. Mm hmm. So I think about that a lot, too, to answer the second part of the question about parenting just in terms of structure. And what are the structures that we create? How do those structures allow for freedom or how do they inhibit freedom, right? So often I might have an interpersonal reaction, both in teaching or in parenting, that goes really poorly.

And in the moment, I want to blame the people involved in it, often me, and yeah, I'll take it very sensitively. But a lot of times the issue is a much more structural issue. And once I figured that out, then those interpersonal moments play out in a much better way.[00:31:00]

[00:31:03] **Kaitlin:** So I have three children. As I mentioned, my middle is a boy identifies his way is right now. And he is so destructive. Anything he touches just falls apart. Just, he seems to have, we joke that he doesn't have the Midas touch. He's like the opposite, like the shit touch. Everything you touch turns to shit.

And to the point where it's become this family trope. And when he was little, my daughter called him Mr. Destructo and, and over time, like, wait, this is a terrible weight for him to have to carry. I didn't like that as the more I thought about that he feels like it's so destructive. And I started trying to like step back from things and moments where he was doing things and try to actually.

for me to approach them with more curiosity. And for example, recently I'm in the kitchen, he's in the dining room and I hear this huge thud. And I realize it's this massive potted plant that we've had for eight years that no other child has managed to pull over or had any interest in pulling over, but he's managed to pull over the whole thing.

And the dirt is toppled and all over the ground. [00:32:00] And then I look and there's a leaf and it's all shredded up. Like he's done something with these giant fig leaves, those huge, beautiful fig tree leaves. And he's like, sorry, mom, sorry. And I'm like, what? Are you okay? He's like, yeah, I'm okay. Well, what's going on here?

And then I'm realizing that I think old me, if you will, would have gotten angry, would have just been frustrated. You're always breaking things. Why is this falling? And this sort of reassessed me was like, what's going on with the leaf? What are you doing with this leaf? And he said, well, I was hoping if I cut it up like this, I could start a campfire.

I wanted to start a campfire. I'm like, first of all, don't start a campfire in the house. But second of all, interesting. Okay. Well, what if we use other leaves? Not this leaf from this tree, but we look at fallen leaves outside and it's a reaffirmed, but it also was a reframe for me of. The destruction is sort of a byproduct of his curiosity, as opposed to the destruction being the impetus that he's trying to be destructive.

Yeah. You were talking about structural frames and how [00:33:00] we can reframe things or how we can re see things. I do find that like frames are so important, right? Because when we're able to then look at the frame from outside or just have the frame as a containment itself, I think it shifts our

relationship with the work, but it provides for opportunities and it's not always about constraint, right?

That's great. A really long-winded way of saying yes, my son is not destructive, he is curious. So again, it's a mess, right? How important the language is too, right? I'm just looking at his curiosity rather than his destructiveness. So

[00:33:33] **Ben:** much. Yeah, it's interesting. My wife is a special education teacher, and I feel as though I've learned so much from her.

And both my parents are as well, and her mom as well. All my cousins. It's very much rooted in my family. But I feel as though this, particularly for my wife from just living so closely with her, she is remarkable at seeing past the behavior and trying to understand the child and whether it is [00:34:00] anxiety or a learning issue.

It's not just a technical skill, although it is very technically skillful in the moment she's able to say something or reframe something. But I also really think it comes from like a belief of this person is offering something different than what we might be expecting, but just because it's creating disorder, it's not necessarily a bad thing.

And so I feel as though from watching her parent and watching her work with kids, it's really shifted a lot of the way that I might see things too. Mhm.

[00:34:30] **Kaitlin:** Yeah. So taking that to the work, there's a wonderful moment at the end of, spoiler alert, I'm talking about the end of the book, but where you quote Yeats and you say, the intellect of the man, and I'll say of the person, but is forced to choose perfection of the life or of the work.

And you give your answer in the book. Obviously there's the tension of forcing to choose the life and the work, but I thought the word perfection there was really. And I was [00:35:00] curious about your relationship to the idea of the perfection of the life of perfection of the work and what that means to you on a daily basis, because I don't feel in your work that there's this commitment to perfection.

And so I'm curious what that means.

[00:35:14] **Ben:** Yeah, it's a quote that I think I wrestled with for a long time of how to understand it. And there is something, I think, I know, I know the word man feels off there, but there is something I think of extreme privilege to think

of that as a choice. Right? And to imagine that one can make a decision between the two.

There's something that, that feels just so deeply offensive to me to even imagine that as a choice. I, I think in many ways I have extreme perfectionistic tendencies in my writing. I will rewrite a line 70 or 80 times in different ways as I'm exploring it. And that's one of the things I actually love about tight form is it gives you the constraints where you can almost feel something clicking shut to [00:36:00] quote a different eighth quote, but I also love messiness.

I love imperfection. I love the breaking of rules. I think that my life has been a constant uncovering of difficulty that every time I think something is in order, the more I probe it, the more I see the disorder that's there. And I think I want writing to yoke order and disorder or chaos in order. So. I think perfectionism in process is horrible.

It just gets in the way. I love deep exploration and open-ended play. But I do think that I'm drawn to, uh, a certain tidiness and order and perfectionism on the page. Like, maybe a little obsessively so. I think I'm maybe slower writer than I'd like to be because of that. But I also think that it, it asks me to engage with language and thought.

In emotion, in persona, in ways that maybe wouldn't be there if. I weren't so [00:37:00] tuned to the best words in the best order.

[00:37:03] **Kaitlin:** So finally, I just have to ask, cause you talked about the choice, the idea of the choice at all, feeling like a false choice. Could you dig in a little bit more there? What does that

[00:37:11] **Ben:** mean to you?

Yeah. I mean, for me, it meant. Embracing my children in the life of a father in particular, I want to say parent, but I think father for me gives me both immediacy and some distance in terms of the expectations and the reality of how much you can sometimes be involved, thinking of that as the writing material.

So I'm not choosing, I'm merging the two, right? I'm trying to find a way to say that the most complex themes are often right in front of us. And if what is right in front of us is a four-year-old throwing her socks in the toilet, I want to make room for that in my poetry as well. So for me, I think that allowed the choice to dissolve.

And to say, I'm not going to try to write some great [00:38:00] literature that's detached from the reality of my life. And of my life, my children are the most wonderful and important thing to me. As difficult as parenting is, that's like, where my heart always is. And to really think about, well, how do you make that your creative engagement, as opposed to thinking of them in opposition

[00:38:20] **Kaitlin:** to one another.

Yeah, I appreciate that. And also, as you're saying that I can feel like this, speaking of the intellect and the quote, right? This intellectual exercise of allowing that space and that creative investigation to still have as much value intellectually, right? As any other subject matter. So I think that's something that's obviously been important to me personally, to this podcast, to our listeners.

So I, I think, and commend that you're enacting that in your work as well. I do feel like it's shifting the conversation around what subject matters can be considered intellectually engaging and appropriate and [00:39:00] creatively worthy, if you will.

[00:39:02] **Ben:** Yeah, I think the gates have to open as to what we allow, right?

I think when you have a certain group of people who are making those decisions of what's literature with a capital L and what's literature with a lowercase l and they're all coming from a certain vantage point, they're going to have intense biases around race and class and gender and sex and nationality.

And so I, I think I'm thinking about forms and structures. I think you have to blow up that structure in many ways to really be able to engage with that question of what are the incredible intellectual and emotional subject matter.

[00:39:35] **Kaitlin:** Yeah. Well, thank you. And I know you have places to be right now, children to attend to.

So I'll let you go back to it, but I'm really appreciative of the time you took today and that we were able to. Also get over any technical glitches.

[00:39:49] **Ben:** Your, your podcast is such a pleasure to listen to. And I feel like I've learned so much from your many guests and thoughtful conversation. So it's really an

[00:39:57] **Kaitlin:** honor to be a part of it.

Oh, thanks. Well, thanks, [00:40:00] Ben. And it was lovely to have you on today. I wish you the best and our show notes will include links to the book and to all of your work so that listeners can also. Get a glimpse of all of the work that we're talking about here today and not just hear about it, but really be able to engage with it and read it and maybe even read it to their kids like I did with mine.

So awesome.

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